Anatomy of a Civil War

Iraq's descent into chaos

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⏩ On April 7, 2006, the third anniversary of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, I drove south with Shia pilgrims from Baghdad to the shrine city of Najaf. The day before, on the same route, a minibus like ours had taken machine-gun fire in the Sunni town of Iskandariyah. Five pilgrims were killed.

My companions—a young man named Ahmed, his mother, and their friend Iskander, a driver—came from Sadr City, the Shia bastion in Baghdad named for Muhammad Sadiq al Sadr, a popular and politically ambitious Shia cleric slain in 1999. They wanted to hear a sermon by Sadr's son, Muqtada, who after the war had become the single most important person in Iraq and the only one capable of sustaining the fragile alliance between Shias and Sunnis. His power had only grown, although hopes for that alliance were now gone.

It was Friday, and like my companions, I was going to the Friday prayers. I had been following this practice since I arrived in Iraq in April 2003, when it became clear that clerics were filling the power vacuum created by the war. After the fall of Saddam and his Baath Party, looting and anarchy gave way to forces of more organized violence: men with guns, some wearing the turbans of clerics, some the scarves of the resistance, and many belonging to criminal gangs. Despite American intentions to create a secular, democratic Iraq, clerics were quickly replacing Baathists, and in the absence of anything else the mosque would become Iraq's most influential institution.

This should not have come as a surprise. Many complex factors influence life in the Muslim world, most of them secular and mundane, but the mosque plays a central role in the community, in religious, social, and political life. The call to prayer five times a day echoes through neighborhoods, regulating time and the cycles of life. At the mosque men meet to pray, learn, talk, and organize. The Friday sermon, or *khutba*, is often a call to action, in which the imam lectures his flock about issues affecting the community. In authoritarian states, the pulpit is a rare source of alternative authority. The mosque unites communities. It has also at times been a provider of welfare and a weapons depot, a source of news and a rallying point.

After the 2003 invasion, the country's majority Shia, radicalized by three decades of persecution and poverty under Saddam and suspicious of the American occupiers, responded quickly to the clerics' incitements. Followers of Muqtada al Sadr capitalized on his father's network of mosques and clerics to seize control of Shia Baghdad and much of the southern part of Iraq. They occupied hospitals, Baath Party headquarters, and government warehouses and gave themselves state power. The same pattern repeated itself in much of Iraq.

When Baghdad fell, on April 9, 2003, and widespread violence erupted, the primary victims were Iraq's Sunnis. For Shias, this was justice. "It is the beginning of the separation," one Shia cleric told me with a smile in the spring of 2003. Saddam had used Sunni Islam to legitimize his power, building one large Sunni mosque in each

Shia city in the south; these mosques were seized by Shias immediately after the regime collapsed. During the 1990s Saddam also used the donations that Shia pilgrims make to the shrines they visit—totaling millions of dollars a month—to finance his Faith Campaign, which spread Sunni practices in Iraq and even declared official tolerance of Wahhabis for the first time, perhaps because of their deep hatred of Shias. Wahhabism is an austere form of Sunni Islam, dominant in Saudi Arabia, that rejects all other interpretations and views Shias as apostates. Wahhabis had traveled up from Arabia in centuries past and sacked Shia shrines. Now Shias were terrified of a Wahhabi threat. They feared that Wahhabis would poison the food distributed to pilgrims. According to a cleric in Najaf, Sheikh Heidar al Mimar, "There were no Sunnis in Najaf before the 1991 intifada, but Saddam brought Wahhabis to the Shia provinces in order to control the Shia. These Wahhabis were very bad with us, and all Shia were afraid of them." Again and again I heard Iraq's Shias refer to all Sunnis as Wahhabis.

The Shia wave that swept Iraq in the wake of the American attack overthrew the Sunni-led order imposed on Iraq for centuries—by the Ottomans and by the British. The uprising was guided largely by Shia leaders who under Saddam had been pushed underground or into exile and whose sectarian identity had been strengthened as a result. On April 7 Ayatollah Sayyid Kadhim al Haeri, a cleric from Karbala who had been in exile in Iran since 1973, sent a letter to Najaf appointing Muqtada as his deputy and representative in Iraq. Haeri also urged Iraqis to kill all Baathists to prevent them from taking over again. On April 18, in the southern city of Kut, Abdel Aziz al Hakim, brother of the Shia opposition leader Muhammad Bakr al Hakim and leader of the 10,000-strong Iran-supported Badr Brigade militia, proclaimed that Iraq's majority Shia hoped for an Islamic government. That same day, Muqtada's deputy for Baghdad warned that Shias would not accept a democracy that would obstruct their sovereignty.

Later that month Shias descended in the millions upon Karbala for a massive celebration on Arbain al Hussein, the day marking the end of the 40-day mourning period for the prophet Muhammad's grandson, Hussein ibn Ali, slain in 680 in a battle that crystallized the division between Sunni and Shia Islam. An important and distinctively Shia holiday traditionally observed with mourning processions, public flagellation, and crying, its ceremonies had been severely restricted under Saddam.

The first Arbain after the war was marked more by Shia triumphalism than mourning. While Shias could not remember a time when they expressed pride in their identity so openly, Sunnis watched with concern and some disdain at the celebrations, which they rejected as un-Islamic or primitive. The Shias who made their way to Karbala were united in one message: the Hawza—the Shia theological seminary and seat of the Ayatollahs—was supreme. Banners, songs, and statements demanded that the Hawza should lead Iraq. These sentiments hardly assuaged Sunni fears, nor were they consistent with the words of such Shia exiles as Ahmad Chalabi, who had closely advised the United States before the invasion and who had promised that Iraq's Shias were secular and sought democracy.

Some realignment of power was inevitable after Saddam's removal, and perhaps not even shared opposition to the American occupation could have united Sunnis and Shias. As it happened, the occupation divided Iraqis between those seen as anti-occupation and those seen as pro-occupation. The Shias I spoke with proudly pointed to the attacks of Muqtada's militia on Americans in the spring and summer of 2004

as proof that they were as anti-occupation as the Sunnis. Nevertheless, Sunnis viewed Shias as the primary beneficiaries of the American occupation. And they were right: the Sunnis had been pushed to the side, dismissed from the security forces and the government, replaced in the government by Shias and Kurds, and treated as the enemy by the American military, which punished them collectively first for Saddam's crimes and then for the insurgency.

After Saddam's fall, the Sunnis were vulnerable. They had no leader; Saddam had gotten rid of the competition. Sunni clerics formed the Association of Muslim Scholars to protect Sunni interests and unite their leadership under the command of Baathists-turned-clerics. These clerics would soon call for boycotts of the Iraqi elections and would eventually control much of the insurgency, harboring the leader of al Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Musab al Zarqawi, and other foreign fighters who targeted not only Shia civilians in markets, buses, and mosques but Iraq's new security forces, which were filled with young Shia men.

Three years later, Shia religious parties such as the Iran-supported Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (its name a sufficient statement of its intentions), or SCIRI, controlled the country, and Shia militias had become the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army, running their own secret prisons, arresting, torturing, and executing Sunnis in what was clearly a civil war. And the Americans were merely one more militia among the many, watching, occasionally intervening, and in the end only making things worse. Iraqis' hopes for a better future after Saddam had been betrayed.

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Iraqi National Guard and police checkpoints slowed our progress to Najaf. Officers would peer through the driver's window and ask where we were going. "We're a family from Sadr City," we would say, or simply, "We're from the city." This was enough to convey the fact that we were Shia pilgrims. We would be waved along with a smile. "Go in peace."

We drove past brick factories and palm groves. As we approached Najaf we were stopped more and more often, our minibus searched, our bodies patted down. When all roads were closed off by Iraqi National Guard pickup trucks fitted with machine guns, we parked on a sandy lot filled with hundreds of cars, some with coffins lashed to their roofs. Mourners were bringing their dead to be buried in The City of Peace, the vast cemetery for Shias in Najaf, close to the shrine of Imam Ali, the prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law. As we continued on foot, we saw men waiting with pushcarts to carry the feeble, shrouded women and the coffins. Iraqi National Guardsmen in blue fatigues surrounded the charred wreckage of three minibuses and urged the pilgrims who stopped to stare, "Please, brothers, move on."

Not far away was the cemetery set aside for the martyrs of Muqtada's militia, Jaish al Imam al Mahdi, or the Mahdi Army. The Mahdi was a ninth-century Shia leader who is said to have disappeared into an occult realm when he descended into a hole in Samarra to escape assassins. Shias see him as a messiah and believe that when he returns he will restore justice. Many view his return as imminent. Among Muqtada's followers it is common to hear that the American army has come to kill the Mahdi. In a September 2006 sermon in Kufa, Muqtada told his followers that the Pentagon had a large file on the Mahdi and would greet his return with their military. But I was

often assured that the Mahdi would kill all the Americans, and all the Jews, too, for good measure.

Muqtada formed the Mahdi Army in the summer of 2003. Thousands battled American and British troops in Najaf and Kufa in the spring and summer of 2004 in what Muqtada's followers call their two intifadas. Many members of the Mahdi Army were former members of the Fedayeen Saddam, a paramilitary militia. Its Sunni members would constitute the core of the resistance. (It is a misconception that all Baathists and soldiers in Saddam's army were Sunnis.)

Ahmed, himself a Mahdi Army fighter, regaled his mother with tales of their daring fight against the Americans. We stopped so that Ahmed could visit the tombs of his friends.

As we approached the Kufa mosque just outside Najaf, we were searched by Mahdi Army militiamen. *Latmiya*, or mourning songs, echoed through the stalls of the market outside, describing in rhythmic beats the death of Imam Hussein, grandson of the prophet, and professing loyalty to him. The mosque's thick walls looked fortified and indeed had been used as a base for the Mahdi Army during the 2004 intifadas. Here they had lined up to receive food and weapons training. Small groups had learned how to use grenades and grenade launchers. Crates full of weapons were stored here, as well as in Muqtada's office in Najaf. There had even been a unit of female fighters, called the Bint al Huda Brigade, allegedly with its own suicide squad.

The Kufa mosque also holds a mystical importance to Iraqi Shias. Some believe it to be the oldest mosque in the world. Imam Hussein's cousin Muslim bin Aqil was buried there after being slain by the same traitors who would kill Hussein. And many Shias believe that the Mahdi will return there, descending from heaven onto its dome.

It was at Kufa in 1998, after Saddam relaxed restrictions on Shia clerics, that Muqtada's father delivered 47 famous sermons. Saddam had promoted Sadr at first, hoping that as an Iraqi nationalist he could be used as a tool against Shia leaders of Iranian or Pakistani descent, and against Iran itself. But Sadr did not show sufficient loyalty; his last sermons criticized Saddam himself. In 1999 Sadr and two of his sons were shot by unknown assailants. The government accused rival Shias of the murder and executed the suspects, but Sadr's followers blamed Saddam and rioted. Many were killed in Sadr City, then known as Saddam City. After the war Muqtada took over the Kufa mosque, and it was to this mosque that he retreated in April of 2004, urging his fighters to "make your enemy afraid" and assuring them that he would not abandon them.

The market outside the mosque offered key chains with pictures of Muqtada and his father and books by Shia thinkers including Sadr and his uncle Muhammad Bakr al Sadr, the most important Shia theologian of the 20th century, whose Dawa Party called for an Islamic state in the 1970s. When he was executed by Saddam in 1980 along with his sister, Bint al Huda, he became known as the first martyr. Sadiq al Sadr, Muqtada's father, was known as the second martyr. One stand sold films of Muqtada's sermons as well as panegyrics to Muqtada and films depicting his men battling the Americans. A large group stood around watching them.

Before the noon prayer a crowd assembled to receive copies of Muqtada's latest *bayan*, or statement, with rulings on certain questions and the cleric's seal at the

bottom. This week's bayan was formulated in a typical way, with a real or hypothetical question posed, followed by Muqtada's response.

"*Sayyiduna al mufadda*," began the question, "Our *sayyid* for whom we sacrifice ourselves, in the Iraqi streets these days there is a lot of talk . . . about militias. And as your eminence knows, some politicians classify Jaish al Imam al Mahdi (God speed his appearance) under this title. Do you classify the army under this title like the brothers in the Badr organization and the Kurdish peshmerga or do you classify it under another one?" The question was signed by a "group of members of the Mahdi Army."

In his answer Muqtada explained that the Mahdi Army was only an outlaw to oppressive governments. As long as the government was legitimate and not associated with the people's enemies, the Mahdi Army was with the government "in a single trench." He was affirming his nationalism, a consistent theme in his public pronouncements and the reason many Sunnis once viewed him as "the good Shia." He was also trying to distinguish the Mahdi Army from other militias: his position was that the Mahdi Army was not a militia at all but a spiritual army, and therefore did not deserve the label of sectarian armies that merely control fiefdoms through violence. "The Mahdi Army," he continued, "is not a party, and it is not an organization. There is no salary, no headquarters, there is no special organization, there is no arming, and every weapon is a personal weapon." Muqtada said that the ones who had provoked these questions were the American occupiers, the Saddamists, and the takfiris—radical Sunnis who believe Shias to be infidels, although this was a veiled reference to all Sunnis. The Mahdi Army, he said, belongs to the Shia leadership in the Hawza, and the Shia leadership belongs to the Mahdi.

