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**The Sadrists of Basra and the Far South
of Iraq**

**The Most Unpredictable Political Force in the Gulf's
Oil-Belt Region?**

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The Sadrists of Basra and the Far South of Iraq

The Most Unpredictable Political Force in the Gulf's Oil-Belt Region?

Reidar Visser

[Abstract] The argument in this paper is two-fold: on the one hand, the oil-rich far south of Iraq has a special potential for radical and unpredictable millenarianism by discontented Sadrists; on the other hand, developments among the Sadrist leadership nationally suggest that many key figures – including Muqtada al-Sadr himself and some of his lieutenants with links to Basra – still prefer a more moderate course and will seek to hold on to a veneer of Shiite orthodoxy as long as possible. Accordingly, the future of the Sadrist movement, including in the far south, will likely be decided by how US and Iraqi government policies develop over coming months. If Washington chooses to support Nuri al-Maliki in an all-out attack against the Sadrists, the response may well be an intensification of unpredictable Mahdist militancy in the far south, in a far more full-blown picture than anything seen so far. There will be no genuine national reconciliation in Baghdad, simply because the centralism of the Sadrists is a necessary ingredient in any grand compromise that can appeal to real Sunni representatives. Conversely, if the Sadrists are encouraged to participate in the next local elections, Amara, where Sadrists have been engaged in local politics since 2005, could emerge as a model of positive Sadrist contributions to local politics in Iraq. At the national level, too, the Sadrists could come to play the same constructive role as that seen in February 2008, when they together with Fadila reached out to Sunni Islamists and secularists to challenge the paralysed Maliki government on a nationalist basis by demanding early provincial elections.

About the author

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Introduction

On 10 August 2004, 31-year old Salam Awda al-Maliki created shockwaves in Iraqi politics. The Sadrist deputy governor of Basra warned that unless American and Iraqi armed forces immediately ceased their military operations against Muqtada al-Sadr – at the time holed up in Najaf after a second uprising against the Americans – Basra would “separate from Iraq”.¹ Furious reactions followed from all parts of Iraq and the Arab world, including from Sadrists in other regions of Iraq who found the idea of Basra’s separation offensive. Never since the early 1920s had anyone even toyed with the idea of splitting up the Arab parts of Iraq and severing the strategically important head of the Gulf; never ever had a Shiite been involved in a leading role in this kind of project.² But Maliki’s threat was accompanied by more brinkmanship by southerners. From Nasiriyya, Aws al-Khafaji, a preacher and another leading figure in the Sadrist movement, announced that unless offensive operations against Muqtada were discontinued, oil fields would be set ablaze across southern Iraq in a petro-kamikaze involving the world’s third largest reserves.³

Are the Sadrists of Iraq’s far south – Basra, Amara and Nasiriyya – the most unpredictable political force in the Gulf’s “oil-belt region”, the mostly Arab Shiite-dominated oil-rich area that extends from Western Iran via Basra to al-Hasa in Saudi Arabia? This paper argues against that kind of characterisation. Whilst the south is certainly radical, there is evidence that the more moderate civilian leadership of the Sadrist movement – parliamentarians and the leaders of the Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) – still hangs together fairly well at the national level, and that this cohesion also extends to some Sadrist leaders in Basra. With regard to this segment of the Sadrist movement, the overall trend for the past year or so has been towards increased engagement in politics. In February 2008, the Sadrists were among the most decisive contributors behind the push for early provincial elections, and they have also been active in a number of recent initiatives to challenge the Maliki government by the creation of a new alliance on a broad, Iraqi nationalist, non-sectarian platform. As for their leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, quite despite all the controversy and sensationalism surrounding him in the Western press, he has in fact quite consistently held on to a facade of Usuli Shiite orthodoxy. This signals that, absent any new, major provocation by the US and the Maliki government, Sadr is more likely to aspire to a role as a young Shiite scholar than as a revolutionary Mahdist – a crucial distinction in terms of the political potential of his movement.

However, there is also a second, more militant, and also more unpredictable current among the southern Sadrists. Down in the south, at a far earlier stage than elsewhere in Iraq, the Iranians succeeded in luring individual Sadrist cells into subversive activities that sometimes conflicted with the policies of the Najaf-based Sadrist leadership. As early as in 2005, concerns grew about Iranian involvement in supplying advanced arms technology that could be used against the occupation forces and thus serving the dual purpose of weakening both the British and the mainline nationalist Sadrists. This second trend has attracted both Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) leaders as well as individual Sadrist preachers. However, it should not be seen as a sign of any particular southern enthusiasm for Iran; rather it reflects a general tendency among southerners to often go their own ways and disregard attempts at outside domination, whether by Baghdad, Najaf or Tehran. Other signs of internal southern subversion of the central Sadrist leadership include a number of declarations of *jihad* or “holy war” (targeting the multi-national forces) which clearly were issued by lower-ranking clerics without

¹ *Al-Manara*, 11 August 2004.

² For previous episodes of separatism in Iraq south of Baghdad, see Reidar Visser, *Basra, the Failed Gulf State: Separatism and Nationalism in Southern Iraq*, Berlin, 2005.

³ Interview with Aws al-Khafaji on al-Jazeera, 19 August 2004.

reference to anyone outside the southern region, as well as the proliferation of kangaroo courts – especially in Basra – that similarly materialised without any supervision by qualified clerics. On top of this, in comparison with the rest of Iraq, the level of internal Sadrism fragmentation is elevated in the south (with a strong Fadila branch in Basra and smaller cells loyal to the renegade cleric Mahmud al-Hasani across the three southern governorates), and there are also clear links between the southern Sadrists and political currents of an even more radical and unpredictable nature – especially Mahdists such as the followers of Ahmad al-Hasan. Again, the proliferation of this kind of radical current is probably not the product of Iranian influence but rather a result of a strong radical tradition in the far south, historically comprising also the Shiite Arab areas of neighbouring Iran and Saudi Arabia. Ever since medieval times, various Mahdist initiatives have prospered in this region, repeatedly posing problems for outsiders trying to establish control.

In other words, the potential for radicalism is considerable. To a great extent, the United States and the Maliki government are in a position to decide the way forward. If they choose a policy of head-on confrontation, as was seen in the January 2008 operations against Ahmad al-Hasan and again in late March 2008 when the Sadrists of Basra came under what seemed to be an indiscriminate attack, the tilt towards unpredictable radicalism among the southern Sadrists may be unavoidable. As a substantial component of the social structure in the south, the Sadrists can be neither ignored nor annihilated; so far, even modest operations against tiny southern factions under the Sadrism umbrella have illustrated glaringly the limited capacities of the Iraqi security forces in handling this kind of Shiite-on-Shiite challenge. On the other hand, more positive scenarios can also be envisaged. If unobstructed Sadrism participation in the 2008 local elections is enabled, more predictable trends can once more come to dominate in the south. In that case, the pioneering example of Amara can become relevant as a model: here, Sadrists have run the local government since 2005, and have now reached the point where they boast of being the Iraqi governorate with the highest implementation rate for local development projects.

Ideological background

The Sadrism movement emerged as an underground phenomenon in the 1990s during the special circumstances of international sanctions, authoritarian government and social unrest in Iraq. It took observers by surprise, because it distinguished itself from what many had described as a “traditional Iraqi Shiism” supposedly characterised by apolitical attitudes and disdain for the idea of clerical involvement in formal politics.

One of the hallmarks of the Sadrism movement, as it emerged under the leadership of Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr (henceforth Sadr II)⁴, was a high degree of social conservatism. It should be stressed that strict adherence to Islamic ideals was by no means a unique feature of the Sadrists; it was shared also by Islamist groups operating in exile in places like Iran. This included a special focus on Islamic social codes, such as wearing the hijab and abstaining from alcohol. Nevertheless, certain aspects of Sadr II’s preaching highlighted tendencies that would become characteristic of the Sadrists after the 2003 invasion. In particular, Sadr II went further than many others in prescribing Islamic morality for the entire Iraqi community, including groups normally seen as being exempt from this,

⁴ Sadr I was Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr who was murdered by the Baathist regime in 1980. A relative of Sadr II, the first Sadr was an icon to the entire community of Iraqi Shiites, and the image of long-standing dynastical conflict between the Sadr and Hakim families should not be overplayed. Suffice to say that the arch rival of the Sadrists, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), titled its mouthpiece in the 1980s and 1990s *Liwa al-Sadr* or “banner of Sadr [I].”

like non-Muslim minorities. In a speech on the position of women, for example, Sadr II stressed that Jews and Christians should also wear the hijab, which in his view was in accordance with the traditions of their religions.⁵ Similarly, gypsies – a miniscule minority in Iraq – were sometimes singled out for admonishment by Sadr and his representatives.

