

# SADR AND THE MAHDI ARMY:

Evolution, Capabilities, and a New Direction

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## *Executive Summary*

Iraq still faces three major internal security risks: First, the resurgence of Al Qa'ida in Iraq; second, the risk that ethnic or sectarian tensions could turn violent, rather than be solved through political accommodation, and third, the risk that a substantial element of the Sadrist movement and the Mahdi Army or Jaysh Al-Mahdi (JAM) will try to use violence to achieve political power – possibly with Iranian support. This analysis focuses on the latter risk, and recent developments in the Sadrist movement and the JAM.

At this moment in time, that risk seems significantly lower than it did at the start of 2008. At the start of the year, the JAM seemed to be emerging as the most serious of the three remaining threats. These threats precipitate violence which could prevent Iraq from finding a relatively peaceful path back to stability and development. That threat now seems significantly lower, and Muqtada al-Sadr appears to be concentrating on his political options.

The key first step in reducing the threat from the JAM was the Iraqi government intervention in Basra. On March 25, al-Maliki and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) entered Basra in order to regain control of a situation often leading to violence. Shi'a factions, the SIIC and the Da'wa, the Sadrist and JAM, and the al-Fadilah were fighting for control of oil facilities, control of the ports, and the lucrative business of smuggling. By March 30, al-Sadr and the Iraqi government had agreed to a ceasefire with the assistance of the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF), Qassem Suleimani.”<sup>1</sup> In total, 6,000 troops and U.S. air support was needed to reinforce 30,000 ISF troops already in Basra.

Further progress then occurred in Baghdad and Sadr City. As troops entered Basra, JAM and “special group” militants started a barrage of mortar and rocket attacks on the Green Zone. In response coalition forces built a concrete wall in Sadr City, in an attempt to isolate the attacks while at the same time cutting off support. What at first appeared to be the groundwork for a collision between ISF and the JAM ended with another Iranian brokered ceasefire allowing thousands of Iraqi troops into once off-limit areas of Sadr City. Although ISF entered Sadr City without U.S. troops due to ceasefire preconditions, the U.S. is still required for both air support and as a Quick Reaction Force (QRF).

Prime Minister al-Maliki then continued to apply pressure on al-Sadr by targeting areas like Amarah, which has been a hub for Iranian weapons smuggling. Once again, the JAM and “special groups” followed al-Sadr's ceasefire. Raids in Amarah led to discoveries of multiple weapons caches which included many Iranian made armaments. Pressure on the JAM has continued, and especially on the more radical and violent elements within it.

The JAM has not been defeated, however, and Muqtada al-Sadr has continued to explore ways to restructure the JAM and expand his political options. Al-Sadr has

proven capable of maneuvering and heading in what seems to be a new direction. On June 13, 2008, al-Sadr's released a letter laying out a strategic shift in the way the JAM is to operate in Iraq. Al-Sadr stated that he was dividing his Mahdi Army into two distinct wings. The largest wing would be made up from most of his followers. This group was designed to act as the "political" and "social services" wing. The smaller group would be turned into new "special companies" of elite experienced fighters tasked with resisting the occupation.<sup>2</sup>

It is still far from clear how these "special companies" will be structured, how they will be used, how effective they will be, and how they will relate to the more extreme JAM elements that the Coalition has called "Special Groups." It is also unclear how much real paramilitary capability Sadr and the JAM have to build upon. While Sadr's forces are called a "militia," most seem to be little more than street thugs who are more skilled in sectarian cleansing and excoriation than actual fighting. Although some elements of the Sadr militia have had arms and training from the Iranian Al Quds force and other elements like the Hezbollah, the scale and success of that training is far from clear.

Most of the JAM seems to consist of young men with little training and discipline who could exploit a vacuum in security and governance in areas like Basra and Sadr City, but had no clear hierarchy, uncertain discipline, and limited war fighting capability. A number of cadres within the JAM seem more capable, but their current strength, the level of Sadr's control, and their present willingness to fight sustained battles with Iraq's growing security forces is unclear. It would be exceedingly dangerous to dismiss them, but equally dangerous to exaggerate their capabilities. The fact is that there is not enough empirical evidence to judge their present level of capability or Sadr's success in transforming them into a more effective force.

Iranian involvement remains a key issue, and one with many uncertainties. Iran seems to be trying to find a careful balance between retaining influence over Sadr and the JAM and working with the Iraqi government and other Shi'ite parties. Iran seems to have played an important role in both the Sadr ceasefire in Basra and in Sadr City, but some of the most lethal technology used in IEDs, components for shaped charges, came from Iran.

Examinations of captured weapons caches also reveal a wide range of Iranian weapons which are identifiable through lot numbers with manufacturing dates within the last three years. These weapons include some of the rockets and mortars used in strikes against the Green Zone during the fighting in Sadr City before the ceasefire. The JAM has had Iranian advisors and the new direction al-Sadr appears to be taking in shaping the JAM does resemble the Iranian-sponsored Hezbollah.

Finally, even though the Iraqi government so far appears to have come out on top in its clashes with al-Sadr and the JAM, much of the JAM survived the ISF attacks on Basra, Baghdad, and other areas by dispersing and hiding their weapons. Most elements of the JAM that were involved in significant fighting managed to disengage from heavy

fighting without having to disarm the Mahdi Army. Much depends, therefore, on both the future of the Sadrist movement and the Iraqi government's success in winning sustained popular support from Iraq's Shi'ites.

If Sadr is excluded from Iraq's political process, feels the process is unfair, or chooses to mix politics with violence, the JAM could again become a major threat. Sadr's future strength will also depend heavily on how well the Iraqi government builds on the success of the Iraqi security forces to provide local security, government services, and economic opportunity – particularly for the massive number of Shi'ite young men who are unemployed or underemployed.

It is also important to note that Iraq's current Shi'ite political parties gained power in elections with closed lists of candidates and won largely on the basis of a sectarian coalition. None have really had to campaign for office on the basis of merit or clear policies and goals. None have had to be judged on the ability of their basis to serve a given constituency, and none have had to participate in open local and provincial elections.

This makes it very difficult to judge the future balance of power between leading factions like Al-Da'wa, the SIIC, and the Sadrists if honest elections are held with open lists of candidates. It makes it equally hard to judge what will happen if elections are not held or are not felt to be fair. It is equally difficult to look beyond the prospect of local elections in 2008 and national elections in late 2009, and judge how effective Iraq's current and future central governments will be in serving Iraq's Shi'ites. So far, the central government has been as ineffective in meeting Arab Shi'ite needs as those of Arab Sunnis.

The unknowns shaping the balance of power in terms of violence are matched by those shaping the balance of power in terms of religious influence, local and national politics, governance, local security and the rule of law, and economics. Intra-Shi'ite power struggles over all these issues are a certainty and will almost certainly play out over at least the next half decade. Whether this will lead to intra-Shi'ite violence, and how it will affect Iraq's broader sectarian and ethnic tensions, is beyond any reasonable ability to predict. Only time can provide the answers.