The crowds marched into the mosque, and I marched with them, past more security. Many men carried *umsalayas*, prayer rugs, on their shoulders, setting them down in the concrete courtyard. Next to each marble column stood grim-faced men in dark suit jackets, their arms pressed down to hide their guns and keep them within reach. They had once openly carried Kalashnikovs, but this was now considered undignified.

Over 10,000 people filled the mosque. Unlike Sunnis, who go to whatever mosque is nearest to their home, Shias take buses to attend Friday prayers in one of several key mosques. Many women were there, sitting in a separate section. And I had never seen so many children at a mosque: Muqtada was the "cool" cleric, a fighter who defied authority, and he reached out to children, offering them stickers for their notebooks. As the call to prayer ended, the crowd chanted and sang songs they all knew by heart.

A murmur and a frisson spread through the crowd to the back as Muqtada waddled in with his head down, surrounded by assistants and bodyguards. People had been expecting one of his deputies to speak for him that day. "*Ali wiyak Ali!*" they thundered, waving their fists. "Ali is with you!" Muqtada was flanked by his two closest friends and advisers. On his left stood the young and very thin Ayatollah Ali al Baghdadi, originally from Sadr City. On his right stood his more rotund brother-in-law, Riyadh al Nuri, the usual imam of the Kufa mosque. Nuri lived with Muqtada and had cared for Muqtada's mentally handicapped brother, who died in 2004. As a leader of Muqtada's Islamic courts, Nuri also had a militia at his disposal, which he would dispatch to arrest and torture people for suspected infractions ranging from homosexuality and the sale of pornography to theft and slander against Muqtada.

Nuri raised his hand to quiet the crowd as Muqtada began to speak.

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I first met Muqtada in May of 2003, when his quick rise as a Shia leader was beginning to outrage the Hawza. Each *marja*, or cleric who has been deemed "a source for emulation," had his own office and received a tithe from his followers. Muqtada appeared with no experience or education and almost immediately won the loyalty of thousands of young men. He spoke in the name of his father and the *mustadafin*—the dispossessed masses—and he spoke their dialect and its slang, much as his father had. He alone was known by his first name because Iraq's Shias felt a personal bond with him. While the Iranian-born Ayatollah Ali al Sistani was the most respected religious authority for Iraq's Shias, Muqtada spoke for them and led them politically and spiritually. Tens of thousands would die for him. Chubby with an unkempt beard, he was awkward and unsure of himself then, coming across more like a street punk than a religious leader among Najaf's refined and somewhat snobbish clerical aristocracy. He seemed to speak with a slight lisp.

It would be nearly a year before his militia would fight Americans openly, but already he warned that the time would come. His men had taken over much of Shia Iraq, providing social services and security and imposing their strict interpretation of Islam on women and more liberal Muslims. His network of clerics coordinated their sermons, and his bayans were posted on mosque walls throughout the country.

On June 23, 2003, he returned from Iran, where he had met with his father's exiled student and intellectual heir, Ayatollah Kadhim al Haeri, and commemorated the death of Ayatollah Khomeini with government officials. It was Muqtada's first visit to Baghdad since his father's death four years earlier. In Sadr City tens of thousands greeted him with Iraqi and Shia tribal flags. A speaker read the victory verse from the Quran: "If you receive God's victory and you witness a great many people joining Islam, thank your God and ask him to forgive you, for God is very merciful." People chanted, "Muqtada, don't worry, we will sacrifice our blood for the Hawza!" They sang a song written in praise to Saddam with new lyrics praising Muqtada. When a speaker asked the crowd to make room for Muqtada to take the stage, they would not move, everyone wanting a chance to be close to him. Muqtada cried, or pretended to, addressing the crowd: "I visited this city when my father was alive, and I will visit this city on this day every year." Muqtada spoke of the memory of the martyrs and promised that businesses would return to Iraq and that the unemployment problem would soon be solved. He also promised to establish a humanitarian office in Sadr City. He spoke for seven minutes, and the crowds of adulators would again not move to let him leave.

That month, when Muqtada's name was proposed as a possible member of the U.S.-appointed Iraqi Governing Council, other members of the council rejected the idea. Muqtada and his constituency were radicalized by the exclusion, and he took on the role of a spoiler. He temporarily grew closer to Haeri. Though Muqtada's politics were at the time inchoate, lacking ideology and seeking only inclusion and power, Haeri was a rigid Khomeinist, with a clearly defined political program aimed at establishing a theocracy in Iraq, just as Khomeini had established one in Iran 25 years ago.

On July 20, Muqtada publicly claimed that American soldiers had surrounded his home and were planning to arrest him. Thousands of protestors descended upon Najaf. Demonstrators chanted, "No Americans after today," echoing Saddam's storm troopers, who in 1991 ransacked southern Iraq warning that there would be "no Shias after today." Some carried swords and flags. A message from Ayatollah Haeri was read to the crowd condemning the "American agents" of the Iraqi Governing Council and calling on the clerics to rule Iraq. From the shrine of Ali, protestors walked past Najaf's cemetery in rows and columns like soldiers to the American base in Najaf, where the protest leaders handed a list of demands—including an immediate withdrawal from the city—to the American colonel.

On August 13 an American helicopter hovered over a Sadr City radio tower flying the black Mahdi flag. Soldiers tried to knock it down. Thousands of protestors clashed with U.S. troops; at least one Iraqi was killed and several others wounded. For Iraq's insecure Shias, accustomed to victimization and reared on myths of martyrdom, it was the spark they had been waiting for: the Americans had declared war on Islam. In spite of an official apology, Friday prayers two days later in Sadr City were inflammatory. Sheikh Abdul Hadi al Daraji, a Sadr spokesman, warned that Iraqis would exact revenge for attacks against their sacred symbols. "Yesterday Saddam the infidel attacked our holy sites and the people of this holy city," Daraji cried, "and now the Americans do the same thing. So what is the difference between Saddam and America?" He warned that people would seek revenge against the Americans, but the army of the Mahdi would channel that anger and control it.

For the next nine months Muqtada continued to test the limits of American tolerance, sometimes virtually declaring war on them, then retreating and welcoming them as friends. In a sermon he praised the September 11 attacks and condemned the Interim Governing Council and all its actions. In March 2004 the Americans closed his newspaper, *al Hawza*, which they accused of calling for violence, arrested an influential associate of his, and issued an arrest warrant for him as well. To the Americans Muqtada was an annoyance and a religious radical, but they had been led to believe that he had no constituency and could be forced to retreat. But American pressure on Muqtada only increased his following among Shias. At the same time, the revelations of American abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and the attack on Fallujah allowed Muqtada to capitalize on growing anti-American feeling.

Following the success of Shia parties in the January 2005 elections, Muqtada's representatives in the Iraqi National Assembly demanded a timetable for U.S. withdrawal, a demand also made by Sunni rejectionists, who refused to participate in the new government or rein in the resistance until the Americans committed to leaving Iraq. The vote on the initiative fell short of the needed majority, but Muqtada's championing of a nationalist and anti-American agenda shared by Sunni leaders suggested a fragile alliance. Muqtada also joined Sunnis in condemning the draft constitution. Like them, he opposed giving the Kurds local political control of their region in the north and also opposed the Shia SCIRI leader Abdel Aziz al Hakim's goal of establishing autonomous Shia regions in the south. Muqtada's followers demonstrated against the constitution, sometimes marching with Sunnis. In the summer of 2005 militiamen loyal to Muqtada clashed with SCIRI militiamen in several Iraqi cities, including Baghdad, Nasriya, Najaf, and Amara. The two Shia movements had a historic rivalry dating back to the time when competing clerics sought to succeed the first martyr. But Muqtada and his followers also resented SCIRI for living in exile and for returning on the backs of American tanks. They

suspected SCIRI of being controlled by Iran, while accusing it publicly of collaborating with the United States. Most importantly, this was a turf war: each faction hoped to establish power among the Shias.

Despite the tensions between Muqtada's followers, also known as the Sadrists, and SCIRI, Muqtada was invited by SCIRI and Dawa to join the United Iraqi Alliance, the dominant Shia coalition that would be competing in the elections for the National Assembly in December 2005. They needed the numbers, and he could provide them. The Sadrists were granted equal status with the two other parties, giving them the opportunity to win as many as 30 seats in the National Assembly. Muqtada was legitimate now, no longer on the outside.

Later that year he visited Saudi Arabia on the hajj pilgrimage as an official guest of the Saudi king; then he visited Iran, Syria, and Lebanon, practicing his diplomatic skills and establishing a close relationship with the Syrian leader Bashar al Assad and Lebanese Shias.

By this time, the United States understood Muqtada's power. When the Americans realized they had to work to encourage Sunni participation in the December election, they condemned Shia militias and pressured Shia Prime Minister Ibrahim al Jaafari to step down in favor of a candidate Sunnis would find less aligned with Muqtada, and therefore more acceptable.

By the time I saw Muqtada in the spring of 2006, he was no longer meeting with the media for security reasons. While the rhetoric of nationalism still pervaded his sermons, so did thinly veiled references to Sunnis as infidels. All hope of an alliance between Sunnis and Shias was gone.

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Muqtada read a verse from the Quran and then switched into Iraqi dialect. Like his father, Muqtada spoke in a quiet monotone, without the emotion many clerics invest in their speeches. He was not a talented speaker. He kept his eyes down most of the time, reading from his notes and only glancing up occasionally.

"This is the time when right becomes wrong and wrong becomes right," he said. "When women become corrupt. Occupation has become liberation, and resistance has become terrorism. The occupation has joined the *nawasib*—those who do not accept the Shia imams and hate the family of the prophet." To Muqtada's followers this meant the Sunnis. "Look at them," he said, "the occupation and the *nawasib*. And look at their values." He called for Muslims to be united. "Which Muslims?" he asked. "The ones who say we are good Muslims. The ones who follow the family of the prophet. In the past God punished people by sending frogs, locusts, lice. Now he punishes them by sending earthquakes, mad-cow disease, hurricanes, floods, bird flu, the diseases in Africa, and globalization, armies, politics, solar and lunar eclipses."

Muqtada sat down for a minute, and somebody in the crowd shouted a *hossa*, a responsive slogan. "For the love of the oppressed, the two martyrs, the Sadrs, pray for Muhammad and the family of Muhammad!" he shouted. Thousands of people bellowed, "Our God prays for Muhammad and the family of Muhammad." They waved their fists. "And speed the Mahdi's return! And damn his enemies!",

Muqtada stood up once again. In spite of his veiled attack on Sunnis he expressed the hope that political struggles would not cause sectarian strife, and he blamed what strife there had been so far on the Americans. He gave his condolences to his followers for a joint American and Iraqi army raid on one of his movement's offices in the Mustafa Husseiniya—a northern Baghdad Shia religious center—two weeks before. "That attack was not the first carried out by the occupation forces," he said. "It is part of a series. . . . The occupation has attacked a lot of people among us. It has started killing civilians in the streets and in public areas. They are killing us randomly. They drag cars with their tanks. And they torture prisoners in Abu Ghraib and Um Qasr and other hidden prisons in Iraq. They made our neighbors our enemies.

"We did not have a country under Saddam, and now that Saddam is gone, why can we not have a country? . . . Even though we and our neighbors have one religion and one fate, the United States has succeeded in making us enemies. Instead of reconstructing the shrine of the two imams in Samarra", an important Shia shrine whose bombing in February 2006 fed the civil war—, the occupation is building prisons." Muqtada switched to Iraqi dialect again to quip, "preparing them for the Iraqi people.",

"When the press insults the prophet Muhammad, they say this is the freedom of the press. And when our press writes something true against America, they say it incites terrorism. So this is all proof that the small Satan has gone and the big Satan has come.

"So be patient, my brothers," he said. "They are trying to plant a civil war. Do not let them drag you into it. We know that they are going to assassinate our clerics and our leaders to make a sectarian and civil war. So be careful. We will never be oppressed. Do everything to resist the American idea called democracy."

Muqtada asked the nationalist forces in Iraq to help him pressure the Americans to schedule their withdrawal. He called for the United Nations, the Arab League, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference to cooperate in what he called "the national project for scheduling the withdrawal of the occupation of Iraq." And he outlined his plan: the withdrawal would begin in Iraq's stable areas such as the south, some of the middle (the Shia areas), and the north. Security would be turned over to Iraqis, and Iraqi airspace would not be used by military planes without the permission of the parliament and the governorates. The Iraqi security forces would be trained, but not by the Americans, and all the members of government would refrain from associating with the Americans as well.

When Muqtada withdrew and the prayer leader took over, thousands of men rushed the windows and fences in the hope of seeing Muqtada one last time. "Ali is with you!" they shouted as he walked by. The crowd slowly made its way out of the mosque. One man shouted, "Curse America and Israel and pray for Muhammad and the family of Muhammad!" Thousands joined in.

In Baghdad that day, the important Shia Buratha mosque was attacked, leaving nearly 100 dead and more than 100 wounded. It was the second postwar attack on this mosque, and it would not be the last; another suicide bomber would strike in June. The mosque's imam, the SCIRI politician Jalal al Din al Saghir, blamed two Sunni newspapers for falsely claiming that the mosque was a secret prison and the site of a mass grave for Sunnis.

