IRAQ

TURKEY

SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC

ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

JORDAN

SAUDI ARABIA

KUWAIT

Hakkâri
Orūmīyeh (Umia)
Daryācheh-ye Orūmīyeh (Lake Urmia)
Mīāneh
Zākhū
DAHŪK
Dahūk
Al Qāmishlī
'Aqrah
Rāyāt
Mīāndowab
Zanjan
Qezel Owzan
Al Mawṣil (Mosul)
ARBĪL
Arbīl
Sinjār
Tall 'Afar
NĪNAWĀ
Al Qayyarah
Kūysanjaq
Makhmūr
AS SULAYMĀNĪYAH
Ar Raqqah
Al Ḥaḍr
As Sulaymānīyah
Sanandaj
Dayr az Zawr
Kirkūk
KIRKŪK
Hālabjah
Bayjī
Tāwūq
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF
Nahr al 'Uẓaym
Hamadān
Tikrīt
SALĀH AD DĪN
Abū Kamāl
'Ānah
Buḥayrat al Qādisīyah
Sāmarrā'
Qaṣr-e Shīrīn
Al Qā'im
Euphrates
Khānaqīn
Kermānshāh
Tharthā Lake
DIYĀLĀ
Al Ḥadīthah
Ba'qūbah
Īlām
Borūjerd
'Akāshāt
Khorramābād
Al Walīd
Al Ḥabbānīyah
Hīt
Ar Ramādī
Mehrān
Wādī Ḥawrān
Dehlorān
Ar Ruṭbah
Al Fallūjah
Baghdad
BAGHDAD
Trebil
AL ĀNBAR
Habbānīyah Lake
Rūdkhāneh-ye Shīmareh
Wādī al Ghaḍawī
WĀSIT
Razzaza Lake
Karbalā'
BĀBIL
Shaykh Sa'd
Dezfūl
Al Ḥillāh
Al Kūt
KARBALĀ'
'Alī al Gharbī
Wādī al Ubayyid
Al Hayy
MAYSĀN
Nukhayb
An Najaf
Ad Dīwānīyah
Al 'Amārah
Abū Sukhayr
Qal'at Sukkar
Qal'at Sāliḥ
Ahvāz
AL QĀDISĪYAH
Judayyidat 'Ar'ar
Qaryat al Gharab
DHĪ QĀR
Shaṭṭ al Gharrāf
Tigris
AN NAJAF
Euphrates
Al Qurnah
Ar'ar
As Samāwah
An Nāsirīyah
Hawr al Ḥammār
Khorramshahr
AL MUTHANNĀ
Jalībah
Al Baṣrah
Abadān
As Salmān
AL BAṢRAH
Shaṭṭ al 'Arab
Makhfar al Buṣayyah
Umm Qaṣr
Al Fāw
Rafḥā
KUWAIT
Al Jahrah
Persian Gulf
Kuwait
Al Aḥmadī
Ḥafar al Bāṭin
Nahr al Khābūr
Great Zab
Little Zab
Tigris

Legend

Symbol	Description
✪	National capital
◉	Governorate capital
○	Town, village
✈	Airport
–··–··–	International boundary
–·–·–	Governorate boundary
━━	Expressway
━━	Main road
━━	Secondary road
╫╫╫	Railroad

IRAQ

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

0   50   100   150   200   150   300 km
0   50   100   150   200 mi

Jaish al-Mahdi in Iraq

Phil Williams and Dan Bisbee

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003 was an emphatic military success. The resulting occupation, however, proved far more problematic, with various groups and factions opposing the U.S. military presence. The invasion itself, combined with the ineptitude of the occupation authorities, created several distinct but powerful strands of resistance, which erupted as a complex insurgency. Moreover, in the chaos and anarchy that followed the toppling of the Baathist regime, the line between licit and illicit power was blurred—an ambiguity never fully appreciated by the United States. This set in motion a series of missteps reflecting a profound lack of understanding of Iraqi traditions and politics, a failure to realize that common sectarian identity was no guarantee of harmony, and a sense of bewilderment when U.S. forces were not universally treated as liberators rather than occupiers.[1]

The failure to prevent widespread looting encouraged a sense of lawlessness, and the disbanding of the Iraqi army created a power vacuum and a whole new set of enemies challenging the U.S.-led Coalition. Moreover, the inability to recognize, let alone deal with, "industrial-strength" criminal organizations involved in kidnapping and extortion fostered a climate of fear and insecurity. This seriously impeded reconstruction and development and permitted, encouraged, and even compelled competing groups and factions to take matters into their own hands.[2]

One of those factions was the Sadrist movement, which in turn spawned the militia known as Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM). This chapter looks first at the background that helps explain JAM's emergence as a major player in post-Saddam Iraq. It then identifies those characteristics of the Sadrist movement in general and JAM in particular that led to JAM's chaotic evolution. Its development could be described either as (a) a skillful and pragmatic approach that maintained multiple options, engaged in frequent course reversals, and adopted a balanced but precarious mix of cooperation and confrontation; or (b) a hapless flailing about in response to a mix of internal and pressures, and driven by immediate opportunities and needs rather than any coherent strategy.

We then examine the various phases of JAM's evolution. These phases were characterized by dramatic shifts between *pragmatic policies,* in which the Sadrists participated in the political process, and *confrontational policies,* emphasizing the use of violence. The shifts were driven largely by the efforts of Muqtada and the Sadrist leadership to maintain or regain control over their organization, which, from the outset, displayed unruly behavior and a tendency to fragment. From outside, Jaish al-Mahdi looked like a hierarchical and structured organization, but it was actually unruly, bedeviled by factionalism and defections, and terribly difficult to control, let alone direct. The diverse agendas within JAM at times threatened the movement's cohesion and challenged Muqtada's ability to achieve what appear, in retrospect, to be his primary aims: removal of the U.S. presence, and significant influence over Iraq's future via legitimate political pow-

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[1] The authors wish to thank Andrew Terrill, Alex Crowther, and Michelle Hughes for several helpful discussions on the themes in this chapter.

[2] Toby Dodge, "A sovereign Iraq?" *Survival* 46, no. 3 (2004): 39-58.

er. Members and supporters of JAM engaged in predatory and criminal activities that threatened to undermine Muqtada's more legitimate aspirations.

Thus, the breadth of the Sadrist movement was at once JAM's greatest strength and its most serious liability. Jaish al-Mahdi fused multiple roles and contradictory tendencies: it was both a protector and a predator. It sometimes reached out to Sunnis across the sectarian divide but also engaged in vicious sectarian cleansing. It lost battles but always survived intact and able to fight another day. It was often seen as a pawn of Iran yet was also the most fiercely nationalist and independent of all the Shia groups and factions in Iraq. And it was devoutly Shia yet struggled against the Shia establishment and fought other Shia factions as intensely as it fought the Sunnis.

JAM violence contributed enormously to the anarchy in Iraq in the four years after the U.S. invasion. But shifts in the landscape were occurring. These included wiser yet more aggressive U.S. policies, the constantly evolving intra-Shia political feud, the al-Maliki government's increased effectiveness in bringing Iraqi security forces under state control, and internal developments within the Sadrist movement that brought about the truce in 2007 and the reorganization in 2008. All these developments dramatically altered the role of JAM within the overall context of Sadr's agenda to shape Iraq's future.

Background

Even at the height of its violent activities and fundraising through crime from 2003 through 2007, JAM was not simply an illicit power structure acting as a spoiler. Although many parts of JAM have been heavily engaged in illicit and violent activities, the underlying Sadrist impulse is based on an important, though sometimes muted, strand in the Shiite tradition that is politically active and socially responsible. Its leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, was heir to a family tradition that had courageously stood up to Saddam Hussein during the 1970s and 1990s and sought to provide welfare and support to the marginalized and socially excluded Shia populations in Baghdad's slums and in communities of southern Iraq. Understanding Muqtada al-Sadr, the Sadrist movement, and Jaish al-Mahdi is therefore impossible unless we understand the Sadr family's role during the Baathist era. As one study noted:

> Descendants of the Prophet, the Sadrs form one of those large, transnational and learned families that, from one generation to another, pass on the requisite attributes of power and legitimacy in the Shiite world: prestigious ancestry, knowledge and accumulated resources. More specifically, Muqtada largely owes his position to two crucial figures of Iraq's contemporary history, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, one of his father's distant cousins, and his father, Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr.[3]

Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, known as the first martyr, was a distinguished Islamic scholar but was also innovative in both thought and organization.[4] He not only advocated "implementation of Islamic law and establishment of the rule of God on earth," but also formed "a political organization with a strict hierarchy and governing

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[3] International Crisis Group (ICG), "Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?" Middle East Report no. 55, July 11, 2006, 1.
[4] Ibid., 2.

charter."[5] In doing so, "Baqir and his supporters fundamentally challenged the central-ity of the Hawza," the elite Shia religious establishment school of theological learning, which is largely nonpolitical.[6] By also offering a voice to a Shiite community that had hitherto been marginalized, Baqir challenged the regime and was arrested several times during the 1970s. According to the International Crisis Group (ICG), "Baqir's intransi-gence toward the regime, his popularity among Shiites, together with the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran magnified regime fears. In response, the regime killed hundreds of Baqir's followers and, in April 1980, Baqir himself."[7] The Hawza failed to react, provok-ing a widespread sense of betrayal among Baqir's constituents.[8]

