

# **IRAQ'S CIVIL WAR, THE SADRISTS AND THE SURGE**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS</b> .....	<b>i</b>
<b>I. INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>II. BAGHDAD’S CIVIL WAR AND THE SADRISTS’ ASCENT</b> .....	<b>2</b>
A. HOW THE SADRISTS EXPANDED THEIR TERRITORY .....	2
B. NEUTRALISING THE POLICE.....	4
C. DEALING IN VIOLENCE.....	6
<b>III. THE SADRISTS’ REVERSAL OF FORTUNE</b> .....	<b>8</b>
A. AN INCREASINGLY UNDISCIPLINED MOVEMENT .....	8
B. THE SADRISTS’ TERRITORIAL REDEPLOYMENT .....	10
C. ARE THE SADRISTS SHIFTING ALLIANCES? .....	13
D. A CHANGE IN MODUS OPERANDI.....	16
<b>IV. A SUSTAINABLE CEASEFIRE?</b> .....	<b>18</b>
<b>V. CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>21</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b>	
A. MAP OF IRAQ .....	22
B. ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP .....	23
C. INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP REPORTS AND BRIEFINGS ON THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA .....	24
D. INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP BOARD OF TRUSTEES.....	26

## IRAQ'S CIVIL WAR, THE SADRISTS AND THE SURGE

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The dramatic decline in bloodshed in Iraq – at least until last week's terrible market bombings in Baghdad – is largely due to Muqtada al-Sadr's August 2007 unilateral ceasefire. Made under heavy U.S. and Iraqi pressure and as a result of growing discontent from his own Shiite base, Muqtada's decision to curb his unruly movement was a positive step. But the situation remains highly fragile and potentially reversible. If the U.S. and others seek to press their advantage and deal the Sadrists a mortal blow, these gains are likely to be squandered, with Iraq experiencing yet another explosion of violence. The need is instead to work at converting Muqtada's unilateral measure into a more comprehensive multilateral ceasefire that can create conditions for the movement to evolve into a fully legitimate political actor.

The Sadrists appeared on a steady rise in 2006 and early 2007. They controlled new territory, particularly in and around Baghdad, attracted new recruits, accumulated vast resources and infiltrated the police. But as the civil war engulfed much of the country, Iraqis witnessed the Sadrists' most brutal and thuggish side. Their increasingly violent and undisciplined militia, the Mahdi Army, engaged in abhorrent sectarian killings and resorted to plunder and theft. Militants claiming to be Mahdi Army members executed untold numbers of Sunnis, allegedly in response to al-Qaeda's ruthless attacks, but more often than not merely because they were Sunnis.

The Sadrists were victims of their own success. Their movement's vastly increased wealth, membership and range of action led to greater corruption, weaker internal cohesion and a popular backlash. Divisions within the movement deepened; splinter groups – often little more than criminal offshoots – proliferated. As a result, anti-Sadrism grew, including among Muqtada's Shiite constituency. The U.S. surge, which saw the injection of thousands of additional troops, particularly in Baghdad, worsened the Sadrists' situation, checking and, in some instances, reversing the Mahdi Army's territorial expansion. Finally, in August 2007, major clashes erupted in the holy city of Karbala between members of Muqtada's movement and the rival Shiite Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), which further eroded the Sadrists' standing.

In reaction, Muqtada announced a six-month freeze on all Mahdi Army activities. It applies to all groups affiliated (loosely or otherwise) with the Mahdi Army, and Muqtada reportedly dispatched his most loyal fighters to tame holdouts. Most importantly, his order removed the veil of legitimacy and lifted the impunity that many groups – criminal gangs operating in the Mahdi Army's name and Sadrist units gone astray – had enjoyed.

The ceasefire largely has held and, together with bolstered U.S. and Iraqi military presence in Baghdad, helps account for a dramatic drop in violence. But the respite, although welcome, is both slightly misleading and exceedingly frail. Muqtada's decision likely reflected a pragmatic calculation: that a halt in hostilities would help restore his credibility and allow him to reorganise his forces and wait out the U.S. presence. Their retreat notwithstanding, the Sadrists remain deeply entrenched and extremely powerful in a number of regions. Fleeing military pressure in Baghdad, Mahdi Army fighters redeployed to the south, thereby setting up the potential for an escalation of the class-based confrontation with the U.S.-backed ISCI.

Among Sadrism rank and file, impatience with the ceasefire is high and growing. They equate it with a loss of power and resources, believe the U.S. and ISCI are conspiring to weaken the movement and eagerly await Muqtada's permission to resume the fight. The Sadrism leadership has resisted the pressure, but this may not last. Critics accuse Muqtada of passivity or worse, and he soon may conclude that the costs of his current strategy outweigh its benefits. In early February 2008, senior Sadrism officials called upon their leader not to prolong the ceasefire, due to expire later in the month.

The U.S. response – to continue attacking and arresting Sadrism militants, including some who are not militia members; arm a Shiite tribal counterforce in the south to roll back Sadrism territorial gains; and throw its lot in with Muqtada's nemesis, ISCI – is understandable but short-sighted. The Sadrism movement, its present difficulties aside, remains a deeply entrenched, popular mass movement of young, poor and disenfranchised Shiites. It still controls key areas of the capital, as well as several southern cities; even now, its principal strongholds are virtually

unassailable. Despite intensified U.S. military operations and stepped up Iraqi involvement, it is fanciful to expect the Mahdi Army's defeat. Instead, heightened pressure is likely to trigger both fierce Sadrist resistance in Baghdad and an escalating intra-Shiite civil war in the south.

Muqtada's motivations aside, his decision opens the possibility of a more genuine and lasting transformation of the Sadrist movement. In the months following his announcement, he sought to rid it of its most unruly members, rebuild a more disciplined and focused militia and restore his own respectability, while promoting core demands – notably, protecting the nation's sovereignty by opposing the occupation – through legitimate parliamentary means. The challenge is to seize the current opportunity, seek to transform Muqtada's tactical adjustment into a longer-term strategic shift and encourage the Sadrists' evolution toward a strictly non-violent political actor.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **To Muqtada al-Sadr and the Sadrist Leadership:**

1. Ensure greater discipline and accountability among Sadrist ranks by:
  - (a) prolonging and strictly enforcing the ceasefire; and
  - (b) articulating a clear and comprehensive political program.

### **To the U.S. and the Iraqi Government:**

2. Narrowly circumscribe operations against the Mahdi Army and Sadrist movement by:
  - (a) focusing on legitimate military targets, including armed groups involved in attacks against civilians or U.S. or Iraqi forces, weapon stockpiles and hideouts, or arms smuggling networks;
  - (b) taking action against Sadrist-manned patrols or checkpoints; and
  - (c) tolerating Sadrist activities that are strictly non-military, including those involving education, media, health services and religious affairs.
3. Freeze recruitment into the Shiite *sahwa* (awakening), the U.S.-backed tribe- and citizen-based militia set up to fight the Mahdi Army, and instead concentrate on building a professional, non-partisan security force, integrating vetted Mahdi Army fighters.

### **To Najaf-based Clerics:**

4. Allow Sadrists to visit religious sites in the holy cities as long as they are unarmed and show appropriate restraint.

**Baghdad/Damascus/Brussels, 7 February 2008**

## IRAQ'S CIVIL WAR, THE SADRISTS AND THE SURGE

### I. INTRODUCTION

In July 2006, Crisis Group argued that Muqtada al-Sadr, head of the so-called Sadrist movement, had reached a crossroads.<sup>1</sup> Enjoying few traditional political, social or religious assets, he nonetheless had become an indispensable actor on the Iraqi scene. The movement's paramilitary branch, the Mahdi Army, had developed into an extensive network of loosely integrated units, which controlled large portions of the territory. However powerful, the militia was only one aspect of the Sadrist phenomenon, which more importantly also was the expression of a genuine social movement among Shiites, with deep roots in the impoverished underclass as well as urbanised youth. The Sadrist movement reflected the frustrations and aspirations of a significant portion of the Iraqi people, which would find an outlet either peacefully, through politics, or violently, through armed struggle. How it acted and how others reacted, Crisis Group concluded, would determine whether its role would be that of spoiler or stabiliser.

At the time, Crisis Group underscored three negative dynamics. First, a class struggle between the Sadrists and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI, then known as SCIRI), a party backed by both the U.S. and Iran and representing more conservative Shiite interests, threatened to escalate into intra-Shiite violence. Secondly, an often indiscriminate U.S. military campaign against the Mahdi Army risked persuading the Sadrists that they were being unfairly targeted and that their only option was a military one. Finally, while Muqtada sought to present his movement as one of national resistance that could transcend confessional divides, the Mahdi Army had emerged as one of the most brutal perpetrators of sectarian killing and cleansing in Baghdad and elsewhere.

Muqtada's challenge was to clearly and unequivocally denounce these sectarian attacks and bring order to the Mahdi Army. In return, the U.S. should have restricted its military operations to legitimate targets rather than seek to wipe out the Sadrist militia. The Iraqi government should have encouraged intra-Shiite reconciliation, in particular by

acceding to certain legitimate Sadrist political demands.<sup>2</sup> None of this happened over the next year.

Instead, as this report clearly shows, the Sadrists continued until mid-2007 to be deeply involved in the sectarian civil war, notably in Baghdad. In some instances, militants claiming to belong to the Mahdi Army executed untold numbers of Sunnis simply because they were Sunnis. As it engaged in acts of unprecedented brutality and pressure from coalition forces intensified, the Sadrist militia broke up into a multitude of uncontrollable sub-units. At the same time, intra-Shiite tensions deepened, giving rise to a series of political assassinations, as well as to dramatic clashes in the holy city of Karbala. The present situation, and most importantly Muqtada al-Sadr's August 2007 decision to freeze his movement's armed activity, however, offer yet another opportunity – which this time ought not to be missed.

<sup>1</sup> Crisis Group Middle East Report N°55, *Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?*, 11 July 2006.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, p. ii.

## II. BAGHDAD'S CIVIL WAR AND THE SADRISTS' ASCENT

Although the U.S.-led surge undoubtedly has contributed to a dramatic reduction in violence, most notably in Baghdad, its precise role remains difficult to assess. The rift between Sunni insurgent groups and al-Qaeda, greater separation between confessional groups as a result of sectarian cleansing and an apparent shift in Iran's behaviour all likely are important factors. Of at least equal significance is Muqtada al-Sadr's decision to decree a unilateral ceasefire.

Indeed, during the first half of 2007, sectarian cleansing was continuing in some of Baghdad's neighbourhoods, such as Hurriya, notwithstanding the fencing off of numerous areas with blast walls and checkpoints.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, as late as August 2007, the Sadrists were still extending their control over Baghdad, at least at the margins.<sup>4</sup> This process came to a full halt, and levels of violence notably decreased, once Muqtada al-Sadr froze the activities of the movement's militia, the Mahdi Army.

Increased U.S. pressure coinciding with the surge is not the least significant explanation for the ceasefire decision, but there are more. In the period preceding the surge, the Sadrist movement experienced its most successful but also, ultimately, one of its most debilitating moments. Though they never quite achieved hegemonic control over the entire city – there always remained mixed neighbourhoods and a few Sunni enclaves, as well as areas dominated by the Mahdi Army's Shiite rival, the Badr Corps – the Sadrists were remarkably determined and efficient in progressively extending their control over most of its suburbs.

Central actors in an intensifying civil war, they overreached, resorting to brutal methods, exploiting their new power through corruption and theft and alienating their own constituency. Faced with these reversals at the same time as more aggressive U.S. troops, Muqtada made a tactical shift, calling on the Mahdi Army to halt its operations. In the following months, whatever mixed neighbourhoods the Sadrists had controlled through mobile units they lost to combined U.S. and government forces, marking a serious setback to their strategy.

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<sup>3</sup> In April 2007, the U.S. began implementing a controversial policy of creating the equivalent of "gated communities". Despite initial Iraqi discontent, it was progressively extended throughout the capital. Anthony Cordesman. "Securing Baghdad with Gated Communities", Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 20 April 2007.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance, "Assessing the 'Surge': A Survey of Baghdad Neighborhoods", *The New York Times*, 6 September 2007.

## A. HOW THE SADRISTS EXPANDED THEIR TERRITORY

The Mahdi Army's expanded control over Baghdad must count as one of the more spectacular outcomes of the civil war that engulfed the capital throughout much of 2006 and 2007. Despite myriad obstacles and continuous U.S. pressure against an enemy it viewed as a priority target, the Sadrists managed during that period to extend their domination far beyond their Sadr City stronghold on the east bank of the Tigris River. Whereas in mid-2006 the city appeared headed toward a split between a predominantly Shiite east bank (Rusafa) and a predominantly Sunni west bank (Karkh), significant Sadrist inroads in Karkh challenged this neat division.

Sadrist advances were far from haphazard. Rather, they resulted from a classic urban civil war strategy. In late 2006, at a time when fighting between the Mahdi Army and Sunni armed groups in Baghdad's western neighbourhoods was still intense, a Sadrist militant offered an insight into the movement's frontline tactics:

The Sunnis came close to seizing the Hurriya neighbourhood, where they had a strong minority. Until recently, they would murder fifteen to eighteen of our people daily. But young people from Hurriya organised themselves with the help of the Mahdi Army – the only force that could effectively protect Shiites. The neighbourhood is divided into three zones, dubbed one, two and three. We started by cleaning up Hurriya 1 and Hurriya 2. We are in the process of recovering Hurriya 3. That is where the [Sunni] Islamic Party established its headquarters. We attacked it several times and the Sunnis finally shut it down and then began to flee the neighbourhood.

We therefore established our own headquarters on the far edge of Hurriya, near the `Adil neighbourhood. From there, we mounted several raids against `Adil, and we even reached the home of Adnan al-Dulaymi, the Shiites' enemy number one.<sup>5</sup> `Adil is a mixed neighbourhood [with a Sunni majority], but it is essentially middle class. As a result, the local population – young as well as old – neither joined the militias nor mobilised itself to defend the neighbourhood. That opened the door to the Mahdi Army.