On the road back to Baghdad, Ahmed called his friends on his mobile phone to tell them that he had seen Muqtada speak. He told me repeatedly how lucky I was.

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Ten days earlier, on March 27, 2006, I had driven into the al Shaab district of northern Baghdad with a long convoy of Mahdi Army pickup trucks and minibuses. Several hundred fighters were waving flags and machine guns. Blue and white Iraqi police trucks drove along with them.

It was one day after the incident that Muqtada had mentioned in his sermon: a still little-understood American raid on the Mustafa Husseiniya that had inflamed Shia rage against Americans but had secretly satisfied many Sunnis. A statement issued later that day by the U.S. military said, "Iraqi special-operations forces conducted a twilight raid today in the Adhamiyah neighborhood in northeast Baghdad to disrupt a terrorist cell responsible for attacks on Iraqi security and coalition forces and kidnapping Iraqi civilians in the local area." It added that "no mosques were entered or damaged" and that the operation was conducted at dusk to "ensure no civilians were in the area and to minimize the possibility of collateral damage." It also claimed that U.S. forces were merely present as advisers; only Iraqi soldiers were involved.

The American statement was at best confused. The raid had targeted the husseiniya, which strictly speaking was not a mosque but which had the same function. Before the war it had been a Baath Party office. Like other Baath Party buildings seized by Muqtada's followers, the Mustafa Husseiniya now had a minaret clearly protruding above its walls, with loudspeakers on top to broadcast the calls to prayer. Several rooms had been given to the Dawa Party for its offices. Furthermore, the husseiniya was not in the Adhamiya neighborhood. Adhamiya is a Sunni bastion, not far from Shaab but worlds apart. Could the Americans have confused the most Sunni neighborhood in Baghdad with a Shia stronghold? Could they have confused Muqtada's militia with a terrorist cell?

I had arranged to meet a journalist I knew from Shaab who was also a close confidant of Sheikh Safaa, the imam of the husseiniya and Muqtada's deputy in Shaab. When we spoke on the side of the road, far from the husseiniya, he warned me that he would act as if he did not know me when we met later at the mosque; it would be dangerous for him if people knew he associated with foreigners. He wore a black suit, a dark shirt with no tie, and leather shoes—Madhi Army dress. He told me that Sheikh Safaa was expecting me and that he had asked the sheikh to guarantee my safety.

The journalist was an informal intelligence gatherer in the neighborhood. Three years earlier I had found thousands of Baathist security files in an abandoned and looted General Security Service office that documented the day-to-day operations of the dictatorship, including orders for executions, arrests, spreading rumors, and countering rumors, as well as lists of snitches and collaborators, and careful records of mosque sermons. They revealed the names of Baathists and those who cooperated secretly with them and the fates of missing men imprisoned under Saddam. At the time I felt that they were Iraqi patrimony and should be handed over to an Iraqi movement. The journalist was associated with the Dawa Party and asked to borrow them. I agreed. I never got them back. I now believe that they were used to compile

hit lists for Shia militias in Shaab who targeted former Baathists. The journalist was involved in this.

A large sign in front of the husseiniya bore the faces of Muqtada's father and local Mahdi Army martyrs. Black banners hung on the wall with Arabic letters in white, red, green, and yellow: "The massacre of the Mustafa Husseiniya was done by the Wahhabis with the help of the Americans." Another said that the massacre was committed by "the forces of darkness with the help of the forces of occupation."

The husseiniya was blocked off by concrete barriers, and in the lot in front of it stood a large black *chadir*, a round tent erected for mourning. Rows of plastic chairs lined its sides, and several turbaned clerics sat talking. It is customary for visitors to enter on the right side, shaking the hands of all present, wishing peace upon them one by one. Each then sits down and asks God to have mercy on the one who reads the *fatiha*, the first verse of the Quran. Everyone recites the *fatiha* seated except for the relatives of the deceased, who stand. Following the recital, the men wipe their hands down their faces.

In front of the husseiniya was a small stand where a pot of tea was boiling. I was offered a small glass of the very sweet and strong tea popular in Iraq, always poured into glasses that taper inward gracefully. The young men guarding the mosque welcomed me and gave me a tour of the wreckage. The journalist was there, too, and he introduced himself as promised. The men pointed to a pile of rubble that had been the imam's home. A missile fired from an American Apache helicopter had apparently destroyed it. As proof, the men had collected all the shrapnel, along with numerous shell casings from American M-16s, not the Kalashnikovs used by Iraqis. Three blackened cars sat inside the courtyard. These, the men explained, had belonged to people praying in the mosque and had been parked outside, but the Americans had burned them and dragged them in. "By God, I don't know why the Americans came," said one of my guides. "They killed people praying, innocent people."

Brownish-red stains still marked the courtyard. "One of the people praying was shot here"he pointed—and dragged all the way here. And one was shot here." He showed me dried pools of blood in the next room and pointed to the ceiling, where blood and pieces of flesh had splattered. "They brought four here; one of them was 14." He gestured toward a doorway. "There were five martyrs in that room."

To the left of the husseiniya were several rooms that had been given to the Dawa Party. This was not Prime Minister Ibrahim al Jaafari's party but a rival Dawa Party branch (there are three) that had been exiled in Iran. Inside the offices, blood covered plastic chairs and parts of the floor. Political posters on the walls featured the first and second Sadr martyrs. "Here they killed one," my guides told me, pointing to more blood. We were interrupted by a guide's mobile phone; its ring tone was an angry Shia sermon.

In one of the Dawa Party's rooms they showed me a vast pool of blood with white pieces of brain stuck in it. I glanced at a Sunni doctor who was my interlocutor to get confirmation. It looked real to him. The men pointed to more blood. "Torture, you understand? Torture?" one said. A book written by Muhammad Sadiq al Sadr was bloodied. A poster of Prime Minister Jaafari had black ink scribbled on his face. In the room where the ceremonial drums and chains were stored, drums had been torn.

Outside, Sheikh Safaa paced back and forth in the courtyard by his destroyed home, talking on his mobile phone. The journalist and several other young men surrounded him to consult as I waited. I recognized another one of them, also wearing a black suit and shirt with no tie and leather shoes. He worked for the Iraqi government's de-Baathification committee but passed information about Baathists along to the Mahdi Army.

Sheikh Safaa agreed to meet me inside the prayer room itself. Its green carpet and shiny model of the Najaf shrine were still intact. On its walls hung verses from the Quran about judgment day, a picture of Muhammad Sadiq al Sadr, and one of Muqtada. Sheikh Safaa looked extremely young, and his stylishly groomed beard was still not fully mature. He was thin, with a long, narrow nose. He wore modern wire-frame glasses and had a white *imama*, or turban, balanced on his ears. As we spoke he held his mobile phone and prayer beads in one hand, gesticulating with the other.

He confirmed that the mosque belonged to the Sadrists. He explained that they had permitted the Dawa Party to use some of their rooms as an office. "They are old people, and they are even not capable of carrying a weapon," he said. "They didn't even have a guard in their office. The American forces denied that they attacked the husseiniya—they said they just attacked the Dawa office—but it was a lie. . . . The truth is they entered both the Dawa office and the Mustafa Husseiniya and they killed in a very barbaric way. . . . And nobody expected the Americans would do that, especially those who saw films about freedom in America. No one expected this.

"We were surprised at six o'clock, half an hour before the prayer, by a large number of Humvees and another armored vehicles. They surrounded the husseiniya and started firing randomly. It didn't sound like Kalashnikovs or classic light weapons but like Dushkas and heavy belt-fed machine guns. They also used bombs and grenades." I was surprised by his knowledge of weapons.

"There were low-flying planes and helicopters. I don't know if they were F-16s or B-52s. Infantry soldiers came in shooting. They took the brothers to a single place and grouped them together and executed them. One of them had a black band on his forehead because he was a sayyid. He was the one who got the most bullets. You have already seen his brains. They went inside the shrine with a grenade. People were praying. They went inside the *mihrab* [which only the imam enters]. The mosque should be a safe place. . . . I have four children, and they were very scared. They still are not stable. I went today to visit my mother, an old woman. She was in shock and couldn't recognize me."

Sheikh Safaa blamed the political pressure on Jafaari for the raid. "Americans think that Jaafari is the closest man to the Sadrists, and they don't like the Sadrists to have a friend in the prime minister's position in Iraq. They allowed the Sadrists to participate in the elections, but the election results were not what the Americans wanted, so they are putting political pressure to prevent things from going in the direction they dislike."

Sheikh Safaa warned of his people's anger. Over the last few days, he said, the people of Shaab "were very upset by the presence of the occupation. Muqtada demanded that the occupation forces apologize and compensate the families of the victims. America should not kill and compensate. Just stop killing. When the occupier came to this country we lost our security, and security is one of the most important favors that

God gives to us. It is true that there was a strong oppression of Iraqis by the former regime. America came to Iraq proclaiming its liberation and freedom and democracy and pluralism, but America proclaimed one thing and we saw something else. We saw freedom, but it was the freedom of tanks and the democracy of Humvees, and instead of multiple parties we saw multiple killings of people in ugly ways."

That Thursday, March 30, I attended the weekly press briefing of Major General Rick Lynch, the U.S. military spokesperson, in the Combined Press Information Center. I expected some mention of the raid, since prominent Shias had issued angry statements. Prime Minister Ibrahim al Jaafari said that the dead had indeed been inside a mosque. Nuri al Maliki, who would soon succeed Jaafari as prime minister, said on Iraqi state television, "This was a hostile attack looking to destroy the political process and provoke a civil war." He blamed the American military and the American ambassador, Zalmay Khalilzad.

Lynch wore pressed fatigues with two stars on his shoulder straps. He stood before American and Iraqi flags and throughout the conference remained expressionless. His hands sliced the air to emphasize points, in rhythm with his words.

"Our operations continue across Iraq towards the identified end state," he said, "an Iraq that is at peace with its neighbors and that is an ally in the war on terrorism, that has a representative government and that respects the human rights of all Iraqis, that has a security force that can maintain domestic order and deny Iraq as a safe haven for terror. And now we're making progress there every day." He explained that attacks against the coalition forces were concentrated in three provinces: Baghdad, al Anbar, and Salah ad Din. He neglected to mention that this was also where U.S. troops were concentrated and where some of the biggest cities—Baghdad, Tikrit, Samarra, and Ramadi, among others—were located.

"The enemy," he said, "specifically the terrorists and foreign fighters, specifically al Qaeda in Iraq, the face of which is Zarqawi, is now specifically targeting Iraqi security-force members and Iraqi civilians. In fact, the number of attacks against Iraqi security-force members has increased 35 percent in the last four weeks compared with the previous six months." General Lynch told the story of Sunni Arab recruits to the army who joined even after some other recruits had been killed in a suicide bombing. "If that's not a testimony to the courage and conviction of the Iraqi people, I don't know what is. They're uniting against Zarqawi. As we've talked about before, counterinsurgency operations average nine years. The people that are going to win this counterinsurgency battle against Zarqawi and al Qaeda in Iraq are the Iraqi people, and indications like that show their courage, their conviction, and their commitment to a democratic future. Amazing story." General Lynch insisted on talking as if the insurgency were limited to al Qaeda.

"We are making great progress to our end state here inside Iraq," General Lynch said. He switched slides to a satellite image of Ur and Shaab showing the Mustafa Husseiniya. It was labeled "Tgt Complex." Several blocks away was a building described, falsely, as the Ibrahim al Khalil Mosque, and even farther away was a building described, again falsely, as the Al Mustafa Mosque.

"Last Sunday," he said, "Iraqi special-operations forces had indications that a kidnapping cell was working out of this target complex. . . . This was led, planned, and executed by the Iraqi special-operations forces, based on detailed intelligence

that a kidnapping cell was occupying this complex. The operation consisted of about 50 members of Iraqi special operations forces and about 25 U.S. advisers. But the U.S. advisers were there purely in an advisory role. They did none of the fighting; there wasn't a shot fired from a U.S. service member during the conduct of this operation. They surveyed the battlefield in advance, looking for sensitive areas, and they said, Okay, there are mosques in the area, but the nearest mosque is about six blocks from the target-point complex, so a decision was made to do the operation. . . .

"All told, 16 insurgents were killed, 18 were detained. We found over 32 weapons, and we found the hostage, the innocent Iraqi, who just 12 hours before was walking the streets of Baghdad. He was walking the streets of Baghdad en route to a hospital to visit his brother who had gunshot wounds. He was kidnapped and beaten in the car en route to this complex. When he got there, they emptied his pockets, they took out his wallet, and in the wallet was a picture of his daughter, and he asked for one thing: he said, 'Please, before you kill me, allow me to kiss the picture of my daughter. That's all I ask.' The kidnappers told him, 'Hey, we got you, and if we don't get $20,000 sometime soon, you're dead.' And they showed him the bare electrical wires that they were going to use to torture him and then kill him. And they said, 'We're going to go away and do some drugs, and when we come back, we're going to kill you.'