Around the same time, Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, a pupil and cousin of Baqir, was placed under house arrest, and he, too, received no support from the Hawza. In the aftermath of the Shia uprising of 1991, however, the regime decided that Sadiq could be useful—not least because he believed that Iran had too much influence over the Shia es-tablishment in Iraq—and supported his claim to be grand ayatollah. The attempt to co-opt Sadiq succeeded in the short term, but then he challenged the regime itself. After us-ing regime support to attack the quietists in the Hawza, Sadiq successfully mobilized the Shiite masses with his sermons about the Twelfth Imam, restoration of Friday prayers, and social and economic support for a population that had long been marginalized and excluded.[9] Indeed, as Leslie Bayless reports, "[When the] 'sanctions-depleted govern-ment of Saddam Hussein cut back services to Shiites,' Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr took it upon himself to dole out charity."[10] Inevitably, his actions challenged the authority of the regime, which responded with efforts at intimidation. After continuing to speak out in the face of threats, in February 1999 Sadiq, along with two of his sons, was killed by persons linked to the regime. "Sadiq al-Sadr's murder sparked violent demonstrations, a testament to his success in building a popular base despite his initial affiliation with the regime and notwithstanding the climate of fear that prevailed at the time."[11]

Indeed, Sadiq combined "Shiite martyrdom and social revolution" in ways that reso-nated with much of Iraq's Shia population.[12] The legacy of Baqir and Sadiq, who became known respectively within much of the Shia community as the "first martyr" and the "second martyr," was a powerful grassroots religious, political, and social movement that inherently challenged the mainstream nonpolitical, or "quietist," thread in Shiite tradition. The quietists had been passive in their opposition to the regime, had failed to give the al-Sadr family much support, and had largely been content to operate in exile in Iran and Europe rather than suffer the consequences of standing up to Saddam Hus-sein.[13]

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[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid., 23.

[8] Ibid., 3.

[9] Ibid., 45.

[10] Leslie Bayless, "Who Is Muqtada al-Sadr?" Studies in Conflict and Terrorism 35, no. 2 (2012): 139.

[11] ICG, "Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr," 4.

[12] Ibid.

[13] For a fuller analysis, see ICG, "Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr."

Emergence of Muqtada al-Sadr and JAM

Muqtada al-Sadr, the fourth son of Sadiq, who was married to one of the daughters of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, unexpectedly became the heir to this tradition of political involvement. Although he lacked major religious credentials and was largely unknown before 2003, in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion Muqtada al-Sadr rapidly emerged as a powerful, charismatic figure. Yet he did so with an agenda fueled not only by resentment toward the Baathists but also by the sense that the Shia religious establishment in Iraq had betrayed his family. Unlike the al-Sadr family, most members of the Hazwa had sought safety outside Iraq and had displayed neither courage nor commitment to the Shia population. Not surprisingly, therefore, Muqtada disdained the mainstream Shiite clergy and the quietist tradition embodied by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. For its part, the traditional Shiite establishment regarded Muqtada al-Sadr as an upstart and rabble-rouser and saw his relationship with the impoverished masses as a threat.[14]

Equally important was Muqtada al-Sadr's antipathy toward the United States. This had much to do with the consequences of the tough UN sanctions regime imposed on Iraq following its invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and maintained until after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. The sanctions, linked to Saddam's nuclear program, significantly degraded Iraq's technological and engineering capacity, rendering reconstruction after 2003 much more difficult than the United States had anticipated. Moreover, rather than hurting the Hussein regime, sanctions had hurt the poor and the marginalized—the same people the al-Sadr family had tended and who were now a key part of Muqtada al-Sadr's power base. Far from welcoming the invasion for toppling Saddam Hussein, Muqtada al-Sadr saw it as a continuation of a punitive policy that had hurt ordinary Iraqis, especially those in the Shia community.[15] Indeed, he felt enormous antipathy toward the U.S. military presence. This was compounded by U.S. missteps, especially the failure by Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) Administrator Paul Bremer to understand the al-Sadr family history and treat al-Sadr as someone who could influence a crucial segment of Iraq's population. Instead of engaging with al-Sadr, the CPA focused on building bridges with al-Sistani and other Shiite elites. The CPA initially treated Muqtada al-Sadr as irrelevant and later viewed him as a serious threat—a shift that introduced elements of a self-fulfilling prophecy into the equation.

Muqtada al-Sadr moved rapidly from obscure cleric to major power broker in postinvasion Iraq. He could do so because he inherited enormous legitimacy from his father's combination of religious authority and social obligation.[16] Although the Sadrists imposed a strict code in areas under their control, making women wear the veil and prohibiting alcohol, their tradition of providing social welfare assumed critical importance during the massive economic upheaval that followed the invasion. In effect, Muqtada and the Sadrists provided alternative governance and collective goods for vulnerable populations underserved by a state in crisis. This was most evident in Saddam City—which was quickly renamed "Sadr City" in honor of Sadiq, the "second martyr"—and among many tribes in the south, especially those in and around Basra.

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[14] Ibid., 16.
[15] ICG, "Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr," 10.
[16] Ibid., 9.

Sadiq had also gained many followers among rural tribal leaders in the south, either directly or through missionary work among their clansmen in East Baghdad. After the regime fell, Muqtada al-Sadr and a Sadiq disciple, Muhammad Yaqubi, made a concerted and successful effort to spread the Sadrist movement in the Marsh Arab areas.[17] Those who had relocated to east Baghdad but were still linked to the countryside assisted.[18] After Saddam's fall, many Marsh Arabs who had embraced the Sadrist movement relocated to the city of Basra, bringing with them a tradition of social banditry.[19] This predilection, together with traditional respect for their weapons—an important part of their identity—would inevitably bring them into conflict with the Coalition and with other tribes and political parties competing for the control of rents associated with the diversion, theft, and smuggling of oil.[20]

Al-Sadr's appeal to the disenfranchised among Iraq's Shia community is closely linked to a second factor that helped bring him to prominence. The anarchic conditions after the U.S. invasion, combined with the vacuum of indigenous power and authority in the country, leveled the playing field for the Sadrists in a way that few other things could. Moreover, al-Sadr's opposition to the invasion and U.S. presence evoked an enthusiastic response among Shia who were concerned that the Baathist dictatorship was simply being replaced by foreign oppression. Thus, according to Bayless, "[Al-Sadr could] present himself as the sole protector of the Shi'a inhabitants of Iraq. This move was fairly easy; no one else had stepped forward to assume the position."[21] Thus, the July 2003 creation of JAM as a protective militia stemmed from the need for security amid conditions of chaos, confusion, and continuing uncertainty about the future.

Another factor that helped propel Muqtada al-Sadr to prominence was his and his advisers' excellent sense of what the U.S. military called *strategic communication*. Al-Sadr made use not only of Friday prayers but also of satellite television and other media outlets.[22] Sometimes, these things went hand in hand. In his first Friday prayer on April 11, 2003, for example, he asked Shiites to express their piety by undertaking a pilgrimage on foot to Karbala.[23] Coming on the heels of the regime's fall, the massive celebrations offered Shiites their first opportunity to sense their unprecedented importance in Iraq. According to ICG, "The Sadrist phenomenon benefited from the Shiite community's visibility and, given the media's particular interest in Muqtada, from unprecedented focus on its most destitute members."[24] One journalist suggested that "the emergence of the Sadrist current after the regime's fall essentially occurred through satellite televisions" and the satellite dishes that had hitherto been banned but were enthusiastically bought by many Iraqis.[25] Not only did the Sadrists publish a daily and a weekly newspaper,

[17] Juan Cole, "Marsh Arab Rebellion: Grievance, Mafias and Militias in Iraq," Jwaideh Memorial Lecture, Bloomington, IN: Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, Indiana Univ., 2008, www-personal.umich.edu/~jrcole/iraq/iraqtribes4.pdf.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Bayless, "Who Is Muqtada al-Sadr?" 136.

[22] ICG, "Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr," 9.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

but they also had a radio station, TV station, and website. Using all these outlets, the movement made excellent use of symbolism, ranging from Muqtada al-Sadr's black turban—worn to signify his descent from the prophet—to what one observer described as "a fusion of sectarian and nationalistic iconography and language."[26]

Perhaps most significant of all, however, was the way that the Sadrists differentiated themselves from the other Shia factions and groups by "the pervasiveness of violent resistance" in their images, symbolism, and discourse.[27] This emphasis on resistance certainly distinguished the Sadrists from most other Shia groups in Iraq. It also led observer to suggest, "Muqtada al-Sadr sought to model his organization on Lebanese Hezbollah, combining a political party with an armed militia and an organization providing social services. The Hezbollah model gave the Sadrist Movement levers of control over political life through representation in Parliament, control of ministerial offices, the ability to organize popular protests, and the possibility of taking up arms when necessary."[28]

Yet it was not clear at the outset that Muqtada al-Sadr had a comprehensive design or that he was consciously trying to emulate Hezbollah. As with most other groups in the chaos of postinvasion Iraq, improvisation seemed more important than long-term strategy. Moreover, although Muqtada and the Sadrist leadership were good at mobilizing the disenfranchised Shia, controlling the movement was another matter entirely. In spite of senior leadership's efforts, JAM was never a monolithic, hierarchical, disciplined organization, nor was the broader movement. This was evident early on. ICG emphasizes this:

> As spectacular as it was disorganized, the Sadrist phenomenon did not reflect the growth of an already-structured movement shedding its prior clandestine status so much as a series of often-uncoordinated initiatives. Young imams, invoking Sadiq al-Sadr's name, rushed to fill the vacuum created by the collapse of the state apparatus. Surrounded by armed volunteers, they seized control of mosques, welfare centers, universities and hospitals and, particularly in Sadiq al-Sadr's former strongholds, instituted forms of local governance. Sadr City was the logical power base, but the movement also showed strength in large swaths of southern Iraq.[29]

Identifying the exact role that Muqtada al-Sadr himself played within his movement is enormously challenging. He has often received credit where it was not due, and blame where it was not completely warranted. Clearly on display in his career are significant survival skills, both personal and political. On several occasions, he rescued political success from military defeat by shifting between different identities. At times, he was a bitterly militant proselytizer capable of enormous pragmatism, and a fervent nationalist and outspoken critic of the occupation. Nevertheless, when he found it expedient, he cooperated with the U.S. military to remove some of the unruliest elements of his

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[26] Ibrahim Al-Marashi, "Sadrabiliyya: The Visual Narrative of Muqtada al-Sadr's Islamist Politics and Insurgency in Iraq," in *Visual Culture in the Modern Middle East: Rhetoric of the Image*, ed. Christiane Gruber and Sune Haugbolle (Bloomington IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 2013): 162.