Another important Sadrist characteristic was a strong focus on Iraq and Iraqi nationalism. This dimension is best appreciated if contrasted with the prevalent trends among other Iraqi Islamist currents at the time, especially the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI, since May 2007 ISCI), which explicitly advocated subservience to Iran's leaders, first Khomeini and later Khamenei. From Tehran, in 1999, the SCIRI leadership expressed dismay at Sadr II's attempt to carve out a role for himself in Iraq – entirely without reference to Khamenei, and in an authoritarian (i.e. Baathist) context where he could not possibly achieve the total dominance of Iraqi society which the Khomeinist tradition favoured. SCIRI, they explained, was also in favour of a particular religious leadership “for the Iraqi scene” (in the shape of Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim); however this would “never” compete with or stand in the way of the supreme Islamic (and in practice pan-Shiite) leadership of Iran's Khamenei.⁶ By way of contrast, Sadr II, while sharing SCIRI's preference for the concept of clerical rule (*wilayat al-faqih*), for the first time challenged Tehran by launching the idea of a supreme ruler (*wali amr al-muslimin*) based in Najaf rather than in Iran.⁷ While theoretically pan-Islamist in character, in practice this soon translated into a basic Iraqi nationalist attitude which has permeated the Sadrist movement ever since, and which has proved durable even in the context of steady Iranian attempts to reverse it. Thus, while the Sadrist phenomenon in sometimes portrayed as an Iraqi parallel to the Lebanese Hizbollah, this analogue is imprecise as far as political theory is concerned. More on the mark is probably Shaykh Subhi al-Tufayli, a former Hizbollah commander who should know this subject from the inside, and who in 2007 explained the parallels between Iraq and Lebanon to the *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* newspaper in the following terms: “Hizbollah adopts the theory of government by the jurist [*wilayat al-faqih*] and fully adheres to this policy. The same attitude is adopted by SCIRI. This means that Hasan Nasrallah and Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim adhere to Sayyid Khamenei's leadership one hundred per cent.”⁸

Sadr II not only challenged Khamenei. Another target of his fiery rhetoric was the established clergy of Najaf, which by the mid-1990s had crystallised around the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani along with three other top clerics who all chose to stay completely aloof from politics in the context of Saddam Hussein's authoritarian rule. Sadr II took exception to this. Coining the concept of a “vocal” or “articulate” hawza (*al-hawza al-natiqa*) he explicitly distanced himself from what he described as its logical opposite, the “silent hawza” (*al-hawza al-samita*) of Sistani and the other higher-ranking ulama. To some extent this challenge corresponded to the fundamental opposition between “activist” and “quietist” orientations within Shiite Islam as typified in the polarisation between Khomeini and Khomei since the 1970s; that is, between currents advocating active involvement of the clerics in the state structure and those propagating a far more reclusive if not entirely apolitical role.⁹ But

⁵ Muhsin al-Musawi (ed.), *Minbar al-sadr*, Beirut, 2003, pp. 251–52. Sometimes, there appears to be a link between the Sadrist interest in social conformity among non-Muslims and the universalistic tendencies of their Mahdism, which in theory aims at mankind in general.

⁶ Fa'iq al-Shaykh Ali, *Ightiyal sha'b*, London, 2000, pp. 78–79.

⁷ Adil Ra'uf: *Muhammad muhammad sadiq al-sadr: marja'iyat al-maydan*, Damascus, 1999, pp. 56–57.

⁸ *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 9 February 2007. The subsequent (May 2007) attempt by SCIRI to play down their Iranian connections has little substance to it, see Reidar Visser, “SCIRI More Flexible on Federalism, but Fails to Resolve Khamenei Ambiguity”, 12 May 2007, www.historiae.org/Khamenei.asp

⁹ The opposition between activists and quietists should not be translated as a tension pitting political versus apolitical traditions against each other. The quietist school does not surrender the idea of clerical authority as such but rather emphasises the distance from structures of formal, institutionalised political power. Thus, it is

there was more to Sadr II's challenge to the established clergy. In many ways it was an audacious move by a cleric whose rather abrupt pretension to the status as "the most learned cleric" (*al-a'lam*) in the Shiite world was at variance with the gradual and very linear process of slow advancement to this kind of status usually seen as the norm in Shiite Islam. This sort of religious power grab had significant parallels to tendencies seen in Iran after the revolution, where junior clerics often appealed to their greater knowledge of "the conditions of the time" and practical politics to compensate for a perceived lack of scholarly maturity. But in the Sadrist case there was also a more frontal attack on the hierarchical system as such, with Sadr prosecuting a somewhat unusual campaign in support of his claim to supreme knowledge, at one point admitting openly that his claim to be the *a'lam* was peculiar in the sense that it was not yet backed up by an extensive record of publication in the relevant fields.¹⁰ Still, this did not amount to an abandonment of the Usuli concept of clerical monopoly (i.e. only recognised *mujtahid* clerics can interpret Islamic law), as Sadr himself remained loyal to all the trappings of formal Shiite nomenclature, stretching many traditional barriers but ultimately confirming their continued validity. Sadr II never went as far as the Akhbari direction with Shiism in terms of explicitly attacking the monopoly of the senior clergy associated with the mainstream (Usuli) branch.

Finally, a fourth characteristic aspect of early Sadrist ideology which also merits attention is the remarkable prominence of themes related to the Mahdi and the conditions of his return in the scholarship of Sadr II. Of course, the Hidden Imam (who disappeared in the ninth century AD) is an integral and indeed crucial component of Shiite theology and religious discourse, with a theoretical monopoly of all political authority on Earth also in the period of his occultation (the *ghayba*). However, where Sadr II stood out was in scholarship that went into more detail than usual concerning the exact circumstances of the return of the Mahdi, sometimes featuring critical discussions of the source bases for expectations of particular scenarios of the apocalypse. This exercise reached its zenith in the remarkable "History of the Post-Appearance Era"; a futuristic work of history that comprises discussion of such themes as the signs of the return of the Mahdi and the expected characteristics of the "Mahdist state". Its detailed sections on such subjects as the character of the would-be companions of the Mahdi and their ethnic backgrounds lend themselves to contemplations about possible modern-day parallels. And while at times speculative to the point where Sadr's conclusions perhaps first and foremost speak volumes about the comparative novelty of the field (at one point he suggests that the word *Bastan* in one of the medieval Islamic sources is a reference to "Pakistan", the modern state whose name was coined in the 1930s),¹¹ the more enduring consequence of Sadr's work was an increased interest in Mahdism in Iraq, whose territory plays a very central role in several traditions pertaining to the Mahdi's return. As such, the Mahdism of Sadr II was another harbinger of ideological trends in the Sadrist community that would grow in importance in the period after 2003.

Developments at the national leadership level, 2003–2008

Sadr II was assassinated by the Baathist regime in January 1999. Knowledge about the exact evolution of the Sadrist community during the remaining years of Baathist rule in Iraq remains patchy, but there can be no doubt that the emergence of Sadr's son, Muqtada, as a

basically a different approach towards formal bureaucracy that constitutes the essential difference between the two, see Reidar Visser, "Sistani, the United States and Politics in Iraq: From Quietism to Machiavellianism?" *NUPI Paper 700*, 2007, www.historiae.org/sistani.asp

¹⁰ Shaykh Ali, pp. 24–25.

¹¹ Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, *Tarikh ma ba'da al-zuhur*, p. 276.

leading figure for the Sadrists shortly after 2003 to a considerable extent can be attributed to his ability to mobilise an existing network of religious representatives that had been put in place across Iraq by his late father, with additional fuel provided by anti-American attitudes shaped by a decade of suffering during the international sanctions, as well as what many Iraqis consider an act of betrayal when American forces failed to extend a helping hand to the anti-Baathist uprising in the wake of the Gulf War in 1991.¹²

The first significant development after the US-led invasion in 2003 was the emergence of several competing claimants to the role as leader for the Sadrist movement. This sudden intensification of internal Sadrism in itself suggests that continued authoritarian political conditions in Iraq between 1999 and 2003 as well as Iran's desire to check the emergence of a challenge to its own protégée (SCIRI) had acted as a deterrent against any decisive leadership struggle within the considerable Sadrist community that had been left on its own in 1999. The regimes of both Iraq and Iran had taken sweeping measures against Sadrism supporters in this period, including the house arrest of Sadr II's son, Muqtada, in Iraq, and widespread clampdowns on Sadrists among Iraqi refugees in Iran.¹³

However, with the changed conditions in Iraq after the 2003 invasion, grassroots pressures for the articulation of Sadrism in politics became irrepressible, and several competing leaders soon emerged. Among the first was Muhammad al-Yaqubi, who soon established a political movement (the Fudala or the "virtuous ones"), and a political party, Hizb al-Fadila.¹⁴ In many ways, Yaqubi is the pretender to Sadrism leadership whose advance to power may have the most similarities to that of Sadr II himself, even if significant differences also remain. He remained a relatively unremarkable scholar until early 2004, when he on a flying visit to Iran managed to obtain certificates (*ijazas*) from two rather obscure clerics who vouched for his status as a *mujtahid* and thus declared him a scholar capable of legal reasoning (*ijtihad*) and with the authority to issue fatwas independently.¹⁵ Importantly, Yaqubi quickly went on to exploit this newfound status to act as a source of emulation (*marja' al-taqlid*), a leadership role which in Usuli Shiism is always restricted to scholars recognised as *mujtahids*. This stage normally requires decades of study and may often be achieved only when scholars are in their sixties or seventies; Yaqubi, by way of contrast, had barely reached forty when he ambitiously adopted the title of grand ayatollah normally associated with a widely recognised *mujtahid*. To some extent this paralleled Sadr II's meteoric rise to a position where he quite suddenly claimed the *wali amr al-muslimin* title and thereby challenged the entire leadership and indeed the basic institutions of the Iranian state. The rapidity with which Yaqubi developed a sizeable following (despite fervent protest from more established scholars) was remarkable.

As for Muqtada himself, he inherited a political movement whose existing criteria for leadership he could not possibly match. Still a very young man and a student at the introductory level of the hawza, Muqtada could at that point not even dream of integrating religious and political leadership in a single person in the way his father had done. To compensate for his lack of scholarly credentials, Muqtada embarked on an alternative strategy: an alliance with an already-established Islamic scholar. His choice was a cleric of Iraqi origins residing in Qum in Iran, Kazim al-Haeri. This may not have been entirely

¹² David Siddhartha Patel, "Ayatollahs on the Pareto Frontier: The Institutional Basis of the Religious Authority in Iraq", working paper available at http://comparativepolitics.stanford.edu/Papers2005-06/Patel_10_Oct_2005.pdf.

¹³ See in particular Shaykh Ali, pp. 211–17.

¹⁴ It is noteworthy that the Fadila party celebrates its anniversary on a date (16 of Muharram, corresponding to 19 March for 2003) that actually preceded the invasion, possibly an attempt at revisionist historiography that may render a certain underground dimension to the movement. Fadila press release, 5 February 2007.

