

# Mahdi Army

## AT A GLANCE

Overview  
Organization  
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Maps

## HOW TO CITE

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## SUMMARY

**Formed:** April 2003

**Disbanded:** Active

**First Attack:** April 4, 2004: Members of the Mahdi Army carried out simultaneous attacks in Baghdad, Najaf, Kufa, and Amara, targeting American, Spanish, Salvadoran, and Iraqi coalition forces. Most of the casualties resulted from a clash between Mahdi Army militiamen and the Spanish garrison outside Najaf (35 killed, 200+ civilians, Mahdi Army fighters, and coalition troops wounded).<sup>1</sup>

**Last Attack:** November 27, 2020: Members of Saraya al-Salam armed with light weapons and petrol bombs attacked and cleared a protest camp in Nasiriyah’s Haboubi Square (3+ killed, dozens wounded).<sup>2</sup>

## OVERVIEW

The Mahdi Army, also known as the Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM), is a militia led by Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. The group was founded in 2003 and was considered one of the most dangerous groups in Iraq until March 2008. During this time, Iraqi Security Forces and coalition troops launched a major offensive against the Mahdi Army in Basra, which significantly hampered the group’s capabilities. However, after signing a ceasefire agreement with the coalition forces in 2008, Sadr reoriented the Mahdi Army to focus on social services provision for the Shiite community. In 2010, Sadr again redirected the focus of many members of the Mahdi Army, this time to the upcoming parliamentary elections, before stepping out of the public eye in 2013. Then, in June 2014, he reemerged to revive the Mahdi Army to join the fight against the Islamic State, changing its name to Saraya as-Salam (“the Peace Brigades”). The Mahdi Army/Saraya al-Salam has been active in Iraqi politics in recent years under Sadr’s guidance. Sairoon, the Mahdi Army’s current political wing, won the most seats of any political bloc in the 2018 Iraqi parliamentary elections.

## **NARRATIVE SUMMARY**

The Mahdi Army, also known as Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM), was formed by Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr in June 2003 in response to the U.S. invasion of Iraq.<sup>3</sup> Muqtada al-Sadr is the son of Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr, who, in the 1980s, founded the Sadrist Movement – a vehemently nationalist political movement popular among Iraq’s Shiite lower classes. Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr was assassinated in 1999, presumably on the Ba’athist regime’s orders due to his growing stature among the Iraqi Shia. While Muqtada al-Sadr succeeded his late father as the political and spiritual leader of the Sadrists, he also assumed his father’s mantle as one of the most influential Shiite clerics in Iraq.<sup>4</sup> Following the U.S. invasion in 2003, Sadr called upon the Sadrists to join his new militia known as the Mahdi Army, whose primary goal was the expulsion of the U.S.-led coalition from Iraq.<sup>5</sup> Some of the initial three hundred fighters the group recruited consisted of Kuwaiti and Saudi Shia who, together with their Iraqi counterparts, Sadr sent to IRGC-operated camps in Iran in 2005 for training under Arabic-speaking Hezbollah operative Ali Mussa Daqduq.<sup>6</sup> While in Iran, Mahdi Army fighters reportedly received four to six weeks of training in the use of mortars, rockets, sniper tactics, intelligence gathering, kidnapping operations, and IEDs.<sup>7</sup>

The Mahdi Army remained relatively unknown until April 2004, when its fighters clashed with American troops in the southern Iraqi city of Najaf, a holy city in Shiite Islam and the seat of Iraqi Shiite political power.<sup>8</sup> During the early years of the occupation, the Mahdi Army took control of Kut, Najaf, and parts of Basra before agreeing to a ceasefire with coalition forces in May 2004.<sup>9</sup> However, by August, the Mahdi Army once again started targeting coalition forces.<sup>10</sup> Over subsequent years, the group came to be viewed in many areas of Iraq as more dangerous than Al Qaeda in Iraq and as second only to coalition forces in terms of military strength.<sup>11</sup>

