

Iran in Iraq: The Role of Muqtada al-Sadr

by [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



Brief Analysis

On January 5, radical Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr entered Iraq after a three-year self-imposed exile in Iran, but then returned to Iran fifteen days later. According to Saudi-owned media outlets, he fled because of threats from Asaib Ahl al-Haqq (AAH), a militant offshoot of his own Sadrist movement. Whatever the reason for his departure, he remains a significant force in Iraq, where he is viewed by some as a political and military proxy of Iran.

Muqtada's Movement in 2011

For years, personal rivalries and policy differences within the Sadrist movement have prevented Muqtada from establishing firm control over his potential supporters through the Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS), an organization he formed in 2003. A key point of disagreement has been truces with the U.S. military in Iraq, an issue that has driven a wedge between Muqtada (who authorized a number of such truces before taking shelter in Iran in 2007) and diehard militants such as AAH (who have increasingly turned to Iran for support and shelter). Moreover, the sectarian killings and looting undertaken by the Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM) militia left a lasting stain on the reputation of both Muqtada and his movement, even after he disbanded JAM in 2008.

Today, the OMS shows a mixture of strengths and weaknesses as a political bloc. The Sadrists were able to win 40 seats in the new 325-seat national parliament, partly due to Iranian coaching on electoral strategy. They also played a key role in securing Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's reappointment. In return, they gained the deputy speakership of parliament and six medium-grade ministerial portfolios, including construction and housing, planning, labor and social affairs, and water and irrigation. They also reportedly gained other less obvious inducements, such as a "right of return" for Muqtada (who previously faced an outstanding arrest warrant for a political slaying committed by his followers in April 2003 -- allegedly at his behest) and the governorship of Maysan, a strategic province on the Iran-Iraq border.

Purpose of the Visit

Many features of Muqtada's January visit reinforced longstanding rumors regarding threats against his life by

rival Sadrists. Under normal circumstances, one might have expected him to return in triumph, crossing the land border with pomp and forewarning and gathering crowds as he traveled. Instead, he entered Iraq in secrecy through Najaf airport, the only commercial airport (outside the Kurdistan Regional Government) where he could avoid U.S. forces entirely while minimizing his public exposure. He then remained at his home in Najaf under heavy Sadrist security for almost the entire visit. Although he delivered a major televised address on January 8, he left the country before the commemoration of Arbain, when millions of pilgrims flow through Najaf and other parts of central Iraq to visit the shrines at Karbala.

According to *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, AAH leader Qais al-Khazali -- Muqtada's former aide and a student of his father -- issued a ruling in Najaf "declaring the killing of Muqtada al-Sadr lawful." Threats from rivals may have played a role in Muqtada's 2007 departure from Iraq as well.

Muqtada may indeed have received threats during his January visit, but fear of assassination was probably not the sole driving force behind the trip's short duration. More likely he faced a combination of pressures that cut the visit short, and these pressures were probably anticipated well before the trip.

For example, some accounts of his 2007 departure from Iraq cite the Shiite religious establishment in Najaf (known as the Hawza) as a key factor, reflecting the traditional clergy's alarm over Sadrist demonstrations and violence in Shiite shrines during that year's religious festivals. According to a number of WikiLeaks cables from 2009, the Hawza is also actively working to limit Iranian influence in Iraq's seminaries. Therefore, it probably did not welcome Muqtada back to Najaf in January, but rather tolerated his brief visit as long as it did not overlap with the sensitive Arbain commemorations.

Perhaps most important, many Iraqis still regard the Sadrist movement with suspicion and fear, suggesting the need for a more patient strategy on Muqtada's part. From this perspective, his short trip could be viewed as a calculated move negotiated with Iranian assistance during Iraq's government formation period, allowing him to test the waters regarding his position in Najaf and the country in general. The trip was short, stage-managed to avoid mishaps, and limited to parameters that were likely prearranged with the Iraqi government and the Hawza.

Muqtada's Messages

The centerpiece of Muqtada's visit was his thirty-five-minute Saturday sermon on January 8. The short address had two main messages. First, Muqtada played to his traditional support base by signaling defiance to "the occupation" (i.e., U.S. military presence) and affirming the "legal and religious obligation" to resist it "militarily and culturally and by all the means of resistance."

Second, he reflected the OMS's new role as a partner in the Iraqi government, declaring that if Baghdad "serves the Iraqi people, and provides services, we will stand by it, not against it.... If it doesn't, there are political -- only political -- ways to reform the government." He sought to further his rehabilitation in the political mainstream by clarifying that armed resistance would not be expected of all followers, by demonstrating his cross-sectarian goodwill, and by expressing disapproval of unauthorized militia-type gatherings by his supporters. Even more than his words, the quiet and brief nature of his visit signaled his willingness to work within the rules set by the political and religious mainstream -- for now.

The only policy prescription in Muqtada's sermon concerned the prospect of a new U.S.-Iraqi security agreement that might extend the American military presence beyond 2011. Speaking for the Sadrist movement, Muqtada warned the government that "we're watching you," holding al-Maliki to his December 28, 2010, pledge that "the last American soldier will leave Iraq" by the end of 2011. On this issue, Muqtada's interests have always dovetailed with Tehran's. His January 8 characterization of "our joint enemy: America, Israel, and Britain" is not new, but rather reflects the Sadrists' identification with the arc of anti-Western resistance that Tehran seeks to cultivate in Gaza,

Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere.

Implications for U.S. Policy

A myopic focus on the loudest and most obvious vectors of Iranian influence (at the expense of more subtle forms) has been a consistent weakness of U.S. policy in Iraq. Recent developments show that the OMS continues to recover from its setbacks in 2007-2009 and that Muqtada remains an important player on the political scene. Yet his short-lived return to Iraq also points to his near-term political weaknesses, the embryonic status of his rehabilitation, and the limited role that his movement may play in driving the current government's policies. Consequently, Washington should keep its eye on the greater near-term influence that Tehran can wield via its well-positioned proxies in the Shiite political mainstream, most notably elements of al-Maliki's Islamic Dawa Party and the Badr Organization, which collectively control the lion's share of Iraq's security forces and many top-tier ministries.

In the longer term, Muqtada may become a more important player: his sights are clearly fixed on eventual dominance of the Iraqi clerical establishment. He also still hopes to establish clerical rule in southern and central Iraq, borrowing from the *velayat-e faqih* model in Iran but with an Iraqi cleric -- presumably himself -- atop the structure. At some point, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's time as Iraq's senior cleric will come to an end, and Muqtada may seek to disrupt the selection of his successor from the traditional "quietist" school (which rejects a *velayat-e faqih* system for Iraq). In that scenario, Muqtada's nationalist and dynastic interests would potentially come into conflict with Tehran's ambitions to dominate the Hawza and, through it, to control Iraq's Shiites.

Accordingly, Washington should find ways to exploit strains in Muqtada's relationship with the Iranian government, both on the looming al-Sistani succession issue and many others (e.g., Tehran's deliberate splintering of his support base). As the United States seeks to balance Iranian influence in Iraq, continued tracking of the Sadrist movement's internal dynamics will be critical, as will maintenance of U.S. diplomatic outposts in strategic locations such as Hillah, near Najaf.

Michael Knights is a Lafer fellow in the Military and Security Studies Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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