¹⁵ The *ijazas* are from Muhammad Sadiqi Tihrani (30 January 2004) and Muhammad Ali Garami Qummi (7 January 2004).

accidental: rumours to the effect that Sadr II personally invested Haeri with a successor role had been circulating widely already in 2002.¹⁶ At the same time, however, the new partnership was not without friction. Haeri had already distinguished himself as a scholar steeped in the Khomeinist tradition and with ideas about subservience to the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran comparable to those found among SCIRI loyalists; the late Sadr II, by way of contrast, had explicitly challenged Khamenei through his aspirations as *wali amr al-muslimin*, and his followers had used the opportunity of the fall of the regime to boast of their Iraqi nationalist ideology and their status as a domestic underground movement more in touch with Iraqi realities than their exiled competitors in SCIRI.¹⁷ Also, there seemed to be a certain tension within the Sadrist camp with regard to the general principle of the superiority of the clerical leadership. In moves that resemble trends seen within Sunni Islamist camps for decades and perhaps best characterised as neo-Akhbari tendencies (after the minuscule Akhbari direction within Shiism which refutes the leading role of the ulama in interpreting Islamic law and which today is mainly found in Bahrain) some Sadrists now seemed happy to dispense with the advice of the ulama altogether as they went about setting up vigilante courts where the “Islamic” punishments meted out appeared to be first and foremost based on the caprices of these thugs themselves.¹⁸

Between 2003 and 2008 several notable developments at the Sadrist leadership level ensued. In the first place, more leadership challengers materialised. Most prominently, this involved the emergence of Mahmud al-Hasani. Hasani’s career closely resembles that of Yaqubi, albeit in a less successful version. Even if his scholarly credentials have been subjected to heavy criticism (his detractors call him “the engineer *mujtahid*”, a reference to his pre-hawza career), it is significant that despite all his radical criticism of both American and Iranian influences in Iraq, Hasani has remained loyal to the established nomenclature of orthodox Shiism, trying to present himself as a *mujtahid* scholar, and suggesting that he was seen by the late Sadr as his foremost pupil “who could become the most learned in the world”.¹⁹ However, the response by the Iraqi public and former followers of Sadr II has been less enthusiastic than what was seen in the case of Muhammad al-Yaqubi. Hasani’s followers do not appear to be well represented across the Shiite governorates; rather they make up small bastions of diehard supporters, especially in the far south in the Basra–Amara–Nasiriyya triangle.²⁰ An even less known Sadrist cleric who typologically belongs to the same category is Qasim al-Tai. He has a representative in Basra, Ahmad al-Maliki.

As for Muhammad al-Yaqubi, he consolidated his position after 2003. But despite his emergence as a *mujtahid* scholar, the Fadila party clearly remained a secondary splinter movement that was generally seen as less influential than the “mainline” Sadrists associated with Muqtada al-Sadr. Nevertheless, whereas Yaqubi’s rhetoric at times can come across as stern in its adherence to conservative values, and sectarian in its focus on the Shiites as a community, he and his party have in fact distinguished themselves in Iraqi politics through repeatedly seeking the moderate centre and serious dialogue with Sunnis and secularists. This has manifested itself in such initiatives as a rejection of SCIRI’s scheme for a single Shiite federal entity, repeated suggestions for federal solutions that would either build on existing (non-sectarian) governorate entities or phase the whole process into a far longer time frame, and public recognition of the need to accommodate Sunnis, secularists (even Baathists) and

¹⁶ Adil Ra’uf, *Iraq bi-la-qiya*, Damascus, 2002, pp. 572–77.

¹⁷ In front of a crowd of several thousand supporters, Muqtada al-Sadr condemned “Iranian influences in the Iraqi security forces” in August 2003, *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 23 August 2003. In the same period, he warned against “Kurdish chauvinism” in the Kirkuk question, *Turkomaneli*, 27 August 2003.

¹⁸ *Al-Zaman*, 28 May 2003.

¹⁹ From a biographical note entitled “Nubda mukthasira ‘an hayat samahat al-marja’ al-dini al-‘ala ayat Allah al-uzma al-sayyid al-hasani”.

²⁰ Hasani supporters demonstrated in central Basra on May 2005, *al-Manara*, 31 May 2005.

minorities in constitutional questions instead of pushing through sectarian pet projects. At the same time, Yaqubi has emphasised the importance of reconciling the concept of clerical rule (*wilayat al-faqih*) with Iraqi nationalism. Thus, whereas traditionally pro-Iranian parties like SCIRI/ISCI have yet to produce a convincing clarification of their stance on these issues (while ISCI has said that *wilayat al-faqih* on the Iranian pattern may not be suitable for Iraq, the party has failed to clarify whether it rejects the pan-Shiite concept of *wali amr al-muslimin* or not), Yaqubi has repeatedly stressed that any system of clerical rule in Iraq would have its capital in Iraq itself, not in Iran.²¹ More generally, it seems that Yaqubi, to a greater extent than his older and more established peers, relies quite heavily on dialogue with his “followers”. Thus, at one point he expressed disapproval of popular interest in sports like football (criticising excessive interest in a “game about a simple leather ball”), but later appeared to have softened his stance and even went on to act as sponsor for a sports project for local youth.²² Yaqubi has also taken opinion polls among his followers in an attempt at promoting discussion about constitutional issues. This all makes for a less stratified relationship between *muqallids* (the vast majority of Shiites who do not perform legal reasoning themselves) and *mujtahid* clerics than the almost absolutist norms of mainstream Usuli Shiism, even if the overall orthodox framework is kept intact also by Yaqubi.²³

Muqtada al-Sadr, for his part, faced renewed challenges after 2003. Relations with Haeri soured in late 2003 and early 2004 (Haeri eventually revoked Muqtada’s status as his Najaf representative and instead appointed Qasim al-Asadi), implying that his movement was once more without a leadership that fulfilled the requirements of Usuli Shiism. Nevertheless, Muqtada ultimately remained loyal to the power structures of Shiite orthodoxy. Muqtada’s followers continued to refer to him using the traditional title of *hujjatulislam* (a widespread honorific of lower rank and with limited prestige, but at least a signal about an attachment to the traditional hierarchical system), and Muqtada refrained from issuing proper fatwas, deferentially advising his followers to consult their *mujtahids* in questions such as what attitude to adopt to the Iraqi constitution in October 2005 and the subsequent parliamentary elections in December.²⁴ Thus instead of doing like Yaqubi and Hasan who had stretched the definition of a *mujtahid* scholar through the use of loopholes in the system and by aggressively using the title of “grand ayatollah” associated with a source of emulation (*marja’ al-taqlid*), Muqtada opted for a strategy that involved ad hoc solutions for challenges posed by the Iraqi political process, and a more general reliance on his late father’s teaching as a point of reference for his followers. He himself explicitly admitted more than once that he was not a *mujtahid* or a *marja*.²⁵

This kind of practice (i.e. “emulating the dead” or *taqlid al-mayyit*) is rejected by most Shiites because the *mujtahid* needs to be a living person, and it is clear that although some Shiites resort to this option in the absence of satisfactory alternatives, it is not something that can be sustainable in the long run. Ultimately, Muqtada will have to choose between becoming a *mujtahid* himself (potentially a fast-track one, on the pattern of Yaqubi and

²¹ Fadila press release with remarks by Yaqubi dated 20 Dhi al-Hijja 1427/10 January 2007: “Muqarina bayna al-nizam al-dakhili li-hizb al-fadila al-islami wa-wilayat al-faqih”.

²² Press release from Yaqubi’s office dated 24 December 2007.

²³ In other words, the *mujtahid* concept is not challenged as such, in contrast to the principles of Akhbari doctrine where the role of the ulama is reduced to that of *muhaddith*, or narrator of the Prophetic traditions.

²⁴ *Bayan* dated 10 December 2005 from www.alsader.com. However, even this was not without some ambiguity. An earlier pronouncement on registration of electors dated 14 Rajab 1426 (20 August 2005) advised Sadrists followers that “orders” (*al-amr*) as to whether one should vote Yes or No would be forthcoming, and that no one should take any action without reference (*muraja’a*) to the “vocal, righteous hawza” (*al-hawza al-natiqa bi-al-haqq*).

²⁵ Answers to questions from his followers dated 15 Shaaban 1426/19 September 2005, at www.muqtada.com (accessed 12 July 2006, now offline).

Hasani), finding another alliance with an established *mujtahid* cleric (the kind of relationship he had with Haeri in 2003), or abandon orthodox Usuli Shiism altogether and settle for something more radical. By May 2008, it seemed as if Muqtada was trying to keep both the two first alternatives afloat: having apparently relocated to Iran at the time of the start of the US-led “surge” in Baghdad in 2007 (which was perceived as an anti-Sadrism operation), he had not only resumed religious studies in Qum, but also rebuilt his alliance with Kazim al-Haeri, whose status as source of emulation for the Sadrists he seemed to reconfirm in a television interview in March 2008, even if some “problems” apparently remained.²⁶

It would still be an exaggeration to say that Muqtada’s message on these issues has been crystal clear. While some of the purported “fatwas” by Muqtada that circulate on the internet on subjects such as hashish and group sex are almost certainly forgeries,²⁷ scattered pronouncements (*bayans*) by him go quite far in copying the fatwa format, such as instructions issued in early 2008 in advance of the pilgrimage to Karbala which detailed how visitors and security officials should behave.²⁸ Similarly, the confrontation between Iraqi government forces and Sadrists in March 2008 and the demands for dissolution of the JAM highlighted internal Sadrism tension on these issues. On the one hand, reactions by individuals within the Sadrism leadership in some ways epitomised the traditionalist approach to Shiite theories of authority: Muqtada himself could not dissolve the JAM, only the *marja’iyya* (i.e. Haeri) could do so.²⁹ But, confusingly, an earlier fatwa from Haeri’s website, probably from the period after 2004 when relations between Muqtada and Haeri soured, still declared that the JAM “was not formed on Haeri’s orders”, i.e. it must have been created by Muqtada himself.³⁰ Where Haeri is unequivocal, though, is in striking against the alternative challengers within the Sadrism movement: both Hasani’s and Yaqubi’s claims to leadership are rejected, on the grounds that they do not possess the required skills and certificates for acting as *mujtahids*. Haeri has also asserted himself as a potential player in Iraqi politics (with or without Muqtada’s partnership) by outlining a constitutional draft for Iraq that features a veto-wielding body of clerics on top, as well as remnants of his original pan-Islamic ideology in a constitutional requirement that the Iraqi government shape its policies on “basis of the alliance and union of the Islamic peoples”.³¹ Both the pan-Islamic tendencies and the elitist procedures for creating the constitutional court (half of the representatives are to be appointed by “recognised Shiite sources of emulation” or *maraji’ al-taqlid*) could in turn come into conflict with the interests of the young clerics among the Sadrists.³²

²⁶ Al-Jazeera, 29 March 2008. The remaining and unspecified problems may relate to quite serious matters. In the same interview, Sadr explicitly rejected Khamenei’s leadership, whereas Haeri’s attitude to Khamenei is at its clearest in his fatwa on *tatbir* (ceremonial head-cutting during the Muharram festival): *tatbir* is rejected because an order on this issue has been issued by the *wali amr al-muslimin*, an unequivocal reference to Khamenei who has explicitly forbidden this ritual.

