

SPIEGEL INTERVIEW WITH IRAQI LEADER ADIL ABDUL-MAHDI

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'Brutal Attacks Will Continue'

Adil Abdul-Mahdi, 65, is a member of the Supreme Islamic Council, the largest Shiite party in the Iraqi parliament, and is regarded as a possible successor to Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. SPIEGEL spoke to him about reconciliation, the Mahdi Army's standdown and US diplomacy with Iran.

SPIEGEL: More than 50 people have died in the holy city of Karbala as a result of fighting between Shiites. Who is responsible for this escalation?

Abdul-Mahdi: The armed militias, who act without any state authority. These problems will persist as long as weapons are circulating freely in our country. And that is independent of whether tensions remain among the political blocks or not.

SPIEGEL: Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr now intends to withdraw his Mahdi Army for half a year. What do you make of that?

Abdul-Mahdi: That is a good decision. It shows that His Eminence has now realized that the free access to weapons is only causing problems.

SPIEGEL: Kurdish and Shiite parties have just founded an "Alliance of the Moderates." But is national reconciliation possible without Sadr's group and without the Sunni Arabs?

Abdul-Mahdi: No. Up to now we have merely started an initiative, and we are working hard to also involve the Sunni Iraqi Islamic Party in it. We are open to all political powers.

SPIEGEL: To Sadr too?

Abdul-Mahdi: Yes. We have to bring together all the powers that fought against Saddam's regime for 25 years and put them on a common footing.

SPIEGEL: Abdul-Aziz al-Hakim, the leader of the Supreme Islamic Council, has lung cancer and is being treated in Tehran.

Abdul-Mahdi: I spoke with him on the telephone yesterday and he is doing well. His treatment will last a few more weeks.

SPIEGEL: The al-Hakim family and the Supreme Islamic Council are in a unique position: They have good relations with both Washington and Tehran.

Abdul-Mahdi: We are doing our best to mediate between the US and Iran. The fact that there have been two meetings in Baghdad on a diplomatic level can also be attributed to our influence.

SPIEGEL: A report from the US Congress asserts that the number of deadly attacks in Iraq since March has remained virtually unchanged and that the fighting strength of the Iraqi Army divisions has even sunk.

Abdul-Mahdi: Statistics are deceiving. Brutal attacks like the recent ones in northern Iraq will continue. Terrorists choose "weak" targets, so the numbers will keep increasing. The important thing is that today you can travel to Anbar or Diyala provinces, which was impossible a few months ago.

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