"He was beaten. He was tortured. He was tortured with an electrical drill. Twelve hours after he was kidnapped, he was rescued. . . . He is indeed most grateful. He is most grateful to be alive, and he is most grateful to the Iraqi special-operations forces. . . . The closest mosque was six blocks away. When they got close to the compound, they took fire, and they returned fire. When they got inside the room, a room in this compound, they realized this could have been a *husseiniya*, a prayer room. They saw a prayer rug. They saw a minaret. They didn't know about that in advance, but from that room and from that compound, they were taking fire. In that room and in that compound, the enemy was holding a hostage and torturing a hostage, and in that room and in that compound, they were storing weapons, munitions, and IED explosive devices. Very, very effective operation, planned and executed by Iraqi special-operations forces."

When asked who the enemy might have been, Lynch responded, "Extremists, terrorists, and criminals, and it's all intertwined. We have reason to believe and evidence to support that the terrorists and foreign fighters are indeed using kidnapping as a way to finance their operations. And the story that I told about Sunday night's kidnapping can be told many more times."

I remembered my visit three days earlier. There had been no signs inside or outside the husseiniya of a gun battle or any fire coming from inside, no random bullet holes in the husseiniya or the buildings around it, no Kalashnikov shells (although those could have been removed). The entire affair had seemed one-sided, and General Lynch's account of the kidnappers was pretty implausible. If the Americans had committed extrajudicial killings there, they were lying about the incident and even its location. They may have stumbled on a Shia assassination squad targeting Sunnis, but they seemed to have no idea.

* * *

In fact, the Mustafa Husseiniya's Sheikh Safaa was at the center of an organized campaign against Sunnis in Shaab, which was one of the first parts of Baghdad where

Sunnis were the victims of assassinations and cleansing by Shia militias. Here, in the Baghdad neighborhood with the second-largest Mahdi Army presence, the civil war began in earnest in early 2005.

But it all started in the last months of 2004. Shias had fought alongside Sunnis in April in the first battle of Fallujah, but by November, when a second battle between Americans and insurgents destroyed the Sunni city of Fallujah, some Shias were beginning to think that the Fallujans got what they deserved for harboring Zarqawi and his killing force. The near-daily insurgent attacks against Iraqi policemen and soldiers had taken on a sectarian tone, because these forces were mostly composed of poor Shia men; Sunnis avoided joining. And as Shias grew indifferent to Fallujans' suffering, Sunnis became resentful, and some turned murderous. Sunni militias started targeting Shias as Shias, not as forces of the occupation.

As Sunni refugees from the bombed-out Fallujah settled in west Baghdad, the cleansing of Shias began. The neighborhoods there were Sunni strongholds, with a formidable presence of both insurgents and Salafis, people who practice a strict, reactionary form of Sunni Islam that in its most extreme form even sanctions the killing of all who disagree with its tenets. Shia families started getting threats urging them to leave. If they ignored the threats, their homes were attacked or their men murdered by Sunni militias (women were rarely targeted).

It was in the al Amriya neighborhood of Baghdad in the last months of 2004 that violence by Sunnis against Shias became widespread. Hundreds of families were brutally forced out. Vacated homes were seized by Sunni refugees. Not only insurgents but relatives of refugees who merely needed housing conducted attacks. In the months leading up to the January 2005 elections, Amriya's streets were littered with leaflets, and walls were covered with graffiti calling for "death for those who betray what they have promised God," meaning death for those who participate in the election.

Jafar's family was one of four Shia families on their street in Amriya. They were the third to flee. Two others had left a month before: one after their son, a translator for the U.S. Army, was assassinated in the gate of his home and the other after receiving a threat—their son worked in the Iraqi police forces.

Jafar is a Shia originally from Nassiriya. His family moved to Baghdad in 1940, but maintained the connection with their tribe in the south. Jafar lived in Amriya in a big house with his 70-year-old mother, his brothers, and a large extended family. The family was known for practicing the Shia tradition of cooking food and giving it away to poor people on Ashura (the anniversary of Imam Hussein's martyrdom), even in the final years of Baath rule.

On September 4, 2005, they found a letter in their garage: "In the name of God, do not think God is unaware of what the oppressors are doing. We are watching your movements step after step, and we know that you have betrayed God and his messenger; for that we give you 48 hours to leave Amriya forever, and you should thank God that you are still alive. And there will be no excuse after this warning."

The writer did not seem well versed in the Quran, and there was no heading or signature to reveal the letter's origins. It seemed more a personal threat than a Jihadist operation. Nonetheless, the family did not take a chance. They fled. The

brothers split up because they could not find a place that could take them all. Jafar moved in with his wife's parents in a Shia neighborhood; the rest of the family moved into their aunt's house in the al Binok district. They had to leave much of their property behind: there was no time to pack, and there would be much less space in their new home.

In Dora, another majority Sunni neighborhood of west Baghdad, the cleansing of Shias was even more brutal. Once one of Baghdad's nicest and most expensive neighborhoods, terrorism had brought housing values down to a third of their pre-war price. Fleeing Shia families would sell them cheaply, or abandon them; and poor Sunnis would move in and live among other Sunnis. The cleansing had been carried out largely by local insurgents who lived in the farms of Dora (Arab Jiboor and Hor Rijab), but criminals had also contributed, demanding money for kidnapped members of rich families. When no hostage was taken, which was most often the case, it was a sectarian attack.

Solaf was a 33-year-old Shia carpenter who had lived in Dora since 1974, the youngest brother of five from the poor Abu Muhammad family. His oldest brother, Muhammad, joined the police in mid-2004; in May 2005 he was threatened and told to quit. But Muhammad needed work, so he kept his job. He moved out of his parents' house and rented a small house in Shaab, a safer place for Shias. The other brothers did not feel safe and tried to sell their house.

In mid-July they accepted an offer, but there was a delay in signing the contract. Days later, as Solaf sat at the gate of his home chatting with a friend, a white Hyundai stopped a few meters away. A gunman with neither uniform nor mask emerged and started shooting, killing Solaf and his friend. Solaf's family buried him the next day. On the second day of the funeral, they received another threat and left Dora forever.

One week after Solaf's murder, his mother heard that the family of Solaf's dead friend, who are Sunnis, had received *jizya,* or blood money, of two million Iraqi dinars and an apology from the mujahideen. Two Sunni families now live in Solaf's old house.

In the Shia stronghold of Shaab, Shias began retaliating against Sunnis for the killings of their brothers, in a tit-for-tat that foreshadowed what was to come. The Mahdi Army, having battled coalition forces in April 2004, had formed new hierarchies and accumulated guns and vehicles. Shia attacks on Sunnis would become better organized after January 2005, when Sheikh Haitham al Ansari was assassinated.

Sheikh Haitham was Muhammad Sadiq al Sadr's representative in the Friday prayers. He fled to Syria in 1999 and returned to Iraq only after Saddam's fall. At the time he was an ally of Ahmed Chalabi of the Iraqi National Congress, and he immediately gained political importance, grouping different Shia factions together around him. Most importantly, he enjoyed wide popularity among Mahdi Army soldiers. His murder on January 2, 2005, a few months after he joined the United Iraqi Alliance as the Sadrist representative, infuriated young Mahdi Army soldiers and other loyalists. Further inflaming passions was the attempted assassination of another prominent Shia, the so-called Prince of the Marshes, Haj Abdul-Karim Mahood al Muhammadawi of Iraqi Hizbullah, as he left Haitham's funeral.

Soon after, organized campaigns against Sunnis in Shaab began. Sheikh Safaa decided to avenge Haitham's murder. He established a special assassination squad under his command. All his soldiers belonged to the Mahdi Army, and all targets belonged to the Salafi movement. A room inside the Mustafa Husseiniya was used for torturing suspects. Prisoners' confessions to attacks against Shias or civilians were filmed, with the interrogator's voice in the background, asking questions calmly in a southern Iraqi accent (the same one common in Sadr City). One film captured the group that confessed to the murder of Sheikh Haitham al Ansari. The films were kept in the Sheikh's possession and were not distributed, only saved as evidence that people who deserved it were executed. Sometimes the executions were filmed too.

Sheikh Safaa armed his death squad with grenades, grenade launchers, and Kalashnikovs. He hand-picked the soldiers for their strength and prowess and supplied them with vehicles donated by supporters in Shaab. Having Mahdi Army friends in the vehicle-registration department helped the group replace license plates. Sheikh Safaa gave final approval of all targets, who would then be tracked for a couple of days before their murder. There was no need for the sheikh's permission to follow a target merely to gather intelligence. When they conducted operations and raids, members of the group usually wore all black or military uniforms. Sometimes they coordinated their operations with the Iraqi army. When raiding a target's house at night, the group operated quickly, dragging him from bed, taking him to the mosque for interrogation, executing him, and then disposing of his body by dumping it in the outskirts of Sadr City locally known as al Sadda.

The killings of Shias by Sunnis and Sunnis by Shias escalated into systematic sectarian cleansing in certain Baghdad neighborhoods. Local Shia and Sunni militias were running death squads, sometimes targeting their neighbors, even secular Iraqis, who would in the end have no choice but to embrace the militias who might protect them. This grinding daily violence had little to do with resistance against the occupation, despite the clerics' rhetoric. It would make a project of national reconciliation very hard indeed.

Al Maalif, a poor, majority-Shia neighborhood of Baghdad lying in the southern part of the Seidiya district, is a case study in the cycle of violence. It was established in the late 1980s when the government moved tribes from villages north of Baghdad to build a factory and military camp in their place. The families moved from village to city but preserved their tribal habits and traditions. The neighborhood consists of a few large tribes and other poor people (both Sunnis and Shias) who moved to the city in the 1990s for cheaper living, but Shias are the vast majority there, unlike in Seidiya in general, which is evenly split.

On June 13, 2005, the Shia Shuhada al Taf mosque was attacked with a car bomb. Angry relatives of victims attacked Sunnis in the area. That night Shias wrote "Death to Saddam and death to Zarqawi" on the wall of the local Sunni Ali al Sajjad mosque. Sunnis left "Death to Saddam" but removed Zarqawi's name, which only angered Shias more.

Hussein, a butcher from the Tual tribe who owned five shops in Seidiya, and his partner, Ahmed al Mulla, also from the Tual, formed a death squad targeting Sunnis. After two of Ahmed's brothers returned from exile in Iran where they had been soldiers in the Badr Brigade, Hussein and Ahmed hung portraits of Ayatollahs Sistani and Khomeini over their shops walls. They too joined the Badr Brigade. Shia locals

who had raided the Baath Party office and transformed it into a Shia mosque gave them records with the names, addresses, and personal information of party members in Seidiya. The records even included the types of weapons they owned and the serial number for each weapon. Hussein and Ahmed scanned the records and interviewed about ten former regime loyalists a day in an interrogation room they set up in one of Hussein's shops. They would knock on their doors and inform them: "You were a Baath Party member and you need to come visit us in our office in the Elam Market to clarify a few issues concerning you."

Their "office" was a desk with two chairs and a long bench. They would ask the Baathist to sit on the bench and sign a statement: "I condemn all the former regime's activities against the Iraqi people, and I regret everything I have done with that regime, and I promise to never help the Baath Party again." The Baathists would then be asked to turn over their weapons. Ahmed and Hussein would check the serial number against the records. They did not let any Baathist retain his weapons.

Assassinations of local Baathists in Seidiya intensified one month after the office opened. They started fleeing the district. Hussein and Ahmed tried to obtain a fatwa to give them legitimate cover for their militia, but no respected cleric would give them one. Even their dear friend and neighbor Sheikh Dhafer al Qeisi, the Sistani representative for southern Baghdad, refused; he did, however, support them secretly.

Hussein and Ahmed's militia operated very professionally; its many young members moved quickly, driving fast German Opels. Ahmed spoke proudly about his operations in public and often said that he would exceed 100 dead "Saddamists" before 2005 ended. Since most of the former Baathists in his neighborhood were Sunni, all Sunnis in the neighborhood began to fear Ahmed, worrying that they might be the next target. In late 2004 Sunnis from the Omar Mosque in Elam formed their own assassination group. Their main targets were Ahmed and Hussein.

One evening in March of 2005, Ahmed al Mullah was attacked in his shop. A member of his group, Kadhum, died immediately; Ahmed was seriously wounded. One week after he left the hospital, while visiting the shop again, he was assassinated. His group ceased operations. They had killed more than 50. In October, Hussein was shot while driving home. Another brother, locking up the shop the next day, found a warning: "In the name of God, we did not oppress them, but they oppressed themselves, those who killed the sons of Sunnis and Baathists, killed the men, made the children orphans, and made the wives widows. They are cursed for what their hands have done. We will beat them like they beat us, and we will kill them everywhere."

The end of the militia didn't make al Maalif any safer for Sunnis. On December 25, 2005, 13 Sunni families were threatened and ordered to leave their homes. Two left the next day. In other families the men hid or left. A Sunni woman in al Maalif whose son had left the city reported his words: "There is a conspiracy to force Sunnis out of Baghdad. We are limited in where we can move; we cannot move to Shulaa, Hurriya, Dolaie, Shaab, Baghdad al Jadida, or al Amien, where we face the same threats. We can only move to Sunni neighborhoods dominated by the resistance—Dora and Amriya. But it is not safe to live there either. We cannot avoid attacks by writing on the walls that we are Sunnis. We might be attacked by the army since we live next to terrorists."