As it stands, Sunnis fully control only two neighbourhoods in Karkh – Ghazaliya and `Amiriya.

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<sup>5</sup> Adnan al-Dulaymi heads the *Jabhat al-Tawafuq al-Watani*, which the media has variously translated as the Iraqi Accord Front, Iraqi Accordance Front, Iraqi Concord Front or Iraqi Consensus Front. Crisis Group favours Iraqi Consensus Front as most accurate.

These were mixed areas, but many former army members live there, and so they are relatively cohesive. Sunnis also control Baghdad's vicinity – in the north, Taji; in the south, Mada'in and Mashru` al-Wahda; in the east, Ba`quba and Khan Bani Sa`ad; and in the west, Abu Ghayb and Falluja. But they lost considerable ground within Baghdad itself. Many Sunnis have fled Karkh. The only thing they still have are fake roadblocks at which Shiites are stopped and killed.<sup>6</sup>

Hurriya offers an apt case study of the Sadrists' approach during this expansionist phase. Mahdi Army units based in Sadrist strongholds helped mobilise support and extended their reach to Shiites in disputed areas.<sup>7</sup> Units were dispatched to assist local residents at the same time as the movement opened local offices (*Makatib al-Sayyid al-Shahid*, literally the Martyr's Office, a reference to Muqtada's father) in order to mark its presence, reassure the population and establish deeper and longer-term roots. A Hurriya resident said, "Mahdi Army units coming from Sadr City and Shu`la [a Sadrist neighbourhood close to Hurriya] did much to help Hurriya's Shiites regain control over their neighbourhood. Once there, the Mahdi Army opened offices near `Adil as a first step toward future conquest".<sup>8</sup>

In Sunni majority neighbourhoods it wished to dominate, the Mahdi Army engaged in sectarian assassinations in order to empty them of non-Shiite residents before wresting full control.<sup>9</sup> The militia focused on merchants, businessmen and other prominent Sunni personalities, part of a deliberate and systematic attempt to disrupt their socio-economic

fabric. Conversely, Sadrists sought to co-opt Shiite residents and take advantage of their superior knowledge of the landscape. A Baghdad Sadrist militant observed:

The Mahdi Army's effort to conquer neighbourhoods is highly sophisticated. It presents itself as protector of Shiites and recruits local residents to assist in this task. In so doing, it gains support from people who possess considerable information – on where the Sunnis and Shiites are, on who backs and who opposes the Sadrists and so forth. That's how they penetrated Zayuna and Shara' Falistin, two mixed middle-class neighbourhoods.<sup>10</sup>

Overall, according to a neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood study of Baghdad conducted by Crisis Group in the early stages of the surge, the Mahdi Army had extended its hold over significant sections of the capital. Only a few pockets remained Sunni strongholds. Among these were A`dhamiya – a historic Sunni neighbourhood on the otherwise predominantly Shiite east bank – and Shamsiya and Slaykh, two adjacent areas, as well as the sprawling residential suburbs of `Amiriya, Ghazaliya and Dura.<sup>11</sup> Dura in particular, where Shiites believe Sunnis assembled car bombs intended for use against their neighbourhoods, has long been a Mahdi Army priority.<sup>12</sup> The Sadrists were frustrated there even before the surge by the heavy presence of American troops.<sup>13</sup> Still, even these remaining

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<sup>6</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army fighter, Hurriya, Baghdad, December 2006.

<sup>7</sup> The following incident, which occurred in Na`iriya, is illustrative. "The Mahdi Army put up a huge portrait of Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr which Sunni militants repeatedly blew up. The Sadrists then decided to reinforce it with concrete, and senior Mahdi Army leaders were present at the inaugural ceremony, when a Sunni armed group shot at them. Eight well-known Sadrist leaders were killed. It was a true catastrophe for the Mahdi Army. The Mahdi Army mobilised its units in Sadr City, Shu`la and Fudhayliya in order to track down the perpetrators. The following day they killed tens of Sunnis and dropped their bodies near the portrait. After this incident, a large number of Sunnis were expelled from the neighbourhood", Crisis Group interview, Shiite critic of the Sadrist movement, Na`iriya, Baghdad, February 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hurriya resident, September 2006.

<sup>9</sup> "Mahdi Army fighters would enter Sunni neighbourhoods such as Fadhil [on the east bank of the Tigris] and return with tens of Sunni corpses in their cars' back trunks", Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army commander, Sadr City, Baghdad, September 2007. That said, the Sadrists were unable to take over Fadhil. For a discussion of a massacre that likely involved the Mahdi Army and occurred in the Jihad neighbourhood (which thereafter largely fell under Sadrist hegemony), see Crisis Group Report, *Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr*, op. cit., p. 23.

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<sup>10</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sadrist, Baghdad, September 2007. The Sadrists established a presence in Zayuna and Shara' Falistin, both of which are adjacent to Sadr City, in large part because government forces were absent. However, the two neighbourhoods remained confessionally mixed.

<sup>11</sup> A Sadrist explained the problems the movement faced in Ghazaliya. "For Sunnis, the most important neighbourhood from a strategic point of view is Bakriya, right next to Ghazaliya. Bakriya is where most of the *mujahidin* who are fighting on behalf of Baghdad's Sunnis come from. It is of great significance because the highway that originates in Jordan ends there. Americans often use it, and they know the whole area is full of *mujahidin*. But they don't attack it because they don't want the *mujahidin* to retaliate by targeting U.S. convoys on the highway. It's an implicit bargain. That's why we have been unable to conquer Ghazaliya, which is adjacent to Bakriya. The Mahdi Army is trying to take over Bakriya but it can't. As for `Amiriya, which faces Bakriya, nobody can enter – neither the Iraqi National Guard nor the police. The Sunnis are in full control", Crisis Group interview, brother of a senior Mahdi Army leader, Baghdad, December 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Sadrist sympathisers and Mahdi Army fighters, August 2006.

<sup>13</sup> "The Americans are protecting the neighbourhood, preventing us from killing Dura's *takfiriyyin* [literally excommunicators, a term that describes Sunni extremists, though often used to designate Sunnis more broadly]. What is more, U.S. roadblocks are everywhere and hamper our access", Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army commander, Baghdad, January 2007.

Sunni pockets were largely emptied of their residents and subjected to draconian U.S. security measures, which progressively weakened the hold of Sunni armed groups.

Meanwhile, Baghdad's centre was surrounded by Sadrist-controlled areas, including Sadr City, Sha`b, Sumar and `Adn to the north east, Shu`la, Hurriya, Iskan and Washshash to the north west, Jihad, Abu Tshir and Ma`rifa to the south west, northern Za`faraniya to the south east and Fudhayliya, Mashtal, Khansa and Muthanna, as well as Amin, to the east. The circle was interrupted at only a few points by areas controlled either by the ISCI-affiliated and pro-government Badr Corps (Gri`at, Kadhimiya, Shaltshiya and `Utayfiya to the north and Baghdad Jadida to the east) or Sunni armed groups (A`dhamiya to the north, Ghazaliya and `Amiriya to the west and Dura to the south).

The U.S. surge and, perhaps more importantly, Muqtada al-Sadr's late August decision to freeze all Mahdi Army activities, produced notable changes. Muqtada's order left his militants – for whom territorial expansion had been the main goal and rallying cry – without a clear agenda or sense of direction. As a militant put it in September 2007, "as far as I know, the Mahdi Army's strategy is to maintain and extend its domination over various neighbourhoods, especially in Baghdad. That's it".<sup>14</sup> Besides generalities – insistence on a U.S. withdrawal; opposition to any federal solution that could lead to partition;<sup>15</sup> and rejection of any infringement on national sovereignty<sup>16</sup> – the Sadrist movement has no concrete political goal; virtually all of its recent political decisions have been unrelated to a specific ideological agenda.

Moreover, Sadrist mobile units that had extended the Mahdi Army's control over a number of middle-class mixed areas were forced to withdraw to strictly Sadrist neighbourhoods. Thus Sha`b, Sumar, Iskan, Jihad, Ma`rifa, Mashtal and Muthanna reverted to government control, marking a sharp break from the previous months.

In 2007, the Sadrist bloc withdrew from the broad Shiite alliance that won the 2005 elections, invoking "failure of

the political process and the government's inability to protect its citizens or provide them with public services".<sup>17</sup> In fact, disagreements were of a far more mundane variety, reflecting power struggles between Sadrists and more traditional Shiite parties.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, the April 2007 withdrawal of seven Sadrist cabinet members – purportedly a result of the government's rejection of a specific timetable for the departure of U.S. troops – was motivated by the twin desire to weaken Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki<sup>19</sup> and cleanse the Sadrist movement of some of its more corrupt elements.<sup>20</sup> Ideology and principle were and remain secondary.

## B. NEUTRALISING THE POLICE

The Sadrists' rapid territorial expansion would have been unthinkable without the security apparatus's complicity. Although the movement at first steered clear of the security branches to avoid collaborating with the U.S.-led coalition,<sup>21</sup> things changed dramatically in 2006. The

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<sup>17</sup> Reuters, 12 and 16 September 2007. See also Crisis Group Middle East Report N°52, *The Next Iraqi War? Sectarianism and Civil Conflict*, 27 February 2006. The Sadrist bloc withdrew from parliament twice, purportedly in reaction to government policy. "The first time was in November 2006, after the prime minister travelled to Jordan to meet with President Bush. We objected to the prime minister's decision to extend the occupation for yet another year... On a subsequent occasion, after the second attack against the Samarra' shrine in 2007, we withdrew to protest the government's failure to provide protection", Crisis Group interview, Sadrist parliamentarian, Baghdad, November 2007.

<sup>18</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Shiite Politics in Iraq*, op. cit.

<sup>19</sup> Although they initially supported him, the Sadrists came to view Maliki as hostile, particularly with the onset of the surge. Tensions grew as Maliki appeared to back military operations and issued increasingly harsh anti-Sadrist statements. See, e.g., Agence France-Presse, 9 July 2007. "The Sadrists left the government in order to undermine Nuri al-Maliki. Ever since he delivered his speech comparing Sadrists to Baathists, they have done everything possible to isolate him and accelerate his demise. They miss his predecessor, Ibrahim al-Ja`fari who protected and backed them till the end", Crisis Group interview, ISCI supporter, Baghdad, September 2007.

<sup>20</sup> "I think Muqtada al-Sadr ordered his cabinet members to withdraw because he had received numerous complaints against them. They are unbelievably corrupt. Some people went so far as to tell Muqtada al-Sadr that the health ministry was more corrupt under the leadership of Muslim Sadrists than it was under the helm of secular Baathists", Crisis Group interview, Sadrist militant, Baghdad, September 2007. "Personally, I think Muqtada was right. Our neighbour became director general in the health ministry overnight. He terrorised people and quickly became one of our neighbourhood's wealthiest men, even though he is illiterate!" Crisis Group interview, anti-Sadrist Baghdad resident, Baghdad, September 2007.

<sup>21</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr*, op. cit., p. 14.

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<sup>14</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sadrist militant, Baghdad, September 2007. A Shiite merchant affiliated with the rival Badr Corps added: "You want to know what the Sadrists' strategy is? It is simply to take control of Iraq", Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, September 2007.

<sup>15</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr*, op. cit., p. 15. Muqtada strongly opposes ISCI's vision of federalism. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°70, *Shiite Politics in Iraq: The Role of the Supreme Council*, 15 November 2007; and "Sadr lambasts call for federalism", Agence France-Presse, 15 October 2007.

<sup>16</sup> In July 2007, the Sadrist parliamentary bloc (32 deputies) balked at a draft oil law on the grounds that it violated the country's sovereignty, *Middle East Times*, 5 July 2007.



Sadrists gradually penetrated the interior ministry, which had been a Badr preserve since the formation of Iraq's first elected government in May 2005. In early 2007, a police colonel confided, "Mahdi Army members are being recruited into the police rank and file. Officers are afraid of mere cops, fearful they might be Sadrists. It's true that high-level personnel belong to the Badr corps, but the Sadrists are becoming more and more important".<sup>22</sup> The U.S. had trumpeted 2006 as the "year of the police", during which its ranks would be cleansed and its capacity strengthened;<sup>23</sup> instead, the police increasingly became an instrument in a bitter sectarian war.

The police played a central part in the Mahdi Army's strategy in several ways: providing legal cover to Sadrist fighters even when these clearly engaged in sectarian attacks;<sup>24</sup> allowing the militia to operate with impunity; steering clear of Sadrist-controlled areas; and letting its militants pass through checkpoints unimpeded.<sup>25</sup> In January 2007, a police colonel lamented: "Unfortunately, the police play no role in Sadrist-controlled neighbourhoods. Sadr City police do virtually nothing. What happens defies all logic: Mahdi Army members punish the police, not the

other way around".<sup>26</sup> As a result of their complacency and impotence, the police often were referred to as undertakers (*daffana*) – good only to collect dead bodies.<sup>27</sup>

Most egregiously, and until Muqtada's call for a freeze in militia activities, the police appear to have taken an active part in the civil war in close coordination with the Mahdi Army. They purportedly retaliated against Sunni attacks even when they were not targeted<sup>28</sup> and handed over Sunni detainees to Sadrists who could arbitrarily execute them.<sup>29</sup> The most conscientious police officers were seriously hampered and disturbed by the Sadrists' influence over both their subordinates and superiors. An officer said in May 2007:

The Mahdi Army's role in the police is expanding. For example, I discovered one day that a mere policeman I was supposed to supervise was collecting bribes and was highly corrupt. I questioned him and tried to impose some rules. The next day, I was harshly reprimanded by my boss, an influential general in the interior ministry. He said, "I don't want any problems with the Mahdi Army". It's incredible: a general fears a mere policeman because he is a Sadrist or has ties to the Mahdi Army. Anyway, I had to apologise to the policeman! The ministry's penetration by Sadrists undermines any security plan. For instance, when I go on a mission, I begin by confiscating my subordinates' mobile phones because they are the ones who will pass on information to the militias. It's simple: whenever an officer lets the policemen keep their cell phones, we run into trouble.<sup>30</sup>

In backing the Sadrists, the police ran up against the National Guard (*al-Haras al-Watani*), which showed greater affinity to Sunnis.<sup>31</sup> In mid-2007, a Sadrist said:

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<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group interview, police colonel, Baghdad, January 2007. He added: "Sadrist and Badrist members of the ministry clash from time to time, but for the most part each side respects the other's vital interests. As for Sunni officers, many resigned after the Mahdi Army began to wage a systematic assassination campaign", Crisis Group Report, *Shiite Politics in Iraq*, op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> Zalmay Khalilzad, then the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, stated in December 2005 that the following year would be the "year of the police", saying, "you can't have someone who is regarded as sectarian as minister of the interior. You need to have someone who has the confidence of all communities", American Forces Press Service, 20 December 2005. The interior minister, Jawad al-Bolani, reportedly has close ties to the Sadrist movement, Crisis Group interviews, Mahdi Army fighters, Baghdad, September 2007. In the past, he was affiliated with several different Shiite parties, including Muhammad al-Ya'qubi's Fadhila party, Nouri al-Maliki's Da'wa, Abdul Karim Mahud's Hizbollah and Ahmad al-Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress. According to one of Chalabi's aides, he has become a close adviser to Muqtada al-Sadr, Crisis Group interview, Amman, May 2006.