²⁷ These “fatwas” have been played up by Israeli scholar Amatzia Baram in an essay titled “Muqtada al-Sadr, the Mahdi and Shi’i Messianic Expectations”. However, their form seems so exaggeratedly scandalous that it is difficult to take them seriously: they invariably relate to sensationalist themes such as sex and drugs, are furnished with casual remarks regarding “our meetings with the Twelfth Imam”, and come complete with warnings to the effect that the recipients of the “fatwa” should “refrain from circulating it outside the JAM”!

²⁸ *Bayan* dated 12 Safar 1429/20 February 2008. The contrast is a *bayan* on the use of Sadrism posters in classrooms, where Muqtada offers certain views but also speaks of “your source of emulation, Sadr II” (i.e. his father and not himself), *bayan* dated 1 Dhi al-Hijja 1428/11 December 2007. Some Sadrists remained loyal to Haeri throughout, *The New York Times*, 6 February 2005.

²⁹ *Al-Hayat*, 17 April 2008.

³⁰ Undated fatwas published at <http://www.alhaeri.com/esteftaat/Hol-e-Iraq.htm>.

³¹ *Labna awaliyya muqtaraha li-dustur al-jumhuriyya al-islamiyya fi al-‘iraq*, circa January 2004.

³² Symptomatic of Sadrism ambiguity in this field is the common practice of Muqtada’s followers to address him with “requests for fatwas” (*istifta*, which can also be used for a more general “request”), to which Muqtada replies not with a fatwa proper but with a *bayan* or pronouncement.

Mahdism crystallised as another significant component of Sadrism after 2003. This could be seen firstly among the “orthodox” Sadrists themselves, such as Yaqubi and Hasani, and indeed in the rhetoric of Muqtada al-Sadr. Yaqubi often encourages his followers to take a strong interest in the cause of the Mahdi and with his focus on the “conditions of the return” tends to go somewhat beyond the orthodox view that the return of the Twelfth Imam cannot be influenced by the believers. He has also made the Mahdist theme a very central part of his Iraqi nationalism: according to Yaqubi, “Iraq will be the capital of the State of the Mahdi [*dawlat al-imam al-mahdi*].”³³ At the same time there is considerable emphasis on the expected universalistic character of the Mahdi’s regime, for example in the assertion that “the international Zionist conspiracy has as one of its aims to prevent the Christians of the West to join the movement of the promised Mahdi.” Hasani, for his part, has become notorious due to reports of his belief in the imminent return of the Mahdi, to the point where he allegedly asks for extra teacups to be prepared for the Hidden Imam in case he should materialise during the course of an ongoing social event.³⁴ More importantly, however, Hasani’s public sermons still tend to affirm a belief that mankind remains in the “age of the *ghayba*”, or the period when the Hidden Imam is still absent. Rather than focusing on the question of the return as such, Hasani discusses what kind of attitude the Shiites should adopt while they are waiting for the reappearance of the Imam.³⁵ Similarly, while Muqtada’s frequent references to the “establishment of the Mahdist state” have generated furore on internet sites like You Tube, it needs to be appreciated that such evocation of the Mahdi’s appearance is a perfectly integral aspect of traditional Shiism and not something which in itself can justify the label of unorthodoxy.³⁶ While some of the rhetoric of the Sadrists may perhaps prompt suspicions about mysticism, Sadrism policies are often down-to-earth to the point where those looking for the exotic may end up feeling disappointed: one Sadrism manifesto, for example, begins with a dramatic assertion that it is the ambition of the Sadrists to pave the way for the “government of total justice [i.e. the state of the Mahdi]”, but then goes on to enumerate a plan of action featuring comparatively mundane items, such as “the fair distribution of natural resources such as oil among the Iraqis without regard to religion, sect or ethnicity”.³⁷

An entirely new development, though, was the emergence of a number of full-blown Mahdist groups in Iraq after 2003.³⁸ These began coming to the fore in Basra around 2005, when a small group of adherents congregated around Ahmad al-Hasan (al-Yamani) as their leader.³⁹ Whereas many of Hasan’s supporters are ex-Sadrists, his own attitude to orthodox Shiism is diametrically opposed to the views of Yaqubi, Hasani and Muqtada al-Sadr. Where those leaders stay loyal to the established principles, Hasan simply declares that the return of the Mahdi is so near that the traditional hierarchy of Shiism no longer has any meaning. Hasan demands that Shiites abandon their current sources of emulation and submit to him instead; this call is explicitly extended even to such leading Shiite figures as the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and Iran’s Ali Khamenei. Instead of presenting arguments to back up his scholarly credentials Hasan opts for a more mystical approach: he claims that his lack of

³³ Undated khutba no. 12 in *Malamih min ta’rikh wa-khitab al-qiyada al-diniyya fi al-‘iraq al-jadid*.

³⁴ The Iranian president, Mahmud Ahmadinejad, has also had his fair share of these stories. They are not entirely without historical precedent: the Safavids of Persia maintained special stables with harnessed horses prepared for the Mahdi’s return.

³⁵ Mahmud al-Hasani, Friday prayer, Kut, 6 January 2008.

³⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gvu6R-Hu-EY>.

³⁷ Zuhayr al-Asadi, “Al-mashru‘ al-kamil wa-al-barnamaj al-siyasi li-al-khatt al-islami al-sadri fi al-marhala al-rahina”.

³⁸ Reidar Visser, “Ashura in Iraq: Enter Mahdism?” 29 January 2007, <http://historiae.org/mahdism.asp>

³⁹ For an early, peaceful demonstration by this group, see *al-Manara*, 2 August 2005.

formal religious education vouches for the divine nature of the religious knowledge he claims to possess.⁴⁰

Hasan claims to be the “guardian” of the Mahdi, and much of the group’s discourse focuses on dreams about meetings with the Hidden Imam. For example, in a statement published on the Ahmad al-Hasan website, Adil al-Jabiri of Nasiriyya recounts, “One Friday night, I prayed to God that I would get to see the Mahdi, and that night I dreamt that the Mahdi and Ahmad al-Hasan were waiting for me and some of the other *ansar* [companions] at the gate of the tomb of Hussein.”⁴¹ Similarly, in the words of Ahmad al-Darraji of Basra, “I dreamt I was in a white castle with the other *ansar*. Suddenly Imam Hussein and his companions entered, and with them the promised Yemenite [Ahmad al-Hasan].” This sort of Mahdist discourse is far more radical than that of Yaqubi or Hasani or Muqtada al-Sadr himself, because it effectively seeks to abolish a whole tradition of Shiite scholarship and establish a pretext that enables the religious activists to act as scriptwriters on their own. As such, it also carries a potential for political upheaval of a much more dramatic and unsettling nature.

It should be stressed that all these groups reside on the same ideological continuum where Usuli orthodoxy and pure Mahdism occupy opposite extremes.⁴² Historically, this entire spectrum has been in use, most recently in the nineteenth century which saw Shaykhi, Babi and Baha’i movements emerge near the Mahdist pole, and, before that, in medieval times when Sufi and Mahdist elements were sometimes mixed.⁴³ Southern Iraq played a prominent part in many of these episodes and the region clearly has a tradition of fostering this kind of radical internal challenges to the Shiite leadership. It seems doubtless, however, that the increased focus on the return of the Mahdi in the writings of Sadr II and his successors must have been one of the causes for the remarkable upsurge in Mahdist activities in Iraq since 2003. Also, it should be emphasised that whereas the potential for radicalism is clearly there, some of these new Mahdist groups appear to be largely peaceful in nature, and it seems somewhat extraordinary that the United States and Britain should support the Iraqi government’s anti-Mahdist policies so uncritically and so robustly when much of what is at stake is above all an internal Shiite theological dispute.⁴⁴

Finally, with regard to organisational structures at the national level, the Sadrists movement saw a degree of institutionalisation after 2003. Hasani’s network is the smallest one, restricted to selected areas in the far south of Iraq, although in theory there is a nationwide Hizb al-Wala affiliated with him. The Fadila party of Yaqubi is supposed to maintain branches across Iraq, but its electoral success in local politics has mostly been limited to Basra, where it still controls the office of the governor. The biggest movement among the Sadrists is made up of the mainline followers of Muqtada al-Sadr. Based on networks of preachers and representatives developed under Sadr II, so-called Offices of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) have been established in most major Shiite urban areas in Baghdad and areas south, as well as in some outlying areas with Shiite minorities. A parallel military structure is the Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM), the paramilitary force of the Sadrists thought to

⁴⁰ Reidar Visser, “Basra, Reluctant Seat of Shiistan”, *Middle East Report* 242, 2007, <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer242/visser.html>.

⁴¹ This statement and the subsequent one were downloaded from www.almahdyoon.org on 22 January 2008.

⁴² In the case of the Jund al-Samaa (Soldiers of Heaven), who suddenly came to the fore in January 2007, the direct link to the Sadrists remains less clear.

⁴³ For some historical examples, see William F. Tucker, *Mahdis and Millenarians: Shiite Extremists in Early Muslim Iraq*, Cambridge, 2008; Alexandre Popovic, *The Revolt of African Slaves in Iraq*, Princeton, 1999; Ahmad al-Katib, *Tatawwur al-fikr al-siyasi al-shi’i*, Beirut, 1998, pp. 373–74.

⁴⁴ A critical perspective on the Iraqi government’s handling of the Jund al-Samaa case was given by Ali Allawi in “Millenarianism, Mahdism and Terrorism: The Case of Iraq”, presentation at the Jamestown Foundation, 9 October 2007.

comprise tens of thousands of fighters nationwide. A third distinctive element in Muqtada al-Sadr's organisation is the parliamentary contingent of around 30 members of the national assembly. Sadrists also participated in government from April 2005 (there were a couple of Sadrist ministers in the Jaafari government) to April 2007 (when the Sadrist ministers resigned, ostensibly over Maliki's failure to push for a timetable for a US withdrawal); on the whole their record has been an unimpressive one.⁴⁵ Despite repeated rumours about new internal breakaway movements (the most recurrent being associated with Adnan al-Shahmani), and regardless of constant attempts by Iran to divide and rule the Sadrists by stimulating the emergence of small splinter groups, no other substantial Sadrist organisations have emerged so far.

