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Demagoguery or Diplomacy

The Case for Engaging Moqtada al-Sadr

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The House of Hakim and the House of Sadr have both been long revered among the world's Shia population. However, there are basic philosophical differences between the two houses that have historically balanced them very well. Simply speaking, the House of Hakim is akin to the Republican Party while the House of Sadr is reminiscent of the Democratic Party. Both of these stalwarts of Iraqi domestic politics are necessary for a stable government. However, for the last six years American foreign policy in Iraq has been directed toward diminishing the power of Moqtada al-Sadr—if not destroying it. This has thrown the balance of power out of kilter and like a top losing momentum; Iraq is wobbling toward an uncertain future.

Understanding the House of Sadr and the House of Hakim in the Modern Context

IRAQ AND THE RISE OF BAKR AL-SADR

Historically, Iraqi Shia have tended toward commerce and trade while Iraqi Sunni often led the affairs of state. During the Ottoman Empire, the Turks appointed a Sunni-dominated government in order to balance the economic power of the Shia majority. With the British colonization in the latter part of the 19th and early 20th century, the Shia again found themselves with a Sunni-dominated government. Given their historical underpinnings, the Shia were generally ambivalent toward Sunni governance, yet roiled at the British occupation¹. In 1920, the religious leader of the Shia, Supreme Grand Ayatollah al-Shirazi, issued a Fatwa that prohibited Shia from cooperating with or working for occupation governments under non-Muslim control². This was more of a political statement since few Shia participated in the government anyway. The political landscape of the 1950s, specifically the election of communist-supported Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran in 1951 and the spread of communism, caused concern among the Shia clergy, many of who began to re-examine the long history of Shia absence from politics.

Communism was not only popular in Iran but it was increasingly popular with the poor Shia in southern Iraq. The fall of the Iraqi monarchy in 1958 in a coup led by Brigadier General Qassim (who was supported by communists) caused great consternation among Shia clergy in Najaf.

Internationally, the counterbalance to communism was free market capitalism. However, Western capitalism had been marred by its apparent lack of humanitarian concern. In the West, great wealth had been accumulated in a small percentage of the population but, there appeared to be no social responsibility in spending. From the Islamic perspective, capitalism and communism were extreme opposites, neither of which was palatable to the Shia clerics who felt a moral obligation

¹ The focus of Shia anger in 1920 was not directed toward the Sunni who had historically administered the government, but against the British occupiers.

² This Fatwa was almost universally followed until a small group of lower echelon clerics, called “Clerics of the Office,” secretly agreed to accept money from the administrative government to urge Shia to join the Sunni government. In 1930, the grandfather of current Prime Minister Nouri al-Malaki accepted the position of Minister of Education and broke the unanimity of the Shia boycott. However, very few Shia joined him, and he eventually left the government.

to take care of the poor. In response to the polarizing economic theories of the day, Mohammed Baqr al-Sadr (one of the leading Shia clerics) published a work entitled *Iqtisaduna* (*Our Economy*). This was followed by *Falsafatuna* (*Our Philosophy*). While both books discuss communism, capitalism and socialism in relation to Islam from an economic perspective, *Iqtisaduna* is perhaps the most important treatise on Islamic economic theory ever written. Its publication was so influential, that Baqr al-Sadr was eventually solicited by the Kuwaiti government to assess how its oil wealth could be managed in accordance with Islamic principles, which led to a major work on Islamic banking that still forms the basis for today's Islamic banking system.

According to Baqr al-Sadr, Islamic economic theory recognizes the right of private property and the accumulation of wealth in contrast to communism. However, there are moral and religious obligations to spend a certain amount of one's wealth on civic and social improvement, and to invest additional wealth in accordance with Islamic principles. Additionally, religion must be a touchstone of Islamic political philosophy. *Falsafatuna* simultaneously advocated an adherence to fundamental Islamic religious principles *and* a free market society. Importantly, Sadr's Islamic political theory embraced a cornerstone of Western constitutional governments – that is, power should be derived from the people (*Wilyat al-ummah*).

To represent his Islamic political view and his Islamic economic theory, Sadr created the Da'wa Party—the first Shia political party in Islamic history. The Da'wa Party (*Hizb ad-Da'wa al-Islamiya* or Party of Islamic Call) was initially headquartered in Najaf, the religious center of the Shia denomination and home to Baqr al-Sadr. The Da'wa Party was part of a religious renaissance that flourished in Najaf in the 1960s, during which Islam, politics, society and philosophy were discussed in a “circle of learning” led by al-Sadr. The Da'wa Party would stay in Najaf until Ba'athist harassment forced the hierarchy of the party to flee to Iran (and subsequently Syria and England) in the early 1980s.