In late 2006 a Shia friend of mine from Maalif updated me about his neighborhood. "There are no more Sunnis," he said. "Maalif for Sunnis is much worse than Fallujah for Shias." A few months earlier the body of his 16-year-old Sunni neighbor had been found decapitated. The Mahdi Army had continued cleansing the neighborhood, and after a mortar attack by insurgents that killed more than 50 civilians, war was declared on the neighborhood's Sunnis. Sunnis with friends in Shia neighborhoods began exchanging homes with them. While battling Sunnis, the Mahdi Army routinely took over houses, using their rooftops for firing positions and sometimes terrorizing the inhabitants.

The civil war was spreading. Violence between Sunnis and Shias took on a life of its own, operating outside the reaches of the occupation and its forces. Sectarian violence even extended to the American prisons in Iraq, and prisoners segregated themselves. Sheikh Muayad al Khazaraji, a Shia who had been imprisoned by Americans for stockpiling weapons in his mosque, told another Sadrist cleric, "After I was in the jail I knew who is my enemy and who is not. The Americans are not my enemy. The Americans have interests, and anybody who wants to block the way of Americans from obtaining those interests becomes their enemy and they destroy him. Be away from their road and they will not touch you. Our enemies are the Wahhabis."

* * *

I returned to the Mustafa Husseiniya for the Friday prayers five days after the attack, and much of the neighborhood was shut down. Roads were blocked with tree trunks, trucks, or motorcycles. Mahdi Army militiamen sat on chairs on the main road east to the husseiniya asking for IDs as men walked slowly in the sun to the noon prayer. The soldiers of the Mahdi Army were mostly in their 20s and 30s, sporting carefully groomed clipped beards, shaved under the chin and neck, and wearing all black, sometimes with cotton shirts that said "Mahdi Army" and their unit's name. Many carried Iraqi police–issue Glock pistols and handcuffs at their sides. They were off-duty policemen. The Mahdi Army had become the police, and the police were the Madhi Army.

As the call to prayer ended, a man stood up to yell a hossa. "Damn Wahhabism and takfirism and Saddamism and Judaism, and pray for Muhammad!" The crowd yelled back, "Our God prays for Muhammad and the family of Muhammad!" Then they shook their fists. "And speed the Mahdi's return! And damn his enemies!" Wearing a white turban and white shroud to show he was prepared for martyrdom, Sheikh Hussein al Assadi, the lead Sadrist cleric for the entire eastern half of Baghdad, stood up behind the pulpit. The sermon would be inflammatory. It would again blame the occupation for sectarian violence. But like the sermons of other Sadrist clerics since early 2005, its message would be implicitly sectarian—it would treat Sunnis as infidels and urge, indirectly but using encoded language the audience would understand, that they be subjugated and even killed.

"All this martyrdom was done by international Zionism and world imperialism and the American occupation." Sheikh al Assadi's angry voice echoed against the city's walls. Some filmed the sermon with their mobile phones. Sheikh al Assadi prayed against the enemies of Islam, asking God to divide them and make them hungry, to make them fight each other, to kill them, to make them cowards, to push them from victory, to stop their tongues, to make them run away, to make them always losers, to make them examples for future generations, to make them infertile, to make their

livestock infertile, to stop the rain from them, to kill their plants, and to unite Muslims. He reminded his listeners that nothing could replace Islam because man's laws, like man, were imperfect, and therefore people must follow a constitution written by God.

Sheikh al Assadi blamed the Americans for opening Iraq's borders to the takfiris, and he blamed the Americans for killing Sunnis and claimed that they had thrown bodies in the Sadda area, near Sadr City, to ruin the reputation of Sadr City and to frame it for the crimes. He called the American government an occupying, criminal, Zionist, infidel administration, a criminal against humanity. He said that the Americans planted agents around the world, including the Baath Party founder Michel Aflaq, who was buried in hell, and Saddam, and the American ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, "the husband of the Jew who was accepted by the Mossad." He explained that "the American monkey Bush" had admitted to collaborating with Israel. He said that George W. Bush and Condoleezza Rice were well-known Protestant Christians and that such people were "Zionist Christians who do not even believe in the Christian prophet, and so they gave the green light to attack targets in Palestine and Lebanon." For good measure he called United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan an "idiot friend of Saddam." He warned that the UN has infiltrated in the north to help the Kurds under the guise of humanitarian, charity, and health organizations and that it openly occupies northern Iraq.

He condemned the "rotten spy" and "loyalists of the criminal Saddam and some leaders in the infidel American army" who declared that Mustafa Husseiniya was not a mosque and said they wanted to return it to its previous use as a Baath Party office "for slaughtering people." He asked the crowd of thousands to shout, "We will never be oppressed!" and they thundered in response. Invoking the custom of tribal vengeance that mandates that no funeral ceremonies be observed for a murdered relative until his killers are themselves killed, he said, "We promised ourselves not to cry for the martyrs until we kill their killers in a worse way and the government should not put their hands in the hands of those who killed us and we want them to prove their Iraqi identity and Islamic identity and we want them to release our prisoners or an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."

After the sermon, the streets of Hai Ur and Shaab filled with men strolling home in the heat or heading for minibuses and trucks. Prayer was also ending across town in the western Sunni neighborhood of Ghazaliya; there, several hundred Sunni men were heading home from the Um al Qura mosque. In Sunni mosques, too, clerics had long since stopped appeals for unity.

Ghazaliya was built in the 1980s for Baath Party members and Iraqi army offices. It was largely Sunni, although it had its own Shia slums. Saddam didn't allow Shia mosques to be built there, so all 12 of Ghaziliya's mosques are Sunni. Um al Qura is the largest. Its name, which means "mother of villages," is a reference to Mecca. Built by Saddam as a symbol of his turn to Sunni Islam at a cost of $7.5 million, the mosque (whose original name was Um al Maarik, "mother of all battles") commemorated his battle against the United States and its allies in the 1991 Gulf War. Its tall minarets and sharp tapering dome, taller than most in Iraq, are visible from far away. Four of the minarets are shaped like Kalashnikovs and four like Scud missiles. A large fence and a moat shaped like the Arab homeland surrounds it. Inside, bright white marble and natural light streaming in from high up gives more an impression of a cathedral than a mosque. The imam's voice echoes like a Gregorian

chant. On the mosque's cream-colored walls hang green and gold decorations and gruesome posters of murdered members of the Association of Muslim Scholars, allegedly killed by Shia militias or the ministry of the interior's forces. The mosque's huge parking lot has not been full since the heady days of spring 2004.

Sunni mosques in Iraq rarely attract the same large crowds as their Shia counterparts, since Sunnis generally go to the closest mosque in their neighborhood. People tend to sit alone and pray quietly. There are no group chants or social activities, no songs. Men do not converse with each other. Some lean against the columns in solitary thought.

About 500 men were present in Um al Qura the day Sheikh Sumaidai made his way up the steps wearing a tightly wound white turban and immaculate white robes. His beard was shaved so close it was barely visible. He wore thin wire-frame glasses. Before microphones from the full panoply of Iraqi and Arab television stations, he began in a slow chant, eventually picking up, screaming, and waving his hands as his emotion mounted, then began all over again, his voice once more subdued until it built up to a frenzy—the standard form.

The Prophet Muhammad's birthday was coming up, and Sheikh Sumaidai reminded his audience that Muslims had "felt like kings in time of Muhammad and now they feel oppressed." He cut the air with his fists and asked, "What kind of life are we living now? Is this a life? People have abandoned their religion, abandoned their Islam! These days remind us of the days before Muhammad's birth. Where are the Muslims?"

Sheikh Sumaidai urged people not to abandon Islam, not to abandon God's word "and start chasing the slogans of the West like democracy." He compared the American occupation to the attempted assassination of the prophet Muhammad. "They want to assassinate Islam," he said. "The invasion does not want Muslims to be Christians; it wants them to be cattle, and to disconnect the communication between them and God. . . . Today all the Muslim countries, including our patient country, are suffering enormous disasters. Muslims are confused: should they follow the politics of the West, or the politics of the parties, or the politics of sectarianism? There is no way except religion. That is the only asylum from this strife. We should return to Islam that taught brotherhood and mercy."

"Islam tells us that if we want to preserve our country we have to defend it," he said. "We should stop crying about our country; we should act to keep it."

It was a far more subdued message than ones I had heard in the past from the mosque's pulpit. For months before the war Baath Party clerics had called the Americans pigs and apes and preached in support of Saddam's regime. On July 18, 2003, a day after the anniversary of the Baath coup, over a thousand men with white skullcaps had gathered for the Friday prayer and sermon. The mosque's original name still hung there, and an adjoining museum displayed a Quran allegedly written with Saddam's donated blood.

That day, Dr. Muthana Harith al Dhari, the head of the Association of Muslim Scholars, warned that the Americans should think of leaving Iraq to spare them and the Iraqis time, blood, and money. Dhari was the grandson of Sheikh Suleiman al Dhari, who led the 1920 rebellion against British occupation and killed Colonel

Gerard Leachman, a British colonial officer. Dhari proudly kept his grandfather's gun. "It is the right of occupied people to resist the occupiers . . . The Iraqis will resist." Dhari recalled the recent American July Fourth celebrations, commemorating America's own independence from the British. Did the Arabs not have the same right to resist occupation and expel the occupiers that other nations had? Dhari commended the resistance, calling it "an honest opposition" of which Iraqis could be proud.

Dhari condemned the new Iraqi Governing Council, "established by dishonest parties," for dividing Iraq along sectarian lines, and warned that it would provoke hostilities among the Iraqi people. He was infuriated by the council's declaration making April 9, the day Baghdad fell in 2003, a national holiday, a day he described as "the downfall and surrender of Baghdad," which should be remembered with sorrow and pain. Dhari's anti-Shiism came across only obliquely, when he condemned as the council's greatest evil its acceptance of one community (the Shias) unjustly dominating the others (he rejected the statistics that said that Shias were in the majority). Dhari also implicitly condemned opposition leader Ahmad Chalabi, as well as his colleagues, who he said came on the backs of U.S. tanks and called for the killing of former Baathists. Up to half of the country's population were former Baathists, he said, and all were pious and well-intentioned. In private, Dhari spoke of Muslims and Shias as if they were two different things.

Even so, like most Sunni clerics in the spring of 2003, Dhari made some effort to embrace national unity publicly and to join with Shias in resisting the occupation. His voice building to a shrill cry, Dhari screamed out that the Americans were committing crimes—breaking into homes, searching women. "Do you agree with this?" he demanded. "No!" the crowd shouted back. Dhari said that the Iraqis knew how to resist occupation, recalling the 1920 revolution against the British, when Sunnis and Shias fought together. As prayers ended and the men streamed out of the mosque, they shouted, "No to colonialism! No to the occupiers!"

The crowd chanted rhyming slogans calling for the extermination of the infidel army and for the American head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, Paul Bremer, to follow Nuri al Said, the British-protected Iraqi prime minister who was killed by mobs in 1958. Leaflets distributed during the demonstration contained a statement from the Iraqi branch of the Islamic Liberation Party. It called on Muslims around the world to come to their aid.

On August 11, 2003, the Association of Muslim Scholars issued a statement condemning the American violation of mosques, which they said even the Mongols had not done. Thanking the Shia Ayatollah Sistani for his own statements defending Sunni mosques, it blamed the Americans for giving Shias too much power, including control over the ministry of religious endowments, or Awqaf. Awqaf did not protest the arrests of 30 clerics or the American violation of holy places, the association said.

In early April 2004, Dhari called for national unity and a three-day general strike to protest the U.S. siege of Fallujah. He announced that the Sunni council had declared it against Islam to purchase American or British goods, since the money would support the military operations against Iraqis, Arabs, and the Muslim world. Dhari also asked his audience to help in providing medical supplies for Fallujans, as well as gas and generators.

“Come to Jihad!” he shouted, calling Fallujah a historic battle of the Iraqi nation in which their loved ones were fighting, welcoming death and martyrdom. Dhari called on God to support the holy warriors who were fighting to liberate their country and religion and to kill the occupiers. “Do not spare any of them!”

Two years later, there was no more talk of unity. Sunni clerics were trying to demonstrate to the public and to the media that innocent Sunnis were being slaughtered by Shia militias and to rally Sunnis around the common threat. On April 4, 2006, I stood waiting in the sun for the second day in a row after a friend who moonlighted for the Association of Muslim Scholars told me that the bodies of Sunnis slain in sectarian violence would be brought in from the morgue, a standard show. Ghazaliya had long been one of Baghdad’s many no-go zones for foreigners, journalists, and even many Iraqis. Sunni militias openly patrolled its streets when American or Iraqi army or police forces were not looking, and they stopped cars at their checkpoints to look for suspicious outsiders. Shias living in Ghazaliya had been receiving death threats, if they were lucky, warning them to leave the neighborhood. As I stood in the parking lot with a few Iraqi cameramen, I could hear exchanges of fire in the distance.