[27] Ibid., 146.

[28] Marisa Cochrane, *The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2009), 13.

[29] ICG, "Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr," 7.

organization. Often described as a firebrand cleric lacking in sophistication, he pursued strategies that, at times, have been remarkably pragmatic and subtle and gave him an important, if intermittent, voice in Iraqi politics. Al-Sadr was simultaneously sectarian and nationalistic, ideological and pragmatic, a theological scholar (albeit at a relatively low level) and a skilled political operator. This resulted in decisions and policies that, at times, appeared inconsistent or even contradictory. Nevertheless, there was a consistency of objectives: removal of U.S. military forces from Iraq, provision of social welfare for marginalized Shiites in Baghdad and Basra, and reduction of the power of the formal Shia hierarchy, embodied most obviously by Ayatollah al-Sistani. This provided a coherence and continuity sometimes hidden by the tactical shifts, reversals, and compromises that were essential to keeping the Sadrist movement—and himself—alive.

This is not to imply that Muqtada al-Sadr avoided making serious mistakes. On the contrary, he made several major missteps, sometimes becoming involved in battles he could not win. He never gained complete control over a movement riven with divisions and subject to factionalism, and some of the factions continued to be manipulated by Iran. Cooperation and compromise between his movement and rivals were often the result of setbacks and weakness, not positions of strength. Yet he learned from his mistakes and ultimately managed to overcome many problems. Despite significant challenges, Muqtada al-Sadr navigated a path that took his movement from its initial formulation as simply an anti-occupation force, past a tipping point to recognition as a major legitimate political party in Iraqi politics.

JAM Phase 1: From Emergence to Confrontation, 2003-4

Muqtada al-Sadr's new movement was off to a good start when, on April 7, 2003, Ayatollah Kazem al-Haeri, a leading Iranian-based Iraqi, appointed Muqtada as his representative in Iraq and authorized him to collect the khums, or Islamic taxes.[30] This gave the Sadrists an important source of funding. According to Adnan Shahmani, a cleric in Sadr's Najaf office, the movement collected roughly $65,000 a month from these donations. Roughly half the funds were used to support the poor and religious students. The other half directly funded the Sadrist offices in Iraq—quickly reopened as the "Office of the Martyr Sadr."[31]

Despite the financial boost, it was not long before al-Sadr made a major error in May 2003, when he issued a fatwa that "looters could hold on to what they had appropriated so long as they made a donation (khums) of one-fifth of its value to their local Sadrist office."[32] Al-Sadr's fatwa provided post hoc legitimacy to the widespread looting that had destroyed the government infrastructure, had seriously hurt businesses, and was to complicate the task of reconstruction. To some extent, Muqtada's endorsement was understandable: Iraq has a long tradition of looting as a form of social expression and political protest, and he was simply tapping into this in a manner that was crassly expedient. Unfortunately, it was ultimately counterproductive to his movement. Although

[30] Cochrane, *The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement*, 11-12.

[31] Ibid., 12.

[32] Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada: Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia Revival, and the Struggle for Iraq* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 130.

it offered short-term benefits for an organization not endowed with resources, it further alienated mainstream Shiites, especially those with property, and encouraged additional criminal activities by many of his followers. Moreover, the fatwa legitimized a strand in the Sadrist movement that embraced criminality and "often drifted toward gratuitous violence."[33] The problem would become pronounced after al-Sadr created his own militia, the Mahdi Army, or Jaish al-Mahdi, in July 2003. Indeed, the absence of payment for militia members made crime particularly attractive as a source of revenue for them, and convenient, at least initially, for Muqtada al-Sadr.

In what was to be another recurring theme, defections plagued the Sadrist movement from the outset. Mohammed al-Yacoubi, a prominent Shia cleric, claimed that Sadiq al-Sadr had designated him the rightful heir to the movement because he had greater religious knowledge and authority than Muqtada.[34] When his claim was ignored, Yacoubi created the Fadhila (Islamic Virtue) Party in July 2003.[35] The Fadhila Party won 15 seats in the Iraqi parliament in the 2005 elections and became JAM's persistent rival, especially in what would become a major struggle to control rents from oil smuggling in Basra.

Other rivalries had more immediate outcomes. Another potential rival to al-Sadr in the Shia community was Sheikh Abdul Majid al-Khoei, who had recently returned from exile in London and was the son of the Shia cleric who had led the revolt against Saddam Hussein in 1991. In Najaf, a mob attacked and killed al-Khoei and "reportedly left him to die outside the house of Muqtada al-Sadr."[36] Sadrist supporters also besieged the home of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Najaf.[37] Regardless of whether Muqtada al-Sadr ordered these actions or simply encouraged them, he was clearly implicated. Because of this and his anti-U.S. stance, CPA did not invite him to become part of the Iraqi Governing Council, formed in July 2003.[38] The snub put the Sadrists and the CPA on an inexorable collision course.

After simmering through the latter half of 2003 and early 2004, the relationship between the Sadrists and the Coalition entered an even more hostile phase in March 2004. Near the end of the month, Coalition Forces shut down the main Sadrist newspaper, *al Hawza*.[39] Then, in early April, they arrested a prominent aide to al-Sadr, Mustafa al-Yacoubi.[40] JAM responded to what it viewed as provocations, with major uprisings in Karbala, Najaf, and Kufa.[41] JAM forces established positions near the holy shrines, complicating Coalition forces' ability to use heavy firepower and enhancing the militia's ability to control access to these shrines and the revenue they generated.[42] An uneasy cease-fire between JAM and Coalition forces was established in May 2004 but broke down in Najaf in August 2004.

As ICG pointed out, the breakdown was not entirely al-Sadr's doing:

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[33] ICG, "Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr," 8.

[34] Cochrane, *The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement*, 12.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid., 13.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid., 14.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid.

Coalition forces, determined to resolve the crisis once and for all by detaining Muqtada and disbanding his militia, never offered him or his followers an honorable exit. His Shiite opponents backed and even reinforced this inflexible position: coalition forces could not have entered the holy cities without the implicit consent of Hawza leaders for whom the partial destruction of sacred sites was a price worth paying in order to reassert their authority. In short, the conflict was not simply a struggle against the occupation; it was set against the deep and deepening intra-Shiite confrontation.[43]

Consequently, Coalition forces interpreted al-Sistani's departure for London for medical treatment in early August 2004 as implicit permission to confront the Sadrists in the holy sites.[44]

The second battle of Najaf was disastrous for al-Sadr. Many of his followers were killed; disputes over strategy with Qais Khazali, one of his top lieutenants, led Khazali to break away, creating a major split in the organization; the fighting alienated the merchants, who lost a lot of money because of it. And, in a major humiliation for al-Sadr, Ayatollah al-Sistani arranged a cease-fire upon his return to Iraq.[45] Moreover, in the aftermath of the confrontation, Ayatollah al-Haeri, who had initially provided al-Sadr with great legitimacy and a source of funding, not only disavowed al-Sadr but also issued a fatwa instructing followers in Iraq to stop paying khums to al-Sadr.[46] This was a critical financial loss that almost certainly contributed to a growing emphasis on fundraising through criminal activities. As Cochrane observed, "The heavy losses of JAM fighters forced the movement to spend a great deal of money to help the families of dead, increasing their financial expenditures at a time when their funding sources were declining."[47] In effect, the series of reverses placed the Sadrists in a bind where they had little alternative to creating and expanding illicit revenue streams. But some gains came amid the losses. As one study noted, "The Mahdi Army, which originally only had a presence in Sadr City, was able to hold its own against the U.S. for months. The losses suffered were terrible, yet they contributed to the image of resistance. Muqtada al-Sadr no longer fears arrest, and any disarming of his militia remains very hypothetical."[48] These gains were probably little comfort for Muqtada at the time, however, and he kept a low profile for the rest of 2004.

JAM Phase 2: From Politics to Sectarianism and Racketeering, 2005-7

According to Marisa Cochrane, "Sadr emerged from his seclusion in early 2005, which was also Iraq's first democratic election year. He adopted a more conciliatory tone towards the Iraqi government and turned his attention to politics."[49] The Sadrists joined a coalition of Shia parties in November 2005 and won 30 seats in parliamentary elections held in January 2006. Moreover, the Sadrist political bloc gained control of the Ministries

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[43] ICG, "Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr," 11.

[44] Kirsten Aiken, "Departure of Ali Sistani Prompted by Coalition: Middle East Observer," *AM*, Aug. 7, 2004, www.abc.net.au/am/content/2004/s1171202.htm.

[45] Cochrane, *The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement*, 15.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Michael Goya, quoted in ICG, "Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr," 12.