Shortly after Mohammed Baqr al-Sadr published his economic and political treatises – and in the shadow of a growing communist threat within the Shia community – Supreme Grand Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim issued a Fatwa denouncing all communists as infidels. Ironically, for the economically conservative Hakim, the 1962 Fatwa was predicated upon the anti-religious principles of communism and not its disdain for private property. This was a religious, not a political Fatwa. As a consequence, many if not most communist sympathizers in the Shia community turned away from communism.

ACROSS THE BORDER

Similar events were also occurring in Shia-dominated Iran. With the election of communist-supported Mohammed Mossadegh in 1951, communism was a growing concern among Persian clergy, many of who secretly worked with the monarchy of Shah Pahlavi in opposition to Mossadegh. Proving that politics makes strange bedfellows, even the Ayatollah Khomeini supported the Shah at this time. The enemy was communism, which openly attacked religion and challenged the very existence of Islam. The fact that Mossadegh was democratically elected was a point not lost on Khomeini. He too was developing a political theory in contrast to Western capitalism and Soviet communism. His evolving political theory would track very closely to that of Baqr al-Sadr with one major difference, Khomeini would never support unbridled political power vested in the people.

In contrast to Baqr al-Sadr, Khomeini formulated his concept of an Islamic government based upon Plato's philosopher-king. Recall that Khomeini was not a theological student per se, but was a student of philosophy with an emphasis on Greek philosophy. His book, *Waliyat al-faqih*

(*Rule of the Scholar*) combined the concept of a philosopher king with Sadr's Islamic and open market economic theory. Against the backdrop of Islamic economic theory, there would always be a supreme grand cleric watching over the society to ensure that it did not stray too far from Islamic principles—the cleric-king.

Like Baqr al-Sadr, Khomeini believed in an open market society – from an economic perspective there was little difference in their philosophies. The two were also very close in ascribing to the necessity that Islamic religious principles be woven into political governance. However, the point of their irreconcilable difference was the *Waliyat al-faqih* – the Rule of the Scholar. Under Khomeini's theory, the power of government was not vested with the people (whose popularly-elected parliament had appointed a communist prime minister). To Khomeini there would be one supreme Scholar. This Scholar would be both the political and the religious leader.

Unfortunately for Khomeini, the concept of a cleric-king lacked religious authority within the Shia hierarchy. Only the elected Supreme Grand Ayatollah located in Najaf had a religious mandate to lead *all* the Shia. However, for generations the Supreme Grand Ayatollahs rarely flexed their massive political muscle. These restraints frustrated the rebellious Khomeini who wanted to be the cleric-king but who lacked religious authority. Khomeini did not want simple religious authority, but authority that would trump the power of the Supreme Grand Ayatollah in Najaf (who was elected by other Grand Ayatollahs similar to the way Cardinals elect the Pope). The answer came in the form of the Hidden Imam: the *Mahdi*. In basic terms, Khomeini proposed the re-introduction of the Deputy of the Imam which hadn't been seen since the ninth century.

THE MAHDI

The Mahdi is a title and not a name. It is associated with the Islamic belief of a “redeemer” who will bring ultimate justice and turn the world into a perfect Islamic society before the final Day of Judgment. The concept of the Mahdi is central to understanding modern Islamic fundamentalism. The Mahdi is so ingrained in the Shia psyche that discussions of politics, society, philosophy, government and even economics must take it into consideration. According to Shia Islamic belief, there were twelve divine leaders or Imams that followed the death of the Prophet Mohammad. The last or twelfth Imam, Muhammad Ibn al-Hassan al-Mahdi, was hidden by God when he was five years of age in the year 873. He is to remain invisible until his return before the final Day of Judgment. According to Shia belief there are two distinct periods of absence or invisibility of the Mahdi. The first or Minor Occultation, began in 873 when the child Imam died. Initially, the Mahdi maintained contact with his followers through deputies whom he selected by direct communication. However, in 941, the 4th deputy announced that following his death the period of Minor Occultation would end and there would be no more deputies through whom the Imam would communicate. The death of the 4th deputy within days thereafter, signaled the beginning of the Major Occultation, a period of unknown length during which the Shia wait for the Mahdi to reappear and bring absolute justice to the world.

In a stroke of what some saw as brilliance and others saw as audacity, Khomeini proposed the reintroduction of the Deputy of the Imam through the *Waliyat al-faqih* (Rule of the Scholar). Like the deputies of old, Khomeini would derive his authority from direct communication with the Mahdi. This would give him divine authority over the world's 225,000,000 Shia, including the Supreme Grand Ayatollah.

Despite the fact that Khomeini's *Waliyat al-faqih* and his proposal to re-introduce the Deputy of the Imam was rejected by the majority of Shia, the book resonated with a small but powerful group of Persian Shia who, like Khomeini, viewed it as a multi-faceted way of accomplishing several long-term objectives:

- The preservation of Islamic values in the face of western degradation;
- The triumph of Persian over Arab Shia; and
- The eventual transfer of the center of Shiism from Najaf to Qom (or, in the alternative, Persian domination of Najaf).