<sup>24</sup> The police reportedly dispatched reinforcements to help the Mahdi Army during the sectarian clashes in Diyala province. "The interior ministry has entire squadrons of Mahdi Army members. Some of them were sent to Diyala in order to fight the terrorists", Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army fighter, Baghdad, September 2007. In Sadrist terminology, "terrorist" can and often is used to designate Sunnis as a whole.

<sup>25</sup> "The Iraqi police and army typically can establish a checkpoint only after they have received authorisation from the Mahdi Army or some other militia. The deal generally is this: if a car is carrying weapons for a designated militia, it can go through. In any event, the police have deplorable equipment and weaponry. The other day, we were forced to set up a checkpoint even though we had no weapons!" Crisis Group interview, police colonel, Baghdad, May 2007.

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<sup>26</sup> Crisis Group interview, police colonel, Baghdad, January 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army fighter and Hurriya residents, Baghdad, December 2006.

<sup>28</sup> "Two to three weeks ago, the Sunnis attacked a Sadrist office in Hurriya. The police asked us to prepare a joint counter-attack. More generally, we have no problem with the police – only with the Americans and their *allasa* ["informers" in Sadrist terminology]", Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army fighter, Hurriya, Baghdad, December 2006.

<sup>29</sup> "A few months ago, the police arrested two Sunni snipers who were hiding in Rashid Street. They contacted the *Maktab al-Sayyid al-Shahid* to request that the Mahdi Army come get them and kill them. Why? Because had the snipers been questioned by a Sunni police officer, they would have been released. Had they been questioned by the U.S., the Americans would have respected their human rights, and that's rubbish", Crisis Group interview, Sadrist, Baghdad, September 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Crisis Group interview, police colonel, Baghdad, May 2007.

<sup>31</sup> Complicity between the Mahdi Army and the interior ministry appears to be stronger than that between the National Guard and

The interior ministry, led by a Shiite, and the defence ministry, led by a Sunni conspire against one another – all the more so since many Shiites were expelled from the National Guard after the appointment of the current defence minister. Sunni units of the National Guard, acting alongside U.S. forces, tend to target the Mahdi Army. If a Sadrist is arrested at a checkpoint manned by the National Guard, the Mahdi Army will destroy it the following day. But we have yet to see a confrontation opposing the Mahdi Army and the police.<sup>32</sup>

Overall, and partly due to their internal divisions and complicity with various armed groups, Iraq's security forces did little to slow sectarian cleansing in Baghdad. Units were often deployed in areas where they enjoyed good relations with the dominant militia – the very militia they were supposed to rein in and dismantle. A Sadrist student observed:

When the interior ministry's Special Forces were ordered to search Sadr City, they refused. For its part, the National Guard cannot enter Sadr City. In [the predominantly Sunni West Bank area of] Karkh, in Baya` or `Amil for example, the government tried to overcome the issue of complicity with militias by dispatching Kurdish units (*peshmergas*). The Mahdi Army attacked them, and the Kurds ultimately withdrew.<sup>33</sup>

Another Sadrist, speaking in June 2007, said:

They sent a Kurdish unit to Hurriya, but they couldn't do much. That same rule applies elsewhere. A Shiite National Guard unit cannot work in `Adil. A Sunni unit cannot succeed in Hurriya. Each unit responds to different orders sent by different quarters. There is no coordination. Moreover, many senior officers cooperate with militias, a relationship that gives rise to a sort of *modus vivendi*.<sup>34</sup>

Even in early September 2007, at the height of the surge, Mahdi Army militants remained confident that security forces were no match, whether as combatants or protectors of the Shiite civilian population. In the words of a Mahdi Army commander:

The Mahdi Army considers itself solely responsible for the safety of our neighbourhoods. Nobody challenges our right to search individuals, whether they are seeking to visit our markets or anywhere else under our control. We also take care of families

that have been expelled. We find them lodging and provide them with compensation. Nobody else does that.<sup>35</sup>

The self-confidence proved misplaced. Buoyed by their military success and accumulation of resources and police complicity, the Sadrists overreached, engaging in self-destructive behaviour. Soon, amid the surge and Muqtada's decision to freeze his militia's activities, most of their militants were forced underground.

### C. DEALING IN VIOLENCE

The Mahdi Army's territorial control and heavy involvement in the civil war became an important source of revenue. The militia sold its services to merchants and businesspeople seeking protection.<sup>36</sup> Assassinating Sunnis also became highly lucrative:

Many of the unemployed joined the Mahdi Army. The more daring *sakakin* [term used by Sadrists to describe fighters seeking to eliminate Sunnis] can become rich in four or five days. They seize the victim's belongings – money, gold, car and so forth. They invoke a fatwa [religious edict] according to which "it is legal to seize the goods of those who oppose Ali's caliphate". There is even an exhibit featuring such cars – and being sold at far lower prices than regular ones.<sup>37</sup>

In some instances, the murderers went so far as to contact families to sell them their relatives' remains. One family told Crisis Group their own tragic story. Their son's kidnappers had called; in exchange for \$10,000, they said they would hand the body over to the father if he drove his car, with the cash, to a designated spot. The father did as told. He too disappeared, along with the car and ransom money.<sup>38</sup>

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Sunnis, Crisis Group interview, Sadrist student, Baghdad, June 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sadrist, Baghdad, June 2007.

<sup>33</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sadrist student, Baghdad, June 2007.

<sup>34</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sadrist, Hurriya, Baghdad, June 2007.

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<sup>35</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army commander in Sadr City, Baghdad, September 2007.

<sup>36</sup> "If, as an entrepreneur, I want to start a project in a neighbourhood controlled by the Mahdi Army, I have to ask for permission at the Sadrist office (*Maktab al-Sayyid al-Shahid*). Otherwise, I cannot work. The Mahdi Army requires such authorisation and collects a fee in exchange. They are very pragmatic and get money from everybody, including petrol stations", Crisis Group interview, Shiite entrepreneur, Baghdad, May 2007. See also Crisis Group Report, *Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr*, op. cit., p. 19.

<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sadrist, Baghdad, May 2007. See also Crisis Group Report, *Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr*, op. cit., p. 19.

<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group interview, Damascus, June 2007. Both bodies were subsequently recovered.

Sectarian cleansing in Baghdad also provided the Sadrists with vast real estate, which generated considerable revenue. A young Sadrist intellectual explained:

Despite intensified U.S. raids and arrests, the Mahdi Army bolstered its influence and role, largely thanks to its limitless sources of income. It took over numerous Sunni possessions, including houses, villas and stores that belonged to the Baghdad bourgeoisie that prospered from the time of the Ottoman Empire. Sadrist offices [*Makatib al-Sayyid al-Shahid*] manage and rent these assets, thus generating colossal fortunes.<sup>39</sup>

Sadrist offices were critical in this respect. By channelling and then redistributing resources, they gave Muqtada al-Sadr's movement a central economic role in neighbourhoods falling under its sway. Arguably of greatest importance, they controlled the network of petrol stations which provide such staple commodities as petrol, propane and kerosene. They also established an extensive individual contribution system to mitigate the effects of violence on the Sadrists' social base.

As long as he has a job, every Mahdi Army member must donate 10,000 dinars [around \$8] monthly to the *Maktab al-Sayyid al-Shahid*. The office uses the money to pay displaced families as well as families of martyrs who died in combat. This strengthens the Mahdi Army because any Shiite intending to fight the Americans would rather do it through the militia; that way, he makes sure his family will be compensated should he die. Likewise, anyone who found work thanks to the *Maktab al-Sayyid al-Shahid* – for example at one of the Sadrist-run ministries – must give it 50,000 dinars per month [around \$40].<sup>40</sup>

It is no surprise, then, that in Baghdad the Sadrists gained additional legitimacy and influence from 2006 through the first half of 2007 wherever violence was most intense. In a city virtually abandoned by the state, Sadrist offices in several neighbourhoods became the last and only resort for Shiite residents in need of help. Shiites living in remote areas requested military support;<sup>41</sup> displaced families asked for resettlement assistance;<sup>42</sup> even feuding couples turned

to the *maktab* for arbitration.<sup>43</sup> The Mahdi Army offered security by protecting the perimeter of neighbourhoods and emptying some of all Sunni presence; as a result, its popularity grew well beyond its natural social constituency (chiefly composed of young and more disadvantaged Shiites).<sup>44</sup> Shiites of all backgrounds experienced fear, hatred and a powerful desire for sectarian revenge and were thus drawn to the Sadrists. This included both members of the middle class and fighters from the Badr Corps who were loyal to ISCI, the Sadrists' principal rival.<sup>45</sup>

Baghdad's most intense period of sectarian fighting gradually came to an end by mid-2007. The process was incremental and did not affect all neighbourhoods at once; in many instances, it simply reflected completion of sectarian cleansing. But it placed the Mahdi Army in a relatively awkward position. The sectarian confrontation had provided it with important material and symbolic resources; these began to dry up precisely at a time when the Sadrists' territorial reach had extended far beyond its natural boundaries (Sadr City and a handful of neighbourhoods of relatively similar social makeup, such as Shu'la and Washshash). Pressure on the Mahdi Army also was stepped up as U.S. forces reached full deployment and, angered at the militia's brutality and corruption, increasing numbers of Shiites turned against it. This dramatic shift in the conflict's dynamics presented the movement with significant challenges.

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Crisis Group interview, Sadrist fighter, Shu'la, Baghdad, February 2007.

<sup>43</sup> "In the absence of the state, everyone resorts to the *Maktab al-Sayyid al-Shahid*. The other day, for example, a woman lodged a complaint against her husband because he had married another woman", Crisis Group interview, brother of Mahdi Army commander for Karkh, Baghdad, December 2006.

<sup>44</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr*, op. cit.

<sup>45</sup> "Luckily, we have the Mahdi Army because our neighbourhoods owe them our security. You have to understand that the Sunnis initiated the sectarian cleansing and forced displacement. They started to expel minority Shiite populations from Tall `Afar, Mosul, Habbaniya, Abu Ghraib and elsewhere. Every action produced a reaction. The Shiites' reaction exceeded the Sunnis' action. Today, Shiites recovered all mixed areas [a gross but revealing overstatement] and are taking control of Baghdad. Sunnis cannot resist because we are the majority", Crisis Group interview, ISCI sympathiser, Kadhimiya, Baghdad, December 2006. "Violence is pervasive and unfortunately has even reached the health sector. Colleagues of mine who worked at the Nu'man hospital in A`dhamiya for seven years were killed because they were Shiite. No Shiite can seek care in Sunni-neighbourhood hospitals and vice versa. I am not a member of the Sadrist current, but the Sadrists are only a reaction. The Sunnis committed the first action", Crisis Group interview, Shiite doctor, Baghdad, February 2007.

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<sup>39</sup> Crisis Group interview, young intellectual close to the Sadrist movement, Baghdad, May 2007.

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army fighter, Baghdad, September 2007.

<sup>41</sup> "Even tribal chiefs turned to the Mahdi Army for weapons and military expertise. In one instance, they came from an area adjacent to a small Sunni village from which they came under continuous attack", Crisis Group interview, brother of Mahdi Army commander for Karkh, Baghdad, December 2006.

<sup>42</sup> In Shu'la neighbourhood, for example, the Mahdi Army helped resettle families which had been expelled from nearby 'Adil,

### III. THE SADRISTS' REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

#### A. AN INCREASINGLY UNDISCIPLINED MOVEMENT

From the outset, the Sadrist movement has been fluid and unruly, a tendency Muqtada repeatedly sought to address as of late 2004-early 2005. A Mahdi Army commander explained:

After we clashed with the occupation forces in Najaf, Karbala and Baghdad in 2004, Sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr noticed that our forces were weak even as membership was growing. Therefore, he started to reflect on how to control the militia. He formed courts and special units responsible for punishing law-breakers. Over time, the number of fighters who broke away from the leadership grew, and we discovered how difficult it had become to control them. This became particularly apparent in 2006. After the attacks against the Samarra' shrine, we received clear orders not to attack Sunni mosques. We were told to protect Shiite districts from *takfiriyyin* [Sunni extremists; literally, excommunicators] attacks. We sent many reports to our Najaf office explaining that numerous splinter groups had emerged and engaged in brutal retaliations and that fighters who joined them were completely out of control.<sup>46</sup>

In an effort to ensure internal coherence, the movement imposed a unified Friday sermon on Sadrist preachers (*khutbat al-jum'a al-muwahhada*). Members the leadership chose to banish were publicly expelled during Friday prayers – a costly punishment insofar as it entailed loss of Mahdi Army protection.<sup>47</sup> Sadrist militants also claim that the movement formed elite committees and units charged with imposing internal order, including through violent means.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army commander, Baghdad, September 2007. See also Crisis Group Report, *Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr*, op. cit., p. 13.

<sup>47</sup> "A member excommunicated by the sheikh immediately loses his immunity. Since members typically have killed many people, the victims' families seize the opportunity to exact revenge. If a member is expelled for two months, for example, he must survive during that period without Mahdi Army support or protection", Crisis Group interview, Sadrist, Baghdad, June 2007.

