

MILITIAS AS SOCIOPOLITICAL MOVEMENTS
IRAQ'S ARMED SHIA GROUPS

Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy Thesis

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February 5th, 2010

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THE FLETCHER SCHOOL

TUFTS UNIVERSITY

MALD Thesis

**MILITIAS AS SOCIOPOLITICAL MOVEMENTS:
IRAQ'S ARMED SHIA GROUPS**

*Submitted to Professor Richard Shultz
In fulfillment of the term paper requirement for
P243: Seminar on Internal Conflict and War*

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February 5, 2010

ABSTRACT

The rise to power of Iraq's Shia militias not only caught U.S. policymakers off-guard, it also revealed a broader lack of understanding of militias as a type of non-state armed group. While considerable research has been conducted on terrorist networks and insurgencies, the literature on militias is relatively weak. Furthermore, the Iraq case suggests that the frameworks that do exist for analyzing militias need to be expanded. Through a review of the existing literature on militias followed by a case study of the two largest Shia militias in Iraq—the Badr Organization and the Mahdi Army—this paper seeks to differentiate the Iraqi groups from previous characterizations of the militia based on their degree of popular legitimacy, pursuit of a social and political agenda, and participation in the institutions of the state. Far more than just warlords, Iraq's Shia militias are complex sociopolitical movements who are actively seeking to fill the gaps left by the weakness of the state in a bid to win the support of the people and consequently gain political influence. The use of force is but one element, along with the provision of social services and participation in formal politics, that these groups use as instruments to gain influence and realize their social and political agendas.

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I. INTRODUCTION

On April 4, 2004, General Ricardo Sanchez made an emergency phone call to Coalition Provisional Authority leader Paul Bremer: “All hell is breaking loose with Muqtada... We’re getting reports from a lot of different sectors, Sadr City, Najaf...al-Kut. Demonstrators flooding the streets. A lot of them carrying AKs and RPGs.”¹ Over the next several days, Muqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi Army militia swept through the cities of southern Iraq with little resistance as the Iraqi National Police forces were either unable or unwilling to stop them.

Shia militias were not an enemy that Bremer, Sanchez, and the rest of the U.S. government had been prepared to encounter. From the pre-war fantasies of Iraqis welcoming the U.S. military with open arms, to the initial dismissal of the Sunni insurgency as a band of leftover Saddam loyalists, the United States repeatedly underestimated not only the potency of armed actors within Iraq, but more importantly, their legitimacy within the population. The Shia militia movements remain especially poorly understood. Yet the members of these militias have achieved prominent positions within the Iraqi government and have infiltrated the Iraqi army and police. They have proved capable of mobilizing massive street demonstrations, have dominated the electoral process at both the local and national levels, and have been able to confront U.S. forces on the battlefield with some marginal success. Most notably, and tragically, their violent response to the February 2006 bombing of the al-Askari Mosque in Samarra led to what many

¹ Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada: Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia Revival, and the Struggle for Iraq* (New York, NY: Scribner, 2008).

analysts have described as a sectarian civil war between Sunni and Shia. Over the next year and a half, thousands of Iraqi civilians were killed each month, nearly five million were either internally displaced or became refugees abroad, and the city of Baghdad was reshaped along sectarian lines.

This Shia militias' incredible rise to power not only caught U.S. policymakers off-guard, but revealed a broader lack of understanding of armed groups, especially militias. While considerable research has been conducted on terrorist networks and insurgencies, the literature on militias is relatively weak. Much of the existing writing conflates militias with warlordism, a term often used derisively and with the intention of separating this type of armed group from insurgents based on the absence of popular legitimacy and motives that are more economically than politically driven.

The Iraq case suggests that this conception of militias needs to be expanded. While Iraq's Shia militias are similarly taking advantage of a vacuum of state order, they are not merely warlords but rather sociopolitical movements with substantial legitimacy and support from Iraq's Shia population. They actively seek to fill the gaps left by the weakness of the state in a bid to win the support of the people and consequently gain political influence. The use of force is but one element, along with the provision of social services and participation in formal politics, that these groups use as instruments to gain influence and realize their social and political agendas.

But the Iraqi case also reveals limits on the appeal and power of militias, even as sociopolitical movements. Since the middle of 2007, the Shia militias have been in decline. Muqtada al-Sadr has declared a general cease-fire for the Mahdi

Army and is believed to have fled to Iran. Meanwhile the Badr Organization and its affiliated political party, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)², were defeated badly in municipal elections in January of 2009. While the militias were able to build legitimacy by providing needed security and social services when the state failed to do so, as the militias' agendas went beyond what the population was willing to tolerate and as Iraqi state began to reassert itself, the support for the militias has eroded.

This paper will first draw upon the existing literature on militias to provide a framework for the analysis of militias and how they interact with states, with other armed groups, and with local populations. It seeks to differentiate the Iraqi groups from previous characterizations of the militia based on their degree of popular legitimacy, pursuit of a social and political agenda, and participation in the institutions of the state. This framework will be followed by a case study examination of the two major Shia militias in Iraq, the Mahdi Army and the Badr Organization/SCIRI, tracing their development from resistance movements under the rule of Saddam Hussein, to their emergence as major political, social, and military actors after the 2003 invasion, to their decline as the Iraqi state has reasserted itself since 2007. Finally, the paper will conclude with some implications from the Iraqi experience for how states and the international community deal with militias that operate as sociopolitical movements and that, unlike warlords, have substantial popular legitimacy and political aims.

² SCIRI has since changed its name to the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq, however, for the purpose of simplicity, it will be referred to consistently as SCIRI in this paper.

II. AN ANALYTIC FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY OF MILITIAS

Militias have been one of the most seldom studied and poorly defined types of armed groups. Shultz, Farah, and Lochard write that, “While individual militias received considerable international attention, particularly those in Africa and central Asia, there have been few attempts to define this type of armed group in a systematic way or to identify different sub-types.”³ Other types of armed groups have been subject to more considerable analysis following global events that have brought them to prominence. The Vietnam War, for example, sparked a research agenda into the motivations and operations of insurgencies. The rise of international terrorism in the 1980s, 1990s, and especially after the attacks of 2001 has resulted in major theoretical debates over how terrorist networks form, recruit members, and sustain their operations.

Scholars and analysts did not begin to pay serious attention to militias until after the end of the Cold War, and even then, the majority of the literature focused on the experiences of humanitarian groups encountering warlords in Africa. Nevertheless, there was a growing sense that these militias were no longer operating on purely a local scale, but in fact had increasingly transnational dimensions. Militias are heavily involved in the international spread of drugs and weaponry and are often the source of material support for terrorist or other organizations with aims of attacking Western states. Liberia’s Charles Taylor, for example, reportedly supplied weaponry to terrorist groups in Somalia. Militias also

³ Richard Shultz, Douglas Farah, and Itamara Lochard, *Armed Groups: A Tier-One Security Priority* (Colorado Springs, CO: INSS, USAF Academy, 2004), 22-23.

push weak states along the process toward becoming failed states, creating greater regional and global instability. Furthermore, the horrific violence committed by many of these warlords pose a moral challenge to the international community that cannot be ignored.⁴

The recent military engagements of the United States have made the need for a better understanding of militias even more urgent. From Somalia to the Balkans to Afghanistan to Iraq, militias are major players in nearly every theater to which the U.S. military has been recently deployed. Meanwhile, Lebanon's Hezbollah militia may be the best example of such a group that can challenge major western states not just in a foreign battlefield, but worldwide. Hezbollah was able to fight the far more powerful Israeli Defense Forces to a draw in the summer of 2006, has successfully carried out terrorist attacks on targets as far away as South America, and has even operated tobacco smuggling operations in the United States.⁵ Given these real-world challenges, we have an urgent need to better understand how militias operate, what their motivations are, and the nature of their relationship with the societies in which they operate.

A major obstacle to defining militias is the wide range in the behavior and characteristics of the armed groups that are identified with this term. The current militia literature is divided between those who describe militias as solely pernicious actors with no concern for the population at large, and those who argue that militias can play an important social function in offering security and other

⁴ Sasha Lezhnev, *Crafting Peace: Strategies to Deal with Warlords in Collapsing States* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2005), xiii.

⁵ Sari Horwitz, "Cigarette Smuggling Linked to Terrorism," *The Washington Post*, June 8, 2004.

services that the state is failing to provide. The assessment may often depend on the specific militia being examined. As Shultz, Farah, and Lochard point out, while the characterization of militias as little more than bandits is accurate for some groups, “In other parts of the world, militias have been more disciplined, less abusive of the population in general and of their own ethnic tribe or clan in particular, and led by men interested in local or regional political power.”⁶

Warlords

The majority of theoretical writing on militias has focused on the type commonly referred to as the warlord. The emphasis is often on the experience of aid groups working in Africa where these leaders and their militias have played a particularly damaging role over the past several decades. Studies frequently look at the warlords of China in the 1920s as well as a basis of comparison and as a model of how the warlord structure operates. Common themes in the assessment of warlords include the exploitation of ungoverned territory, brutality towards the host population, and a pursuit of economic profit.

The failure of the state, or at least a fragmentation of the state that allows spaces of ungoverned territory, is cited almost universally as a necessary condition for the emergence of warlordism. Hills succinctly states that “Warlords and militia can only exist in states...in which structure, authority, power, law, and civil order have fragmented.”⁷ And while warlords may certainly exacerbate or hasten the

⁶ Shultz, Farah, and Lochard, *Armed Groups: A Tier-One Security Priority*, 24.

⁷ Alice Hills, “Warlords, Militias, and Conflict in Contemporary Africa,” *Small Wars & Insurgency* (Spring 1997): 39.

process of state disintegration, MacKinlay argues that the condition of state fragmentation usually exists first: “The warlords were reactive, they did not try to seize power from the hands of a thriving government as an insurgent might and, with few exceptions, they acted only when the state had become terminally weak.”⁸ Warlords are thus not ideological but opportunistic; they seek to take advantage of the existence of ungoverned space in order to seek power and profit.

Warlord scholars have also focused heavily on the economic underpinnings of warlord rule and many see monetary profit as the warlord’s ultimate goal. As such, warlord activity can be understood through the lens of rational economic interest. MacKinlay argues that “The warlord might be a negative phenomenon, perhaps even evil, but there was nothing mindless or irrational about his behaviour. He followed a ruthless logic in his activities.”⁹ The success of the warlord in the 1990s especially can be linked to the new economic opportunities made available by the expansion of global commerce. Warlords utilize a powerful combination of forceful control over territory with valuable natural resources and access to international markets through which the warlord can sell and distribute the resource. Jackson uses the term “grey trade” to describe the quasi-legitimate business operations of the warlords and emphasizes their importance: “Warlords earn substantial sums from ‘grey’ trades. Typically this trade consists of primary commodities, including oil, diamonds, timber and rubber as well as drugs and guns. The amount of this ‘grey’ activity should not be underestimated.”¹⁰ The opium trade

⁸ John MacKinlay, “Defining Warlords,” *International Peacekeeping* (Spring 2000): 48-62.

in Afghanistan and diamonds and other extractive resources in Africa are the classic examples of warlords operating under this economic model.

The political economy of warlordism is also used to distinguish it from other types of armed groups. On one hand, mafia-type criminal organizations depend on the institutions of the state—both political freedoms and physical infrastructure that the state provides—in order to conduct its operations. Insurgents, on the other, are tempered in their ability to exploit their territory by their need to win the support of the population.¹¹ Most scholars similarly see the political economy of warlords as reinforcing the concept of warlords as pernicious and providing no benefits to the society. Reno writes that warlords are only interested in their own wealth and power, have little interests in long-term investments and public goods that may benefit the society at large, and only distribute funds and services to specifically targeted groups and individuals as a form of payment or bribe.¹²

The role of the charismatic leader is particularly important in warlord militias. Warlords are able to maintain the loyalty of their soldiers either by presenting themselves as a charismatic leader with the unique abilities necessary to provide order and stability in a chaotic environment, or by establishing and controlling a system of patronage ties, often based on tribe, ethnicity, religion, or in other cases purely financial relationships. Marten argues that in providing a new

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Paul Jackson, "Warlords as Alternative Forms of Governance," *Small Wars & Insurgency* (Summer 2003): 144.

¹¹ MacKinlay, "Defining Warlords."

