

Defeating AQI requires defining a strategy combining both targeted actions with a more systemic approach. First, the United States should continue to assist and train the ISF to improve its capacity and capability to deal with terrorism once all foreign troops depart. Indeed, the ISF will have to deal with AQI and other threats alone in 2012. A first concrete step could be the strengthening of the INCTF's functions, especially of gathering and sharing intelligence between all institutions and agencies involved in security matters. Second, because AQI has seen its popular support fall dramatically, new measures should be taken to address its ideological strengths that draw cadre to its cause. Broader counter-radicalization and deradicalization campaigns should be enforced, and moderate imams mobilized to counteract AQI's radical Salafist ideology.

Eventually, Iraq's legal and judicial framework must be further reinforced, with law provisions and enforcement reaching further. A body of highly competent and trained counterterrorism magistrates should be established who would be allowed to use preventive prosecution and detention powers whenever individuals are reported to have connections with radical insurgents such as AQI and other related groups. Within the Iraqi prison system, which has become a crucible for the spread of Salafist ideology, the monitoring of inmates should be enforced to more effectively prevent prisoners from radicalizing and potentially rejoining the insurgency once released.

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The Return of Moqtada al-Sadr and the Revival of the Mahdi Army

By Babak Rahimi

SINCE THE BEGINNING of the U.S. intervention in Iraq in 2003, one of the key Shi'a political players has been Moqtada al-Sadr. As the leader of a powerful Shi'a militia, the Jaysh al-Mahdi (the Mahdi Army, JAM), al-Sadr became one of the most important political contenders in post-Ba'athist Iraq. For the past two years, however, al-Sadr has maintained a low profile, studying at the theological seminary in the Iranian city of Qom. Yet al-Sadr recently made a dramatic re-entry into Iraq's turbulent politics, with his bloc winning 40 seats in the 325-seat parliament during the March 2010 nationwide elections.¹ This leverage has enabled al-Sadr to become a kingmaker in a Shi'a-dominated government. In Iraq's highly fractured parliamentary politics, al-Sadr emerged to play a decisive role in forging an alliance among the Shi'a bloc—led by Nuri al-Maliki's State of Law coalition and Ammar al-Hakim's Iraqi National Alliance—while gaining considerable influence over who is appointed to certain government posts.² By striking a major political deal that allowed his rival, Nuri al-Maliki, to continue as prime minister in exchange for the release of his detained militiamen, al-Sadr has proved himself a savvy political actor, capable of negotiating with his adversaries to enhance his own political authority.

In April 2010, al-Sadr exercised this increased political leverage by publicly announcing the restoration of his feared militia, the Mahdi Army.³ The militia was disbanded in 2008 after Iraqi security forces, supported by international troops, neutralized al-Sadr's fighters during the final stages of counterinsurgency operations.⁴ Al-

Sadr's recent call for the restoration of JAM is largely in response to weeks of Sunni attacks on Shi'a urban centers in Baghdad and in the southern provinces. As al-Sadr called on his militia to support Iraqi security forces, he justified the move by arguing that JAM could provide protection for Shi'a neighborhoods, especially during religious events.

This article will examine whether the revival of JAM is a mere tactical move to provide security for the Shi'a community, or whether al-Sadr is again harboring larger ambitions. It will also describe the new characteristics of JAM, which through the assistance of Iran has been reshaped to fit the new Iraqi political context.

Revisiting the Mahdi Army

Since its inception in 2003, JAM has proven capable of changing organizational and operational tactics to advance the political interests of the Sadrist movement. In its original manifestation in the early phases of the post-war period, JAM emerged as a "citizen militia" to address local security problems with retaliatory actions against sectarian (Sunni) and foreign (U.S.-UK) threats.⁵ Between 2003 and 2007—a period of insurgent violence and (intra) sectarian conflict—JAM played a critical role in fomenting sectarian tensions as Iraq entered a deadly phase of civil conflict that almost tore the country apart. Between 2006 and 2008, the militia fractured, and some members broke away from al-Sadr's political faction in response to him entering negotiations with coalition forces. This development played a decisive role in al-Sadr's decision to move to Iran in late 2007 or early 2008, as he sought Tehran's protection against his own militiamen who no longer viewed him as a spiritual and military leader, but instead as a mere politician.⁶ With diminishing clout, especially after the 2008 provincial elections, the Sadrists suffered not only

