'MUQTADA' THE CLERIC WHO HAS GRIPPED IRAQ

Part popular mystical figure, part militia boss, the politically powerful Shia cleric has stood up to Iran – and his volatile persona continues to mesmerise his Iraqi compatriots

Lorraine Mallinder

Ask any Iraqi about politics and talk will soon turn to Muqtada al-Sadr. Widely known by the mononym "Muqtada", he wields unparalleled clout as Shia cleric, militia boss and political leader. Often described as mercurial, his sudden shifts of mood and changes of mind have the country gripped.

He's lying low right now, licking his wounds after a failed attempt to change the political system that involved some serious tussles with Iran – which views Iraq as its "near abroad". Having been a permanent fixture in Iraqi politics since the 2003 US invasion, Iraqis are watching for his next move.

"What does Muqtada want?" is the oft-repeated question.

"Even Muqtada does not know what Muqtada wants," comes the answer.

Sadr was long the bad boy of Iraqi politics. The Pentagon dubbed his Mahdi Army Iraq's biggest security threat. This was back when his militiamen would attack US and British troops with Iranian bombs, later specialising in ultra-violence against Sunnis and mafia-style criminality. Anticipating a US troop surge, Sadr fled to Iran for four years.

By 2011, he was back. His militiamen, rebranded as Saraya al-Saram, fought Islamic State under the umbrella of the Hashd al-Shaabi, a group of mainly Shia militias backed by Iran. But, over the years, Sadr was playing it his way, competing with Iran's proxies to embed his own people in key ministries, signing up to the ruling class while positioning himself as an outlaw reformist at the centre of successive protest movements.

It's a strategy that gave him financial firepower and political leverage, turning his Sadrist movement into a major political force. But working against the dysfunctional system while being at the heart of that same system has led to some strange contortions.

Take the 2019 Tishreen protests, in which young Iraqis sought to overturn the system, blaming Iranian meddling for high unemployment, rampant corruption and abysmal services. Recognising a battle for the nation's soul was under way, Sadr got involved, sending his "blue hats" on to protest sites to help defend the protesters against security forces and militias, who were shooting to kill. By the end of November 2019, protesters had brought down the government.

However, the US assassination of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani and Iraqi militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis changed everything. Soon, Sadr was off to the Iranian holy city of Qom, breaking bread with the very Iran-backed factions the protesters were demonstrating against, agreeing to form an anti-US resistance front and selecting a new prime minister.

Feeling betrayed, protesters ignored Sadr's calls to march against US presence in Iraq. They also denounced the new prime minister-designate, who would swiftly withdraw his candidacy, as an establishment stooge. In Qom, Sadr had also offered to neutralise the protests, pitching himself as a leader who could fill the power vacuum left by the US strike. Once he'd withdrawn his support, his "blue hats" switched from protectors to killers, torching sites, using blades and firearms to disperse protesters.

Opportunism

Having sacrificed protesters on the altar of his opportunism, Sadr's bid to be Iran's number one in Iraq failed. "The Iranians never went for it," says Ben Robin-D'Cruz, a specialist in Shia movements at Aarhus University. "They don't trust Sadr. They know that if they empowered him, he would become a weapon that could be dangerous to them. They prefer to keep things fragmented."

But Sadr's anti-establishment streak does run deep. This is the son of Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, a hero among Iraqi Shia, a champion of the poor. Repeatedly locked up by Saddam Hussein's regime, he was assassinated by regime forces in 1999 while driving his two sons home in the holy city of Najaf – a revered martyr.

Sadr the son inherited his father's massive support base. In good times and bad, he can count on the devotion of millions of Iraq's Shia poor, people from places like the slums of Sadr City in Baghdad and southeastern Maysan province, who have been marginalised from politics, who will always keep the faith. "It's not like the other militias where people join for jobs and money," says activist Hatem Tome. "Sadr's people love him. His power is in his people, his millions of followers. He has the money and the guns and the most control over people."

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Sadr does not have the religious authority of his father, partly because he hasn't finished his religious studies. But, ever the populist, he has cultivated a messianic persona, using a walking stick reminiscent of his father's staff, turning up to meetings in Najaf in an old Mitsubishi Gallant, the same car his father was driving when he was shot. His cred is further burnished by his marriage to the daughter of Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, another Shia giant, martyred in 1980.

All of this lends him a certain mystique. Some of his most fervent followers swear he is Imam al-Mahdi himself, the last of the 12 Shia imams, who will reappear in end times as the world's last saviour, says Muhtada al-Quraishi, an Iraq-based political blogger. His family in the city of Wasit have been devoted Sadrists for decades.

But magical thinking will only get you so far in the ruthless world of politics. Emerging victorious in the 2021 election, Sadr tried to outmanoeuvre Iran, working to exclude its Shia proxies from power, joining forces with parliament's Sunni and Kurdish blocs to form an alliance called "Save the Homeland". US think tanks lauded him as a poster boy for Iraqi nationalism, a leader capable of extracting the country from Iranian influence, bringing it closer to its Arab neighbours.

Iran's foreign ops

Panicked, Tehran sent top general Esmail Ghaani, Soleimani's successor as head of Iran's foreign ops, to Sadr's house in Najaf. According to a Reuters investigation, Ghaani told Sadr that if he included Iran's allies in a coalition, Tehran would recognise him as Iraq's main Shia political figure. Sadr reportedly replied: "What does Iraqi politics have to do with you?"

