

Whatever Happened to Moqtada?

Contributed by WSJ
Friday, 21 March 2008

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March 20, 2008; Page A19, WSJ

"I have failed to liberate Iraq, and transform its society into an Islamic society."
-- Moqtada al-Sadr, Asharq Al Awsat newspaper, March 8, 2008

Moqtada al-Sadr -- the radical cleric dubbed "The Most Dangerous Man in Iraq" by a Newsweek cover story in December 2006 -- has just unilaterally extended the ceasefire he imposed on his Mahdi Army militia last summer. And on the eve of the Iraq War's fifth anniversary, Sadr also issued a somber but dramatic statement. He not only declared that he had failed to transform Iraq, but also lamented the new debates and divisions within his own movement. Explaining his marginalization, Sadr all but confessed his growing isolation: "One hand cannot clap alone."

What happened? Over the past five years, Sadr has been one of the most persistent and insurmountable challenges for the U.S. Leveraging his family's prestige among the disaffected Shiite underclass, he asserted his power by violently intimidating rival clerics, agitating against the U.S. occupation, and using force to establish de facto control over Baghdad's Sadr City (named after his father, and home to two million Shiites on the east bank of the Tigris) and large swaths of southern Iraq.

The story of his rise, and fall, illustrates the complex relationship between security and political power that drives the fortunes of the U.S. mission in Iraq.

Sadr's postwar ascent caught the U.S. Government completely off-guard. Iraqi society was impenetrable in the 1980s and 1990s. Neither our intelligence community nor our diplomats, who had left Iraq in 1990, knew anything of significance about Sadr. The western press and punditry had never reported on him before the war (a Nexis search reveals not a single news article mentioning Sadr's name in the year leading up to the war). The oft-cited "Future of Iraq Project," produced by the State Department, failed to warn about Sadr in its thousands of pages of projections and scenarios. Few knew he existed, let alone anticipated the influence he would one day wield.

That influence was vast: Moqtada al-Sadr came very close to establishing a state within a state inside Iraq, much like Hezbollah had done in Lebanon.

It began in 2003, when Sadr's followers orchestrated the murder of Majid al-Khoie, a moderate Shiite cleric whom the U.S. government had hoped could play a pivotal role in building a democratic Iraq. It continued with a series of armed uprisings across the south in April 2004, which took the lives of scores of American troops, and led to the collapse of Iraq's fledgling security forces. These culminated in a dramatic standoff against the Iraqi government and U.S. forces at the Holy Shrines in August 2004. In 2005 and 2006 Sadr expanded his territorial reach, using his militia to expel Sunnis from their Baghdad neighborhoods and massively infiltrating the Iraqi police forces.

In areas under his control, Sadr set up extrajudicial Sharia courts to administer justice against Iraqi Shiite "heretics." Large numbers of citizens found guilty were punished by death. The Mahdi Army militia also established its own security checkpoints in Baghdad and across the south -- supplanting Iraq's weak national army and lightly deployed U.S. forces.

This militia took over petrol stations, skimming funds to finance its own operations. And it had practically halted many of the civic society initiatives launched by the coalition, NGOs, and many Iraqis in Shiite towns. For example, in 2004 our U.S. colleagues Fern Holland, Robert Zangas and their Iraqi translator, Salway Oumaishi were assassinated by Shiite militiamen, just as they had courageously helped a group of Shiite women to build a successful program to train them in advocacy for their rights.

The principal reason for Sadr's ability to augment his power during these years was the absence of security in Baghdad. This vacuum left the Shiite community completely vulnerable to an unrelenting wave of terror attacks from the Sunni insurgency and al Qaeda. With the U.S. Government's failure to engage in serious counterinsurgency and make it a priority to provide basic safety for Iraqi civilians, Sadr and his Mahdi militia moved quickly to fill the void.

As one Sadrist militant told the International Crisis Group last year: "The Mahdi Army's effort to conquer neighborhoods is highly sophisticated. It presents itself as protector of Shiites and recruits local residents to assist in this task. In so

doing, it gains support from people who possess considerable information -- on where the Sunnis and Shiites are, on who backs and who opposes the Sadrists and so forth." By the end of 2006, U.S. military officials had concluded that sectarian violence by Shiite militants had surpassed al Qaeda and the insurgency as the principal threat to Iraqi stability.

In retrospect, that assessment marked the high point of Sadr's influence. While his empire had expanded, it had generated its own resentments. Ordinary citizens chafed at the harsh version of Islamic law imposed by Sadr's lieutenants, not to mention the corruption and brutality of functionaries manning checkpoints and patrolling the streets. Sadr's hold on the broader Shiite community was actually quite tenuous, cemented chiefly by fear of the insurgency and al Qaeda.

In 2007, the U.S. military shifted approach, putting in place for the first time a comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy backed by a surge of troops to support it. The new strategy paid large dividends against al Qaeda and Sunni insurgents, as attacks dropped to 2005 levels and Iraqi deaths due to ethno-sectarian violence declined 90% from June 2007 to March 2008. As Sunni attacks against Shiite civilians declined, so did the rationale for Sadr's authority.

As the International Crisis Group concluded, one "net effect" of the surge "was to leave the Sadrist movement increasingly exposed, more and more criticized and divided, and subject to arrest."

Other factors also contributed to Sadr's marginalization. But the increased security provided by more U.S. forces was essential in removing an underlying rationale for the Sadrist movement. Newsweek's 2006 profile had predicted that "the longer the American occupation lasts, the less popular America gets -- and the more popular Sadr and his ilk become." But as a recent ABC News poll of Iraqis makes clear, Shiite support for local militias has plummeted over the past year. The full implementation of the surge helped weaken Sadr, not make him more popular.

To be sure, Sadr's diminished capacity to stir up trouble may not last forever. While he has not appeared in public in close to a year, he still has his family name and a base of support among the Shiite underclass, particularly in Baghdad. He may be biding his time, hoping a U.S. withdrawal will leave him with a weaker opponent in the fledgling Iraqi security services. And as this week's deadly suicide bombing of a Shiite shrine in Karbala indicates, the security threats that enabled the Mahdi Army's rise to power have not yet been fully defeated.

So while the progress made against Sadr has been remarkable, it may also be fragile. Sustaining it means recognizing that political progress depends fundamentally on security. This basic insight of counterinsurgency warfare -- which has driven our progress against Sadr's militants, the Sunni insurgency, and al Qaeda over the past year -- is the central lesson America has learned in its five years of war in Iraq.

Messrs. Senor and Martinez were foreign policy advisers to the Bush administration. They were based in Baghdad in 2003 and 2004.