Developments among the Sadrists in the far south of Iraq, 2003–2008

Perhaps the most useful way of discussing Sadrism in the far south is to look at how its adherents diverge from national trends when it comes to key ideological questions: the orthodoxy–Mahdism axis, and tendencies of neo-Akhbarism or challenges to the hierarchical principles of Usuli Shiism more generally.

In certain areas, it seems that the OMS has been relatively successful in pursuing a coherent policy in Basra on the basis of ideas formulated in Najaf. The most striking example is no doubt the relationship with the occupying forces: as early as 7 June 2003 followers of Muqtada al-Sadr demanded the withdrawal of British forces “to points on the outskirts of the cities”, away from the population centres.⁴⁶ Similar demands were articulated by Sadrists elsewhere in Iraq,⁴⁷ and they were repeated in Basra periodically until the British forces finally evacuated to the Basra airport in September 2007.

However, a more recurrent trend in the far south after 2003 related to impromptu actions by local Sadrists that often seemed divorced from (or even in opposition to) the central leadership. One of their first spectacular operations in Basra took place in July 2003, when a gang of Sadrists variously estimated at between 40 and 100 individuals forcefully took control of the Sunni administration of Islamic endowments (*awqaf*), ejected its staff, and installed one of their own, Hamid al-Asadi, as new director. Local Sadrists offered the justification that the Sunnis were unbelievers (*kuffar*) because of their collusion with the former regime, and added that many Shiite places of worship had been unlawfully taken over by the Baathists during the past decade. Whereas the latter point echoed a reasoning used by Sadrists and indeed Muqtada al-Sadr himself to justify takeovers elsewhere in Iraq (and had been put down in a written demand signed by the OMS leadership in Basra), the first part of the argument seemed to be an ad hoc point invented by the local group of Sadrists. Later in the summer, the *waqf* administration was duly restored to the Sunnis, partly as a result of support extended to them by Shiites from the Daawa and Fadila who disagreed with Muqtada's followers. On the other hand, SCIRI, through Akram al-Hakim, justified the attack on al-Jazeera shortly after it had taken place, which serves as a reminder that the general spread of conservative sectarian

⁴⁵ Principal complaints include the misuse of the infrastructure of the health and transportation ministries for party purposes (and in some cases for sectarian murders). However, some critics seem to disregard the potentially positive side of Sadrist inclusion and participation, such as a former official in the archaeology and tourism ministry, whose complaint against the Sadrists concerned the shift of interest from pre-Islamic Mesopotamian to Islamic antiquities under the Sadrists' watch; *The Guardian*, 26 August 2006.

⁴⁶ BBC, “Basra Protest Against British Presence”, 7 June 2003.

⁴⁷ *The Guardian*, 31 July 2003.

values in the far south by no means was an exclusive Sadrist pursuit.⁴⁸ On several occasions, the local leadership of SCIRI warned the British against interfering with the general Islamisation trend, and at times would try to surpass the Sadrists in terms of hostility to former Baathists.⁴⁹ Thus southern Sadrist distinctiveness seems to have more to do with an unusual pattern of challenging clerical hierarchy rather than with a particular position on a scale of Islamic conservatism.⁵⁰

A second example of southern independent-mindedness materialised during the first Sadrist uprising in April 2004. Some aspects of this uprising had a nationwide (and indeed Iraqi nationalist) aspect, as it followed the arrest of an aide to Muqtada and the clampdown on a Sadrist newspaper, and also coincided with Sunni-led operations against the Americans in Falluja. However, other initiatives clearly had local roots. In Basra, Shaykh Abd al-Sattar al-Bahadli, a Sadrist preacher, continued to urge armed struggle against the British well into the early summer, and, reportedly, went as far as to declare holy war (*jihad*) against the British and even decreed that any female soldier taken prisoner could be kept as a slave.⁵¹ A similar tone was heard during the second Sadrist uprising in 2004, in August, when Saad al-Basri repeated the call for *jihad*, and Aws al-Khafaji pushed for holy war against the Italian forces further to the north, at Nasiriyya.⁵² These moves represented overt challenges to Muqtada al-Sadr's practice of maintaining a cloak of Shiite orthodoxy around his movement. The declaration of *jihad* is in itself controversial in Shiism, but the idea that this sort of order could be issued by a lower-ranking cleric in the way it was done by Bahadli and Basri challenges the very principle of hierarchy in the Shiite clergy. The central leadership of the OMS subsequently tried to remove Bahadli, but he later re-emerged as a leading figure in Basra, clearly showing the limits to Najaf's control of the southern periphery in this period.

It was also in the context of the second Sadrist uprising in August 2004 that the unprecedented call by a Shiite for Basra's separation materialised. Salam al-Maliki, a civilian figure in the Sadrist movement who had been appointed deputy governor of Basra shortly earlier, made the threat on 10 August 2004, and was supported by Sadrist sympathisers in Nasiriyya and Amara. Two aspects of this incident are particularly important. Firstly, the Sadrist message related to the threat was couched in nationalist language: the separation ultimatum was seen as a demand that could change the misguided ways of the central Iraqi government and thereby eventually consolidate Iraqi territorial unity. Separation in itself was never presented as a goal.⁵³ Secondly, however, it seems clear that the young Sadrists had seized upon an idea that had been under serious discussion at the governorate level in the far south for some time, namely, a scheme to create a federal entity of the three southernmost governorates in the country in accordance with the provisions of the 2004 Transitional Administrative Law. But the Sadrists themselves did not express interest in this particular scheme, and merely seem to have hijacked it as an instrument that could pose an effective

⁴⁸ *Al-Hayat*, 18 and 19 July 2003; *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 18 July 2003; al-Jazeera, 17 July 2003. The episode serves as a reminder of the relatively flimsy character of the British position in Basra even in the supposed "honeymoon" phase of the occupation.

⁴⁹ *Al-Zaman*, 19 May 2003; "Iranian-backed Militia Groups Take Control of Much of Southern Iraq", Knight Ridder report dated 26 May 2006.

⁵⁰ Even on the issue of hierarchy, these tendencies are not entirely confined to the Sadrists. For example, Tharallah, a militia which has often supported SCIRI/ISCI, is also known to have organised impromptu "Islamic courts" in Basra. With regard to Islamic conservatism, see also remarks by SCIRI figures in David Enders, "How Will Iraqi Women Fare under a Constitution Based on Islamic Law?" www.motherjones.com, 9 February 2005.

⁵¹ AFP, 8 May 2004.

⁵² Sky News, 5 August 2004; *Christian Science Monitor*, 13 August 2004.

⁵³ Al-Jazeera, 10 August 2004.

threat.⁵⁴ At any rate, this all proved too much for the Sadrist leadership in Najaf, which promptly rejected any idea of separation.⁵⁵

The first months of 2005 saw yet another example of the dualism between local and national trends among the southern Sadrists. In Amara, in March, Sadrists participated in a peaceful demonstration against the Iraqi government's designation of Saturday as part of the weekend (instead of Thursday, as per the standard Gulf pattern).⁵⁶ This issue was widely debated nationally, and even the reclusive Sistani issued a statement somewhat critical of the government's choice. But in Basra, more radical trends soon came to the fore. On 15 March, a group of Sadrists descended on the campus of the Basra university with the aim of breaking up a mixed-gender gathering of students whose attires were deemed un-Islamic by the Sadrist activists.⁵⁷ Some of the male students came to the defence of the young women, and in the ensuing fracas several people were killed and injured. The pretext offered by Sadrist personalities who subsequently justified the attack in the local press (they included Murtada al-Hajjaj, a senior OMS representative) is intriguing. First, there was an attempt to explain the action as a step to improve public morale. Secondly, however, there was reference to the institution which supposedly had ordered the clampdown: The Committee for Promoting Virtue and Preventing Vice (*lajnat al-amr bi-al-ma'ruf wa-al-nahy 'an al-munkar*).⁵⁸ This sort of underground committee, apparently not directed by any specific cleric and certainly not a *mujtahid*, seems highly contradictive of the basic principle of ulama monopoly in Usuli Shiism. In practice, it seems resemblant of similarly named committees in Saudi Arabia or perhaps the Iranian *basij*, but in contrast to the Basra committee these are centrally (and clerically) led instruments of the respective governments, with more limited prerogatives for the local branches.

The emergence of this kind of committee is mentioned in Basra in late 2003;⁵⁹ still in late 2007 the Basra police chief accused a committee with an identical name of having perpetrated upwards of fifty murders of women in Basra, partly due to their use of make-up.⁶⁰ At the time of the Basra university attacks, even Salam al-Maliki (the deputy governor who by now was on his way to becoming minister of transport in the first Jaafari government) seemed unwilling to categorically condemn the group responsible for the crimes at the university campus, whereas the new Fadila governor of Basra, Muhammad al-Waili, offered mild criticism.⁶¹ Again, it should be stressed that this drive towards strict Islamisation in Basra has not been a one-party show by the Sadrists. In May 2007, an investigative reporter in Basra gave the following account of one of the city's militia leaders: "Beginning with a small group of gunmen occupying a small public building, the former religious student built up a reputation as a fearless thug, killing former Baathists, alcohol sellers and eventually freelancing as a hitman for anyone willing to pay the price..."⁶² This was the description of the chief of the Tharallah militia, a force which has been strongly linked to the pro-government SCIRI and which even has a brigade named for SCIRI's former leader,

⁵⁴ On the various schemes for small-scale federal entities in the far south of Iraq, see Reidar Visser, "Suffering, Oil, and Ideals of Coexistence: Non-Sectarian Federal Trends in the Far South of Iraq", paper presented to the MESA annual meeting in Montreal, November 2007, <http://historiae.org/south.asp>

⁵⁵ Al-Jazeera, 11 August 2004.