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## ***I. The Sadrist Movement: Understanding the Importance of the Past***

The forces that shape the Sadrist movement long predate the US-led invasion. Saddam Hussein and Ba'athist Party never tolerated any rival source of power, and especially among Iraqi Shi'ites and Kurds. Nevertheless, Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr developed his own version of the Sadrist movement. Baqir al-Sadr, also known as Sadr I, was Muqtada al-Sadr's uncle and father-in-law. Baqir and his daughter were killed in 1980, after Saddam indentified him as a threat for being one of the Da'wa Party founders and opponent of the regime.<sup>3</sup>

Ayatollah Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr, Muqtada's father, then took over as the head of the Sadrist movement. Unlike Baqir al-Sadr, Sadiq al-Sadr opposed the principle of *Taqiyya* (dissimulation and concealment) followed by Baqir and other prominent Ayatollah's such as al-Sistani.<sup>4</sup> He believed that the "Shi'a religious leaders needed to stand up openly" transitioning from a silent and pacifist *Marji'iyah* (religious authority) to an active more militant form of *Marji'iyah*.<sup>5</sup> Sadiq al-Sadr built a movement based on Islamic revivalism, Iraqi nationalism and social populism, which Muqtada al-Sadr would soon inherit.<sup>6</sup> Sadiq al-Sadr also began to strengthen his alliance with Shi'a tribes in Sadr City, which represented many of the tribes found in Southern Iraq. It was during that time of transition that the Mahdi Army began to evolve into its current form.

During this time, Sadiq al-Sadr made enemies who have become some of the Muqtada al-Sadr's political rivals. While Sadiq al-Sadr blamed the United States for the sanctions which impoverished the country and led to "horrific conditions," he also criticized Sistani, Khoei, the Da'wa, and al-Hamik (SCIRI) for abandoning the Shi'ite population.<sup>7</sup> His criticism intensified after the Shi'a Intifada of 1991 began, following the Gulf War.<sup>8</sup>

His actions also created problems with Iran. Even though Sadiq supported an Islamic state ruled by *Wilayat al-Faqh* (learned jurist) just like Ayatollah Khomeini, relationships with Iran began to deteriorate as Sadiq proclaimed leadership over the Iraqi Shi'a, taking supreme Islamic power away from Iran.<sup>9</sup> It was during this time that a young Muqtada al-Sadr became involved in his father's movement. He helped security for his father, and became the chief editor of the Sadrist Islamic magazine *al-Huda*.<sup>10</sup>

Once Saddam suppressed the Shi'a Intifada in 1991, he allowed Sadiq al-Sadr to become the most prominent Shi'a voice in Iraq. Saddam tolerated Sadiq and even assisted him as a way to prevent another uprising. This led to further criticism of Sadr by exiled Shi'a leaders who saw Sadiq as both a rival and disloyal to their vision of the Shi'ite cause. Ayatollah Sadiq al-Sadr scarcely proved to be a Saddam loyalist, however, and he and Muqtada al-Sadr's two brothers were assassinated in Baghdad in 1999.

A second and much smaller rebellion took place following these assassinations sometimes labeled as the "Sadr Intifada." Saddam didn't hesitate to crush the uprising before it led to a bigger rebellion. Moreover, Shi'ite leaders in exile and the Badr

Brigade did not support the rebellion nor assist the Shi'a population, and Muqtada al-Sadr was thrown into the leadership position of the Sadrist movement.

## ***II. The Mahdi Evolution Following the U.S.-led Invasion***

These developments helped position Sadr to exploit the power vacuum that followed the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Muqtada al-Sadr soon emerged as a significant figure and a violent one. He is associated with the killing of Sayyid Abdul Majid al-Khoei in 2003, and his growing militia fought battles with U.S. and British troops in Najaf in April 2004 and again in August 2004.

The rise in sectarian violence gave Sadr new opportunities to expand his role and that of his militia, particularly after the 2006 al-Askari mosque bombing in Samarra. Sectarian violence became rampant throughout much of Iraq and Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army often provided the security the Shi'a population needed. At the same time, Coalition and Iraqi defeats steadily weakened Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). By March 2007, a number of US officers and intelligence analysts felt that the Mahdi Army had had "replaced AQ-I as the most dangerous accelerant of potentially self-sustaining sectarian violence in Iraq."<sup>11</sup> They were particularly worried about the most violent elements within the JAM, that MNF-I came to call the "special groups."

A growing political power struggle had begun between Sadr and other elements of the Shi'ite coalition party, called the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA). Sadr's rivals in Al Da'wa, now led by Prime Minister Maliki, and the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC), led by Sayyid Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, controlled most centers of power in the government and most of the governorates and key offices in southern Iraq. It was clear to all of the Shi'ite factions that control of the south was up for grabs, and that the party or parties that controlled the south before any local and provincial elements would have a major advantage. These tensions help lead Sadr to have his faction withdraw from the government on September 2007.<sup>12</sup>

Violence broke out long before the surge and tribal uprising began to suppress AQI in much of the country. By August 2007, the Mahdi Army and the Badr Brigade were facing off in a bloody battle in the holy city of Karbala. This fighting came to a close when Mahdi leaders agreed to a ceasefire. This ceasefire did reduce the level of violence, but elements of the Sadr militia continued to attack rival militias, coalition forces and the ISF. Moreover, intra-Shi'ite squabbles and political tensions rose as the prospect of provincial and local elections became more real, and elements of SIIC began to exercise more direct influence through their control of the governor's office in most Shi'ite governorates, as well as the police and often the local commands of the Iraqi Army.

It is far from clear that this power struggle was the key reason that Prime Minister Maliki launched his offensive in Basra. The city was not dominated by the Sadr militia as much as by a range of political gangs that smuggled crude oil, stole product imports, manipulated cargo shipments and custom fees, and ran local extortion rackets. Bad as the Sadrists were, no political party was innocent, especially a smaller southern party called al-Fadilah, which controlled the governor's office. The fact remained, however, that a city and province that were a key source of the nation's wealth, its only outlet to the Gulf,



and the location of two-thirds of Iraq's oil exports was coming under hostile local control. Moreover, the Sadrists seemed to be winning growing power after the British presence in Basra virtually collapsed and British forces largely retreated to Basra airport.

The exact reasons for Maliki's timing are far from clear, but control of Basra's oil facilities, ports, and the lucrative smuggling business were putting growing pressure on the Iraqi government to act. On March 25, 2008, the Iraqi Army began operation "Knight's Charge" in the port city of Basra. This operation ran into major problems that are described later, but the end result strongly favored Malki and the ISF. The Mahdi Army lost control of the streets in Basra as a result of the operation and the ceasefire negotiated in Qom, and al-Maliki gained much needed respect from Sunnis and Kurds by finally fighting Shi'ite militants. At the same time, al-Maliki's actions potentially limited the success that Sadr and Sadrists could have during provincial/local elections.

Further gains occurred as a result of ISF operations taking place in Sadr City, although not without initial significant fighting. As the Iraq Security Forces (ISF) entered Basra, the JAM launched mortar and rocket attacks from Sadr City on the Green Zone. After weeks of increasing attacks, U.S. and Iraqi forces responded by building a wall which isolated the southern parts of al-Sadr's stronghold of Sadr City. Unlike the Basra operation, however, the ISF's operations in Sadr City met with little Sadrist resistance. On May 11, 2008, al-Sadr and the Iraqi government came to a second ceasefire which allowed the ISF access into all of Sadr City.

