The Future of Moqtada al-Sadr's New Jaysh al-Mahdi

By Babak Rahimi

ON NOVEMBER 27, 2008, the Iraqi parliament approved a new security pact that requires the United States to withdraw its forces by the end of 2011. The passage of the pact marked the Sadrists' greatest political defeat since their rise to power in 2003. With the failure to convince other Iraqi lawmakers to reject the security deal, which would have bolstered Moqtada al-Sadr's political influence in the legislative branch, al-Sadr's uncompromising anti-occupation stance has left his movement without a pragmatic position to gain popular support ahead of provincial elections in January 2009.[1] As al-Sadr and his blackshirt Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) militia—once hailed as the most formidable Shi`a military force in post-Ba`athist Iraq—confront a stronger Nuri al-Maliki government, the political wing of the movement faces increasing challenges with the changing political landscape of Iraqi politics.

Yet, al-Sadr's greatest mishap in recent months has been his inability to prevent the decline of his influence in Iraqi politics. A gradual marginalization process began in 2007 when conflict over the U.S. presence in the country erupted between him and the al-Maliki government. This marginalization should not, however, be seen in terms of an eventual annihilation of the movement or its total irrelevance; rather, it should be viewed as causing the possible transformation of the movement into something new in the course of a transitional phase, through which al-Sadr could reemerge as a more powerful force with a stronger militant presence on the Iraqi scene.

The Mumahidun and al-Sadr's Challenge to Baghdad

Since late summer 2008, al-Sadr's political-military movement has undergone numerous changes in its activities. Major reforms can be traced back to the August 2007 freeze on the activities of JAM due to the outbreak of violence in Karbala that led to the deaths of several pilgrims. The most significant of these reforms has been the transformation of the Mahdi militia into a new cultural-political force. On August 28, al-Sadr ordered JAM to suspend its armed operations and undergo a major shakeup, with considerable changes in its organizational apparatus.[2] The call came as the name of the armed force was also changed to "Mumahidun" ("those who pave the path"), coined in reference to the devout followers of the Hidden Imam, who prepare the way for the Mahdi's return.[3]

The rise of the Mumahidun signals a notable transition from a grassroots paramilitary unit, with a decentralized political and social presence on the street level, to a private "special force," with specific military and political tasks. The former Mahdi Army represented a "citizen militia" with a grassroots base, best suited to carry out local security problems with retaliatory actions on perceived foreign threats.[4] Akin to groups such as the Badr Organization or the Pasdaran of Iran, the new elite force is now restructuring into becoming a centralized armed force, largely divided into two operational units: one elite unit of combatants and another unit of cultural activists, providing public services to the community.[5]

Although the precise socio-cultural program of the Mumahidun is still unknown, the new emphasis on soft power could signify a self-promotional strategy designed to create a restored military force operating on par with the Badr Organization, although mainly modeled after Hizb Allah of Lebanon.[6] The new strategy also suggests how in recent months al-Sadr has made considerable effort to extricate himself from unruly elements within his movement, a problem ever since the escalation of sectarian violence in early 2006. Although the tactical reasons for the recalibration of JAM are several, one major force behind the recent changes has been Tehran, particularly the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), that has lately worked hard to tame and remold JAM into a more organized military force under Iranian supervision.

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In many ways, Iran has played a major role in al-Sadr's new militia politics. The May 10, 2008 cease-fire between al-Sadr and Baghdad was brokered by Iranians who saw a major danger in intra-Shi`a conflict, with its apogee in the summer of 2007, and sought ways to micromanage Shi`a politics inside Iraq in a way to resist U.S. occupation.[7] Tehran's new role as peacemaker has been largely led by pragmatic hardliners such as Ayatollah Mahmud Hashemi Shahrudi, Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and the IRGC's Mohsen Rezai and Qasem Soleimani, who saw the political significance of limiting the activities of the Mahdi Army from inside Iran, where al-Sadr has been residing since 2007 in order to become an ayatollah.[8] The May 2008

1 Tina Susman, "Iraqi Accord Shows Muqtada Sadr's Diminished Clout," *Los Angeles Times*, December 2, 2008.

2 "Shiite Cleric Al-Sadr Suspends Mahdi Militia Operations," *Voices of Iraq*, August 28, 2008. Al-Sadr's August call followed an earlier call on June 13, 2008, when he announced new plans to reorganize JAM into a "cultural and religious force," charged with the responsibility of leading an intellectual jihad. See "Sadr Reorganizes Mahdi Army," *Herald Tribune*, June 13, 2008 and "Al-Sadr: New Force to Fight U.S. in Iraq," CNN, June 13, 2008.