Although the Mahdi Army continued to focus its efforts on expelling U.S. troops from Iraq, Sadr also backed several candidates in the 2005 Iraqi parliamentary elections. In addition, Sadr instructed the elected Sadrists to join the Iraqi Union Alliance coalition, which included future Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki’s Da’wa Party and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). The Sadrists’ participation was crucial to the coalition’s success and ultimately resulted in Nouri al-Maliki’s assumption of the Iraqi premiership.<sup>12</sup> After that, however, Sadr and Maliki were often at odds; by 2006, Sadr and the Mahdi Army openly opposed the Iraqi government.<sup>13</sup>

Between 2004 to 2007, observers began to accuse the Mahdi Army of stoking sectarian violence.<sup>14</sup> Sadr consistently refuted charges of running “death squads” that targeted Sunni civilians; however, the Mahdi Army, or at least rogue elements within it, reportedly targeted Sunni civilians between 2006-2007.<sup>15</sup> Following the 2006 and 2007 bombing of the Golden Mosque in Samarra, the Shiite community rallied around Sadr and the Mahdi Army, who staged large protests across Iraq to decry the occupation and publicly blame the embattled Maliki government for Iraq’s sectarian violence.<sup>16</sup> The Golden Mosque bombing and several other bombings against Shiite holy sites spurred growth in the Mahdi Army’s popularity, boosting recruitment.<sup>17</sup>

Despite an increase in popularity following the Golden Mosque bombings, the group's involvement in a series of bloody skirmishes in early 2007 tarnished the Mahdi Army's reputation – even among its Shiite supporters – and eventually forced Sadr to reorient the group. This turning point occurred in August 2007, when the Mahdi Army was blamed for a violent clash in Karbala with the Badr Organization, another Shiite militia, that killed 50 Shiite pilgrims.<sup>18</sup> In light of the group's existing reputation as an instigator of sectarian violence, Sadr ordered his supporters to disarm.<sup>19</sup> However, not all Mahdi Army members followed Sadr's order, and individual units began to operate independently.<sup>20</sup> As a result, elements of the Mahdi Army split into the “noble” Mahdi Army and the “rogue” Mahdi Army. While the former followed Sadr's ceasefire command and continued to obey his orders, the rogue Mahdi Army continued to fight despite Sadr's orders. Some of these rogue elements became known as the “Secret Cells” or “Special Groups.”<sup>21</sup>

In late 2007 or early 2008, Sadr went into self-imposed exile in Qom, Iran. There, he resumed his clerical studies, though he continued to direct the Mahdi Army from Iran.<sup>22</sup> On Sadr's orders, the group returned to military action in February 2008. Its reemergence provoked a massive joint offensive between Iraqi and coalition forces, known as Operation Charge of the Knights, against Mahdi Army elements in Basra on March 26, 2008. Over 30,000 Iraqi Security Force troops were involved in the operation, with over 600 civilians and combatants killed within the first few days of hostilities. Sadr finally agreed to an Iranian-brokered ceasefire agreement on March 31, 2008, by which time Iraqi and coalition forces had killed over 2,000 Mahdi Army fighters.<sup>23</sup>

Following the 2008 ceasefire, Sadr reorganized the Mahdi Army into two distinct sub-groups: the non-violent Mumahidoon, which focused on providing social services to Shiite communities and received the majority of the Mahdi Army's reassigned members; and the Promised Day Brigades (PDB), which served as a small, elite armed group under Sadr's direct command.<sup>24</sup> The Mumahidoon provided a wide range of services to Shiite communities in and around Baghdad and throughout Southern Iraq, including Koran lessons, recreational soccer teams, neighborhood reconstruction, and trash collection.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, members of Mumahidoon remained willing to take up arms again should Sadr order them to do so.<sup>26</sup> Though Sadr had prohibited the PDB from attacking Iraqi citizens or Iraqi troops, the group reportedly continued to target U.S. forces through 2011. Credible information on the PDB's attacks against American forces is sparse; what is clear, however, is that the frequency of the attacks increased in the lead up to the U.S. withdrawal in 2011.<sup>27</sup>

