

## Al-Sadr and the Mahdi army: Sectarianism and resistance in Iraq



### Introduction

Largely unknown before the fall of Saddam Hussein, Muqtada al-Sadr has risen to become a major figure in Iraq over the past five years. Certainly, Muqtada al-Sadr has become something of a *bête noir* for the American authorities, and contrawise, he has become something of a hero for many in the anti-war movement. Yet Muqtada al-Sadr remains a rather enigmatic figure. Patrick Cockburn's new book *Muqtada al-Sadr and the Fall of Iraq* (Faber & Faber, 2008) promises to shed light on who Muqtada al-Sadr is and the nature of his Sadrist movement. This book has been vigorously promoted by both the Stop the War Coalition and the SWP. So what does Cockburn tell us about Muqtada al-Sadr and his movement and why has it gained such enthusiastic backing from the leaders of the official anti-war movement?

Patrick Cockburn has a well earned reputation as an intrepid investigative journalist. Unlike many of his colleagues, who have preferred to write up the official briefings and press releases from the coalition's PR departments in the relative safety and comfort of the Green Zone, Patrick Cockburn has repeatedly had the courage to venture out to find eye-witness accounts and testimonies of those actually involved in what has been happening during the occupation of Iraq. In doing so Cockburn has often had to risk his own life, and has seen many of his friends and contacts murdered. This courageous investigative journalism, combined with both his long experience of reporting on Iraq - which dates back to the late 1970s - and his trenchant opposition to the occupation, has meant that Cockburn has provided a vital alternative source of information for opponents of both the war and the subsequent occupation of Iraq.<sup>1</sup> As a consequence, at least for the British anti-war

movement, Patrick Cockburn's views on Iraq carry considerable weight.

In this book Cockburn aims to refute the common characterisation of Muqtada Al-Sadr as a 'maverick', 'rabble-rousing' and 'firebrand' cleric, which has been promoted by both the mainstream Western press and many of Al-Sadr's opponents in Iraq. Against what he sees as this false characterisation, Cockburn presents Muqtada Al-Sadr as an 'astute' and 'cautious' politician committed to national unity. Muqtada Al-Sadr, we are told, has shown himself to be a skilful and intelligent leader of a mass, if rather 'anarchic', political movement, which has consistently opposed both Saddam Hussein's regime and the subsequent US occupation. In developing this argument Cockburn has drawn on his own extensive experience of reporting on Iraq and conducted numerous interviews with Muqtada Al-Sadr himself, Al-Sadr's supporters and many of his opponents, particularly amongst rival Shia parties.

However, intrepid anti-war reporting is one thing; to go beyond the competing ideological interpretations of immediate events to uncover the true nature of the contending political forces in Iraq is quite another. As we shall have cause to point out, a critical reading of the extensive evidence presented in Cockburn's book serves to refute his own sympathetic characterisation of Muqtada Al-Sadr and the Sadrist movement, just as much as it serves to refute the antipathetic characterisations put forward by Sadr's American and Iraqi opponents!

But perhaps a far more serious fault of this book, and one that is particularly insidious, is that Cockburn unquestioningly accepts the fundamental notion, shared by the both Al-Sadr and most of his opponents, that the Iraq is primary divided along sectarian and ethnic grounds; and that furthermore the bitter conflicts that have arisen in Iraq following the fall of Saddam Hussein are to be understood as essentially the continuation of the age old struggle of the long oppressed Iraqi Kurds and Shia against their domination by the Sunni Arab minority. This specious and ideological notion has been vigorously promoted by Kurdish Nationalist Parties (the KDP and KUP) and by the rival sectarian Shia Parties that make up United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), which together now dominate the Iraqi government.

But it is a notion that has also been adopted by the American foreign policy establishment in justifying the occupation. In order to justify their acceptance of an Iraqi government filled with the pro-Iranian Shia parties of the UIA, the Americans have come to argue that the occupation has not simply liberated Iraq but that in doing so it has liberated the 'long oppressed Shia majority from Sunni tyranny'.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, For all of his criticisms of the American

book on the US occupation of Iraq: *The Occupation: War and Resistance in Iraq*, Verso. 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Under the guidance of these nationalist and Shia politicians, the US had from the very beginning of the occupation seen Iraqi society as being divided primarily along ethnic and sectarian lines. To ensure 'ethnic and sectarian balance' the Americans appointed those who claimed to 'represent' these various sectarian and ethnic groups. Thus from the very outset it can be argued that the Americans had both promoted and institutionalised ethnic and sectarian divisions.

<sup>1</sup> Cockburn has written extensively on Iraq. Besides numerous articles and reports on Iraq for the *Independent* and has also written a

invasion and occupation of Iraq, Cockburn essentially concurs with the Americans that the fall of Saddam Hussein has meant that the time of the 'long oppressed Iraqi Shia' has finally come. Where Cockburn disagrees with the Americans is who it is that truly represents the 'long oppressed Iraqi Shia'. For the Americans it is the English speaking dark suited politicians, which had for decades opposed Saddam Hussein from exile; for Cockburn it is Muqtada Al-Sadr, with his mass support amongst the most dispossessed Shia in Iraq.

At first sight it might seem that what he euphemistically terms the puritanism of Muqtada al-Sadr and his supporters would be repellent to liberal leftists like Cockburn, and indeed to much of his audience. The Sadrist movement has long been committed to the imposition of a draconian interpretation of Sharia Law. In the 1990s, with the tacit approval of Saddam Hussein, Muqtada Al-Sadr's father ran Sharia courts from his Baghdad headquarters that meted out severe punishments, including executions, to ungodly gays and wayward women.<sup>3</sup> Under the occupation these Sharia courts have multiplied. As the Sadrist and the other political Islamic groups have attempted to impose their strict interpretation of Sharia Law on what, at least in urban areas, is a largely secular and westernized society, punishments such as floggings, stonings and beheadings have become widespread. Women have particularly suffered from this imposition of Sharia Law. According to the Organisation for Women's Freedom in Iraq the number of women killed by political Islamic organisations, such as the Sadrists, now amounts to 'a genocide against women'.



However, at first, the US could still envisage that such divisions would be contained and transcended within a pliant pro-western secular state. However, in 2004, faced with insurrections across Iraq, the US did its deal with Sistani, dividing the resistance along sectarian grounds and opening the way for the sectarian parties of the UIA to sweep the elections in 2005. As a consequence, US propagandists have adopted the ideology of the UIA that they represent the long oppressed Shia of Iraq.

<sup>3</sup> See, 'Baghdad Gays Fear for Their Lives' in *Iraqi Crisis Report*, In Institute for war & peace reporting.

[www.iwpr.net/?p=icr&s=f&o=324756&apc\\_state=henh](http://www.iwpr.net/?p=icr&s=f&o=324756&apc_state=henh)

The situation in Basra is a prime example. Since the withdraw of British troops from Basra in September 2007, and the consequent take over of large parts of Basra by Muqtada Al-Sadr's Mahdi army, the mutilated bodies of more than a hundred women are being found dumped on the cities streets every month.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the atrocities committed by the Sadrists are not confined to the draconian imposition of Sharia Law. The Mahdi army has played a major part in sectarian conflict. The Mahdi army was a prime protagonist in what Cockburn himself has called the 'cruel and bloody civil war' that erupted in Baghdad following the bombing of the Samara mosque in February 2006. The Mahdi army pursued a ruthless policy of sectarian cleansing in areas of the city they took over, which involved the brutal murder of thousands of those deemed to be Sunni and terrorized thousands more to flee.

Patrick Cockburn, perhaps wary of the feminist sensitivities of many of his readers, is a little shy concerning the Sadrists repressive implementation of Sharia Law. He readily admits that the Sadrists have enforced the wearing of the veil in the areas they control. Indeed, he recounts how families he knows have been threatened with violence by the Mahdi army if they did not make their women wear the hijab. Yet he tries to play this down by alleging that most women, at least in southern Iraq, wore the veil anyway.<sup>5</sup> Cockburn claims that the Sadrists attitude to women is better than the Taliban. The Sadrists', he tells us, stand for the 'separation of men and women rather than the total subjection of women like the Taliban in Afghanistan'.<sup>6</sup> Cockburn completely ignores the severe punishments meted out, particularly to women, by the Sadrists. In fact he swallows whole the claims of his Sadrist interviewees that, as regards to women, the Sadrist courts merely 'heard women's complaints and asserted their rights, particularly in matters of divorce and child custody'.<sup>7</sup>

However, although he seeks to play down and avoid the reactionary and repressive character of the Sadrist movement, particularly in regard to women, Cockburn does not seek to deny the Mahdi army's involvement in sectarian killings; indeed, he provides ample evidence for it. In the very first chapter, after relating how he was nearly killed at a Mahdi army checkpoint, only being saved by the quick thinking of his driver and his Irish passport, he tells us how:

Iraqis began to carry two sets of identity papers, one showing they were Sunni and the other that they were Shia. Faked papers avoided identifiably Sunni names such as 'Omar' or 'Othman'. Shia checkpoints started carrying out theological examinations to see if a person with Shia papers was truly familiar with Shia ritual and was not a Sunni in disguise. Many of these dangerous young men manning these checkpoints came from Sadr City and belonged, or claimed to belong to, the Mahdi army.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See 'Joint Statement to Stop "Gender Cleansing" in Iraq, Iraq Freedom Congress, [www.ifcongress.com/English/index.htm](http://www.ifcongress.com/English/index.htm)

<sup>5</sup> p. 216.