⁵⁶ Al-Manara, 9 March 2005.

⁵⁷ Al-Sharq al-Awsat, 19 March 2005.

⁵⁸ Al-Manara, 27 March 2005.

⁵⁹ Press release by the Basra branch of the Communist Party, 4 December 2003.

⁶⁰ *Sawt al-Iraq*, 26 December 2007. See also *Christian Science Monitor*, 21 September 2005 with regard to "whispers about Sharia courts in Basra enforced by the Mahdi Army".

⁶¹ RFE/RL, 28 March 2005.

⁶² *The Guardian*, 19 May 2007.

Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim.⁶³ Still, the Sadrists appear to have gone somewhat further in formalising their vigilantism, and even though there is also occasional mention of Sadrists “punishment committees” in other parts of Iraq, Basra seems to have taken a lead role in this kind of grassroots challenge to the established norms of hierarchy in the Shiite community.⁶⁴

In September 2005 came yet another indication that the Sadrists of the south and those of Basra in particular were not reading from the same page as members of the movement elsewhere in Iraq. After a series of lethal attacks by roadside bombs, British forces moved to arrest Shaykh Ahmad Majid al-Fartusi, a Sadrist preacher and JAM commander. Fartusi was widely suspected of having colluded with Iranian intelligence operatives who were thought to have procured some of the arms that had been used in the assaults on British military personnel, possibly with the help of the Lebanese Hizbollah which may have been a more suitable conduit at the time given the long-standing anti-Iranian stance of the mainline Sadrists.⁶⁵ That Iraqi nationalism on the part of the Sadrists was still very much in evidence in other parts of Iraq in 2005, where leading members of the organisation such as Sahib al-Amiri and Abd al-Hadi al-Darraji criticised SCIRI’s plan for a single Shiite federal entity soon after it had been announced in August, and where Sunnis still saw SCIRI’s Badr brigade as the principal perpetrator of sectarian killings.⁶⁶ Many civilian Sadrists (including Basra’s Salam al-Maliki) were busy finding roles in the newly-formed Jaafari government. But conditions in Basra were already unique; days after the arrest of Fartusi the British were left with no other option than to use special forces to free some of their officers who had been “arrested” by a branch of the local police loyal to the Sadrists in retaliation for Fartusi’s detention.

However, during 2006 and 2007, as the Sadrists elsewhere in Iraq increasingly became engrossed in actions that clearly deviated from the declared Iraqi nationalism of the organisation’s leadership (including heavy involvement in sectarian cleansing in Baghdad), the southern branches gradually became more prominent for activities that featured a more nationalist and certainly a vocal anti-foreigner dimension. Sunni–Shiite tensions were less pronounced in the far south, doubtless to some extent because of the more homogenous sectarian landscape, although Sadrists did become involved in another dispute with Sunnis in Nasiriyya about the ownership of a mosque,⁶⁷ and were implicated in cases of sectarian death threats in Basra. But more energy was now spent on attacks on British forces. Logistical assistance from the Iranians may have persisted, but it was the mainline movement of the Sadrists which received credit for many of these actions. “We are all the soldiers of the Sayyid [Muqtada]” sang a group of Basrawis after a British helicopter had been downed in May 2006.⁶⁸ Key clerics like Aws al-Khafaji of Nasiriyya remained loud in their condemnation of Iranian influences in the Iraqi security forces, as did Sadrist parliamentarians from the far south such as Baha al-A’raji of Dhi Qar.⁶⁹

The British attempt at cleaning up Basra during the autumn and early winter of 2006–2007 (Operation Sinbad, including a December attack on the notorious Jamiat police station) did not succeed in neutralising the Sadrists. Whereas it seems clear that it was persuasion by Iraqi government officials (“the British presence is the problem”) that finally prompted the British to decide to withdraw from Basra city centre in September 2007 and hand over power to the

⁶³ *Al-Manara*, 21 February 2006.

⁶⁴ There are certain parallels to cases from Iran (such as the infamous Kirman case) in which *basij* members have clearly gone further than their formal prerogatives in enforcing Islamic law, by even executing people without any kind of trial.

⁶⁵ “Murder, Violence and Politics: How Rogue Police Can Live outside Law”, *The Times*, 22 September 2005.

⁶⁶ *The New York Times*, 9 October 2005.

⁶⁷ *Al-Zaman*, 24 August 2006; David Enders, “Hezbollah on the Tigris?” *Salon*, 8 May 2006.

⁶⁸ *Al-Hayat*, 7 May 2006.

⁶⁹ *Al-Hayat*, 17 June 2007; *al-Ahram*, 21 June 2007; *al-Ilaf*, 23 November 2007.

Iraqis in December,⁷⁰ the Sadrists were more than happy to take credit for it and celebrated loudly their “expulsion” of the British.⁷¹ They also obtained the release of several key prisoners as part of the handover arrangements, and were described by one British observer as “stronger than ever before” by the time the British relocated to the Basra airport.⁷² When the Iraqi government tried to challenge them in March 2008, the Sadrist movement appeared more formidable than what the security forces had expected, and the ability of Muqtada al-Sadr to control the fighting from his new base in Qum in Iran was seen by many as superior to the lacklustre command and control witnessed back in 2004.

Open ruptures with Muqtada’s line by Basra Sadrists were now less frequent, even if the continued attacks against the British right until their departure from downtown Basra in September 2007 seemed to be at variance with the general truce declared by Muqtada on 29 August, presumably with the aim of cleaning up his own organisation. In this period, the only high-profile case of vigilante extravagance comparable to the 2005 university attack was that of a Basra university teacher (Abd al-Jabbar al-Khadduri) who in June 2006 was labelled an “unbeliever” for his positive remarks about dialogue with the West. But even in this case, details remain sketchy, and the degree of Sadrist involvement is unclear.⁷³ More generally, the activities of the new OMS boss in this period, Harith al-Adhari, seemed very much focused on a message of political correctness, with frequent attempts to engage with the non-Shiite communities of Basra, as well as initiatives to negotiate about the security situation in the city.⁷⁴ This reflected the stance of the leadership at the national level, and certainly within the parliamentary bloc, which played a key role in pushing through legislation that fixed early provincial elections for October 2008.⁷⁵ Basra Sadrists were not abandoning their social conservatism, but they were seemingly becoming more disciplined and aligned with their national leadership.

Ever since 2005, Amara has been in a special position for the Sadrists, because followers of Muqtada participated in local elections here and went on to win control of the governorate. As the only case of Sadrists in power in local politics, Amara is of considerable interest as a possible model. The governor is Adil Mahudar Radi, a young man whose style is somewhat reminiscent of that of Salam al-Maliki, the Basra minister of transport under Jaafari. Sometimes he has coordinated his activities with the national Sadrist movement, as when the OMS premises were used by the governorate to stage demonstrations in the wake of British military operations in June 2007.⁷⁶ Similarly, the governor has repeatedly arranged public events where his official sponsorship must have conveyed a certain sectarian bias, such as the commemoration of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr’s martyrdom.⁷⁷

At the same time, subtle and sometimes more substantial differences with the OMS leadership nationally has emerged. Whereas the mainline Sadrists, in contrast to many other politicians in the far south, have remained mostly aloof from the various incarnations of small-scale federalism aiming at the unification of the three southern oil-rich governorates, the Sadrist governor in 2007 repeatedly stressed his desire for wide-ranging powers for the

⁷⁰ BBC Panorama: “The Battle for Basra Palace” (10 December 2007); “Basra: The Legacy” (17 December 2007).

⁷¹ As early as in February 2007, Sadrist parliamentarians established links between British plans of withdrawal and the “heroic actions” of the Sadrist resistance in Basra, *al-Hayat*, 27 February 2007.

⁷² “In Basra, Violence Is a Tenth of What It Was before British Pullback, General Says”, AP, 15 November 2007.

⁷³ *LA Times*, 5 June 2006. “Qanduri” in the original article is a misspelling of “Khadduri”.

⁷⁴ *Aswat al-Iraq*, 18 December 2007.

⁷⁵ Jason Gluck, “From Gridlock to Compromise: How Three Laws Could Begin to Transform Iraqi Politics”, *USIP Briefing*, March 2008, at http://www.usip.org/pubs/usipeace_briefings/2008/0319_iraqi_politics.html.

⁷⁶ Press release from the Maysan governorate dated 20 June 2007.

⁷⁷ Monthly reports of the Maysan governorate, December 2005.

existing governorates to be enshrined in the provincial powers act.⁷⁸ Typically, he has emphasised Amara's status as an oil-producing governorate, but rather than going as far as some Basra politicians (who have presented several schemes for local quotas of oil revenue to be deducted before the rest is handed over to the central government) he has focused local revenue-raising efforts on a special 1 per cent toll on import goods.⁷⁹ Conversely, at the national level, Sadrist politicians were a key force behind limitations on the autonomy of the governorates.

Perhaps even more significantly, whereas Sadrist ministerial performance at the national level has been dismissed as sub-standard by most independent observers, at the local level in Amara the transformation from 2004 to 2008 is quite remarkable. Back then, the governorate proudly boasted some of the highest numbers of "martyrs" who had sacrificed their lives in warfare against the multinational forces, with at least 100 named *shahids* from the fighting in 2004.⁸⁰ Today, the Sadrist-led governorate is busy developing plans for new universities, hospitals and shopping malls, and claims to have the highest rate of implementation for development projects in Iraq.⁸¹

As for the other elements of the wider Sadrist family in the south, similar tensions between local and national leaderships have been seen, especially in the Fadila party. Ever since it came to power in Basra politics after the January 2005 elections, the local branch of the Fadila party, and its governor (Muhammad al-Waili) in particular, have been central in the propagation of a small federal entity restricted to the far south of Iraq – either Basra with Maysan and/or Dhi Qar, or the governorate of Basra proper. From 2006 onwards, the focus seemed to shift progressively from the three-governorate scheme to the variant that would convert the existing Basra governorate to a new stand-alone federal entity; Waili's preference for this kind of model was confirmed as late as in February 2008.⁸² To some extent this is in harmony with what the Fadila leadership has proposed nationally, where during the debate on the law for implementing federalism in 2006 a scheme to convert existing governorates south of Kurdistan into federal entities was presented as a compromise alternative designed to appeal to the Sunnis (and to scotch the competing scheme by ISCI for an all-Shiite sectarian entity). It is however noteworthy that national leaders such as Hasan al-Shammari as well as Muhammad al-Yaqubi (the spiritual leader) often go further in expressing opposition to the very idea of early implementation of federalism, arguing that the time is not right with regard to national reconciliation and that governance capacity in the provinces is not sufficient to cope with the added administrative complications.⁸³ This internal tension can be seen even inside the Basra branch: shortly after the governor had declared his support for Wail Abd al-Latif (a secular proponent of the single-governorate federal scheme for Basra) a local Fadila preacher and parliamentarian warned against this kind of scheme, emphasising instead national unity.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, in the case of the Fadila party, none of this tension between centre and periphery has translated into attempts to redefine the parameters of the relationship between clerics and followers as such.