¹² William Reno, *Warlord Politics and African States* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

system of political loyalty outside of the state, the warlords are further contributing to the state's disintegration and make it more difficult for the state or the international community to reassert control.¹³

But while the warlord may rely on his charismatic leadership to win the loyalty of his fighters, he often still struggles to maintain control over the many actors operating under his name. In many previous case studies, scholars observe that through repeated acts of violence, small groups of fighters tend to become more entrepreneurial and lack the discipline and order of traditional militaries or other types of armed groups. Lary notes how in China "gang culture" began to replace traditional military order,¹⁴ and MacKinlay describes how as the warlord loses control over his fighters, "small groups of soldiers could use the threat of their weapons to loot personal property, to rape, to steal harvests and commit casual acts of terrible violence without fear of reprisal."¹⁵ In a similar vein, Jackson writes that, "the replacement of formal structures by ad hoc, primitive and personalised control leads to a behavioural logic based on the licensing of gratuitous violence."¹⁶

Overall, the word "warlord" is widely used as a pejorative term and warlords are often portrayed, even in the scholarly community as irredeemably despicable entities. Lezhnev summarizes warlords by describing them as "globalized gangsters"

¹³ Kimberly Marten, "Warlordism in a Comparative Perspective," *International Security* (Winter -2007 2006): 48.

¹⁴ Diana Lary, *Warlord Soldiers* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 5.

¹⁵ MacKinlay, "Defining Warlords."

¹⁶ Jackson, "Warlords as Alternative Forms of Governance," 138.

that “prey on civilians through looting and mass murder.”¹⁷ MacKinlay, meanwhile, writes that “Warlordism is an ugly, pejorative expression, evoking brutality, racketeering and the suffering of civil communities” and argues that those connotations are largely substantiated by warlord behavior. “The warlord,” he writes, “occupied territory in a strictly predatory manner and his social activities seldom enriched the lives of the civilian families in his grasp.” He therefore concludes that:

“The warlord, as defined above, is a wholly negative phenomenon. There is, so far, no mitigating, Robin Hood tendency which might show him to be a redresser of global inequality. It is therefore inconsistent to uphold the values of civil society and, at the same time, define the warlord in the anodyne circumlocutions of the politically correct as a ‘non- state actor’. The warlord is a warlord.”¹⁸

Militias as Alternative Governance

Other scholars have examined the phenomenon of warlordism and have argued that warlords and militias may play a more important social and political function. In contrast to the argument that warlords’ profit motive causes them to disregard and even exploit the local population, Mancur Olson notes that warlords and other seemingly selfish autocrats may actually have a strong interest in investing in their local population. In describing what he terms “bandit rationality,”

¹⁷ Lezhnev, *Crafting Peace: Strategies to Deal with Warlords in Collapsing States*, xi.

¹⁸ MacKinlay, “Defining Warlords.”

Olson argues that they may often wish to provide security, build infrastructure, and even offer services because doing so actually enhances their ability to extract resources and earn profits: “A secure autocrat has an encompassing interest in his domain that leads him to provide a peaceful order and other public goods that increase productivity.”¹⁹ A key variable in determining which of these approaches a warlord takes may be their overall sense of security. A militia leader who believes he will be in control of a territory for a long period of time may be more willing to make longer-term investments in infrastructure and the population than one who fears imminent defeat and may thus be looking only to secure a quick profit.

Jackson similarly argues that “Warlords are not irrational anarchists, but an alternative form of governance system that has historically emerged during periods of central political collapse, either from an empire, or a ‘state’.”²⁰ They can in fact play a productive role in rebuilding some form of stability in a chaotic, ungoverned environment. “Given the collapse of state control, warlords represent an attempt to re- establish stability within anarchy,” he writes and even goes on to claim that they can be considered “embryonic governments.”²¹

Jackson highlights the extensive programs and institutions that Liberian militia leader Charles Taylor put into place in the territory that he governed. Taylor established radio stations, published newspapers, built an airport and deep-water seaport and operated many legitimate commercial businesses in addition to his

¹⁹ Mancur Olson, “Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development,” *American Journal of Political Science* 87, no. 3 (September 1993): 567.

²⁰ Jackson, “Warlords as Alternative Forms of Governance,” 132.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 147-148.

“grey-market” activities. “Taylorland” appears to be a case where a militia leader, in his efforts to earn a profit, makes investments that help the population at large. Moreover, his projects, particularly his media endeavors, suggest a political motive as well as an economic one, distinguishing this type of militia from the purely profit-driven warlord.

Like many of the other scholars previously discussed, Hills examines the warlords of China in the 1920s, but in focusing on two of the larger warlords with the most complex systems of governance, she comes to different conclusions about their role. In fact, her depiction of Chinese warlordism is more similar to Jackson’s account of Charles Taylor’s Liberia. She notes that the most effective warlords were able to recreate the basic structures of governance in the absence of the state; they levied taxes, ran police forces, and implemented their own legal systems. The warlords themselves often had larger political ambitions, and thus had some interest in building popular support. She writes, “Their control (or organisation) of territory tended to be a means to a political end, rather than a matter of simple exploitation.”²²

Like the warlord, this second type of “alternative governance” militia exploits the absence of the state to seek economic profit, but is interested in expanding political power as well. These militias provide security for the population under their control and may also establish a system of infrastructure and social services that may resemble a primitive government. However, their motives are still more economically than politically driven as their efforts to win popular support and

²² Hills, “Warlords, Militias, and Conflict in Contemporary Africa,” 38.

some political influence are largely intended to allow them to protect and expand their extralegal business operations. And while they seek to maintain control over an expanding amount of territory, they usually have little interest in becoming involved in formal politics.²³ Finally, these militias, like warlords, are often dependent upon a single individual leader. Jackson in particular warns that the security and services provided by quasi-governmental militias “historically do not offer long term stability beyond the life of the individual warlord.”²⁴

Militias as Sociopolitical Movements

As Shia militias emerged as major actors in post-Saddam Iraq, analysts, scholars, and policymakers alike have struggled to find the correct paradigm through which to view these groups. How the militias were characterized and perceived had major implications for how the Iraqi government, the United States and the international community would respond to them, both politically and militarily.

The Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) appointed to run the country of Iraq in the aftermath of the invasion, viewed the Mahdi Army militia in much the same way as the first group of authors discussed in this section viewed warlords, that is, as a pernicious actor with no redeeming value for the community at large. CPA staffers described Muqtada al-Sadr, the leader of the Mahdi Army, as a

²³ Charles Taylor’s effort to take control of Liberia provides a possible counter-example and it could be argued that his militia could be classified under the third category for this reason, though in most other respects, his profit-driven operations follow the logic of the quasi-governmental militia.

²⁴ Jackson, “Warlords as Alternative Forms of Governance,” 149.

Bolshevik Islamist with little to no popular support.²⁵ The CPA thus favored a confrontational policy toward the militia and hoped to be able to either capture or kill al-Sadr. Other, especially American, analysts emphasized the relationship between Iran and the Iraqi Shiite groups.²⁶ Under this view, the external financial and logistical support from Iran, not domestic legitimacy and popularity, were the key to the militias' success. Their rise to power came as a result of Iran's response to a change in the balance of power and a security dilemma that was created by the U.S. invasion.

Viewing Iraq's Shia militias in such a way greatly underestimates their degree of social legitimacy. Hubbard, for example, reveals how the militias emerged because of their ability to offer protection, jobs, and economic support to Iraqi Shia in the chaos following the U.S. invasion. He writes, "the militias in Iraq formed predominantly as a response to the insecurity and government vacuum that resulted from Saddam Hussein's regime collapse."²⁷

In providing extensive services to the population, Iraq's Shia militias clearly distinguish themselves from warlords and are more similar to the militias that act as forms of alternative governance. But many of characteristics and operations seem to go well beyond what those of even the "alternative governance" militia.

²⁵ L. Paul Bremer, *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope* (New York, NY: Threshold Editions, 2006), 129.

²⁶ Christopher Forrest, "Coercive Engagement: A Security Analysis of Iranian Support to Iraqi Shia Militias," *Security Studies Quarterly* (Summer 2009): 99-123; Joel Felter and Brian Fishman, *Iranian Strategy in Iraq*, Occasional Paper Series (Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point, October 18, 2008).

²⁷ Andrew Hubbard, "Plague and Paradox: Militias in Iraq," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 18, no. 3 (2007): 350.

First, the shared experience of suffering under the Baathist regime and the militias' lineage to Shia resistance movements dating back to the 1950s give them social legitimacy beyond what has been observed in the other categories of militias. Middle East scholar Vali Nasr describes the cohesive power of Shia identity, especially when combined with a history of violent repression.²⁸ As will be examined later in the case study, SCIRI lacks the mass popular base of the Sadrist movement. However, its support among the middle classes and close relationship with the Shia clerical elite provide it with a different but similarly powerful form of legitimacy.

Secondly, economic profit plays a far less important role in Iraq's militias. While they are certainly concerned with obtaining revenue and often use force in order to do so, money is not an end in itself, but a means for the pursuit of a social and political agenda. They seek to enforce more conservative Islamic practice, closing brothels and alcohol shops, and have articulated positions on major national political issues such as the degree of federalism in the Iraqi constitution and the proper timeline for occupation forces to leave Iraq.

Furthermore, scholars of both warlordism and "alternative governance" militias have noted that these militias are closely tied to the individual charismatic leader and few endure beyond his fall. Iraq's militias and their preceding movements have shown far greater resiliency. The Sadrist movement was for sure built upon the charisma of its individual leaders, but each time one was assassinated by Saddam, the movement's base of support has remained intact and has been

²⁸ Vali R. Nasr, "When the Shiites Rise," *Foreign Affairs* (August 2006), http://www.cfr.org/publication/10951/when_the_shiites_rise.html.

revived later by another member of the family. Similarly, SCIRI/Badr's leading al-Hakim family has suffered several tragic deaths, and yet the movement has remained intact through each.

This combination of popular legitimacy, political goals, and resiliency over time make the Shia groups in many ways more similar to insurgents than militias.²⁹ However, they differ in one critical respect: they do not seek to overthrow the government, but rather accept the political system and actively participate in it. The Badr Organization and its affiliated SCIRI political party hold more parliamentary seats than any other political party, and, until the 2009 municipal elections, controlled the governorships of many southern Iraqi provinces. The Mahdi Army does not have an official political wing, however it runs loyal candidates in local and national elections and controls enough seats in parliament to have been able to decisively affect the outcome of the contest for Prime Minister in 2006.³⁰

In sum, the Iraqi militias seem to be a combination of three different types of groups: while they are certainly armed militias, they also contain elements of social movements and formal political parties. This paper suggests the term "sociopolitical movement" to describe this unique type of militia that can alternatively draw upon popular support, formal politics, or the use of force in pursuit of their social and political agendas. Muqtada al-Sadr himself described it best when he said, "The Sadrist movement first resorted to peaceful resistance, then

²⁹ For more complete characterizations of insurgent groups, see Bard E. O'Neill, *Insurgency and Terrorism* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 1990), 13; Shultz, Farah, and Lochard, *Armed Groups: A Tier-One Security Priority*, 17-18.

³⁰ Cockburn, *Muqtada*, 188.

to armed resistance, and finally to political resistance. This does not present any problem: every situation requires its own response.”³¹ The following case study will provide a more in depth examination of how these groups formed, how they operate, what there goals and motivations are, and also where their weaknesses lie.

³¹ Ibid., 165.

III. THE ORIGINS OF IRAQ'S MILITIAS IN SHIA SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

An ethno-sectarian map of modern Iraq shows a sea of green from Baghdad down into the southernmost reaches of the country, representing the demographic dominance of Iraq's Shia population. While accurate census data has never been developed (and indeed, actively avoided due to the political sensitivity of the results), most analyses estimate that Shia Arabs comprise between 60 and 65 percent of Iraq's total population.³² Despite this majority, Iraq's leaders throughout the 20th century were all Sunni, and this dynamic of minority rule informed much of Iraqi politics, culminating in the ruthless and oppressive rule of Saddam Hussein. As could be expected, Iraq's Shia formed social and political movements to help preserve their religious faith and resist, to the degree that they could, Sunni rule. These sociopolitical movements formed the basis for today's militias.