(This obviously ignored the straightforward megalomania of Khomeini, who viewed himself as *the* cleric-king and who demanded, during his reign, that he be referred to by the cumbersome, self-anointed title of "Supreme Grand Ayatollah, the High Spirit of God, Khomeini.")

Despite general repudiation, religious and political splinter groups in the 1980s helped Khomeini export his Islamic fundamentalism. For example, Syria which is heavily dependent upon Iran for oil supported Khomeini for political expediency. Khomeini painted the political world in very black and white terms: you were either for him or against him – no one in the Middle East was allowed to ride the fence. This dogmatic approach was very successful and had reverberations that continue to resonate today in Iraq and throughout the Middle East.

Although closely aligned philosophically with Khomeini, Baqr al-Sadr did not support the *Waliyat al-faqih*, but instead continued to advance the ideal that governmental power should be vested in the people and not a religious monarchy. This one point of divergence worked to split the Shia world and spawn political factions throughout the Middle East. For instance, in 1974, Moqtada's cousin, Musa al-Sadr, started the Shia political movement *Al Mahromen* or The Movement of the Deprived (or Disinherited) in Lebanon. Its military arm, popularly known as Amal (Afwaj al-Mouqawma al-Lubnaniyya), emerged the following year. Amal was created to protect the poor Shia during the Lebanese Civil War and clearly grew from the roots of Baqr al-Sadr and his Islamic political philosophy represented by the Da'wa Party. When Khomeini attempted to export his *Waliyat al-faqih* to Lebanon in the early 1980s, the Amal Movement, like the Da'wa Party in Iraq, rejected it. In response, Khomeini organized the more radical elements of the Amal Movement and created Hezbollah, which supporting *Waliyat al-faqih* and thus challenged Amal's powerbase.

With the accession of both Saddam Hussein and Khomeini to political power in 1979, the path was set for an international collision. Using the *Waliyat al-faqih*, Khomeini incited an Islamic Revolution, which was fomenting unrest throughout the Shia world. In Iraq, Saddam was carrying out the mandates of the Arab Ba'ath Socialist Party. The momentum for both men derived from a megalomania that hadn't been seen in the Middle East in centuries. Caught in the middle were the Shia.

PERSECUTION AND CLASS WARFARE

Almost immediately after seizing power in 1968, Iraq's Ba'ath Party, the majority of which was Sunni, began a systematic program of persecution against Iraq's Shia. Initially, this was predicated upon economic factors. The Sunni had long excelled in government and military service, while the Shia had excelled at commerce and trade. This left most of Iraq's private wealth clustered in a minority of wealthy Shia. Iraq experienced a huge economic windfall after nationalizing the oil industry in 1972, which was followed by expropriation of large Shia-controlled businesses, including the vegetable oil and commercial soap industries. Upon his accession to power in 1979, Saddam zealously continued the Ba'ath Party's persecution against the Shia, exploiting economic and theological differences in order to diminish Shia power within Iraq.

The historical rivalry between the Hakim family and the Sadr family in the Shia religious center of Najaf was also ripe for Saddam's "divide and conquer" exploitation. The House of Hakim was an old family with an honorable past. In the early 18th century Nadir Shah, the "Persian Napoleon," visited Najaf, which was under Ottoman rule at the time. Many in Najaf begged the Nadir Shah to help them cope with a plague that besieged the city. In response, he ordered his own physician or *hakim* to remain in Najaf. From that date, the family of Hakim ("the physician") was born.

Through the years, the Hakim family remained steadfastly Persian. The family name is associated with wealth and support for imperial governments. On the other side of Najaf, the Sadr family arose from relative obscurity in the late 19th century to represent Arab Shia and often poor Arab Shia³. The word "Sadr" has become synonymous with a leader. In the Arab language to "sit in the Sadr chair" or "take the Sadr position" means to be the leader. The patriarch of the Sadr family, the one who lifted them from obscurity, was a well-respected scholar nicknamed

Sadr al-Ulama ("The Leader of Scholars"). As a consequence, the family has become associated with democratic ideals (power vested in the people), but also with a government steeped in fundamental Islamism.

Taking advantage of the political and religious differences between the Hakim and Sadr families, Saddam created class warfare to further divide the already splintered Shia. He pitted the poor against the wealthy and depicted Persian Shia as followers of Khomeini and his *Waliyat al-faqih*, who was to be reviled for attempting to move the center of religious study from Najaf to Qom. Simultaneously, Saddam highlighted Sunni and Shia differences to further marginalize the Iraqi

Shia and diminish their majority power. In addition, within months of assuming the presidency, Saddam began a program of forced "repatriation" of Iraqi Shia of Persian descent. Even those who had lived for generations in Iraq were "returned" to Iran, including some of the wealthiest businessmen in Iraq whose property and wealth Saddam confiscated.