Al-Maliki was quick to exploit this ceasefire. On June 18, Operation Basha'er as-Salaam began. The operation was conducted in the town of Amarah located in the Maysan province which borders Iran. The military purpose of the operation was to curb the suspected weapons smuggling from Iran but it was again seen as an attack on the Sadrist political movement.

Sadr's Mahdi army lost much of the territory it once controlled in these operations, but it did not fight the kind of serious battles that led to major losses, and it is unclear how much capability it retained. One Iraqi politician stated that, "*The main Mehdi Army bastions in Baghdad were Sadr City, with a population of 2.4 million people, and in al-Hurriyah and al-Shu'ala districts, with a further 1.1 million. That is more than half the people in Baghdad, and I suspect the Mehdi Army could take back these areas in 48 hours' fighting.*"<sup>13</sup>

It is not clear that this is the case. The JAM certainly has some capability for paramilitary combat and urban warfare, but it is scarcely a well-organized, well-disciplined, or capable force. It is one thing for street thugs to exploit a power vacuum and deal with other street thugs in a movement like the AQI. It is another to fight to what are increasingly more experienced and capable Iraqi Army forces, particularly without broad popular support.

In any case, al-Sadr responded by changing tactics. On June 13, al-Sadr released a statement outlining a new plan for the JAM. In a letter read in Kufa by one of his clerics, al-Sadr announced the division of his Mahdi Army. The Sadrist movement would now consist of a social/political wing, made up of most of his followers, and a small group of

elite fighters, that he labeled “special companies.” The purpose of these “special companies” was stated to be solely to rid the country of all foreign occupiers, although it was clear that they could as easily be used to bolster al-Sadr in any confrontations with the Maliki government

### ***III. Al-Sadr's Politics: Fighting with Rhetoric***

Unlike Ayatollah al-Sistani, Muqtada al-Sadr has never practiced “quietism.” From the outset, Muqtada al-Sadr has been an open critic of the U.S. occupation, and he quickly became known as a “firebrand” cleric. Since May of 2007, however, al-Sadr has been more calculating in issuing his orders. He has not appeared in public and has conveyed all of his messages through proxies.

Starting in the summer of 2007, Sadr began to communicate officially through three or four top aides, who are switched every few months. This practice has made it harder to validate the authenticity of Sadr's messages. Moreover, al-Sadr has also used other clerics and militia leaders to publicize his positions in ways where it is unclear whether they speak for Sadr or themselves, and whether Sadr is deliberately sending different signals to different audiences.

#### **Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) Iraq-U.S.**

What is clear from repeated statements, however, is that al-Sadr has constantly rejected a U.S. presence since the onset of the Iraq war. Al-Sadr labeled the U.S. as a “cancer that has spread and must be removed.”<sup>14</sup> Sadr has also made it clear that he does not support a long-term agreement with the U.S. On May 28, for example, the Muqtada al-Sadr called for protests against the U.S.-Iraq status of forces agreement (SOFA) and issued orders to:

- raise awareness of its terms;
- unite political opposition against it;
- participate in weekly protests;
- hold a national referendum or if denied gather millions of opposition signatures;
- form political and religious delegations in opposition;
- set a timetable for the occupation's end;
- inform the Iraqi government it has no right to sign an agreement; and
- to have the Hawza Shi'ite religious academy become more active and stand against an agreement that's clearly against the interests of the Iraqi people.<sup>15</sup>

After this announcement during a Friday sermon, the U.S. military estimated that 10,000 protesters took the streets in Sadr City. However, the number of protesters dropped significantly to around 3,000 on June 6 and to 1,500 by June 13.”<sup>16</sup>

#### **Domestic Issues**

Sadr initially tolerated and supported the current Iraqi government. Al-Maliki's selection as Prime Minister would not have been possible without al-Sadr's support.

Yet, Al-Sadr did always keep a distance. During the January 2005 provincial elections, the Sadrists had minimal involvement, leaving al-Sadr's faction underrepresented in most southern provinces.<sup>17</sup> In total, the Sadrists won an estimated 30 of 275 seats in Iraq's parliament and became members of the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), an umbrella Shi'a political group.<sup>18</sup>

The Sadr faction stayed in the government as long as this was to Sadr's advantage, but rivalry grew steadily with Al Da'wa and the SIIC. By April 2007, Sadrists had pulled out from their cabinet positions, which included the Ministries of Health, Transportation, and Agriculture as well as two Ministry of State posts.<sup>19</sup> By September 2007, the Sadrists had officially left the UIA bloc.

These shifts reflect intra-Shi'ite power struggles which could become a new source of violence in Iraq. The Sadrists' two biggest political rivals are the Da'wa Party lead by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (formerly the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, SCIRI), led by Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim. The SIIC returned to Iraq in 2003 with the biggest Shi'ite militia, the "Badr Brigade." This force was trained and equipped in Iran by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. In theory, the Badr Brigade is now a civil Badr Organization, although the SIIC still retains the second-largest Shi'ite militia.

Much of the original "Badr Brigade" is also now a part of the ISF, particularly the National police and police commando units.<sup>20</sup> This infiltration of the ISF by the Badr Brigade has contributed to a series of confrontations between JAM and the Iraqi government.

In April 2008 al-Sadr threatened al-Maliki as follows after the confrontation in Basra:

- "Do you want a third uprising?": referring to the two Mahdi Army uprisings in Baghdad, Najaf, and the South in April and August 2006.
- "So I direct my last warning and speech to the Iraqi government to refrain and to take the path of peace and abandon violence against its people. If the government does not refrain and leash the militias that have penetrated it, we will announce an open war until liberation."<sup>21</sup>

Maliki quickly responded. On April 6, 2008, the Iraqi government asked that al-Sadr disband the JAM as a precondition to participate in the upcoming provincial elections.<sup>22</sup> The request was made for internal security reasons and probably because Da'wa and SIIC were seeking to curb the influence that Sadrists are expected to have in the upcoming elections. In response, al-Sadr declared another a political shift. On Saturday, June 14, 2008, a spokesman for al-Sadr said that the Sadrist movement would not take part in the provincial elections, but al-Sadr also made it clear that the Mahdi Army will be supporting "technocrats and independent politicians" to keep other parties from dominating the political scene.<sup>23</sup>

As for legislation currently in progress, al-Sadr is opposed to:

- “A Shi’ite region” in the south
- The draft oil laws: seen as a “sellout”
- A defense pact with U.S.<sup>24</sup>

### **Al-Sadr’s Letter**

Sadr has continued to maneuver. On June 13, 2008, after the Friday prayer in Kufa, a cleric affiliated with Sadr’s movement read a letter laying out new guidance for the JAM. The letter called for the following steps:

- Transitioning much of the rest of the Mahdi Army into a civilian movement dealing with "religious, social and cultural affairs,"
- The other group will be an armed force of experienced fighters labeled “the special companies.”
- Restricting weapons exclusively to this new group, and stating they should be pointed exclusively at the occupier.
- Using the civilian side of the movement to fight Western ideology and liberate Iraqi minds from domination and globalization.
- “We will not stop resisting the occupation until liberation or martyrdom.”
- Disowning anyone in the Mehdi Army who disobeys Sadr’s new commands.