[49] Cochrane, *The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement*, 16.

of Health, Transportation, and Agriculture. This enabled them "to provide jobs, services, and revenue for militiamen and loyalists."[50] Being part of government provided both a new source of income and an expanded patronage network.[51] At the same time, al-Sadr placed renewed emphasis on discipline and control within the organization. He also displayed conciliatory tendencies by reaching out to the Sunni community and advocating national unity.

Baghdad's municipal politics clearly illustrate the expanding political role of the Sadrists during this period. Elections (largely boycotted by Sunnis) in January 2005 gave Shia-affiliated parties a dominant voice over Baghdad politics. ISCI/Badr, a coalition of well-organized Iranian-sponsored parties, won 28 of 51 seats on the provincial council, and the majority clout to take over the key positions in Baghdad's municipal government.[52]

In the ensuing months, Baghdad's political landscape was transformed. Shia party loyalists from either the ISCI/Badr camp or the Sadrists replaced many nonpartisan and technocratic officials who had cooperated with early Coalition reconstruction efforts. A pattern emerged in which ISCI/Badr held the primary positions of provincial council chairman, governor, and amin (commonly referred to as the "mayor," or city manager of Baghdad) while the Sadrists held the deputy positions within each of these major institutions. This power-sharing arrangement reinforced a deep sense of sectarianism within Baghdad, with Shia parties dominant, Sunnis underrepresented (if at all), and independent or technocratic officials increasingly marginalized. It also illustrated the tidal shift from the Iranian-sponsored parties that had initially gained power in a top-down process through electoral victory, toward a Sadrist bottom-up approach that saw the movement's power on the street and in the neighborhoods increasingly converted into institutional authority at higher levels.

The Amanat Baghdad, or "city hall" of Baghdad, became a significant battlefield in the intra-Shia contest over power in Iraq. With the population of metropolitan Baghdad estimated at around seven million of Iraq's roughly 27 million (est. 2007) people, control over Baghdad's service delivery institutions and the associated budgeting resources, contracts, jobs, and patronage opportunities made the Amanat a crucial component of Iraq's governance apparatus. With an ISCI/Badr-appointed official serving as mayor, and the powerful deputy mayor position filled by a newly appointed Sadrist (who had risen rapidly from the local Sadr City district department and reportedly had ties to JAM and the Office of the Martyr Sadr), departments, and sometimes entire wings, of the Amanat were known within the institution as either "Badr" or "Sadr" territory. The Badr-affiliated governor of Baghdad (who had temporarily filled in as amin during a previous political crisis that accompanied the Shia takeover in early 2005) repeatedly told a U.S. official that millions of U.S. reconstruction dollars were going directly to the Sadrist offices because of the deputy mayor's authority over major Amanat contracts. The overall atmosphere of conflict between Sadrists and the other Shia parties, which frequently

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[50] Ibid., 18.

[51] Ibid., 18.

[52] The Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq (then known as SCIRI, or the Supreme Council for the Revolution in Iraq) and the Badr Organization (previously known as the Badr Corps—an organization that maintained both political and militia wings tightly connected to supporters in Tehran).

erupted in violence on the streets of Baghdad, also intensified throughout this period.[53]

With greater representation within nominally legitimate positions of political authority, distinguishing between the licit and illicit strands of the Sadr movement became more problematic and illustrated the complexity of confronting illicit power structures amid conflict and political transition. Disparate strategies, ranging from espousing social welfare to pursuing extremist sectarian agendas, to profiting from criminality, were increasingly pursued under the same banner.

Some of al-Sadr's followers were unhappy about the new emphasis on political participation. Khazali, nominally still within JAM, was increasingly working with the Iranian Quds Force, forming what became known as the JAM "special groups" (even though they were, in fact, largely independent of JAM).[54] Another defector, who became known as Abu Dura, operated notorious death squads in Baghdad that were responsible for the kidnapping, torture, and murder of thousands of Sunni civilians during 2004-6.[55]

While both the Khazali network and the Dura forces were operating outside JAM, the JAM mainstream was also becoming involved in sectarian violence. After the attack on the Samarra shrine in February 2006, al-Sadr remobilized and rebuilt JAM.[56] Then, as Iraq appeared to be heading toward civil war, JAM underwent a major resurgence, first as a protector of the Shia in Sadr City and then as a relentless force for sectarian cleansing. According to Cochrane, the loosely knit nature of the Sadrist movement also facilitated the "emergence of a mafia-like system [that] undermined Muqtada al-Sadr's control over his commanders. As local commanders grew more powerful and financially independent, they became less likely to follow orders from Muqtada al-Sadr and the clerical leadership in Najaf."[57]

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that JAM benefited most obviously from its criminal activities in 2006-7, even though some of these activities had been providing money for the militia from the outset.[58] The first and perhaps best established of the revenue streams came from rents or taxes imposed on oil smuggling in Basra.[59] The theft and smuggling of crude oil from Basra became evident soon after the U.S. invasion. It was facilitated by the general anarchy and insecurity and also by the specific lack of gauges and measurements in the oil facilities, combined with the pervasive corruption and lack of oversight. Reports even suggested that oil bunkering—similar to the process in the Niger Delta whereby small boats were used to move stolen oil to the bigger tankers—had become common practice. Without any real state presence, let alone regulation and enforcement, and with the spoils shared among politicians, militias, and smuggling gangs, the potential for violence was enormous.[60]

The struggle over oil rents brought the Mahdi Army into conflict with two other Shiite militias. One belonged to the Sadrist breakaway faction that had become the Fadhila

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[53] Author (Bisbee) interview with Baghdad governor, 2007. Bisbee served on the Baghdad Provincial Reconstruction Team in 2005-6 with the U.S. Army and in 2007-8 with the State Department.

[54] Cochrane, *The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement*, 6, 19.

[55] Ibid., 16.

[56] Ibid., 21.

[57] Ibid., 21.

[58] This section draws heavily on Phil Williams, *Criminals, Militias, and Insurgents: Organized Crime in Iraq* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2009).

[59] Ibid., 235.

[60] Ibid., 75-76.

Party; the other to the Badr organization, which was linked to the main Shia political parties. The three militias became engaged in sporadic but often intense violence fundamentally related to the battle over payoffs from the smuggling of crude oil.[61] All three militias demanded a cut from the smuggling proceeds carried out by several tribes, while Fadhila at times also became more directly involved in the smuggling.[62] The conflict was further complicated by militia infiltration of the police and government agencies, so that militia violence in Basra occasionally involved different police units fighting against one another.

In a completely separate activity (though also linked to the oil industry), JAM had control over black-market sales in the forecourts of many gasoline stations. Ironically, the diversion of gasoline from the major Iraqi oil refinery at Baiji was largely under the control of the Sunni insurgents.[63] Somewhere along the commodity-smuggling chain, therefore, commercial transactions were likely, either directly between Sunni insurgents and JAM or via intermediaries, although how and where these exchanges took place is uncertain. Whatever the precise arrangements, this was far from the first case of tacit cooperation between enemies to fund themselves so they could wage war on each other more effectively. The same thing had happened in places as diverse as Sarajevo and Northern Ireland.[64]

Another important revenue stream came from JAM dominance over the Shia trade in propane gas canisters, which Iraqis use for cooking.[65] Sometimes, the militiamen sold the propane at a premium, and at other times, they sold at below-market rates to earn the goodwill of the poor.[66] Too much should not be made of this, however, since JAM had little hesitation in using its territorial control for extortion. Those who paid for "protection" avoided violence and kidnapping; those who did not pay became targets.

Indeed, according to one report, JAM "was involved at all levels of the local economy, taking money from gas stations, private minibus services, electric switching stations, food and clothing markets, ice factories, and even collecting rent from squatters in houses whose owners had been displaced. The four main gas stations in Sadr City were handing over a total of about $13,000 a day, according to a member of the local council."[67] One U.S. general even compared the situation to "the old Mafia criminal days in the United States."[68]

By 2007, reports from Baghdad also suggested that the Mahdi Army had obtained complete control over the Jamila market, the most important wholesale center in Baghdad, and the receiving point for millions of dollars of market-bound goods into the capital.[69] Until mid- to late 2007, Sunni truck drivers transporting goods from Jordan and

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[61] Reidar Visser, quoted in Ben Lando, "Shia Parties Battle for Control of Oil-Rich Basra Region," UPI, Aug. 18, 2007.

[62] Williams, *Criminals, Militias, and Insurgents*, 81.

[63] Ibid., 90.

[64] See Peter Andreas, *Blue Helmets and Black Markets: The Business of Survival in the Siege of Sarajevo* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2011).

[65] Jeffrey Bartholet, "How Al-Sadr May Control U.S. Fate in Iraq," *Newsweek*, Dec. 4, 2006.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Sabrina Tavernise, "A Shiite Militia in Baghdad Sees Its Power Wane," *New York Times*, July 27, 2008.

[68] Ibid.

[69] IraqSlogger, "Anbari Trucks, Mahdi Guns, & High-Volume Trade,"' Oct. 2, 2007, http://iraqslogger. powweb.com/index.php/post/4520/Anbari_Trucks_Mahdi_Guns__High-Volume_Trade?PHPSESSID= a9a8b1d85a59b3ab94543c9f6a1e83cb.