<sup>6</sup> p. 216. Of course this defence of gender apartheid is similar to the defence of racial apartheid by white South Africans.

<sup>7</sup> p. 216.

<sup>8</sup> p. 14.

Later on in his book Cockburn vividly describes the terror instilled in the ‘Sunnis’ of Baghdad by the death squads of the Mahdi army during the sectarian cleansing of 2006. What is more Cockburn provides what he himself describes as ‘a convincing account’ of the operations of the Sadrist death squads during this period by a former Mahdi army member and self-confessed death squad leader Abu Kamael:

On the overall objective of the campaign [Abu Kamael] admits: ‘It was very simple, we were ethnically cleansing. Anyone Sunni was guilty: if you were called Omar, Uthman, Zayed, Sufian or something like that, then you would be killed. These are Sunni names and you are killed according to identity.’<sup>9</sup>

Muqtada Al-Sadr has repeatedly denied that he has anything to do with sectarian cleansing and death squads. He has claimed that the death squads are either rogue elements, which have exceeded his orders to target those actively involved in Sunni attacks on Shia areas, collaborators with the occupation forces or senior ex-Ba’athists; or else impostors attempting to discredit the Mahdi army.

However, even Cockburn is not altogether convinced of such denials. In Chapter ten where he describes the murder of the senior Shia cleric Sayyid Majid al-Khoel shortly after the fall of Saddam Hussein and the attempts by Muqtada Al-Sadr to deny that his supporters had anything to do with it, Cockburn remarks:

As I discovered at a Mahdi army checkpoint in Kufa a year later the Sadrist movement contains many violent young men loyal to Muqtada, but loosely under his control. It was a convenient excuse for the Sadrists in the coming years that they were not responsible for much of the violence carried out in their name.<sup>10</sup>

And in the concluding chapter, referring to the sectarian cleansing that followed the bombing of the Samarra mosque, Cockburn remarks:

The excuse that it was ‘rogue elements’ among his militiamen who were carrying out this slaughter is not convincing because the butchery was too extensive and too well organized to be the work of only marginal groups.<sup>11</sup>

But even though he accepts that Muqtada Al-Sadr cannot escape all responsibility for the atrocities carried out in his name, Cockburn is prepared to excuse him for them. After all, for Cockburn, Muqtada Al-Sadr, with his mass base in what he calls the ‘underclass’ of Baghdad, is the true leader of the long oppressed Shia. As such the atrocities committed by the Sadrists must be understood as the result of the righteous anger of the oppressed.

But, as we shall now see, in taking this position regarding Muqtada Al-Sadr and the nature of the Sadrist movement, Cockburn has uncritically accepted the myths of Sadrists in particular and of Shia political Islam in general.

As such, for all his superficial criticisms and scepticism, Patrick Cockburn ends up as little more than an apologist for Muqtada al-Sadr.

### Myths and legends

In chapter two of his book – entitled the Shia of Iraq – Cockburn recounts how, days after the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime, ‘a million’ Shia Iraqis from across central and southern Iraq answered Muqtada al-Sadr’s call to make the mass pilgrimage to the holy city of Kerbala to commemorate the anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein. This mass pilgrimage to Kerbala, which for several years had been banned by Saddam Hussein, proved to be a decisive moment in the rise of Muqtada al-Sadr. Firstly, it provided a timely occasion to revive and mobilize the Sadrist movement, which had largely lain dormant since the murder of Sadr’s father and two elder brothers in 1999. Secondly, with most of the leading Shia politicians and clerics still to return from exile, it catapulted Muqtada al-Sadr from being a rather obscure junior cleric to national prominence.

In order to explain the symbolic importance of Muqtada al-Sadr’s call for this mass pilgrimage for the devout Shia of Iraq, Cockburn then goes on to explain the significance of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein at the battle of Kerbala in 680AD for Shia Islam. This explanation then serves as the starting point for Cockburn to present what he describes as the ‘complex’ and ‘rich’ history of the Shia of Iraq. For Cockburn this ‘history of the Iraqi Shia’ is essential to understanding the politics of present day Iraq; and it’s a failure to appreciate this ‘history’ that, for Cockburn, is the source of many of the problems the Americans have faced during the occupation.

Unfortunately, whatever the rich and complex history the Shia of Iraq may have, what Cockburn presents us with, in what accounts for more than a third of his book, is rather poor – being more myth than history. It does momentarily occur to him that it is dangerous to read history backwards,<sup>12</sup> but this is precisely what Cockburn proceeds to do. Indeed, Cockburn ends up regurgitating the Sadrist myths that during his numerous interviews he has swallowed whole.

Cockburn relates in some detail the fairytale-like legends that surround the family feud that culminated in the battle of Kerbala and the resulting schism between Sunni and Shia Islam. In doing so Cockburn certainly provides a valuable insight into why Shia Islam may be perceived by Sadrists and others as being the religion of the heroic resistance of the poor and oppressed; and consequently why Sunni Islam may be seen to be the religion of the oppressors. But, by uncritically relating this myth, Cockburn slips into implicitly accepting this perception as being essentially true. Significantly Cockburn neither puts the Sunni side of the story nor places this episode in its historical context.

Of course, Shia Islam is far from being the only religion that exalts the poor and oppressed. Christianity is another. But as we know from the history of Christianity, religions that exalt poverty, and promise redemption through the return of a Messiah in the distant future – which in the case of Shia Islam will occur with the return of the twelfth imam,

<sup>9</sup> p. 230.

<sup>10</sup> p. 158.

<sup>11</sup> p. 249.

<sup>12</sup> p. 29.

Muhammad al-Mahdi<sup>13</sup> - usually serve to inculcate resignation in the poor and oppressed. In order to explain the historical dominance of its 'quietist' and apolitical tradition, Cockburn is obliged to admit that for much of its history Shia Islam in Iraq has served to reconcile the poor and oppressed with their lot. But what Cockburn avoids admitting is that, as such, although Shia Islam in Iraq and elsewhere may claim to be a religion of the 'poor and oppressed' it also equally has been a religion for the rich and powerful. Indeed, just like the bishops and cardinals of the Christian Church, the clerical hierarchy of Shia Islam - the *marji'iyā* - has been drawn from the rich and powerful families and has traditionally been an integral part of the dominant classes.



Having related the myths of the battle of Kerbala in some detail, Cockburn glosses over the next 1300 years in little more than a page. From now on the remainder of Cockburn's account of the history of the Shia in Iraq becomes little more than the lineage of Muqtada al-Sadr. Like all of the major families of what Cockburn himself terms the 'clerical aristocracy' the Sadr family claims direct descent from the prophet Muhammad. However, the first of the Sadr family that Cockburn can tell us much about is Sayyid Muhammad al-Sadr, who, we are told, played a prominent role in the 'Shia' uprising against British rule in 1920.

Yet what Cockburn does not say is that following the suppression of this uprising the British sought to maintain their hold of Iraq by renewing their efforts in shoring up the traditional dominant classes. In southern Iraq this included the tribal leaders, who were being rapidly transformed into rapacious landlords, merchants and money lenders. As a result these dominant classes, including leading families of the 'clerical aristocracy' became an integral part of the pro-British ruling class of Iraq under the rule of King Faisal. Indeed, as Cockburn himself lets slip, Sayyid Muhammad al-Sadr 'became a long term president of the senate and briefly prime minister in 1948'.<sup>14</sup>

The 1950s saw rapid growth in the Communist party of Iraq, which united landless peasants, the growing working

class and the professional middle classes. The Communist party played a central role in the revolution of 1958, which overthrew the regime of King Faisal and swept away the pro-British factions of the old ruling class. Cockburn claims that, because the majority of the Communist party were Shia, this was really a Shia revolution! Equally, because the majority of the officer corps of the Iraqi army happened to be Sunni, then the subsequent army coups, which eventually led to the establishment of the Ba'athist regime, were in effect a Sunni counter-revolution.

This is nonsense. Firstly, Cockburn's claim that the 1958 revolution was a 'Shia revolution' is like claiming that the French revolution was a catholic revolution because the majority of the *sans culottes* happen to have been catholic! Secondly, the 1958 revolution itself was started by a coup by army officers. Thirdly, in the subsequent uprisings that swept much of southern Iraq the 'Shia' peasants clearly felt little compunction about lynching their 'Shia' landlords en masse. Fourthly, although it was to be drawn disproportionately from Sunni army officers, the Ba'athist regime was far from being exclusively 'Sunni'.

The 1958 revolution was a nationalist and anti-imperialist revolution that, by sweeping away the old reactionary factions of the ruling class, which had been allied to British imperialism, had sought to establish a modern and *secular* Iraq. The subsequent counter-revolution, which established the Ba'athist regime, was a counter-revolution that arose out of the revolution itself. It was a counter-revolution made to check the growing power of both the Communist party and the working classes, not to restore the old order, and as such remained committed to establishing a modern and secular Iraq.

For the remnants of the old ruling classes religious faith gained a renewed importance as the principal means of holding themselves together as a class. Most of those of the former ruling classes sought to keep their heads down, mind their own business and accommodate themselves with the new political order. This was reflected in the continued predominance of the 'quietist' traditions of the *marji'iyā*. A few, however, sought to oppose the new order by rallying behind the Dawa party. The Dawa party (from Dawa meaning the 'call to Islam') had been founded shortly before the 1958 revolution as a political party based on Shia Islam that would seek to turn back the growing tide of secularism in Iraq. Two prominent families of the Shia clerical aristocracy played a central role in founding this party; the Sadr family, which was now headed by the son of Sayyid Muhammad al-Sadr, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (who Cockburn calls Sadr I for short), and the Hakim family.