<sup>48</sup> In 2007, militants often spoke of the Sadrist Justice Committee (*Lajnat al-Nazaha*) and Golden Brigade (*al-Firqa al-Dhahabiya*). "This [latter] group is in direct contact with the leadership and was established precisely to monitor and punish the most unruly Mahdi Army militants. Its members are not interested

More recently, according to some observers, Muqtada has sought to use the surge as a further opportunity for cleansing his movement, ridding it of notorious troublemakers and giving their names to the government or coalition forces.<sup>49</sup> These accounts remain unconfirmed, though Sadrists point out that Muqtada has not reacted to the arrest of several of the movement's more unruly figures even as he has promptly denounced the detention of his most loyal lieutenants and has generally secured their quick release.<sup>50</sup>

Despite these efforts, discipline remains uneven at best, with groups gravitating around or splintering from the movement. A Mahdi Army commander acknowledged this:

Although Shiites needed the Mahdi Army as a result of the army's and police's weakness, the militia became an instrument of personal interests. Our leaders' inability to control their fighters led to increasing divisions. In Najaf, one of Sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr's aides, Muhammad al-Tabataba'i, formed a splinter group. He is believed to be financed by Iran and was arrested by Iraqi forces a month ago. Ansar al-Husayn is another splinter group, this time in Diwaniya, which also reportedly is financed by Iran. Ahrar Fayha' al-Sadr is yet another example.<sup>51</sup>

Although U.S. military pressure likely helped remove some of the movement's most disruptive militants, it also

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in negotiations. They kill. They often came to Hurriya in order to purify the Mahdi Army", Crisis Group interview, Sadrist, Hurriya, Baghdad, June 2007. Rumours about their activities abound. "An old friend, a Sadrist religious student, told me that Muqtada runs prisons in the Najaf cemetery, which abound with Mahdi Army troublemakers. But it makes no difference. There are so many of them within the Sadrist current", Crisis Group interview, Ayatollah Sistani disciple, Baghdad, October 2007.

<sup>49</sup> "Today, the Mahdi Army is divided between those who obey Muqtada's orders and those over whom he lacks control. I heard that Muqtada even handed over to the interior ministry names of those who belong to the second category to ensure they were arrested", Crisis Group interview, Na'iriya resident, Baghdad, February 2007.

<sup>50</sup> "Not all Sadrist members obeyed Muqtada al-Sadr's orders. The Abu Dur' group, led by Qays al-Khaz'ali, continues to attack Americans and plant explosives, even after al-Khaz'ali's arrest. His relations with Muqtada remain tense, and Muqtada has never demanded his release", Crisis Group interview, Sadrist student, Baghdad, January 2008.

<sup>51</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army commander, Hay al-Amil, Baghdad, September 2007. In late October, Adnan al-Shahmani (former spokesperson for Muqtada al-Sadr), Rahim al-Ugayli (a Sadrist religious figure) and Abdul Mutlib Mahmud (former health minister) announced the establishment of the National Iraqi Gathering. This was the first time a splinter group openly and officially challenged Muqtada's authority. See *al-Itihad*, 26 October 2007.

appears to have been indiscriminate in its targeting. As a result, Sadrists argue, the pressure, which began in mid-2006 and climaxed with the surge, to some extent was counterproductive. As they see it, their efforts at imposing greater cohesion and discipline have been undermined by the U.S. and Iraq's government:

We took note of this lack of discipline and cohesion long ago and have been doing our best ever since. We set up various programs to deal with it, educate our young people, calm them down and keep them busy. We have employment projects in Sadr City, paying people to repaint buildings and clean the streets. But U.S. forces prevent us from fully implementing these plans and projects on the ground. Even civilian members of our movement, who are not in any way involved in military activities, are constantly targeted.

Many committees operate under the *Maktab al-Sayyid al-Shahid*'s umbrella. The Mahdi Army is one of them, but there also are committees on education, media, social health, religious affairs and Friday prayers. The Mahdi Army itself is not wholly and strictly military. But all are targeted. Another problem is that Iraqi politicians who participate in the political process pushed us into a corner. They did this because they know we are an important, popular movement, whereas they are not. So they've strived to undermine us. Most political parties have opposed us, refused dialogue, ignored our demands. And they ridicule us. This doesn't make controlling our militants any easier.<sup>52</sup>

Many veteran Mahdi Army leaders have been killed, detained or forced to flee the capital. The ensuing vacuum has been filled by younger, less experienced militants. Hungry for power and money, they also have turned out to be more willing to shed blood. Starting in early 2007, in neighbourhoods where the perceived Sunni threat had markedly diminished, Shiite residents of Baghdad complained bitterly that the militia's cavalier behaviour and indiscriminate attacks endangered civilians. "Several missiles intended for Sunni neighbourhoods have landed on our schools. One recently killed three young girls. It makes no sense. What happened in Hurriya is that the original Mahdi Army leaders have been arrested or fled. Now, all we have are kids and thugs".<sup>53</sup> Another said:

The thugs who dominate the Mahdi Army in Hurriya don't give a damn about anything. Yesterday, they blew up a U.S. tank. The Americans searched the entire neighbourhood and harassed everybody because of these kids, even though Muqtada just announced that we should back the Baghdad security plan.<sup>54</sup>

As the Mahdi Army consolidated its territorial control and was joined by new recruits, many of its fighters reportedly engaged in gangster-like behaviour, particularly in areas conquered by the Sadrists at the height of the sectarian conflict. They formed small, undisciplined groups seeking their share of war spoils (*ghana'im*). As discipline eroded, rival groups affiliated with the Mahdi Army even fought pitched battles with one another.<sup>55</sup> Their violence increasingly turned against their own Shiite social base, particularly in neighbourhoods that fell under the control of commanders only loosely affiliated with the movement. In June 2007, a Baghdad merchant said:

Their priority has become to seize war spoils from their victims. They take their cars and rent out their homes and buildings. But their targets are not only Sunnis. One of my friends who works at the U.S.-run military academy for Iraqi officers has a brother who is a Mahdi Army commander. The brother informed the Mahdi Army, which summoned my friend. They beat him and stole all his goods. Now, many people fear the Mahdi Army in the same way they feared the Baathists under Saddam Hussein.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sadrist, Hurriya, Baghdad, January 2007.

<sup>55</sup> A Shu'la resident said, "a fratricidal war within the Mahdi Army has been raging. The other day, Mahdi Army members hit one of my friends in the Hurriya neighbourhood. He lodged a complaint with the *Maktab al-Sayyid al-Shahid* in Shu'la. The office then dispatched four Mahdi Army men to summon the suspects to Hurriya. In response, Mahdi Army members from Hurriya attacked the Shu'la envoys. To this date, Mahdi Army members are killing each other in Hurriya over this incident", Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, June 2007. "The problem with the Mahdi Army is that its members are undisciplined and uneducated. My neighbour was a good-for-nothing before he joined the Mahdi Army. Today, he drives around in a convoy with three or four cars for protection. He has become a mini-tyrant because he has gained so much authority. Others like him were murdered by the Mahdi Army after they had established gangs of thieves or kidnappers that operated under the Mahdi Army's name", Crisis Group interview, anti-Sadrist Shiite, Baghdad, February 2007.

<sup>56</sup> Crisis Group interview, merchant, Baghdad, June 2007. A Sadrist described these gangs as comprising a handful of people driving together in four or five cars. "One gang has nothing to do with another. If one Mahdi Army group arrests your brother and you appeal to another group for help, you won't get anywhere. They can't do anything", Crisis Group interview,

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<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Sadrist leader, November 2007.

<sup>53</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sadrist, Hurriya, Baghdad, January 2007. The view was widely echoed by civilians. "Mahdi Army's true leaders have left, were arrested by the U.S. or have been killed. Today, they all are kids who spread chaos everywhere", Crisis Group interview, Baghdad resident, Baghdad, June 2007.

The resulting popular resentment and rejection of the Mahdi Army triggered a bloody and vicious cycle. As Mahdi Army members perpetrated indiscriminate acts of violence, Iraqis in ever greater numbers stepped forward to denounce them; the ensuing wave of U.S. arrests elicited more brutal Sadrist reprisals against the civilian population. In May 2007, a Sadrist commented:

Relations between the Mahdi Army and the population are getting increasingly tense. The Mahdi Army made a lot of enemies by killing those who work with the Americans, translators for example, whether they are Shiite or Sunni. In turn, the victims' friends and families turned on the Mahdi Army and provided the U.S. with names. The Mahdi Army knows that U.S. sweeps and arrests would not be possible without local cooperation.<sup>57</sup>

The civil war thus had a contradictory impact on the Sadrists. On the one hand, it generated considerable material and symbolic resources and enabled the movement to extend its influence beyond its traditional social base. On the other hand, the movement's vastly increased wealth and membership led to both greater corruption and weaker internal cohesion. The net effect, once the surge was underway and sectarian dynamics receded in Baghdad, was to leave the Sadrist movement increasingly exposed, more and more criticised and divided, and subject to arrest.

## **B. THE SADRISTS' TERRITORIAL REDEPLOYMENT**

A variety of factors ultimately checked the Sadrists' territorial expansion in Baghdad while reversing their control over middle-class neighbourhoods. These include increased U.S. and Iraqi presence in the capital, Muqtada's freeze on militia activity, a decrease in Sunni sectarian violence – a key source of Sadrist legitimacy – and an anti-Sadrist backlash among Shiite civilians. Nevertheless,

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Baghdad, May 2007. The same pattern is replicated in other parts of the country. "The situation is very tense in Basra. It can explode at any time because of the multiplicity of actors, officials, religious personalities, politicians and tribal chiefs. Nobody really controls things here. And the Mahdi Army is splintered into several groups, each headed by a different person. The Sadrist current has been extremely divided in Basra. It has become a collection of *za'atit* [irresponsible kids] with no clear strategy, especially since its principal leaders fled. They have become unmanageable", Crisis Group interview, pro-ISCI Basra merchant, Baghdad, September 2007.

<sup>57</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sadrist, Baghdad, May 2007. He added: "Sometimes, tribes intervene if the Mahdi Army kills one of their members. That is what is happening in Kut, a traditionally quiet city. The Mahdi Army took action against police and army members, who also happened to be tribal members. The tribes got involved, seeking revenge for their brethren".

Sadrists remain deeply entrenched and extremely powerful in a number of regions, and the coalition's geographically concentrated presence has left them with ample space within which to redeploy.

At the core of the Sadrists' support are impoverished Shiites whose families took part in the rural exodus of the first half of the twentieth century and migrated to Sadr City, but also to places such as al-Shu'la and Washshash, two Baghdad neighbourhoods on the west bank of the Tigris.<sup>58</sup> Like Sadr City, a vast Sadrist sanctuary of recently urbanised, economically disadvantaged, socially marginalised and politically disenfranchised Shiites, they have since 2003 become Mahdi Army strongholds.<sup>59</sup> So too has Fudhayliya, one of Baghdad's eastern suburbs.<sup>60</sup> In contrast to the situation in other Shiite neighbourhoods, it would be extremely difficult to dislodge the Sadrist movement from these parts of town – and extremely costly to try to do so.

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<sup>58</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°27, *Iraq's Transition: On a Knife's Edge*, 27 April 2004, pp. 22-24; and Middle East Report N°8, *Iraq's Shiites Under Occupation*, 9 September 2003.

<sup>59</sup> Sadr City, al-Shu'la and al-Washshash are known as *sarayif*, areas where a formerly rural population initially built houses out of reeds. Typically neglected by the central government, they traditionally have constituted sources of political opposition and protest. After the 1958 coup against the monarchy, successive regimes pursued urbanisation policies designed to facilitate control and coercion rather than provide basic public services.

<sup>60</sup> Fudhayliya is dominated by several tribes (notably the 'Ugayl, Bani Ka'b and Darraj) which were forced to leave the south in the wake of Saddam Hussein's decision in the 1990s to drain the marshes, which since Ottoman days had served as a sanctuary for the central government's opponents. They have long been the object of prejudice and discriminatory treatment, considered to be socially deviant and disorderly by other Iraqis and pejoratively referred to as *Ma'dan* (a term meant to convey their supposed backwardness). After the destruction of the Samarra` shrines in February 2006, they reportedly engaged in ferocious attacks against Sunnis and coalition forces, leading other Shiites – including Sadrists – to describe them as "barbaric". Crisis Group interviews, Baghdad, September 2007. Mahdi Army units operating in the area are known for their combativeness and zeal in fighting U.S. troops and have become a key component of the Sadrist militia. A Mahdi Army critic said, "Fudhayliya is rife with weapons. Over there, they attack the Americans with such ferociousness that the U.S. sought the tribes' help in negotiating a truce", Crisis Group interview, September 2007. A Baghdad merchant claimed that "Fudhayliya has become the Mahdi Army's focal point. When a problem arises between Sadrist offices from different neighbourhoods, the Fudhayliya office steps in to find a solution", Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, September 2007. In the words of a Baghdad student, "Fudhayliya is the Mahdi Army's headquarters. It makes sense. Given how the *Ma'dan* fight against the Americans, they deserve it! They are very courageous and have no fear. The Americans don't come near it; they bomb it from afar", Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, May 2007.