Syria to Baghdad adopted the practice of transferring their loads to haulers outside the city in order to avoid JAM.[70] Somewhere in the latter half of 2007, however, the truckers began to complete the trip to the Jamila market. This development led to rumors that an agreement had been struck between the wholesale merchants, truckers, and the Mahdi Army, providing another lucrative revenue stream. As *IraqSlogger* put it, "With the high volume of goods arriving at Jamila market on a daily basis, bound for Baghdad's millions of consumers, any arrangement allowing a militia to take a cut of the action in exchange for non-interference with shipping operations [would have paid] very well indeed."[71]

JAM elements in Basra were also implicated in smuggling cars into Iraq from Dubai, paying for them with the proceeds obtained from oil diversion.[72] Although this was a for-profit activity rather than using the cars as weapons, the profits were almost certainly used to support both JAM's military and social welfare activities.

None of these illicit fundraising activities was surprising. All had analogues in other conflicts and illustrate the complex but inescapable linkages between crime and conflict. The profit motive also became a key impetus for sectarian cleansing as the situation in Iraq in 2006 and 2007 degenerated into what was effectively a civil war. Although Muqtada al-Sadr had earlier called for unity between the Sunni and Shia communities, JAM became a key player in Baghdad's sectarian violence. Nowhere was this more obvious than in the Ministries of Health and Interior. Although control over the Ministry of Health was designed to give the al-Sadr movement greater control over—and greater credit for—service provision in Iraq, JAM also exhibited a vicious sectarianism that included attacking Sunni patients in hospitals, and the doctors who attended them. JAM control over health facilities also meant an attack on women's health services. In an effort to push traditionalist social practices of sexual segregation, male gynecologists and other women's health specialists were banned from practicing in several facilities in Sadr City, leaving female patients to the care of often undertrained female health workers.[73]

Involvement in sectarian killings became even more pronounced as JAM members infiltrated the police in 2006-7 and used the Ministry of Interior as a base for kidnapping and killing Sunnis.[74] JAM created a climate of fear and intimidation within the Ministry and leveraged its access to set up roadblocks, disguised as police checkpoints, at critical locations. When cars with Sunnis were stopped, the occupants were often kidnapped and tortured. After they were killed, their bodies were deposited at the initial location of the kidnapping, demonstrating the impunity that JAM enjoyed.

There was also a financial impetus for continuing and expanding such activities. As the Baghdad death squads became especially adept in kidnapping, torture, and murder, car theft became a form of funding for JAM. Death squads typically financed their operations by stealing anything of value from the victims, and often the most valuable things

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[70] Ibid.

[71] Ibid.

[72] *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, "Basra—Iraq's Second Largest City Controlled by Militias and Mafias," Nov. 11, 2007; Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, "When Night Falls, the Assassins Gather in Hayaniya Square," *Guardian*, Nov. 17, 2007.

[73] Author interview with medical professional and local council member, Baghdad, 2007.

[74] Williams, *Criminals, Militias, and Insurgents*, 209.

were their cars.[75] Reportedly, stolen cars sold on the black market for roughly half their fair-market price, although the typical price was in the $2,000-$2,500 range.[76] A similar impulse was at work when JAM cleared neighborhoods of Sunni residents. When Sunnis were evicted from Shiite-dominated areas, their houses were often taken over by Mahdi Army members, who then rented or sold them. In short, as the ICG put it, JAM found that "assassinating Sunnis also became highly lucrative."[77]

But Mahdi Army violence and the resulting profits created a self-perpetuating spiral that ultimately became counterproductive. As the sectarian violence peaked, many of those who had seen JAM as their best protection against Sunni insurgents came to regard it as a mixed blessing at best and highly pernicious at worst. As one October 2007 report noted, "In a number of Shiite neighborhoods across Baghdad, residents are beginning to turn away from the Mahdi Army, the Shiite militia they once saw as their only protector against Sunni militants. Now they resent it as a band of street thugs without ideology."[78] According to one Shiite, "We thought they were soldiers defending the Shiites . . . But now we see they are youngster-killers, no more than that. People want to get rid of them."[79] The difficulty, as conflict analyst William Reno has pointed out, is that protection and predation are two sides of the same coin, and it is easy to move from one to the other.[80] By late 2007, it appeared that JAM had flipped the coin.

This is not to deny that both service provision and protection of Baghdad's Shia population against the Sunnis added enormously to the legitimacy of al-Sadr and his movement. Some of the proceeds of criminal activity and ethnic cleansing also fed into service provision for the Sadr City poor and marginalized. ICG points out, "In a city virtually abandoned by the state, Sadrist offices in several neighborhoods became the last and only resort for Shiite residents in need of help."[81] Although JAM militants' violence pushed out the very state institutions whose absence the Sadrists condemned, the Sadrists capitalized on this. They provided shelter, food, and other staples to displaced and poor Iraqis.[82] They also housed families in vacant homes, many of which were obtained through sectarian cleansing, and provided heating and cooking fuel they had either stolen outright or obtained from government sources through corruption or intimidation.

But widespread criminality soon undermined this legitimacy. How much of the blame was Muqtada al-Sadr's remains uncertain, but most accounts agree that he had very limited control over his followers. As Cockburn notes, JAM "had always had a loose structure and its fighters were largely unpaid. Units often had their origin in locally raised vigilante groups that were never amenable to discipline from the center. And as the sectarian war got bloodier, local commanders became more independent and

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[75] *IraqSlogger*, "Stolen Cars Finance Militia Operations. Fenced Autos Fetch $2,000 on the Black Market; Few Live to Complain," June 28, 2007.

[76] Ibid.

[77] ICG, "Iraq's Civil War, the Sadrists and the Surge," Middle East Report no. 72, Feb. 7, 2008, 6.

[78] Sabrina Tavernise, "Relations Sour between Shiites and Iraq Militia," *New York Times*, Oct. 12, 2007.

[79] Ibid.

[80] William Reno, "Protectors and Predators: Why Is There a Difference among West African militias?' in *Fragile States and Insecure People? Violence, Security, and Statehood in the Twenty-first Century,* ed. Louise Andersen, Bjørn Møller, and Finn Stepputat (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 99-122.

[81] ICG, "Iraq's Civil War, the Sadrists and the Surge."

[82] Dean Yates, "Cleric Sadr Key Player in Helping Poor Iraqis—Report," Reuters, Apr. 15, 2008.

more powerful."[83] The Mahdi militia began to operate as a series of semiautonomous or even wholly independent units that answered not to the Sadrist leadership but to their own commanders. At times, JAM seemed little more than a brand name used by Shia militia factions heavily involved in criminal activities and political assassinations. According to the *Washington Post,* "Bands of young gunmen used the Mahdi army name as a cover for extortion, black marketeering, and other crimes."[84] Not surprisingly, therefore, as sectarian violence waned, so did Shia tolerance for JAM's abuses.

Along with an increasingly divisive and uncontrollable movement and disillusionment among segments of his support base, al-Sadr also faced a less hospitable political environment. In November 2006, after a split over the timetable for withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq, the Sadrists withdrew from the government. This left al-Maliki free to marginalize al-Sadr and allowed Coalition forces to go after JAM more directly even in Sadr City. Recognizing the dangers that he faced from a direct confrontation with U.S. forces that were finally proving increasingly adaptable and effective, al-Sadr adopted a more conciliatory approach.

JAM Phase 3: Factionalism, Cease-fire, and the Struggle for Control, 2007

Reports from late 2006 suggest that al-Sadr and his loyalists had already tried to clean house by giving rogue commanders' names to U.S. and Iraqi forces.[85] This led to death threats against al-Sadr.[86] In January 2007, increasingly beleaguered and facing a more aggressive U.S. strategy, al-Sadr ordered JAM forces to stand down rather than fight Coalition forces.[87] At this point, he seems to have realized that direct confrontation with Coalition forces would not only complicate his efforts to purge his organization but would also severely weaken his movement. His primary focus was to reestablish control over a movement and militia that were increasingly fractured and fractious.

As ICG reported, "Muqtada's objective was to improve his movement's reputation by imposing greater discipline. Seeking to distance himself from abuses, he blamed excessive violence on rogue elements and overzealous militants, claiming to be a moderate leader urging calm."[88] Although he went into seclusion, he and his close supporters sought to reestablish central control over JAM and punish or expel those who had committed gratuitous violence or unduly exploited the Shia population. During 2007, al-Sadr also sought to position himself as a representative of national unity and began to make overtures toward the Sunni tribal leaders, who were increasingly distancing themselves from al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

Against this background, Marisa Cochrane has identified several distinct segments

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[83] Cockburn, *Muqtada*, 184.

[84] Hamza Hendawi and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "Al-Sadr Overhauling His Shiite Militia," Associated Press, Sept. 10, 2007, www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2007/09/10/AR2007091000169_pf.html.

[85] Babak Rahimi, "Muqtada al-Sadr Steps into the Power Vacuum," *Terrorism Focus* 4, no. 19 (June 19, 2007).

[86] Ibid.

[87] See Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey A. Friedman, and Jacob N. Shapiro, "Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?" *International Security* 37, no. 1 (2012): 740.