Finally we heard wailing coming from the mosque’s gate as two trucks approached, accompanied by men on foot. The men were crying and beating themselves, stopping to collapse on the ground or raise their arms in desperation, then shouting, “There is no god but God!” They cursed the killers. “Faggots! Brothers of whores!” they said. “This is a disaster! What did they do? We are almost extinct! They’ve broken our backs! The bastards! The infidels!”

The dead were Sunni shopkeepers. I asked one of the men to tell me what had happened. “They took them in the south, from their shops. They took them to an office and took their car. We found them yesterday in the morgue. They lived in Ghazaliya. Four brothers. And a father and son!” He began crying again.

An older man wearing tribal clothes and hiding his face with his headscarf shouted, “This is arranged by Iran. We are Muslims and this is our country. Why are they doing this to us? . . . One victim is only 12 years old! Everywhere they kill Sunnis.” He said when other relatives came to the morgue for the bodies they too were kidnapped.

After the trucks stopped at the mosque’s steps, the men took out rugs and laid the coffins on the ground, their covers pulled to the side, revealing bodies under plastic. “Open the bags so they can see,” one man said. “This one is only ten years old,” cried a man. “A kid. Should he be strangled? Look at him.” The boy did indeed look about ten, his face swollen and eyes closed, thick stitches lining his chest.

They opened another coffin. “This one was tortured before killing!” one man shouted. “They pulled out his teeth! He was helping his father. What is their crime that they were killed? Only that they are Sunnis?” He raised his hands and shouted, “God is great!” I looked at the corpse, a middle-aged man with a bruised face, missing some of his front teeth. “Even Jews wouldn’t do this!” shouted one man. “They say that Saddam Hussein was a tyrant. How do you explain this?”

Somebody decided the show was over. The coffins went back on the trucks, which drove away, followed by the Iraqi journalists. The members of the Association of Muslim Scholars remained outside, discussing a Sunni man who was kidnapped as he

went to visit relatives in the hospital. “They control the hospitals,” said one man, referring to Muqtada’s followers. He noticed me filming him and angrily covered the lens with his hand. He was the head of security, I was later told.

On my way back I drove through the wealthy Mansur district. Two bodies lay on the main street. It was a common sight. I later found out that they were Iraqi staff of the embassy of the United Arab Emirates. The same day a Sunni friend from western Baghdad called me, distraught, because his Shia neighbor and friend had been killed the previous night. At least ten bodies had been found in his neighborhood. A Sunni who brought one of them to the hospital was also killed, for doing just that. On another typical night, Shias who lived in a Sunni neighborhood saw masked men in their garden. They found a letter ordering them to leave. The following day they did. Over the course of six weeks that spring I had had three different drivers; at various times each had to take a day off because a neighbor or relative had been killed.

Several Iraqi news channels were running a warning from the ministry of defense that Iraqis should not follow the orders of police or army patrols at night unless they were accompanied by American forces. Some Iraqis began panicking at the sight of unaccompanied Iraqi forces and fired on them. Iraq was deteriorating. One morning 14 bodies were found, all with ID cards in their front pockets identifying them as “Omar,” a Sunni name. It was a message. On another day a group of bodies were found with their hands overlapping on their abdomens, right hand above left, the way Sunnis pray. Another message. Many Sunnis were thinking of obtaining false papers with neutral names. And Sunni militias were retaliating, stopping buses and demanding the *jinsiya*, or ID cards, of passengers and executing those with Shia names. In the past the American military was a dominant presence, its Brobdingnagian vehicles rumbling through Baghdad’s traffic, its soldiers giants with their vests and helmets and weapons. The occupation could be felt. Now in Baghdad you could go days without seeing American soldiers. Instead it felt as if Iraqis were occupying Iraq, their masked militiamen blasting through traffic in unmarked security vehicles, shooting into the air, angrily shouting orders on loudspeakers, pointing their Kalashnikovs at all who passed.

On February 8, 2006, Abdulsalam al Kubeisi, the director of public relations for the Association of Muslim Scholars, said in an interview, “There is an organized campaign being run by the current government and executed by militias belonging to the government and following a Persian strategy to occupy Baghdad and replace its Sunni families with other families whose roots we do not know. . . . The government militias are attacking Sunnis everywhere.”

* * *

With the January 30, 2005, electoral success of the Shia parties, the balance of power between Shias and Sunnis shifted, initiating an apartheid process. In the ministry of health, pictures of Muqtada and his father were everywhere, along with pictures of Shia saints and banners celebrating Shia holidays. Traditional Shia music reverberated through the hallways. Doctors and ministry employees referred to the minister of health as “imami,” or “my imam,” as though he were a cleric. And in the ministry of transportation, walls were adorned with Shia posters, including some specifically supporting Muqtada. Sadrists instituted a program they called “cleansing the ministry of Saddamists,” with “Saddamist” defined so broadly that all Sunnis felt vulnerable. Ousted Sunnis were replaced by Shias with no apparent qualifications. In

one case, a Sunni chief engineer in the transportation ministry was fired and replaced with an unqualified Shia who wore a cleric's turban to work. Efficiency dropped; the ministries of health and transportation barely functioned, and the ministry of the interior operated an anti-Sunni death squad. Its secret prisons were uncovered in November 2005.

Although SCIRI controlled the ministry of the interior, which nominally controlled the security forces, the rank and file were poor, young Shia men, often members of the Mahdi Army. Local police forces thus fell under the control of the Sadrists. Iraqi police stations and army bases were decorated with posters of Muqtada, as were police and military vehicles. Even in the Sunni Anbar province, the Iraqi army was composed of Sadrists. In the spring of 2006, when Sunni soldiers from the Anbar province graduated as new members of the Iraqi army and were told that they would serve outside their home province, among Shias, they rioted and tore off their uniforms. (The Americans had established police forces in Anbar, composed of local Sunni men selected by their tribes. When I visited them in the spring of 2006, these police had not been paid in months, because the ministry of the interior was not sending the money.)

Sunnis had initially courted Muqtada, who opposed Iranian intervention, in the hope of establishing a united front against Americans. But Muqtada's Mahdi Army was in fact primarily responsible for the attacks against Sunnis. The Mahdi Army could claim, as it did, that it had handed over its weapons after battling Americans in Najaf, Sadr City, and other Shia enclaves, that it was a purely "spiritual army," but since Mahdi Army soldiers pervaded the police force, they were still armed and in control. And although the ministry of the interior had been implicated in attacks against Sunnis, it was the police themselves that conducted such attacks regularly.

Fighting between Sunni militias and the Mahdi Army escalated but was not yet officially declared. One Mahdi Army soldier explained to me that "Wahhabis know we are killing them, otherwise they would not attack us back, but they have not declared war on us because then all the Shias of Iraq would be against them and they would lose." Another soldier told me, "We kill more Wahhabis than Badr does, and we throw their bodies in our city, but accusation's finger points to Badr anyway." In private conversations Sunni insurgents and their leaders acknowledged the Madhi Army's role and expressed the belief that they were motivated by Iran, not Iraqi nationalism. But they too feared publicly naming them, still hoping for some manner of reconciliation.

Shia militias led by the Mahdi Army took the offensive against Sunnis when it was clear that the Sunni resistance had reconciled with al Qaeda, and Iraqi nationalist groups, including the Association of Muslim Scholars, began supporting al Qaeda's attacks on security forces and providing Zarqawi's men with shelter in late 2005. The Mahdi Army saw the Association of Muslim Scholars as merely Salafis and Baathists in the attire of normal Sunni clerics and claimed that "they are not representing our Sunni brothers." This justified killing any Sunni they wanted. The Mahdi Army became increasingly effective, perhaps because of its new collaboration with Lebanese Hizbullah; Muqtada had sent his senior men to Lebanon and was modeling his militia on theirs, although Hizbullah was a resistance movement and had never engaged in sectarian killings. With a small number of police cars Mahdi Army militiamen could operate at night, past curfew, entering Sunni neighborhoods to arrest or kill Sunnis with official sanction.

A turning point in the intensifying struggle between Shia and Sunni militias had been the fighting in Madain, a town in the Baghdad province, in the spring of 2005. Although Shias, Christians, and members of the rare Sabaen sect (which combined elements of Judaism and Christianity) all lived there, it was a majority-Sunni town. After about 150 impoverished Shia families from the south migrated there, encamping in former military bases, they were soon accused of looting, stealing, and highway robbery. Resistance and insurgent groups needed the roads unobstructed so that they could conduct their own attacks on coalition and Iraqi security forces. They clashed with the new Shias. Among the insurgents were members of Zarqawi's Tawhid and Jihad group, who brought with them foreign fighters. Unemployed youths also joined the insurgents. Salafi fighters drove around the area in their pickup trucks ordering all Shias to leave the city.

A special unit of the ministry of interior called the Wolf Brigade occupied Madain and fought with the insurgents, making mass random arrests of Sunnis. They took over a school and based themselves there. The Wolf Brigade was replaced by the Karar Brigade, based in the Wasit province in the Shia south. Locals viewed the presence of ministry forces from a different province with suspicion. Karar is another name for Imam Ali, whom the Shias revere; this was not a coincidence. Karar made more random arrests of Sunni men and established a reign of terror, ominously resembling Saddam's, for the first time under the new Iraqi security forces. Sunnis compared the security forces' operations in Madain to the American operations in Fallujah. In its communiqués the Association of Muslim Scholars described the Iraqi police and army forces as Shia militias and referred to them as "government police" instead of "Iraqi police," and the "government army" instead of the "Iraqi army.",

When Zarqawi declared war on Shias in a September 2005 speech, Iraq's radical Sunni leadership reacted quickly to condemn it. The Association of Muslim Scholars announced that Iraq's Shias were responsible neither for the crimes the government was committing with the Americans' blessing nor for the attacks by the Americans themselves. No religious principle allowed one to seek revenge on an innocent person, they said, and they accused Zarqawi of supporting the Americans' hope to create civil war in Iraq. Meanwhile five resistance groups—the Army of Muhammad, the al Qaqa Battalions, the Islamic Army of Iraq, the Army of Mujahideen, and the Salehdin Brigades—condemned Zarqawi's statements, calling them a "fire burning the Iraqi people" and explaining that the resistance only attacked the occupiers and those who assisted them, and did not base their attacks on sectarian or ethnic criteria.

These Sunni condemnations did not satisfy Muqtada, and in late 2005 he sent a letter to various Sunni leaders complaining that Zarqawi had labeled all Shias as infidels and that he and all Shias were being targeted by Zarqawi's deadly attacks. He demanded that Sunni leaders label Zarqawi an infidel. No Sunni leader agreed. Some explained that it was too dangerous to do so, but Muqtada refused their apologies.

This was a key moment for the Sadr movement and for sectarian relations in Iraq. Mahdi fighters complained bitterly about this betrayal by the Sunnis. And Sadr decided to join the Shia coalition openly in the December elections. For the first time Mahdi Army soldiers were sitting down with Sistani followers and discussing politics. In the past it was difficult to even have them in the same room.

Sunnis and Shias began using new terms to refer to each other. To Shias, Sunnis were Wahhabis, Saddamists, and *nawasib*. To Sunnis, Shias were *al rafidha* or *al turs*.

Rafidha, meaning "rejectionists," refers to those who do not recognize the Islamic caliphs and want instead a caliphate from the descendent of Imam Ali. It has become a blanket pejorative term. *Turs*, meaning "shield," refers to the human shields used by the enemy infidels. It is permitted to kill these shields. Iraqi Salafis call the Shias they kill *turs* to justify their killings.

Elections may have represented a victory for the Bush administration, but they also enshrined sectarianism more deeply in Iraq. Ayad Alawi, the former prime minister and the secular nationalist candidate, faired even worse than he had in the January elections. Other nonsectarian parties failed to win even one seat. The elections also proved that the resistance was disciplined and Iraqi-controlled: the resistance did not attack Sunni voters; in some cases resistance fighters protected them, since they too viewed a large Sunni turnout as a key element in their struggle for a larger Sunni role in the new Iraq. The Sunni winner in the elections was the Iraqi Accord Front, a coalition of three Islamist parties. Sunnis felt betrayed when SCIRI leader Abdel Aziz al Hakim warned that Shias would prevent Baathists from joining the new government—by force if necessary—nor would Sunnis be able to modify the constitution, something promised to them by U.S. Ambassador Khalilzad to secure their participation. Khalilzad's attempt to woo Sunnis had been viewed as a betrayal by Shias, who called for his removal. Hakim also renewed his call for a southern Shia super-region.

In February 2006 the Iraqi Accord Front, with 44 seats in the new parliament, threatened civil disobedience if attacks against Sunni civilians did not stop.

On February 22, 2006, a bomb destroyed the Shia Askari shrine in Samarra. In the days that followed, over 1,300 bodies were found in Baghdad, most of them Sunni. Once these figures were revealed, the ministry of the interior—whose forces were likely responsible for most of these deaths—asked the Shia-controlled ministry of health to cover up the numbers. Shias took over dozens of Sunni mosques and renamed them after the Samarra shrine.