By concentrating almost exclusively on the petty intrigues of the Dawa party in his account of the 1960s and 1970s, Cockburn gives the impression that they were the principal opposition to the Ba'athist regime. But, as Cockburn occasionally admits in passing, during this time Iraq had become both socially and politically a predominantly secular society. The main competing political ideologies were those of the *secular* Kurdish nationalist parties, the *secular* Communist party and the *secular* pan-Arab nationalism of the Ba'athist party. The Dawa party made little head way in building a popular base amongst an increasing secular Iraqi population, and hence remained a marginal and largely irrelevant political force.

<sup>13</sup> Hence the name of Muqtada al-Sadr's militia - the Mahdi army - which is supposed to be preparing the way for the return of Muhammad al-Mahdi.

<sup>14</sup> p. 35.

It was only briefly at the end of the 1970s that the Dawa party gained political prominence as an 'opposition' to the Ba'athist regime, and then it was more the doing of Saddam Hussein than any success they may have had in building a mass movement. Following the overthrow of the Shah, Saddam Hussein saw the opportunity of exploiting Iran weakness to launch a war. Many of the leading families of the *marji'iyah* in Iraq were Iranian, just as many of its leading families in Iran were Iraqi. As a consequence the Dawa party could be seen to have close connections with Khomeini and his theocratic regime, which was consolidating its power in Iran. As part of his efforts to stir up anti-Iranian feeling, Saddam Hussein pumped up the Dawa party as a Trojan horse from the Iranian regime that seriously threatened Iraq. In 1980, shortly after starting the war with Iran, Saddam Hussein had Sadr I murdered. The Dawa party fractured, with many of its members fleeing into exile.

The subsequent Iran-Iraq war presents a problem for Cockburn. If, as he insists, the religious identity of Iraqis was so important, why didn't the 'long oppressed' Shia of southern Iraq rise up in support of the 'Shia revolution' in neighbouring Iran? Furthermore, given that most of the lower ranks of the Iraqi army were Shia, why did they continue to fight their co-religionists for eight long years? Cockburn's main explanation is that the Shia feared brutal repression if they mutinied.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, this would seem to be supported by what Cockburn terms the 'Shia' uprising in southern Iraq, which occurred following the American invasion of Iraq in 1991, when it seemed that the repressive grip of the Ba'athist regime had finally been broken.

But remarkably Cockburn is unable to provide much to substantiate his claim that the uprising in southern Iraq, which was sparked by mutinying Iraqi soldiers fleeing Kuwait, was a particularly 'Shia' uprising, rather than a general uprising against the regime. Indeed, as he himself points out, calls by senior Shia clerics to respect property and set up Islamic councils were widely ignored.

It is only after the 1991 invasion that political Islam began to gain ground in Iraq; and perhaps rather ironically, this advance of political Islam was to a significant extent due to the designs of Saddam Hussein. As Cockburn points out, after the Iran-Iraq war, with the pan-Arab nationalist ideology of the Ba'athist party largely discredited, Saddam Hussein had increasingly turned to religion as an ideological support for his regime. 'God is great' in Arabic was inscribed on the national flag and, after the US invasion, Saddam Hussein promised to build a 'hundred' new mosques. But, perhaps far more importantly, Saddam Hussein promoted Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr (Sadr II) – who was the son-in-law of Sadr I and father of Muqtada al-Sadr – as the leading Shia cleric in order to help create a cultural revival of Islam in Iraq.

After the long war with Iran, the bombing and invasion by the US and the imposition of punitive economic sanctions, the economic situation of the once relatively prosperous Iraq had become desperate by the 1990s. Cockburn argues that, with pan-Arabism and socialism largely discredited, such

conditions proved particularly fertile for the revival of Islam, particularly amongst the younger generations of the poor and dispossessed. As a consequence, with the backing and generous funding from the state, Sadr II was able to build both an effective organisation and a substantial popular base. This was particularly the case in what has now become known as Sadr City in east Baghdad, which became the principal base for the Sadrist movement.

For many Dawaists that had gone into exile, Sadr II had sold out. He was seen as a traitor and, perhaps quite correctly, as a collaborator with Saddam Hussein's regime. Sadrists, as Cockburn tells us, now claim, with the benefit of hindsight, that Sadr II was really 'tricking' Saddam Hussein into allowing him to build up the Sadrist movement under the guise that it was merely a cultural movement. However, Sadr II suffered the fate of all former collaborators with Ba'athist regime. In 1999 Saddam Hussein had him, together with his two eldest sons, murdered. This effectively decapitated the Sadrist movement. If Sadr II was 'tricking' Saddam Hussein it was a 'trick' that only came to fruition with the aid of the American invasion.

As we have seen, Cockburn's attempt to present the Sadrist movement as representing a long struggle of the poor Shia against Sunni oppression simply does not stand up. The Sadrist family was part of the old traditional Iraqi ruling class, and as such had been collaborators with British imperialism. Although Sadr I may have been a bitter opponent of the Ba'athist regime, he was largely irrelevant. His successor built up the Sadrist movement in collaboration with Saddam Hussein. Now we shall see how far Muqtada al-Sadr has been a collaborator with US imperialism.

### Muqtada al-Sadr, Iraqi nationalism and the 'resistance'

#### Patriotism: The last refuge of a scoundrel?

It has been claimed that Muqtada al-Sadr sees himself as being first of all an Iraqi, secondly an Arab and only thirdly a Shia.<sup>16</sup> Certainly Muqtada al-Sadr has sought to present himself as an Iraqi nationalist who has consistently opposed foreign intervention in Iraq, not only from the US-led coalition forces, but also from both the international jihadi militants of Al-Qaida and the interference of Iran. Muqtada al-Sadr's nationalist claims have not only been important in defining the distinctive identity of the Sadrist movement, but also for his attempts to appeal to Iraqis beyond his rather narrow popular base.

Muqtada al-Sadr's claim to be a nationalist has been a vital part of his riposte to the accusations from his rivals within the UIA that his father was a collaborationist with Saddam Hussein. Not only can he answer that the Sadr family had the courage to stay in Iraq, while his Shia rivals fled to the comforts and safety of exile, he is able to point to the close connections that many of his rivals within the UIA have with Iran. This is particularly true of al-Sadr's most bitter rivals, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). SCIRI was formed as a breakaway faction from the Dawa party by followers of the Hakim family based in Iran in

<sup>15</sup> In fact there were mass mutinies during the Iran-Iraq war. But mutinies cannot be identified as being Shia mutinies – being either communist or Kurdish nationalist uprisings – they have been written out of Cockburn's Sadrist history of Iraq. See *Ten days that shook Iraq*, Wildcat (UK), BM CAT, London WC1N 3XX, UK, or PO BOX 3305

<sup>16</sup> This would seem to suggest that even Muqtada al-Sadr acknowledges that Iraqi nationalism and pan-Arabism still remain far more powerful ideologies amongst the Iraqi population than Shia political Islam.

the 1980s. It was given generous support by their host Iranian regime. Indeed, its militia – the Badr Brigades – were trained and equipped by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and fought beside them against Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war.

By portraying what have become known as the Sunni insurgent groups as being dependent on the foreign forces of Al-Qaida, and by presenting the Badr Brigades as merely a tool of Iran, Muqtada al-Sadr has been able to claim that his Sadrist movement and Mahdi army is the only truly nationalist force that has consistently opposed the US occupation of Iraq both politically and militarily. How far this claim is accepted in Iraq beyond the ranks of the Sadrist movement is unclear. Muqtada al-Sadr's claim that the Sadrist movement is the true nationalist, and indeed, anti-imperialist force opposing the US occupation is one that has gained significant traction within the anti-war movement and the anti-imperialist left in the west.

Certainly Cockburn is sympathetic to Muqtada al-Sadr's nationalist and anti-imperialist claims. However, Cockburn faces serious problems defending them. Firstly, as Cockburn has to admit, Muqtada al-Sadr has his own links with the Iranian regime. Secondly, if it is the case that the Sadrist movement has consistently opposed the US occupation, why were there Sadrist ministers in the collaborationist Iraq government? Thirdly, if Muqtada al-Sadr is such a nationalist opposed to the US occupation why has he allowed his Mahdi army to wage not only a sectarian war against the Sunnis but also against rival Shia militias?

First of all we shall consider Muqtada al-Sadr's relationship with the Iranian regime and then we shall examine Cockburn's contention that he is an anti-sectarian nationalist who has consistently opposed the occupation.

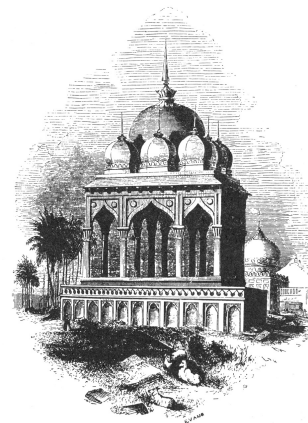
### **Muqtada al-Sadr and Iran**

Firstly, let us consider the question of Muqtada al-Sadr's links with Iran. It is certainly true, that with the growing diplomatic confrontation between the US and Iran, the US government has made strenuous efforts to find evidence that Iran has been supplying arms to Iraqi militia, particularly to the Mahdi army. Yet, as Cockburn points out, they have failed to find any convincing evidence of such arms supplies. But, given the large black market in weapons in the Middle East there is little need for the Iranian government to supply arms directly. They can simply provide the cash, which is far more difficult to uncover.