Shia Resistance Under Sunni Rule

After the Shia played an active role in the revolt against British colonial rule in 1920, the British installed a non-Iraqi Sunni Arab, King Faisal from the Hijaz region of what is now western Saudi Arabia to rule Iraq. In the years that followed, much of the religious leadership left for Iran where Shia Islam was the official religion and Shia clerics enjoyed considerable influence upon state affairs.³³ However, many other Shia worked with the Sunnis and even joined the secular

³² Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook," <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html>.

³³ Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 271.

nationalist Baath Party. It is estimated that by 1957, as much as three quarters of the Baath Party was Shia.³⁴ Iraqi nationalism and pan-Arabism were enjoying greater salience as social and political forces than Shia religious identity. This meant greater opportunities for Iraq's Shia population—especially the middle classes and intelligentsia—but was a direct challenge to the clerical elites. As religious fervor declined, pilgrimages to the Shia holy cities of Karbala and Najaf dropped to an all-time low, cutting off a major source of funding revenue for the clerics.³⁵ Meanwhile, the communist party was very successful at organizing in southern Iraq as an opposition movement to the Iraqi government, but one that was vehemently secular.

In response to these challenges, the Shia religious leadership came together in 1957 to found a new political party, Dawa (“The Calling”) with the goals of promoting a revival of religious practice and the implementation of Shia Islamic law.³⁶ As an outlaw party, Dawa sought to imitate many of the techniques used by the communists. Since they could not meet openly, they formed a structure of cellular units operating with strict discipline under a formal chain of command. But unlike the communists, they were able to take advantage of a religious hierarchy and infrastructure already in place.³⁷ Shiism differs from Sunnism in that its religious structure is highly organized with a clear pecking order amongst the clerics. This arguably makes it more suited for political as well as religious

³⁴ *Shiite Politics in Iraq: The Role of the Supreme Council*, Middle East Report (International Crisis Group, November 15, 2007), 1.

³⁵ Cockburn, *Muqtada*, 31.

³⁶ *Shiite Politics in Iraq: The Role of the Supreme Council*, 2.

³⁷ Cockburn, *Muqtada*, 31.

organization. Nevertheless, the Iraqi government brutally repressed the Dawa Party and many of its members were tortured and executed.

The Sociopolitical Movement of the First al-Sadr

Muhammed Baqir al-Sadr joined the Dawa party while he was studying in the seminaries of Najaf and beginning his rise through the ranks of the Shia clerical establishment. Joining Dawa was an audacious act for an aspiring young cleric: while the clerical establishment had supported the creating of Dawa to challenge the secular social and political movements of the time, the Shia tradition of political “quietism” dictated that the clerics themselves refrain from overt participation in the political sphere. But Baqir al-Sadr from the beginning took a more active approach. In his work, he gave special attention to the Shia underclass, bringing religious teachers into poorer neighborhoods and recruiting lower class young men into the seminary: “He guaranteed them the same socioeconomic status that they might have gained from government jobs.”³⁸

His attention to the poor and his affiliation with Dawa gave Baqir al-Sadr a reputation as a dangerous radical among the clerical elite. It also caused the Iraqi government to view him as a threat. To ensure his continued progression through the religious ranks as well as to avoid arrest—and perhaps worse—Baqir al-Sadr was forced to publicly distance himself from Dawa, though he remained active behind the scenes.³⁹

³⁸ Ibid., 34.

³⁹ Ibid., 35.

Tensions between the Iraqi government and Shia leaders worsened through the 1970s as the increasing instability in Iran struck fear in Iraq's Sunni leadership. A religious takeover in Iran could very well spillover into Iraq's Shia majority. In 1977, Iraqi police opened fire on pilgrims marching from Najaf to Karbala. The pilgrims responded by taking over a local police station resulting in an escalating cycle of violence that ended in tremendous bloodshed when Saddam Hussein (then deputy to President Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr) ordered in helicopters and armored units.⁴⁰

But the Baathist regime in Baghdad was right to be worried: the Iranian revolution was an inspiration to Iraq's Shia. Baqir al-Sadr had known Khomeini from when the latter was taught at the seminaries in Najaf. And when Khomeini succeeded in ousting the Shah, Baqir al-Sadr ordered street demonstrations to celebrate—and perhaps to test the traction of a similar movement in Iraq. But unlike the Shah of Iran, Saddam Hussein's willingness to repress his own population was not limited. Four to five thousand Dawa party members were arrested and Baqir al-Sadr was placed under house arrest. He was given the option to reconcile with the Iraqi government and be freed, but he refused. He supposedly told Saddam Hussein, "No, I have closed all doors, there is no escape for you now. Now you have to kill me so the people can rise up."⁴¹

Saddam Hussein went ahead and executed Baqir al-Sadr. al-Sadr's loyal Shia followers took to the streets in protest, but they were no match for the heavy weaponry of Saddam's army. There would be no Islamic revolution in Iraq as there

⁴⁰ Ibid., 38.

⁴¹ Ibid., 41.

had been in Iran. But through his cultivation of a religious-political network, his outreach to the disenfranchised Shia lower classes, and his symbolically powerful martyrdom, Baqir al-Sadr created—without the use of armed force—the basis for a sociopolitical movement that his relatives would revive later.

The Formation SCIRI and Badr in Iran

Baqir al-Sadr and his followers were not the only Shias to face the wrath of Saddam Hussein's repression and many Dawa members and other Shia activists fled Iraq to Iran.⁴² The Iranians welcomed the Iraqi Shia with open arms, hoping to gain a foothold within Iraq's neighboring Shia community and to convince the religious elite to embrace Iranian Grand Ayatollah Ruholla Khomeini as their spiritual leader. This effort did not gain much traction, particularly among Dawa party members who still wished to maintain control over their own political movement. So the Iranians adopted a different strategy: rather than try to establish overt authority over the Iraqi Shia, they formed an alliance with one of the most prominent Iraqi clerical families, the al-Hakims. They assisted Baqir al-Hakim, then seeking refuge in Iran, in founding a new political movement that could rival Dawa and named the new organization the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iran (SCIRI). In the wake of Saddam Hussein's successful repression of Dawa and Baqir al-Sadr, SCIRI sought to establish itself in exile as the sole legitimate expression of Shia Iraqi opposition. The group's name did not leave much to the imagination regarding their

⁴² *Shiite Politics in Iraq: The Role of the Supreme Council*, 2.

ultimate intentions: SCIRI hoped to spark an Islamic revolution in Iraq modeled on Khomeini's revolution in Iran.

But while SCIRI had an Iraqi face, the Iranian government was heavily involved at every level of its organization and operations, including the formation of a military wing: the Badr Brigade. Badr was a militia comprised of Iraqis, but was trained, equipped, and even commanded at the most senior levels by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).⁴³ It was intended to be the military vanguard that could provide the missing element of force to the efforts to expand the Islamic revolution to Iraq.

By the middle of the 1980s, there were an estimated one million Iraqi Shia refugees in Iran.⁴⁴ These exiles became SCIRI's base of support. SCIRI helped provide care for the refugees by offering subsidized food and employment in the Badr Brigade.⁴⁵ They built the beginnings of a social services network, but one that was intimately connected with their military wing.

And not all of SCIRI's recruiting efforts were benevolent. Many Iraqis allege that SCIRI activists in Iran during the Iran-Iraq war would go to the prison camps and use intimidation, guilt, and even torture to compel Iraqi Shias who had fought in Saddam's army to defect and join Badr. These soldiers, known as the *Tawabbîn*, not only significantly increased the size of the Badr Brigade, but also brought with them much needed military skill and experience as many were senior officers in the Iraqi

⁴³ Ibid., 4.

⁴⁴ Cockburn, *Muqtada*, 53.

⁴⁵ *Shiite Politics in Iraq: The Role of the Supreme Council*, 4.

Army.⁴⁶ According to a SCIRI member interviewed by journalist Patrick Cockburn, the *Tawabbîn* “became and still are today the backbone of SCIRI/Badr.”⁴⁷

But other than recruiting from the war prisons, SCIRI and Badr played a very limited role in the events of the Iran-Iraq war. While Iraqi Shia despised Saddam, they nonetheless held closely to their Iraqi and Arab identity (after all, most Iraqi Shia families had only converted to Shiism within the previous two centuries, while their Arab tribal heritage dates back far longer). A Shia revolutionary movement riding the back of the Iranian military probably would have attracted more resistance than support even from Iraq’s Shia population. Moreover, by the time Badr was sufficiently trained and organized, the Iranian military was largely on the defensive. The time was not yet right for SCIRI to make its move. A better opportunity would present itself after Saddam’s humiliating expulsion from Kuwait.

The Iraqi Intifada

The Iraqi Intifada of 1991 did not start out as a Shia revolution, but as a military mutiny. It was spontaneous and lacked any organization of clear ideological goals.⁴⁸ The myth goes that an Iraqi tank commander (sectarian identity unknown) was proceeding through Basra on his way out of Kuwait, and in an act of frustration and resentment, fired a shot from his tank at a billboard of Saddam Hussein. Whether this particular anecdote is true or not, it describes both the mentality and disorganization from which the intifada emerged. Abdul Hassan al-

⁴⁶ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁷ Cockburn, *Muqtada*, 31.

⁴⁸ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 276.

Khafaji, an Iraqi soldier from Najaf, describes to Cockburn that “The streets were full of deserters... All structure in the army was lost. Everybody was their own boss.”⁴⁹

Retreating soldiers took control of key points of the regime’s authority in Basra—the mayor’s office, the Baath party headquarters, police and security service facilities—and then preceded to other major southern cities including Najaf, Kufa, Karbala, Diwaniyya, Hilla, Amara, and Kut.⁵⁰ It was only once this mutiny began achieving some success that Iran and SCIRI decided that it presented a potent opportunity for their revolutionary aims. Badr soldiers began to cross the border into Iraq, joining in the attacks on official infrastructure and defacing images of Saddam Hussein. Posters of Ayatollah Khomeini and Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim began to prop up in their place. In Basra and Amara, pamphlets circulated with the message “all parties working from Iranian territories should also obey al-Hakim’s orders, no party is allowed to recruit volunteers; no ideas except the rightful Islamic ones should be disseminated.”⁵¹ Badr used mosques to set up provisional headquarters and the network of Shia clerics to pass communications back and forth. They hoped that with a collapse of the Iraqi regime, they would be the best organized to take over in its place.

SCIRI’s efforts gave the intifada a new ideological overtime. More than just a military mutiny, the rebellion was now an effort to establish Shia political control in Iraq. But this political agenda, with its apparent Iranian backing, undermined the

⁴⁹ Cockburn, *Muqtada*, 62.

⁵⁰ Nakash, *The Shi’is of Iraq*, 244.

⁵¹ Cockburn, *Muqtada*, 68.

movement's support among the broader Iraqi population.⁵² Sunnis who despised Saddam feared the prospects of a Shia government even more and thus supported Saddam's efforts to quash the insurrection. And even many Shia resented the clear Iranian influence. "The result was that the center greeted the intifada not with hope but with fear of a bloodbath and a desire to protect itself and its property," writes the historian Phebe Marr.⁵³

But if Iran's influence on the intifada was enough to create a popular backlash, it was insufficient to topple Saddam's regime militarily. Marr estimates that the actual number of trained Badr fighters was only between three and five thousand: "too few to make a significant impact."⁵⁴ In fact, while some Iraqis resented the Iranian involvement in the rebellion, others who were actively fighting were angered that Iran was providing too little assistance.⁵⁵ The results of the intifada and Saddam's response were catastrophic. An estimated 30,000 Iraqis were killed, more than twice as many as were killed in the war against the United States and its allies.⁵⁶

By taking control of the insurgency but being unable to ensure its success, SCIRI's popular credibility in Iraq suffered a devastating blow. The International Crisis Group writes that "To this day, residents of Basra...and other southern towns blame SCIRI for having transformed an army-based anti-regime revolt into an

⁵² *Shiite Politics in Iraq: The Role of the Supreme Council*, 6.

⁵³ Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2004), 251.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq*, 252.

⁵⁶ Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 251.

Iranian-sponsored Shiite rebellion, only to leave the population exposed to brutal reprisals once defeated. Badr fighters slipped back into Iran.”⁵⁷

As a result, SCIRI was forced to find new bases of political support and looked to connect more closely with the worldwide Iraqi expatriate community who shared similar ambitions of ending Saddam Hussein’s rule. They established representative offices in major European cities and in 1992 joined the coalition of Iraqi expatriate organizations known as the Iraqi National Congress (INC). Through the INC, SCIRI was even able to develop a relationship with the United States, despite its Iranian connections. This relationship would prove invaluable to SCIRI in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion.

