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MUQTADA AL-SADR AND HIS FEBRUARY 2014 DECLARATIONS. POLITICAL DISENGAGEMENT OR SIMPLE REPOSITIONING?

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On February 2014 Muqtada al-Sadr announced his decision to detach himself from politics and to focus on his religious duties as well as on the important network of charities and institutes he presides. The news shocked the whole Iraqi political spectrum: while the Shiite leader is not new to this *coup de théâtre*, this time his move seems to carry much deeper political implications. Just a few weeks separate the country from its fourth round of political elections and the competition for control of the Iraqi political arena promises to be tough as never before. *Al-Ahrar*'s good results in the 2013 provincial elections and the significant support the Sadrist movement can count on especially among the Shia urban underclass poise it to play a prominent role in the April 2014 voting. Al-Sadr's declarations questioned these predictions but did not eliminate his influence over the Iraqi socio-political spectrum.

This report aims to analyse the origins and the main features of the Sadrist trend, underlining the importance of Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr's legacy for its ascendance in the post-Saddam Hussein Iraq and its evolution since 2003. The last part of the analysis will focus on the reasons which could have pushed Muqtada al-Sadr to limit his political activities and the consequences this decision may have on his movement and the whole Iraqi system.

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1 Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr's legacy

The Sadrist network is a religious and socio-political movement which rose to prominence in the 1990s under the leadership of Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, cousin of the Grand *ayatollah* Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr executed by the Saddam Hussein regime in 1980.

Despite this lineage, Sadiq al-Sadr benefited from a series of initiatives led by the central government to reach out to the Iraqi Shia population after the failed 1991 *intifadha*. In this framework, the cleric was allowed to establish a network of schools, mosques and charities aimed at alleviating the desperate living conditions of the poorest strata of the Shia population, who were suffering tremendously due to the neglect of the central government and the effects of the sanctions the United Nations imposed on the country.

While not overtly challenging the Iraqi establishment, at least during the first half of the 1990s, Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr called for a more active involvement of the Shia religious clergy in the socio-political field, *de facto* distancing himself from the quietist approach associated with the *hawza* of Najaf, dubbed *sakita* (silent) for having being silent out of fear of regime retaliation (ICG, 2006, p. 3). The Sadrist movement grew stronger in the slums of Baghdad and Basra and in the rural south, thanks to the social services it offered to the population and to its message linking together nationalism, religious piety, defiance and activism (Cochrane, 2009, p. 10).

The widespread support enjoyed by al-Sadr attracted the attention of the regime, especially when the cleric began to publicly question the policies adopted by the Iraqi leadership and to rally huge crowds. The confrontation which ensued led to the disbandment of the movement and to the elimination of Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, who was killed together with two of his sons in an attack allegedly staged by the regime in February 1999 (Marr, 2012, p. 249-250).

Muqtada al-Sadr, the fourth son of the murdered cleric, was too young and devoid of sufficient religious credentials to succeed his father as head of the movement and he was also severely limited by the strict measures enacted by the regime against him. Devoid of Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr's strong leadership and under the pressure exerted by the Iraqi security apparatus, the Sadrist movement had to go underground, but maintained its hold over its constituency thanks to the veneration surrounding its founder and to the efforts of some of Sadiq al-Sadr's closest aides.

The situation changed only in 2003 with the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime. In April the Qom-based *ayatollah* Kazem al-Haeri, who replaced Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr as *marja'* (literally, source of emulation) for many of his followers, recognized Muqtada as his representative in Iraq,

allowing him to benefit from his father's lasting legacy and to reconstitute the movement.

2. The Sadrist trend in post-Saddam Iraq: consolidation and challenges

Al-Haeri's blessing provided Muqtada al-Sadr with the formal religious endorsement he lacked but it was his activism and his ability to read the mutating Iraqi context that allowed him to emerge as one of the most powerful actors of the "new Iraq". The young cleric was able to attune his agenda to the grievances of the masses of dispossessed Shias, succeeding in filling the *vacuum* distancing them from the exiles who returned to Iraq only once Saddam was deposed as well as from their middle class coreligionists and from the traditional religious establishment of the *atabat*.