In preparation for the 2010 national elections, Sadr shifted the Mahdi Army's focus once again towards politics. He entered Mumahidoon into the Iraqi National Alliance bloc (INA) for the 2010 parliamentary elections from his residence in Iran.<sup>28</sup> In doing so, Sadr debilitated Mumahidoon's social service provision capabilities. The elections were a relative success for the Sadrists: as part of the INA bloc, the Sadrists won 40 out of 325 seats in the Iraqi parliament.<sup>29</sup> The Sadrists performed particularly well in Baghdad and won seats in Babil, Basra, Dhi-Qar, Diyala, Karbala, Maysan, Najaf, Qadisiyyah, and Wasit provinces.<sup>30</sup> At Iran's urging, Sadr and the INA agreed to join Maliki's coalition, even though they had violently opposed him from 2006-2008.<sup>31</sup> The party's support for Maliki ensured him a second term as Prime Minister, and the Sadrists received 8 out of the 32 cabinet seats in the new government.<sup>32</sup>

Sadr returned to Iraq in January 2011. With a newfound stake in the Maliki regime, he prohibited his followers from joining anti-government protests that began in February 2011.<sup>33</sup> However, Sadr's attitude toward Maliki had changed by September 2011, as Sadr grew frustrated with what he viewed as divisive policies and tyrannical tendencies on Maliki's part. Seeking to capitalize off of the building anti-Maliki climate in Iraq, Sadr began holding small anti-Maliki rallies. By December 2011, Sadr had reverted to openly opposing the Maliki government and called for new elections.<sup>34</sup> On August 6, 2013, days after violent clashes between members of the Mahdi Army and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Sadr announced that he would retire from political activity and dismantle the Mahdi Army, stating that he no longer wished "to be part of a conspiracy against the Iraqi people" through continued militancy.<sup>35</sup> Despite the Mahdi Army's official demobilization, its members continued to follow Sadr, and the Sadrist movement remained prominent in Iraqi politics.<sup>36</sup>

In June 2014, Sadr reversed his decision to dissolve the Mahdi Army. After the fall of Mosul to the Islamic State (IS), Sadr called upon his supporters once again and reformed the Mahdi Army under a new name: Saraya al-Salam (the Peace Brigades).<sup>37</sup> Saraya al-Salam made its first public appearance on June 22, 2014, when hundreds of former Mahdi Army fighters outfitted in fatigues and brandishing assault rifles paraded down the streets of Sadr City.<sup>38</sup> At its inception, Saraya al-Salam had two main aims: 1) ensuring the defeat of IS; and 2) pursuing the resignation of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.<sup>39</sup> The latter of these goals was accomplished in the summer of 2014 when Maliki was replaced as Prime Minister by Haider al-Abadi, to whom Sadr quickly pledged his support.

Following Abadi's ascension to power, Saraya al-Salam worked closely with Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), aiding in the recapture of much of the Jurf al-Sakhar region. Additionally, it secured the city of Samarra in Salah ad-Din province against an IS offensive in the winter of 2014-2015.<sup>40</sup> In addition to its cooperation with the ISF, Saraya al-Salam also joined the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) – a Shiite-led, semi-statal coalition of militias representing Iraq's multitude of religious and ethnic identities – alongside several other well-established Shiite militias to fight IS.<sup>41</sup> After several incidents wherein Shiite militias massacred Sunni civilians in February 2015, Sadr withdrew Saraya al-Salam from the front lines. There was no evidence, however, that Saraya al-Salam participated in the sectarian killings. In March 2015, Sadr deployed Saraya al-Salam to the front lines to aid government soldiers in their offensive to retake Tikrit from IS.<sup>42</sup>

Although Saraya al-Salam allied itself with the Iraqi Government and thus indirectly cooperated with the United States in the fight against IS, relations between Saraya al-Salam and U.S. forces remained tense due to Sadr's strong advocacy for Iraqi sovereignty and stance against interference from the United States in Iraqi affairs.<sup>43</sup> In September 2014, Sadr ordered Saraya al-Salam to withdraw from the front lines if the United States continued to intervene in the conflict.<sup>44</sup> Although the United States ignored Sadr's warning, Saraya al-Salam remained at the front.<sup>45</sup> In May 2015, Sadr again threatened the United States, warning that Saraya al-Salam would attack U.S. personnel inside Iraq if the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill authorizing direct aid to the Kurdish Peshmerga. The bill passed, but there were no reports of attacks on U.S. forces by Saraya al-Salam.<sup>46</sup>