The religious clerics in the powerful Najaf Hawza (a religious center similar to the Vatican) posed a significant challenge to Saddam. Controlling vast amounts of wealth, they had extensive communications networks and thus held sway over millions of people causing the Ba'ath Party

³ Although seemingly contradictory, the Islamic socialistic tendencies of the Sadr family are not in contention with the open market economic theory of Grand Ayatollah Baqr al-Sadr.

great anxiety. Therefore, they were routinely persecuted by the Ba'ath Party. When the Supreme Grand Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim died in 1971, President Bakr refused to lower the state flags to half-staff. This affront caused massive rioting that resulted in street violence that saw many Shia killed by police and government troops. The next year, the government arrested the deceased Supreme Grand Ayatollah's third son, Mohammed Baqr al-Hakim (although he was released a short time later). In 1973, the government issued an arrest warrant for the Supreme Grand Ayatollah's second son Mahdi al-Hakim. However, before the arrest warrant could be executed, Mahdi fled to Iran. In 1977, the Ba'athist government once again provoked the Shia clerics. On the tenth day of the Muslim month of Muharram, when the Shia-world mourns the death of the Imam Hussein at the Battle of Karbala, hundreds of thousands of people walk from different locations in Iraq to the city of Karbala. During their trek they sometimes engage in symbolic self-flagellation and bloodletting. In Karbala they re-enact the famous battle to honor the Imam Hussein. Occasionally, there are injuries and even deaths.

In 1977, the Ba'athist security apparatus, under the command of Saddam Hussein, stationed intelligence, police and military units along the route to Karbala. At a particular point along this route is a small waystation called Khan al-Nos. At that time, the *Inn at Khan al-Nos* was owned by the surviving family of Supreme Grand Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim who had died in 1971. As the people approached, the government troops opened fire, injuring and killing thousands. The government claimed it was trying to stop the self-flagellation, bloodletting and occasional deaths that occurred during battle re-enactments. As a result of this incident, two sons of the deceased Supreme Grand Ayatollah were arrested and charged with treason: Grand Ayatollah Yosif al-Hakim, the eldest son and Mohammed al-Hakim, the third son. Both were summarily tried and convicted. Yosif was hanged in Baghdad in 1978 and Mohammed was sentenced to life in prison. The next year, he and a fourth son, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, escaped to Iran where they joined a fifth son who was already living there in exile.⁴

With the rise of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Da'wa Party was growing in popularity among the Shia community. Saddam viewed these organized Shia as a potential threat. Therefore, almost immediately upon assuming the presidency in 1979, Saddam took action. At his recommendation, the Revolutionary Command Council passed a resolution declaring that every person who was, or ever had been, a member of Baqr al-Sadr's Da'wa Party was guilty of high treason. This resulted in tens of thousands of people fleeing to Iran. However, Baqr al-Sadr and his sister refused to be exiled.⁵ Consequently, Saddam had them arrested and tried for high treason.⁶ Saddam himself

⁴ Mahdi al-Hakim was assassinated in 1983 while attending a conference in Khartoum, Sudan. Most Shia believe that Saddam Hussein ordered the assassination.

⁵ Martyrdom runs very deeply in the Sadr family. Even prior to his arrest, Baqr al-Sadr spoke from the pulpit on several occasions that he hoped Saddam would kill him so that he (Sadr) could unite the Shia against Saddam with his death. Apparently, the glorification of martyrdom also runs very strongly with his only living son, Maqtada al-Sadr.

⁶ A letter from Ayatollah Khomeini addressed to Sadr as "The Leader of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq" was the evidence used by Saddam in the trial. However, the letter was sent by Khomeini to manipulate Saddam into executing Sadr.

acted as judge, and on April 9, 1980, Grand Ayatollah Baqr al-Sadr and his sister were found guilty and hanged⁷.

IRAN/IRAQ WAR

With the hanging of Baqr al-Sadr and his sister, the leadership of the Da'wa Party fell to present day leaders in Iraq, Ibrahim al-Ja'afari and Nouri al-Maliki, both of who had fled to Iran.⁸ There they joined tens of thousands of Iraqi Shia who had fled from Saddam, including the other self-exiled members of the Da'wa Party; exiled Shia businessmen, and Iraqis of Persian decent who had been forced to "repatriate". The Ayatollah Khomeini welcomed the refugees knowing that if these disenfranchised Iraqis could be organized, they would make a frenzied and formidable force he could then exploit and employ against his Arab neighbor. However, the Iranian honeymoon did not last long. The Da'wa Party refused to accept *Waliyat al-faqih*, finding Khomeini's price too steep. Ibrahim al-Ja'afari and many Da'wa members moved to the United Kingdom, while Nouri al-Maliki and countless others moved to Syria. The remaining Iraqis either rationalized their support of the *Waliyat al-faqih* or let passion influence their decision. Foremost among these were the three sons of the deceased Supreme Grand Ayatollah Muhsin alHakim, who loathed Saddam and eventually united with Khomeini against him.