Certainly the Iranian regime has a vital interest in promoting a degree of instability in Iraq. As one of its main rivals in the region, anything that divides and weakens Iraq serves to strengthen the position of Iran. More immediately, with the threat posed to Iran by the US, instability in Iraq ties down a large part of the American army. However, it is also true that it is not in the interests of the Iranian regime to see the complete political disintegration of Iraq. This would inevitably create a political vacuum that would inevitably suck in other powers in the region – such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Syria – with unpredictable consequences. As a consequence, the Iranian regime has been playing a complex game. By exerting its influence in Iraq, particularly through its links with the Shia parties and their militia, the Iranian regime has sought to make itself indispensable for any lasting settlement that would allow the US to withdraw from Iraq. As such, its influence in Iraq provides the Iranian regime with a valuable bargaining counter with the US.

Of all the Shia parties it is SCIRI that has the strongest links with the Iranian regime. However, they are not simply instruments of Tehran. SCIRI has sought to play the Iranians off against the Americans. Indeed, of all the Shia parties, SCIRI has perhaps done most in accommodating the US.<sup>17</sup> As a result, Janus-like, SCIRI is widely seen as being alternatively both pro-American and pro-Iranian. Iran has therefore had to hedge its bets. As an 'experienced Iraqi Shia' commentator told Cockburn 'it is impossible to oppose Iran because they are paying all the pro-Iranian parties – and they are paying all the anti-Iranian parties as well'.<sup>18</sup>

Muqtada al-Sadr, as a Shi'ite leader with a significant popular base and a formidable militia, would seem an ideal candidate to be an ally for the Iranian regime. But has Muqtada al-Sadr been willing to accept support from Iran? Although he may claim to oppose Iranian interference in Iraq, Muqtada al-Sadr has shown himself to be far from hostile to the Shia regime in Tehran. As Cockburn tells us, as early as June of 2003 al-Sadr went to Iran and had meetings with 'the Iranian supreme leader, Ayatollah Khameni, and, reportedly, also with Qasim Suleimani, the commander of the Qods Brigade (a special foreign department of the Intelligence arm of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards)'.<sup>19</sup> For Cockburn, establishing cordial relations with Tehran at this time is evidence of the astuteness of Muqtada al-Sadr as a politician. But as Cockburn then goes on to admit 'Iran did provide a useful safe haven and potential source of supplies and money for the nascent Medhi army'.<sup>20</sup> Has Muqtada al-Sadr subsequently drawn on these Iranian supplies and money? Cockburn attempts to wriggle out of this question. Although he insists that Iranian backing is a largely a conspiracy theory propagated by al-Sadr's opponents, Cockburn eventually admits that after 2005 the Mahdi army did begin to receive substantial material support from Iran.<sup>21</sup> Cockburn tries to get round this by saying the acceptance of this material was the work of infiltrators and was opposed by Muqtada al-Sadr. But in the end Cockburn seems to not quite to believe such excuses. As a last line of defence, Cockburn blames the American for driving Muqtada al-Sadr into the arms of the Iranian regime.



<sup>17</sup> SCIRI ministers in the Iraqi government have played a prominent role in pushing through legislation preparing the way for the privatization of Iraq's oil.

<sup>18</sup> p. 167.

<sup>19</sup> p. 167.

<sup>20</sup> p. 168.

<sup>21</sup> p. 205.

### **Muqtada al-Sadr's 'betrayal of the resistance': Sectarianism and collaboration**

Whatever his links may be with the repressive theocratic regime in Tehran, what is more important for Cockburn, and perhaps more so for many of the anti-war/anti-imperialist left amongst his readership, is Muqtada al-Sadr's claim to have consistently opposed the US occupation. Of course, it may be true enough that Muqtada al-Sadr has repeatedly spoken out against the occupation. However, this is not saying that much. Given its great unpopularity amongst Iraqis, all the parties of Iraq have repeatedly called for an early end to the occupation. What is more, as Cockburn himself complains, Muqtada al-Sadr's words do not live up to his actions.

Nevertheless it is true that Mahdi army has repeatedly found itself fighting US troops. Often Muqtada al-Sadr has been obliged to disown some of these conflicts with the coalition forces as 'rogue elements' or present them as merely self-defence. But what he, and his apologists, are able to tout loudly as evidence of his resolute resistance to the occupation is that Muqtada al-Sadr and the Mahdi army led two armed uprisings in the Spring and Summer of 2004. Cockburn gives us vivid eyewitness accounts of these uprisings, which show the determination, commitment and heroism of the Mahdi army in what became an unequal battle with the Coalition forces. But as we shall see, what is more significant than the uprisings themselves is the reasons that led to them, and what is even more important is what Muqtada al-Sadr did to end them, and the dire consequences this was to have on the 'Iraqi resistance'.

As the first anniversary of the invasion approached it was becoming clear even to the Bush regime that the resistance of 'die-hard Ba'athists' would not fade away soon. Indeed, opposition and resistance to the occupation was steadily growing. In many of the cities, particularly in central Iraq, whole districts had become effectively self-governing no-go areas, where coalition troops were unable to enter without the concentration of considerable military force. At the same time, both Coalition patrols and bases were coming under daily attack.

In the Summer of 2003 Muqtada al-Sadr had been quick to revive the Sadrist movement and in July he had announced the formation of the Mahdi army as its military wing. Yet, as Cockburn puts it, in the Autumn he seriously 'overplayed his hand'.<sup>22</sup> On October 10 Muqtada al-Sadr announced that he was forming a 'shadow government' and days later his supporters made an abortive attempt to capture shrines in Kerbala. The Americans responded by moving into Sadr City and deposing the Sadrist local council. Muqtada al-Sadr attempted to counter this by calling for mass demonstrations in Sadr City, but, as Cockburn admits, they proved to be a damp squib.

By November Muqtada al-Sadr had abandoned all his vehement anti-occupation rhetoric. He now adopted the line being put out by the most senior Shia cleric the Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, and the Shia parties, that the 'coalition forces were 'guests' in Iraq and the main enemy were survivors of Saddam's regime'.<sup>23</sup> Of course, for Cockburn, this humiliating climb down after a reckless and ill-conceived attempt to seize power was a deft tactical retreat that demonstrates al-Sadr's astuteness as a political leader.

With his anti-Sunni rhetoric, and his promise that the Mahdi army would protect the Shia, Muqtada al-Sadr was able to regain some support following the al-Qaida bombings on March 2, which killed 270 Shia pilgrims at Kerbala and the Kadhimiyyah shrine in Baghdad. However, for the Americans at this time the main military and political resistance to the occupation came, not from the Sadrists, but from the loose alliance of ex-Ba'athists, Nationalists and various Sunni Islamic groups.

On March 31<sup>st</sup> 2004, American mercenaries were killed in Fallujah and their bodies hacked to pieces. The subsequent attempts by the American army to reassert its control provoked a full scale uprising across the city. These events coincided with moves by the Coalition authorities to clamp down on Muqtada al-Sadr and the Sadrist movement. Earlier in March orders had been issued for the closure of the Sadrist newspaper *al-Hawza* and the arrest of Muqtada al-Sadr for the murder of cleric Sayyid Majid al-Kheol. These moves served to mobilize the Sadrist movement. Muqtada al-Sadr now resumed his anti-occupation rhetoric.

On April 4<sup>th</sup> leading Sadrists were arrested. Taking advantage of the fact that the Americans' attention was concentrated on the insurrection in Fallujah, the Mahdi army launched its own armed uprisings in Sadr City, Najaf, Kut Nasiriyah, Kufa and elsewhere. However, even the Italian army stationed in Nasiriyah, weighed down as it was by having to carry vast quantities of pasta, was able to swiftly put down these uprisings. It was only in Sadr City and the holy cities of Najaf and Kufa that the uprisings were able to hold out for any length of time.

Significantly, Cockburn makes no claim that these uprisings were in anyway in solidarity with the uprising in Fallujah. What is more, Cockburn does not tell us what Muqtada al-Sadr's views were on the Fallujah insurrection. Indeed, it is all too likely that Muqtada al-Sadr saw the Fallujah insurrection as an uprising of his 'Ba'athist'/'Sunni' enemies. The immediate aim of the Sadrist uprisings was to repulse the attempts by the Americans to close down the Sadrist movement, and in doing so brought the Mahdi army into direct military confrontation with the occupying forces. However, by attempting to hold on to the holy cities of Najaf and Kufa, which were the centres of the *marji'iyah*, Muqtada al-Sadr could hope to use the opportunity offered by the Fallujah uprising to strengthen his own position, by force of arms, as a Shia leader.

The Mahdi army's conflict with the Coalition forces in taking and holding the holy cities may have gained Muqtada al-Sadr support amongst those opposed to the occupation, but it was also to demonstrate his dependence on al-Sistani. Facing the prospect that they might lose control of Iraq, the US was reluctant to launch a full scale attack on the holy cities so as to crush the Mahdi army for fear of losing the goodwill of al-Sistani and the Shia parties whose support they needed to legitimate the scheduled formal transfer of power to an Iraqi provisional government in June. As a result, after a few weeks of siege a truce was agreed that allowed the Mahdi army to withdraw and suspended the arrest warrant issued against Muqtada al-Sadr.