The Ahmad al-Hasan group also remained relatively stable from 2006 to January 2008, despite a barrage of accusations directed against the group at the time of the confrontation between Iraqi government forces and another small Mahdist group, Jund al-Samaa, at Najaf in January 2007. When the Iraqi government in January 2008 launched a crackdown on the

⁷⁸ Press release from the Maysan governorate dated 5 September 2007.

⁷⁹ Press release from the Maysan council of elders, 11 June 2006; *al-Mu'tamar*, 20 February 2007.

⁸⁰ Originally published on www.alsaggad.5gigs.com/shda_mesana.htm, accessed on 4 October 2006, later removed.

⁸¹ Press release from the Maysan governorate dated 26 January 2008.

⁸² Radio Dijla, 21 February 2008.

⁸³ Hasan al-Shammari, typescript note on federalism dated 2 August 2006.

⁸⁴ Fadila press release dated 24 March 2008.

followers of Ahmad al-Hasan across the south (Basra and Nasiriyya in particular), the group essentially reiterated its well-known ideology, if perhaps in a slightly more subdued format.⁸⁵ In other statements by this group, there has been an interesting symbiosis of neo-Akhbari tendencies (such as an emphasis on the Koran as far more important than any other source of Islamic law, almost as per the pattern common in Sunni Islamism) and a focus on implementing strict Islamic codes (again underscoring the concept of *al-amr bi-al-ma'ruf wa-al-nahy 'an al-munkar*).⁸⁶ Nevertheless, it is also noteworthy that among the Mahdist personalities rounded up by Iraqi authorities in January 2008 was one Hasan al-Musawi al-Hammami – the son of the famous Najaf-based Shiite cleric Muhammad Ali al-Musawi al-Hammami and thus the first known personality with a high-level clerical connection in this otherwise largely anti-clerical group.⁸⁷

Relationships between the various Sadrists groups have also shifted over time. With all of them constituting splinter branches of the same Sadrists tree it is unsurprising that the default attitude seems to have been one of mutual hostility. Ahmad al-Hasan followers have clashed with adherents of Mahmud al-Hasani, whereas the latter have had bitter confrontations with Fadila despite both of them having a common enemy in the shape of ISCI and Iranian influence in Basra more generally.⁸⁸ As for the mainline followers of Muqtada al-Sadr in Basra, they remained hostile to Fadila for a long time, with several direct clashes in 2007 and accusations that Fadila relied on British support. However, since the summer of 2007 relations have improved somewhat. First, the Sadrists in parliament supported Fadila against an attempt by the Maliki government to unseat Muhammad al-Waili as governor for Basra; later Fadila played a role in securing the release of several Sadrists prisoners on the eve of the British withdrawal from the urban areas of the city.⁸⁹ In the wake of the latest operations against the Sadrists in Basra there have been protests from Fadila parliamentarians – first related to the Maliki government's actions in Basra, and later also with regard to the siege of Sadr City in Baghdad.⁹⁰ But with regard to the federalism issue, the southern Sadrists still remain very much on the sidelines, instead of being exploited as a potential partner by any of the interested parties. In early 2008, an OMS representative simply claimed to have no knowledge of ongoing discussions between Fadila and secular politicians to revive the scheme for Basra as a single-governorate federal entity.⁹¹

Conclusion

Macro trends from 2003 to 2008 show that the Sadrists of Basra and the far south of Iraq have at times been more radical and less faithful to Usuli orthodoxy than the official line of the Sadrists leadership in Najaf. In historical perspective this is unsurprising. From the Zanj revolt in the early Islamic period to the Shaykhi movement in the nineteenth century, the far south has always played a key role in producing Shiite leaders with radical new ideas that depart from established patterns in Shiite orthodoxy. As such, the south has a special tradition for

⁸⁵ Undated *bayan*, circa 19 January 2008. The first operations against the group had started several weeks earlier, Radio Sawa, 4 January 2008. Some Western media misreported this as part of the ongoing operations against the JAM in Basra.

⁸⁶ Press release by Ansar al-Imam al-Mahdi dated 25 April 2006.

⁸⁷ Press release by Ansar al-Imam al-Mahdi dated 4 January 2008.

⁸⁸ There have also been phases of greater amicability: in July 2005, Fadila representatives on the Basra council resisted attempts by the central government to arrest followers of Mahmud al-Hasani in Basra, *al-Manara*, 12 July 2005.

⁸⁹ Basra governorate press release, 20 August 2007.

⁹⁰ Fadila party press release, 27 March 2008.

⁹¹ *Al-'Arab*, 23 February 2008.

radicalism that could potentially come to the fore again. The regional and historical extensions of this legacy among Shiite Arabs in Iran and Saudi Arabia include Akhbari tendencies among the Arabs of Khuzestan, as well as Shaykhism in al-Hasa in Saudi Arabia and in Kuwait. The prolificacy of this region with regard to Mahdism more generally could have geopolitical implications: while Usuli orthodoxy historically has not tended to go hand in hand with state formation, Mahdism has a long tradition for creating small breakaway states on the basis of radical ideology.⁹² In other words, it means a huge difference whether Muqtada al-Sadr decides to opt for the Mahdist line (which could easily lead to unpredictable developments like the hijacking of oil facilities or even the creation of tiny oil emirates), or chooses to remain loyal to Usuli Shiism.

At the same time, it is noteworthy that the desire of the Sadrism leadership to stay within the confines of Usuli orthodoxy appears to be much stronger than what is usually acknowledged. So far, Muqtada al-Sadr has been more of a cleric politician than a jihadist, and this more moderate position also has its followers in the far south – as exemplified both within the mainline Sadrism movement by figures like Salam al-Maliki, Harith al-Adhari and Adil Mahudar Radi, and among the wider family of Sadrism groups by the Fadila party which still remains in control of the governor position in Basra. The powerful impact of this more moderate trend among the Sadrists was highlighted in early 2008 in their leading role to pass a law that fixed a date for early provincial elections – a piece of “benchmark legislation” which was virulently resisted by all of Washington’s allies in Iraq, who feared it could mean a weakening of their own positions. Importantly, even in the middle of the recent crisis with the Iraqi government, Sadrism demands remained eminently negotiable: On 12 April, Muqtada al-Sadr emphasised a “timetable” for withdrawal as his principal objective – something which by definition signifies a gradual process, and which after all is demanded also by a considerable proportion of the US electorate. In short, there is nothing to suggest that Sadr’s immediate goal is self-destruction and martyrdom.⁹³

Similarly, also the regionalist demands associated with Fadila in the far south have recently assumed a more flexible form. In December 2007, after having previously toyed with the idea of introducing some kind of ownership surcharge on oil revenue from the Basra region, the party presented a proposal of a more modest share of one dollar per exported barrel of oil to be earmarked for a Basra development fund.⁹⁴ Characteristically, in an interview with a pan-Arab newspaper in May 2008, Fadila governor Muhammad al-Waili once more identified the Sadrists and Sunni nationalists as the most promising building blocks of an alternative political force in Iraq.⁹⁵ A clear expression of the parliamentary strength of this sort of coalition came to the fore in May 2007, when Sadrists obtained 133 signatures by parliamentary deputies on a petition for a demand for a timetable for a US withdrawal – extremely close to a parliamentary majority (138 deputies) and a remarkable result in a context when all material forces were working against the Sadrists (their leverage had by then been much reduced after they had left the Maliki government).⁹⁶ Despite strenuous efforts by the Bush administration to stimulate a gravitation of assumed “sectarian moderates” around the remains of the Maliki government, many independent Shiite parliamentary deputies quite consistently tend to go in other directions, several of them finding it worthwhile to draw attention to what they see as the “legitimate” grievances of the Sadrists.⁹⁷

⁹² Reidar Visser, “State Formation and Sectarian Identity in Shiism”, paper presented to a conference on “Rethinking Sectarianism”, Princeton University, NJ, May 2008.

⁹³ See also Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada al-Sadr and the Fall of Iraq*, London, 2008, p. 138.

⁹⁴ Fadila press release, 16 December 2007.

⁹⁵ *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 1 May 2008.

⁹⁶ *Aswat al-Iraq*, 2 May 2007.

⁹⁷ Remarks by Qasim Dawud in OSC report “Iraq: Al-Sadr Trend Withdrawal Unlamented by UIC Leadership”, 21 September 2007.

Given the Maliki government's heavy reliance on the multinational forces, it is to a considerable extent up to the United States to influence which of the two Sadrist trends will prevail in the far south. By uncritically going after whomever the Maliki government defines as "terrorists" Washington may end up provoking more and more radicalism within the Sadrist ranks. This may possibly play out as a steady succession of splinter cells, but it would be a great mistake to see that kind of fragmentation as a road to stability in the long term. The historical roots of the Sadrist movement are simply too deep to allow for a purely military solution, and nowhere are these historical roots more entrenched than in the oil-rich far south. So far, tiny breakaway factions and Mahdist cells have created a remarkable degree of trouble for the Iraqi government; an all-out attack on the Sadrists would likely increase the scale of the problem exponentially. Similarly, attempts at disarming or dissolving the JAM by force would be seen as hypocrisy by many Iraqis, including many non-Sadrists, who point to the survival of remnants of the Sadrists' competitors – the Badr brigades – within the Iraqi army.⁹⁸ In sum, the tendency in American circles of reducing the Sadrist phenomenon to a xenophobic reaction by the inarticulate urban poor simply underestimates the popularity of the Sadrists among a wider segment of the Iraqi population. It is not accidental that both Fadila and the followers of Muqtada al-Sadr made a point of trying to improve salary conditions for teachers during the January 2008 parliamentary debate on the Iraqi budget, a clear expression of a desire to reach out to the more middle-class segments of Iraqi society.