Sunni television stations such as Baghdad TV, controlled by the Iraqi Islamic Party, showed only Sunni victims of the retaliatory attacks. Shia television stations, such as al Furat and al Iraqiya, focused on the damaged shrine and on the Shia victims. Al Furat was even more aggressive, encouraging Shias to "stand up for their rights." On a Shia radio station's talk show, one caller announced that those responsible for the attack were Abu Bakr, Omar, and Othman, the three first caliphs whom Sunnis venerate and whom Shias reject as usurpers of the position that rightfully belonged to Imam Ali, the prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law.

Following the February 22 attack Sunni militias faced the increased wrath of the Mahdi Army. Throughout Iraq, Mahdi Army cadres flooded the streets, marching and chanting in unison.

After a young Shia sheikh was stopped and searched by armed guards near the Sunni al Sajjad mosque, Mahdi Army soldiers surrounded the mosque and searched the entire building for explosives. (The Sajjad mosque belongs to the Sunni militia Ansar al Sunnah. In late 2004 it had celebrated two funerals for Iraqi-Palestinian suicide bombers killed in operations against collation forces in Iraq. The Sajjad mosque graduation's ceremonies for children who memorize the Quran are named after al Qaeda video titles, such as "Winds of Victory.") Sunnis informed the media, and local

stations claimed that the Mahdi Army had taken over the mosque. On the following Friday, Sunnis asked for U.S. Army protection against possible Mahdi Army attacks during their Friday prayers. They were increasingly open in accusing the Mahdi Army.

Officially, Muqtada opposed attacks on Sunnis, but he had unleashed his fighters after the Samarra attack, ordering them in his sermons to kill the *nawasib*. Angry Shia militiamen believed that not even destroying all the Sunni mosques in Iraq would avenge the attack on the shrine in Samarra.

In any case, Muqtada did not have direct control of his militias. The Mahdi Army is a diverse movement and not strictly hierarchical, and Muqtada himself is unaware of most of its local commanders and activities (although it is widely believed that this October he executed 30 rogue Mahdi Army officials for being out of control). The Mahdi Army's cells are generally loose and informal and resemble soccer teams. In fact, many emerged from local soccer teams. (Sayyid Hassan Naji al Musawi, an important Mahdi Army commander in Sadr City, was a well-known local soccer star before the war.) Different leaders of the Mahdi Army dislike each other. There are jealousies and rivalries. There is nothing stopping a group of Shia youths from declaring themselves a Mahdi Army unit, collecting weapons and interpreting Muqtada's fatwas as they see fit. But the Mahdi Army is also evolving and becoming far more structured and professional in parts of Baghdad and Iraq. Many have been divided into units, following the model of Hizbullah in Lebanon. Many are paid salaries, a few hundred dollars a month.

Mahdi Army units are attached to the offices of Muqtada Sadr's representatives in various Baghdad districts. Smaller neighborhoods are easier to control; there is usually a local boss, intelligence officers, and a chain of command. Large neighborhoods such as Sadr City are harder for them to govern, and different groups compete for control. In the past journalists could guarantee their security by coordinating with the Sadr office in Sadr City, but now one group can grab you from another group. Recent talk of Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki disarming the militias is absurd: Maliki's Dawa Party, which has no armed wing, closely collaborates with Muqtada's men. But this division of labor within the Shia bloc is temporary; once they consolidate their control and cleanse the Sunnis, the Shia parties will begin competing among themselves for power and the civil war will devolve.

As sectarian cleansing escalated after the Samarra bombing, Shia families fled Abu Ghraib, al Taji, and al Mishahda, moving into Shia strongholds in Baghdad, where Muqtada's representatives took care of them. In Amriya bodies were found on the main street at a rate of three, or five, or seven a day. People feared approaching the bodies, for those who did, or those who called an ambulance, were threatened or killed. Hundreds of Shia families from Sunni towns settled in Red Crescent–run refugee camps near Kut. The United States constantly shifted its support back and forth between Sunnis and Shias, calling on Shias to rein in their militias, a key Sunni demand, while still conducting massive and lethal raids on the Sunni population.

A television station launched a program entitled "Terror in the Hand of Justice." On it alleged Sunni insurgents were shown confessing to crimes such as rape and sodomy. On one episode an interrogator accused the members of important Sunni tribes—the Juburi, Janabi, and Duleimi—of all being terrorists. The show only heightened Sunni fears that the Shia security forces were targeting them en masse. (Sunnis are also

targeted by rejectionist groups such as al Qaeda for seeking to participate in the mainstream political system.)

In April 2006 the Mahdi Army attacked a number of high-ranking insurgents, including prominent former Baathists in Baghdad's Adhamiya neighborhood. They captured their suspects. Irate locals began shooting at Iraqi National Guardsmen, and they accused both the Badr organization and Iranian revolutionary guards of being involved. Rumors spread of revolutionary guards taking prisoners. In fact, it was a Mahdi Army operation. In the days that followed, Iraqi police fired randomly into Adhamiya, and residents could not leave their homes for days in a row. The police shot out generators and cut power cables, presumably to punish residents for harboring terrorists.

Following the battles the Association of Muslim Scholars released a statement accusing the ministry of the interior: "The people of Adhamiya defended their city with honor and they lost seven martyrs and 19 were injured. We have realized that satellite channels like Hurra and al Arabiya have changed the truth, and they have shown the interior's commandos and militias as the ones who helped the people of Adhamiya from an attack by other armed people, despite the fact that these forces were the ones who attacked the city. And we saw that the Iraqi National Guard leader who is responsible for protecting the city was just watching and doing nothing." For Sunnis the state was at war with them.

* * *

A staunch Sunni bastion, Adhamiya was named for its famous eighth-century mosque, Al Imam al Adham, meaning "the greatest imam," a reference to Abu Hanifa al Numan, whose tomb is contained there. Abu Hanifa was a ninth-century theologian whose legal judgments are still followed by about half the world's Muslims. As Iraq's most important Sunni shrine, it was visited by hundreds of thousands of pilgrims a year. It had been a favorite mosque of the former Iraqi government, and prior to the war Iraqi state television often broadcast its Friday prayers. The mosque's imam, Sheikh Abdul Ghafar al Kubaisi, would hold up a Kalashnikov, exhorting listeners to protect Saddam and his regime. After the American invasion, Kubaisi went into hiding.

Iraq's Shias believe that Abu Hanifa was a treacherous student of Imam Kadhim who participated in his killing. They have a tradition of spitting in the direction of the shrine when they pass by it. Sayyid Hassan Naji al Musawi, a close ally of Muqtada's in Baghdad and a commander of the Mahdi Army, once confided to me that Abu Hanifa was an "*ibn zina*," or "son of adultery," and that "a dog is buried there." Salafis, whose numbers in Adhamiya had grown in the 1990s, also despised the mosque because of the Salafi rejection of all shrines and tombs.

Adhamiya was very old and very rich, and the former regime found many supporters there. Up-and-coming Baathists would often buy houses in Adhamiya as soon as they could afford it. General Mustafa al Azzawi, who commanded the Iraqi forces that fought Americans in Nasiriya in 2003, had begun building a home in Adhamiya before the war. Saddam himself hid in Adhamiya in the first Gulf War of 1991, and following the war he appeared on Iraqi television and thanked the people of Adhamiya for helping him. He declared that Adhamiya was Baghdad's original neighborhood. (Saddam was spotted and filmed on April 9, 2003, at a rally outside

the Abu Hanifa mosque.) Posters of Saddam are still sold in the streets, and the former leader is still highly regarded. Shias call the neighborhood "Saddamist City."

Adhamiya was also the last part of Baghdad to fall. Its defenders were mostly foreign fighters who had retreated from the rest of the country and tenaciously held out. The ones who survived the April 10 battle were hidden in mosques or homes by sympathetic locals; some were even driven to the Syrian or Iranian border. Twenty-two prisoners were taken from the mosque, including the mosque's sheikh, Watheq al Obeidi, and his two sons. Inside the mosque, a cemetery "for the martyrs of April 10" would be built. Before the headstones were ready, the names of the dead foreign fighters, at least 20 of them, were written on paper, put into soda bottles, and stuck into the ground. There were Egyptians, Syrians, Lebanese, and Yemenis.

After the fighting, to prevent looting, Adhamiya's residents formed a committee from armed volunteers. And life began to return to normal, with the tea houses across from the mosque open and the neighborhood's men gathering once more to chat and play dominoes.

I first visited Adhamiya on April 18, 2003, to see the triumphal return to Abu Hanifa of Dr. Ahmad Kubeisi, Iraq's most famous living Sunni theologian and a television preacher who had been based in the United Arab Emirates. The mosque was covered in banners. On top of its walls young men held ones proclaiming "One Iraq, one people," "No to America," "We reject foreign control," "Sunnis are Shias and Shias are Sunnis; we are all one," "All the believers are brothers," "Leave our country; we want peace." Demonstrators chanted, "No to America, no to Saddam. Our revolution is Islamic!" The angular, white-bearded Kubeisi had been a strident opponent of the American war, which he had warned would fail. Shortly after he was proved wrong, he made haste from his comfortable life in Dubai for Baghdad—he had supported Saddam against the alternatives but preferred life in exile. He was reportedly flown in from Amman on an official UAE private jet.

Baghdad was once occupied by the Mongols, Dr. Kubeisi said in his sermon, referring to the 1258 sacking of what was then the capital of the Muslim world. Now, new Mongols were occupying Baghdad, destroying its civilization and creating divisions between Sunnis and Shias. But, he said, the Shias and Sunnis were one, and they must remain united in rejecting foreign control. They were all Muslims and had all suffered together as one people under Saddam's rule; Saddam oppressed all Iraqis, and then he abandoned them. Iraqis had defended their country together against the Americans and the British. He thanked the Shia people of Basra for "defending their country against the foreign invaders." And he demanded an administration governed only by Iraqis and a council of Shia and Sunni scholars to oppose any government the Americans tried to establish.

"We fear that sectarianism will be exploited by our enemies," he said. "We will reconstruct our country." He mocked the "continuous lies" of the Americans. They had not come to get rid of Saddam's weapons of mass destruction; they were the enemies of mankind and had come for Iraq's oil. "Get out before we expel you," he said, addressing the occupiers.

The parallel with the fall of Baghdad to the Mongols in 1258 was ominous. It had shocked the Muslim world of the 13th century. Theologians such as Taqi al Din ibn Taimiya from what is today Allepo, Syria, blamed Muslims for failing to be

sufficiently devout. A wave of conservative Islam spread through the Muslim world. Often quoted by bin Ladin, Ibn Taimiya is the spiritual father of radical Sunnism, in particular Wahhabism and Salafism. Taimiya viewed offensive jihad as a duty of every Muslim and expressed extreme hatred for Shias. He even blamed Shias for the sacking of Baghdad. Perhaps as ominously, many Sunnis blamed Shias for the betrayal that led to the fall of Baghdad. The sultan's Shia adviser, Ibn al Alqami, was said to have sold out his people and helped the Mongols. The Saudi government has been distributing the works of Ibn Taimiya for free throughout the world since the 1950s. I found a shop selling magazines that promoted Ibn Taimiya's thoughts across from the Abu Hanifa mosque. Most recently Zarqawi and other Salafi jihadists have called Shias the "grandsons of Ibn al Alqami" for their collaboration with the Americans, the new Mongols.

But in 2003 Kubeisi's followers held joint demonstrations and joint prayers with radical Shia movements such as Muqtada's. Their message was "*maku farq*" there is no difference" between Sunnis and Shias: "We are all Muslims." But they were protesting too much, and behind the stentorian insistence that they were united was the fear that they were not, and the knowledge of what would happen should this secret become known.

On April 21, 2006, I returned to the mosque on the Friday following the clashes between local fighters and Iraqi security forces. The mosque's security men were so stunned to see a foreigner with a camera that they could come up with no objections to my presence, although as I filmed the exterior, a man walked by and cursed me. "May your eyes go blind," he said. Outside, Iraqi National Guardsmen stood watch. As an important Sunni symbol, Abu Hanifa was a likely target of Shia militias. And indeed there had been several attempts to hit it with mortar fire since the February 22 bombing in Samarra.

The clock tower damaged by American missiles three years earlier had been repaired, I noticed. Outside hung different banners than the ones I had seen in April 2003. Now they were white banners, commemorating martyrs from recent clashes. One gave condolences from the families of Adhamiya to the Sunni politician Saleh al Mutlaq for the murder of his kidnapped brother. Another honored a young man, Muhammad Fawad Latufi Annadawi. A black banner announced the death of a woman.

Loudspeakers echoed the call to prayer and the reading of the Quran. Locals made their way in. They stopped to be patted down by the mosque's militia. Inside, the mosque walls were intricately detailed, inlaid with geometric carvings, with stalactite vaulting in its dome. About 500 men prayed quietly. Ibrahim al Naama, an aged cleric wearing a white hat with a red top took out his glasses and stood up. As is traditional, he began by discussing Islam. His voice was raspy and high-pitched. "We are passing the birthday of the prophet Muhammad," he said, "so we want to talk about what the prophet Muhammad was like, and what his friends were like, so we can emulate them in these difficult days." Sheikh Naama made reference to the writings of Ibn Taimiya, and he thanked God that he was a Muslim and thanked him more that he was a Sunni. This kind of explicit sectarian pride would have been shocking a year before, but now it was commonplace. "We are passing through a very hard time, and we have enemies from inside and outside. We have the invasion and their hatred for Islam and Muslims." These were the worst days for Muslims in their history, he said.

