

JIC Assessment, 16 March 2006

IRAQ: MUQTADA AL SADR

*This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 15 March 2006.*

**Key Judgements**

- I. Muqtada al Sadr emerged from the December 2005 election with greater political clout. Al Jaafari depended on Sadr for his nomination as Prime Minister. Sadr's increasing importance has alarmed other Iraqi politicians and Shia religious leaders [...] Sadr has tried at times to present himself as bridging the Sunni-Shia divide, but Sunnis are sceptical of the extent to which they share common ground with him.
- II. Sadr's overriding priority is to increase his own power. He probably wants to be a leading Shia religious authority, above party politics but able to influence key government policies. He has a genuine desire to see (and get credit for) improvements in the quality of life for his core constituency; his declared goals also include: maintaining the unity of Iraq and delaying federalism; ensuring the centrality of religion in politics; and securing a timetable for the departure of "occupation forces".
- III. Sadr remains an opportunist, currently committed to the political process because he thinks it can convert his grassroots popularity into power. His commitment is not guaranteed in the absence of continued success. Sistani remains a moderating influence, but in the worst case, if Sadr felt personally threatened he might order a return to violence on a large scale.
- IV. The bulk of Jaish al Mahdi (JAM) militia members are loyal to Sadr's directives, but a minority are under no effective control, and continue to attack the Multinational Forces (MNF). Sadr's degree of control decreases with distance from his base near Najaf.
- V. Sadr has sought international links to bolster his prestige in Iraq and gain funding. In his dealings with regional Sunni Arab neighbours Sadr plays up his Iraqi Arab nationalist credentials, presenting himself as a counter-weight to Iranian influence and a force for unity inside Iraq. The Iranians provide support to the JAM, but find Sadr difficult to deal with: he does not take direction from them.
- VI. Sadr has consistently refused direct contact with Coalition representatives: contact with the "occupiers" would damage his credibility with his supporters. This is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

## IRAQ: MUQTADA AL SADR

*At the request of the Senior Officials Group on Iraq, we look at the background, motives, and objectives of Shia cleric Muqtada al Sadr.*

### Muqtada's journey

1. Muqtada al Sadr has come a long way quickly. After the assassination of his father and brothers, he unexpectedly assumed the mantle of the revered Sadr lineage. After Saddam's overthrow, Sadr established himself as a fierce opponent of the "occupation" and, initially, of the associated political process, arguing for a strong unified Iraq. The violent Shia uprisings of 2004 gave him national and international prominence. His uncompromising nationalist and anti-Coalition stance has maintained his popular support and enabled him to build a political base. The "Office of the Martyr Sadr" (OMS) was able to negotiate Ministerial positions in the Interim Government, and became formally aligned with the Shia United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) in the run-up to the December 2005 election. Sadr secured 30 seats (more than either of his Shia rivals SCIRI and Dawa), making the OMS a significant force in the Council of Representatives, and in a strong position to demand significant influence in the next Cabinet.

#### Muqtada al Sadr's family history

- Muqtada al Sadr was probably born in 1973, descendant of a long line of distinguished senior Shia clerics, known for political activism. He became head of the Sadr family at the age of 25.
- Muqtada's father-in-law was Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al Sadr, who promoted Iraqi Islamic political activism in the 1970s (and founded the Dawa Party). He was assassinated in 1980.
- His father was Grand Ayatollah Sadiq al Sadr. He was jailed under Saddam, and assassinated in 1999, probably by the regime, following a Shia uprising.

### His fractious organisation

2. Sadr is not the leader of a political party in the traditional sense. He is the head of a grassroots social organisation, with a network of offices around the country, under the banner of OMS. Sadr receives revenue from the network of Shia mosques under his control, and from some foreign governments, although details are obscure. His personal leadership is important to OMS cohesion, and his assassination would lead to fragmentation – he has no obvious successor. We judge Sadr sees the OMS as a way to build his support base, while delivering education and social services to his supporters (some Sadrists have drawn parallels between OMS and Hamas in the Palestinian territories). OMS is influential in a number of local and governorate councils, especially Maysan. Sadr is planning to open more OMS offices overseas, including in Iran. [...] Central direction and coordination between offices is improving but remains patchy.