As anti-Sadrist pressure grew in Baghdad, some of the Mahdi Army's more experienced commanders, fearing arrest, migrated to the south, where the numbers of foreign troops have been on a steep decline.<sup>61</sup> There as well the Mahdi Army holds on to several bastions: Maysan governorate;<sup>62</sup> Basra's more disadvantaged neighbourhoods; and even parts of Kut, a proverbially placid provincial town.<sup>63</sup> A Mahdi Army commander said:

The Mahdi Army is indeed redeploying to the south. We all know that the Americans are tearing down pictures of Sayyid Muqtada in the streets of Baghdad and going after our people because they see us as their enemy number one. So Mahdi Army fighters have been going underground or leaving the capital to avoid falling in the occupiers' hands. I for one often travel to my relatives' house in the south and stay there for some time before coming back. Most of the residents of Shu'la, Sadr city, Hurriya, and Sha'b are from the south, and when they feel they are in danger, they find shelter there. Mahdi Army fighters do the same.<sup>64</sup>

The Sadrist redeployment to the south likely will trigger additional conflict given both deep-rooted animosity between them and the other major Shiite group, ISCI, and the gradual withdrawal of coalition troops, particularly from Basra. For now, both movements' leaderships have shown restraint, keeping lines of communication open and, in October 2007, following the bloody Karbala

battle, reaching a truce.<sup>65</sup> But underlying tensions remain, especially at the rank-and-file level. Citing heightened coalition pressure in Baghdad, Sadrists repeatedly accuse ISCI and its Badr Corps of conspiring with the U.S. to suppress the Mahdi Army. They also see U.S. hypocrisy – backing one Shiite militia against another rather than fighting them all. A Sadrist teacher argued: “The occupying forces have adopted a double standard in their dealings with armed groups. We had understood the surge to target all armed groups, but it soon became apparent that was not the case. It is focused on the Sadrists only”.<sup>66</sup>

Most disturbing to the Sadrists is ISCI's virtual monopoly in – and, in their estimation, tyrannical rule over – the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala.<sup>67</sup> According to them, the Badr Corps is engaged in brutal and arbitrary conduct aimed principally at their sympathisers,<sup>68</sup> while ISCI gives preferential treatment to Iranian pilgrims and real estate investors.<sup>69</sup>

In September, following a series of clashes and assassinations,<sup>70</sup> a Mahdi Army fighter noted:

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<sup>61</sup> See, e.g., Crisis Group Middle East Report N°67, *Where Is Iraq Heading? Lessons from Basra*, 25 June 2007, p. 2.

<sup>62</sup> See Crisis Group Reports, *Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr*, op. cit., p. 5; *Where Is Iraq Heading?*, op. cit., pp. 1-2. According to a Basra merchant, “together with most Basra residents, I discovered after the British withdrawal that coalition forces were only protecting themselves. Their departure didn't change a thing. The Sadrists can celebrate their triumph”, Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, September 2007.

<sup>63</sup> “Most observers believe Kut is calm and quiet. But we control one of its neighbourhoods, al-Zuwarigat, which we have turned into a no-go zone for US and Iraqi forces. Lately, the Americans have had no choice but to bomb it from above. The calm you see at first glance is deceiving. Don't trust it”, Crisis Group interview, Sadrist militant, Baghdad, January 2008.

<sup>64</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army commander, November 2007. “The surge has led fighters to escape to the south if they belong to Shiite militias and to other Sunni zones if they belong to Sunni armed groups. Some of the Mahdi Army fighters who went south started to buy land and houses; this was reflected in a real estate inflation; others set up small businesses, increasing the prosperity of southern cities. But those among them who follow a foreign agenda resorted to violence. They are behind the clashes that took place in Karbala and other cities like Nasiriya, Basra, and Diwaniya”, Crisis Group interview, Sadrist political leader, Baghdad, September 2007. Shiites regularly see a foreign hand (Iranian, U.S. or al-Qaeda) behind intra-Shiite clashes.

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<sup>65</sup> On the origins of this intra-Shiite conflict, see Crisis Group Reports, *Iraq's Shiites Under Occupation*, op. cit.; *Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr*, op. cit.; and *Shiite Politics in Iraq*, op. cit., pp. 18-21. The August 2007 clashes in Karbala are described in *Shiite Politics in Iraq*, op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sadrist teacher at Baghdad University, Baghdad, November 2007.

<sup>67</sup> Sadrists are largely excluded from these cities and must keep a low profile. “In Najaf, it is forbidden to carry portraits of Muqtada al-Sadr, to conduct Sadrist prayers [*al-salawat al-ta'jiliya*, which call upon God to ‘accelerate the reappearance of the Imam al-Mahdi and support his son’ [Sadrists consider Muqtada to be the Mahdi's descendant] or to wear a shroud [a Sadrist practice]. There are as many Badr-affiliated security officers as there are pilgrims”, Crisis Group interview, Sadrist, Baghdad, October 2007. Likewise, the Sadrist movement is barely visible in Karbala.

<sup>68</sup> “Muqtada al-Sadr no longer leads Friday prayers in Kufa [a small town near Najaf where his father used to conduct Friday prayers]. Instead, he dispatches his deputy. ISCI activists detained him in the heart of Najaf and hit him. The news quickly spread among Baghdad Sadrists. In retaliation, the Mahdi Army set fire to ISCI headquarters in the capital. The violence only ended after Muqtada al-Sadr called for calm. Right after that, the government decreed a curfew in Najaf”, Crisis Group interview, Sadrist student, Baghdad, May 2007.

<sup>69</sup> According to a Sadrist, echoing the views of many of his colleagues, “ISCI and the *marja'iyah* [Najaf's religious establishment] mainly promote Iranian interests. They put aside the best hotels, especially those surrounding the mausoleums, for Iranian pilgrims. In contrast, Iraqis have to sleep on the streets”, Crisis Group interview, May 2007. Crisis Group has been unable to verify such claims.

<sup>70</sup> Between June and September 2007, a series of assassinations targeted ISCI governors as well as representatives of Ayatollah Sistani. Although there is of yet no clear evidence, Sadrists are widely believed to have been behind them. See Crisis Group

What we are seeing is just a glimpse of what could happen....These past few weeks give us a relatively clear picture of Iraq's intra-communal conflict. Over the last several days, two Sistani representatives were killed in Diwaniya and Basra. My gut tells me that we were involved in this.<sup>71</sup>

Regardless of what happened and why, the scope and intensity of the August 2007 Karbala confrontation illustrate both the depth of animosity and the potentially devastating consequences of the Sadrist/Badrism conflict.<sup>72</sup> According to press accounts, "hundreds of thousands of pilgrims" fled the holy city, tens of people were killed and hundreds wounded.<sup>73</sup> Sadrists claim that Badr militia members indiscriminately fired upon a crowd of civilians.

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Report, *Shiite Politics in Iraq*, op. cit., p. 20, which lists the victims. The Shiite religious establishment, led by Ayatollah Sistani, is considered closer to ISCI.

<sup>71</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army fighter, Baghdad, September 2007.

<sup>72</sup> Details surrounding the events remain vague and highly contested. See Crisis Group Report, *Shiite Politics in Iraq*, op. cit., p. 20. Sadrists claim that the incident began at a checkpoint manned by Badr fighters. Although they acknowledge that some of their members may well have engaged in provocative behaviour, they claim that Badr security officials discriminated in favour of Iranian pilgrims and sought to search Sadrist dignitaries. A Sadrist said, "there are several competing versions but what is sure is that it involved a clash between Sadrists and Badrists. The Badrists apparently wanted to let the Iranian pilgrims get through before the Iraqis in general and the Sadrists in particular. The Sadrists began to scream 'damn Abdul Aziz al-Hakim [the ISCI leader], damn Sistani, damn Maliki [the prime minister, allied to ISCI]'. The Badrists who were guarding the Karbala mausoleums got excited, and they started to go after the pilgrims. The Sadrists were yelling 'it's an Iranian *fitna* [an attempt to divide Islam]'", Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, September 2007. According to another Sadrist who witnessed the events, "a large number of Mahdi Army groups descended upon Karbala, shouting 'the Sayyid [Muqtada] is a cannon and we are his shells [*al-Sayyid Qadhifa wa Nahnu Sawarikhu*]'. Badr members, with the *Marja'iyah's* blessing, were responsible for protecting the mausoleums and in that capacity were searching the pilgrims. High level Sadrist officials, chiefly the Sada [descendants of the Prophet], refused to be searched by the Badrists who immediately turned violent. That is when the clashes erupted", Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, September 2007. Others went further, denouncing a plot supposedly concocted by the Badrists, the government and – in some versions – Iran. According to this version, the goal was either to discredit the movement by provoking them to overreact or to bring down real estate prices by unleashing violence, thereby enabling the Iranians to buy up city property, Crisis Group interview, Karbala residents, Karbala, October 2007. Conversely, Badrists are quick to point the finger at Sadrists, alleging that their Karbala representatives had wilfully precipitated a clash either alone or in tandem with Ibrahim Ja'fari, the former prime minister and Maliki rival, Crisis Group interviews, Karbala, October 2007.

<sup>73</sup> See Reuters, 29 August 2007.

Photographs and videos clearly show Mahdi Army fighters taking aim at the mausoleums amid pitched battles. ISCI has since used these pictures relentlessly to discredit the Sadrists.<sup>74</sup>

Violence spread beyond Karbala, illustrating possible dynamics of future clashes. The Sadrists called upon their vast pool of supporters in the capital,<sup>75</sup> while the Badrists appealed to the government and, in more symbolic fashion, coalition forces.<sup>76</sup> The Mahdi Army also struck back in Baghdad, where it allegedly burned down its rivals' national headquarters in Shu'la.<sup>77</sup> Meanwhile, in Karbala itself, the confrontation divided the Shiite population along class lines, with residents of poorer neighbourhoods generally siding with the Sadrists and better-off businesspeople supporting ISCI and the religious establishment.<sup>78</sup> According to Sadrist witnesses, the influential bourgeoisie and merchant class from the city centre actively backed the Badr militia,<sup>79</sup> while the more peripheral, suburban areas sympathised with the Mahdi Army.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> "The Badrists freely give out DVDs showcasing the Karbala events in order to turn the pilgrims against the Sadrists. They even have left scorched cars in front of the mausoleums as a constant reminder of what happened", Crisis Group interview, Sadrist-leaning teacher, Karbala, October 2007. In October, during a visit to the mausoleums of Imam Husayn and Imam `Abbas, Crisis Group observed that the damage done to the surrounding wall had yet to be repaired. Pictures of the devastation wrought by the Baathist repression of the 1991 uprising were posted alongside those depicting the current destruction. Above them was a question: "What is the difference between yesterday and today?"

<sup>75</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army militant who participated in the fighting, Baghdad, September 2007.

<sup>76</sup> Coalition forces manifested their presence by dispatching aircraft over the holy city, Reuters, 29 August 2007.

<sup>77</sup> According to a Mahdi Army fighter, "in Shu'la [a Baghdad neighbourhood] the Mahdi Army burned down the ISCI, Sistani and Da'wa [prime minister Maliki's party] headquarters", Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army fighter, Baghdad, September 2007. "Burned down" may in fact simply mean "attacked".

<sup>78</sup> Crisis Group interview, pro-Sadrist teacher, Karbala, October 2007. For background on the Sadrists' and ISCI's social makeup, see Crisis Group Reports, *Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr*, op. cit.; and *Shiite Politics in Iraq*, op. cit.

<sup>79</sup> Karbala's economy largely is based on its status as a holy city; it has spawned a prosperous commerce based on pilgrimage. A Mahdi Army militant who participated in the fighting said, "Karbala's residents by and large backed Badr. The stores that surround the mausoleums did not take in or shelter the Sadrists, to the contrary. They were protecting the Badrists and at times turned against the Sadrists", Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, September 2007.

<sup>80</sup> "Most of Karbala's residents sided with the Badrists. In contrast, the majority of Hay al-Askari [a poor and peripheral neighbourhood of Karbala] residents supported the Mahdi



In the wake of the confrontation, the Sadrist/Badrism split reportedly led to the brutal expulsion of Sadrists from Karbala city – an eerie echo of the sectarian cleansing occurring in Baghdad and elsewhere. The charge remains unsubstantiated, though it was supported by a Karbala-based Iraqi journalist who is not sympathetic to the Sadrists.<sup>81</sup> A Sadrist student said in September:

I just came from Karbala, and it appears that the recent violence has given rise to other forms of intra-communal problems. The Badrists are cracking down on the Sadrists, arresting them and seeking to cleanse Karbala of their presence. One of my friends, a Mahdi Army leader in Karbala, was kicked out along with his family. The Badrists are even arresting pilgrims they suspect of being Sadrist sympathisers.<sup>82</sup>

Sadrists are said to have engaged in brutal behaviour in Karbala. Local police and eyewitnesses claim they committed numerous crimes and assassinations; some media have gone so far as to evoke a Sadrist “reign of terror”.<sup>83</sup> Still, the harsh anti-Sadrist campaign – undertaken without any legal process or protection – only further aggravated the animosity and even hatred of Sadr’s followers toward ISCI and its allies.

### C. ARE THE SADRISTS SHIFTING ALLIANCES?

The Sadrists form a fluid movement, whose relations with local and regional parties generally are ambiguous, often changing and at times incoherent. This pattern reflects shifts in the leaders’ approach, as well as differences between the leadership and its social base. Thus, while Sadrist officials engage in various tactical adjustments, the worldview of the Shiite underclass that is Muqtada’s principal constituency is shaped by relatively stable sectarian, class and national loyalties. The Sadrist rank and file is profoundly hostile to Sunnis, who stand accused of having long dominated and

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Army”, Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army militant who participated in the fighting, Baghdad, September 2007.

<sup>81</sup> “The Sadrists are very angry with what is going on in Karbala. Their claims are true. Sadrist members of the Governorate Council are being targeted for all sorts of crimes, some dating back to early 2005”, Crisis Group email correspondence, Iraqi journalist, December 2007.

<sup>82</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sadrist student, Baghdad, September 2007. “The Mahdi Army essentially has been kicked out of Hay al-`Askari [a predominantly Sadrist neighbourhood of Karbala]”, Crisis Group interview, Sadrist, Baghdad, October 2007.