Iraqis were looking forward to a new government, he said, because they hoped it could prevent the further shedding of Iraqi blood. “Therefore, any obstacle put in the way of forming the government will increase the bloodshed. Those who are causing it”—the Shias—“will be responsible before God. Who could have imagined that the blood of Iraqis would be the cheapest blood? This is how the occupiers want to divide the Iraqi people; this is how they want to plant sectarian division. This is how the occupier succeeds in its mission. Some people want to divide Iraq into regions so Israel can live in safety and security and to do the project that the occupier came for. But are we defeatist? No, we are not!” The Americans hated Iraqis’ resistance, he claimed, as did their “tails,” who came on American tanks. (These were the Shia parties, such as Dawa and SCIRI. Saddam had often called Israel and England the “tails of America.”) God was testing Iraq. “You have to succeed in this test and return to Iraq its sovereignty.”

There was more silent prayer after the sermon, and then each man turned to his left and to his right, still kneeling, and wished his neighbors peace and the mercy and blessings of God. They stood up and shook each other’s hands, walking out into the blinding sun, where neighbors stopped to greet each other and chat, smiling. From a bulletin board by the mosque’s door hung two pictures of middle-aged martyrs, both wearing Iraqi military uniforms. Men paused to read the signs. There were no longer radical books being sold outside the mosque, only a vegetable stand and a mendicant woman in black rocking back and forth with her baby. I went for lunch in Adhamiya’s famous kabob and shwarma restaurant. That afternoon I interviewed a doctor in the neighborhood. He paused every so often when the sound of firefights interrupted our conversation.

After I left Iraq the civil war continued, unaffected by massive security operations in Baghdad. As the summer heat peaked, so too did the violence. North of Baghdad, Shia villagers attacked Sunnis in retaliation for a bombing that killed at least 25. The Shia attackers were joined by Iraqi police and Americans. Following a massive bomb targeting Shias in Baghdad’s Sadr City, several mortars were fired at the Abu Hanifa mosque. Locals clashed with Iraqi security forces. The Sunni parliamentarian Taysir Najah al Mashhadani of the Islamic Party was kidnapped, allegedly, by Shia militias as her convoy drove through the Shaab neighborhood, prompting the main Sunni coalition to boycott the government. A reconciliation proposal offered by Prime Minister Maliki was rejected by Shias including Muqtada for being too soft on Baathists and Sunnis, and it was rejected by Sunnis including Harith al Dhari of the Association of Muslim Scholars for not going far enough with its offer of amnesty and inclusion.

Iraqis were breaking the final taboo: they were asking one another if they were Sunni or Shia. Sometimes this was done obliquely, one asking another about his name, or neighborhood, or tribe. Sometimes it was explicit. Officially, Iraqis tried to stress that they were nonsectarian. On one television channel a poetry contest featured poets chanting that Iraq was unified.

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In an attempt to limit Muqtada’s power and appease Sunnis, the Americans pressured Prime Minister Ibrahim al Jaafari to step down. He was replaced in May 2006 by Nuri al Maliki, his close friend, but American and British bullying cost them the few Shia allies they had and only convinced Iraq’s Shias that Americans were

playing a game of divide and conquer. The debate over Jaafari was framed as Kurds and Sunnis competing with Shias for power. It was one more sectarian battle, fought this time inside the Green Zone. But it was too late for that game because the Americans had long since lost the Sunnis and were continuing to alienate them with daily killings and their protecting with force the Shia-dominated order that they created in April 2003. This American blunder has only pushed Iraq closer to Iran and Syria.

Nuri al Maliki is ideologically at least as extreme as Jaafari, and as committed to preserving the new order. He has already threatened to use "maximum force" against "terrorists," the code word for Sunnis. Even if Maliki was committed to a national unity government and nonsectarian security forces, and even if the Americans tried to reverse the sectarian trend in Iraq, it is too late. Muqtada's supporters will not voluntarily relinquish control of the army or the police, and having fought the Americans in the past, many would be eager to fight them again. And who would replace them? There are no nonsectarian Iraqis left, no nonsectarian militia, and no physical space for those rejecting sectarianism. Even secular Sunnis and Shias are embracing sectarian militias because nobody else will protect them. Many even join these groups out of fear, since to refuse is to be disloyal, or perhaps a spy.

Although the Bush administration has criticized the Iraqi government for not disarming the militias—and this is certainly the most important problem facing Iraq, apart from the occupation—this is an untenable first step. The militias exist *because* there is no security in Iraq. And when the Bush administration criticizes the Iraqi government for being weak, they forget that they deliberately made it weak and dependant on their dictates. The American failure to provide security has led to the militias. The American sectarian approach has created the civil war. We saw Iraqis as Sunnis, Shias, Kurds. We designed a governing council based on a sectarian quota system and ignored Iraqis (not exiled politicians but real Iraqis) who warned us against it. We decided that the Sunnis were the bad guys and the Shias were the good guys. These problems were not timeless. In many ways they are new, and we are responsible for them. The tens of thousands of cleansed Iraqis, the relatives of those killed by the death squads, the sectarian supporters and militias firmly ensconced in the government and its ministries, the Shia refusal to relinquish their long-awaited control over Iraq, the Kurdish commitment to secession, the Sunni harboring of Salafi jihadists—all militate against anything but full-scale civil war.

When it comes, through the slow progression we have seen so far or through a cataclysmic incident like Sarajevo, or the 1975 Ayn ar-Rummanah bus attack, or another attack like the one on the Samarra shrine, or perhaps the assassination of an important Shia cleric or leader, Sunnis will be cleansed from Baghdad. And the Shias will go to war against Sunnis. The Kurds, having waited for this opportunity, will secede and tell the world they tried the federalist route in good faith but those crazy Arabs down south keep killing each other. Who would want to belong to a country like that?

The Arab world had always been dominated by Sunnis, who make up 85 percent of the world's Muslims. The new Shia Iraq is overturning the Ottoman and colonialist legacies that entrenched Sunnis. Along with Hizbullah's victory against Israel this summer, this will threaten the status quo throughout the Arab world. In Syria, already seen as dominated by the Shia-like Alawi minority that is hated by the Sunni majority, the Iranians recently built a mosque commemorating a battle that Imam Ali

lost. The unpopular Sunni regimes of Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, seeing their power wane, can no longer be anti-American or anti-Israeli, having sold out on those issues by supporting the Americans and practically supporting Israel against Hizbullah in July. Instead, they are playing the sectarian card to regain the respect they lost from their population and galvanize them against a new threat, the Shias. Most recently, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak accused Shias of being fifth-columnists, loyal to Iran. Egypt does not recognize Shiism as Islam. In Lebanon, during the demonstrations that followed the publication of the Danish cartoons, Sunni clerics led demonstrations condemning Shias and supporting Zarqawi, whom one cleric called "my sheikh, my emir," perhaps hoping they could appropriate the so-called "sheikh of the slaughterers" as their own to gain more leverage against the powerful Hizbullah. More ominously, in April 2006 Hizbullah accused nine men who were charged in an attempted assassination of Hizbullah's general secretaries of being motivated by a desire to avenge killings of Sunnis in Iraq. In his last statement, Zarqawi specifically condemned Lebanese Hizbullah, making arguments from a Lebanese-Sunni point of view. The effects of Hizbullah's victory remain to be seen, but they further discredit the unpopular Sunni dictatorships who criticized Hizbullah but who were always impotent to stand up to the Americans or Israelis despite their large armies and wealth. Hizbullah's leader, Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, became the most popular leader in the Arab world. But Iraq was pulling in a different direction, for Muqtada was no Hassan Nasrallah.

If Iraq's Sunnis are targeted on a larger scale the concept of the Iraqi nation-state will cease to be relevant. Salafi jihadis will pour in to fight the hated Shias. Shias will attempt to push Sunnis out of Iraq, for until they can control the key highways in the Anbar leading to Syria and Jordan, their economy will be threatened. Sunnis throughout the region will not tolerate the Shias killing Sunnis or a Shia Iraq. Iraq's Sunni tribes extend into Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere. Their tribal kinsmen will come to their aid, sending reinforcements of men and materiel across the porous borders. Sunni retaliation against Shias or Alawis in Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, and even Afghanistan could provoke sectarian clashes throughout the Muslim world. Kurdish independence could provoke Turkish intervention. At minimum it will push the Turks closer to the Iranians and Syrians, who will have the same concerns of Kurdish irredentism. At some point Iran will intervene, and if it threatens the waters of the Persian Gulf the entire world's economy will be threatened. Iraq's civil war will become a regional war.

Rather than remaking the Middle East, the Iraq war has destabilized it. Sunnis throughout the region who already have so many reasons to hate the United States—Abu Ghraib, the Haditha massacre, the rape and murder of an Iraqi girl, Guantánamo—would now have one more, for the Americans would have handed Iraq over to the Shias. We are seeing the death throes, not the birth pangs, of a new Middle East.

The Bush administration persists in its assertions of progress and clings to the idea that something called victory is possible. What victory? By every measure, life is worse for the Iraqis (leaving aside the Kurds, who don't want to be Iraqis anyway). They are dying by the dozens or the hundreds every day—nobody even knows how many, since the Anbar province and much of the south, and even much of Baghdad, are black holes, with no information coming out. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have died violently since the war began, probably eclipsing the number of Saddam's victims. The ministry of health was recently ordered again not to disclose the number

of casualties. The United Nations' torture expert has stated that torture in Iraq is now worse than it was under Saddam. Over 1.5 million Iraqis have fled their country, to Jordan, Syria, and Egypt, and in late 2006 one European official in Syria estimated that up to 3,000 Iraqis a day were fleeing into that country.

SCIRI's calls for a Shia superstate have grown more strident, and Sunnis have made their own demands. Already in March 2006 Harith al Dhari reminded the rest of Iraqis that Sunnis had means of their own available: just as there was oil in the south, there was water in the center and the north, and it could be held off until "the barrel of water in the south was worth a barrel of oil," or it could flood the south and drown it. More recently, maps have been circulating on Sunni Iraqi Web sites showing an enlarged Anbar province including Baghdad, Mosul, and the so-called Sunni Triangle in a large Sunni superstate. Iraqi comedians joke about different neighborhoods of Baghdad becoming their own republics. Iraq is dying, falling apart.

America did this to Iraq. We divided Iraqis. We set them at war with each other. The least we can do is stop killing them and leave Iraq.

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The death of Zarqawi last June was not the long-awaited turning point. A new Zarqawi has already emerged, this time from among the Shias. In the summer of 2006 rumors began spreading through Baghdad of a shadowy killer known as Abu Dira, a nickname meaning "the armor bearer." In the Shia uprisings of 2004 he was said to have held off the Americans in southern Sadr City. He earned his name either by destroying American armored vehicles or by killing an American soldier and stealing his body armor, which (some say) he wears at all times. Another story claims that he took his name out of irony: a Sunni prison guard under Saddam called Abu Dira was notorious for his brutality. Hailed by Shias as a hero, he is known by Sunnis as the "Shia Zarqawi" and the "Rusafa Butcher," a reference to the primarily Shia eastern half of Baghdad. All information about this man is based on rumor, but he is said to be in his 30s and called either Salim or Ismail. It is said that he lives in Sadr City but was born in the southern Shia town of Amara. Some say that he is a member of the Mahdi Army and commands hundreds of fighters, but others say that he is a renegade militiaman, out of Muqtada's control. Some say he was a bodyguard in the former regime but later fled to Iran. Or that he was a guard and torturer in one of Saddam's prisons. One Web site claims that he controlled the ministry of the interior's Falcon Brigade, which kidnapped Sunnis from Baghdad's Zafraniya district. Some say that every time there is an attack on Shias he counts the dead and kills an equal number of Sunnis. Others say he kills a greater number of Sunnis. He is said to kill dozens of Sunnis every day in a remote part of Sadr City by a dam, and he is said to have threatened to fill the craters left from car bombs in Sadr City with the bodies of Sunnis.

Some Sunni sources believe he is obeying a fatwa issued by Ayatollah Kadhim al Hairi in Iran, who was Muqtada's supporter once. One Sunni Web site claims that he took an oath to slaughter a camel and feed the poor people of Sadr City after killing the Sunni politician Adnan al Duleimi. A popular radical-Sunni line is, "Our dead are in paradise and your dead are in Hell." It is said that Abu Dira tells Sunnis, "Our dead are in paradise and your dead are in Sada," a reference to a remote area near Sadr City where Sunni corpses often turn up. Muqtada and the Mahdi Army have denied that Abu Dira even exists, claiming that he was invented by Sunnis as a way of falsely

accusing Shias of crimes. In July, Americans targeted the Sadr City funeral of someone they believed was one of Abu Dira's relatives, but the operation failed to lead to an arrest.

Whether Abu Dira exists or not, the image of a raging, lone killer is prophetic at a time when Muqtada's control over his militia is uncertain. But this much is clear: the Mahdi Army is the police. It holds all the force of state power.

And the once confident and aggressive Sunnis now see the state as their enemy. They are very afraid. All Iraqis are. ■

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Originally published in the November/December 2006 issue of *Boston Review*.