The Second al-Sadr Revives the Movement

The popular disenchantment with SCIRI created the political opening for an alternative Shia movement. Muhammed Sadiq al-Sadr, a younger cousin of Muhammed Baqir al-Sadr was prepared to take advantage of that opening. He harnessed the widespread anger in the Shia community following the failure of the intifada to reconstruct and expand Baqir al-Sadr’s following. Sadiq al-Sadr criticized SCIRI and the prominent Hakim family for having fled Iraq in the 1980s rather than staying in Iraq and providing leadership for the Shia community during such a difficult time. He also brazenly attacked the Shia clerical elite, accusing them of passivity in the face of Saddam’s oppression.⁵⁸ Indeed, Ayatollah al-Khoei, the

⁵⁷ *Shiite Politics in Iraq: The Role of the Supreme Council*, 30.

⁵⁸ Matthew Duss and Peter Juul, *The Fractured Shia of Iraq* (The Center for American Progress, January 2009), 9.

senior-most Shia cleric at the time, had remained silent during the course of the intifada and then, after it was clear the rebellion would not succeed, appeared on television with Saddam Hussein to deliver a message that was interpreted as a condemnation of the uprising.⁵⁹

But Sadiq al-Sadr had one other important factor in his favor: the support of Saddam Hussein. After the intifada, Saddam wanted to empower a Shia leader that he could trust, one that was Arab and a strong Iraqi nationalist. By co-opting a member of the al-Sadr family, Saddam hoped to be able to minimize the threat of a future Shia rebellion without having to rely on the use of violent repression alone.⁶⁰

Sadiq al-Sadr had studied under prominent Shia clerics, including Baqir al-Sadr, Baqir al-Hakim, and even Ruhollah Khomeini, and became a *mujtahid* himself at the very young age of 34. To increase his connection with Baqir al-Sadr's legacy, he married two of his sons to his cousin's daughters. Nevertheless, in 1991, Sadiq al-Sadr still held a far inferior rank within the clerical hierarchy to figures such as al-Khoei, Ali al-Sistani, and the al-Hakims. Striking a deal with Saddam gave Sadiq al-Sadr the resources he needed to circumvent the traditional order and rise to quickly to a position of prominence. Saddam provided Sadiq al-Sadr with access to the schools previously taken from Baqir al-Sadr, and more importantly, granted him control over visas for non-Iraqi students studying in the seminaries at Najaf. As

⁵⁹ Some scholars, it should be noted, have interpreted al-Khoei's message differently, arguing that al-Khoei may have in fact been criticizing Saddam's use of violence.

⁶⁰ Cockburn, *Muqtada*, 78-79.

many of these students came from abroad (especially Iran), this power gave Sadiq al-Sadr considerable leverage within the clerical establishment at Najaf.⁶¹

Sadiq al-Sadr took advantage of the latitude given to him by Saddam to cultivate a strong base of support among the Shia lower classes, especially among the tribal migrants who came to Baghdad in search of work. Many of these Shia lived in the Baghdad suburb that was renamed in his honor after 2003: Sadr City. He expanded upon the social service programs his cousin had begun to develop in the 1970s, creating religious courts, providing medical services, and delivering food to the needy. In doing so, he created an elaborate network of followers throughout the poorer urban areas of southern Iraq—a network that his son Muqtada would later draw upon to restart the movement in the wake of the U.S. invasion.⁶²

Sadiq al-Sadr also began the practice of using Friday prayers as a platform for delivering social messages. While common in Sunni mosques, this was a new religious innovation for the Shia. Sadiq al-Sadr's messages focused on economic themes, emphasizing the plight of the Sunni poor under the international sanctions regime of the 1990s. The sanctions environment was in fact an important, perhaps essential, element in creating the conditions necessary for Sadiq al-Sadr's ascendancy. UN humanitarian coordinator Dennis Halliday warned in 1997 that the sanctions regime might lead to the rise of more radical, fundamentalist figures,

⁶¹ Ibid., 89.

⁶² Duss and Juul, *The Fractured Shia of Iraq*, 9.

saying, "What should be of concern is the possibility of more fundamentalist Islamic thinking... We are pushing people to take extreme positions."⁶³

Sadiq al-Sadr also promoted a return to more conservative religious practice. His followers closed down brothels in the city of Basra, prohibited the sale of alcohol, and ordered taxi drivers not to pick up unveiled women.⁶⁴ But unlike Baqir al-Sadr, Sadiq al-Sadr was less focused on political activity. A teenager from Kut describes that "The first al-Sadr set up a political party linked to the elite of the hawza, while the second was immersed in the world of tribes and the issues of daily life... He wanted to establish an Islamic popular base strong enough to stand up to a murderous and tyrannical regime."⁶⁵

Of course, as he depended on Saddam Hussein's support to develop his movement, Sadiq al-Sadr was limited in his ability to confront the government politically. But as he attracted an ever greater number of followers and built a sophisticated network of services and courts that paralleled the traditional functions of the state, Sadiq al-Sadr became a political force in his own right, and depended less and less upon Saddam's blessing. In fact, as his popularity and influence grew, so did the number of rivals who felt threatened by his position. The Iranians worried that Sadiq al-Sadr, rather than building a Shia movement that might finally deliver the Islamic revolution in Iraq, was actually building the foundations for his own Shia Islamic state that would never cede loyalty to Iran's

⁶³ "UN official blasts Iraq sanctions," *BBC*, September 30, 1998, sec. Middle East, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/183499.stm>.

⁶⁴ Cockburn, *Muqtada*, 89-90.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

Supreme Leader. SCIRI began to write and disseminate publications denouncing Sadiq al-Sadr.

Saddam too began to worry that he had allowed Sadiq al-Sadr to gain too much power. On February 19, 1998, Sadiq al-Sadr was assassinated along with his eldest sons Mustafa and Muammal. But while Saddam had killed the movement's charismatic leader, the movement's network and base of political support remained in tact. While relatively inactive for the remainder of Saddam's rule, Sadiq al-Sadr's followers were ready to be mobilized again by his surviving son, Moqtada, in 2003. As one Iraqi politician described: "Muqtada's movement was built by his father. All he did was help it to evolve and continue the process initiated by Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr."⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Ibid., 109.

IV. THE RISE OF THE SHIA MILITIAS AFTER THE FALL OF SADDAM

The previous chapter examined how SCIRI/Badr and the Sadrists originated as sociopolitical movements, each with their own set of strengths and vulnerabilities. However, neither was strong enough to be able to confront Saddam's regime effectively, and Saddam was able to use the strength and brutality of his security apparatus to quash the threat of rebellion. At the beginning of the 21st century, SCIRI and the Badr Organization remained confined to Iran while the Sadrist movement was dormant with no new leader able to take the place of Muhammed Sadiq al-Sadr.

The overthrow of Saddam Hussein by coalition forces in 2003 gave both of these movements the opportunity they had been waiting for. Given their histories and aspirations, it was inevitable that they would seek to become major players in the new Iraq. However, given each group's weaknesses—Badr's lack of popular trust due to its relationship with Iran, the Sadrist's lack of leadership, organization, or institutional support,—it was far from inevitable that these groups would be as successful as they were. Their ability to win the support of Iraq's Shia population between 2003 and 2007 was very much a result of the failure of coalition forces and the new Iraqi state to provide security and services for the population. Like other militias, Badr and the Sadrists relied upon the weakness or absence of the state in order to take control. But unlike warlord groups, or even militias that provide alternative governance, both Badr and the Sadrists had much larger political and social ambitions. They developed sophisticated social service, judicial, and religious networks, articulated political platforms, promoted Islamic revivalism, and

participated in the electoral and bureaucratic institutions of the new Iraqi state. Their armed wings were an important part of both groups' operations, but they were but one tool at their disposal as each sought to maximize its social and political influence.

The Rise of SCIRI: Green Zone Politics

On the eve of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, SCIRI's reputation in Iraq was still tarnished by its disastrous performance in the 1991 intifada and the rumors that it had tortured Iraqi soldiers during the Iran-Iraq war. With little support from the Shia population in Iraq, SCIRI's strongest asset was its relationship with the United States developed through the Iraqi National Congress (INC), as well as its backing from Iran. The Bush Administration invited SCIRI members to Washington, DC in August of 2002 to attend a conference of Iraqi exiles planning the future of a post-Saddam Iraq.⁶⁷ SCIRI hoped that the United States would use its military to weaken Saddam and, rather than topple Saddam directly, would simply keep his military in check while an uprising of the Iraqi (Shia) masses would take control of the government.⁶⁸

While the United States insisted on having a more active role in Saddam's ousting and in the formation of a new Iraqi state, SCIRI was nonetheless able to ride the heels of the U.S. invasion and re-enter Iraqi politics. On April 16, 2003, Ayatollah Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, the deputy leader of SCIRI, arrived in Kut and his welcoming ceremony was attended by thousands of supporters. It is estimated that he crossed

⁶⁷ *Shiite Politics in Iraq: The Role of the Supreme Council*, 8.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

the border from Iran into Iraq with between 4,000 and 5,000 Badr Brigade soldiers, who came without weapons so as not to upset the U.S. administration.⁶⁹ Paul Bremer granted SCIRI one of 25 seats on the Iraqi Governing Council, allowing the movement to participate in the key inside political decisions and processes from the very beginning.⁷⁰

But while SCIRI and Badr clearly depended on this close relationship with the United States, they were wary of publicly embracing the U.S. presence. In March of 2003, Badr had announced that it would cease all operations being conducted in Iraq against Saddam Hussein's regime lest it appear to be supporting the U.S. invasion.⁷¹ SCIRI announced publicly (if misleadingly) that it was not cooperating with U.S. plans for a post-war Iraq and even boycotted some planning meetings at which coalition officials were present.⁷² There were even reports of some military confrontations between Badr militants and coalition forces.⁷³ Close relations with the United States were the key to SCIRI/Badr's involvement in the political process and while they worked closely and cooperatively with the Americans behind closed doors, their desire to distance themselves from the American's publicly demonstrates their concern for political optics and their desire to build popular support among Iraq's Shia.

⁶⁹ J Daly, "Iraq's Unknown Future: the Shi'a Factor," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, May 2, 2003.

⁷⁰ *Shiite Politics in Iraq: The Role of the Supreme Council*, 10.

⁷¹ Robin Hughes, "Badr Corps suspends military action against Iraqi regime," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, March 19, 2003.

⁷² Daly, "Iraq's Unknown Future: the Shi'a Factor."

⁷³ *Shiite Politics in Iraq: The Role of the Supreme Council*, 9.

In addition to building a strong relationship with the Americans, SCIRI also worked to rebuild relations with the clerical elite in Najaf. While some—especially lower class—Shia resented the clerical elite for their emphasis on abstract theological issues at the expense of the people’s everyday material concerns—Najaf’s seniormost cleric, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, was still by far the most influential figure in Shiite Iraq following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. Sistani followed the Shia tradition of quietism and non-intervention in political affairs. However, he would occasionally let his opinions be known on major political issues, and when he did so, his input was often decisive.⁷⁴ SCIRI and Sistani’s partnership was natural given their common political base. Both enjoyed greater support among the middle classes and were threatened by the Sadrist movement. Badr forces helped provide security in the holy cities and tried to ensure that the holy sites remained under the clerics’ control.

In return, Sistani proved to be a most helpful ally for SCIRI in the 2005 elections. Sistani endorsed the creation of a unified list of Shia candidates while SCIRI used their superior organization and relationships in the Green Zone to ensure that their candidates occupied the dominant positions on that list.⁷⁵ Sistani provided SCIRI with a path to electoral success with limited popular support. His endorsement of the Shia list (which became known as the United Iraqi Alliance or UIA) ensured the lists victory in the elections, while SCIRI’s ability manage the “behind-the-scenes” politics ensured that votes cast for the list translated into seats for SCIRI in parliament. In the January 2005 election, the UIA received 48 percent of

⁷⁴ Ibid., 12.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

the vote, giving them 140 out of 275 seats in the assembly. In the December elections of the same year (in which far more Sunnis participated), UIA still received 46.5 percent of the vote for 128.⁷⁶ SCIRI and Badr held 36 of the UIAs seats in parliament after the December 2005 election, making them the most powerful single player in the new governing coalition.