3. The OMS's "armed wing", the Jaish al Mahdi (JAM), is a loosely-coordinated militia whose members claim affiliation to, and take guidance from, Muqtada al Sadr. The threat of JAM violence, whether officially directed by Sadr or not, affords him significant political leverage. We judge the bulk of JAM members are loyal to Sadr's directives (for example, most adhered to his call for non-violence in the aftermath of last month's Samarra mosque attack). But a minority of members (or ex-members) are under no effective control, and continue to attack the Multinational Forces (MNF) in direct contravention of Sadr's instructions. The degree of control decreases with distance from Sadr's base in Kufa, near Najaf. Basra and Maysan are of particular concern, where significant numbers of rogue JAM elements are involved in attacks on MNF and skirmishes with Badr-inclined police. In the Sadr strongholds of East Baghdad JAM members now assert

that they, not the Iraqi Security Forces, will deliver security; many were involved in reprisal attacks against Sunnis following the Samarra mosque attack. [...] Sadr has periodically said he will disband the JAM, but it is a fundamental part of his power base and we judge he has no genuine intention to do so.

## Relations with others

4. Iraq's politicians have a generally fraught relationship with Sadr. Rivalry is particularly intense with SCIRI – there is historical animosity between Sadr's family and that of SCIRI leader al Hakim. Violence between JAM and the SCIRI-affiliated Badr Organisation has been commonplace in southern Iraq. This is likely to increase as the provincial elections, due later this year, approach. Sadr's emergence from the December 2005 election with greater political clout in the Shia UIA has caused alarm. Senior Shia leaders have expressed deep concern about Sadr's political demands and the potential for further JAM violence. [...] Sistani remains a moderating influence on Sadr.

5. Sadr is in contact with some Sunni politicians [...] although relations are probably not as strong as Sadr would like to think. For tactical reasons, Sadr has made common cause with Sunnis on some issues: for example opposition to federalism, and foreign interference (whether from the Coalition or regional states such as Iran). In summer 2005, a Sadr representative told Sunni insurgent groups that Sadr stood alongside those engaged in "honourable jihad". However, sectarian tensions have risen in the last few months, especially following the Samarra mosque attack; Sunnis blame JAM (as well as Badr elements in the police) for many of the subsequent reprisals. Sadr's commitment to de-Baathification has also led Sunnis to be sceptical of the extent to which they share any common ground with him.

## Sadr on the international stage

6. Sadr's rising political fortunes have brought him greater international attention. He has sought international links to bolster his prestige in Iraq and gain funding, but he needs to keep enough distance from foreign powers to maintain his nationalist credentials. He has so far balanced these pressures carefully. He has consistently refused direct contact with Coalition representatives: contact with the "occupiers" would damage his credibility with his supporters. We judge this will not change in the foreseeable future. HMG has contact with some of his senior officials, but it is not clear whether they pass messages accurately to Sadr or are able to represent his views faithfully.

7. Sadr's ties with Iran have been particularly complex. The Iranians support Sadr (among other Shia groups): [...]. However [...] we judge that Sadr does not take direction from Iran. [...]

8. Iraq's Sunni neighbours are concerned about Iranian influence in Iraq. Sadr plays up his Iraqi Arab nationalist credentials in his dealings with them, presenting himself as a counter-weight to Iranian influence and a force for unity inside Iraq. [...]

## Where's he going, and who will follow him?

9. We judge Sadr probably aspires to be a leading Shia religious authority in Iraq, above day-to-day party politics and government, but able to influence key government policies. We judge that Sadr's overriding priority is to build his own power. He has a genuine desire to see (and get credit for)

improvements in the quality of life for his core constituency, among Iraq's disenfranchised poor. Beyond this, he has declared a number of strategic goals, set out in his "Charter of Honour" manifesto launched in the run-up to December's election: to maintain the unity of Iraq and delay federalism; to ensure the centrality of religion in politics; and to secure a timetable for the departure of "occupation forces". Jaafari and Ahmad Chalabi have reportedly signed up to the Charter, but others (including SCIRI) have not.

10. Sadr has demonstrated growing political agility, but he has little capacity for details and often acts on instinct. He keeps his options open, and often avoids difficult decisions altogether, attempting to please all sides by maintaining ambiguous positions [...]. However infuriating to others, these tactics have been strikingly successful to date; Sadr has probably surprised himself by the progress he has made.

11. Sadr remains an opportunist. We judge he is currently committed to the political process because he thinks it can convert his grassroots popularity into power. His commitment is not guaranteed in the absence of continued success. He is unpredictable, and a number of pressures could cause his tactics to change. His political rivals may successfully marginalise him, or another major sectarian attack could spark violence which he and other leaders cannot control. In the worst case, if Sadr felt personally threatened, he might order a return to violence on a large scale.