[88] ICG, "Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr," 13.

or factions, with divergent though sometimes overlapping agendas, and very different reactions to Sadr's calls for a cease-fire: "The first group included mainstream JAM led by the Najaf-based clerical leadership and the Baghdad-based political leadership. This group believed the movement had been heavily infiltrated by criminal elements and Iranian influence." [89] For this reason, it had lost much of its legitimacy and status in Shia communities. While the JAM rank and file generally followed Sadr's orders for a cease-fire, other parts of the movement were unrulier. Consequently, the leadership formed an elite unit, known as the Golden Battalion, to restore discipline by punishing or eliminating rogue elements.[90] An al-Sadr loyalist acknowledged that members of this unit "conduct spot checks, and . . . deal harshly with troublemakers."[91] According to one report, the Golden Battalion, or Golden JAM, as it was sometimes termed, operated in northwest Baghdad as early as February 2007 but intensified its activities from April onward after some groups disregarded al-Sadr's orders.[92] The effort to restore control and restrain rogue elements of JAM became even more urgent after clashes on August 27, 2007, between JAM and the Badr Militia in Karbala led to pilgrims' deaths and further tarnished JAM's image. The next day, al-Sadr announced that all militia activities, including attacks on U.S. forces, were to be suspended for the next six months and "that his movement would purge all rogue factions and reorganize."[93]

One JAM commander, Abu Jaffar, admitted that soon after the freeze on violence, the Golden Battalion summoned him and blamed him for letting the hundred men in his unit commit crimes against civilians. As a result, he was fired. The names of others who had been demoted or expelled were read at Friday prayers and posted on walls and in flyers.[94] Reportedly, one such flyer was addressed to "All Mahdi Army Members" and reported the expulsion of one member because of his "immoral actions" and "use of the blessed name of the army to loot, kidnap and bargain."[95] Other militia members were dismissed for disobeying orders or going beyond the rules of engagement established by the Sadrist leadership.

The campaign was not simply one of name and shame; it also involved direct violence. In one instance, three men on motorcycles killed 25-year-old Saif Awad. Known as "the Assassin" and heavily involved in kidnapping and extortion in Baghdad's Hurriya neighborhood, Awad was killed while in one of his two new cars.[96] Such killings became increasingly frequent, reflecting the leadership's decision to do away with those "whose thuggish tactics have disgusted ordinary Iraqis."[97] The message was clear on what would happen to those going too far in their criminal activities and hurting JAM's reputation. In January 2008, another JAM commander, called Hamza, whose units had continued killing and kidnapping despite the freeze on violence, was given a death sen-

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[89] Cochrane, *The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement*, 25.

[90] Ibid.

[91] Babak Dehghanpisheh, "The Great Muqtada Makeover," *Newsweek*, Jan. 28, 2008.

[92] Cochrane, *The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement*, 25-26.

[93] Ibid., 30.

[94] Amit R. Paley, "Sadr's Militia Enforces Cease-fire with a Deadly Purge," *Washington Post*, Feb. 21, 2008.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Dehghanpisheh, "The Great Muqtada Makeover."

[97] Ibid.

tence. A loyal Sadrist commander noted, "We were ordered to eliminate him and we did . . . This is how we have been cleaning the Mahdi Army."[98]

This process was not entirely smooth, however. The leadership frequently encountered complaints either that the cease-fire had made the Sadrists more vulnerable to rival Shia groups or that crimes such as robberies and car thefts had increased.[99] The purges also met with resistance and, sometimes, retaliation. In December, a dozen Mahdi Army fighters on motorcycles stormed into an ice factory in Baghdad's Tobji neighborhood and kidnapped its Sunni owner. When the family complained, the al-Sadr office told the kidnappers to return the victim or a complaint would go to the main Sadr office in Najaf. But the kidnappers made clear that they did "not take orders from anyone," and killed the owner.[100] In another instance, fighters who had exceeded their orders were dismissed. A Sadrist official said, "We sent people to talk to them, to inform them of Moqtada Sadr's instructions and abide by them, but they refused . . . We now consider them a splinter group. They do not belong in the Mahdi Army."[101] In response, a few days later, the fighters "attacked the Sadr office in Hurriyah with rocket-propelled grenades and machine guns."[102]

Whether because of this resistance or simply as a different tactical approach, a second but perhaps overlapping group of loyal Sadrists began working with U.S. forces to get rid of the unruliest elements in the movement. The group, Noble JAM, felt that the Mahdi Army could most effectively be purged of the death squads and other criminal elements by seeking the Coalition's help.[103] According to Cochrane, "Noble JAM operated in northwest Baghdad. In the Shi'a-dominated neighborhoods of Shula and Hurriyah, Noble JAM squads secretly cooperated with Coalition and Iraqi forces."[104] As a result, it was easier to target the criminals, the sectarian death squads, and militia members who were believed to be working closely with Iran. Noble Jam identified renegade Mahdi Army figures and provided sworn statements against them, thereby providing Coalition forces with a legal basis to take them off the streets.[105]

While some factions in JAM worked with Coalition forces, others continued to fight. Particularly troubling to the Coalition were the JAM Special Groups, also known as the Khazali network.[106] Khazali was arrested in March 2007 and was succeeded by Akram Kabi, who became head of a splinter militia known as Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH).[107] The Special Groups did not accept the freeze on hostilities, and with Iranian training and the use of explosively formed projectiles (EFPs) that were particularly lethal, they continued to pose a challenge for U.S. forces.[108] The Special Groups were never really under al-Sadr's control, and by 2007, they were completely outside his movement and militia

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[98] Paley, "Sadr's Militia Enforces Cease-fire."

[99] Ibid.

[100] Ibid.

[101] Ibid.

[102] Ibid.

[103] Cochrane, *The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement*, 26.

[104] Ibid.

[105] Lauren Frayer, "U.S. Seeks Gains in Shiite Militia Rifts," *Washington Post*, May 15, 2017.

[106] Ibid., 26.

[107] Cochrane, *The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement*, 31.

[108] Ibid.

and probably much closer to Iran than he had ever been. In 2008, when al-Sadr announced the dismantling of JAM, Asaib Ahl al-Haq continued to operate as an independent militia with continuing attacks on U.S. forces.[109] Ali Mamouri reports, "Following the withdrawal of U.S. forces, the group turned to political participation and changed its name to the Ahl al-Haq movement." Nonetheless, as recently as 2013, it was involved in relatively minor clashes with al-Sadr loyalists.[110]

The criminal gangs within JAM also refused to stand down. As Cochrane noted, "These fighters operated local criminal rackets that generated large sums of money. They stood to lose personal power and wealth in the stand-down. Their extortion of the population also meant that they were prime targets of Coalition Forces and Noble JAM."[111] Nevertheless, many of their criminal enterprises and activities were deeply entrenched, and although the attacks significantly weakened them, they were certainly not destroyed.

By the end of 2007, the traditional Sadrist leadership had made serious efforts to re-establish control over JAM, with only partial success. Criminal activities and intermilitia rivalries continued, especially in Basra. The Special Groups had not been purged but had become overtly independent from JAM, whereas earlier they had remained nominally under the JAM umbrella even while pursuing their pro-Iran agenda.

The U.S. military, however, was now differentiating between "irreconcilable" rogue members of the Mahdi Army and "reconcilable" ones they could engage. As one officer could not resist putting it, there were "all sorts of different flavors of JAM." They included those who could be integrated into the political process, as well as irreconcilable elements "as bad as AQI," and "criminal elements that use JAM as their cover."[112] Indeed, in the last four months of 2007, there was evidence of an improved relationship with U.S. forces, and explicit though covert collusion in removing from the streets some of the more extreme and uncontrollable elements within JAM. In February 2008, Muqtada al-Sadr extended the cease-fire he had put into place in August 2007. A month later, however, JAM was the target of a major offensive by the Iraqi government and, subsequently, U.S. forces. It suffered a major military defeat that paradoxically allowed al-Sadr greater freedom of action politically.

JAM Phase 4: Military Defeat and Political Reconciliation 2008-14

In March 2008, faced with continuing militia unrest in Basra, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki launched a military offensive to stabilize the city and restore order. The offensive, named the Charge of the Knights, began on March 25. At first, it appeared to be something of a debacle for government forces, with many deserting rather than fighting fellow Shiites. But with the introduction of additional forces and U.S. assistance in surveillance and air support, the tide gradually turned in the Iraqi government's favor. JAM resisted vigorously but had been significantly weakened by the time Iran brokered a truce. The outcome was a reduction in crime and violence, enhanced stability, and a significant dilution of JAM influence in Basra.

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[109] Ibid., 39-40.

[110] Ali Mamouri, "The Rise of 'Cleric Militias' in Iraq," *Iraq Pulse*, July 23, 2013.

[111] Cochrane, *The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement*, 27.

[112] Department of Defense Bloggers Roundtable with Col. Martin N. Stanton, Chief of Reconciliation and Engagement, Multinational CorpsIraq, via teleconference, Federal News Service, Nov. 2, 2007.

In the aftermath of the war, there was much speculation about the Iraqi government's objectives in going into Basra. Critics saw it as a direct attempt to undermine Muqtada al-Sadr and his constituents before provincial elections. A more cynical view is that it was part of the continued struggle over who would control Basra and its resources. In the final analysis, though, it is hard to dispute the notion that the operation was a long-overdue effort by the Iraqi state to reassert centralized power and authority and diminish the power of the militias, especially JAM. By early 2007, Iraqi government authority was viewed as almost irrelevant, with the security institutions unable to control substate groups.[113] The Charge of the Knights was an attempt to rectify the situation in a city plagued by militia violence, criminality, and repression, and it succeeded.

The battle of Basra was soon followed with another offensive in Sadr City, this time provoked by persistent rocket fire, coming mainly from the Special Groups, against Bagdad's Green Zone.[114] Led by Coalition military forces using a mix of heavy armor, Apache helicopters, and unmanned Predators, the offensive penetrated deeply into the Sadrist stronghold. Despite strong resistance, about 700 JAM militiamen were killed, and on May 11, 2008, al-Sadr requested a cease-fire.[115] Negotiations were completed the following day, and a week later, Iraqi forces moved in to take control of Sadr City. The battle had reduced JAM's military strength, removed a safe haven from the militia, and severely undermined both JAM's social control and its dominance in criminal markets. And yet, the al-Maliki and Coalition offensive also created new opportunities for Muqtada al-Sadr. In effect, it allowed him to disengage from those parts of the movement where he lacked control, and reenergize and revitalize other elements, such as his social and religious programs. In retrospect, the setbacks in Basra and Sadr City made it possible for him to move directly into the political mainstream.