SCIRI and Badr quickly used this political authority to gain control of the Ministry of Interior, placing a Badr member, Bayan Jaber Solagh, as its minister. This gave Badr a means to both provide government jobs to its members as well as a powerful tool with which it could confront its opponents. Badr fighters were recruited into the ministry, particularly the national police and elite commando units. And while the police looked to go after those who were participating in the insurgency against the new Iraqi government and coalition forces, there was soon a dramatic increase in Sunni deaths across Baghdad that clearly targeted far more than just those who were participating in the insurgency or collaborating with foreign jihadis.⁷⁷

As Badr expanded the ministry's forces, it began to look beyond just its own members and recruit from the Shia lower classes. This may have been part of a political effort to expand their base of popular support, but it does not appear to have been successful. Even as the new Shia recruits operated under Badr commanders, many continued to express their support for the leader of a rival Shia movement: Muqtada al-Sadr.

⁷⁶ Toby Dodge, "The Causes of U.S. Failure in Iraq," *Survival* 47, no. 1 (March 2007): 94.

⁷⁷ *The Next Iraqi War? Sectarianism and Civil Conflict*, Middle East Report (International Crisis Group, February 27, 2006), 3.

The Rise of the Sadrists: A Grassroots Militia Movement

In 2003, the Sadrist movement faced a political situation that was almost exactly the opposite of that of SCIRI and Badr. Both Baqir al-Sadr and Sadiq al-Sadr continued to be highly revered among Iraq's Shia lower classes and their images were posted all over the cities of southern Iraq. But since Sadiq al-Sadr's assassination in 1998, the movement had no clear leader, organizational structure, or institutional support from either within Iraq or abroad.

In killing Sadiq al-Sadr's two eldest sons along with the father, Saddam Hussein had effectively eliminated the two most likely heirs to the movement. Sadiq al-Sadr's third son, Murtada, was rarely seen in public, and reported to be chronically ill. Some even believe that he died in 2005.⁷⁸ This left the fourth son, Muqtada, to inherit the movement. But Muqtada was hardly seen as someone fit to lead such a movement. Only 29 years old when Saddam Hussein was toppled, Muqtada had dropped out of seminary and had a reputation for playing video games and consuming large quantities of falafel. Journalist Patrick Cockburn argues that Muqtada al-Sadr actually played an important role in his father's organization, editing the *al Huda* magazine and running social service operations in Sadr city. The stories of Muqtada's incompetence may have been myths intentionally spread to prevent him from being targeted by Saddam's regime.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, Muqtada seemed an unlikely figure to be able to revive his father's movement in the wake of the U.S. invasion. Moreover, Muqtada lacked many of the assets that his father had so effectively utilized in the 1990s: he did not have the religious legitimacy of being

⁷⁸ Cockburn, *Muqtada*, 111.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

a cleric himself, and the religious elite in Najaf had assumed control of the institutions and funding sources that had supported Sadiq al-Sadr's movement.⁸⁰

But Muqtada's reputation and lack of credentials may have in fact made him an even more endearing figure to the frustrated lower classes of Iraq's Shia community. Cockburn writes, "His very lack of official status as a member of the Marji'iyah [clerical elite] made him all the more attractive to many impoverished young Shia who were distrustful of all religious and political authorities. They found it easier to identify with Muqtada, who had stayed in Iraq, than to trust people like Sayyid Majid al-Hakim, the leader of SCIRI, who had spent 23 years in Iran."⁸¹

The elements of the Sadrist movement began to re-form in the period of looting that followed Saddam's overthrow in April, 2003 and appears to have occurred simultaneously from the bottom up and from the top down. Muqtada al-Sadr had been held under house arrest since his father's assassination in 1998, however he was still able to maintain regular contact with a core group of 12 to 15 religious imams who were ready to follow his lead. When the regime collapsed, these imams quickly began to form a more expansive religious network, often invoking Sadiq al-Sadr's name to build alliances with other imams, reopen mosques, and establish local Sadrist offices.⁸² Meanwhile, former followers of Sadiq al-Sadr formed local committees on their own in an effort to confront the escalating violence from looting. One young Shia, who later joined the ranks of the Mahdi Army, describes that "we, the young men, organized ourselves and volunteered,

⁸⁰ *Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?*, Middle East Report (International Crisis Group, July 11, 2006), 6.

⁸¹ Cockburn, *Muqtada*, 114.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 128.

without anybody leading us, to guard public property... We guarded power stations, transformers, and electricity cables, so if there was any electricity at all in Baghdad after the fall of Saddam, it was because of al-Sadr's followers."⁸³ Eventually these groups of young followers and the network of imams pledging their allegiance to Muqtada al-Sadr came together to form a potent organization. With the state in total dysfunction, Sadrists were able to seize control of the key infrastructure in Iraqi society: social service centers, hospitals, schools, and mosques.⁸⁴ More than just a collection of armed rogues headed by a young, inexperienced "firebrand," the Sadrists were able to build legitimacy amongst Iraq's Shiites by restoring some semblance of order in the chaos following the coalition invasion.

But the use of violence was also a major element of the Sadrists activities. Despite, and perhaps because of, the movement's growing popular support, rival Shia groups and coalition authorities worked to ensure their exclusion from the political process in Baghdad. Unlike, SCIRI, the Sadrists were not given a seat on the IGC, and American authorities viewed Muqtada al-Sadr not as the leader of a social movement with broad popular support, but as a warlord who should be contained, and, if possible, eliminated.⁸⁵ Angered by this alliance between what they saw as foreign occupiers and Shia leaders that had either fled to Iran or quietly tolerated Saddam's brutality, many of Muqtada al-Sadr's followers turned to violence.

In April, 2003, Majid al-Khoei, one of the most senior clerics at Najaf, was bound and dragged from the Imam Ali shrine and assassinated. It is believed that

⁸³ Ibid., 118.

⁸⁴ *Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?*, 7.

⁸⁵ Bremer, *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope*, 129.

his killing may have been ordered directly by Muqtada al-Sadr.⁸⁶ Later, Sadrist followers surrounded the homes of other senior clerics, including Ayatollah al-Sistani, Bashir al-Najafi, and Muhammed Ishaq al-Fayadh. They were forced to call upon local tribal militias to disperse the crowds.⁸⁷

In August of 2003, Sadrist militants clashed with U.S. forces for the first time in Baghdad. It was during this encounter that Muqtada al-Sadr officially announced the formation of the Mahdi Army (*jaysh al-mahdi*) as a militia with the stated purpose of protecting the Shia religious shrines.⁸⁸ But clearly the creation of a militia was intended to serve the Sadrists' political goals as well. In attacking the coalition military presence, Muqtada al-Sadr was able to tap into a growing popular anger at the foreign occupation and contrast himself with the senior clerics and SCIRI who were working so closely with the Americans. Furthermore, by possessing a credible threat of force, he hoped to command the attention of both Iraqi and coalition leaders and demand his inclusion in the political process.

The early confrontations between the Mahdi Army and coalition forces led to increased coalition patrolling in known Sadrist strongholds, and in turn, an increasing number of low-level military confrontations. Tensions between the Sadrists and coalition forces came to a head in the spring of 2004. Prompted by a sermon in which Muqtada al-Sadr called the September 11th terrorist attacks a "miracle and a blessing from God," Bremer closed down a Sadrist newspaper that had published the sermon on March 28th. A few days later, he arrested one of

⁸⁶ Cockburn, *Muqtada*, 119.

⁸⁷ *Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?*, 9.

⁸⁸ Jeffrey White and Ryan Philips, "Sadrist Revolt Provides Lessons for Counterinsurgency in Iraq," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, August 1, 2004.

Muqtada al-Sadr's closest advisors, Mustafa al-Yaqubi, in connection with Majid al-Khoei's murder and the next day issued a warrant for the arrest of al-Sadr himself.⁸⁹

Muqtada al-Sadr responded with violence and in a matter of days the Mahdi Army seized control of major cities across southern Iraq including virtually all of Kufa and Kut, and parts of Najaf, Karbala, and Basra.⁹⁰ That the Mahdi Army was still a highly disorganized force made their rapid success even more surprising. A Mahdi Army commander described, "At the beginning, the Mahdi Army was weak and had no real units such as companies or divisions, but was just a group of armed men... The only condition for somebody who wanted to be a soldier in the Mahdi Army was to be a believer and perform prayers."⁹¹

Generally, the Mahdi Army operates as small independent squadrons led by a single commander who in turn may have received guidance and instructions from a cleric within Sadr's religious network.⁹² Fighters in the militia were generally unpaid and had to provide their own weapons. Nevertheless, serving in the Mahdi Army was a tremendous source of pride—for disenfranchised young Shia males, the opportunity to wield a weapon, patrol the streets, and enforce religious edicts gave them a sense of purpose and prestige that they had never before experienced.⁹³ And in many Shia neighborhoods, Mahdi Army members were received warmly and welcomed as a source of protection. Cockburn describes that "The Mahdi Army could, in areas like Sadr City, deliver on security in a way the police could not, by

⁸⁹ *Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?*, 11.

⁹⁰ White and Philips, "Sadrist Revolt Provides Lessons for Counterinsurgency in Iraq."

⁹¹ Cockburn, *Muqtada*, 135.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 153.

⁹³ *Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?*, 19.

telling gangs of criminals and dealers to get out or be killed. In Kut, Sadrists militiamen provided backup for the local police.”⁹⁴ This explains how when the Sadrist uprising began, Mahdi Army units encountered little resistance from Iraqi security forces and even tacit support.⁹⁵

Coalition forces were able to regain control of most areas by the middle of April, though fighting continued on and off through August with cease-fire agreements reached first in June and then on August 25th after violence escalated again in Najaf. While the military outcome was a defeat for the Mahdi Army, the political outcome was mixed. Muqtada al-Sadr was able to use his resistance against the “occupiers” to rally support from Iraqis—even Sunnis—who similarly opposed the foreign military presence. The coincidental timing of the April attacks with the battle at Fallujah and the revelations of abuses at Abu Ghraib allowed the Sadrists to exploit a wave of anti-American sentiment and turned Muqtada into a national figure with hero-like status.⁹⁶ The Sadrists were particularly savvy in their use of media, effectively spreading his message of Iraqi nationalism and resistance against occupiers throughout the military operations. Satellite news coverage of the rebellion played an especially important role. An Iraqi journalist commented that “the emergence of the Sadrist current after the regime’s fall essentially occurred through satellite televisions. We were surprised at the time, but in hindsight we realized that, through this acknowledgement, the Sadrist movement was born.”⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Cockburn, *Muqtada*, 154.

⁹⁵ White and Philips, “Sadrist Revolt Provides Lessons for Counterinsurgency in Iraq.”

⁹⁶ *Iraq’s Muqtada al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?*, 11.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

However, while his uprising ignited the passions of some Iraqis, it was a turn-off to others who viewed his efforts as futile and abhorred the damage to the Shia holy sites inflicted by his militiamen. Abbas Khoederi, a Mahdi Army fighter, comments that, "At the end of the battle, we felt a sense of disappointment and failure... We believed we had moved away from what the people wanted. Even Muqtada retired from public life and issued no statement for a long time, while we avoided letting people know we were Sadrists."⁹⁸

Ayatollah Sistani may have been the biggest victor in the fight, emerging as an indispensable peace-broker for the coalition due to his singularly powerful influence over Iraq's Shia population. Sistani was able to force the Sadrists to disband their Islamic courts, return all goods they had stolen from the holy sites, and withdraw their forces from Najaf. This allowed the clerical elite to regain control over the holy sites and the revenue streams that accompanied them.⁹⁹

But Muqtada al-Sadr scored some significant political victories as well. Over the course of the fighting, al-Sadr reportedly sought on 11 different occasions to open talks with the coalition to negotiate a settlement,¹⁰⁰ indicating that the ultimate goal of his fighting was perhaps to earn political concessions more than to achieve a military victory. In this regard, it can be argued that he at least partly succeeded in his objective. He was able to avoid arrest and demands that his militia be dismantled. And while he may have alienated the more moderate Shia population, he increased his stature to that of a national political figure and further

⁹⁸ Cockburn, *Muqtada*, 163.