In January 2016, Sadr reentered Iraqi politics. His demands to then-Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to reform his government were threefold: 1) that the cabinet be comprised of skilled technocrats rather than career politicians; 2) that the government absorb the Shiite militias – including Saraya al-Salam – into the regular Iraqi Army; and 3) that the government “allocate a share for each Iraqi citizen from the oil revenues” collected by the Iraqi state.<sup>47</sup> Sadr gave Abadi a 45-day deadline to meet these demands, threatening to order his supporters to storm the Green Zone, a four-mile area in central Baghdad that includes Iraqi government buildings, the U.S. Embassy, and several other foreign diplomatic complexes if Abadi did not meet his demands. To underscore his threat, hundreds of thousands of Sadr’s supporters set up a sprawling protest camp just outside the fortified walls of the Green Zone.<sup>48</sup> When the deadline passed in early March 2016, Sadr himself walked into the Green Zone and declared that he was ready to sacrifice his life for the people’s demands.<sup>49</sup> He proceeded to set up a protest tent in the middle of the Green Zone, where he remained for five days until Prime Minister Abadi announced that he had formed a new cabinet. Then, deeming his requests to have been sufficiently met, Sadr dispersed the protest camp.<sup>50</sup>

Since the end of his protest, Sadr and the Peace Brigades have engaged in various military and political activities. In May 2016, Sadr announced that Saraya al-Salam was preparing to participate in an offensive to retake Mosul from the Islamic State and that his militias would target any U.S. forces participating in the offensive. It is unclear if Sadr's militias subsequently attacked U.S. forces.<sup>51</sup> In October 2016, Sadr attended a reconciliation meeting with the leaders of the Badr Organization, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Kata'ib Hezbollah to create a unified Shiite political alliance ahead of Iraq's parliamentary elections; however, little resulted from their meeting.<sup>52</sup> In May 2018, Sadr’s political alliance between the Sadrist Movement and Iraq’s Communist Party, called the Sairoon Alliance, won the most seats out of any coalition in the Iraqi parliamentary elections, winning 54 of the 329 seats in Parliament. After striking an alliance with PM Abadi’s Nasr coalition, Sairoon became the leading bloc within the parliamentary coalition backing PM-designate Adel ‘Abd al-Mahdi’s government.<sup>53</sup>

The Mahdi Army/Saraya al-Salam has played a volatile role in Iraq’s recent mass protests. As protests erupted across the country in October 2019, members of Saraya al-Salam – easily distinguished by their signature blue baseball caps – stood in solidarity with anti-government protesters and protected them from police and militia reprisals.<sup>54</sup> However, with the shift of the protest movement’s anger toward the PMF, Saraya al-Salam quickly withdrew support from the protest movement; Muqtada al-Sadr himself called on his supporters to vacate protest camps and to punish “anyone who impedes the return to work and normal daily life.”<sup>55</sup> From this point, Saraya al-Salam has sought to suppress Iraq’s protest movement, frequently using military-grade stun grenades, tear gas, and even live munition to brutally disperse protesters, causing an untold number of casualties.<sup>56</sup>

## **ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE**

### **A. LEADERSHIP**

**Muqtada al-Sadr** (June 2003 to Present): Muqtada al-Sadr is an influential Shiite cleric and the founder of the Mahdi Army. He has led the Mahdi Army since its formation in June 2003 and has been the architect of the group's many transformations. He is also the leader of the Sadrist political movement and enjoys considerable personal support among Iraq's Shiite lower classes.<sup>57</sup> His tenure has seen significant political successes for the Sadrists, with the Sairoon political alliance winning the most seats in Iraq's 2018 parliamentary elections.<sup>58</sup> Allies and observers alike have described Muqtada al-Sadr as "the most powerful man in Iraq."<sup>59</sup>

**Hazim al-Araji** (Unknown to Present): Araji is a Sadrist cleric and a senior aide to Muqtada al-Sadr. Sadr appointed him to be one of the leaders of the Mumahidoon when it was created in 2008.<sup>60</sup> Araji also controls the Kadhimiyah shrine, a major Shiite shrine in northern Baghdad that generates a significant amount of revenue via donations from pilgrims.<sup>61</sup>

## B. NAME CHANGES

As the mission of the Mahdi Army has evolved over the last decade, the group took on a series of different names. The Mahdi Army is also frequently referred to by its Arabic name, Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM). While the names listed below represent the official name changes of the group as stated by its leadership, it has also been known as the Mahdi Army/JAM throughout its existence.<sup>62</sup>