3 "Faalyat-e Artesh-e Al-Mahdi be Halat-e Taliq Dar Amad," Fars News Agency, August 29, 2008.

4 Karim Porzabid, "Moqtada-ie Javan be Donbale Marjaeyat: Goftego ba Shaikh Youssef Naseri az Azay-e Jaryan-e Sadr," *Shahrvand Emrooz*, December 30, 2007.

5 Amit R. Paley and Saad Sarahan, "Powerful Iraq Cleric Recalibrates Strategy," *Washington Post*, June 15, 2008.

6 Bill Roggio and Daveed Gartenstein, "Sadr's Special Groups," The Long War Journal, June 10, 2008.

7 The March 30 cease-fire, when al-Sadr ordered his militia to lay down their arms, was also brokered in Iran by the head of the IRGC's Quds Force, Qasem Soleimani. For more, see Marisa Cochrane, "The Battle for Basra," Institute for the Study of War, June 23, 2008, p. 9.

8 Kenneth R. Timmerman, "Iran Leans on Shiite Leader Muqtada Sadr," Newsmax.com, April 15, 2008. It is also important to recognize the role of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Shi`a Iraq's leading cleric based in Najaf, who has successfully brought al-Sadr under his wings since

detention of al-Sadr in Qom by the IRGC is indicative of Tehran's growing control over the young cleric, with the aim to bring the Sadrist movement under direct Iranian control.[9] While al-Sadr's current political activities in Qom remain unknown, Tehran has also shown signs of curtailing its military support for the Shi`a militia, most likely due to the election of Barack Obama, who has said he favors a diplomatic approach with Iran.[10]

Al-Maliki Versus al-Sadr

With the March 2008 Knights Assault Campaign in Basra, al-Maliki's Iraqi security forces were able to claim a major victory against al-Sadr's militia rule in the most strategically significant port city in the country. With the help of Tehran's new al-Sadr strategy, al-Maliki was able to flex his muscles and take over Basra from militia rule and, accordingly, focus his attention on Baghdad's Sadr City, al-Sadr's stronghold in the capital. Accordingly, the Basra campaign created a conflict between al-Sadr and al-Maliki, an alliance of convenience which began to deteriorate since early 2007 and continues to be a source of major political tension to this day.[11]

The current state of antagonism between al-Maliki and al-Sadr was hardly predictable in 2006, when the two Shi`a leaders formed a loose political alliance, primarily motivated for political gain in parliament. In fact, it was in 2006 when the 30-member Sadrist bloc in parliament provided the boost needed to help al-Maliki become prime minister. Although on the ideological level both al-Maliki and al-Sadr shared a similar sense of Iraqi nationalism, backed by a vision of a strong centralized state, they differed significantly on how to deal with U.S. troops stationed in the country. Due to their different policies (and ideological stances) toward Washington, in spring 2007 the Sadrists broke away from al-Maliki's government and formed an anti-establishment Shi`a bloc in parliament.

As Baghdad's campaign against militia activities achieved major military success with Operation Peace in Sadr City and Messenger of Peace, which considerably eliminated armed operations in Maysan Province, the Sadrists took significant losses. Maysan Province, for example, was a key passage point for Mahdi Army supplies coming from Iran. Al-Maliki's success in getting the security pact passed by the parliament marked the final stage in an orchestrated effort to marginalize al-Sadr. This effort has left the two Shi`a politicians of two diverse political backgrounds—one an exile leader (al-Maliki) and another a native dissident (al-Sadr) during the Ba`athist era—at the verge of a new Shi`a power struggle.