1 Adam Schreck, "2 Candidates from Iraq's Sunni-backed Party Killed," Associated Press, June 5, 2010.

2 Suadad al-Salhy, "Iraq's Shi'ite-led Groups Edge Closer to Government," Reuters, June 16, 2010.

3 "Al-Sadr Call for Reviving Mahdi Army to Keep Security, Official Maliki Advisor Rejects," AK News, April 25, 2010.

4 Sami Moubayed, "Muqtada Unleashes News, Improved Army," *Asia Times Online*, April 30, 2010. Also see "Sadr

Reforms Mehdi Army Amid Iraqi Crisis," United Press International, May 20, 2010.

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

6 Babak Rahimi, "Two Types of Splinter Groups Break from Moqtada al-Sadr," *Terrorism Focus* 4:10 (2007); Babak Rahimi, "Becoming an Ayatollah: The New Iraqi Politics of Moqtada al-Sadr," *Terrorism Monitor* 6:3 (2008).

from declining Shi`a public support, but also a lack of coherent, organized military force that earlier in 2005 gave the movement enhanced leverage in Sadrism strongholds such as Sadr City and Maysan.

In light of considerable pressure from the Najaf-Tehran-Qom nexus,⁷ al-Sadr implemented a major strategic shift by steering away from politics and instead pursuing religious activities. He transformed his militia into a religious association to enhance his leadership on a spiritual level. While residing in an affluent northern Tehrani neighborhood, al-Sadr began his studies at Qom in Shi`a jurisprudence under (an unknown) high-ranking cleric with the aim to become a *mujtahid* or a learned scholar with the recognized ability to issue religious decrees.⁸ As for JAM, al-Sadr called for the transformation of the militia into a “cultural and a religious force,” charged with the responsibility of leading an intellectual jihad.⁹ The changes primarily involved the centralization of the command structure into disciplined and small units of loyalists, vigorously training to provide public services and other community activities. The newly formed religious association became known as the “Momahidoun,” in Arabic meaning those who pave the path.¹⁰

The decision to remold JAM into a cultural body dates back to August 2007, when clashes between the Badr Organization—which is part of the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (ISCI), a Shi`a rival to al-Sadr’s organization—and JAM led to the deaths of several

7 This nexus is marked by a set of relations—cultural, economic, political and, at times, familial—that connect clerics, their representatives and Iranian officials in a network association. Such complex relations play a critical role in Iraq, as many Iraqi politicians, especially from the Shi`a faction Iraqi National Alliance, are closely linked with this nexus.

8 It is widely known that al-Sadr has been in Qom. See, for example, Babak Dehghanpisheh, “The Kingmaker,” *Newsweek*, May 15, 2010.

9 Babak Rahimi, “The Future of Moqtada al-Sadr’s New Jaysh al-Mahdi,” *CTC Sentinel* 2:1 (2009).

10 The name was coined in reference to the devout followers of the Hidden Imam, the Mahdi, who prepare the way for his return, which is believed by the Shi`a to culminate in the establishment of divine justice on earth. For details, see “Faalyat-e Artesh-e Al-Mahdi be Halat-e Taliq Dar Amad,” *Fars News*, August 29, 2008.

Shi`a pilgrims in Karbala. With Najaf’s and Tehran’s intervention, al-Sadr agreed to a truce and issued a decree to freeze the activities of his militia, a decision that was renewed six months later to ensure his Shi`a critics of his commitment to bring the unruly militia under control.¹¹ The Knights Assault Campaign to disarm JAM first from Basra, and then from Sadr City, ended in another cease-fire agreement on May

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10, 2008. Despite the truce, the Iraqi security offensive expanded into other cities such as Amara and Diwanya in the summer of 2008, as supporters of al-Sadr followed their leader’s call for restraint, showing no signs of major resistance. Al-Maliki, who came to power because of al-Sadr’s support in 2006, had now become the Sadrists’ arch enemy.