Sadr also stated that, "The resistance will be exclusively conducted by only one group. This new group will be defined soon by me."<sup>25</sup>

In addition to unveiling the new strategy, al-Sadr and his followers made it public that they believed al-Maliki’s actions were just a way to curb their success in the upcoming election. For example, a Shi’ite cleric allied with Muqtada al-Sadr described the Iraqi security operation in Amarah as a "fierce attack" against the Sadrist political movement.”<sup>26</sup>

#### ***IV. The Evolving Jaysh Al-Mahdi (JAM)***

The key question for Iraq's future is how much of a threat the JAM still presents to political accommodation in Iraq, and how Sadr will actually use it in the future. According to recent estimates in a Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I) report, "The Mahdi Army and its affiliated special groups have a combined nationwide strength of approximately 25,000 to 40,000 active members supported by a large body of non-active supporters."<sup>27</sup> However, the true size of the JAM is guesswork at best. So are the size of its weapons holdings, the level of training given cadres have absorbed, the role Iran has played with various elements, and how much discipline Sadr can exert over time.

What is clear is that al-Sadr's various calls for ceasefires have contributed to the decrease in violence since the beginning of the surge in 2007. If al-Sadr should now begin to use his "special companies" and JAM attacks should prove effective, this might do much to offset the progress over the last year.

#### **Understanding the JAM**

The JAM has been effective in the past, although scarcely as a major paramilitary force or in prolonged combat. From 2004-2007, various elements of the Mahdi Army and "special groups" were able to increase their area of influence throughout most of Southern Iraq and the Baghdad region. The Mahdi Army gained legitimacy after the 2006 bombing in Samarra, by providing protection against Sunni radicals when the Iraqi government could not.

In addition, the Mahdi Army has offered Shi'ites some much-needed services, such as generators. In a country where electricity may only run four hours a day, a generator provided by the JAM can have a popular impact.<sup>28</sup> However, Sadrists militants have often sold power at high rates and have sometimes prevented the government from providing other services by threatening contractors.

More broadly, many of the Mahdi Army's activities resemble those of organized crime. Using mafia-like tactics have allowed the JAM to become 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."<sup>29</sup> The JAM was able to control parts of their operation through exploitation and threats.

These tactics, however, depended on the absence of government services and security forces, and were scarcely designed to make the JAM popular. Neither were the arrogance and private criminal activities of many of its members, or its emphasis on strict Islamic practices as interpreted by the JAM rather than the mainstream *Ulema* (legal scholars).

This explains why the Iraqi government has been able to win back support by providing some sense of security, and services that give poor Shi'ites a reason to gain confidence in their government. However, this has been far less true where the government has not provided security or where the government is unable to provide essential services such as garbage disposal; in these areas the Shi'a population will continue to be discontent and likely to support al-Sadr.

## Special Groups

In addition to the Mahdi Army, there are smaller, hard-line Shi'ite groups that have often led the fight against the U.S. and ISF. Coalition forces have labeled these elements of the JAM "special groups". Most, however, are not organized as part of an integrated force or with any well-structured, special hierarchy.

Many of these elements are described as rogue JAM members with an Iranian influence. Al-Sadr has repeatedly claimed that these groups are not under his influence, it is unclear what connections they have to the Sadrist movement. However, "special groups" appear to be operating only in areas that are considered JAM strongholds. Even though al-Sadr claims to have no connection to such groups, the recent military operations in Basra, Sadr City, and Amarah hint at the fact that the "special groups" are followed by al-Sadr's ceasefire.

Some argue that al-Sadr uses these groups as a scapegoat for violent acts that would affect his credibility. U.S. commanders have often stated that the "special groups" are linked to both al-Sadr and Iran. Their link to Iran will be discussed in the Iranian portion of this paper.

## Fighting Capabilities

In spite of their limits and lack of practical combat experience the Mahdi Army and the "special groups" have been effective in using asymmetrical warfare in a number of past battles, and they remain the largest and most dangerous Shi'a militia in Iraq.<sup>30</sup> Their ability to adapt to military tactics and technological advancements has put further stress on the U.S. military both financially and mentally, and their ability to develop and/or employ devastating weapon systems has been a serious problem.

## Armaments

The Mahdi army uses both small and heavy arms. Most fighters are equipped with the classic AK-47 assault rifles. The use of grenades, RPG's, sniper rifles, and other light machineguns is common among fighters. Then JAM's use of IEDs, EFPs, IRAMs, mortars and Katyusha rockets has been particularly difficult to defend against and have been the primary cause of both civilian and military casualties.

- **IEDs** – Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) are a signature weapon used by the Mahdi Army and "special companies." According to data provided by Iraqi officials, from January 2007 - June 2008, there have been over 1,500 violence incidents involving IEDs.<sup>31</sup> The widespread use of IEDs illustrates how simple it is for the Mahdi Army to employ a rather rudimentary weapon system. In order to combat technological advancements such as the up-armored Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicle (MRAP), the sizes of IEDs have increased dramatically. These developments have created concern to the extent where the U.S. is spending billions of dollars to develop a new prototype vehicle, MRAP II. In April, 5 U.S. soldiers were killed as IED's flipped MRAP's over.
- **EFPs** - The increased use of Explosively Formed Projectile/Penetrator's (EFPs) has been a concern and challenge for both ISF and the coalition forces. Unlike an IED, EFP's shoot out wads of nearly-molten copper which can, in some cases; penetrate the armor on an Abrams tank. A May 4, 2008 EFP attack also demonstrated that the MRAPs are vulnerable to EFPs. EFP's are

strongly believed to be a weapons system which Iran has contributed to the arsenal. However, in the past three months, the U.S. military has seen a 70 percent decrease in their use.