Right from the beginning, Muqtada presented himself as the voice of the oppressed and the marginalized, remarking his distance from the "silent" *hawza* as well as from parties like the Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the *Da'wa* which did not share the fate of the Iraqi Shia community during the last terrible years of the Saddam Hussein regime. He was also one of the most vocal opponents of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), demanding not only the withdrawal of foreign troops from Iraqi soil, but also the abandonment of its Western-leaning institution-building programs in favour of a redefinition of the country system in accordance to the *velayat e-faqih* principles (Isakhan, 2013, p. 181).

Thanks to these factors, and against the previsions of Iraqi and international analysts, the Sadrist trend gained momentum and evolved from a purely socio-religious association to a more complex organization with agencies operating also in the security and (albeit later) political domains. The movement re-activated its network of mosques, charities and institutions to provide the population with much needed basic services (like health care assistance and the distribution of food and potable water). It also extended its authority over growing swaths of territory (especially in Baghdad's Sadr City and in the southern cities of Iraq), establishing a militia (the *Jaish al-Mahdi* - JaM) to protect the population from the growing instability affecting the country and opening a series of religious courts to administer justice and apply strict Islamic law. The Sadrists proved then to be willing and able to fill the gap created by the fall of Iraqi institutions and by the inadequacies of the Coalition Provisional Authority, responding effectively to the basic needs of the Shia population and strengthening its linkage with its lower strata – a factor which remains even now one of the major assets the movement can count on.

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Despite its largely unexpected success, the fast and somewhat uncontrolled growth experienced by the Sadrists exposed them to a series of important challenges. A few months after the fall of Saddam, al-Sadr's leadership was questioned by Mohammad al-Yacoubi, one of the most important followers of Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr. The cleric decided not to join the Sadrist trend and founded the Basra-based *Fadhila* (virtue) organization, an independent group claiming to follow the true path indicated by Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr which came to obtain 15 seats in the December 2005 elections. Al-Yacoubi's position was also shared by other leading Shia religious and political actors, who viewed Muqtada as a *parvenu* and his organization as a group of arrogant, uneducated and undisciplined people out of control.

Apart from internal and external doubts over the capabilities and the legitimacy of al-Sadr, his position at the head of the movement was significantly threatened by the tenuous hold he exerted over its military apparatus. This emerged clearly during the crisis which pitted Mahdi Army units against rival Shia militias and political groups in 2004 (Kerbala, Najaf, Kufa) and 2007 (Kerbala) and when the ceasefires he proclaimed in in 2007 and 2008 were violated by some wings of the group (Cochrane, 2009). Furthermore, while Sadrist forces played a key role in protecting the Shia community from the attacks conducted by Sunni insurgents (especially in Baghdad), several local leaders associated with them resorted to mafia-style tactics which significantly tarnished the image of the whole organization, despite al-Sadr's tentative to limit them (ICG, 2006). Even at the operative level, the central leadership has never been able to exert its complete control over the forces under his nominal authority. This was evident both concerning the operations conducted by the "death squads" (which, despite the formal opposition of the leadership, were responsible for thousands of assassinations of Sunni civilians during the height of the civil war) and the huge autonomy retained by the so-called "special groups", which ended up by detaching themselves from the JaM (Visser, 2011).

Al-Sadr's fragile hold over JaM was further exacerbated by the somehow "schizophrenic" *modus operandi* adopted by the young cleric, who often did not refrain from changing his mind in a matter of days, contradicting his previous stances should the contingent conditions suggest him to do so. An example of al-Sadr's various reversals were the different positions he assumed in 2008 concerning the freezing and the disbanding of the Mahdi Army, many of whose squadrons were *de facto* out of control. In a matter of days he passed from threatening open war if the Iraqi Security Forces

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and the Coalition did not cease their attacks against its strongholds[1] (April 19th), to limiting such "open war" to the Coalition only (April 25th), to confirming the freeze on JaM activities (only a few hours later his previous declaration) (Cochrane, 2009).

