

# Sadr's Withdrawal and the New Splinter Group of Ashab al-Qadiya

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Brief Analysis

**By suspending the Sadrist Movements activities, Sadr hopes to prevent the growth of a new Mahdist splinter group that threatens his religious and political credibility.**

Shia religious leader Muqtada al-Sadr appears to be **withdrawing** ([https://twitter.com/Mu\\_AlSadr/status/1646664660190461952?t=tm81UxQY1XV0ngU4S43c6A&s=19](https://twitter.com/Mu_AlSadr/status/1646664660190461952?t=tm81UxQY1XV0ngU4S43c6A&s=19)) from the political scene until further notice—the political leader announced that the Sadrist Movement would suspend its activities for a full year and posted that his Twitter account would be shut down until further notice. This withdrawal was not driven by external factors, political conflicts, or fatwas issued by a Shia religious authority (*marja'*), as was the case in 2022 when Grand Ayatollah Kazem al-Haeri **issued** (<https://asharq.com/ar/5dqy4gu83GJf6t56UCdBiQ-%25D9%2583%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B8%25D9%2585-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25AD%25D8%25A7%25D8%25A6%25D8%25B1%25D9%258A-%25D8%25AA%25D9%2584%25D9%2585%25D9%258A%25D8%25B0-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B5%25D8%25AF%25D8%25B1-%25D9%258A%25D8%25AF%25D9%2581%25D8%25B9-%25D9%2585%25D9%2582%25D8%25AA%25D8%25AF%25D9%2589/>) a fatwa urging al-Sadr to retire from politics. Instead, Sadr decided to withdraw after an incident with a group known as “Owners of the Cause” (*Ashab al-Qadiya*) in the Great Mosque of Kufa in Najaf, which Sadr and his followers control.

After gathering at the mosque with other Sadrists to participate in Sadr's invitation to *i'tikat*—an extended spiritual seclusion—members of Ashab al-Qadiya allegedly called on other Sadrists to pledge allegiance to Sadr as the Mahdi—the messianic figure in Shia Islam. Sadr subsequently canceled the *i'tikat*, and announced at dawn on the Night of

Power during Ramadan that the Sadrist Movement was suspending its activities for an entire year in light of the growing visibility of Ashab al-Qadiya.

Ashab al-Qadiya is a hardline religious group whose followers build on the Sadrist principles espoused by Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, Muqtada's father. However, this group is also an offshoot of Mahdist organizations such as the Soldiers of Heaven, al-Yamani Group, or the Sulukis, all of which emerged after the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

The group believes that the Mahdi—the twelfth Imam whom Shia believe will appear again in Kufa—appeared to Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr and asked Sadr to hide him, which he allegedly did until the U.S. occupation and the Battle of Najaf. At that point, according to Ashab al-Qadiya, al-Sadr's son Muqtada was killed and buried in an unknown location. They claim that the Mahdi then took Muqtada's place and name without telling anyone, lest his enemies use this knowledge against him. Ashab al-Qadiya therefore **believe (<https://fb.watch/jWPVV08fS0/?mibextid=Nif5oz>)** that the person known as Muqtada al-Sadr today is actually the Mahdi. A religious figure also appeared within this group and indicated that he was **preparing (<https://fb.watch/jWQelWesZw/?mibextid=l2pjGR>)** a major campaign to declare allegiance (*bay'ah*) to Muqtada al-Sadr as the Mahdi.

Ashab al-Qadiya has received some pushback on social media and elsewhere from political figures. Some **described (<https://twitter.com/AlaaIabadi/status/1646624693472960516?t=2Ca00mcnld1jmBIVogokFg&s=19>)** the group's ideology on social media as unacceptable and **deviant**

**(<https://twitter.com/HassanAlkaaei/status/1646661861297778689?t=eQacYE9Wwq7r4F9DvToTQQ&s=19>)**.

From the rival Shia Coordination Framework (CF), there has been complete silence on the part of the leadership, but CF supporters have **widely ([https://twitter.com/almuswia24/status/1646837172773830657?](https://twitter.com/almuswia24/status/1646837172773830657?t=hjsDh59R3qT7NvzWJ3_4Ng&s=19)**

**[https://twitter.com/MazenW23/status/1647223025555632129?](https://twitter.com/MazenW23/status/1647223025555632129?t=yXzVehu_IUqnzofH3EqrnA&s=19)**

**[t=yXzVehu\\_IUqnzofH3EqrnA&s=19](https://twitter.com/MazenW23/status/1647223025555632129?t=yXzVehu_IUqnzofH3EqrnA&s=19))** Ashab al-Qadiya and the Sadrist Movement as a whole. Fragmentation within the Sadrist Movement is expected to provide a clear opportunity for the CF and other armed factions to attract new members who are defecting or were expelled from the Sadrist Movement. The CF will likely benefit from information gained from these individuals as well as their assistance in the armed conflict, since most of those recently expelled from the Sadrist movement are dangerous characters with criminal histories.

For his part, Sadr realizes that like past splinter groups from the Sadrist movement, Ashab al-Qadiya poses a direct threat to his religious and political prospects. Since its previous iteration as the Mahdi army when Sadr fought the Americans in post-2003 Iraq, the Sadrist Movement has seen a series of defections and splinter groups. Some of these figures are still players in the Iraqi arena—including Qais al-Khazali, now secretary general of Asa'ib ahl al-Haq but once a member of Sadr's inner circle, and Akram al-Qaabi, the secretary general of al-Nujaba militias and one of the most prominent militia figures in Iraq.

In the religious sphere, Sadr is likely concerned that Ashab al-Qadiya could threaten the future of his and his father's work and undermine his family's standing within Najaf and other major Shia cities. He also likely believes that his rivals will use these groups to paint Sadr as straying from Shia doctrine and Twelver Shia Islam and to embarrass him in front of his followers and the Shia *hawzas* (seminaries), undermining his religious clout.

Sadr is also aware that the emergence of these groups will reduce his political clout both among Shia and among Iraqis in general, eroding his broad base of popular support from followers who are interested in his political leadership and not the return of the Mahdi. Although Sadr has always cast the Sadrists as a diverse movement open to dialogue with all parties and inclusive of sectarian differences, emerging groups like Ashab al-Qadiya stand to undermine his political discourse and credibility. For that reason, al-Sadr has been quick to distance himself from these organizations in the past, and has done so again in this case.

From time to time, the Iraqi state has intervened through its security and judicial institutions to curb the growth of

such groups among the Iraqi public. If these groups pose a threat to *hawzas* and traditional Shia discourse, they also pose a threat to Iraqi national security, stability, and societal cohesion. The Iraqi Supreme Judicial Council announced on April 14 that it had **detained (<https://www.sjc.iq/view.70996/>)** more than 65 suspected Ashab al-Qadiya members. It stated that Ashab al-Qadiya was a “gang” seeking to sow discord and undermine societal security.

Sadr’s swift and decisive announcement might not put an end to these extremist groups, but it will at least significantly hinder their growth within the Sadrist Movement. Nevertheless, Ashab al-Qadiya is likely to join previous splinter groups from the Sadrist movement and remain at the margins of the Shia religious sphere in Iraq and Iran. Ultimately, it is the power of religious authorities and seminaries that restrains such splinter groups and prevents their further spread, especially when these groups’ ideologies directly challenge religious authorities and the central tenets of Shia doctrine. Nevertheless, these fringe movements can have staying power, as groups like Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq demonstrate. ❖

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