- June 2003: The Mahdi Army. Muqtada al-Sadr formed the Mahdi Army in June 2003 in response to the U.S. invasion of Iraq.
- 2008: The Mumahidoon. Following the 2008 ceasefire with the Iraqi government, Sadr completely rebranded a large segment of his organization as the Mumahidoon, or "the Ones who Pave the Path," and focused on social service provision.<sup>63</sup>
- 2008: The Promised Day Brigades. When Sadr created the Mumahidoon, he also retained a small group of fighters for an elite "special forces" unit named the Promised Day Brigades.<sup>64</sup>
- June 2014: Saraya al-Salam (the Peace Brigades). When Sadr restarted the Mahdi Army in 2014 to fight IS, he renamed the group the Peace Companies, often translated in English as the Peace Brigades.<sup>65</sup> The name change was likely an attempt to distance the revived Mahdi Army from the tarnished reputation it had garnered during the bloody sectarian conflict in 2006-2007.<sup>66</sup>

## C. SIZE ESTIMATES

- April 2003: 300 (Long War Journal)<sup>67</sup>
- January 2004: 500-1000 trained fighters, 5,000-6,000 additional (GlobalSecurity.org)<sup>68</sup>
- April 2004: 3000 (FDCH Regulatory Intelligence Database)<sup>69</sup>
- June 2004: 6000-10000 (GlobalSecurity.org)<sup>70</sup>
- July 2006: 10,000 (Associated Press)<sup>71</sup>
- December 2006: 60,000 (BBC News)<sup>72</sup>
- January 2007: 60,000 (Council on Foreign Relations)<sup>73</sup>

- August 2008: 15,000 (United Press International)<sup>74</sup>
- June 2014: 10,000 (Al Jazeera)<sup>75</sup>
- June 2014: 50,000 (The Telegraph)<sup>76</sup>
- June 2014: 20,000 (Al Alam)<sup>77</sup>
- December 2017: 18,000 (Wilson Center)<sup>78</sup>
- April 2018: 18,000 (Iraqi Ministry of Justice)<sup>79</sup>

#### D. RESOURCES

Although some of the Mahdi Army's initial recruits came from Shiite communities in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the vast majority of the Mahdi Army's members are Iraqi.<sup>80</sup> Initially, the group successfully attracted young, unemployed men who saw no benefit from the American "liberation" and were less secure than before the 2003 invasion.<sup>81</sup> The Mahdi Army also experienced a significant boost to their recruitment after the bombing of the Golden Mosque in Samarra in February 2006, having used the incident to portray themselves as the defenders of the Shiite faith in Iraq.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, the group has used its personal and historical connections to Ayatollah Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr, one of Iraq's preeminent Shiite scholars before his death in 1999, to garner donations from the Sadr's' followers.<sup>83</sup> However, the Mahdi Army/Saraya al-Salam likely decreased their use of this tactic after the group joined the PMF. As a member of the PMF, the Mahdi Army has access to the Defense Ministry's budgetary allocations for the PMF: Iraq's 2021 federal budget included an allocation of roughly \$2.4 billion for the PMF – nearly 50% more than was allocated to the PMF in the previous 2019 budget.<sup>84</sup>

Although Sadr has denied receiving Iranian aid, U.S. intelligence suspects that the Iranian Quds Force has supplied the Mahdi Army with weapons and financing.<sup>85</sup> At the very least, Sadr was able to run Mahdi Army operations with Iran's tacit consent during his residence at the Qom seminary from 2008-2011.<sup>86</sup> Additionally, the Mahdi Army has received significant funding from individual Iranian patrons, most notably Grand Ayatollah Kazem Hussein Haeri, one of Sadr's mentors.