⁹⁹ *Shiite Politics in Iraq: The Role of the Supreme Council*, 12.

¹⁰⁰ White and Philips, "Sadrist Revolt Provides Lessons for Counterinsurgency in Iraq."

invigorated the zealous support of his lower-class, urban, Shia base who shared his disdain for the foreign occupiers and the quietist detachment of the clerical elite.

Muqtada al-Sadr's Turn to Politics

Following his rise to national prominence, but defeat on the battlefield, Muqtada al-Sadr chose a different strategic direction for his movement and prepared for participation in the January 2005 elections. "The Sadrist movement first resorted to peaceful resistance, then to armed resistance, and finally to political resistance. This does not present any problem: every situation requires its own response," he told the al-Arabiya news channel.¹⁰¹

The Mahdi Army remained highly visible, but avoided engagements with coalition forces. They focused instead on patrolling the streets of Sadrist strongholds such as Sadr City and providing social services. Meanwhile, al-Sadr tried to instill greater order within his ranks. He created a "Mahdist Institute" to provide some training and rules for his militants. In addition, he formed a special internal policing unit charged with identifying corruption and insubordination.¹⁰²

Like other Shia religious figures, Muqtada al-Sadr refrained from explicitly endorsing political candidates, but individuals known to be his followers won 23 assembly seats in the January 2005 elections. For the December elections, the Sadrists formally entered the UIA block and increased their share to 32 seats. While a small fraction of the overall seats in the 275 member national assembly, it was sufficient for the Sadrists to have a major impact on national politics. In April 2006,

¹⁰¹ Cockburn, *Muqtada*, 165.

¹⁰² *Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?*, 13-14.

after Ibrahim al-Jaafari had been ousted as prime minister, the United States and SCIRI supported the nomination of a SCIRI member, Adel Abdul Mahdi, to be the next prime minister. Al-Sadr, however, let it be known to his followers that he did not support Mahdi's candidacy. He threatened to have his members back out of the governing alliance and to use his militia to create chaos in southern Iraq as he had in 2004. The tactic worked, and Nouri al-Maliki was elected prime minister as a compromise candidate.¹⁰³ The fight over the prime minister offers a perfect example of how the Sadrists leveraged their political clout with the threat of militia violence to exert influence in the fragile Iraqi state.

But the provision of infrastructure and social services remained an important third pillar the Sadrist movement's agenda. Rather than focus on the security services like SCIRI had in assuming control of the Ministry of Interior, the Sadrists sought the ministries that allowed him access to the provision of social services, such as the ministries of health and transportation. A Sadrist commander stated, "Muqtada's strategy is to rally the masses; that's why he wants to dominate service-oriented civilian ministries through which he can gain greater popular support since most Iraqis consider services their number one priority."¹⁰⁴

In the process of becoming a national political figure whose followers were part of the governing coalition, al-Sadr moved closer to Dawa and SCIRI. While he remained firm in his support for a unified Iraq, he demonstrated new flexibility on

¹⁰³ Robert F. Worth and Sabrina Tavernise, "Radical Cleric Rising as a Kingmaker in Iraqi Politics," *The New York Times*, February 16, 2006, sec. International / Middle East,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/16/international/middleeast/16sadr.html>.

¹⁰⁴ *Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?*, 14.

the issue of federalism and joined leaders of the other parties. A rising number of violent acts committed against the Shia population also gave the rival groups a common cause. In December, 2005, al-Sadr organized a conference that successfully forged a common platform among the Shia parties participating in the UIA on issues ranging from the withdrawal of foreign forces to the independence of Iraqi security forces.¹⁰⁵

His rising importance within Iraqi politics made him an increasingly prominent figure regionally as well. His combination of Shia theology and unabashed Iraqi nationalism made him a figure uniquely capable of diplomacy with both Iran and the Arab world. In early 2006, he went on a regional trip meeting with leaders in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Iran.¹⁰⁶ In fact, despite his family's history of enmity toward Iran, it was during this period that Muqtada al-Sadr was able to develop a new relationship with Tehran.

Iran and the Militias: A Shia Crescent?

Iran obviously has had an intimate and enduring relationship with SCIRI and Badr from their founding in 1982 through their over two decades of refuge in Iran. As has been referenced several times already in this paper, that support continued upon SCIRI/Badr's return to Iraq. SCIRI leadership regularly travel back and forth between Iraq and Tehran and many of their actions carry unmistakably Iranian fingerprints. Abdul Aziz al-Hakim's proposal for a southern Iraqi "super-region" immediately following a trip to Tehran was but one revealing case. In December,

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 16.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

2006, U.S. forces arrested four Iranian members of the elite Quds force in Baghdad at al-Hakim's residence.¹⁰⁷

Iranian involvement in Iraqi militias has taken the form of not only military support, but funding for social services and infrastructure investments, and political assistance, including attempts at electoral fraud. A smuggling network run by Abu Mustaf al-Sheibani—who seems to hold official positions in both Badr and the Iranian Quds force—has provided Iraqi militias with some of their most sophisticated and deadly weaponry. He is believed to have smuggled a particularly advanced and lethal form of explosive device known as explosively formed penetrators (EFPs).¹⁰⁸ These devices were reported to have brought down five U.S. helicopters in January, 2007 alone and been responsible for over 170 American casualties.¹⁰⁹ Meanwhile, Iran has channeled funding through the Bank Saderat to the Iraqi Shia militias for use by their social service components and even for infrastructure investment projects.¹¹⁰ Finally, just two weeks before the December, 2005 elections, U.S. forces intercepted a tanker crossing the border from Iran into Iraq filled with forged ballots.¹¹¹ Iranian support appears to be as sophisticated and multi-dimensional as are the militias' operations.

¹⁰⁷ James Glanz and Sabrina Tavernise, "U.S. Is Holding Iranians Seized in Raids in Iraq," *The New York Times*, December 25, 2006, sec. International / Middle East.

¹⁰⁸ Felter and Fishman, *Iranian Strategy in Iraq*, 37.

¹⁰⁹ Scott Conroy, "U.S. Sees New Weapon In Iraq: Iranian EFPs," February 11, 2007, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/02/11/iraq/main2458318.shtml>.

¹¹⁰ Forrest, "Coercive Engagement: A Security Analysis of Iranian Support to Iraqi Shia Militias," 113.

¹¹¹ Dexter Filkins, "Police Seize Forged Ballots Headed to Iraq From Iran," *The New York Times*, December 14, 2005, sec. International / Middle East.

While the history of enmity between the Sadrist movement and Tehran prevented a level of cooperation similar to what Iran enjoyed with SCIRI, both sides have seen a benefit in some level of cooperation. Iran historically has pursued a strategy in both Lebanon and Iraq of supporting multiple parties in a conflict.¹¹² Such a strategy not only allows Iran to “hedge its bets,” but increases its influence on all sides as it holds a unique ability to spark violence as well as to intervene as a mediator.¹¹³

The Sadrists, while having a strong popular base, were in need of funding and the benefits of institutional support. The Iranians were very willing to help by offering both money and training. “Iranian intelligence secretly recruited young people to train in Iran... they give volunteers \$300 to \$400 a month, train them to use weapons and to fight the Americans,” a Sadrist militant explained to Cockburn. “Iranian policy was to offer aid in the shape of financial support, modern weapons, and a good communication system. Once lured into accepting them, the recipient cannot do without them.”¹¹⁴

This apparent coordination between the Shia militias and Iran sparked considerable fear in the Sunni Arab world, with Jordanian King Abdullah publicly worrying about the formation of a “Shia crescent” extending from Tehran through Baghdad to Beirut. Many American analysts, having at first erroneously dismissed the militias as little more than warlords, now viewed them through the prism of simply Iranian surrogates. But such a view overlooks the severe limitations on Iraqi

¹¹² Felter and Fishman, *Iranian Strategy in Iraq*.

¹¹³ A clear example of this will be seen in the next section as Iran brokers a cease-fire after intense fighting in Basra in 2008.

¹¹⁴ Cockburn, *Muqtada*, 168.

militia partnership with Iran. Especially for SCIRI/Badr, the image of being close to Iran is a severe political liability. If it hoped to continue to stay in power through electoral success, it needed to prove to the Iraqi population that it serves Iraqi interests first. As a result, in 2007, SCIRI dropped the allusion to the Iranian revolution from its name, becoming the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI).¹¹⁵ Furthermore, it clarified that it looked to Ayatollah Ali Sistani, and not Iran's Ali Khamenei, as its source of religious emulation. The Sadrists, with their history of hostile rhetoric toward Iran and Iraqi groups who fled to Iran, have less to fear in terms of the political repercussions of some cooperation with Iran. Yet they still maintain some important ideological differences, including their intense Iraqi nationalism and adamant opposition to a semi-autonomous Shia region. Both SCIRI and the Sadrists are therefore engaged in a careful political balancing act, trying to simultaneously accrue the benefits that Iran can offer while trying to retain their legitimacy as independent Iraqi actors in the eyes of the population.

Sectarian Civil War: 2006-2007

The elections of 2005 sent a strong message to Iraq's Sunni community about the political future of Iraq. Boycotting the elections in January and the Constitutional referendum did little to slow down the Shia-dominated political process. Yet even when they participated in December 2005, their demographic minority meant that the Shia would continue to have their way in parliament. A

¹¹⁵ For simplicity's sake alone, this paper will continue to refer to the group as SCIRI. However, this name change may be an important indicator of the group's evolution as a political movement since its return to Iraq and participation in the Iraqi political process.

Jordanian-born jihadi, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi sought to exploit this frustration within the Sunni community to bring chaos to Iraq. Zarqawi, under the auspices of an organization he called “al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia” orchestrated an increasing number of violent attacks—often in the form of car bombs—targeting Shia communities. Zarqawi left little doubt that he hoped to spark a sectarian civil war. In a statement released in September of 2005, Zarqawi called for a “comprehensive war against the *Rawafidh* [i.e. Shia] all over Iraq, wherever and whenever they are found.”¹¹⁶

Badr responded to this escalating violence through its members embedded in the security forces. Several elite commando units became known for raiding Sunni homes in the middle of the night and abducting men they accused of participating in the insurgency or collaborating with Zarqawi. The Wolf Brigade became particularly famous/infamous for their aggressive actions and their operations are worthy of further exploration as they demonstrate the complexity of the relationships between the population, the militias, and the government.

The Wolf Brigade was founded in 2004 and was originally supported and funded by the U.S. government as it was seen as a highly effective police unit that could help stamp out remaining Saddam loyalists and thwart the burgeoning Sunni insurgency.¹¹⁷ Over the course of 2005, Badr leaders penetrated the unit and it gradually drove out Sunni members. As Badr took over the unit, its actions became more and more aggressive. The Brigade was accused of going well beyond insurgents and targeting any Sunni who was thought to have participated in

¹¹⁶ *The Next Iraqi War? Sectarianism and Civil Conflict*, 14.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

Saddam's regime. They were accused of brutal human rights violations including widespread torture and extrajudicial assassinations. In November, 2005, U.S. soldiers uncovered an underground bomb shelter in an Interior Ministry building in which 175 Sunnis had been secretly held captive, tortured, and killed.¹¹⁸

While Wolf Brigade leaders did not admit to the most egregious abuses, at the same time they were not ashamed of their aggressive tactics. A senior Wolf Brigade leader said, "Human rights (workers) used to come and complain about how we treat the prisoners, but they never asked how the terrorists treated the people they killed... If it was your sister who was raped and killed, how would you deal with it?"¹¹⁹ In fact, they even produced a television program called "Terrorists in the Grip of Justice" in which they recorded and broadcast their interrogations. The show became the most widely watched in Iraq. While Baghdad's Sunnis were terrified at the sight of a squad car with the Wolf Brigade logo, the unit was adored by much of the Shia population. When the Wolf Brigade appears in Shia neighborhoods, "Drivers honk, children cheer and street vendors ply them with falafel and bottles of water," reports journalist Hannah Alam. One young Iraqi Shia told her, "Every time I see them in the street, I feel safe...I feel that we have a country with a government."¹²⁰

While sectarian violence had escalated steadily over the course of 2005, Zarqawi's attack on the al-Askari Mosque in Samarra on February 22, 2006 was a

¹¹⁸ Ellen Knickmeyer and Omar Fekeiki, "Sunnis Tell of Abuse at Secret Iraqi Prison," *The Washington Post*.