- **IRAMs** – The Improvised Rocket Assisted Mortar (IRAM) also known as a “lob bomb” or “flying IED’s” is a weapon system that is now being regarded by Army Gen. Jeffery Hammond, commander of U.S. forces in Baghdad, as “the greatest threat we face.”<sup>32</sup> This new system was first seen on the April 28, 2008 attacks on Joint Security Station Thawra I in Sadr City and Forward Operating Base Loyalty.<sup>33</sup> The IRAMs are propane tanks packed with hundreds of pounds of explosives, which use 107mm rocket charges. They are launched from small trucks and are fired in multiples of four to nine rockets at a time by using cell phone signals or timers to detonate.<sup>34</sup> According to military officials, IRAM attacks are capable of producing higher casualty rates than IEDs and conventional mortar or rocket attacks. This year alone IRAMs are credited for killing 21 people.<sup>35</sup> In addition, the U.S. military has claimed that these charges are “of Iranian-manufacture” with rocket casings showing both lot numbers and date of manufacturing within the past three years.<sup>36</sup> Although not an entirely new weapons system, the use of IRAMs shows the Shi’ite militants ability to counter technological advantages such as the MRAP.
- **Mortar/Rockets** – Used as a quick and effective way of harassment, mortar and rocket attacks combined are responsible for 1,891 attacks in Iraq from Jan 08 – Jun 08.<sup>37</sup> The inability to prevent these attacks and the lack of accuracy have contributed to the high civilian casualty rates and are a constant threat to static military forces. A July 15 raid in the Rashid district of Baghdad illustrates the varying types of mortars used by “special groups.” The cache consisted of 46 Iranian-manufactured 120 mm mortar rounds, 152 Iranian-manufactured 81 mm mortar rounds, 139 Iranian-manufactured 60 mm mortar rounds, a 60 mm mortar tube, a 120 mm mortar tube with base plate.<sup>38</sup> Although not in as high numbers as mortars, Katyusha rockets also saw an increase of use in 2008. From Jan 07 - Jun 08, a total of 123 rockets were fired with 116 this year alone. Some of these rockets are believed to be 107mm Iranian supplied rockets.<sup>39</sup> After the Battle of Basra, both rocket and mortar attacks increased drastically, however, the month of June brought a steady decline of attacks.
- There is a growing concern of weapon technology being transferred from Iran to Shi’a militias

The use of these weapons has given the JAM a political impact much larger than its military impact. Like Al Qa’ida in Iraq (and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Hezbollah in Lebanon) the JAM and “special groups” have been able to use such weapons and limited resources in attacks on Coalition forces that have been expensive in lives, cost billions of dollars, and have had a major impact on U.S. domestic politics.

### Size

One reason the size of the Mahdi Army is so difficult to quantify is that Sadr seems to only have loose control over many units, and there are so many low-level fighters, part time volunteers, and other young men who have become involved in JAM activity. According the latest MNF-I report, JAM and “special groups” have a combined nationwide strength of approximately 25,000 to 40,000 active members supported by a large body of non-active supporters.<sup>40</sup> However, with half of the Iraqi workforce unemployed, the pool of recruits is extremely large. In Sadr City alone, which al-Sadr’s main stronghold, Shi’ite population is estimated to be between 2-2.5 million people, many of which are young, unemployed, and strong supporters of al-Sadr. If the Iraqi government is unable to provide security, develop jobs, and spend oil revenue on rebuilding, al-Sadr will continue to have unrestricted support.



### **Evolving tactics**

Both the Mahdi Army and the “special groups” have shown they have elements skilled in the tactics of asymmetrical warfare. Most of their successes come through the use of indirect fire and extremely primitive yet effective explosives. JAM and “special groups” have proven more than capable against both U.S. and ISF forces when fighting head-on. However, of greater importance is their ability to stop fighting, via ceasefires or clandestine retreats in order to prevent eradication. Even more impressive is their ability to end fighting without ever having to give up their weapons.

## ***V. The Fighting for Basra and Sadr City***

The history of ISF clashes with the JAM has been increasingly reassuring. After two ceasefires and hundreds of Mahdi militants either killed or captured, it appears that the Mahdi Army has lost much of its control over both Basra and Sadr City. It is less clear, however, how strong they remain and how much influence and control they have really lost. Much will depend on the actions taken by the Maliki government.

### **Fighting for Basra**

The city of Basra is situated along the Shatt al-Arab waterway in Iraq's southernmost province, where the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers flow together into the Persian Gulf. As has been touched upon earlier, Basra Province provides Iraq's only direct access to the ocean, and it is key to Iraq's oil exports.<sup>41</sup>

Basra became the first Iraqi city to fall to coalition forces after the Coalition invasion in 2003.<sup>42</sup> The British military then took control of the Basra province -- in addition to the neighboring provinces of Maysan, Dhi Qar, and Muthanna. Britain did not, however, have the resources or intention to try to become deeply involved in national building and stability operations and increasingly limited its role after 2005 as it came under pressure from the JAM and other hostile local forces. This led to a growing power vacuum in Basra and the neighboring provinces, and growing intra-Shi'ite violence and tension.

These problems increasingly came to a head after British forces handed over control of Basra to Iraqi Army Lt. General Mohan al Freiji, the head of the Basra Operation Command (BOC), on September 3, 2007.<sup>43</sup> Fighting began to intensify between Shi'a factions, the SIIC and the Da'wa, the Sadrist and JAM, and the al-Fadilah over control of oil facilities, control of the ports, and the lucrative business of smuggling, and as the SIIC and the Da'wa parties started to extend their influence in both the political and security realms.

This fighting led Prime Minister to personally organize and launch a major offensive. On March 25, 2008, the Iraqi Army began operation "Knight's Charge" in the port city of Basra. Prime Minister Maliki's decision to launch this attack came as a surprise since planning had the operation scheduled for July 2008. As a result, the operation was not properly organized and planned, and quickly turned into a bloody battle between the JAM and an unprepared ISF force.

As ISF moved from Al-Tamiyah, a JAM stronghold in western Basra, through neighboring Sadrist neighborhoods, they met fierce resistance.<sup>44</sup> It quickly became apparent that the Mahdi Army and Shi'ite "special groups" were capable of challenging the newly-formed 14<sup>th</sup> Iraqi Army Division. The Iraqi Army and police forces also had problems with loyalty and discipline and lost well over 1,000 personnel who deserted their post and weapons, some to join the JAM.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, the ISF forces lacked proper preparation, command discipline, and effective logistic support -- in part because the Prime Minister rushed them into action without proper preparation, planning, and staging.

The ISF only started to gain control as Iraqi and U.S. reinforcements started to come online. Roughly 6,600 more troops were brought in to reinforce the 30,000 ISF personnel already stationed in Basra.<sup>46</sup> Six IA brigades were amassed in and around Basra, and 16,000 police officers were stationed in the city.<sup>47</sup>

These reinforcements gave the ISF a decisive edge in the battle, and the fighting finally concluded on Sunday March 30, 2008, after al-Sadr called for a ceasefire and ordered his militia to lay down their weapons. The ceasefire negotiations were conducted by Sadr, Hadi al-Amiri, the head of the Badr Organization, and Ali al-Adeeb, a member of the Maliki's own Dawa party.<sup>48</sup> According to a report by the Institute for the Study of War:

“In an interesting political move, Amiri and Adeeb flew to Iran, where Sadr has been living for over a year, without the knowledge of Prime Minister Maliki. Perhaps what is most significant was that the agreement was brokered in Iran by the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF), Qassem Suleimani.”<sup>49</sup>

Even though the operation in Basra was initially seen as an ISF failure, al-Sadr clearly lost some control of Basra as a result of the fighting and ceasefire. A number of sometimes contradictory factors had an impact on the result:

- Al-Sadr has the ability to end intense fighting to prevent a complete loses of his fighting forces.
- Iran's Qods Force played a role in equipping and training Mahdi Army members. How much control or influence Iran has however, still remains obscure.
- Although a large number of militia were either captured or killed, the true size of the Mahdi Army and “special groups” remained unknown. It is believed that many fighters left the region before the ISF took full control.
- Even though the ISF came out as the winning party, the Mahdi Army proved to be capable of serious opposition. It wasn't until Iraqi reinforcements and U.S. air support came in that the ISF regained control of the fight.
- In the onset of the battle, over 1,000 ISF members deserted, some to join the Mahdi Army. Sadr later admitted that he ordered his followers within the Army and police to abandon their posts and join the fighting against the government which raises the question of the loyalty of ISF personnel.  
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- This was the third time that the Mahdi army showed its ability to stand up to what was believed to be a superior force. (Twice in Najaf 2004)
- Although it appeared that the Iraqi government won control of Basra, how much control remains unclear and will be heavily dependent on the services the government provides, security of the region, and economic growth.
- The stability of the ceasefire showed al-Sadr's ability to control his militia and the government's inability to disarm al-Sadr.
- The operation has been viewed by many as a way for Maliki to increase the Da'wa and SIIC influence in the region and control the economical capital instead of riding the area of all militias.