The Bush regime now gave up all hope that the resistance would peter out on its own accord, thereby clearing the way for the Iraqi population, grateful for their liberation, to elect the American's protégé, and long-time exile, Ahmed Chalabi as their leader. They now adopted Plan B; to back a

<sup>22</sup> p. 170.

<sup>23</sup> p. 171.

strongman who could direct the newly reconstituted Iraqi army to lead the crushing of the resistance. To this end the Americans insisted that the former Ba'athist and Shi'ite Iyad Allawi be appointed the Prime Minister of the new Provisional Government.

By August it was becoming clear that Allawi's first move would be against the Sadrists. After a series of clashes in Najaf, Muqtada al-Sadr sent the Mahdi army to retake the city. As Cockburn points out, Muqtada al-Sadr was in a stronger position than in the Spring. The Sadrists had consolidated their control over Sadr City and the Mahdi army was stronger and better equipped. However, al-Sistani and the Shia parties now wanted Muqtada al-Sadr brought to heel, even if it meant wrecking large parts of Najaf. As Cockburn suggests, al-Sistani gave tacit approval for Allawi and the Americans to launch a full scale attack on the Mahdi army in Najaf so long as they did no damage the holy shrines.

As a result the Mahdi army suffered heavy casualties as they were forced back and obliged to hold out in the Imam Ali shrine and the nearby Wadi al-Salaam cemetery. Yet for days the American and Iraqi government troops failed to break them despite overwhelming firepower that was damaging large areas of Najaf. Eventually, after returning from a medical operation in London, al-Sistani brokered a deal along lines similar to that which ended the first siege of Najaf in the Spring.

This proved to be a master stroke on the part of al-Sistani. Having spent a year cajoling the fractious Shia parties to form what was to become the UIA, and having allowed the Americans to bring to heel the young upstart Muqtada, al-Sistani was able to show that he was indispensable to the Americans. As a consequence, al-Sistani was now in a position to strike what was to prove a crucial deal with the US. Al-Sistani assured the Americans that all the Shia parties, including the Sadrists, would stand aside while the Coalition forces crushed the 'Sunni' rebellion in Fallujah and the Anbar province. In return the US had to agree to stop their procrastinations and hold early national elections in Iraq.

As a result, within a few days of the presidential elections in the USA, which saw the return of Bush as President, the coalition forces moved to crush the rebellion in Fallujah. A few weeks later, early in 2005, elections were held for a national assembly of Iraq. With their well organized and funded campaign, and with the tacit recognition of the Americans, the UIA won the largest number of seats in the assembly. After months of wrangling, the UIA then was able to form a coalition government with the two Kurdish nationalist parties – the KDP and KUP.

Following the end of the siege of Najaf Muqtada al-Sadr fell in behind al-Sistani's collaborationist strategy. Although Muqtada al-Sadr expressed a few qualms about holding an election while the country was occupied by foreign power, the Sadrist movement duly fought the election as part of the UIA and won 35 seats in the 275 seat assembly, and were subsequently rewarded for their collaboration with six ministries in the Provisional Government.

Cockburn presents Muqtada al-Sadr's willingness to fall in behind al-Sistani's deal with the Americans as another of his astute tactical retreats. Indeed, to sustain this Cockburn claims that that the biggest losers in this deal were the US and Allawi.

But of course, by far the biggest losers of al-Sistani's deal were the people of Fallujah. After all, as a result of this

deal, a quarter of a million people were forced to flee their homes and then wait while their city was pulverized by the American's overwhelming firepower. For the predominantly Sunni population of Fallujah and Anbar, which had already borne much of the brunt of the repression meted out by the occupying forces, Sistani's deal with the Americans was an unmitigated act of betrayal. Not only had the Shia parties stood by while Fallujah was destroyed but they took advantage of the subsequent political situation to gain the fruits of office for themselves.<sup>24</sup> As a consequence, al-Sistani's deal poured oil on the fire of sectarian tensions that were to bring Iraq to the brink of civil war in a little more than a year later.

It is certainly true that the US had to drop Allawi, and with him their plan B, and accept that the Provisional Government would be dominated by the decidedly pro-Iranian parties of the UIA. However, the Americans had been facing the prospect that, with the growing opposition and resistance to the occupation, they would lose their grip on Iraq. Their deal with al-Sistani divided Iraq along sectarian lines. In increasing numbers Iraqi militia now began attacking Iraqis rather than US troops.

As we have already pointed out, Cockburn does not seek to deny that the Mahdi army was involved in the subsequent sectarianism and sectarian killings. He also does not altogether deny that in falling in behind al-Sistani's deal Muqtada al-Sadr contributed to increasing sectarian tensions. However, Cockburn puts forward the excuse that it was the Sunnis who started the sectarian killings and that the 'Sunni insurgency' as a whole increasingly adopted an anti-Shia jihadist and Salafist ideology. Cockburn admits there was considerable sympathy with the Fallujah uprising, with many Shia giving blood for the wounded insurgents. He also mentions that Fallujah insurgents came to support the Sadrists during the second siege of Najaf, providing invaluable military expertise. However, following the bombing of Shia pilgrims at Kerbala in March there had been further sectarian bombings through the Spring and Summer. As a result, Cockburn claims that by the Autumn of 2004 the 'Shia of Baghdad' had lost their patience with the 'Sunni insurgents' and wanted the 'rebellion in Fallujah crushed'.<sup>25</sup> Muqtada al-Sadr therefore had little choice but to accept Sistani's collaboration with the Americans.

Of course, it cannot be disputed that sectarian bombings began before al-Sistani's deal with the Americans and were targeted against what were deemed the Shia population. However, these bombings were not carried out by insurgents in Fallujah, but by al-Qaida. At that time Al-Qaida in Iraq was largely made up of foreign militants that had flocked to Iraq to join the international jihad against the US. They only made up a small part of the insurgency. With al-Sistani's and the Shia parties' 'betrayal' of Fallujah, and the subsequent formation of the collaborationist government, al-Qaida's anti-Shia position appeared vindicated. As a consequence, al-

<sup>24</sup> Cockburn details how the ministries under Sadrist control were run along sectarian lines. In the ministry for health, for example, medical staff, including doctors, who were deemed to be Sunnis were purged. Cockburn excuses the Sadrists for this on the grounds that other ministries controlled by the Kurdish nationalist parties and the other Shia parties of the UIA were also run along ethnic and sectarian lines!

<sup>25</sup> p. 207.





Qaida were able to recruit Iraqis in large numbers and took the ideological lead in what now became identified in reaction to the collaboration of the UIA as the ‘Sunni insurgency’. Indeed, many of the insurgent groups now abandoned their nationalism and adopted a jihadist ideology.

Eventually, after much beating about the bush, Cockburn is obliged to ask the crucial question: ‘Did Muqtada have any alternative to joining the Shia coalition? Could he ever have united with the Sunni insurgents to form a common front against the occupation?’<sup>26</sup> Although he argues that the US had been eager to make a deal to end at least the first uprising in Najaf for fears that the ‘Shia’ and ‘Sunni’ might combine, Cockburn answers that ‘the romantic vision of the a popular front of Shia and Sunni was never really feasible’.<sup>27</sup>

Cockburn may well be right in this; but not for the facile reasons he puts forward. Cockburn suggests that such unity was ultimately unfeasible because of the 1000 year old enmities that divide the Iraqi population between Sunni and Shia. Of course, this is not to be taken to imply that the Sadrist are sectarian. Oh no, Cockburn is insistent that they are anti-sectarian; a) because Muqtada al-Sadr says so, b) because his father once told his followers to pray in Sunni mosques and c) because Muqtada al-Sadr offered (rather belatedly three months after Fallujah) to arbitrate between Sunni and Shia.<sup>28</sup> For Cockburn, the problem is that, despite anything they may say about being nationalist and wanting to unite all Iraqis against the occupation, the Sunnis are irrevocably sectarian and want to continue their age old domination of Iraq.

But it is not enough to take Muqtada al-Sadr’s claims to be an anti-sectarian nationalist who has been consistently opposed to the US occupation at face value, and then put all the blame on the Sunni insurgency for creating sectarian divisions. By following Sistani’s strategy of collaboration with the US Muqtada al-Sadr had effectively abandoned his

opposition to the occupation. As such it cannot be said that he has ‘consistently opposed the occupation’. Indeed, as we have seen, and will see further when we come to consider his response to the American surge in 2007, Muqtada al-Sadr has continually vacillated between resistance and collaboration with the US occupation. Furthermore, as we have argued, by siding with the US against the ‘Sunnis’ Muqtada al-Sadr help to create these sectarian divisions.

If a combined front against the US occupation was never really feasible, it was in no small part due to sectarianism of Muqtada Al-Sadr and the Sadrist movement. As Cockburn himself shows, central to the Sadrist ideology is the need to overthrow the 1400 year domination of the Sunnis. Hence, it is no surprise that the Sadrists see the US as a lesser evil than the Sunnis. However, the inherent sectarianism of the Sadrist movement and its propensity to vacillate between resistance and collaboration with the US occupation is not merely ideological but arises from a material and class basis as we shall now consider.