¹¹⁹ Hannah Alam, "Wolf Brigade Most Loved and Feared of Iraqi Security Forces," *Knight Ridder Newspapers*, May 21, 2005.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

tipping point that sent Iraq into an all out ethno-sectarian civil war. The bombing caused no injuries, but the damage to one of Shia Islam's holiest sites, including the collapse of its famous golden dome, was the last straw for much of Iraq's Shia population. Leaders of all the major Shia groups urged calm in the days that followed, but their words were ineffective. As many as 1,300 Iraqis died in the days following the attack. According to a Mahdi Army commander named Sheikh Ali, "We were under orders to stay calm, but we couldn't control the angry crowds of young men who went to the Husseiniyas shouting 'Do Something! We want to go to Samarra! Give us guns!'"¹²¹

It was at this point that the Mahdi Army became far more involved in sectarian operations. More than just hunting down individual Sunnis, the Mahdi Army worked to take over neighborhoods, evicting Sunnis through violence and intimidation. While the Mahdi Army was still highly fragmented, its operations had organization and logic, using urban warfare tactics to gain control of neighborhoods, and then using the neighborhoods under its control to further expand its operations outward. According to a Sadrist militant,

"The Mahdi Army's effort to conquer neighborhoods is highly sophisticated. It presents itself as protector of Shiites and recruits local residents to assist in this task. In so doing, it gains support from people who possess considerable information—on where the Sunnis and Shiites are, on who backs and who opposes the Sadrists and so forth."¹²²

The Mahdi Army engaged in sectarian assassinations, often targeting prominent middle class Sunnis such as merchants, doctors, and businessmen, to

¹²¹ Cockburn, *Muqtada*, 180.

¹²² *Iraq's Civil War, the Sadrists, and the Surge*, Middle East Report (International Crisis Group, February 7, 2008), 3.

instill fear and encourage the remaining Sunni residents to “voluntarily” relocate. The Sadrists would set up local offices, provide services and security for the Shia residents, and then begin targeting adjacent neighborhoods.¹²³

Violence was the major source of funding for the Mahdi Army. Local militia units would sell their protective services to businesses, kidnap for ransoms, or simply steal from Sunnis they abducted, tortured, and/or killed. The Mahdi Army not only did not pay militia members, they actually instituted a reverse payroll, whereby each member was required to donate funds acquired through militia activities to the Sadrists offices which would intern use the money to help displaced Shia families and support the survivors of deceased fighters.¹²⁴

The consequences of the sectarian violence were catastrophic with thousands of Iraqis killed every month and nearly five million displaced. However, the chaos from 2006 to 2007 helped the Shia militias gain even greater legitimacy among the population. As the state was unable to provide protection, Iraq’s Shias turned to the militias as the only source of security and economic assistance. While in 2003, the two major militias had clearly defined constituencies, their indispensable role for many Shia during the sectarian conflict allowed them to expand their bases of support to larger segments of the population.¹²⁵

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 6-7.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 7.

V. THE FALL OF THE MILITIAS

Through the first half of 2007, the Shia militias appeared to be the most dominant forces in Iraqi politics. They had seized most of Baghdad, provided their own security and social services within Shia neighborhoods, dominated national politics, and controlled many key ministries. But their success had a paradoxical consequence: as the security and economic situation improved for Iraq's Shia, the population's need for the militias' protection and services diminished. At the same time, the population grew less tolerant of the costs that accompanied militia rule such as corruption, violence, and religious fundamentalism. The militias began to lose public support as their organizations fragmented, they overplayed their hand in both brutality and religious fervor, and the Iraqi state began to reassert itself.

Fragmentation and Loss of Command

As was previously mentioned, the Sadrists' developing relationship with Iran brought in new resources, equipment, and opportunities for training. However, Iranian influence also challenged Muqtada al-Sadr's ability to maintain leadership and control over his forces. He had rarely provided funding to Mahdi Army militants, counting on them to find their own revenue sources through their violent activity, and even asking them to provide contributions to the Sadrist social services network. As Iranian agents began offering funding to Mahdi Army members, it is not surprising that their loyalties may have begun to change and they became less willing to obey al-Sadr's instructions.

The sheer brutality of the sectarian warfare was another contributing factor to the splintering of Mahdi Army forces. As Baghdad became an even more lawless environment over the course of 2006 and early 2007, brutality and gangsterism became the norm. While at first the Mahdi army units had exploited the Sunnis to exact violence and extort money, they increasingly turned on each other and even on the Shia population that they were supposedly responsible for protecting. A Mahdi Army commander told the International Crisis Group that “Although Shiites needed the Mahdi Army as a result of the army’s and police’s weakness, the militia became an instrument of personal interests. Our leaders’ inability to control their fighters led to increasing divisions.”¹²⁶

A Shiite politician not affiliated with the Sadrist movement similarly described to *The New York Times* in late 2006 that the Sadrists “are really facing a problem... They formed a militia. It expanded. Now each one is a cell. This is a dangerous thing.”¹²⁷

Muqtada al-Sadr responded with efforts to crack down on renegade activity within his forces and to establish a stricter sense of organization and procedure. He formed the “Mahdist Institute” to provide commanders and militants with uniform training and guidelines for conduct, and he created an internal police force charged with rooting out criminal activity within his organization. The internal policing unit had direct lines of communication with al-Sadr and reported any improper activity to him. Militants found guilty of corruption, however, faced relatively light

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹²⁷ Sabrina Tavernise, “Influence Rises but Base Frays for Iraqi Cleric,” *The New York Times*, November 13, 2006, sec. International / Middle East.

punishment, such as having their heads shaved or being reassigned to garbage collection duties.¹²⁸ Muqtada al-Sadr also borrowed began to fire commanders on a regular basis (a tactic that he borrowed from Saddam) with the purposes of both weeding out insubordinates as well as preventing militants from developing loyalties to their commanders that overrode their loyalties to the movement. This tactic had limited effect. As one commander noted, "Even when Sadr fires the brigade commanders, their soldiers follow them and not Sadr."¹²⁹

In February 2007, rumors began circulating that Muqtada al-Sadr had fled to Iran in anticipation of the "surge" of U.S. troops into Baghdad.¹³⁰ The combination of al-Sadr's absence and increasing pressure by U.S. forces caused the command and control of the Mahdi Army to deteriorate even further over the course of 2007. The Mahdi Army's leadership problem came to a head in August 2007 when its units engaged in fighting with Badr forces in Karbala. While al-Sadr had repeatedly issued calls for calm in the holy city, Mahdi Army units continued to engage Badr forces defending the holy sites.¹³¹ The violence resulted in considerable damage to the holy sites, causing popular anger against both groups, but especially the Mahdi Army, which was seen as the instigator. Muqtada al-Sadr responded to the incident in a way that surprised everyone. While claiming that those who caused the violence in Karbala were not truly his followers, he issued a cease-fire for the Mahdi Army, even banning attacks on coalition forces.

¹²⁸ *Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?*, 13-14.

¹²⁹ Solomon Moore, "Iraqi Militias Seen as Spinning Out of Control," *Los Angeles Times*, September 12, 2006.

¹³⁰ Laura Clout, "Moqtada al-Sadr 'flees to Iran'," *The Daily Telegraph*, February 14, 2007.

¹³¹ *Iraq's Civil War, the Sadrists, and the Surge*, 17.

Overplaying Their Hand

An additional consequence of militia fragmentation was increased abuse of the civilian population. While Iraq's Shia population had rallied around the militias in the face of Sunni attacks, as that threat diminished, so did their tolerance for militia rule. And as described above, as the militias fragmented, they engaged in increasingly predatory activity upon their own population. A Baghdad merchant complained to the International Crisis Group, "Their priority has become to seize war spoils from their victims... Now, many people fear the Mahdi Army in the same way they feared the Baathists under Saddam Hussein."¹³² With the increased U.S. military presence, Baghdad Shia began turning in militants in their neighborhood. This often sparked reprisal attacks against the population, only furthering the growing rift between the militias and the population.¹³³

Iraq's Shia population also grew fed up with corrupt governance in the southern governorates and municipalities that were run by SCIRI or the Sadrists. The militias had provided needed resources and services in the initial years following the occupation when the Iraqi government was dysfunctional. But as time passed, the incompetence of the militias' governance became apparent and popular resentment grew. The militias often doled out administrative positions to relatives or as political favors, resulting in local leadership that was often unqualified and unfit for the job. Meanwhile corruption was rampant and Shias actually began to

¹³² Ibid., 9.

¹³³ Ibid., 10.

hope that the central government could play a more effective role in straightening out local affairs.¹³⁴

Finally, the militias overreached in their attempts to impose strict Shia Islamic law upon the population. While Islamic law or “sharia” was never officially incorporated into law, both Badr and the Mahdi army tried to enforce more conservative cultural and social rules in areas that were under their control. In Basra, which was at different times and in different areas controlled by Badr, the Mahdi Army, and a Sadrist offshoot called “Fadhilla,” alcohol vendors were shut down, brothels were closed, and women were threatened and intimidated into wearing the veil.¹³⁵ In more extreme cases, grenades were thrown into a wedding party where music was being played and some women were even reportedly killed for failing to cover their hair.¹³⁶

Re-emergence of the State

As the Shia militias began to fragment and overreach, the Iraqi state, backed by the “surge” of U.S. troops into Baghdad, was able to reassert itself and position itself as a preferable alternative to the militias as a provider of security and social services. The influx of U.S. forces inhibited the ability of Mahdi Army units to continue to operate freely in Baghdad. Having learned from Najaf in 2004 that his militants could not successfully confront U.S. forces, Muqtada al-Sadr opted for a

¹³⁴ Doreen Khoury, *The 2009 Iraqi Provincial Elections*, Middle East (Heinrich Boll Stiftung, 2009), 1.

¹³⁵ Edward Wong, “Shiite Morality Is Taking Hold in Iraq Oil Port,” *The New York Times*, July 7, 2005, sec. International / Middle East.

¹³⁶ Leila Fadel, “Basra Sings Again as Iraqi Army Patrols Streets,” *McClatchy Newspapers*, May 24, 2008.

strategy of laying low, perhaps hoping to wait out the American presence and reemerge when they eventually withdrew.

However, Muqtada al-Sadr seems to have underestimated the damage that U.S. and Iraqi forces could do to his movement even during a period of cease-fire. In fact, the United States took advantage of the diminished threat of retaliation from the Mahdi Army to detain both loyal and renegade Sadrists (which they began calling “Special Groups”). The new security walls and checkpoints restricted Sadrists’ movement and choked off many of their revenue streams.¹³⁷ Rather than allowing al-Sadr to consolidate his forces, Mahdi commanders’ frustration with their inability to respond to the American crackdown only furthered the militia’s fragmentation. The population of the Iraqi neighborhoods that the Mahdi Army had conquered throughout 2006 and early 2007 remained predominantly Shia, but the Sadrists were forced to give up control of all but their traditional strongholds such as Sadr City.¹³⁸

The biggest reversal of fortune for the Sadrists came in 2008 when Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, encouraged by the success of U.S. forces in Baghdad, decided to take matters into his own hands in Iraq’s south. While Maliki had come to power as a result of Muqtada al-Sadr’s backing in 2006, he increasingly relied on SCIRI for support in passing his agenda through the Iraqi national assembly. But in Basra, the commercial hub of Southern Iraq, SCIRI/Badr forces were fighting with the Mahdi Army as well as the militia of a third Shia party, al-Fadhilia, over control of the city’s ports, oil facilities, and smuggling networks. By deploying his forces

¹³⁷ *Iraq's Civil War, the Sadrists, and the Surge*, 19.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

against the Sadrists in Basra, Maliki could deliver a favor for his SCIRI allies, promote himself as a strong leader capable of commanding the Iraqi army, and even win some support from Sunnis and Kurds who questioned his willingness to confront the Shia militias.¹³⁹

On March 25, 2008, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) launched an offensive on Basra, focusing on Mahdi Army and al-Fadhila militants. The United States, surprised by al-Maliki's rushed attack, nevertheless provided air and intelligence support. In the early days of battle, over 1,300 ISF members deserted, refusing to fire upon fellow Shia.¹⁴⁰ Meanwhile, Sadrist militants responded in Baghdad where mortars and rockets were fired at the Green Zone from Sadr City. These two events demonstrated that despite its fragmentation over the previous year, the Mahdi Army still maintained a presence within Iraq's security forces and was capable of orchestrating serious attacks.