The situation in Basra has steadily improved since the ceasefire, but Basra is still far from stable. Approximately 20,000 Iraqi soldiers and scores of policemen still operate in Basra.

### **Sadr City: “Operation Peace”**

Shortly after al-Maliki launched the Basra offensive in March, the JAM began to launch indirect fire attacks on the Green Zone and fighting broke out between the Iraqi Army and JAM in Kut, Hilla, and outside Sadr City.<sup>51</sup> Iraqi troops reacted by moving against Sadr's Mahdi Army militia, and fought a series of clashes that lasted a number of weeks. This fighting appeared to be setting the stage for a far more serious battle for Sadr City: Sadr's main stronghold and a largely impoverished section of Baghdad which houses around 2-2.5 million people, many whom are strong supporters of al-Sadr.

In order to prevent the Mahdi Army from using the southern areas of Sadr City as launch sites for mortar and rocket attacks into the Green Zone, Coalition forces began to build a wall barrier separating the Iraqi Army and US controlled sections in the south from the northern portion of the district control by al-Sadr. Construction of the wall began on April 8, 2008 along al-Quds Street. Al-Quds street acts as a major thoroughfare that separates the Tharwa and Jamilla districts to the south from the heart of Sadr City to the north.<sup>52</sup> As a result, fighting between Shi'ite militants and U.S. forces centered on the Tharwa area.<sup>53</sup> In response to small arms fire and constant mortar and rocket attacks, Sadrists faced an increased use of Hellfire missiles from U.S. air strikes.

April 28 saw one of the largest battles in Sadr City. Due to a sandstorm, the Mahdi army was able to take advantage of the lack of air cover and ambushed U.S. forces as they patrolled along al-Quds Street. A counter attack left 28 Mahdi militants dead and six U.S. wounded.<sup>54</sup> By May 15, 80 percent of the wall had been built. By Monday May 19, American M1 tanks, Bradley fighting vehicles and Stryker vehicles from the First Battalion, 68th Armor, set up a cordon around the area.<sup>55</sup> During these raids, multiple weapon caches were found containing large quantities of weapons.

The course of the fighting did have many of the ambiguities of the fighting in Basra:

- It is unclear how many Mahdi fighters fled the area before the ceasefire was finalized.
- Once again, it is evident that al-Sadr is capable of calling a ceasefire in order to save his militia without having to give up his arms.
- It is unclear how much control Sadr has or how much control Iran has.
- It is unclear how willing Al-Sadr is to work with the Iraqi government as provincial elections approach.
- It appears violence is taking a toll on al-Sadr supporters. It is up to the Iraqi government to capitalize by rebuilding, investing, security, and providing jobs.

- Al-Maliki's use of Iraq's security forces, however, is sometimes seen as a way to undermine Sadr ahead of the provincial elections and not to promote national reconciliation.

Nevertheless, the JAM took significant losses for a popular force. A total of 465 Mahdi Army fighters had been confirmed killed around Sadr City by March 25, 2008.<sup>56</sup> The success of ISF and U.S. forces also helped produce successful ceasefire negotiations place between Sadrist leaders and lawmakers allied with Maliki in order to ensure a peaceful entrance into northern parts of Sadr City.<sup>57</sup> On May 20, 10,000 Iraqi troops proceed to patrol into the once "off-limit" areas of Sadr City as part of a May 11 truce between Sadrist and the government.<sup>58</sup> What was expected to be an all out confrontation became something very different: the ISF were allowed in without resistance. Moreover, over time, the Mahdi Army largely melted away. Sadr City was once filled with militants manning checkpoints, guarding Sadr's offices, or driving pickup trucks. Within a month, the ISF performed these functions.

Sadr and the Mahdi Army did, however, succeed in setting important preconditions:

- No U.S. troops.
- No abuse or unwarranted arrests of Mahdi members.
- No abuse of the Shi'ite civilians
- The removal of high concrete blast walls built along the length of Al Quds Street.

In addition, the operation in Sadr City was conducted by ISF forces alone, although U.S. forces did remain in the southern sector of Sadr City in case an all-out battle broke out and to provide air support. Al-Sadr did, however, appoint a committee with the power to seek a more lasting political accommodation with al Dawa, the SIIC, and the United Iraqi Alliance.<sup>59</sup>

## **Amarah**

On June 18, Iraqi Security Forces began Operation Basha'er as-Salaam (Messengers of Peace) in the southeastern city of Amarah.<sup>60</sup> According to Maj. Gen. Micheal Oates, commander of the Army's 10th mount division, Amarah was the hub for the shipment of Iranian weaponry.<sup>61</sup> The objective of the operation was to eliminate militias and criminal networking from operating in the Maysan province which borders Iran. The operation started with a four-day amnesty period which allowed citizens before raids began.

Once the raids began, the ISF went into homes, businesses and public areas throughout the city. Between June 19 and 22, weapons found totaled 1,739 mortar rounds, 873 mines, 445 artillery rounds, 347 rocket-propelled grenades, 267 rockets, 227 missile launchers, 109 improvised explosive devices, 74 grenades, (35) 122mm rounds, 27 explosively formed penetrators and 1) missiles.<sup>62</sup>

As is in Sadr City, the ISF met minimal resistance. In addition to arresting Mahdi militants and eliminating weapon caches, the Iraqi government plans on restoring essential services and using oil revenue to rebuild and create jobs in order to maintain the current progress. Although the government has insisted that it is targeting all militias, some of those arrested have included Sadrist political figures.<sup>63</sup> Another thing to be aware of is the involvement of U.S. forces. Even though ISF appears to be in full control of the operation, there is a U.S. battalion waiting to support Iraqi military forces.<sup>64</sup> This indicates that ISF may not be ready to overcome a Mahdi attack if al-Sadr chose to retract the ceasefire.

## ***VI. Sadr and the Mahdi Army: Going In a New Direction?***

On June 13, 2008, al-Sadr's chief spokesman announced the reorganization of the Mahdi Army during Friday prayer at a mosque in Kufa. He read a letter in which al-Sadr laid out what appeared to be a new direction in Iraq. Sadr stated he had made the decision to split his Mahdi Army into two distinct wings. The largest wing would be made up from most of his followers. This group was designed to act as the "political" and "social services" wing. The smaller group would be turned into new "special companies" of elite experienced fighters tasked with resisting the occupation.<sup>65</sup> This shift has become worrisome because the restructuring mirrors the structure of Iranian-sponsored Hezbollah.