The Mahdi Army has also used extortion, car theft, weapons trafficking, the sale of armed protection to businesses, and kidnapping to finance its operations.<sup>87</sup> In the past, the Mahdi Army was involved in everything from the housing market (i.e., collecting rent from squatters) to electric power distribution in areas where the group had a strong presence (i.e., turning power on and off in various sectors).<sup>88</sup> They used the revenue from these practices to build a sophisticated weapons arsenal: in the two weeks following the 2008 ceasefire, the Iraqi Army found nearly 100 weapon caches belonging to the Mahdi Army.<sup>89</sup> Equipment found included "deadly explosively formed projectile roadside bombs, explosives, mortars, land mines, rockets, anti-aircraft rockets, rocket-propelled grenades, hand grenades, mortar tubes, rocket launchers, AK-47s, sniper rifles, ammunition, and other bomb-making materials and weapons."<sup>90</sup> In addition, there were 251 devices classified as either medium or heavy weaponry.<sup>91</sup>

#### E. GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATIONS

**Disclaimer:** This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

The Mahdi Army has operated entirely within Iraq, mostly in Shiite-majority districts within Baghdad and southern Iraq.<sup>92</sup> Its historic strongholds include Sadr City, a poverty-ridden Shiite-majority neighborhood in northeastern Baghdad named for Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr, as well as the Shiite-majority cities of Najaf and Basra. The Mahdi Army has also been active in Karbala, one of the holiest cities in Shia Islam. To thwart suicide bombings against Shiite civilians, Mahdi Army fighters provided security to pilgrims visiting Karbala to commemorate the holiday of Nurf Sha'aban in 2007.<sup>93</sup> With its re-formation in 2014, Saraya al-Salam expanded its operations further to the west and north of the country to combat the Islamic State (IS). Specifically, the group has fought IS in Jurf al-Sakhar in Babil province and Samarra in Salah ad-Din province.<sup>94</sup> In addition, an affiliate of Saraya al-Salam reportedly had a significant security presence in the western Anbar desert near the Syrian border.<sup>95</sup> In May 2016, Sadr announced that Saraya al-Salam would participate in the offensive to retake Mosul from IS.<sup>96</sup> Since 2020, most of Saraya al-Salam's military deployments have been to central Salah ad-Din province, where the group is active alongside other militia groups, such as Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Kata'ib Imam Ali, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and the Badr Organization.<sup>97</sup> Throughout Iraq's most recent protest movement, the group maintained a highly visible and, at times, active presence in many cities in central and southern Iraq, including Baghdad, Najaf, Karbala, and Nasiriyah.<sup>98</sup>

## STRATEGY

### A. IDEOLOGY & GOALS

#### *Ideology*

The Mahdi Army, following its founder Muqtada al-Sadr's theological background, is a Twelver Shiite organization. In Islamic theology, the Mahdi (also known as the Imam al-Mahdi) is an apocalyptic figure who will assist Christ in preparing the world for the Yawm al-Qiyamah, or Judgment Day.<sup>99</sup> While Sunnis and other Shiite traditions believe that the Mahdi has yet to arrive, Twelver Shia believe that the Mahdi is a historical figure that lived on earth before disappearing out of concern for His safety in 873 CE.<sup>100</sup> According to Twelver theology, the Twelfth Imam, Muhammad al-Mahdi, was the Mahdi for whom Muslims wait to reappear to herald the end of days.<sup>101</sup> Despite its deeply-rooted Shiite identity, the group differs ideologically from other Shiite groups (AAH, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Badr, etc.) that espouse a Khomeinist ideology – one in line with Iran's state theology and seeks to establish absolute clerical rule within Iraq. Instead, Sadr and the Mahdi Army occupy a third position between the Iranian theocrats and the Iraqi clerical establishment, which generally supports political quietism. Though they certainly espouse profess an activist theology, Sadr and the Mahdi Army stop short of advocating for the Iranian model of clerical governance.<sup>102</sup>

In addition to its Shiite identity, the Mahdi Army is vehemently nationalist and populist, rejecting foreign influence in Iraq from an Arabist and Islamist perspective and decrying the corruptive actions of Iraq's post-2003 political elite.<sup>103</sup> It was formed mainly as a response to the U.S. occupation of Iraq in 2003 and fought against coalition forces until their withdrawal from Iraq in 2011.<sup>104</sup>

#### *Goals*

The Mahdi Army's goals have evolved as the political landscape of Iraq has shifted over the past decade. The organization's original goal was the expulsion of coalition troops from Iraq.<sup>105</sup>