The Decline of al-Sadr?

With the ascendance of al-Maliki, al-Sadr's political and military clout has diminished considerably, especially in provincial towns where he was earlier expected to sweep into power in the 2009 elections. In Basra, for instance, where JAM suffered a major defeat in the spring, Sadrist politicians have yet to declare their intention to run for the provincial elections. This is mainly due to a sense of unease many Sadrists feel, largely due to a sharp decline in their leader's popularity since the outbreak of violence in spring and, possibly, because of al-Sadr's staunch opposition to federalism, a relatively popular concept among Shi`a in Basra.[12]

There are four major causes for the Sadrists' decline in recent months: corruption, enhanced security in the country, Washington's change of strategy with the Sadrists and Tehran's influence over Moqtada al-Sadr. First, in cities such as Basra, Karbala and southern towns like Diwaniyya, al-Sadr's public support has deteriorated significantly because of his failure "to appoint qualified people to important positions in the province and Baghdad."[13] Al-Maliki's push into Basra and public works efforts to rebuild the slums of Sadr City has been the second contributing factor to the decline of al-Sadr's influence in JAM's main stronghold.[14]

The third cause of decline can be attributed to U.S. efforts to incite further fragmentation within JAM by reaching out to the "moderates" in the al-Sadr camp, and hence isolating the "radicals." This strategy has also led to a decrease in the armed groups' organizational capabilities.[15] The split in Sadrist leadership, accordingly, matches Iran's success in bringing the movement under the supervision of the IRGC. While remaining under the influence of Tehran, al-Sadr has not only seen his popularity fade away and his status as a nationalist leader of an indigenous Iraqi movement jeopardized, but he has also lost direct control of his followers inside the country.

Future Perils and Promises

Al-Sadr is now playing a waiting game. As the leader of a major socio-political movement, the young cleric understands that both militarily and politically he is vulnerable to political forces in the Shi`a bloc backed by Iran and the United States. Yet, he also knows that neither Baghdad nor Tehran nor Washington can defeat his movement, primarily because of the passionate support he still enjoys, at times even cult-like devotion, among the Shi`a population in Baghdad's disadvantaged neighborhoods and provincial towns in the southern regions. The street is his base, and populism is his ideological marker.

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a 2004 agreement with the Paul Bremer government, which later led to the consolidation of the Sadrists as a legitimate political force in Iraq's electoral process in 2005. For a study of al-Sadr's rise to power, see Nicolas Pelham, *A New Muslim Order: The Shia and The Middle East Sectarian Crisis* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), pp. 147-156.

9 "Edea-ie Bazdasht-e Khaneghi Moqtada dar Qom tavasot-e Sepah!" *Tabnak*, May 17, 2008.

10 For Iran's decline of military activity in Iraq, see Anne Gearan, "US General: Iran Backs Off Worst Bombs in Iraq," Associated Press, December 12, 2008.

11 Mark Kukis, "A Maliki-Sadr Breakup?" *Time*, January 11, 2007.

12 Saleem al-Wazzan, "Basra's Dominant Parties Expect to Maintain Power," *Niqash*, December 16, 2008. For now, as analyst Reidar Visser argues, Sadrists appear to adopt multiple strategies, as many Sadrist candidates are running under different names for the Basra governorates. For more, see Reidar Visser, "The Candidate Lists Are Out: Basra More Fragmented, Sadrists Pursuing Several Strategies?" www.historiae.org, December 22, 2008.

13 Riyadh Sari, "Al-Qadisiyah Gears Up for Elections," *Niqash*, December 11, 2008.

14 Howard Lafranchi, "U.S. Hopes to Counter Mahdi Army's Clout in Baghdad: American Forces in Iraq Announced Monday Ambitious Public-Works Plans to Win Support in Sadr City," *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 15, 2008.

15 Gareth Porter, "Unable to Defeat Mahdi Army, U.S. Hopes to Divide It," International Press Service News Agency, December 11, 2008.