Al-Sadr’s 2008 shift toward soft power signified a self-promotional strategy designed to create a restored civic force operating on par with the Badr Organization, although mainly modeled after Hizb Allah of Lebanon.¹² This development also underlined how al-Sadr made considerable efforts to extricate himself from unruly elements within his movement, a source of tension since the escalation of sectarian violence in early 2006. Although the

11 For details on this period in time, see Rahimi, “The Future of Moqtada al-Sadr’s New Jaysh al-Mahdi.” Also see Babak Rahimi, “The Mumahidun: Muqtada Al-Sadr’s New Militia,” *Terrorism Monitor* 6:17 (2008).

12 The Lebanese case of Hizb Allah and its soft, public activities served as a model for al-Sadr, especially since 2006 when the Lebanese militia’s popularity soared in the Arab world in the aftermath of a military conflict with Israel. See Bill Roggio and Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, “Sadr’s Special Groups,” *The Long War Journal*, June 10, 2008.

tactical reasons for the recalibration of JAM are several, one major force behind the changes appears to be Iran, particularly the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which has worked to remold JAM into a Hizb Allah-like Shi`a militia in Iraq.¹³

Iran and the Rise of the New JAM

Since 2003, Tehran actively sought to bring the Sadrism movement under its sphere of influence. Yet Iraqi nationalism and the decentralized nature of JAM constrained Iranian control over the movement. It was the bloody clashes between JAM and other Shi`a factions, along with the declining influence of Sadrists in Iraqi politics after the sectarian conflict, that allowed Tehran to increasingly gain a hold over Moqtada al-Sadr and his militia. With intra-Shi`a conflict and violent JAM splinter groups, al-Sadr grew dependent on Tehran’s financial and military support, further undermining his ability to emerge as an independent Shi`a leader in the post-war period. Accordingly, al-Sadr’s decision in late 2007 to move to Iran provided Iranian hardliners a major advantage to monitor the young cleric, while encouraging him to undergo religious training through Iranian seminary circles.

By and large, it is not clear the extent to which the IRGC has aided in regrouping JAM into a Hizb Allah-like militia force since al-Sadr left Iraq. Yet if Iran has been actively engaged in restructuring al-Sadr’s militia by weakening various splinter elements and training the militia into a disciplined force (especially on the leadership level), it is unlikely that the IRGC has been able to maintain focus in this restructuring process since the Iranian election unrest of 2009. As a result of Iran’s domestic problems stemming from the election, it appears that many of its intelligence resources have been refocused internally.¹⁴

Of course, it is still possible that Iran continues to provide logistical and financial support to JAM in developing the militia into a charity and religious

13 This assessment, and those that follow, are based on the author’s observations and research work in the region.

14 Apparently, between summer 2009 and winter 2010, many Iranian intelligence officers in Iraq returned to Iran for intelligence operations.

association both inside Iraq and Iran. Along with their leader, a number of JAM military officers resided in Tehran and the shrine cities of Mashhad and Qom.¹⁵ This is, in a way, reminiscent of the 1980s when Ayatollah Hakim's Badr officers resided in Iran and were trained by the IRGC for an eventual return to Iraq. Yet unlike the Badr Brigade in the 1980s and 1990s, many Iranian-based Sadrists continue to travel between Iran and Iraq, strengthening JAM's financial and network ties across both countries.