### Muqtada al-Sadr and the nature of the Sadrist movement

#### Turning back the clock

The invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq has served to sweep away the last remaining remnants of the legacy of the 1958 revolution. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime, and the consequent collapse of the Ba’athist party-state, together with the wholesale privatisation of the Iraqi economy, shattered the state-dependent industrial bourgeoisie of Iraq, which had grown up in the wake of 1958.

In the weeks following the coalition’s ‘victory’ the exiled political representatives of the old ruling class flooded back to Iraq. Rallying the factions of the old ruling class, which had been dominant in southern Iraq, around Shia political Islam and the *marji’iya*, al-Sistani and the leaders of SCIRI and the Dawa party sought to fill the political vacuum and restore the old political and social order.<sup>29</sup> As in the old days they have been eager to collaborate with imperialism – although now it is US not British imperialism – in return for a small slice of the profits. Under the collaborationist government of the UIA and the Kurdish nationalists, the oil companies that exploited Iraq oil in the old days are back and are being offered long term production sharing agreements which are remarkably similar to the ones signed in the 1930s!<sup>30</sup>

By defining themselves in terms of Shia political Islam the parties of UIA have been able to cut both the rival factions of the old ruling class and the remnants of the state-dependent bourgeoisie out of the deal with American imperialism. The response of both these rival factions of the old ruling class and the Ba’athist bourgeoisie has taken two (not necessarily mutually exclusive) forms. Firstly they have sought to present themselves as alternative collaborators for US imperialism or else they have supported the resistance to the occupation. In the face of the success of the UIA, these opposing factions of the Iraqi ruling class have increasingly abandoned any nationalist or pan-Arab ideology and have

<sup>26</sup> p. 206

<sup>27</sup> p. 207.

<sup>28</sup> See pp. 206-7.

<sup>29</sup> Sistani and tribal leaders.

<sup>30</sup> See Hands Off Iraqi Oil for an analysis of the prospective oil contracts being offered to the transnational oil companies such as Shell and BP.

instead have adopted Sunni political Islamic ideology. Thus we have the sharp suited Green Zone politicians of the Islamic party, which claims to represent Sunni Iraq in the National Assembly, and as we have seen the increasingly jihadist and Salafist 'Sunni' insurgency.

As a consequence, the growth of sectarian violence is not as Cockburn and the American ideologists insist, the result of age old sectarian enmities between the Sunni oppressors and the Shia oppressed, which have been released by the occupation. Instead this sectarianism is the ideological form through which the factional struggles within the Iraqi ruling classes are being fought out.



### Muqtada al-Sadr

As we have seen, Muqtada al-Sadr descends from a rich and powerful family that has been an integral part of the *marji'iyah* and with it the old ruling class of Iraq. However, the Sadr clan has in recent times fallen into disrepute amongst their class. As we have seen, Muqtada al-Sadr's father – Sadr II – was widely regarded as a traitor for collaborating with Saddam Hussein. With his low ranking within the *marji'iyah* hierarchy, Muqtada al-Sadr is seen as a young upstart who lacks religious authority. Furthermore, even his claim to be the legitimate representative of the illustrious Sadr family is rather dubious. This has allowed rivals to attempt to cut Muqtada al-Sadr, and his clan and associates, out of any deal with the US imperialists right from the beginning of the occupation.

However, Muqtada al-Sadr had one trump card over his rivals. From the outset he had a popular base and an already existent organisation in Iraq, which his rivals – who were mostly exiles – did not have. By mobilising his popular base and forming the Mahdi army, Muqtada al-Sadr was soon able to create an armed movement that neither his rivals amongst the Shia parties nor the Americans could ignore. Backed by this armed movement, Muqtada al-Sadr could then hope to press the claims of the Sadrist clan to its 'rightful inheritance' as part of the traditional ruling class of Iraq.

But the mobilization of the Sadrist movement was a double-edged sword. To mobilize his support amongst the 'poor and dispossessed' in Sadr City and elsewhere, Muqtada al-Sadr has had to deplore the 'quietism' of the *marji'iyah*; he has had to denounce the leaders of the rival Shia parties for having spent a life of luxury in exile while those, like his supporters, had suffered the deprivation and repression in Iraq

and he has had to call for resistance to the occupation. Yet in doing so he has confirmed the allegations of his rivals that he is a rabble rousing firebrand who threatens class peace and accommodation with the US occupation. As such he has threatened to alienate his own class.

As a result of this contradiction, every time Muqtada al-Sadr has sought to mobilize the Sadrist movement he has been obliged to make a deft retreat, in which he has to profess his deference to al-Sistani and the authority of the *marji'iyah*. Likewise his calls for resistance to the occupation have repeatedly been followed, as we have seen, by a willingness to collaborate.

### The nature of the Sadrist movement

Cockburn is, on occasions, obliged to acknowledge that there are 'deep class divisions' within the Shia. Of course such 'class analysis' is always subordinated to Cockburn's sectarian based analysis that all of Iraq's Shia have somehow been oppressed since 680AD. Yet, although Cockburn's claim that Muqtada al-Sadr represents 'millions of the poor and dispossessed Shia of Iraq' is somewhat exaggerated, it cannot be denied that much of the support for the Sadrist movement, and most of the foot soldiers of the Mahdi army, is drawn from the slums of Sadr City and similar districts of Iraq's cities.

It could be argued that, although he may himself be drawn from the ruling class, Muqtada al-Sadr heads a movement that, however contradictory, in some sense 'represents' the dispossessed of Iraq. But of course, it could be equally argued that the US army is largely made up of recruits from the poorest sections of the American working class. Does that mean that in some sense the US army 'represents' the American working class? No, it would be necessary to see what the aims, nature and organisation of the US army is to see what it represents, and likewise we have to understand what the nature of the Sadrist movement is to see what it represents.

Cockburn presents us with considerable evidence as to the nature of Sadrist movement. The former Sadrist death squad leader Abu Kamael, interviewed by Cockburn, which we quoted earlier, goes on to tell Cockburn:

The Mahdi army is supposed to kill only Ba'athists, Takfiris [Sunni fanatics who do not regard Shia as Muslims], those who cooperate with the occupation and the occupation troops... It does not always happen like that though and it can turn into a mafia gang.<sup>31</sup>

Cockburn goes on to describe in some detail the emergence of 'district warlords' in Sadrist-controlled areas. He gives us the example of Abu Rusil, a former taxi driver who grew rich plundering the possessions of Sunni residents in his area. As Cockburn tell us:

Pledging loyalty to then distant figure of Muqtada his gunmen were wholly controlled by himself and killed any Shia that criticized his actions.<sup>32</sup>

Muqtada al-Sadr had built his movement by gaining the allegiance of the heads of locally powerful families in the

<sup>31</sup> p. 230.

<sup>32</sup> p. 232.

neighbourhoods of Sadr City and similar impoverished districts of Iraq's cities where organized crime has become rife. Bestowed with the hallowed authority of Muqtada al-Sadr these families, together with newly emergent warlords, have been able to run protection rackets, kidnap people for ransom and plunder anyone deemed to be Sunnis or Ba'athists in the name of Islam. As such the Sadrist movement no more represents the poor and dispossessed than the mafia represents the poor and dispossessed of southern Italy or Moscow.

Nevertheless Cockburn is probably correct to dismiss *Newsweek's* characterisation of Muqtada al-Sadr as simply some kind of 'mafia don'. As we have seen, he is from a well-to-do family that has for generations been a part of the clerical hierarchy. As a consequence, the Sadrist movement can claim the allegiance of sections of the old ruling class. Being able to assume a certain degree of bourgeois respectability, ambitious members of this class have been more than willing to represent the Sadrists both in the Iraqi National Assembly and in the Green Zone more generally.

However, although they thrive in conditions of lawlessness offered by a weak state, mafia organisations require connections to state power. This is what Muqtada al-Sadr and the leadership of the Sadrist movement is able to provide. As Cockburn himself points out, in entering the collaborationist government in 2005, and gaining the control of ministries such as education, health and culture, the leadership of the Sadrist movement was able to determine the distribution of government money and jobs. This seems to have been vital to holding the Sadrist movement together.

So, on the one hand the Sadrist movement ideologically depends on its ability to mobilize its foot soldiers amongst the poor against the American occupation and rich former exiles that now collaborate in running the Iraqi government. On the other hand the Sadrist movement depends materially on its ability to make connections with the powers that be in order to gain control over government jobs and money. Thus it is not only the hope of Muqtada al-Sadr to reclaim his family's rightful inheritance as part of the Iraqi ruling class that has driven the vacillation between resistance and collaboration but also the inherent nature of the Sadrist movement itself.

### **Muqtada and the surge**

In April 2007 Muqtada al-Sadr finally announced that he was breaking with the Iraqi government. At the same time he made overtures to various Sunni politicians inviting them to participate in a mass demonstration against the occupation. For many in the anti-war movement this was evidence that Muqtada al-Sadr was once more taking the lead in building a non-sectarian movement against the occupation. For Cockburn, this move also demonstrated the 'astuteness' of Muqtada al-Sadr as a politician in distancing himself from an increasingly unpopular government. However, the collaborationist government made up of rich exiles safely ensconced in the Green Zone had never enjoyed a great deal of popularity. To understand why Muqtada al-Sadr chose to resign from the government we have to briefly consider the broader political situation in both the USA and Iraq.