Al-Sadr also realizes, however, that his support could rapidly corrode away if he is unable to prove himself and his military-political organization as a viable alternative to the Maliki-Hakim Shi`a faction in power. For now, the primary predicament al-Sadr faces is the ability to reinvent himself as an anti-occupation notable. While facing the prospect of a U.S. withdrawal in 2011, al-Sadr would need to redefine his political leadership in a post-occupation period. Since much of his success in recent years has evolved around the rhetoric of nationalist resistance, however, the question remains as to what will happen to al-Sadr's political power when U.S. troops actually leave Iraq in 2011.

The answer to this question is two-fold. First, al-Sadr's future success will largely be shaped by how successfully he restructures his fractured militia and expands his popular support on the street level into a thriving political movement, participating (and succeeding) in the electoral process (independent from Tehran). It is important to note that such a scenario is highly unpredictable in light of al-Sadr's apparent diminishing political popularity ahead of provincial elections in January 2009.

Second, the future of al-Sadr as a political leader will also depend on Baghdad's capability to implement the U.S.-Iraq "status of forces" agreement on both legal and perceptual levels. If al-Maliki shows Iraq's competing factions that he is able to carry through the agreement (i.e., the withdrawal of U.S. troops in 2011) without the outbreak of violence, and continues to appear as the head of a sovereign nation independent from the United States, al-Sadr's popularity could diminish further. If, however, an Iraq-U.S. security deal is undermined by numerous amendments to the treaty made by al-Maliki or by various Shi`a factions in power pressuring him to do so, then al-Sadr could make the case that the approved security pact has been merely a Washington ploy to make its stay in Iraq permanent. This would further legitimize his movement as an anti-establishment force. There is certainly a likelihood for this scenario, as the threat of breakaway Sunni insurgent groups and al-Qa`ida could force Baghdad to seek out the support of U.S. troops beyond 2011. This would prolong a U.S. stay in Iraq for an unforeseeable future and, in return, increase al-Sadr's position as a legitimate anti-occupation politician.

In many ways, therefore, al-Sadr is still a major player on the Iraqi political scene. As a shrewd student of politics, the yet-to-be ayatollah could still break away from the Tehran-Qom nexus, reconstitute his militia into a more organized force in southern regions and, under the right circumstances, emerge as a prevailing national figure. Through the "cultural" wing of his new organization, al-Sadr can also exert power on the street and neighborhood levels. Like Hizb Allah or Hamas, he could muster considerable support from the disfranchised and unruly youth, vying with Shi`a factions such as Dawa and the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq (ISCI) for territorial and political control over the southern regions.

An alternative to the intra-Shi`a power struggle is the unlikely alliance between al-Sadr and al-Maliki's Dawa Party or Sunni anti-federalist factions. This would allow al-Sadr to gain momentum in the provincial or national elections and, while forming coalitions with smaller parties and militias (such as Fadila), stir political or even military conflicts with Kurdish or certain Shi`a federalist factions (such as the ISCI).[16] There is also the possible coalition between al-Sadr and the anti-Maliki Dawa faction, led by former Prime Minister Ibrahim Jafari, in a way to counter-balance the Maliki-Hakim hegemony and forming a new (anti-American) Shi`a nationalist front.[17]

The above scenarios, however, largely depend on how Baghdad maintains the fledgling political process, local security and economic prospects, which have been slowly achieved since the surge. There is also the implementation of transparent elections, the July referendum over the security deal and successful constitutional negotiations, especially over the Kirkuk question. If Baghdad prevails, al-Maliki can claim a decisive victory over the militias (Sadrist or otherwise) and look beyond ethnic and sectarian politics as a way of managing politics.

The resurrection of JAM also depends on how the new U.S. administration deals with Tehran and its controversial nuclear program before the agreed withdrawal date of 2011, and whether it can find a diplomatic way, especially with the pragmatic conservatives close to Ayatollah Khameini, to convince Iran to curb al-Sadr's military activities for years to come.

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16 For a possible Sadr-Maliki alliance, see Saleem al-Wazzan, "Basra's Dominant Parties Expect to Maintain Power," *Niqash*, December 16, 2008.

17 Sari, "Al-Qadisiyah Gears Up for Elections."