The first two years of the Iran/Iraq War went exceedingly well for Iraq. However, in early 1983 the tide began to turn in Iran's favor. With the help of outside elements, Iran's previously disheveled army fielded new equipment and employed new military tactics that significantly influenced its successes. By then, Khomeini had already begun his collaboration with the sons of al-Hakim. Together, they recruited exiled Iraqis by playing on the popularity of the martyred Baqr al-Sadr, and created and financed an organization that to date, has outlived the reigns of both Khomeini and Saddam – the Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and its military arm, the Badr Brigade.⁹ A pro-Persian, anti-Saddam political organization, SCIRI endorsed the Islamic Fundamentalist philosophy and economic theory of Baqr al-Sadr and at the same time supported Khomeini's *Waliyat al-faqih*. Although SCIRI propaganda often claims Baqr al-Sadr was one of its founders, SCIRI's endorsement of the *Waliyat al-faqih* makes such claims ludicrous, since SCIRI was pro-Persian and supported the *Waliyat al-faqih*, while Da'wa was

⁷ There is a famous conversation that purportedly occurred between Baqr al-Sadr and Saddam Hussein. In that conversation Baqr told Saddam that: "I pray to Allah that you will live a long life until someone will come and avenge you." Coincidentally, during the Coalition invasion of Iraq, Baghdad fell on April 9, 2003—the same day Baqr al-Sadr had been hanged. Therefore, many poor Shia believed the fall of Saddam's Baghdad was the revenge of Sadr and that the Coalition was a divine force, pre-ordained by Allah to avenge Sadr.

⁸ Ibrahim al-Ja'afari became Prime Minister of Iraqi Transitional Government following the elections of January 2005. Nouri al-Maliki is the current Prime Minister who came to power after the constitutional elections of December 2005.

⁹ In May 2007, the Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) would change its name to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) which continues to represent Iranian interests in Iraq.

pro-Arab, democratic¹⁰, and supported al-Baqr's *Wilyat al-ummah* – power derived from the people not a Supreme leader.

The UN-brokered end of the Iran/Iraq War in 1988 left both countries depleted, strapped for cash and with a huge debt. Iraq looked to Kuwait, its largest debtor, for relief. Iraq wanted Kuwait to decrease its oil production which would have given Iraq a better economic playing field in which to recover from its ailing post-war economy. Kuwait refused. Therefore, in August 1990 Saddam invaded Kuwait claiming that its southern neighbor was stealing Iraqi oil through a slant-drilling. An international coalition representing 34 countries and led by the US ousted Iraq within six months in what is now known as the First Gulf War.

MOQTADA AL-SADR INHERITS THE FAMILY NAME

Eight years of war followed immediately by UN-imposed sanctions left Saddam constrained within his own country. Therefore, when Ayatollah Sadiq al-Sadr (Moqtada al-Sadr's father) was elected Supreme Grand Ayatollah in 1992, Saddam was powerless to continue his past persecution and a state of mutual tolerance began. Saddam would keep the piece with Sadiq al-Sadr until 1999. In February of that year the Supreme Grand Ayatollah and several of his followers began to criticize Saddam for living in opulence while the rest of the nation suffered under the hardship of the sanctions that saw an almost total trade and financial blockade against Iraq. In retaliation for the criticism, Saddam arrested several students of the Najaf Hawza who were followers of Sadiq al-Sadr. The Supreme Grand Ayatollah responded forcefully by declaring that if the students were not released within one week, he would proclaim a jihad on the government of Saddam Hussein. In the Shia religion, only the Supreme Grand Ayatollah can issue a jihad. Once announced, it becomes the religious duty of all Shia to attack the target of the jihad – even if it means death. This declaration put Saddam in a precarious position. If he relented, he would lose face in front of the world's Shia. If he didn't, it would surely lead to civil war and his eventual demise. Saddam was in a predicament.

On Friday of the same week (Feb. 18, 1999), Supreme Grand Ayatollah Sadiq al-Sadr and his sons Mustafa and Muamel were coming out of the Mosque of Kufa in Najaf when unknown assailants attacked and killed them. Immediately, there were worldwide protests against Saddam, who denied any involvement. Within a short time, he had police arrest several young men who claimed they were acting on behalf of Grand Ayatollah Sistani. However, allegations of Sistani's involvement were so preposterous no one took them seriously. The Supreme Grand Ayatollah

¹⁰ Several popular Western websites such as Wikipedia incorrectly state that Baqr al-Sadr “is credited with first developing the notion, later put in operation in Iran, of having western style democratic elections, but with a body of Muslim scholars to ensure all laws corresponded with Islamic teachings.” This is solely the philosophy of Ayatollah Khomeini and not Baqr al-Sadr. As a result of Baqr al-Sadr's popularity within the Shia world, Iran has worked tirelessly to characterize him as a follower of the principals of the *Waliyat al-faqih*, this is simply misinformation intended to sway support for Iranian political objectives. When Maqtada al-Sadr began his religious studies in 2007, the Persian influence in Najaf was exceptional. How this will influence Maqtada's interpretation of his father's and his uncle's work remains to be seen.