Al-Sadr's willingness to move in new directions was evident on June 13, 2008. After the Friday prayer in Kufa, a Sadrist cleric read a letter from Muqtada providing guidance for JAM. Under this guidance, the Mahdi Army would be largely transformed into a civilian movement dealing with religious, social, and cultural affairs.[116] Weapons were to be restricted to experienced fighters and pointed exclusively at occupying forces.[117] The letter contained words of defiance and promised continued resistance to the occupation, while also promising to disown "any JAM members who disobeyed.[118] Several months later, in November 2008, al-Sadr created the Promised Day Brigade (PDB) as his personal militia, which was also permitted to resist the occupation and fight against U.S. troops.

All this made it uncertain whether Muqtada al-Sadr had simply adopted a low profile to let JAM rebuild its strength or had chosen to emphasize the social role of the Sadrist movement and to operate primarily through the political process. This ambiguity would persist. The United States viewed the PDB as one of the Special Groups influenced by

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[113] Adeed Dawisha, *Iraq: A Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2009), 636.

[114] For a fuller analysis, see David E. Johnson, M. Wade Markel, and Brian Shannon, "The 2008 Battle of Sadr City," RAND Occasional Paper, 2011.

[115] Ibid.

[116] Anthony H. Cordesman and Jose Ramos, "Sadr and the Mahdi Army: Evolution, Capabilities, and a New Direction," CSIS, Aug. 4, 2008, 13, http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/080804_jam.pdf.

[117] Ibid., 23.

[118] Ibid.

Iran, but the new militia's import may have been more symbolic than substantive. Some observers noted, however, that the group became more active after May 2009, and in June 2011, the PDB claimed responsibility for 52 attacks against U.S. forces.[119] Significantly, the following month, "a senior Iraqi intelligence official" told U.S. policymakers that "in order to avoid antagonizing Washington, al-Sadr had ordered the Brigade to limit its attacks to 'hard targets'—installations and armored vehicles—to minimize the likelihood of U.S. casualties."[120] At the same time, al-Sadr posted on his website a statement that "the Brigade would have the 'mission' of 'resisting' U.S. forces if they were not all gone by the end of 2011" (the deadline set for withdrawal).[121]

Even though al-Sadr had become more dependent on Iran, he was never wholly compliant. The PDB fought against other Special Groups in Sadr City and, in October 2009, defeated Asaib Ahl al-Haq, or League of the Righteous—which was very close to Iran—in a struggle for dominance in the Shia stronghold.[122] In some ways, this was a continuation of the struggle that had been going on since the splits in the military command in 2004. It also suggests that although Iran may have been trying to shape the remnants or successors of JAM, its influence over al-Sadr remained limited. The main reason for this, as suggested above, is that al-Sadr was very much an Iraqi nationalist. Consequently, the decision to withdraw U.S. forces enabled him to achieve one of his long-term goals. Moreover, he did not want one outside influence simply replaced by another. Religious deference and the need for some Iranian support kept al-Sadr's opposition to Iranian influence in Iraq subtle and covert, unlike his direct, explicit opposition to the U.S. presence. Nevertheless, the opposition was there. At the same time, the prospective U.S. withdrawal also enabled al-Sadr to move more energetically into the political arena.

In the months before the March 2010 elections, al-Sadr became a positive force, urging Iraqis to participate at the polls in order to end the foreign occupation.[123] He also called on Iraqis "to opt for the candidates who would best serve the nation and work for Iraq's liberation."[124] Given the setbacks the Sadrists had suffered, they did remarkably well at the polls, winning 40 of the National Iraqi Alliance's total of 70 seats in the 325-member Parliament.[125]

According to West Point's *CTC Sentinel*, "The key to the Sadrists' electoral success was how they applied systematic polling methods such as databases with information on voters in all provinces and a cunning campaign strategy to win voters in the south. Along with anti-establishment and populist tactics . . . al-Sadr was able to present himself and his followers as the primary political force to defend the Shi`a population."[126] It

[119] See Stanford University, "Mapping Militant Organizations: Promised Day Brigades," 2015, http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/249.

[120] Ibid.

[121] Ibid.

[122] Ibid.

[123] Benjamin Isakhan, "Despots or Democrats? Sistani, Sadr and Shia Politics in post-Saddam Iraq," in *Islam, Islamist Movements and Democracy in the Middle East: Challenges, Opportunities and Responses*, ed. Rajeesh Kumar and Navaz Nizar (New Delhi: Vision, 2013), 171-92, http://dro.deakin.edu.au/eserv/DU:30057125/isakhan-despotsordemocrats-2013.pdf.

[124] Ibid.

[125] Ibid.

[126] Babak Rahimi, "The Return of Muqtada al-Sadr and the Revival of the Mahdi Army," *CTC Sentinel* 3, no. 6 (June 3, 2010).

is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that in April 2010, in response to continued Sunni attacks on Shia targets, al-Sadr announced the restoration of JAM[127] specifically "to support Iraqi security forces" and help protect Shia religious events.[128] This was not the JAM of old, and it appeared that al-Sadr had successfully engineered the transformation of his movement and militia into the political mainstream.

Babak Rahimi noted in 2010, "As long as al-Sadr remains a major political figure, operating within the Iraqi electoral process, it is unlikely that JAM will return to its combative roots and reactivate its military program. Al-Sadr's ultimate interest is to maintain his political prestige, with the possible ambition to one day become the country's first Shia cleric prime minister or perhaps a major Shia spiritual leader like his father."[129]

Indeed, from 2011, al-Sadr took notable steps to establish himself as a leader with broad appeal, speaking in favor of social justice and the rule of law, and against sectarianism.[130] During 2012 and 2013, as large groups of Sunnis protested the increasingly sectarian policies the al-Maliki regime, al-Sadr, too, repeatedly criticized al-Maliki and distanced himself from the block of Shia political parties giving al-Maliki his parliamentary majority. This stance against sectarianism was not easy, however. Tensions between Sadrist loyalists and breakaway militant factions highlighted the cost of Sadr's retreat from militancy, and the readiness of others to fill the gap.[131]

In February 2014, al-Sadr himself seemed to be vacillating between several strategies. He announced he was retiring from political life and shutting all his offices except his charities.[132] Within a few days, however, he delivered a fiery speech calling al-Maliki a dictator and tyrant, criticizing parliament, and condemning his own party for financial corruption.[133] Moreover, any intention to withdraw from political life was nullified by the rapid advances of Islamic State insurgents. The fall of Mosul in June 2014 threw Iraq into deep crisis, and al-Sadr joined the chorus of Iraqi political elites calling for an emergency government.[134] He dramatically reenergized the Mahdi Army by mobilizing Shia fighters in Sadr City, Najaf, and Basra following an appeal by Ayatollah al-Sistani for able-bodied Iraqis to join the fight against ISIS.[135] And yet, this revival of the Mahdi Army also reinforced the familiar rifts within the Shia community as Sadr's mobilization of an independent militia challenged al-Sistani's emphasis on supporting government forces.[136]

Even in the face of an existential threat to Iraq from ISIS, Shia forces remained divided.

Lessons

What lessons about illicit power structures can be drawn from this case? What should

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[127] Ibid.

[128] Ibid.

[129] Ibid., 10.

[130] Mustafa al-Kadhimi, "The New Muqtada al-Sadr Seeks Moderate Image," *Al-Monitor*, Mar. 13, 2013.

[131] Ali Abdel Sadah, "Sadr Reconsiders Political Role, Mahdi Army," *Al-Monitor*, Aug. 30, 2013.

[132] Harith Hasan, "Is Muqtada al-Sadr Retiring or Repositioning?" *Iraq Pulse*, Feb. 21, 2014.

[133] "What next for the millions in the Sadrist movement?" *Middle East Online*, Feb. 21, 2014.

[134] Al Jazeera, "Al-Sadr Calls for Emergency Government," June 27, 2014.

[135] C. J. Chivers, "Answering a Cleric's Call, Iraqi Shiites Take Up Arms," *New York Times*, June 21, 2014.

[136] See Thomas Erdbrink, "Rifts among Shiites Further Threaten the Future of Iraq," *New York Times*, June 23, 2014.

and could have been done differently? The answers to these questions are not obvious, partly because of the nature of the Sadrist movement and the challenges arising when a legitimate social and religious movement overlapped a violent militia whose criminality helped finance the overall enterprise. When power structures are clearly licit or illicit, the course of action is usually clear. But in a complex political environment, this will seldom be the case, and in the twilight zone along the licit-illicit divide, policy choices are less obvious. Nevertheless, the experience with JAM offers some discernible lessons, about both what to avoid and what to do.

1. Be aware of both national and local realities.

The U.S. experience in Iraq highlights the critical importance, from the outset of any military intervention, of paying close attention to national and local realities. The poor planning for postwar Iraq both reflected and exacerbated intelligence gaps. Some of these gaps may have been inevitable, but there is little evidence that neoconservative decision makers wanted intelligence that would challenge the wishful thinking and naïveté with which they approached military intervention. Overly simplistic views about freedom and democracy could not be tarnished by serious consideration that U.S. military forces might not be universally welcomed as liberators.