The abrupt escalation of operations against the Sadrists in the Basra area from late March 2008 onwards prompted a succession of problematic statements by the Bush administration which all highlighted contradictions in Washington's thinking about the Sadrists, ISCI, and Iran. In his speech to the American nation on 10 April, President George W. Bush said, "if we succeed in Iraq after all that al-Qaida and Iran have invested there, it would be a historic blow to the global terrorist movement and a severe setback for Iran. It would demonstrate to a watching world that mainstream Arabs reject the ideology of al-Qaida, and mainstream Shiites reject the ideology of Iran's radical regime." On a visit to Baghdad, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice maintained that a "breakthrough" in the establishment of a "multi-ethnic" coalition against Iranian influence was underway.⁹⁹ In an interview with *The New York Times* on 26 April, one administration official explained that a dossier on Iranian influence in Iraq "has been widely expected but has now been delayed while the government of Iraq's prime minister, Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, confronts Iran diplomatically with new evidence of Iranian assistance to Shiite militias". The only ingredient that seemed to be missing in the image of Iran/Sadr as the main problem in Iraq was an accusation linking Iran's president Mahmud Ahmadinejad with the proliferation of Mahdist unorthodoxy in the Iraqi south.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ A more prudent approach would be to aim at the gradual integration of JAM militiamen in the Iraqi army, the destruction of Badr fiefdoms inside the system, and a conversion of the JAM to a charitable organisation (which would avoid the ideologically touchy issue of dismantling an organisation that has been formed with reference to the Hidden Imam).

⁹⁹ Anne Gearan, "Rice Meets with Top Leaders in Iraq", AP, 20 April 2008. The international press often reproduces the Bush administration's ideas about a tripartite "moderate" coalition without enquiring about its representativeness, for example in sentences such as "More significantly, Sunni Arab Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi signed off on a statement by President Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, and the Shiite vice president, Adil Abdul-Mahdi, expressing support for the crackdown in the oil-rich southern city of Basra." Rice has earlier expressed dismay because the "stated goals of Iran" do not square with their behaviour, *WSJ*, 11 June 2007.

¹⁰⁰ Recently there has been increased focus on Mahdism in Iran, for instance in Mehdi Khalaji's research (*Apocalyptic Politics: On the Rationality of Iranian Policy*, Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2008). With regard to the far south of Iraq it seems however more plausible to look for historical connections, which extend back to medieval times and include incidents like the ninth-century Zanj revolt and the medieval Mushasha emirate. Where transnational influences may perhaps be more likely at least as an indirect contributing factor is with regard to the tendencies to Shiite Islamism "from below" in the shape of vigilantism, as seen in Basra as well as in parts of Iran.

The problem in this is the character of the “rejection of Iran” referred to by Bush as a supposed attribute of the Maliki government. A brief glance at photos of the frequent and amicable meetings between top ISCI officials and Iranian leaders immediately sows doubts about the realities of that “rejection”. Similarly, studies of the run-up to the Basra operations against the Sadrists show that some of the “Iraqi” parties routinely accused of having intimate links to the Iranian revolutionary guards – such as the Sayyid al-Shuhada movement – played a role alongside ISCI in instigating the Maliki government to escalate its operations against the supposedly “pro-Iranian” Sadrists.¹⁰¹ Only weeks prior to the operations, the only Iraqi group that was talking about pushing its enemies “back to Iran” was the Sadrists.¹⁰² By April, even mainstream Western media reports suggested, albeit belatedly, that perhaps ISCI and their scheme of a single Shiite federal region could after all be Iran’s number one priority in Iraq.¹⁰³ In short, there is still very little hard evidence that indicates any change in the long-standing historical image of ISCI as Iran’s primary partner in Iraq and the Sadrists as Iran’s primary challenge – a situation with which Tehran deals shrewdly through dividing and ruling the Sadrists as much as possible through the creation of “special” splinter groups (about which Sadrists complained as early as in April 2007),¹⁰⁴ while at the same time maintaining fallback strategies, such as operating a television channel in Arabic (al-Alam) that allows articulation of both the Sadrist and the ISCI point of view.

Nevertheless, US policy has been the logical opposite of Tehran’s strategy of spreading the bets, namely, to persevere with one particular set-up – a coalition of “sectarian moderates” supposedly representing an imagined trinity of Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds. But two out of the three main components of this coalition (i.e. the “Shiite” ISCI and the “Sunni” Tawafuq) enjoy only limited popular backing in the constituencies they purport to represent. Despite all the spin, key Sunni and Shiite groups outside the government (including for instance Fadila) remain sceptical of Maliki’s methods against the Sadrists, and while Basrawis certainly seem to appreciate the strengthened presence of the Iraqi army in their area, this in itself does not mean that support for the Maliki coalition as a political force is growing. Even the higher-ranking ulama (and Sistani himself) have reportedly signalled that any move to marginalise any particular party in the next elections would be unacceptable.¹⁰⁵ Against this background, the emerging US reconstruction project in Iraq increasingly comes across as a colossus with feet of clay: only Kurdistan is being represented in government by politicians who enjoy widespread popular backing; substantial segments of the Arab population are either being bombed into submission (the Sadrists) or bribed and armed (the Sunnis) instead of becoming genuinely integrated in national politics; finally, in the absence of a grand political compromise that could secure durable peace and healing across sectarian divides, Iraq’s capital city itself is being compartmentalised with concrete barriers, despite complaints by many Iraqis who think that physical separation is no adequate substitute for true reconciliation.

Despite all this, Washington consistently refuses to rethink its basic choice of Iraqi partners (ISCI and the Kurds), and appears to continue to eschew any serious contact with those Shiite groups in Iraq that “reject” Iran – Bush’s term – in a far more convincing manner: the Fadila party, “moderate” Sadrists and independent Shiite figures (both secularists and Islamists) who all repeatedly have made calls for assistance against Iranian infiltration in

¹⁰¹ Reidar Visser, “Iraqi Shiite Factionalism and Iran’s Role in the Basra Fighting”, *Terrorism Focus*, vol. 5 no. 14, April 2008, <http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2374086>.

¹⁰² *International Crisis Group*, “Iraq’s Civil War, the Sadrists and the Surge”, *Middle East Report 72*, 7 February 2008, p. 20.

¹⁰³ *The New York Times*, 21 April 2008.

¹⁰⁴ Ned Parker, “Cracks in Sadr’s Army”, *LA Times*, 3 April 2007.

¹⁰⁵ Aswat al-Iraq, 18 April 2008.

Iraq's security forces, and have asked for help to cope with the pressures they are being exposed to due to their anti-Iranian attitudes. More plausible approximations of the dictionary definition of "rejection" include accusing Iran of death threats (as the Fadila governor of Basra has repeatedly done),¹⁰⁶ criticising the "Iranian occupation of Iraq" to the press (a frequent complaint by Fadila members of the Basra council),¹⁰⁷ accusing Shiite parties of having their headquarters in Iran (the latest charge by Wail Abd al-Latif, a Shiite secularist from Basra)¹⁰⁸ or even setting fire to the Iranian consulate in Basra (followers of the small Sadrist group of Mahmud al-Hasani have reportedly been involved in this). But despite their numerous constructive policy suggestions – a negotiated settlement of Kirkuk, early provincial elections, prudence in the federalism question – such genuinely anti-Iranian elements among the Shiites continue to receive very limited attention from the United States, whether from Democrats or Republicans.

The ironic result is that in the end, even these Shiite Iraqi nationalist groups will have nowhere else to go than Iran. It is of course understandable that Washington may dislike the prospect of Muqtada al-Sadr's strict Islamism becoming ascendant in the new Iraq. But that kind of reasoning misses the point in three ways. In the first place, the main Shiite alternative, ISCI, has been equally involved in the Islamisation of Iraq after 2003, even if they are more professional than the Sadrists in handling their reputation when they deal with the Western media, and sometimes also rely on proxy-like groups, like "Hizbollah in Iraq" and Tharallah. Secondly, the Sadrists can offer something to other Iraqis which ISCI is unable to deliver due to its insistence on a Shiite federal region: national reconciliation that would appeal to a majority of Sunnis. (If Maliki is serious about dialogue with the Sunnis, he should stop boasting about "going after the Sadrists" and instead start pressuring ISCI to take the scheme for a Shiite federal region off the agenda.) And thirdly, to include the Sadrists in the political process is not the same as making Muqtada al-Sadr the next premier of Iraq, and also does not imply a green light to the sort of extremist vigilantism perpetrated by Sadrists in Basra. Rather, the most likely outcome would be a change in the dynamics of Iraqi politics, back to a more nationalist and centrist atmosphere. This in turn could bring to the fore new leaders and new political formulas that simply do not have a chance in today's Iraq, where the political game is largely controlled by a minority of returned exiles who insist on a more sectarian, ethno-federal approach to Iraqi politics.¹⁰⁹ It would be the sort of change that could produce a new Iraq more in touch with the long lines of its own history and hence more stable; dialogue with the Sadrists is as central to this kind of outcome as negotiations with Hamas is in the Palestinian question and as engagement with Hizbollah is in Lebanon.

Finally, it is high time that Washington understands that Muqtada al-Sadr was driven to Iran in 2007 as the result of threatening US policies, not as a consequence of any long-standing warm relations between him and Tehran. More mistakes like this could deprive the United States of one of the last chances to salvage the political process in Iraq, and might also unleash some of the most destructive forces that exist in southern Iraq. The consequences for the geopolitics of the world's largest belt of oil resources could be devastating.

¹⁰⁶ See for instance *al-Hayat*, 24 February 2008.

¹⁰⁷ *The Guardian*, 19 May 2007.

¹⁰⁸ *Al-Zaman*, 8 May 2008.

¹⁰⁹ Reidar Visser, "Debating Devolution in Iraq", *MERIP Online*, 10 March 2008, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero031008.html>