Sadiq al-Sadr left behind two sons: Ali al-Sadr, who died of illness in 2004, and Moqtada al-Sadr, who would survive to carry on the Sadr legacy despite being only 26 years old at the time.

Like the Hakim brothers before him, Moqtada al-Sadr lost most of his family to the ruthlessness of Saddam Hussein. However, unlike the Hakim brothers, Moqtada al-Sadr did not embrace Persian interests. His affiliation with Iran was simply a case of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Somewhat like the affiliation of Khomeini and Shah Pahlavi against Mossadegh in the 1950s. From 1999 until the invasion in 2003, there were many strange bedfellows including the United States, Iran, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

THE SECOND GULF WAR

The successful invasion by the U.S.-led Coalition in March 2003, brought with it Abdul Majid al-Khoei. The son of a former Supreme Grand Ayatollah, Khoei who was hailed as a proWestern moderate who could unite the country in the aftermath of the invasion. However, Khoei, who still enjoyed some support among the people based upon his participation in the 1991 Shia uprising, was looked upon with jaundiced eyes by many other Shia. After his departure in 1991, Iran had waged a extensive propaganda campaign against Khoie; painting him as a traitor who took a fortune in money and ran away to England rather than stay to fight Saddam. Therefore, to many, Khoei was viewed as a traitor.

On April 5, 2003, Khoei entered the city of Najaf with US forces. He immediately began acting as “Governor of Najaf,” setting up an office in the Shrine of the Imam Ali. This presumptiveness offended many who viewed Khoei as he had been painted by the Iranians. Among those who were less than impressed was Moqtada al-Sadr.

The Shrine of the Imam Ali was protected and maintained by the “Servant of the Shrine,” who was the “keeper of the keys.” For more than 400 years the Servant of the Shrine had been in the hands of the family of al-Kilidar (Persian for “Key Keeper”). At the time of Khoei’s arrival, the Servant was Haidar Wahab Raiffee al-Kilidar, who had been funneling millions of dollars generated by the Shrine to Saddam in exchange for safeguarding his position. Therefore, most Shia viewed as a Saddamist and Ba’athist sympathizer.

On April 11, 2003, a rogue group of young men – loosely affiliated with Moqtada al-Sadr, appeared at the Shrine and demanded that Khoei turn over al-Kilidar. Khoei refused and the men departed. A short time later, they returned fully armed and started shooting. Armed with only a 9-mm pistol, Khoei returned limited fire. Sheik Mustafa al-Yakobi, a senior advisor to Moqtada al-Sadr, telephoned Khoei to say that if he turned over Kilidar, the assailants would leave peaceably. Khoei allegedly refused stating he would not allow anyone to be killed at the holy Shrine.

Yakobi gave his word that nothing would happen to Kilidar until he was brought before the religious court. Given little choice, Khoei accepted the terms, which sealed the fate of both men. Al Kilidar was killed immediately upon exiting the building. Khoei ran away from the shrine to a nearby house – the very house of Moqtada al Sadr. There are allegations that as Khoei begged for his life Moqtada told the crowd, “Look to that Persian and the son of a Persian who is trying to rule us – take him away.” The crowd then reportedly descended upon Khoei, stabbing and kicking him, and eventually pulling him by his leg to a nearby shop where he was shot point blank in the

head. Statements by other witnesses say that it was Yakobi who addressed the crowd. Exactly what transpired will probably never be known definitively.

THE RISE OF MOQTADA AL-SADR

Following Khoei's death, the Coalition, influenced by Ahmed Chalabi, pressed the Iraqi judiciary to indict Moqtada al-Sadr, who by this time had been branded by the Western media as a young firebrand leader of Iraq's nascent insurgency. An investigation conducted by the Chief Judge for the Central Criminal Courts of Iraq concluded that there was insufficient evidence to sustain a warrant. Despite this legal determination, the US-led Coalition offered its protection and assistance to any judge in Najaf who would indict Moqtada al-Sadr. The "assistance" package included a transfer to the larger and more prestigious Baghdad Court, a promotion, and relocation to the US in the event the security situation in Iraq became untenable. Raed Johi, a junior judge in the Najaf court, agreed to issue the arrest warrant.¹¹