All these factors deeply exacerbated the tensions which threatened to tear the Sadrist trend apart and led ultimately to the formal disbandment of the Mahdi Army in summer 2008 – a move deemed necessary to escape the heightening pressure exerted by Iraqi and Coalition forces, to purge the Sadrist trend of its internal opponents and to dissociate it from its most compromised members.

3 Muqtada's political outreach

While the Sadrist security apparatus demonstrated its weaknesses in the middle term, the social care network linked to the Office of the Sadr Martyr remained the most important asset Muqtada al-Sadr could count on and proved fundamental for his political career. Despite his initial opposition to the new political system and the external forces which contributed to shape it, he soon realized that it might represent an ideal vehicle for projecting his influence at the national level. After not fielding any candidate in the January 2005 consultations, the movement took part in the December 2005 elections inside the broader United Iraqi Alliance (UIA)[2], mustering 32 members of parliament (out of 130 seats gained by the whole UIA). This result transformed Sadr into a "king-maker": his support was critical for the appointment of Nuri al-Maliki as prime minister and was repaid with control over the Ministries of Health, Agriculture and Transportation (Cochrane, 2009, p. 18).

Despite this promising beginning, the al-Maliki-al-Sadr axis soon crumbled under increasingly conflicting political interests (especially concerning the withdrawal of international troops) which emerged in all their intensity at the end of 2006. This fracture exposed the movement to a severe reprisal: Iraqi and Coalition security forces – which were prevented for months from entering the Sadrist strongholds – began to target some of the most influential Sadrist leaders (officially due to the role they played during the sectarian strife) and to contend the control exerted by JaM units over the territory.

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[1] Starting on March 2008, prime minister al-Maliki ordered the Iraqi Security Forces to conduct a series of military operations against Sadrist strongholds in Basra and Baghdad. Thanks to US support, the initiative strengthened government authority in Basra and in the Sadr City area in Baghdad.

[2] A pan-Shiite coalition comprising, among other forces, the Sadrists, *al-Da'wa*, *Fadhila* and the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq.

Devoid of the protection of the prime minister and exposed to growing internal and external pressure, al-Sadr decided in 2007 to move to Iran (where he remained, apart from a few interruptions, till 2011, officially to continue his religious studies) and began the gradual repositioning of the movement towards its traditional social, religious and political goals. Both the withdrawal from the United Iraqi Alliance (and from the cabinet positions the organization controlled) and the official disbandment of the Mahdi Army have to be considered in this context. The Sadrists, even though devoid of the presence of their leader on the ground and of the benefits connected with cabinet positions, continued to maintain a significant influence over the Iraqi scenario, as demonstrated in 2008, when they succeeded in convening huge manifestations which were instrumental to fixing the withdrawal of US troops from the country by 2011.

Despite the deep transformation it was undergoing and against the calculations of many analysts who predicted the movement would have suffered a significant defeat in the 2009 provincial elections, the Sadrist trend succeeded in securing 41 seats out of the 440 available even if it did not field any official candidate, deciding to back only independents (Wing, 2009). While far from the more than 120 seats gained by al-Maliki's *Dawlat al-Qanun* slate, the movement confirmed its importance in the political arena and the support of its significant core-constituency, also securing its access to important financial resources needed to sustain its network and its patron-client system. The importance of the result was further highlighted by the poor performance of other Shia-based parties, especially the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI, ex-SCIRI), which passed from 200 council seats to only 50 (Katzman, 2014, p. 6).

The March 2010 elections reaffirmed the prominent role of the Sadrist trend, which gained 40 seats out of the 70 won by the Iraqi National Alliance[3], becoming the third most important party after *Iraqiyya* (91 seats) and *Dawlat al-Qanum* (89 seats). Once again the ballot boxes showed al-Sadr to be one of the "kingmakers" of the Iraqi political system, making his support fundamental for the formation of the new al-Maliki government ratified by the November 2010 Erbil agreement (Plebani, 2013, p. 9-10). For its support for the new cabinet the movement was rewarded with eight cabinet positions, including the ministries of Housing, Labour and Social Affairs, Planning, Tourism and Antiquities (Katzman, 2014).