<sup>83</sup> See BBC News, 9 November 2007. In response, some Sadrists claim that ISCI committed these crimes and then shifted blame. “There have been many murders and crimes in Karbala, but I believe these were committed by Badr because the Mahdi Army does not have a strong presence there, unlike in Baghdad”, Crisis Group interview, Sadrist student, Baghdad, May 2007.

repressed them; to more privileged Shiites, the backbone of ISCI and the *Marja`iya* (religious leadership); to the U.S. occupation and the socio-political order it has spawned; and to Iran.<sup>84</sup>

One of the more striking examples of this disconnect between leaders and rank and file pertains to the attitude toward Sunnis. Periodic, hesitant efforts by Sadr and his colleagues to improve confessional ties<sup>85</sup> go hand in hand with Sadrist militants’ intolerant, bloodcurdling rhetoric and behaviour.<sup>86</sup>

The movement’s relations with other Shiite actors are similarly ambiguous. On 6 October 2007, following the Karbala crisis, Muqtada al-Sadr and Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, ISCI’s leader, agreed to end the violent confrontation between their movements.<sup>87</sup> A month later, they set up a joint committee to tackle underlying sources of friction.<sup>88</sup> Yet while these steps suggested the possibility of constructive dialogue and a determination to avert an intra-Shiite civil war,<sup>89</sup> Sadrist militants on the ground

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<sup>84</sup> See generally Crisis Group Report, *Iraq’s Muqtada al-Sadr*, op. cit.

<sup>85</sup> “Muqtada al-Sadr asked the Mahdi Army to refrain from attacking Sunnis and not to expel them from Shiite neighbourhoods. Nassar al-Rubay`i [head of the Sadrist parliamentary bloc], and Salim Abdul Illah [a member of parliament and of the Iraqi Consensus Front, a Sunni movement], met to discuss improving relations between the two parties”, Crisis Group interview, Sadrist student, Baghdad, June 2007. For an account of Sadrist overtures to Sunnis, see *The Washington Post*, 20 May 2007; and Radio Free Europe-Radio Liberty, 24 May 2007.

<sup>86</sup> “What is the way out of this crisis? The Americans need to leave Iraq, and the Mahdi Army will resolve things. For example, the Americans are not prepared to liquidate the terrorists in the Dura neighbourhood. The Mahdi Army will do it and more broadly will cleanse Iraq of Sunni terrorists. The Americans prevent us from doing so. Wherever they are absent, we do quite well. The Mahdi Army entered Fadhil [a neighbourhood in Baghdad’s east bank] and brought out the terrorists in its car trunks”, Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army sympathiser, Baghdad, June 2007. The January 2008 parliamentary deal between Sadrists and Sunni elements does not presage a genuine strategic alliance; rather, it is a narrow tactical move to block attempts to push through a far-reaching interpretation of federalism, Agence France-Presse, 14 January 2008.

<sup>87</sup> Reuters, 7 October 2007.

<sup>88</sup> *Al-Hayat*, 6 November 2007.

<sup>89</sup> An ISCI official sought to minimise the depth of antagonism between the movements: “We think the problem derives mainly from groups acting under the Sadrist banner but who in fact are pursuing their own agenda and want to create problems in our relationship. In discussions with Muqtada al-Sadr, it appeared that he shared this view. Our dialogue is ongoing and enduring. Our dialogue leads us to believe that the problem is not at the leadership level”, Crisis Group interview, ISCI official, November 2007.

sounded a highly different tone, presenting the agreement as the calm before the inevitable storm:

Muqtada al-Sadr is wise; he does not want to provoke *fitna* [division within Islam]. He signed the agreement with Abdul Aziz al-Hakim in order to calm things down and defuse tensions with ISCI. That said, I believe our problems will never be solved. We are simply awaiting a signal, an order from Muqtada al-Sadr, to burn them all.<sup>90</sup>

Another said:

We are impatiently waiting for Muqtada al-Sadr to announce a resumption of the Mahdi Army's activities. You'll see what we'll do with those Badrist bastards. We will set all Supreme Council [ISCI] offices on fire. The only reason we are not reacting now to Badr's attacks is that we respect Muqtada al-Sadr's decision. The day before yesterday, a Karbala delegation went to Najaf to see Muqtada al-Sadr and discuss the situation of Sadrists in Karbala. They told him that the Badrists were persecuting them. Muqtada al-Sadr replied: "Be patient. We will be stronger than before". For now, Muqtada al-Sadr's strategy is to urge calm.<sup>91</sup>

Conversely, ISCI followers remain highly suspicious of Sadrist intentions and convinced that they have not given up their attempts to seize the holy sites.<sup>92</sup>

The Sadrist relationship to *Marja`iya* also is unclear. After Ayatollah Sistani allegedly sanctioned the Mahdi Army's activities at the height of the sectarian confrontation, the Sadrists for the most part moderated their criticism of him. A Mahdi Army fighter said at the time, "we are on good terms with most [Shiite] actors, including Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, because he opposes disbanding the Mahdi Army".<sup>93</sup> However, deep-seated hostility – at times

expressed in surprisingly aggressive terms<sup>94</sup> – resurfaced in the wake of the Karbala events and increased government and U.S. pressure against the Sadrists. As a result, there is now considerable discrepancy between Muqtada's official pronouncements and the feelings of his Shiite constituency. A Mahdi Army commander remarked:

The relationship between our movement and Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani is extremely ambiguous. On the one hand, Muqtada al-Sadr periodically visits Ayatollah Sistani. On the other hand, Muqtada's followers constantly insult him and the Hakim family [one of Najaf's most prestigious families, members of which lead ISCI]. The Karbala clashes between the Mahdi Army and guardians of the mausoleums – who are beholden to Badr and Sistani's *Marja`iya* – have only further widened the gap separating the two camps.<sup>95</sup>

Heightened friction between Sadrists and other key Shiite actors precipitated the break-up of the Shiite electoral alliance known as *Itilaf* (the United Iraqi Alliance, UIA).<sup>96</sup> The Sadrists bolted from the coalition in mid-September 2007 and have since sought to undermine the ISCI-backed Maliki government. Concurrently, they improved ties with Fadhila (a party founded in 2003 by the Najaf-based cleric Muhammad al-Ya'qubi, a disciple of Muqtada's father, whose popular base is concentrated in the far south), their main rival in Basra with which they recently had clashed.<sup>97</sup>

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that Sistani considers the Mahdi Army as a necessity under the current circumstances", Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, May 2007.

<sup>94</sup> "For almost a year, the Sadrists stopped criticising or insulting Sistani's *Marja`iya*. But Sadrists preachers have now resumed harsh denunciations. I attended Friday prayer. In his sermon, the sheikh referred to Sistani by citing Imam Ali's statement: 'the worst individuals are pious people who turn bad [*shurr al-nas al-'ulama idha fasadu*]'. He also quoted one of the prophet's sayings, 'a religious leader will appear and seek to conquer you. He will hail from Sijistan [the origin and veracity of this saying remains unclear]'. He then remarked that, in its Arabic form, Sijistan becomes Sistan. Attacks against Sistani have become increasingly frequent among some Shiites", Crisis Group interview, Sadr, Baghdad, October 2007.

<sup>95</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army commander, Sadr City, Baghdad, September 2007.

<sup>96</sup> The alliance, formed in the run-up to the January 2005 parliamentary elections, comprised ISCI, the Sadrists, three Daawa factions and Fadhila, as well as several smaller Shiite parties and many Shiite independents, along with a token number of Sunni independents. Sistani endorsed it. In December 2005, it captured 128 of 275 parliamentary seats.

<sup>97</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Where Is Iraq Heading?*, op. cit. "Three weeks ago, serious clashes took place between the Sadrist current and Fadhila's militia. The Mahdi Army attacked Fadhila's headquarters in Baghdad's Shu'la neighbourhood. The battle has its roots in Basra and was chiefly related to its governor [a Fadhila member]", Crisis Group interview, Sadr, Baghdad, May 2007.

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<sup>90</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sadr, Baghdad, October 2007. As Sadrists continued to be rounded up – and as they continued to see a Badrist hand behind this – representatives of the movement openly threatened revenge, *Al-Hayat*, 6 November 2007.

<sup>91</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sadr, Baghdad, October 2007.

<sup>92</sup> "In my view, everything that happened in Karbala was predictable. Everyone expected a clash between Sadrists and Badrists. The Sadrist current would still like to take control of the mausoleums and, if they succeed, they will not let them go. The problem is that the Sadrists are moving farther and farther away from the Supreme Council [i.e., ISCI]. The Supreme Council has made clear it will now recognise Ayatollah Sistani as its religious reference – yet he is a quietist and a rival to Muqtada's late father, Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr", Crisis Group interview, ISCI militant, Baghdad, September 2007.

<sup>93</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army fighter, Basra, June 2007. An ISCI follower echoed the view: "I am in complete agreement with the idea that Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani opposes the dismantling of the Mahdi Army. He cannot say it explicitly, but we are sure

The Sadrists opposed Maliki's July 2007 decision to sack the controversial Fadhila-affiliated governor of Basra, despite having long demanded his resignation.<sup>98</sup>

Muqtada's approach toward Iran has evolved even as his supporters remain distrustful of their neighbour. In sermons and official statements, Sadrist leaders have softened their stance. A Sadrist intellectual said, "Muqtada al-Sadr used to stick to a nationalist line. Now, one could describe his rhetoric as almost pro-Iranian. Even the Mahdi Army has shifted its tone. Last year's anti-Iranian discourse has given way to something quite different".<sup>99</sup> Since the surge's onset, Muqtada is widely believed to have spent long periods of time in Iran, most likely for security reasons.<sup>100</sup> According to family members and friends, Mahdi Army commanders also have sought refuge and military training in Iran.<sup>101</sup> Until the time Muqtada decreed a halt to Mahdi Army activities, Sadrist militants went so far as to boast of Iranian help, including courses on street combat<sup>102</sup> and the transfer of sophisticated explosive devices,<sup>103</sup> as well as compensation for attacks against U.S. convoys.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Maliki's decision was rejected by parliament's judicial committee, which is headed by a Sadrist, and the governor remained in office. Reports of a Sadr/Fadhila rapprochement were confirmed by Sadrist militants, Crisis Group interviews, Baghdad, October 2007.

<sup>99</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sadrist intellectual, Baghdad, May 2007.

<sup>100</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Sadrist and non-Sadrist Shiites, Baghdad, February 2007-January 2008.

<sup>101</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Baghdad, February-May 2007. See also Peter Harling and Joost Hiltermann, "Eyes Wide Shut", *Le Monde Diplomatique* (English edition), January 2007. "What do you think the Mahdi Army's principal leaders have become? They escaped the crackdown and now go back and forth between Iraq and Iran, where they receive extensive training", Crisis Group interview, friend of Mahdi Army commander, Baghdad, September 2007.

<sup>102</sup> "I was told that Iran invited the Mahdi Army to give its fighters a course on how to wage street warfare", Crisis Group interview, Sadrist, Baghdad, May 2007.

<sup>103</sup> In June 2007, a Sadrist student claimed "the Sadrists multiplied their attacks against the Americans after Iran gave them weapons and highly sophisticated explosives", Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, June 2007. In early 2007, the word among many Shiites was that Iran had transferred highly powerful explosive devices, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) dubbed *'Ubwat Nijadiya* in reference to President Ahmadinejad (the expression translates as "Nejadist loads"). That said, a Mahdi Army commander remarked, "I never heard anyone mention this. I think the media and ordinary people fall prey to exaggeration when it comes to Iran's military cooperation with the Mahdi Army", Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, February 2007.

<sup>104</sup> "According to a friend who is in the Mahdi Army, Iran pays \$500 in cash to anyone willing to place a mine beneath a U.S. convoy", Crisis Group interview, Sadrist, Baghdad, September 2007.

Sadrist opponents are quick to portray the movement as wholly subservient to Tehran. A former Sistani disciple claimed: "Iran is now fully and exclusively supporting and arming the Sadrist current".<sup>105</sup> It is hard to distinguish between fact, rumour and outright disinformation. What evidence exists suggests that the relationship has improved, but remains complex and far from tension-free. In private, Sadrists express deep anti-Iranian feelings and readily accuse Tehran of seeking to control Iraq's holy cities, mistreating visiting Sadrist pilgrims<sup>106</sup> and overcharging the Mahdi Army for the weapons it supplies.<sup>107</sup> Notably, Sadrist officials regularly accuse movement dissidents of being aligned with Iran. A Mahdi Army commander remarked:

I am pretty sure that thousands of so-called Mahdi Army fighters in fact are not working for the Mahdi Army. We hear about many such fighters training in Iran. I can't deny this. But you can be sure that most of those fighters do not belong to the Mahdi Army. Our Najaf office is very careful about dealing with Iranians because we do not understand why Iran is so interested in financing and training the Mahdi Army, and we cannot predict how its policy will evolve.<sup>108</sup>

Sadrist leaders stress that, cooperation with Tehran notwithstanding, they jealously protect the movement's political independence and nationalist outlook. A senior Sadrist official said:

We have taken steps that show we are not aligned with Iran. We withdrew from the Tehran-backed government, we left the Shiite alliance and we implemented a ceasefire even though Iran benefits from anti-American attacks. We seek to develop friendly relations with all our neighbours, but we will not become anyone's pawn. Recently, we embarked on a regional diplomatic tour during which we

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<sup>105</sup> Crisis Group interview, former Sistani disciple, Baghdad, October 2007. He added that an official from Baghdad governorate, Badr's commander for Rusafa, had been expelled from Badr and sought refuge in Iran because he was discovered to have transferred explosives and weapons from Iran to the Mahdi Army. A Sistani disciple said, "just ask yourself: where is Muqtada al-Sadr? He's in Iran. Moreover, Iran's intelligence service is arming the Mahdi Army. As a result, Muqtada al-Sadr cannot decide on a strategy alone", Crisis Group interview, Sistani loyalist, Baghdad, September 2007. For a description of ISCI's complex and ambiguous relations with Iran, see Crisis Group Report, *Shiite Politics in Iraq*, op. cit.

<sup>106</sup> "Our relations are bad. The proof is that Sadrist pilgrims who go to Iran are ill-received", Crisis Group interview, Sadrist, Baghdad, September 2007.

<sup>107</sup> "Our relations are tense. The Mahdi Army is paying a fortune for weapons from Iran", Crisis Group interview, Sadrist, September 2007.