Last August, as Sadr struggled to form a government, Tehran went for the jugular, leaning on his Iran-based mentor, Ayatollah Kadhim al-Haeri, to denounce him in his resignation speech. Haeri accused Sadr of dividing the Shia, calling on Sadrists to seek guidance from Iran's leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. It was a low blow – Haeri had been anointed as the movement's spiritual adviser by Sadr's father.

Sadr reacted by tweeting his retirement from politics, inciting his followers to breach Baghdad's high-security Green Zone, where they clashed with Iran's proxies in a bloody battle that left dozens dead. Less than 24 hours later, he was on the airwaves, restoring calm. Sadr had shown he was a force to be reckoned with, but he'd brought the country to the brink of a Shia-on-Shia war in the process.

"There is a logic to how violence is used in the system," says Renad Mansour, of London-based think tank Chatham House. "Sadr uses it within the confines of the system."

The ship of state has since sailed on, with Tehran's parties at the helm. It seems unlikely that there will be any changes before 2025, which leaves Sadr's foes enough time to remove his allies from top government jobs and tinker with electoral law. Having recently announced his return to politics, it's thought he will emerge as a protest leader.

"They will want to up the pressure gradually," says Sajad Jiyad, an Iraq-based analyst. "One method would be to support protests, seizing on any government scandals or failures as a trigger. This could be about the cost of living, the decline in the dinar exchange rate, or something else that makes people angry."

Bring justice

However, his betrayal of antigovernment protesters has not been forgotten. Quraishi, who took part in the protests, thinks Sadr has blown it. "He lost the support of the people. They thought he would bring justice to Iraq. But he didn't stand with Tishreen," he says.

For many critics, Sadr is just a militia boss who can whip up a mob at whim. August's battle in the Green Zone could have ended in more bloodshed, had it not been for Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, leader of Iraq's Shia. Sistani told Sadr to order a stop to the violence, threatening to make a rare public intervention. In a system where clerics hold the real power, Sistani is arguably the most powerful man in Iraq.

At Baghdad's al-Kadhimiya mosque, Shia pilgrims mill around on a long stretch of road, the gold domes of Imam Kazim's shrine gleaming in the distance. Amid the stalls selling sweets and jewellery, Sadr's portrait sits in a hall of fame of the Shia clergy, given equal billing to Sistani and his father. But one punter is not convinced. "The true leader of Iraq Shia is Sistani," he says. "Even in Sadr City they look to him. Muqtada takes from the people, but he doesn't give back."

"What Muqtada wants is very simple," he says. "He wants people to talk about him."

■ Supporters of Shia leader Muqtada al-Sadr gather for Friday prayers in Baghdad: He has recently announced his return to politics and it is thought he will emerge as a protest leader. PHOTOGRAPH: AHMED JALIL/EPA-EFE/SHUTTERSTOCK

How to . . . Say no

Expert answers to everyday questions

We can feel bad about saying no. Declining an invitation, turning down work or saying you just can't help this time can make us feel guilty. "People can feel, if I don't say yes I'm selfish. I would always say, replace that word 'selfish' with 'self-care'," says Majella Kennedy, a counsellor certified with the Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (IACP). When someone asks you to do something, check in with yourself. "Ask yourself, do I have time to do this thing, does it fit with my other commitments – that's my self-care to me," says Kennedy.

But I don't want to disappoint

It can feel easier to say yes, even if it's something you really don't want to do. "Our reflex is to say yes and to want to please," says Kennedy. Sometimes that comes from fear. "If we have low self-esteem, our fear might be, what will they think about me?" says Kennedy. "Really, the only approval we need is our own approval." If you always say yes, question why that is. It can come from a fear of conflict. Tease out what is behind your tendency to overcommit.

Say yes to you

Saying yes when you mean no comes at a cost. "We make ourselves more anxious – 'how am I going to juggle all of this?'" says Kennedy. Suppressing our needs can manifest as anger or depression. "It creates turmoil," she says. "You can end up feeling exhausted and resentful and this can damage your relationship with the requestor." Saying no upfront is far better for a relationship than simmering resentment.

Saying no isn't negative

"Try looking at things differently. Saying no to others means saying yes to yourself. I'm taking care of me and looking after me and that's okay," says Kennedy.

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Collateral damage

If you are the person who can't say no to more commitments, this can have consequences for your loved ones. "It might mean you are delegating things to them that you said you would take care of," says Kennedy. If you are the ever-reliable worker, club member or community volunteer, think about the person left picking up the slack on the home front.

Take a beat

If someone asks for something but you are not sure if it suits you, buy yourself some time rather than saying a rabbit-in-headlights yes. "If I say yes straight away, but have other things planned, then I have a dilemma. I have chaos in my own life," says Kennedy. "My best tip to anyone is to say, 'Can you give me a minute just to think about that and I'll come back to you?' Give yourself some time out."

Practice makes perfect

Saying no takes practice. If you find it hard, try practising in front of the mirror. "Or make an audio clip of yourself and listen back to it," says Kennedy. And make sure your no is a clear one.

"Sometimes we want to say no, but what we are saying is 'maybe'. It's about being as assertive as you can in that moment and not leaving any doubt so that the other person isn't still wondering, are we going to do it or are we not going to do it."

No doesn't need a big explanation either, or unnecessary fibs, says Kennedy. "That's the worst thing you can do, because then you beat yourself up about what you said. Practise saying no to small things so that when the bigger things come, you can be assertive."

Be nice of course. You could say, "I'd really love to be able to help, but unfortunately on this occasion, I'm not available."

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