### **Politics and Social Services**

The bigger of the two groups was said to be designed to provide both social services and as political wing. According to al-Sadr's letter:

*"This part of the Mahdi Army is going to transition into a "civilian movement dealing with religious, social and cultural affairs. That part of the Mehdi Army will not be involved in militancy but will "fight the Western ideology and liberate the minds from domination and globalization."<sup>66</sup>*

In addition to providing services that the current government often failed to provide, this element of the Mahdi Army was to supporting "technocrats and independent politicians" to keep other parties from dominating the political scene.<sup>67</sup> Although Sadr had declared the Sadrist Party will not run in the upcoming Provincial elections, it is clear that he was still seeking to influence the outcome by backing certain politicians.

### **The Special Companies**

While the bigger group was to focus on social and political issues, the other group was to be an armed force of experienced fighters labeled "the special companies." Salah al-Obaidi, Sadr's chief spokesman, said the order called for a full scale re-organization of the Mahdi Army.<sup>68</sup> The "special companies" were to be comprised of several hundred or so members who have been training in and out of Iraq.

Al-Sadr's letter also outlined new rules for the companies and the rest of the Mahdi Army:

- Weapons will be held exclusively by this new group, and they should be pointed exclusively at the occupier forbidding the targeting of anyone else.
- We will not stop resisting the occupation until liberation or martyrdom."
- Al-Sadr would disown anyone in the Mahdi Army who disobeys his new command.

- "The resistance will be exclusively conducted by only one group. This new group will be defined soon by me."<sup>69</sup>
- The new group would operate in "total secrecy" and attack only American forces.
- "The resistance will be restricted to a group authorized by a written letter soon,"<sup>70</sup>

Abu Zainab al-Garswie, the head of Sadr's office in Diwaniyah, said the newly formed special companies would assert their strengths by launching attacks within a month, and possibly by next week."<sup>71</sup>

Trying to analyze the capabilities of the "new special companies" is currently guesswork at best. Until these units begin to operate, the U.S. and ISF will have to rely on their analysis of the Mahdi Army to assess the threat it poses. However, it is clear that al-Sadr has once again changed tactics to keep his militia intact and to participate in the elections. It is also important to realize that the new shift in strategy mirrors the structure Iran's Lebanese Hezbollah.

### **Sadr Statement of Late July 2008**

It is also important to note that Sadr issued a statement on Wednesday, July 30 2008 that emphasized discipline, explained some of his reasons for reorganizing the JAM, called for national unity in resisting the "occupation" and those elements in the Iraqi government working closely with the U.S., and called for restraint in dealing with all targets other than "Occupation" forces:

Is it right that you abandoned resistance and you are forbidding it? We would like you to give us your frank opinion.

Peace upon the mujahid Iraqi people and peace upon every mujahid and resisting man. You should know that I am one of those who believes (that the resistance is a legitimate right by human reason and in Islamic law and by human law.) It is even (a duty). And especially after you know that I have taken letters of permission (precaution) for what has happened in a defensive jihad against the occupiers, and another for the continuity of resistance from more than one marjaia, may God prolong their lives and favor us with their shadow and jihad spirit . . .

But this doesn't mean that every person carrying a weapon will be part of the resistance.

There are several orders that must be followed, because if the door is open for everyone, this will result in a great blight. Most importantly, the defamation of the reputation of the resistance, and everyone knows that preserving its reputation is everyone's duty. Especially after some of the resisting men have slipped and begun targeting others than the occupiers. They steal Iraq's money with no rights and use its revenues with no permission, and disobey and violate the central command in many instances . . . Even some of those who were protégés of the resistance were targeting our brothers and beloved ones instead of the occupiers, a cause of deep remorse to me. It became necessary to us to dissolve some of the groups and to fire them from the resistance, to preserve the reputation of the Shi'ite belief and the resistance. We make conditions that are not only a leader's conditions, but also those of Islam and human reason. Some of these conditions are:



- Do not target civilians.
- Do not target the government, even if it is (unfair) for some. That is not permitted.
- If the government stands by the occupiers against the resistance in the field of battle, the resistance must limit its damage as much as possible and according to what is necessary.
- Limit weapons to the hands of the specialized resistance, and none others.
- Military action of the resistance should not be harmful to the people.
- Absolutely avoid military actions in cities.
- Preserve the centrality of command in receiving military orders from its known marjaia, because its dispersion will cause great damage and the greatest blight.
- It is not permitted to carry weapons – only for the specialized resistance. Everyone else will be specialized in (cultural jihad). Obey the terms and regulations that have been recently issued.
- Those who want to join the honorable Iraqi resistance have to commit to the terms made by the known leadership in order to join. Naturally (these) cannot be revealed, for the most important basis of resistance is preserving secrecy by all means.
- Do not damage the people's services, like electricity, water and others.
- Do not use the governmental properties, or involve them in resistance actions, where there is no permission from the legitimate marjaia [Shi'a religious leaders]. That is stressed after the current government claims it is (politically) trying to drive the occupier out.

I call on our great marjaia, our bright clerics from all sects and divisions, to embrace honorable resistance as much as possible and in a way that will not endanger their security, which is our duty to preserve, and to issue their fatwabs against signing any agreement between the government and the occupier, even if it is for friendship or any other purpose. And I call upon the Iraqi government again not to sign this agreement, and I inform them I am ready to support it popularly and politically if they do not sign it, especially after some clerics have prohibited signing this document. We hope the Iraqi people will form ranks to stand against this agreement by political and popular, peaceful means. Despite the difficulties that are facing the believers, detentions, raids, and torture in prisons. Therefore, I demand the release of the resisting men whose hands weren't stained by the sectarian wars and the criminal car bombs, and I demand the lawful organizations, and above them the United Nations: look at the circumstances of the prisoners in American and Iraqi prisons, as it is their duty to the oppressed people.<sup>72</sup>

It is clear from such a statement that Sadr continues to oppose the leadership of Al-Da'wa and the SIIC, but also recognizes the kinds of violence that alienate the Iraqi people. It is also obvious that he seeks to capitalize on the unpopularity of the occupation of U.S. forces.

## ***VII. Iranian Support of Al-Sadr and the Mahdi Army***

How much influence Iran will have on Sadr, the JAM, and these new units is unknown. There is at least some risk that intra-Shi'ite tensions and fighting could make Sadr dependent on Iran in spite of his resistance to both the concept of a Supreme Leader and Iranian dominance over Iraq. Top ranking Sadr aides say al-Sadr has spent the past year studying in Qum, Iran. He is said to be studying under Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, who heads the Iranian judiciary.<sup>73</sup>

The exact level of Iran's influence over al-Sadr and the Mahdi Army is controversial, but clearly present. As the April 8-9, 2008 testimony of Gen. Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker makes clear, the Qods Force of Iran's Revolutionary Guard has provided training and weapons to Shi'ite militants, in particular, to "special groups" linked to al-Sadr. How much training and funding they have provided is unclear.