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[3] The alliance also comprised the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, *Fadilah*, and the parties led by Ahmad Chalabi and Ibrahim al-Jafari.

following months, when al-Maliki refrained from respecting the agreement and heightened his influence on the fragile Iraqi system (Dodge, 2013, p. 248-249), also sparking an all-out confrontation with key Arab Sunni politicians and large parts of the whole Sunni community (ICG, 2013). Al-Sadr emerged as one of the most vocal opponents of the new course inaugurated by al-Maliki and publicly accused the prime minister of authoritarianism and sectarianism. He also took part in April 2012 in a failed attempt to trigger a no-confidence vote against al-Maliki, which failed due to external pressure (Iranian and US) and to internal opposition (Sullivan, 2013). According to Katzman, the petition did not reach the *quorum* required due to al-Maliki's gradual rapprochement with prominent Sunni politicians and to the pressures he exerted over many Sadrist MPs (Katzman, 2014, p. 13).

In this context the 2013 provincial elections became a test for al-Maliki's ambitions and the opposition as well. While *Dawlat al-Qanun* came first in 7 of the 9 Shia majority provinces and obtained around 112 seats, it lost control over the key governatorate of Basra, and had to cope with the emergence of a potential "opposition axis" which allowed the Sadrists, ISCI and the Arab Sunni *al-Mutahidoun* list of Osama al-Nujaifi to exert their control over Baghdad (Plebani, 2014). The overall results confirmed the key role played by the Sadrist trend (59 seats), but also the resurgence of ISCI, which under the leadership of Ammar al-Hakim recovered part of the support lost in 2009 and 2010, gaining a total of 75 seats (Katzman, 2014).

4 Muqtada al-Sadr's February 2014 declarations: causes and impact on the Iraqi political arena

The anti-Maliki axis that emerged in Baghdad represented the most interesting dynamic of the 2013 voting: for the first time since 2006 a cross-sectarian alliance (albeit not based on a defined agenda but on clear and contingent political interests) succeeded in defeating al-Maliki, obliging him to adopt a defensive stance. While not controlling the biggest party of this potential coalition, Muqtada was without any doubt the most vocal opponent of the prime minister and was indicated as one of the most serious candidates for the premiership (Habib, 2013). These were, at least, the predictions of several analysts before Muqtada announced on February 15th 2014 that he "will not intervene in politics [and that] no party represents [him] from now on in Parliament or in any position inside or outside the government" (Duraid, 2014). In a declaration released a few days later the cleric confirmed his decision, denouncing the authoritarian rule imposed by prime minister al-Maliki, and the corruption/ineffectiveness of the incumbent Parliament. Despite this position he invited "honourable voices, political or others, [to] continue in

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their work but in an independent way", praising the good job done by Maysan and Baghdad governors, Ali Dway Lazem and Ali al-Tamimi (Sadr, 2014). At the same time he called the Iraqi people to vote *en masse* so that "the government would not fall into the hands of the ones who cannot be trusted", the ones he compared to "wolves, thirsty for blood, souls that are eager for wealth, leaving their nation in suffering [and] fear" (Sadr, 2014).

