

JIC Assessment, 12 July 2007

MUQTADA AL-SADR: KEEPING HIS DISTANCE

This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 11 July 2007.

Key Judgements

- I. Muqtada al-Sadr's leadership of his movement will not face serious challenge: he has no obvious successor. But his followers are likely to remain fractious: deep seated animosities have been managed rather than resolved. As a political force, Sadristism will probably not survive Sadr himself: [...]
- II. Sadr's authority stems from his iconic family name backed by strong Shia populist support. He wants to be a powerful figure among the Shia in particular and across Iraq more generally: he makes little distinction between political and religious power. His immediate priority is to secure (and get credit for) a timetable for the departure of "occupation forces".
- III. Backed by his Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) militia, Sadr continues to exercise considerable political clout in Baghdad and across large parts of the south. His relations with Prime Minister Maliki have soured. Although withdrawing from government, Sadr wishes to remain politically engaged. [...] Sadr, like others, is positioning himself to benefit from any change of Prime Minister.
- IV. Sadr's relationship with other Shia political figures is equally fraught. Rivalry is particularly intense with ISCI, reinforced by a long standing dynastic feud. But neither side appears willing yet to risk Shia unity by forming an alternative alliance. ISCI and others in the Shia United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) are also nervous of Sadr's ability to mobilise mass support to generate widespread disorder.
- V. Sadr's relationship with Iran is complex. He has spent much of this year in hiding in Iran [...] He also needs Iranian material support. But he does not trust the Iranians, who also back his main Shia rivals and opponents within his own movement. Sadr and the Iranians are likely to remain uncomfortable partners.
- VI. Sadr uses violence as a political tool. He probably also has to accept some JAM violence to maintain its cohesion and his popular support. However, Sadr will try to calibrate anti-Coalition attacks and prevent any return to large-scale sectarian conflict. To date he has intervened quickly to prevent intra-Shia violence from escalating: if he cannot prevent it, he will try to exploit it.
- VII. Sadr has consistently refused direct contact with Coalition representatives, sacking or sidelining advisors rumoured to have talked to the Multinational forces (MNF). This is likely to continue, at least so long as there is no timetable for MNF withdrawal.

Assessment Base [...]

MUQTADA AL-SADR: KEEPING HIS DISTANCE

This paper, commissioned by the FCO, examines the current internal dynamics within Sadr's movement, his political strategy and attitude towards violence. We last looked at Sadr in March 2006, [JIC assessment of 16 March 2006] refers.

A fractious movement

1. We judge that Muqtada al-Sadr's retreat to Iran in January was prompted by a fear of detention by the Coalition (as part of the Baghdad Security Plan (BSP)) or assassination by Sunni extremists. Sadr's fear for his life has not subsided. [...] the growing influence of rival factions in his movement, rumours of plots to replace him and friction with the Iranians probably combined to force his return to Iraq in late May. Since his return, Sadr has made concerted attempts to re-organise and unify both his political organisation – the Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) – and his Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) militia. The Coalition's detention of Qays al-Khazali (leader of a network of Iranian-supported JAM "secret cells") has removed a chief rival. However, we judge that the Sadrist movement, especially JAM, is likely to remain fractious: deep seated animosities between senior Sadrists have been managed rather than resolved. There is no indication that exasperation among some senior members of OMS with Sadr's incoherent leadership has abated. Some are already distancing themselves from him, [...] But we judge Sadr's position as leader will not face serious challenge; he remains an iconic figure to most of his followers. As a political force, Sadristism will probably not survive Sadr himself: [...]

2. In March 2006 we judged that Sadr controlled the majority of JAM, but that his grip decreased with distance from his base in Kufa, near Najaf. We judge his prolonged absence in Iran has further diminished his authority. [...] Despite the appointment of a senior aide, Ahmad al-Shaybani, to oversee both mainstream JAM and the "secret cells", [...] JAM remains divided: many JAM members believe Sadr shows insufficient support for armed action. [...] mainstream JAM in Basra is also out of Sadr's reach.

Sadr's political aims

3. Sadr's authority stems from his iconic family name backed by strong Shia populist support. We judge he wants to be a powerful figure among the Shia in particular and across Iraq more generally. He makes little distinction between political and religious power; reporting indicates he sees Lebanese Hizballah's leader Hassan Nasrallah as a role-model. His immediate priority is to secure (and get credit for) a timetable for the departure of "occupation forces" [...] Notwithstanding the lamentable performance of Sadrists in the welfare ministries, Sadr also has a genuine desire to see improvements in the quality of life for his core constituency among Iraq's Shia poor. We judge that the Sadrists are well placed to convert popular appeal into seats on local councils in the future provincial elections, when they will be participating for the first time. When and where necessary, JAM will be used to intimidate their rivals and the electorate.

Relations with others

4. Backed by the JAM, Sadr now exercises considerable political clout in Baghdad and across large parts of the south. Nuri al-Maliki depended on him for his nomination as Prime Minister and initially appointed five Sadrists to head government departments – more than any other party. Sadr's OMS is the

joint largest bloc in the Shia United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) and Sadr-affiliated members make up the joint largest voice in the Council of Representatives (CoR)¹.

5. But Sadr's relations with Maliki have soured, [...] Sadr withdrew his ministers from the government in April and has resisted attempts to replace them. The Sadrist bloc in the CoR has become increasingly obstructionist: [...] Nevertheless, we judge that Sadr wishes to remain politically engaged: [...] he, like others, is [...]