However, after its 2008 ceasefire with the coalition forces and Iraqi government, Sadr created the Mumahidoon and reoriented the group towards social service provision.<sup>106</sup> Ahead of the 2010 elections, Sadr again redefined the group's mission, focusing its efforts on building mainstream political support for his nationalist Shiite agenda.<sup>107</sup> Despite winning a prominent place in the Maliki Government in 2010, Sadr's disillusionment with the Maliki government grew throughout 2011. Eventually, Sadr called for new elections and Maliki's resignation.<sup>108</sup> With the rise of IS and Maliki's resignation in 2014, the Mahdi Army again switched its aim to defeating IS.<sup>109</sup> In addition to its military activities, Sadr and his Mahdi Army have also pivoted to adopt a more prominent role in Iraqi politics, employing nationalist and populist rhetoric to ride popular discontentment with government performance to achieve a significant degree of political power in Iraq.

## **B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES**

The Mahdi Army has roots in the Sadrist movement, a nationalist Shiite political movement started by Muqtada Sadr's father, Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr, during the rule of Saddam Hussein.<sup>110</sup> Muqtada al-Sadr succeeded his father as the movement's leader following Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr's assassination in 1999, and the Sadrists have been closely tied to the Mahdi Army since its formation in 2003.<sup>111</sup> Despite his previous opposition to Shiite parties such as Nouri al-Maliki's Da'wa Party and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), Sadr and his Iraqi National Alliance party (INA) chose to join these groups to form the United Iraqi Alliance for the 2005 elections.<sup>112</sup> The Sadrists' support was crucial to the coalition's victory in the election.<sup>113</sup> In return for backing Nouri al-Maliki in the coalition, the Sadrists received several influential positions in the cabinet, including the ministers for transport, health, agriculture, and tourism and antiquities.<sup>114</sup>

However, tensions between the Maliki Government and Sadr quickly arose, culminating in the joint-Iraqi – coalition forces' 2008 offensive against the Mahdi Army in Basra. By this time, Sadr had already fled to Iran, where he reorganized the Mahdi Army initially into a group to provide social services and eventually into a political movement to contest the upcoming 2010 parliamentary elections.<sup>115</sup> To complete this reorganization, Sadr reassigned many Mahdi Army members to political roles in INA, the main Sadrist party in the 2010 elections.<sup>116</sup> As a result, INA won 40 out of the 325 seats in the Iraqi parliament, making it a veritable kingmaker.<sup>117</sup> Sadr considered supporting Maliki's opposition in parliament; however, at Iran's urging, he allied with Maliki. With the Sadrists' support, Maliki secured the premiership; for their part, the Sadrists earned 8 of the 32 cabinet seats.<sup>118</sup> However, by 2011, Sadr once again began to oppose Maliki and called for the dissolution of the parliament and new elections.<sup>119</sup>

On August 6, 2013, Sadr surprised many when he announced that he was retiring from political activity.<sup>120</sup> Despite his official disbandment of the Mahdi Army, the Sadrists continued to play a prominent role in the government and signaled their readiness to rearm if Sadr called upon them to do so. Following IS's conquest of Mosul in June 2014, Sadr returned from retirement and announced the remobilization of the Mahdi Army, which he renamed as Saraya al-Salam (the Peace Brigades).<sup>121</sup>

In January 2016, Sadr reentered Iraqi politics, issuing demands to Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to reform his government. These demands included: 1) that the cabinet be comprised of

skilled technocrats rather than career politicians; 2) that the government absorb the Shiite militias – including Saraya al-Salam - into the Iraqi Army; and 3) that it “allocate a share for each Iraqi citizen from the oil revenues” collected by the Iraqi state oil market company.<sup>122</sup> Sadr gave Abadi a 45-day deadline to meet these demands, after which time Sadr threatened to order his supporters to storm the Green Zone, a four-mile area in central Baghdad that includes Iraqi government buildings, the U.S. Embassy, and several other foreign diplomatic installations. The deadline passed in early March 2016, and Sadr joined the large protest organized by his supporters to pressure Prime Minister Abadi. Within days, Abadi announced that he had formed a new cabinet. Deeming his requests to have been sufficiently met, Sadr dispersed the protesters.<sup>123</sup>