<sup>108</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army commander, Baghdad, September 2007.

expressed our views on what role neighbouring states can play to stabilise Iraq without interfering in our sovereignty. We adopted a national position. For the most part, Iraq's Shiite actors engage only with external Shiite parties just as Iraq's Sunnis deal exclusively with Sunni states. By the same token, neighbouring states are inclined to deal with their co-religionists. We say to all that they should extend their outreach. Iran should be doing positive things in [Sunni] Anbar and Saudi Arabia in the [Shiite] south. These states should deal with Iraq as a whole.<sup>109</sup>

For its part, Iran's leadership appears reluctant to establish a genuine military and strategic relationship with the Sadrists. Notably, the U.S. does not claim that Tehran has provided the Mahdi Army with the modern weaponry it supplies to Hizbollah, a step that would radically shift the balance of power and nature of the battle. More generally, one cannot compare Iran's relationship with Hizbollah, which relies on the Lebanese movement's professionalism and strict discipline, to its ties with the far more disorganised and decentralised Sadrist movement.<sup>110</sup> An ISCI sympathiser said, "the Iranians are well aware of the fact that the Sadrist current is unmanageable. Their cooperation is purely tactical".<sup>111</sup> In Basra, where Iran has acquired considerable interests and influence, its support for the Sadrists has been limited, even prior to the suspension of Mahdi Army activities.<sup>112</sup>

Iran's strategy appears tailored to the reality of an undisciplined, disorganised, operationally flexible militia. While it may not have opened regular channels of communication with the Mahdi Army per se, at a minimum Tehran has done so with several units and individual leaders. As a result, Iran can maintain pressure on coalition forces and, in the event of a U.S. or Israeli attack, would be able to rapidly flood Iraq with sophisticated weaponry that would significantly boost the militia's lethal potential. In September 2007, a U.S. officer noted:

There is growing evidence that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard is frustrated with Badr's operational inefficiency. Badr is good at killing

Sunnis, but that's it. It would never fight against the U.S. and, if it did, it wouldn't last a single round. The Revolutionary Guard may well have reached the conclusion that the Mahdi Army, due to its grassroots support, is the better suited force to carry out retaliatory actions [against the U.S.] on Iraqi soil in response to any [military strike] on Iranian territory.<sup>113</sup>

#### **D. A CHANGE IN MODUS OPERANDI**

On 29 August 2007, in the wake of the Karbala clashes, Muqtada al-Sadr surprised everyone by announcing a halt in Mahdi Army activities, including anti-coalition attacks.<sup>114</sup> The prohibition was meant to apply to all groups affiliated (loosely or otherwise) with the Mahdi Army; indeed, the militia was authorised to punish anyone conducting an attack without prior approval by the Sadrist office.<sup>115</sup> The Karbala events were a turning point, clearly demonstrating that Muqtada had lost control over numerous Mahdi Army fighters, who ignored his repeated calls for calm. The damage inflicted on the Imam Husayn mausoleum cast a shadow over the Sadrist movement as a whole.

In reality, however, what happened in Karbala exposed far deeper and older problems, offering Muqtada an opportunity to engage in long overdue structural reforms. A Mahdi Army fighter said:

I think the Karbala events were a pretext. The decision to freeze armed activities stemmed from the U.S. crackdown on trusted Mahdi Army leaders and belief that a short-term pause would result in our long-term strengthening. But Muqtada al-Sadr also wanted to deal with problems related to the movement's lack of discipline. He had received numerous complaints concerning the Mahdi Army's behaviour, including from parents whose sons were killed. Some parents had proof, such as pictures of their sons tortured to death by the Mahdi Army.<sup>116</sup>

In a sign of Muqtada's desire to purge the movement of some of its more controversial members, several were expelled in the aftermath of the 29 August statement.<sup>117</sup> The Sadrists also encouraged the Maliki government to pursue individuals who continued to stage attacks in the

<sup>109</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Sadrist official, November 2007.

<sup>110</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Mahdi Army fighters, January-September 2007.

<sup>111</sup> Crisis Group interview, ISCI sympathiser, Baghdad, September 2007. He added, "for some things, the Iranians essentially rely on the Supreme Council [ISCI]. When the Badr corps entered Iraq, it formally disbanded in order to avoid being seen as a terrorist group by the U.S. As a result, and unlike the Mahdi Army, it enjoys a certain legitimacy even in U.S. eyes. ISCI is a central political actor; when it carries out military operations, it does so wisely and discretely".

<sup>112</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Where Is Iraq Heading*, op. cit.

<sup>113</sup> Crisis Group interview, U.S. officer, London, September 2007.

<sup>114</sup> Associated Press, 29 August 2007.

<sup>115</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army fighter, Baghdad, September 2007.

<sup>116</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army fighter, Baghdad, September 2007.

<sup>117</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sadrists, September-October 2007.

Mahdi Army's name. In the words of a Sadrist member of parliament:

After the suspension of the Mahdi Army's activities, our leadership gave the government the opportunity to destroy all groups that still engage in armed operations and claim to be affiliated with the Mahdi Army. We hope that within months we will have cleansed the Mahdi Army of such groups.<sup>118</sup>

Further suggesting a new approach, the Sadrists set up a five-person political committee to engage, and possibly sign agreements, with other Iraqi or foreign actors (with the notable exception of the occupying forces).<sup>119</sup>

Surprisingly, given the movement's notorious indiscipline and fragmentation, Muqtada's order was widely, albeit not quite unanimously, followed, a result that has boosted his credibility and standing – as well as the Mahdi Army's reputation – among Shiites.<sup>120</sup> A university professor asserted:

Everybody was surprised by the degree to which militants obeyed Muqtada al-Sadr. At first, I expected about half of the Mahdi Army members to ignore him. Of course, some criminal gangs still claim to be working for the Mahdi Army, but Muqtada doesn't control them. I know one group whose fighters were screaming: "the Sayyid [Muqtada] is a soldier and we fired him" [*al-Sayyid jundi wa sarrahna!*].<sup>121</sup>

The main impact of Muqtada's order was to remove the veil of legitimacy and lift the impunity that so many groups – whether criminal gangs operating in the Mahdi Army's name or Sadrist units gone astray – had enjoyed. A Sadrist explained: "Petrol station employees who used to turn over as much as 10 per cent of their revenue as protection money can now complain to a Sadrist office and denounce the racketeers".<sup>122</sup> Another consequence of Muqtada's

announcement has been a dramatic decline in anti-Sunni violence.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sadrist parliamentarian, Baghdad, November 2007.

<sup>119</sup> Crisis Group interview, Iraqi journalist with close ties to the Sadrist movement, Baghdad, November 2007. This was confirmed to Crisis Group by one of the five members of the committee, Crisis Group interview, November 2007.

<sup>120</sup> "Residents of Shiite neighbourhoods for the most part were pleased with Muqtada al-Sadr's decision to suspend the Mahdi Army's activities. They wanted the situation to calm down. And they were impressed by the degree to which the Mahdi Army adhered to his order, with the exception of a few renegades who are no longer considered to belong to the Sadrist current", Crisis Group interview, Sadrist, Baghdad, September 2007.

<sup>121</sup> Crisis Group interview, university professor, Baghdad, September 2007.

<sup>122</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sadrist, Baghdad, September 2007. Another said, "Muqtada understood the need to play on his legitimacy. Since his announcement, people do not give in as

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easily to the Mahdi Army. For example, if a Mahdi Army fighter comes to a gas station and demands something, employees can tell him that Muqtada froze their operations and therefore they cannot do what they used to", Crisis Group interview, Sadrist, Baghdad, September 2007.

<sup>123</sup> A Sadrist alleged: "Immediately after Muqtada's decision, the Mahdi Army stopped attacking Sunnis. Even Sunnis from `Arab Jbur [a rural area of Baghdad that is controlled by Sunni insurgent groups], who are in conflict with al-Qaeda felt safe enough to take refuge in Abu Tshir [a neighbouring Shiite area that is controlled by the Mahdi Army]", Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, September 2007.

#### IV. A SUSTAINABLE CEASEFIRE?

Several months into Muqtada al-Sadr's ceasefire decision, the balance sheet for the Sadrist movement is mixed and pressures from his base to end it are steadily growing. On the positive side, the cessation of hostilities precludes the kind of frontal confrontation with coalition forces that depleted Sadrist ranks in 2004. Renewed violence would cost the movement dearly; it likely would lose many men in battle and significant popularity on the street. Sadrists themselves acknowledge that most civilian Shiites favour the relative calm that has reigned since the latter third of 2007.<sup>124</sup> The Sadrist leadership also can take advantage of the situation to safeguard its most loyal troops and restructure the movement while awaiting a U.S. withdrawal that would offer new and rich possibilities. Moreover, according to a rumour that is widely believed in Sadrist circles, Muqtada is using the ceasefire to resume his religious studies in a bid to boost his legitimacy.<sup>125</sup>

But the freeze in Mahdi Army activities presents important downsides as well. Since Muqtada's announcement, the Sadrists have lost considerable ground. In Baghdad, they retreated to their strongholds; the walls and checkpoints the U.S. erected in late 2007 to surround those neighbourhoods significantly restrict the movements of their militants. In addition, as the army has gradually replaced the police and assumed primary patrolling duties in the capital, the Sadrists have faced a less friendly security force.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> "People are happy and want Muqtada al-Sadr to prolong his decision because things have become calmer", Crisis Group interview, Sadrist student, Baghdad, January 2008.

<sup>125</sup> Muqtada's official biography states that, on his father's advice, he interrupted his studies early on to devote himself to "prescribing good and prohibit transgressions", at [www.muqtada.com](http://www.muqtada.com). According to a Sadrist student, "Muqtada currently is focusing on his studies and pre-graduation research [*bahth al-kharij*]. His goal is to announce his *ijtihad* [in other words, become an accepted authority for the interpretation of religious texts] by late 2009 or early 2010", Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, January 2008. However, an aide to Muqtada denied in late 2007 that he was devoting himself to studying, explaining that "he has many other things to do in such a troubled period", Crisis Group interview, senior Sadrist official, November 2007.

<sup>126</sup> "One of the main causes of violence in our neighbourhood was our proximity to Washshash, a Sadrist and Mahdi Army stronghold. They used to be free to move around and would raid us regularly. Nowadays their movements are restricted as a result of gates and checkpoints manned by the army, which is not infiltrated by the Mahdi Army", Crisis Group telephone interview, Daudi resident, December 2007. A resident of Iskan, another neighbourhood adjacent to Washshash, offered the same explanation, which was echoed by many other Baghdadis, Crisis Group telephone interviews, Baghdad, November-December 2007.

Many Sadrists who once took advantage of war-related economic opportunities are frustrated, anxious to resume past activities. The loss of wealth also translated into loss of status. A Baghdad merchant described this dynamic:

Mahdi Army fighters used to put explosives right outside my shop. I begged them to stop and ended up striking long conversations with them. They admitted that they made a very good living this way, that it had become a real job. Don't forget that many of these young men were once shoe polishers, underpaid manual workers or people who were paid to carry goods at the Shurja market. They started earning good money by planting explosives, extorting petrol stations or seizing their Sunni victims' belongings [*ghana'im*]. They cannot accept a return to poverty after having tasted wealth. Right now, they are impatiently waiting for Muqtada al-Sadr to announce a resumption of the Mahdi Army's activities.<sup>127</sup>

The decrease in sectarian violence – a consequence of the surge, growing antagonism between Sunni insurgent groups and al-Qaeda, and the systematic fencing off of various Baghdad neighbourhoods, as well as the process of sectarian cleansing – also undercut the Sadrists' appeal as guardian of the Shiites. In many middle class areas where they had built up a presence at the height of the civil war, the Sadrists have all but disappeared. Even within their strongholds, they have become far less visible. A Sadrist student said:

Ever since Muqtada al-Sadr's famous decision, the Sadrists have been vanishing bit by bit. We don't see their checkpoints, the guards who used to protect our neighbourhoods, or even those who used to allocate gas and petrol to residents. Prior to the decision, Mahdi Army members did quite well financially. Now, because they can't do what they used to, they have gone back to their regular jobs. Those who didn't have one are trying to find employment. The Americans, together with their network of spies, continue to arrest members of the Mahdi Army, which makes it even harder for them to undertake any activity. Even the Sadrist Committee to Prescribe Good and Prohibit Transgressions [*al-'Amr bil Ma'ruf wa al-Nahi 'an al-Munkar*, tasked with enforcing strict religious mores] has had to stop its work. Today, weddings once again take place to the sound of music, and alcohol vendors have reopened their shops.<sup>128</sup>

Virtually all the Sadrists' social activities, including the work of their tribal committees (*al-Diwawin al-'Asha'iriya*) have been suspended.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Crisis Group interview, merchant, Baghdad, September 2007.

<sup>128</sup> Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, January 2008.

<sup>129</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sadrist militant, Baghdad, January 2008.