By 2006 it had become clear to many in the American ruling class that the invasion of Iraq had been a big mistake. With apparently no end in sight to the occupation, there were increasing calls on the Bush regime to cut its losses and

withdraw the troops from Iraq. This growing opposition to the war culminated in the mid-term congressional elections, which saw the Democrats take both houses of Congress on a platform of bringing the troops back home, and the subsequent dismissal of one of the prime advocates of the war Donald Rumsfeld from his post as Secretary of State for Defence.

However, rather than capitulating immediately to the demands for the withdrawal of US troops, Bush pressed for one last throw of the dice. Under the leadership of General Pretreus, Bush ordered an increase in troop levels to support one last effort to stabilize the situation in Iraq. It was a gamble that few at the time thought had much chance of success.

During the formation of the Iraqi government, which had followed the second national elections that had been held at the end 2005, the US had vetoed the re-appointment of the former Prime Minister and leader of the Dawa party – Ibrahim al-Jaafari. Instead a compromise candidate to become prime minister was found from the Dawa party - Nouri al-Maliki. Al-Maliki had close connections to the Sadr family and was able to depend on the support of the Sadrists. Indeed, for Maliki the Sadrists and the Mahdi army were an important counter-weight to SCIRI and their Badr Brigades in the UIA and the coalition government more generally.

During 2006, when the Mahdi army was establishing its control over much of Baghdad through its policy of sectarian cleansing, al-Maliki played an important role in shielding Muqtada al-Sadr from the American's accusations that he was responsible for the escalation of sectarian violence that was destabilising Iraq. With the surge there was a real danger that the extra US troops would allow the Americans to make a concerted effort to move against the Mahdi army. It seems likely that Maliki, and perhaps other Shia politicians in the UIA, put pressure on Muqtada al-Sadr to keep his head down and thereby avoid diverting the American surge from concentrating on the Sunni insurgency. Following the announcement of the surge Muqtada al-Sadr went in to hiding (his opponents alleged that he went to Iran), and order the Mahdi army to avoid confrontations with US troops.

Why did Muqtada al-Sadr re-emerge from hiding four months later while the surge was still going on? And why did he withdraw his ministers from the collaborationist government and once again announce his opposition to the occupation? There would seem to be three reasons that arise from Muqtada al-Sadr's relation to the Sadrist movement itself, his relation to al-Maliki and the Iraqi government and finally from the prospects of the American surge.

Firstly, as the US troops sought to reassert some semblance of control over Baghdad there were inevitable clashes with the Mahdi army that were leading to growing demands within the Sadrist movement for a more robust response to the surge. With Muqtada al-Sadr in hiding, it was becoming increasingly difficult for the Sadrist leadership to hold the line over avoiding unnecessary confrontation with the Americans. By re-emerging with tough anti-occupation rhetoric Muqtada al-Sadr could hope to rally the restless Sadrist movement behind his leadership once more.

Secondly, as Cockburn mentions, al-Maliki had ordered the arrest of several hundred Sadrists in January 2007. It is difficult to know if this was because al-Maliki was attempting to placate the Americans by taking action himself against the Sadrists; or if he thought the Sadrists had become too

powerful, having established their control over large parts of Baghdad, and was taking the opportunity to cut them down to size. Either way, with the Americans losing patience with Maliki's government the Sadrists in the government may have seen it better to jump before they were pushed. Indeed, at the time, it seemed likely that the Americans would dismiss the Maliki government sooner rather than later and attempt to replace it with a coalition bringing together Allawi, the Kurdish nationalist parties and Sunni parties. In such circumstances a timely break from al-Maliki's government, with accompanying overtures to Sunni politicians, would make sense in terms of the politics of collaboration within the 'Green Zone'.

Thirdly, in April 2007 it was still far from clear that the surge would ultimately succeed. There was a real prospect that pressure at home would force the American government to make a hasty exit from Iraq. By leaving the Iraqi government Muqtada al-Sadr would be free to strengthen his position in the civil war that was likely to follow the departure of the US from Iraq.

In the months that followed the Mahdi army concentrated its efforts on establishing a foothold in the vitally important oil rich regions of southern Iraq and, in particular, the city of Basra. Up until then these southern regions of Iraq had been the strongholds of the Sadrists' main rivals in the UIA – SCIRI; while was a strong hold for both the Hizb al-Fadhila party – which had broken way from the Sadrism movement at the very beginning of the occupation – and SCIRI. In order to establish a foothold the Mahdi army therefore, not only had to wage war on the British army, but also an internecine war on the Badr Brigades and Hizb al-Fadhila militia.

By the end of the Summer Muqtada al-Sadr could claim credit for having defeated the British army, and had established a firm foothold in Basra. But the wider situation in Iraq had by then dramatically changed. Not only had Maliki's government survived, but, far more importantly, Bush's last throw of the dice had turned up a double six. Using the extra troops provided by the surge, General Petraeus had been able to execute a far more intelligent political and military strategy than had previously been implemented during the occupation. By buying off many of Sunni insurgents and exploiting the revulsion of many Iraqis to the sectarianism of the militias, Petraeus has succeeded in driving al-Qaida out of their former strongholds in central Iraq.

As a consequence of General Petraeus's success in stabilising Iraq, the prospect of a hasty US withdrawal began to recede. Having gambled on the rising tide of civil war Muqtada al-Sadr now found himself beached. His reaction was once again to court favour with al-Sistani, the *marji'iya* and indeed the Americans. After a major battle with the Badr Brigades at the end of August, Muqtada al-Sadr declared a six month ceasefire by the Mahdi army, and announced that he was to spend his time in seclusion so he could resume his studies to become an ayatollah.

By keeping his head down and by imposing a ceasefire on the Mahdi army, Muqtada al-Sadr could once again present the Sadrism movement as first and foremost a political movement acceptable to the Americans. Furthermore, with the consolidation of the Mahdi army's control of the newly won areas in Basra and southern Iraq, the Sadrists could hope to make considerable gains in the provincial elections scheduled for the Autumn of 2008. Muqtada al-Sadr could

then hope to persuade Maliki to allow the Sadrists back into the government.

However, this strategy depended on both maintaining the ceasefire, and retaining the control of the newly won areas in Basra and southern Iraq, so that Muqtada al-Sadr could be sure that the Mahdi army could 'persuade' the voters to vote for Sadrism candidates in the forthcoming elections. In February 2008 Muqtada al-Sadr announced that the ceasefire would be extended for another six months. But already it was becoming increasingly difficult for the Sadrism leadership to hold the line on the ceasefire. The truce in southern Iraq was increasingly being punctuated by clashes between units of the Iraqi army and the Badr Brigades (which were often one and the same<sup>33</sup>) on the one side and units of the Mahdi army on the other. The extent to which such clashes arose out of attempts to provoke the Mahdi army to break the ceasefire, were attempts by the Badr Brigades to regain ground previously lost to the Sadrists, or were simply due to the ill-discipline of local Mahdi army units is hard to say. However, the result of such clashes was that the Sadrism leadership was having to disown the Mahdi army in southern Iraq as being made up of rogue elements.

At the end of March, possibly under pressure from both the Americans and his coalition partners SCIRI, Maliki decided to force the issue by launching a concerted military operation by the Iraqi army to break the Mahdi army in Basra. Muqtada al-Sadr and the Sadrism leadership would have to decide whether the Mahdi army in Basra were rogue elements, and hence leave them unaided, or that they were an integral part of the Sadrism movement and therefore give them support. Muqtada al-Sadr chose the latter. The Mahdi army began mortar attacks on the Green Zone in Baghdad, while the Sadrism members of the National Assembly made speeches denouncing the operation.

In Basra the Mahdi army put up a fierce fight. As some units of the Iraqi army went over to the Sadrists, what had originally been intended as an independent Iraqi operation had to call on support from both British and American troops. After a nearly a week of intense fighting a deal was brokered between the Mahdi army in Basra and Maliki by the Iranian government. However, by coming down in favour of the 'rogue elements' of the Mahdi army in Basra, Muqtada al-Sadr gave the green light for American troops to make a concerted attack on the Sadrism strongholds across Iraq, particularly in Baghdad. After suffering heavy losses the Sadrists in Baghdad agreed to a truce on May 10. Fighting continued elsewhere until the end of the month when a broad agreement was made between Maliki's government and Muqtada al-Sadr.<sup>34</sup>

Despite of this offensive Maliki and the Americans have failed to destroy the Mahdi army. However, the Sadrists seem to have lost control of considerable areas of both Basra and Baghdad. In areas where they still have political control the Mahdi army has been obliged to allow the Iraqi police and army to patrol and restrict their own public display of arms. Furthermore, Maliki has insisted that unless the Mahdi army is disbanded the Sadrists will not be allowed to contest the

<sup>33</sup> With SCIRI controlling the ministries concerning security and defence, much of the National Iraqi army is made up of units of the Badr Brigades.

<sup>34</sup> See reports in *al-Arabiya*, May 10 2008. 'The heat is on Muqtada' by Sami Moubayed, *Asia Times*, May 2 2008.

Provincial elections. Muqtada al-Sadr has responded over the Summer by attempting to build a broad political alliance within the National Assembly against Maliki's government around the issue of the security pact currently being negotiated with the US and declaring that the Sadrists will support other parties in the Provincial elections.<sup>35</sup>

Once again with the surge we see how the inherent contradictions of the Sadrist movement has driven Muqtada al-Sadr to vacillate between collaboration and resistance to the US occupation. Certainly the American attacks on Sadrist strongholds, particularly Sadr City, are likely to have strengthened Muqtada al-Sadr's support among his followers in the short term. However, if Muqtada al-Sadr is to hold the Sadrist movement together in the long-term he needs to control the distribution of jobs and money by rejoining the government. But at present this does not look very likely.