The move caught most of the people following the evolution of the Iraqi scenario off-guard, prompting thousands of his followers and many of the most prominent Iraqi politicians (including Ammar al-Hakim, Osama al-Nujaifi and Iyad Allawi) to ask him to reconsider his decision. At first, the formal detachment of Muqtada al-Sadr from Iraqi politics was read as a major political gain for prime minister al-Maliki and as a net loss for the opposition, which would be deprived of one of its most charismatic members. As for the causes that spurred this decision, some reports argued it depended mainly on the disgust the cleric felt for the Iraqi political arena (accused of corruption and subservience to the office of the prime minister), including some elements of the *al-Ahrar* bloc (the political wing of the movement) considered not in line with the principles inspiring the Sadrist trend. This revulsion, already observed after the failed vote of no-confidence against Mr. al-Maliki in 2012, had apparently been nurtured by a series of recent corruption scandals as well as by the anger provoked by the support some Sadrist MPs gave to the widely contested pension law (Abbas, 2014a). Such an hypothesis could be sustained by Sadr's reference in his declaration to the need to protect the honour of his family, but would not totally explain the extent of his decision, since he could have dismissed the *al-Ahrar* members considered not up to the task without breaking off from the whole party (Abbas, 2014b). Other analyses considered al-Sadr's decision as part of a process of detachment from everyday politics (begun in 2007) aimed at strengthening his religious credentials and at reaching out to the traditional Najaf-based leadership by tempering the spirit of the "vocal *hawza*"[4]. This thesis – which tends to link al-Sadr's detachment from political activism to future competition for the position of *marja'* after Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani's death – does not explain the timing chosen but, above all, does not consider the limited religious credentials the Iraqi cleric can rely on and the fact that al-Sadr's success in these years has been directly connected to his father's legacy – a legacy based on the need for religious leaders to play an active role in political and social affairs (Abood, 2013 – Hasan, 2014).

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[4] The term is generally used to identify a Shia school of thought demanding religious leaders to play an active role in political and social affairs.

In this framework, al-Sadr's announcement has to be considered more as a political repositioning than as a definitive retreat (Hasan, 2014 – Wing, 2014). The cleric resorted to a similar move in August 2013 when the news of his intention to retire prompted huge manifestations and public shows of loyalty by his leaders, which helped him to reaffirm his hold over the movement and to purge it from internal opponents (Wing, 2014). While the timing (only two months ahead of 2014 national elections) and the modalities chosen do not play in favour of a rapid reversal of al-Sadr's decision, the cleric's formal detachment from the political arena does not mean he will not exert significant influence over it. The network of charities, schools and institutes associated with the Sadrist trend is still active and will continue to represent a significant resource for the cleric (Hasan, 2014). Furthermore, even if not fielding any official candidate, al-Sadr can mobilize significant support for politicians or political forces close to him, as happened during the 2009 provincial elections. In this framework, the public endorsement given to the governors of Baghdad and Basra has to be considered not only a mere recognition of their efforts but also as a political blessing aimed at sustaining their electoral campaigns and at contributing to the redefinition of the upper echelons of the *al-Ahrar* bloc (Wing, 2014). A final point worth mentioning is directly related to the influence exerted by foreign powers (the East and the West mentioned in his declaration[5]) over the Iraqi system and to their alleged pressure over Shia political forces to support al-Maliki for his third term[6]. While Tehran's influence was fundamental in guaranteeing the backing of the Shia forces for al-Maliki's re-election in 2010, al-Sadr went too far in opposing the prime minister over the past two years to reconcile once again, bowing to Iranian desires. Distancing himself from politics could represent one of the few tools at the cleric's disposal to neutralize these pressures.

While Muqtada al-Sadr declarations shocked the whole Iraqi political spectrum, they appear to be more of a political manoeuver than a complete detachment from politics. His father's legacy, his previous stances, the particular nature of the Sadrist trend and the reasons which favoured its emergence in the Iraqi system play in favour of such a reading. In one way or another al-Sadr's influence over the Iraqi system seems to be destined

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[5] A clear reference to the US and Iran.

[6] The alleged Iranian support to al-Maliki seems to be based more on convenience than on an unquestionable political alliance. Tehran's relations with Ammar al-Hakim, for instance, appear to be much more solid, due also to the historical partnership established with his movement (ISCI). In this framework, the decision to back al-Maliki would stem mainly from geopolitical considerations, in order to avoid the further destabilization of an area already deeply marred by the spill-over of the Syrian crisis.

to endure and the *al-Ahrar* bloc – with or without Muqtada at its helm – to remain one of the most significant actors in the Iraqi political arena.

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