Despite its low profile, the movement continues to feel targeted by U.S. forces and their Iraqi allies, leading many Sadrists to believe they have the worst of both worlds. U.S. officials claim their operations are narrowly aimed at “special groups”, by which they mean dissident and uncontrolled Mahdi Army units.<sup>130</sup> But among the Sadrist rank and file, perceptions differ greatly. They are convinced that the U.S. has chosen sides in a war that now pits Sadrists against Badrists in the capital and in the south. They further attribute the accuracy of U.S. strikes and operations to information provided by Badr's network of informants. A Sadrist asserted:

The Americans attack us relentlessly. Last week an airplane bombed the area. They are guided by spies from Badr who, like the Sunnis, have sold themselves to the enemy of God for a few thousand dollars. The Sadrists were providing services to people in need, helping orphans and widows, giving us fuel and protecting the area from strangers. Attacks against the Mahdi Army are part of a Badr conspiracy. After receiving orders through the mosque, a large number of my comrades have left the area. But those who stayed behind still are subject to U.S. arrests based on tips provided by the enemies of God.<sup>131</sup>

Perhaps more alarming from a Sadrist perspective, given Badr's relatively small numerical strength, have been U.S. attempts to replicate their efforts to mobilise Sunni forces against al-Qaeda by paying, arming and organising Shiite tribes and citizens to fight the Mahdi Army. The result, referred to as the Shiite *sahwa* (awakening), is viewed by Sadrists as yet another dangerous U.S./ISCI scheme.<sup>132</sup> In parts of the south, *sahwa* militias, operating in coordination with the government, reportedly have dealt the Sadrists severe blows. A Sadrist student said:

In the governorates of Nasiriya, Diwaniya and Karbala, the *sahwa* movements have more or less succeeded. In Nasiriya, the police chief belongs to the Supreme Council [ISCI] and is busy coordinating the arrest of Mahdi Army leaders. The Diwaniya *sahwa* is just as effective. But the worst is the Karbala *sahwa*, headed by the police chief, who is also one of the prime minister's cousins.<sup>133</sup>

Sadrist residents of Baghdad are particularly concerned by this phenomenon and have put up signs reading “death to the *sahwa*”. Their efforts to infiltrate these volunteer units having met with only limited success,<sup>134</sup> the Sadrists are seeking instead to intimidate and bully prospective *sahwa* recruits. Friday sermons (*khutbat al-jum'at al-muwahhida*), written by the Sadrist leadership, vehemently denounce the principle of the *sahwa*.<sup>135</sup> Insofar as the *sahwa* militias tend to recruit among tribes and citizens inclined to support ISCI and the *Marja'iyat*, the conflict again has taken on the appearance of a class struggle and could become the spark for another vicious intra-Shiite civil war. According to unconfirmed reports, the Sadrist leadership has issued clear orders to fight back:

We were clearly told to counter the emergence of the *sahwa* in Baghdad's Shiite neighbourhoods. We know these movements are aimed at destroying the Mahdi Army once and for all. Our militants told residents not to join them and killed those who resisted our orders. Since then, people don't dare sign up with the *sahwa*. Shiite heads of the Bani Tamim tribe sought to establish a *sahwa* in Kadhimiya, Shu'la and Hurriya, the most important Shiite neighbourhoods in Karkh. We did not let them.<sup>136</sup>

All this explains widespread disquiet among Sadrist ranks and suggests how fragile the ceasefire is. Mahdi Army militants made clear their adherence to the truce was

<sup>130</sup> See, for instance, “Coalition forces target Special Groups leader, 49 criminals killed”, Multi-National Force-Iraq press release, 21 October 2007.

<sup>131</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Sadrist resident of Amin, Baghdad, December 2007. A Za'faraniya resident who is not sympathetic to the Sadrists concurred: “On the surface, the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) now control the area. But Badr is active and deploys intelligence operatives tasked with gathering information on the Mahdi Army. They undertake discreet surveillance for the benefit of the ISF, which in this part of town is in any event infiltrated and dominated by Badr”, Crisis Group telephone interview, November 2007.

<sup>132</sup> “Wherever they can, the Americans use the *sahwa*. They do so in Muqadadiya, which had fallen under Mahdi Army control, and in Hilla, where they are working with tribes that are close to the Badr corps. The Badrists are plotting against us everywhere”, Crisis Group interview, Sadrist, Baghdad, October 2007. See also *The New York Times*, 12 October 2007.

<sup>133</sup> Crisis Group interview, Sadrist student, Baghdad, January 2008. “The situation in Diwaniya is extremely serious. Many Sadrists have been expelled and are seeking refuge in Baghdad. We find them homes and provide them with financial help”, Crisis Group interview, former Mahdi Army fighter, Baghdad, January 2008.

<sup>134</sup> “The Mahdi Army tried to imitate the Sunnis by gaining access to and penetrating the *sahwa* movement [Sadrists tend to believe that the Sunni *sahwa* essentially is composed of unreconstructed and unrepentant al-Qaeda militants]. But in Shu'la, for example, our members were unsuccessful in their attempts to get paid or to receive weapons”, Crisis Group interview, Sadrist militant, Shu'la, Baghdad, January 2008.

<sup>135</sup> One sermon included the phrase “no, no to the *sahwa*” (*kala, kala lil-sahwa*), which is scrawled over the walls of Sadrist neighbourhoods, Crisis Group observations, Baghdad, January 2008.

<sup>136</sup> Crisis Group interview, former Mahdi Army fighter, Shu'la, Baghdad, January 2008.

halfhearted. From its very onset, many, including senior commanders, were eager to see it end both for personal reasons and because of heightened U.S. pressure.<sup>137</sup> Significantly, on 18 January 2008, Salah al-'Ubaydi, a close Muqtada adviser who is considered to be relatively moderate, stated that nothing justified prolonging the freeze in Mahdi Army activities, since the U.S. continued to arrest its members, security had yet to be restored and unemployment was rising. He insisted that "the decision to suspend the Mahdi Army's activities has not been rewarded with good results because the government is still counting on criminal gangs inside their security system".<sup>138</sup> On 3 February 2008, he announced that the ten committees created to examine the effects of the six-month freeze were all of the opinion that it should not be prolonged beyond its late February expiration date.<sup>139</sup> Earlier, Muqtada himself reportedly pointed out that "the freeze will last as long as it benefits the Iraqi people",<sup>140</sup> thereby leaving open the possibility of a course correction.

Several former Sadrists made clear they were eager for the Mahdi Army's reactivation and were only waiting for the word to come down to "get back to work".<sup>141</sup> This would mean not only a resumption of sectarian killings, but also an escalation in the fratricidal war between rival Shiite militias. A former Mahdi Army fighter explained:

All Mahdi Army members are very, very happy with Salah al-'Ubaydi's statement. We can't wait to resume our military activities. We will finally be able to retaliate against the Supreme Council [ISCI] thugs and regain control over Karbala. You cannot imagine the extent to which they mistreated us. In Karbala, they even check our cell phones and go after those whose phones feature popular Sadrists songs. That is why all Sadrists are impatient to seek revenge. You will see what we will do: we will push them all the way back to Iran.<sup>142</sup>

Many Sadrists believe Muqtada will not long be able to ignore the displeasure, frustration and anger

of his rank and file and merely is waiting for the "ideal opportunity" to end the ceasefire. Already, there are reports of demonstrations in the heart of Sadr City during which protesters are said to have compared Muqtada's restraint to Ayatollah Sistani's quietism – the highest form of insult coming from a Sadrists.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> "The decision to decree a truce upset senior leaders who had a vested interest in the Mahdi Army's activities", Crisis Group interview, Mahdi Army commander, Baghdad, September 2007. A petrol station attendant claimed that "Mahdi Army leaders continue to call us and demand a kick-back. Even after Muqtada's decision, they continued to exercise pressure, albeit in different ways", Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, September 2007.

<sup>138</sup> Agence France-Presse, 18 January 2008.

<sup>139</sup> *Al-Hayat*, 3 February 2008.

<sup>140</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Sadrists militants, September 2007.

<sup>141</sup> "The Sadrists are always present. For now, they are following Muqtada's orders. As soon as we receive a different order from him, we will be back at work", Crisis Group interview, former Mahdi Army fighter, Baghdad, January 2008.

<sup>142</sup> Crisis Group interview, former Mahdi Army fighter, Baghdad, January 2008.

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<sup>143</sup> Some called on Muqtada to buy a pillow in order to share a bed with Sistani, whose aloofness is described as indolence and apathy, Crisis Group interview, Sadr City residents, Baghdad, January 2008. References to Sistani's pillow are not uncommon in Sadrists jargon. See Crisis Group Report, *Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr*, op. cit., p. 3.



## V. CONCLUSION

At this stage of the surge, whose achievements remain extremely fragile, the U.S. and its allies face a difficult choice. Clearly, they are tempted to press their advantage and seek to deal the Sadrists a mortal blow. The Sadrists, according to some, ought to be treated in the manner of al-Qaeda, hunted down in their remaining strongholds.

But the comparison is misleading. The Sadrists enjoy far wider and deeper support than al-Qaeda, particularly among poorer Shiites.<sup>144</sup> The movement's structure and ideology are fluid, making it hard to pin down but also to overcome. It still controls key areas in Baghdad as well as several southern cities, and its strongholds – including Sadr City, Fudhayliya, Hiyaniya and 'Amara – for now are virtually impregnable. As a result, and intensified pressure from the surge notwithstanding, it is fanciful to expect the Mahdi Army's defeat. Rather, excessive pressure – particularly without simultaneous reaching out – is likely to trigger both fierce Sadrist resistance in Baghdad and an escalating intra-Shiite civil war in the south.

Such a development would be particularly regrettable at a time when the movement appears to be undergoing a welcome and long overdue evolution. Its leadership finally has denounced sectarian violence and is seeking to impose greater discipline on a historically unruly base. Of course, there is ample reason to believe this reflects a tactical move far more than a genuine transition and is dictated by the movement's current difficulties. Still, particularly in light of a potential U.S. troop drawdown, every effort should be made to encourage the shift and see whether the Sadrists can become a fully legitimate and non-violent political actor.

The first and most urgent step is to try to solidify Muqtada's unilateral measure by reaching a more comprehensive, multilateral ceasefire. In particular:

- U.S. and Iraqi forces should seek to circumscribe their operations more narrowly so as to focus on military targets and principally respond to attacks.
- The U.S. and its Iraqi allies should tolerate Sadrist activities of a purely non-military nature, while strictly prohibiting Sadrist-manned patrols or checkpoints, and immediately arresting the participants.
- The U.S. and its Iraqi allies should immediately freeze all *sahwa* recruitment, a phenomenon that further threatens the country's cohesion by adding to the number of armed militias; instead, the focus

should be on developing professional and non-partisan national forces.

- Given Sadrist opposition to any open interaction with coalition members, non-coalition third parties such as the UN, Arab countries, Turkey or France should take the lead in engaging the movement and encouraging its transition toward strictly political action.
- As long as they are unarmed and show appropriate restraint, Sadrists should be allowed to visit religious sites; local security forces should enforce a strict ban on unlicensed non-religious demonstrations and other provocative behaviour connected to such visits.

**Baghdad/Damascus/Brussels, 7 February 2008**

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<sup>144</sup> See *ibid.*



## APPENDIX B

### ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and printed copy to officials in foreign ministries and international organisations and made available simultaneously on the website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by the former European Commissioner for External Relations Christopher Patten and former U.S. Ambassador Thomas Pickering. Its President and Chief Executive since January 2000 has been former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans.

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**February 2008**

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*Disengagement and After: Where Next for Sharon and the Likud?*, Middle East Report N°36, 1 March 2005 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew)

*Syria After Lebanon, Lebanon After Syria*, Middle East Report N°39, 12 April 2005 (also available in Arabic)

*Mr Abbas Goes to Washington: Can He Still Succeed?*, Middle East Briefing N°17, 24 May 2005 (also available in Arabic)

*Disengagement and Its Discontents: What Will the Israeli Settlers Do?*, Middle East Report N°43, 7 July 2005 (also available in Arabic)

*The Jerusalem Powder Keg*, Middle East Report N°44, 2 August 2005 (also available in Arabic)

*Lebanon: Managing the Gathering Storm*, Middle East Report N°48, 5 December 2005 (also available in Arabic)

*Enter Hamas: The Challenges of Political Integration*, Middle East Report N°49, 18 January 2006 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew)

*Palestinians, Israel and the Quartet: Pulling Back From the Brink*, Middle East Report N°54, 13 June 2006 (also available in Arabic)

*Israel/Palestine/Lebanon: Climbing Out of the Abyss*, Middle East Report N°57, 25 July 2006 (also available in Arabic)

*The Arab-Israeli Conflict: To Reach a Lasting Peace*, Middle East Report N°58, 5 October 2006

*Israel/Hizbollah/Lebanon: Avoiding Renewed Conflict*, Middle East Report N°59, 1 November 2006 (also available in Arabic and French)

*Lebanon at a Tripwire*, Middle East Briefing N°20, 21 December 2006 (also available in Arabic and Farsi)

*After Mecca: Engaging Hamas*, Middle East Report N°62, 28 February 2007 (also available in Arabic)

*Restarting Israeli-Syrian Negotiations*, Middle East Report N°63, 10 April 2007 (also available in Arabic)

*After Gaza*, Middle East Report N°68, 2 August 2007 (also available in Arabic)

*Hizbollah and the Lebanese Crisis*, Middle East Report N°69, 10 October 2007 (also available in Arabic)

*The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Annapolis and After*, Middle East Briefing N°22, 20 November 2007 (also available in Arabic)

*Inside Gaza: The Challenge of Clans and Families*, Middle East Report N°71, 20 December 2007

#### NORTH AFRICA

*Understanding Islamism*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°37, 2 March 2005 (also available in Arabic and French)

*Islamism in North Africa IV: The Islamist Challenge in Mauritania: Threat or Scapegoat?*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°41, 10 May 2005 (only available in French)

*Reforming Egypt: In Search of a Strategy*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°46, 4 October 2005

*Political Transition in Mauritania: Assessment and Horizons*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°53, 24 April 2006 (currently only available in French)

*Egypt's Sinai Question*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°61, 30 January 2007 (also available in Arabic)

*Western Sahara: The Cost of the Conflict*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°65, 11 June 2007 (also available in Arabic and French)

*Western Sahara: Out of the Impasse*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°66, 11 June 2007 (also available in Arabic and French)

#### IRAQ/IRAN/GULF

*Iraq: Allaying Turkey's Fears Over Kurdish Ambitions*, Middle East Report N°35, 26 January 2005 (also available in Arabic)

*Iran in Iraq: How Much Influence?*, Middle East Report N°38, 21 March 2005 (also available in Arabic)

*Bahrain's Sectarian Challenge*, Middle East Report N°40, 2 May 2005 (also available in Arabic)

*Iraq: Don't Rush the Constitution*, Middle East Report N°42, 8 June 2005 (also available in Arabic)

*Iran: What Does Ahmadi-Nejad's Victory Mean?*, Middle East Briefing N°18, 4 August 2005

*The Shi'ite Question in Saudi Arabia*, Middle East Report N°45, 19 September 2005

*Unmaking Iraq: A Constitutional Process Gone Awry*, Middle East Briefing N°19, 26 September 2005 (also available in Arabic)

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*Iraq and the Kurds: Resolving the Kirkuk Crisis*, Middle East Report N°64, 19 April 2007 (also available in Arabic)

*Where Is Iraq Heading? Lessons from Basra*, Middle East Report N°67, 25 June 2007 (also available in Arabic)

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## APPENDIX D

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