No action against Moqtada was taken for more than a year. In September of 2004, elements of the Iraqi Ministry of Defense were sent to arrest him. As news of the pending arrest leaked out, elements loyal to Moqtada surrounded the house of Supreme Grand Ayatollah Sistani. Although they had been hostile to Sistani for years, they stated that they were surrounding Sistani for his "own protection." There was a clear insinuation that if Moqtada were arrested, Sistani would be killed. It is not clear whether Moqtada condoned the actions of the armed group, although evidence indicates that he did. Fortunately, the arresting agents were not Coalition but Iraqi forces who grasped the severity of the situation and withdrew. This is perhaps the closest Iraq ever came to outright religious civil war, and worked to catapult Moqtada to greater notoriety among Iraq's poorer and disenfranchised Shia population

It must be pointed out, that in the event of Sistani death, the order of succession would see Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Sayyid al-Hakim assume his role as Supreme Grand Ayatollah, Al-Hakim is the nephew of former Supreme Grand Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim whose his cousins, the Hakim brothers, founded SCIRI and its Badr Brigade. Very importantly, al-Hakim supports the

Waliyat al-faqih and could conceivably accept the self-proclaimed Iranian Supreme Grand

Ayatollah Sayyid Ali Khamenei – the current Iranian "Deputy of the Imam" – as the head of all the world's Shia. This would transfer the ability to declare jihad and other powers from the Supreme Grand Ayatollah in Najaf to the "Supreme Leader" of Iran, thus fulfilling Khomeini's dream of Persian control over the Shia. The enormous significance of this, while seemingly lost in US foreign policy, is clearly understood by Iran.

¹¹ Raed Johi was subsequently elevated from a level 4 judge to a level 2 judge and transferred to Baghdad. Eventually he became the spokesman and Chief Investigative Judge of the Iraqi Special Tribunal, and eventually went to Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania as a lecturer, only to return to Iraq in 2011 in order to claim his judicial retirement.

CREATION OF THE JAISH AL-MAHDI ARMY

The Mahdi is associated with the Islamic belief of a “redeemer” who will bring ultimate justice and turn the world into a perfect Islamic society before the final Day of Judgment. The concept of the Mahdi is central to understanding modern Islamic fundamentalists. This concept is so ingrained in the Shia psyche that discussions of politics, society, philosophy, government, and even economics must take it into consideration.

The world’s foremost authority on the Mahdi was Moqtada’s father, Supreme Grand Ayatollah Sadiq al-Sadr, who authored a four-volume *Encyclopedia of the Imam Mahdi*, as well as several other books and articles on the subject. This preoccupation with the Mahdi was not confined to the father. As a young boy, Moqtada al-Sadr would walk for hours among the gravestones in the *Valley of Peace* in Najaf in the hopes of seeing or talking with The Mahdi.¹² Despite huge tragedies in his life, Moqtada has not lost his passion for The Mahdi. So it was only fitting that he named his organization the Mahdi Army, which was not an army at all but more a confederation of gangs, the members of which had little or no military training. Through the passage of time, the experience of their crimes, and weapons from Iran, the Mahdi Army (now known as the Promised Day Brigade) has become more adept at carrying out military-type operations that are more often than not, directed toward US forces.

In 2003, Moqtada’s brother-in-law, Riyadh al-Noori, along with Sheik Yakobi, started a weekly newspaper called *Hawza al-Natiqa* or “Speaking Hawza” (as compared to Sistani and his “Quiet Hawza”). The two editors were inciting and militant in the publication frequently calling the US and the Iraqi Governing Council infidels, using the newspaper to call for mass strikes, and taunting Sistani to declare a jihad against the Coalition. Although Moqtada had virtually nothing to do with the publication and absolutely nothing to do with the editorials, al-Noori and Yakobi made sure a photo of Moqtada al-Sadr appeared on the front page of every newspaper, blatantly using Moqtada and the al-Sadr name to further their own political and theological beliefs. Just 30 years old, Moqtada was easily manipulated by these two charlatans.

By October 2003, Ambassador Paul Bremer, Administrator of the Coalition Provisional Authority, viewed the *Hawza al-Natiqa* as a security threat and ordered it closed. With a little prodding by al-Noori and Yakobi, Moqtada announced the establishment of an unarmed militia, the Jaish al-Mahdi, the stated purpose of which was to peaceably spread the word of Moqtada’s father, the deceased Supreme Grand Ayatollah Sadiq al-Sadr. In reality, the Jaish al-Mahdi was to spread the politics and theology of al-Noori and Yakobi.

From October 2003 to November 2004, Jaish al-Mahdi was a loosely organized band of nearly 10,000 military-aged males, who for the most part had no training. This changed dramatically after the transitional government of Prime Minister Allawi authorized a attack on the deeply embedded Sunni insurgents in Fallujah in fall of 2004. With the full weight of the Iraqi Army aligned against them, the Sunni insurgents made a tactical decision to provide free weapons to Jaish al-Mahdi at

¹² The *Valley of Peace* is the burial place of the Imam Ali, husband of Fatima and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed. Anyone buried in the *Valley of Peace* is expected to rise to heaven. It is by far the largest cemetery in the world.

its home base in Najaf, south of Baghdad. Since there were virtually no Iraqi military units between Najaf and Baghdad, the Iraqi Army had to withdraw substantial units away from Fallujah to protect the southern flank of Baghdad. Although there was no clear indication that the Jaish al-Mahdi would attack, the threat was real and could not be ignored. The tactic was successful in reducing the force against the Sunni insurgents.