At one level, the misunderstanding was simple: a failure to appreciate the power of Iraqi nationalism in the face of external intervention. At a more fundamental level, U.S. officials had little understanding of the Sadrists' key role in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, the sacrifices the family had made, or the popularity and legitimacy Muqtada al-Sadr enjoyed as the heir to this tradition. Nor did they understand the intra-Shia rivalries the United States had inadvertently become entangled in, or the consequences of siding with the exiles who had returned to Iraq after the regime's collapse, rather than with those who had stayed and incurred the wrath of Hussein. Bremer's targeting of al-Sadr transformed resentment into violence and helped enhance al-Sadr's reputation and status. Although al-Sadr suffered a major defeat by the Coalition in 2004, he also displayed a willingness to resist the occupation—a stance that increasingly appealed to many Iraqis as conditions of disorder and insecurity continued.

2. Recognize and integrate all the stakeholders.

Second, it is crucial to identify and understand the whole spectrum of stakeholders and deal with them equitably. Be cautious about preferential approaches to stakeholders. While some are obviously more important than others, snubbing and excluding particular groups and treating them as irrelevant to the country's future is a recipe for disaster. Even worse is the tendency for the United States to classify as a spoiler any group with a different vision for the country's future. Such an approach almost invariably creates a self-fulfilling prophecy: treating groups as irreconcilable merely pushes them into being so.

3. Develop more sophisticated policies for complex challenges.

Third, and an important concomitant to the preceding lessons, is the need for sophisticated and subtle policies to deal with ambiguous and complex challenges. The Sadrist movement emerged as, and remains, the advocate for a large, young, and hugely disadvantaged sector of the Iraqi population, whose grievances and concerns must be met for Iraq to have any hope of long-term stability. Although JAM was more problematic, for a while it protected a significant portion of the Shia population, acting with a high degree of legitimacy. But its actions intensified sectarian violence and undermined even the rudimentary efforts by the government and the United States to reestablish the rule of law. As the Iraqi government, with U.S. backing, gradually and incrementally restored a degree of order and a sense of security to the population, JAM became less crucial.

4. Reduce or minimize opportunities for illicit activities to flourish.

The Coalition's permissive and complacent attitude toward the looting that accompanied the fall of the regime was a profound mistake. It helped establish a culture of lawlessness that proved difficult to change. Similarly, in its response to kidnapping, the Coalition focused only on its own nationals and those Iraqis who provided critical support to the Coalition.

This permissive approach not only perpetuated a climate of insecurity but also clearly revealed the ways that political actors, whether militias such as JAM or insurgents such as AQI, could usefully appropriate organized-crime methodologies. Indeed, kidnapping and extortion, as well as the theft, diversion, and smuggling of oil, helped fund the violence in Iraq. Ironically, a team from the UN Office of Drugs and Crime had warned the United States about the growth of organized crime and its potential impact.[137] Unfortunately, as one member of the team noted, when the members briefed U.S. civilian and military leaders in Iraq, they met a mixture of hostility and indifference.[138]

5. Encourage the moderate factions in violent groups.

The preceding lessons, from the early period of the occupation, are about what to *avoid*. Several lessons from the later years, on the other hand, concern the kinds of approaches to *embrace,* to help reduce violence. One of these is that even in a group generally regarded as beyond the pale, there may still be differences between parts of the group that can be reconciled and brought into the political process, and those elements that remain irreconcilable. Encouraging and exploiting potential fissures can provide important opportunities. In the case of al-Sadr and JAM, this was made easer by the leadership's loss of control, and the obvious overreach with which zealous militant elements inflicted extraordinary predation on wide swaths of the Iraqi population. Moreover, some of JAM's activities were tacitly or explicitly repudiated by Muqtada al-Sadr and those close to him, who displayed a readiness to sacrifice the more extremist and criminal elements in

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[137] UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), "Addressing Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking in Iraq: Report of the UNODC Fact Finding Mission," Aug. 5-18, 2003, Vienna.

[138] Author interview with member of UNODC team, June 2009, Vienna.

JAM. This was something that the U.S. military encouraged by employing a differentiated policy that distinguished between those elements of JAM that could be reconciled with developments in Iraq, and those that were irreconcilable and should be targeted. This policy was vastly more sophisticated and subtle than the ham-fisted initial Bremer approach.

6. Provide consistent governance at all levels.

Another set of lessons to be drawn from the experience in Iraq, while seemingly tangential to the problem of militant groups such as JAM, is, in fact, directly related. The plan to radically decentralize Iraqi governance was a flawed experiment with disastrous results. Locally created councils were supposed to influence the local delivery of services, but Iraq's service delivery institutions were merely branches of a network of centralized national ministries, each controlled by different factional elites with interests far removed from local concerns. The elites in charge of the national ministries had priorities wholly disconnected from those of the local leaders trying to voice local concerns. Mid-level ministry officials, who actually had the most ability to improve Iraq, kept their head down, trying not to run afoul of party elites, militants, and angry demagogues in the local councils. Thus, Iraq's new democracy was dysfunctional on three levels. Moreover, U.S. reconstruction efforts focused mainly on the elites and the street—the top and bottom levels—with reconciliation and grassroots democracy, and neglected the middle. This failure to put appropriate emphasis on the top-to-bottom functioning of Iraqi ministries produced an environment that enabled illicit power structures such as JAM to corrupt and subvert legitimate governance activities to their own ends.

An enormous mismatch existed between U.S. support at the elite levels of ministry leadership, and the efforts of local Coalition military units pursuing expedient measures, in the name of counterinsurgency, to assist local government institutions. U.S. efforts oscillated between the mutually exclusive aims of decentralization, in which institutional arrangements were radically changed, and stabilization, which aimed to prop up whatever seemed to be working at any given time.

7. Enhance, rather than undermine, security goals and policies.

The overall reconstruction effort often put long-term reconstruction and development goals at odds with military necessity. Even when these were not at odds, the focus on economic development sometimes had unintended adverse consequences. Iraqi contractors, for example, who were typically victims of extortion by militant organizations, built their extortion payments into their contract bids. Consequently, the United States indirectly helped fund the very groups it was fighting. Oversight of reconstruction and development assistance to ensure that funds are not extorted or diverted by hostile groups is essential.

8. Use military force to create incentives for armed groups to move into the political process.

Although military force can sometimes be used in ill-advised ways, it is an indispensable tool to counter illicit power structures. Military resources should be heavily focused on the irreconcilable elements of illicit groups, in ways that highlight the futility of those groups' efforts and compel hard-line factions to realize that nonviolent options might actually offer more benefits. In this connection, the reassertion of state power, albeit with U.S. support, in Basra and Sadr City in 2008 had a dramatic impact. Not only did the Charge of the Knights and the subsequent moves into Sadr City represent a pivotal point in limiting the power of militias in general and JAM in particular, these offensives also paved the way for restoration of stability, reduction of violence, and containment of criminal activities. Paradoxically, they also made it easier for al-Sadr to justify his transition from violent resistance against the occupation to more moderate forms of resistance, expressed through the political process. Perhaps the ultimate irony in Iraq is that in 2007-8, the U.S. military displayed a remarkable capacity for adaptation and strategic learning, which was matched only by a similar capacity in al-Sadr and those parts of his militia known as Golden JAM and Noble JAM. It is still uncertain whether this coincidence of flexible and subtle strategies on both sides was purely fortuitous or is something that can be replicated in other contingencies.

Conclusion

The demonstrable shift in JAM's status from irreconcilable spoiler to the U.S. occupation, to diminished armed wing of a Sadrist political movement aiming to move into the legitimate sphere of Iraqi governance, was, from the U.S. perspective, one of the success stories of the Iraq War. The operational shifts that accompanied the Surge—especially the targeting of JAM's most extreme irreconcilables—proved effective in reshaping the political calculations of one of the main factions responsible for the instability undermining Iraq. An illicit power structure, built on militant force and enriched by aggressive criminality, was eventually contained when it overreached in its predation on the population and miscalculated its military capability. Internal fissures within the Sadrist organization, coupled with the determined U.S. efforts to help the al-Maliki regime harness the state's security forces and stabilize Iraq, seemed to offer windows of opportunity for a new political bargain to emerge. Had these trends continued, this transition of the Sadrists from resistance to participation might have offered even more lessons about neutralizing a spoiler and constructing a lasting postconflict political order.

Unfortunately, many of these hard-won gains have dissipated following the U.S. departure from Iraq. Under al-Maliki, stability proved chimerical because his authoritarian tendencies undermined opportunities for a lasting political settlement between factions. The possibilities that the Anbar Awakening gave al-Maliki to reintegrate the Sunnis into more inclusive political arrangements and give them a real stake in the new Iraq were squandered. Instead, the exclusive and corrupt nature of the regime inspired little support or loyalty from the Sunnis. By the end of 2014, with the resurrection of AQI as Islamic State (or ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh), and the capture of Mosul, the de facto

disintegration of Iraq, thought to have been prevented by the Surge, had become a reality. This breakdown of the state has seen the resurgence of Shia militia groups. Al-Sadr has reformed Jaish al-Mahdi, rebranded as "Peace Brigades," to join the fight alongside the forces of other Shia militias (many directed by Iranian Quds Force leadership), Iraqi security forces, and apprehensive Sunni fighters, to push back against Islamic State's advance into Iraq. But in its efforts to retake the major cities captured by Islamic State, this force seems as likely to engage in sectarian slaughter as to restore the authority of Baghdad. Muqtada al-Sadr has been one of the few Shia militia leaders sensitive to the dangers that another round of sectarian bloodletting presents to Iraq. Perhaps this is a measure of how far he has come since 2003. But if so, it is unfortunate that his concerns do not appear to be widely shared.