Prime Minister al-Maliki however was able to employ new tactics of his own. During the first week of battle, he engaged tribal leaders around Basra and recruited 2,500 new fighters to boost ISF forces. As the U.S. forces had done in Baghdad, the ISF took advantage of a cease-fire al-Sadr had called on March 30th (with encouragement from the Iranians) to cordon off Sadrist neighborhoods in Basra and limit the militia's mobility and communications. Iraqi forces took over the main Sadrist office and prohibited Sadrist Imams from holding Friday prayers.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Marissa Cochrane, *The Battle for Basra*, Iraq Report (Institute for the Study of War, May 2008), 7.

¹⁴⁰ Stephen Farrell and Qais Mizher, "Iraq Dismisses 1,300 After Basra Offensive," *The New York Times*, April 14, 2008, sec. International / Middle East, 9.

¹⁴¹ Cochrane, *The Battle for Basra*, 11.

Meanwhile, the Iraqi government took several steps to try to win over the loyalty of Basra's population—a population that had already grown tired of militia violence and corruption. It provided humanitarian aid to citizens who had been harmed by the fighting, including 5.5 tons of medical supplies, 400,000 liters of water, and nearly 80,000 meals. Furthermore, it announced plans to invest \$100 million in Basra city services and create 25,000 new jobs.¹⁴²

Prime Minister al-Maliki followed his success in Basra with a joint operation with U.S. forces in Baghdad's Sadr City in August 2008. At this point, the Mahdi Army was either unable or unwilling to mount effective resistance, and many of the residents even welcomed the arrival of Iraqi state forces. "It is good for our security," one Basra resident told *The New York Times*, "The last few months have been very bad because of the bullets and rockets everywhere. It wasn't easy for us."¹⁴³

Part of what may have made the operations in Sadr City relatively easy was a shift in Muqtada al-Sadr's political strategy that seems to have begun with his decision to leave Iraq in early 2007 and culminated with an announcement on June 13, 2008 formally dividing his movement between civilian and military operations. The military wing would be the smaller unit, made up of only elite groups of experienced fighters, and would only fight against occupation forces. Most of al-Sadr's attention, however, would now focus on the civilian wing, consisting of

¹⁴² Ibid., 13.

¹⁴³ Michael R. Gordon and Stephen Farrell, "Iraqi Troops Take Charge of Sadr City in Swift Push," *The New York Times*, May 21, 2008, sec. International / Middle East.

political, religious, and social services.¹⁴⁴ To a large degree, the Sadrist movement had already been divided in this way, with the network of imams and social services offices (“Offices of the Second Martyr”) representing the civilian wing and the Mahdi Army itself representing the military side. However, the importance of this announcement is in the much greater weight al-Sadr placed on the civilian as opposed to the military aspect. He seemed to realize that the use of force was both alienating his political base and was no longer a credible threat that he could use to bolster his influence in Baghdad. By returning to his religious studies and redoubling his efforts to provide social services, Muqtada al-Sadr seems to be aligning his movement closer to that of his father’s whereby his influence is maintained almost exclusively through social and religious legitimacy and not through the use or threat of violence.

SCIRI hoped that the government’s crackdown on the Sadrists would be to their advantage, but al-Maliki’s remarkable successes in both Basra and Sadr City posed the group with new challenges. While their rival had been largely eliminated, it was the Iraqi government, not SCIRI, who gained the population’s support. By reaching out to Shia tribal councils, al-Maliki was expanding his base of Shia political support in south independent of SCIRI. This was clearly a threat to SCIRI’s ability to influence the central government and the party reacted angrily to these new alliances, calling the tribal councils “illegal and unconstitutional.”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Anthony Cordesman and Jose Ramos, *Sadr and the Mahdi Army: Evolution, Capabilities, and a New Direction* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 8, 2008), 23.

¹⁴⁵ Duss and Juul, *The Fractured Shia of Iraq*, 14.

On January 31, 2009, Iraq held local elections in 14 out of its 18 provinces. Unlike the parliamentary elections of 2005, the elections were held using an “open list” system. This meant that Iraqis would vote for both a political party and individuals within that party, as opposed to simply voting for a pre-established list of candidates. SCIRI could thus not rely on using behind-the-scenes politics to put its members on the top of a Shia coalition. Instead, it had to convince Iraqis to vote specifically for its members. Furthermore, it meant that SCIRI would be competing directly against al-Maliki and his supporters.

In a shrewd political move, al-Maliki renamed his Da’wa Party-based coalition the “State of Law” party, moving away from an emphasis on sectarianism and religion and incorporating some of the Sadrist’s nationalist rhetoric. In this way it was able to both distinguish itself from SCIRI and attract disgruntled former al-Sadr supporters. Furthermore, al-Maliki campaigned on his successful military operations, increases in security and the provision of services, and the recent signature of the Status of Forces Agreement with the United States that set a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign troops.¹⁴⁶ Due to the ballot format and the platforms of the competing parties, the 2009 provincial elections was in many ways set up to be a referendum of Shia support for the Iraqi government versus the militia movements.

Interpreted as such, the election results were a dramatic victory for the Iraqi state. “State of Law” candidates won in most major cities, including Baghdad, Basra,

¹⁴⁶ Doreen Khoury, *The 2009 Iraqi Provincial Elections*, Middle East Office (Heinrich-Boll-Stiftung, 2009), 1.

Najaf, Maysan, and Diwaniyeh. One Iraqi explained his vote for al-Maliki's party saying, "He brought us security... We can venture out freely now even at night."¹⁴⁷

SCIRI, meanwhile, lost control of many councils it previously dominated, and was reduced to only a handful of seats in Baghdad, Basra, and Karbala. The Sadrists also suffered heavy losses, giving up seats in almost every province and usually coming in third behind both al-Maliki's followers and SCIRI.¹⁴⁸ Nearly six years after the overthrow of Saddam, the Iraqi government was finally proving capable of providing the population with security and services expected of a state. In doing so, it exposed the weaknesses of the Shia militias: their corrupt governance, excessive brutality and imposition of strict religious mores. Iraq's Shia had supported the resistance movements under the repressive Baathist regime and had flocked to the militias in the chaos and violence that followed the U.S. invasion. But when presented the choice between militia rule and a just and effective Iraqi state, the preference of Iraq's Shia population was clear.

¹⁴⁷ Sam Dagher and Steven Lee Myers, "Disparate Iraqis Vote for Stability and Security," *The New York Times*, February 3, 2009, sec. International / Middle East.

¹⁴⁸ Khoury, *The 2009 Iraqi Provincial Elections*, 4.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

By the beginning of 2009, the Mahdi Army was fragmented, al-Sadr was in hiding in Iran, and his followers had largely lost their positions in both local governments and in the national bureaucracy. He may be hoping that by attaining the status of a cleric (“mujtahid”) through his studies in Qom, he will eventually be able to return to Iraq after the American forces have left, and remobilize his base with an added dimension of religious legitimacy. But whether his base will continue to support him upon his return, or whether their political and religious loyalties have permanently shifted elsewhere remains to be seen.

SCIRI seems to be in a better position than the Sadrists as their members are still in the bureaucracy and security services and they remain (at least for now) the largest political party in the national government. But open-list elections have exposed its lack of mass support among Iraqi Shia, and with its members so tightly incorporated into the Iraqi security services, it is unknown to what degree it still commands the loyalty of its militants. Is Badr still an independent militia within the security forces that could at some point turn on the government, or have its fighters and commanders become irreversibly integrated into the state?

While the ultimate fate of these militias remains to be seen, their dramatic rise after the fall of Saddam should cause analysts and policymakers to expand and refine their conception of militia behavior and motives. U.S. policymakers initially viewed the Mahdi Army as if it were a warlord-type militia. They focused on its criminal enterprises, assumed it had little popular support, and believed that if confronted militarily, it would be defeated. This outlook had backing in the

academic literature: the majority of research on militias has focused on the warlord sub-group and emphasized their brutality, their economic motives, and lack of support among population.

Other scholars, as was noted in Chapter 1, noticed that some militias did in fact provide social benefits. In the absence of the state, these militias served as alternate forms of governance. These militias are still primarily driven by economic motives and are often dependent on the leadership of a single charismatic leader. Nevertheless, this framework comes much closer than warlordism to describing the behavior of Shia militias in Iraq.

However, this paper has argued that both the Mahdi Army and SCIRI/Badr go beyond “alternative governance” militias in terms of the extent of their legitimacy with the population, their pursuit of social and political agendas, and their participation in the institutions of the state. The Sadrist movement has substantial popular support among lower-class Iraqi Shia that dates back nearly a half century to the movements led by Muhammed Baqir al-Sadr and Muhammed Sadiq al-Sadr. More than just a militia, it employed a sophisticated network of religious leaders that bypassed the official clerical hierarchy and operated a system of social service offices that provided funds, food, and even judicial rulings when the Iraqi state did not. Muqtada al-Sadr was able to translate the combination of popular support and militia force into significant political clout, holding the second largest block of seats in the governing coalition after the December 2005 elections and effectively delivering the premiership to Nouri al-Maliki in the spring of 2006.

SCIRI/Badr had considerably less popular support among Iraq's Shia masses, though it had a core base of supporters in the over one million Iraqi Shia who sought refuge in Iran from the 1980s until the fall of Saddam. What SCIRI lacked in mass appeal, it made up for with the status, skill, and relationships of its followers. It drew support from the Shia middle classes, its fighters had a relatively high level of military training, either from previous service in the Iraqi Army or through training by Iran, and it had close ties to the clerical elite in Najaf from whom its leaders were able to draw greater legitimacy through association. Furthermore it received considerable training and support from Iran and developed a strong relationship with the United States prior to and during the occupation. These relationships ensured that SCIRI members had a seat at the table for the highest level political decisions from the beginning. SCIRI was able to use its close relationship with Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani to become the largest party in Iraq's governing coalition, from which it won control of the Interior Ministry and recruited Badr fighters into the state's security services.

The distinction of Iraq's Shia militias from the warlord or alternative governance frameworks has important ramifications for how states and the international community develop policy to confront militias. Direct military confrontation, as one might use against a warlord, may be necessary to deny the militia space in which it can operate freely, but it will likely not be sufficient against a militia that is linked to a sociopolitical movement as there is still a mobilized popular base that supports the militia's/movement's cause. Saddam Hussein's assassinations of the earlier Sadr's were major setbacks for the movement, but the

discontent among lower-class Shia remained and the movement repeatedly re-emerged when a new opportunity presented itself.

Another strategy often used in confronting militias, termed “Disarm, Demobilize, Reintegrate” focuses on encouraging militia members to give up their weapons, withdraw from the militia and reintegrate themselves into society. However this process is very challenging when confronting a militia, such as Badr, that has so deeply penetrated the state’s security structure. Their militants bear arms legally, wear the official uniforms of the state, and may show no outward signs of being a part of the militia. Determining who has loyalties to a militia and who does would be a seemingly impossible task and likely counterproductive. Even if you could identify militia members, firing them from the security forces would likely produce the same violent consequences as did the decision to disband the Iraqi Army.

Fortunately, the Iraq case also points to some fundamental weaknesses in the militia even when linked to a sociopolitical movement. While these groups are able to build strong support among the population, their extreme social views and proclivity towards violence tests the tolerance of the local population. In the case of both the Mahdi Army and Badr, their brand of fundamentalist Shia Islam was far stricter than what most Iraqi Shias preferred. They were willing to tolerate it only when militia rule was preferable to the fear of Sunni attacks. Meanwhile, as their subordinate units learned to profit from violence and enjoyed the social authority that their militia positions provided to them, they overreached, began to pray upon the population, and gradually lost their support.

A common thread among all types of militias is that their success relies upon the failure or at least absence of the state. If the state is able to reassert itself, provide services, competent governance, and most importantly security, popular support for the militia is likely to erode. The use of force will often be necessary to deny the militias space in which they can exert unchallenged authority. However, to be successful against militias, such as those in Iraq, that have developed substantial legitimacy based on their ability to provide security and social services, force will need to be supplemented with more comprehensive efforts to extend effective state institutions. The case of Iraq over the past two years has shown that when given the choice between militia rule and competent state governance, populations will choose the latter.

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