6. Sadr's relationship with other Shia political figures is equally fraught. Rivalry is particularly intense with ISCI, exacerbated by historical animosity between Sadr's family and that of ISCI leader al-Hakim (the Hakim clan fled Saddam's regime to Iran while Sadr's resisted from inside Iraq – see Annex). Both Sadr and ISCI are exploring alternative alliances, but neither side appears willing yet to risk Shia unity: Grand Ayatollah Sistani, whom both still consult on major political issues, has consistently warned against an alternative political bloc which would split the UIA and isolate the Sadrists. We judge ISCI and others in the UIA are also nervous of Sadr's ability to mobilise mass support to generate widespread disorder.

7. Sadr continues to present himself as a nationalist, trying to appeal to Sunnis as well as Shia. Resistance to "occupation" is a shared common cause. He has consistently shown greater willingness than many in the UIA to maintain a dialogue with Sunni politicians and religious leaders. But we doubt his outreach to Sunnis has much genuine depth. JAM's vicious campaign of sectarian violence, Sadr's perceived closeness to Iran and his commitment to de-Ba'athification will continue to prevent any significant support emerging among Sunnis. Sadr's relationship with the Kurds has historically been distant: [...]

The Iranian connection

8. Sadr's relationship with Iran is complex. He has spent much of this year in hiding in Iran [...] we judge Sadr needs to retain this support. But he does not trust the Iranians, who continue to back ISCI and encourage opponents within his own movement. [...] But a break is unlikely: Sadr needs Iranian support and the Iranians want to maintain influence over a key Shia figure. We judge they will continue as uncomfortable partners.

Sadr and violence

9. Sadr is prepared to use violence as a political tool. He probably also has to accept some JAM violence to maintain its cohesion and his popular support: in the face of Sunni terrorism, MNF operations and a common belief that the Coalition is arming Sunni extremists against the Shia, many Sadrists, including Sadr, view attacks on Sunnis and MNF as justified self-defence. However, we judge that Sadr will try to prevent any return to large-scale sectarian violence. He does not want a descent into greater instability which would put the government and the UIA under greater pressure, and irrevocably damage his attempts to present cross-sectarian appeal. [...]

10. [...] Sadr's preferred means to remove the Coalition is still political. But he will endorse anti-MNF violence where it furthers his purposes. We judge he will try to calibrate the level: [...] To date, when under pressure, Sadr has removed himself to Iran. But we judge that if Maliki or the UIA took steps to further

¹ OMS and ISCI/Badr hold 30 seats each out of 275.

exclude Sadr and backed widespread Coalition action against JAM, Sadr might order a return to anti-MNF violence on a large scale. Sadr has consistently refused direct contact with Coalition representatives, [...] he may be considering conditions for a cease-fire with the US. But we judge it much more likely that his non-engagement policy will continue, at least so long as there is no timetable for MNF withdrawal.

11. Historically, Sadr has intervened quickly to prevent intra-Shia violence from escalating, most recently in Nasiriyah. [...] But sporadic violence between militias has become an enduring feature of the political landscape: in Basra in recent weeks a number of ISF officials have been murdered by JAM. If the desire for national Shia unity diminishes and the ability of local parties to broker deals breaks down, serious intra-Shia violence is likely. If Sadr cannot prevent the violence, he will seek to take advantage of it.

MUQTADA AL-SADR: BACKGROUND

1. Muqtada al-Sadr was probably born in 1973, descendant of a long line of distinguished senior Shia clerics, known for their political activism (distinct from the quietest tradition followed by Najaf-based Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, the leading religious authority for Shia worldwide). Muqtada's father, Grand Ayatollah Sadiq al-Sadr, was jailed under Saddam and assassinated in 1999, probably by the regime, following a Shia uprising. Muqtada unexpectedly assumed the mantle of the revered Sadr lineage – aged 25.

OMS

2. Muqtada inherited from his father a network of quasi-political offices in Baghdad and across the south ("Offices of the Martyr Sadr" (OMS)) used to spread the Sadrist message, but also providing social welfare (although nowhere near as organised as that provided by Hizballah in Lebanon). Although most senior OMS officials remain devout followers of his father's teachings and recognise Muqtada as the figurehead of the Sadrist trend, loyalty to him personally is mixed. After Saddam's overthrow, Muqtada quickly established himself as a fierce opponent of the "occupation" and, initially, of the associated political process. However, in early 2005 he began formal engagement in the political process and nominated affiliated members of OMS to join the Shia United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) to contest the December elections.

JAM

3. Following the Al Qaida bombing of the Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf in August 2003, Muqtada established an armed militia - Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) - to protect Shia religious establishments, counter the military muscle of Badr, the military wing of OMS's main political rival ISCI and resist the "occupation". The size of JAM is uncertain: the Coalition estimates that there are around 10,000 active supporters with varying degrees of paramilitary training and a further 20,000 sympathisers who could be mobilised rapidly. It is most prominent in Sadr City in east Baghdad, but units operate across much of Shia central and southern Iraq, especially Basra. Members join for a wide range of reasons, including power, prestige and a sense of religious duty to avenge Sunni and Coalition 'attacks'. A small minority use JAM as a cover for solely criminal activity. The violent uprisings of 2004 against the Coalition gave JAM national and international prominence. But it is not a unified force with a single command structure: allegiance of local commanders to Muqtada varies considerably. Following the 2004 uprisings, the degree of militancy between members has varied, ranging from those engaged in only occasional attacks to those including the "secret cells" which operate largely outside Muqtada's control, engaged in a coherent campaign of violence against the Coalition and Sunnis.