In July 2007, coalition forces captured Hezbollah operatives in Iraq.<sup>74</sup> Based on information gathered from these captures, U.S. commanders came to the conclusion that Iran was using its protégé, Lebanese Hezbollah, to train and arm Iraq Shi'ite militias.<sup>75</sup> This however, was not the first time that Iranian operatives were apprehended in Iraq. "In December 2006 and in January 2007, U.S. Forces arrested alleged Iranian Revolutionary Guard Qods Forces agents — two at a SIIC compound in Baghdad and five more at a compound in Irbil."<sup>76</sup>

In August 2007, Muqtada al Sadr publicly confirmed Mahdi Army's relationship with Hezbollah, stating: "We have formal links with Hezbollah, we do exchange ideas and discuss the situation facing Shi'ites in both countries. We copy Hezbollah in the way they fight and their tactics, we teach each other and we are getting better through this."<sup>77</sup> By 2008, many of the weapons caches seized in Basra, Sadr City, and Amarah included Iranian made rockets, mortars, and EFP's.

In addition to providing weapons and training Iran has shown the ability to curb violence in Iraq being involved in the last two ceasefire agreements between the Mahdi Army and the Iraqi government. In the Battle of Basra, Iraqi government officials had to travel to Iran in order to broker a ceasefire.

Iran's influence has been a rising concern for the U.S., has and helped lead to joint talks with Iraqi officials and Iranian diplomats. U.S. and Iran announced and then held high profile direct talks, at the Ambassador level, on May 28, 2007, and after combat operations in Sadr City, Iran then said it would not participate in any further meetings, but some form of talks do seem to have occurred.<sup>78</sup> It has also since become clear that the U.S. is seeking to create an interest section in Tehran.

## ***VIII. Conclusion***

Muqtada al-Sadr and the Mahdi Army appear to have suffered significant losses in the course of 2008, but they remain the biggest Shi'ite threat to both the Iraqi government and the U.S.-led coalition. It is also important to recognize that ISF had to negotiate a ceasefire before taking all of Basra, entering into Sadr City, and retaking Amarah. In addition, it is unclear how the Battle for Basra would have turned out without U.S. and British reinforcement and U.S. air support.

The Mahdi Army has shown its ability to adapt and implement lessons learned. If the Iraqi government fails to capitalize on military gains by not "holding and rebuilding," the low levels of violence produced by the ceasefires will not last. While al-Sadr's political aspirations are unclear, it is also evident that he still sees a strong U.S. presence as unacceptable and he may be having a major impact on how the Iraqi government deals with the U.S. Prime Minister al-Maliki announced a short term SOFA agreement, which had many of the requirements that al-Sadr proposed and included a timetable for withdrawal of U.S. troops. However, after a series of long negotiations the July 31 deadline for reaching a SOFA agreement passed without success.

In short, the future of the Sadrist movement and the JAM present major problems and uncertainties. The JAM does not currently seem capable of acting as a coherent or effective paramilitary force. Most of the JAM seems to consist of young men with little training and discipline who could exploit a vacuum in security and governance in areas like Basra and Sadr City, but had no clear hierarchy, uncertain discipline, and limited war fighting capability.

A number of cadres within the JAM seem more capable, but their current strength, the level of Sadr's control, and their present willingness to fight sustained battles with Iraq's growing security forces is unclear. A "martyrs' list" produced by the JAM and obtained by The Associated Press in late July 2008 also shows a long and growing list of militants killed or captured. More importantly it shows a high number of senior members being taken out of the equation totaling at least three dozen killed since last summer and 60 others detained.<sup>79</sup> It would be exceedingly dangerous to dismiss the JAM, but equally dangerous to exaggerate their capabilities. The fact is that there is not enough empirical evidence to judge their present level of capability or Sadr's success in transforming them into a more effective force.

It is still far from clear how the JAM's new "special companies" will be structured, how they will be used, how effective they will be, and how they will relate to the more extreme JAM elements that the Coalition has called "Special Groups." It is also unclear how much real paramilitary capability Sadr and the JAM have to build upon. While Sadr's forces are called a "militia," most seem to be little more than street thugs who are more skilled in sectarian cleansing and exorciation exploitation than actual fighting. Although some elements of the Sadr militia have had arms and training from the Iranian Al Quds force and other elements like the Hezbollah, the scale and success of that training is far from clear.

Iranian involvement remains a key issue, and one with many uncertainties. Iran seems to be trying to find a careful balance between retaining influence over Sadr and the JAM and working with the Iraqi government and other Shi'ite parties. Iran seems to have played an important role in both the Sadr ceasefire in Basra and in Sadr City, but some of the most lethal technology used in IEDs, components for shaped charges, came from Iran.

Examinations of captured weapons caches also reveal a wide range of Iranian weapons which are identifiable through lot numbers with manufacturing dates within the last three years. These weapons include some of the rockets and mortars used in strikes against the Green Zone during the fighting in Sadr City before the ceasefire. The JAM has had Iranian advisors and the new direction al-Sadr appears to be taking in shaping the JAM does resemble the Iranian-sponsored Hezbollah.

Finally, even though the Iraqi government so far appears to have come out on top in its clashes with al-Sadr and the JAM, much of the JAM survived the ISF attacks on Basra, Baghdad, and other areas by dispersing and hiding their weapons. Most elements of the JAM that were involved in significant fighting managed to disengage from heavy fighting without having to disarm the Mahdi Army. Much depends, therefore, on both the future of the Sadrist movement and the Iraqi government's success in winning sustained popular support from Iraq's Shi'ites.

If Sadr is excluded from Iraq's political process, feels the process is unfair, or chooses to mix politics with violence, the JAM could again become a major threat. Sadr's future strength will also depend heavily on how well the Iraqi government build's on the success of the Iraqi security forces to provide local security, government services, and economic opportunity – particularly for the massive number of Shi'ite young men who are unemployed or underemployed.

It is also important to note that Iraq's current Shi'ite political parties gained power in elections with closed lists of candidates and won largely on the basis of a sectarian coalition. None have really had to campaign for office on the basis of merit or clear policies and goals. None have had to be judged on the ability of their basis to serve a given constituency, and none have had to participate in open local and provincial elections.

This makes it very difficult to judge the future balance of power between leading factions like Al Da'wa, the SIIC, and the Sadrists if honest elections are held with open lists of candidates. It makes it equally hard to judge what will happen if elections are not held or are not felt to be fair. It is equally difficult to look beyond the prospect of local elections in 2008 and national elections in late 2009, and judge how effective Iraq's current and future central governments will be in serving Iraq's Shi'ites. So far, the central government has been as ineffective in meeting Arab Shi'ite needs as those of Arab Sunnis.

The unknowns shaping the balance of power in terms of violence, are matched by those shaping the balance of power in terms of religious influence, local and national politics, governance, local security and the rule of law, and economics. Intra-Shi'ite power struggles over all these issues are a certainty and will almost certainly play out over at least the next half decade. Whether this will lead to intra-Shi'ite violence, and how it will affect Iraq's broader sectarian and ethnic tensions, is beyond any reasonable ability to predict. Only time can provide the answers.

## Endnotes

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