On a more significant level, the revival of al-Sadr's political fortunes are less about Iranian influence and more about his followers' ability to cleverly exploit electoral politics to their advantage. The latest parliamentary elections provided such an opportunity, placing al-Sadr in the center of the political map. The key to the Sadrists' electoral success was how they applied systematic polling methods such as databases with information on voters in all provinces and a cunning campaign strategy to win voters in the south.¹⁶ Along with anti-establishment and populist tactics, such as the staged referendum as a way to discredit al-Maliki's authority in the Shi'a urban centers, al-Sadr was able to present himself and his followers as the primary political force to defend the Shi'a population. Also, it is possible that al-Sadr exploited his close ties with General Qasim Soleimani of the IRGC, who also played a part in lobbying the Iraqi National Alliance to merge with the State of Law coalition to boost his political fortunes within the Shi'a bloc. This political move took away the chance for Iyad Allawi's secular-Sunni front to form a government, which would have considerably diminished al-Sadr's role as a key political figure.

In the aftermath of the elections, al-Sadr's public call for the return of JAM reveals a sense of confidence with the backing of not only Iran, but also a large Shi'a electorate. For now, the Sadrists also have the respect of al-Maliki, who was forced to make considerable concessions with al-Sadr to remain in power. In this light, al-Sadr may now feel he has the political capital to legitimize the full restoration of JAM

as part of Iraq's security institutions, which could be controlled by Sadrists in the next government.

Implications

The implications of JAM's revival are several. The most critical is the sectarian factor. While Sadrists are unlikely to undertake military operations against Sunnis in provinces such as Baghdad and Diyala, the resurfacing of JAM could nevertheless threaten Sunnis and motivate their insurgent elements to engage in anti-sectarian activities. A new wave of militant violence could return to Iraq and significantly undermine the country's fragile political process, stirring the country back to the sectarian killings of 2006.

The second aspect is the Iran factor. Increasing pressure by the United States on Tehran's nuclear program could encourage the IRGC, which controls Iran's Iraq policy, to use the new JAM as a proxy force to either deteriorate security conditions or challenge U.S. forces to prevent military attacks against Iran's nuclear facilities. In this scenario, the main question remains to what extent Iranian hardliners could feel threatened to turn to JAM for military support inside Iraq. This scenario is less likely, however, since, like Hizb Allah in Lebanon, al-Sadr would risk major political capital if he appears too obedient to Tehran. The perils of doing Iran's bidding could also severely weaken the new JAM, as the militia could be undermined in case of a renewed military conflict with the United States. In summary, the costs for helping Iran are considerably overwhelming for al-Sadr.

Meanwhile, the Iran factor is closely tied to the U.S. factor. Similar to Hizb Allah during Israel's withdrawal from south Lebanon, Iraq too could see a rise of JAM military activities with the departure of U.S. forces in 2011. This possible outcome is contingent on Baghdad's capability to implement the U.S.-Iraq "status of forces" agreement on both legal and perceptual levels. If al-Maliki is unable to fulfill the withdrawal agreement and appears too dependent on U.S. military power, al-Sadr might shift his attention to anti-occupation activities and engage his new JAM in military operations against the United States. This scenario is also

unlikely, however, unless JAM manages to effectively bolster its asymmetrical military abilities with the support of the IRGC, a prospect that could materialize in case the United States or Israel attack Iran.

In essence, the Sadrist movement is inspired by populist nationalism and millenarian militancy. Yet the key to their success is the political shrewdness in how they survive various assaults, and ultimately return stronger than before. What could eventually limit the Sadrists' militant activities is how far they succeed in the political spectrum. As long as al-Sadr remains a major political figure, operating within the Iraqi electoral process, it is unlikely that JAM will return to its combative roots and reactivate its military program. Al-Sadr's ultimate interest is to maintain his political prestige, with the possible ambition to one day become the country's first Shi'a cleric prime minister or perhaps a major Shi'a spiritual leader like his father, Ayatollah Sadeq al-Sadr. If fulfilled, then the activities of the new JAM will primarily revolve around "cultural" pursuits, although it will always maintain a disciplined military wing in case the Sadrists feel excluded from politics.

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¹⁵ This information was valid as of late 2009, when the author conducted research in the region.

¹⁶ Dehghanpisheh.