### Cockburn as a front for the SWP

The contradiction of Muqtada al-Sadr and the Sadrist movement are reflected in Cockburn's main line of argument in the book. On the one hand it seems that Cockburn wants to be an advisor to the US administration. He wants to claim that the Americans have been ill-advised in seeing Muqtada al-Sadr as a rabble rousing firebrand cleric. Indeed, it seems that for Cockburn, if only they had recognized that Muqtada al-Sadr was an astute and rather cautious politician and, as a consequence, had made greater efforts to integrate him within the post-Saddam political settlement, the Americans could have avoided many of their blunders that has left Iraq in such a poor state after five years of US occupation.

On the other hand, Cockburn presents Muqtada al-Sadr as a messianic leader of the poor and oppressed of Iraq who has implacably opposed US imperialism. Of course, it is this later aspect of Cockburn's argument that the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and their allies like to emphasize.

Against those who would argue that the policy of the Stop the War Coalition (StWC) of holding big national marches against the war every six months has failed, the SWP

has repeatedly cited the example of the Vietnam war. They point out that large protests in the USA, and elsewhere in the west, combined with the 'armed resistance of the Vietnam people' not only eventually ended the war, but struck a major blow against US imperialism. As a consequence, the SWP have been eager to identify a popular resistance movement in Iraq and offer their unconditional support. At the beginning of 2005, shortly after the destruction of Fallujah, the SWP's monthly magazine *Socialist Review* carried an enthusiastic article about the rise of the 'national resistance in Iraq' by Anne Alexander and Simon Assaf. In the conclusion they wrote:

The struggle to end the occupation in Iraq is a fight for national liberation in the tradition of the revolt of 1920. What began as sporadic attacks on the occupying forces has developed into a deep-rooted popular insurgency, the basic aims of which are supported by the majority of Iraqis. Neither the lack of a single organisation to act as the voice of the resistance, as the FSLN did in Algeria or the PLO in Palestine, nor the insurgency's Islamic colouring should change the attitude of socialists towards it. We oppose the occupation and support Iraqis in their struggle for national liberation.

They then go on to write:

Our solidarity with the Iraqi struggle against the occupation is all the more important because history shows that, although it is possible for a guerrilla movement to defeat imperialist powers, they can only do so if the military campaign creates a political crisis for the occupying power. The National Liberation Front in Vietnam fought bravely, but could not achieve military victory against vastly better armed US forces.<sup>36</sup>

At that time the SWP was prepared to extend unconditional support to all those fighting the occupation with the exception of al-Qaida, who could be dismissed as being largely a marginal force.

However, as we have seen, by the time this article was published any hopes of a unified resistance to the occupation had already been shattered by Muqtada al-Sadr's adoption of the collaborationist strategy of both al-Sistani and the UIA. By 2006 Iraq the mere 'Islamic colouring of the Iraq insurgency' had led to virtual sectarian war between militias. The SWP's response to such an outcome was threefold; firstly it sought to place all the blame for the sectarian killings on the Americans, secondly it sought to divert attention from what the sectarianism of the supposed 'national liberation movement' was doing in Iraq by claiming that the US was about to bomb Iran, and thirdly, by narrowing down what they thought constituted the genuine national resistance. Whereas before they had stopped short of endorsing al-Qaida, now the SWP considered the entire 'Sunni insurgency' as beyond the pale.<sup>37</sup> For them the only true national resistance now was that of Muqtada al-Sadr.

<sup>36</sup> *Socialist Review*, January 2005.

<sup>37</sup> Of course, the irony is that al-Qaida has been the only armed insurgent group to consistently fight the US occupation. According to their own logic the SWP should support Al-Qaida.

<sup>35</sup> See 'The Mahdi army: New tactics for a new stage', Fadhil Ali, *Terrorism Monitor*, June 28 2008.

As a result, representatives of the Sadrist movement have been invited to speak at StWC rallies to much applause. Sadrists have been given space to write articles in the *Socialist Review*, free of any editorial comment or reply; while the *Socialist Worker* has carried uncritical, and indeed quite enthusiastic, reports of the actions and statements of the Sadrist movement and Muqtada al-Sadr in Iraq.

Of course, supporting rather unsavoury anti-working class and anti-socialist movements on the grounds that they are in some sense anti-imperialist is nothing new for the SWP. As good Leninists, they are quite prepared to subordinate the class struggle to the immediate struggle against imperialism. Certainly since the end of the second world war, Leninists of various stripes have argued that the economic and political dominance of the imperialist nations has not only blocked economic development of the 'oppressed countries of the third world', but has also provided the material and ideological basis for social imperialism at home, which has ensured that reformism has dominated the labour movements in the imperialist countries. By overthrowing the domination of imperialism, national liberation movements open the way for the national accumulation of capital in their own countries. In doing so, it is argued, they will swell the ranks of the world's proletariat. At the same time, victory for national liberation movements undermines the material basis of social imperialism amongst the working class in the imperialist countries. Thus, it is claimed, in the long term, supporting anti-imperialist national liberation movements serves the long term interests of proletarian revolution on a world scale.

Of course, we would say such arguments have always been rather dubious. However, even many Leninists and others on the anti-imperialist left, including at one time the SWP themselves, recognize that political Islam cannot in anyway be considered an 'anti-imperialist' force. Indeed political Islam can be seen as an ideological form that has arisen from the failure of national liberation movements attempts to break from the dominance of the imperialist powers. Indeed, as we have seen, attempts by Cockburn and the SWP to construe Muqtada al-Sadr as a leader of a national liberation movement do not stand up to close scrutiny.

However, as always, for the SWP opportunism is more important any attempt to defend to any outdated Leninist dogma. In order to maintain the hysterical optimism amongst its foot soldiers necessary to mobilize yet another march up and down the hill the SWP requires a heroic resistance in Iraq. As a consequence, the SWP has been eager to promote Cockburn's book lauding Muqtada al-Sadr.

However, there still remains a bit of a problem for the SWP in promoting Muqtada al-Sadr. This is evident in the otherwise excited review of Cockburn's book in the *Socialist Review*. Of course, the reviewer is unable to accept Cockburn's rather pessimistic conclusion regarding the current situation in Iraq. But also, quite revealingly, she cannot quite accept Cockburn's rendition of the blatant Sadrist propaganda regarding the history of the opposition to Saddam Hussein:

For Cockburn, declining support for the secular opposition forces – such as the Communists – was largely a reaction by Shia Iraqis to the increasingly sectarian behaviour of the state. Other accounts of the same period provide a different perspective, for example,

emphasising the impact of the Communist collaboration with the Ba'athist regime in the 1970s or arguing that the era was marked by the brutal repression of Shia Islamist groups, but not by a general campaign of sectarian persecution.<sup>38</sup>

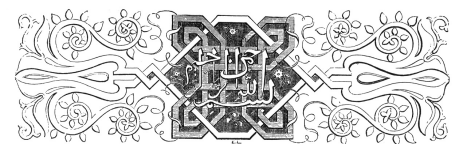
Unlike Cockburn, the SWP are reluctant to fully adopt the Sadrist myth concerning the history of Iraq since this would mean abandoning their own Marxist account. By touting Cockburn's book to the anti-war movement, the SWP can promote support for Muqtada al-Sadr and the Sadrist movement without actually giving a complete and unequivocal endorsement themselves. They can retain their own identity as the 'radical Marxist wing' of the anti-war movement, while at the same time promoting the supposedly anti-imperialist credentials of political Islam and Muqtada al-Sadr.

## Conclusion

Cockburn's book provides a wealth of evidence and information on what has happened in Iraq following the US invasion in 2003. However, as we have seen, its interpretation of the situation in Iraq is fundamentally flawed by his acceptance of the notion that Iraq is to be understood primarily in terms of age-old ethnic and sectarian divisions. Indeed, as we have seen, his notion that Muqtada al-Sadr is the true representative of the long oppressed Shia of Iraq is simply Sadrist propaganda.

The situation in Iraq is certainly bleak. Years of war, sanctions and now occupation has led to economic devastation. Most people are mainly concerned with day to day survival and are depoliticized. There has certainly been a revival in religion and a return to old forms and social structures. Yet as Cockburn's Iraqi friends have told him, the sectarian divisions in Iraq have been greatly exaggerated.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, what seems to be remarkable is that despite the attempts of the militias like the Mahdi army to impose by force of arms sectarian divisions in Iraq many Iraqis reject sectarianism. With widespread revulsion at the gangsterism of militias there is perhaps a glimmer of hope in Iraq.

There is in Iraq, as in neighbouring Iran, a long communist tradition. This tradition may be currently small and marginalized yet it still exists and is organized. Instead of cheerleading the likes of Muqtada al-Sadr and promoting political Islam, it is to these communist currents that we must look and back their slogan '*neither the occupation nor political Islam*'.



<sup>38</sup> *Socialist Review* May 2008.

<sup>39</sup> Cockburn admits that many of his Iraqi friends complain that foreign journalists like himself greatly exaggerate the sectarian divisions in Iraq and point to the fact that Sunni and Shia have lived side by side for centuries and are often intermarried. Cockburn dismisses such complaints on the grounds that his Shia friends are hostile to Ba'athists while his Sunni friends are hostile to the Iranian links of the Shia parties. See p. 207.