Simultaneously, the Iranian-controlled SCIRI Party was becoming the predominant political power within many Iraqi government ministries. While American forces bristled at Jaish alMahdi, the Iranians covertly provided it arms and tactics – exploiting Moqtada’s nationalistic tendencies by focusing them on the US. At the same time, SCIRI-controlled elements within the national government lay the blame for virtually every nefarious deed that occurred on Moqtada al-Sadr. It wasn’t long before the US and Moqtada al-Sadr were locked in combat. Against this backdrop, the Iranian-controlled elements bore down on the central government until they controlled or significantly influenced virtually every ministry in the country.

With the unwitting participation of the US, the imperialistic House of Hakim (Iranian/Persian) was nearly victorious over the House of Sadr (Iraqi/Arab). Today, the balance of power amid the world’s 225 million Shia is askew. As a consequence, the *Waliyat al-faqih* has a real likelihood of being imposed on the world’s Shia population. The danger to regional and world security from the power shift that would occur as a result of this transition cannot be overstated. Ironically, the counterbalance to this Iranian/Persian drive is the House of Sadr, the nationalistic tendencies of which will focus on Iran after the withdrawal of American forces.

A MATURING MOQTADA AL-SADR

How susceptible a young and inexperienced Moqtada al-Sadr is to outside manipulation, or how he will respond to regional events is problematic. Recent indications have been surprisingly positive. Following Iraq’s March 2010 election, Nouri al-Maliki failed to gain a majority. As a consequence, he was forced into a political alliance with Moqtada, who through political wrangling, now wields great influence at Iraq’s Ministries of Justice, Human Rights, Planning, and Finance. With the help Baha al-Alarjy, Chairman of the Parliamentary Integrity Committee and ranking member of the Sadr Trend, the Sadrist may also soon control the “independent” Commission on Integrity, which is the primary law enforcement agency dedicated to addressing corruption.

As he gains more legitimate power, Moqtada is showing signs of political maturity. In July 2011 Moqtada al-Sadr threaten to take the US to the International Court if its troops do not leave by December 31, 2011. Contrasted to his previous threats to activate the Jaish al Mahdi or the Promised Day Brigade, this was a paradigm shift. Additionally, he recently warned his followers, “I want people to abide with the orders of the security services and respect checkpoint procedures.” He went on to call upon the security services to take appropriate action against offenders. Most importantly, he called for his followers to engage in a new commitment to ethics and Islamic laws.

Yet Moqtada’s dedication to ethics seems to be political posturing to some degree – as he was calling for a new commitment to ethics and Islamic laws, he was pushing to get at least 50 of his ardent supports who had been convicted of terrorist activities freed from prison. These and other contradictory actions reflect the conflicts that continually appear in his maturation process. As the

controlling power at the Ministries of Justice and Human Rights, he must promote respect and adherence to the rule-of-law or he will undermine his own power. At the same time, his tribalistic tendencies require loyalty to those who were his supporters despite their having been convicted of terrorism, kidnapping, and murder.

Ironically, as Moqtada gains more power in the government, he may be losing, or has already lost control of some of the more radical fringe elements within Jaish al Mahdi. In December 2010 he felt compelled to issue orders demanding strict obedience to the chain-of-command within Jaish al Mahdi. By July 2011, the admonition had moved to complete renunciation. Under his specific direction, on July 29, 2011, imams and preachers across Baghdad and southern Iraq were instructed to renounce “secessionists” and “saboteurs” who refused to obey the office of Moqtada al-Sadr. While these radicals will inevitably attack US interests in Iraq under his name, it is more likely that they are rogue and not operating under Moqtada’s auspices. It is simply not in his interest to continue destabilizing terrorist activities.

When Moqtada al-Sadr began his religious studies in 2007, the Persian influence in Najaf was already very strong. How this will influence his interpretation of his uncle’s work remains to be seen. However, US foreign policy must nurture the positive aspects recently demonstrated by Moqtada, as well as show respect for the historical position of the House of Sadr. While Moqtada remains a convenient whipping boy for all that has gone wrong in Iraq, perpetuating this belief without acknowledging Iran’s strategic objectives and manipulation is simply demagoguery. To salvage some modicum of success in Iraq, the US must reject partisan ideologues and provide realistic diplomacy that is centered on strategic, long-term objectives and not short-term, political results. Therefore, the US must devise a strategic plan for the Middle East that incorporates the historical and religious significance held by the House of Sadr.



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