

In Iraq, mercurial cleric redefines himself as a nationalist patriot

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*(The Christian Science Monitor)* Yousef Mukthadh, who graduated from law school two years ago and is still looking for a job, has been a follower of Muqtada al-Sadr for as long as he can remember.

“I was young when I first started following the movement—I didn’t know what it meant,” he said. “But as I became older my way of thinking changed,” leading away from blind loyalty.

Mukthadh, one of the several thousand young Iraqis who made it to Europe and then returned, sees a new openness in the movement led by the powerful Shi’ite cleric.

“Before they were radicals; now they have taken off their religious clothing and they have become open-minded,” Mukthadh said. “Sayyid Muqtada has changed according to the situation. When the Americans were there he was focused on fighting the Americans, and when the Americans left, he changed his thinking as well.”

Over the past two decades, al-Sadr transformed from a young man little known outside religious circles to a militia leader who posed a major threat to U.S. forces. Now, he is reemerging in Iraqi political life as a nationalist political figure in favor of government reform.

He is challenging Shi’ite political elites and, in fact, the entire Iraqi political system. He has reached beyond Sunni-Shi’ite divides, including threatening to boycott upcoming elections in the absence of reforms to Iraq’s electoral commission, which al-Sadr accuses of being under the sway of rival Shi’ite political parties he says are corrupt. On many Fridays he brings thousands into the streets in protest.

“Whatever he says we do: if he says ‘live,’ we live, if he says ‘die,’ we die,” said Haider Kamal, a laborer from Baghdad’s Shi’ite neighborhood of Al-Shu’ala, at a protest called by al-Sadr last summer. “All my family and all my neighborhood follows Sayyid Muqtada. He is a resistance leader.”

In the process, the still relatively young cleric, the son and son-in-law of two Shi'ite clerics revered for their concern for the poor, has increasingly made an effort to portray himself as an Iraqi patriot. He is poised to consolidate his position not only as a political kingmaker but as someone who can mobilize potentially millions of followers from Baghdad to the southern coastal city of Basra.

In April, he broke with other Iraqi Shi'ite leaders in calling on Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, who is backed by Iran, to step down to save the country from more bloodshed.

“He really is someone who has provided a social and political outlet for the impoverished, particularly for those southerners who have never had a chance to have their say in middle-class and upper-class politics, which defines much of what goes on in Baghdad,” said Ahab Bdaiwi, a specialist in Islamic history at Leiden University in the Netherlands.

Known by the honorific al-Sayyid, connoting a descendant of the prophet Muhammad, he rarely appears in public and normally only in his home city of Najaf.

With Iraq's Sunni leadership fragmented and accused by many of selling out to wealthy Gulf Arab states, al-Sadr's demand for an Iraqi government that benefits Iraqis speaks powerfully to some Sunnis. It's a major shift from the leading role played a decade ago by his militia, which fueled the flames of Iraq's civil war.

The fall of Saddam Hussein freed al-Sadr to organize millions of his family's followers, creating an armed wing as well as a political and public service organization. In 2004, al-Sadr mobilized his Mahdi Army militia to drive out U.S. occupation forces, but the militia took over neighborhoods and expelled residents as well. Al-Sadr disbanded his militia in 2008 but still considers the United States and Britain occupying authorities.

Unlike Iraq's most influential Shi'ite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who rarely engages in politics, al-Sadr has nourished the following he inherited with political activism, nationalism, and promises of social justice. He has made an effort in recent years to reach out to Iraqi Sunnis and religious minorities.

“Sayyid Muqtada stands for justice,” said Um Yas, who had a pin shaped like a map of Iraq superimposed with al-Sadr's face holding her headscarf, at a demonstration last June opposing Bahrain's detention of a Shi'ite cleric.

The overwhelmingly Shi'ite protest near the Bahraini embassy included two young Sunni men who wore tight jeans and T-shirts, gelled hair, and black sneakers with gold-colored accents.

"I decided to follow him [al-Sadr] when I saw his statements and protests," said Saif Ali, a cleaner from Ghazaliya neighborhood. "There is a big difference between him and the Sunni leaders."

Asked how he reconciles al-Sadr's call for inclusion with his militia's attacks on Sunni Iraqis a few years ago, Ali said both al-Sadr and Iraq have changed: "That was true in sectarian times, but now Muqtada al-Sadr teaches us how to avoid sectarianism."

Al-Sadr's father, the Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr, was assassinated in Najaf in 1999.

"Muqtada's popularity has much to do with his family name," said historian Bdaiwi. "His father was revered because of his revival of messianic sentiment in Iraq."

Shi'ite Islam traces its roots to southern Iraq where Imam Ali, believed by Shi'ites to be the rightful successor to the prophet Muhammad, and his son Hussein were killed in the seventh century.

"Since the advent of Islam, the idea of redemption and suffering messiah-like figures are all associated with the southern regions of Iraq, but in the 20th century that messianic sentiment died down," Bdaiwi said. The elder al-Sadr articulated and "rebranded" messianic beliefs in language that ordinary Iraqis could understand.

Most of the al-Sadr movement's discourse now is about nationalism and inclusiveness. Al-Sadr has replaced his Mahdi Army with a paramilitary group he calls the Peace Brigades, whose role in the fight against ISIS has largely been to guard Shi'ite shrines.

"I think there are lots of hidden and open regrets about what happened to the Mahdi Army and its involvement in the sectarian killings in the height of 2006 and 2007," said Patrick Cockburn, the author of *Muqtada: Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia Revival, and the Struggle for Iraq*. "It was explained away subsequently by saying they were those who were not obeying orders . . . but certainly there is a very strong desire to show that things are genuinely different."

In 2013, Cockburn met al-Sadr in a rare interview with a Western journalist and described him as “fairly open . . . and friendly.”