Since then, Sadr has continued to engage in political activity. In October 2016, Sadr attended a reconciliation meeting with the leaders of the Badr Organization, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Kata'ib Hezbollah to create a unified Shiite political alliance ahead of Iraq's parliamentary elections; this meeting yielded little, given continued political and military tensions between the groups (see “Relationships with Other Groups” section for detail on tensions).<sup>124</sup> In 2018, Sadr formed a new political bloc after striking an alliance between the Sadrist Movement and Iraq's Communist Party. The new bloc, called the Sairoon Alliance, sought three major reforms to Iraqi governance: ending the practice of awarding ministries on sectarian quotas (known as *mukhassasa*), fighting corruption, and allowing independent technocrats to manage key government agencies.<sup>125</sup> The bloc employed nationalist and populist rhetoric to ride popular discontentment with government performance, achieving a significant degree of power as a result. Sairoon won 54 of 329 seats in parliament in Iraq's May 2018 parliamentary elections – the most seats out of any coalition in parliament.<sup>126</sup> Sairoon later struck an alliance with Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's Nasr Coalition and several smaller parties, securing a majority in parliament and forming the coalition that supported PM-designate Adel 'Abd al-Mahdi's government.<sup>127</sup> Despite their instrumental role in bringing 'Abd al-Mahdi's government to power, the Sadrists did not seek ministerial appointments in return for their support. Instead, the Sadrists sought and received the highly influential position of secretary-general of the Prime Minister's office, a more permanent role that oversees appointments to state institutions.<sup>128</sup> Hamid al-Ghizzi, a Sadrist, has held the position since 2018, using the position to advance Sadrist influence over appropriations processes and appointments to sub-ministerial positions.<sup>129</sup> Throughout Ghizzi's tenure, the Sadrists and their allies have come to hold high-level positions within the interior, communications, health, finance, and oil ministries, even appointing an ally to the position of central bank governor.<sup>130</sup>

In October 2019, Muqtada al-Sadr, who had at that point sought to position himself as the “leading voice” of Iraq's nascent protest movement, became one of the most prominent figures demanding Prime Minister 'Abd al-Mahdi's resignation. In doing so, Sadr came into conflict with the Badr Organization, one of 'Abd al-Mahdi's principal backers within Parliament. As a result of their dispute, Sadr claimed that the Sadrists would not work with Badr or Hadi al-Amiri, Badr's leader.<sup>131</sup>

In December 2020, Muqtada al-Sadr announced that he and Sairoon intended to campaign in Iraq's 2021 parliamentary elections with a call to “restore the Shiite home” via the establishment of “moral governance” in Iraq.<sup>132</sup> In June 2021, the Iraqi Communist Party, who had previously

been one of the Sadrists' partners in the Sairoon coalition, announced that they would boycott the 2021 elections, citing the continued violence against protesters and the elections' likely farcical outcome as the primary reasons for their abstention.<sup>133</sup> With this act, one of the Sadrists' main partners in Parliament effectively withdrew from Sairoon, leaving the bloc without a key member mere months away from elections. However, just one week later, members of the Sadrist movement held talks with the leaders of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the largest of the three Kurdish parties active in Iraqi federal politics, to discuss the prospect of forming a new, post-hoc coalition.<sup>134</sup> If it comes to fruition, an alliance between the largest Shiite and Kurdish parties in Parliament would be expected to perform well in the elections and would likely become the key arbiter in the post-election government formation process.

### C. TARGETS & TACTICS

From 2004 to 2011, the Mahdi Army focused its attacks on coalition forces to compel them to withdraw from Iraq.<sup>135</sup> Although most Mahdi Army fighters were poorly trained and equipped only with light weapons, the group proved to be adept at using Explosively Formed Projectiles/Penetrators (EFPs) and Improvised Rocket Assisted Mortars (IRAMs).<sup>136</sup> However, their most effective weapons were Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs): between January 2007 to June 2008 alone, the Mahdi Army conducted over 1,500 IED attacks on coalition forces.<sup>137</sup> These devices ranged from simple homemade explosives to sophisticated mines that used infra-red sensors as triggers – an innovation initially employed by the Irish Republican Army (IRA).<sup>138</sup>

Although Sadr has always denied the Mahdi Army's participation in sectarian violence, the group reportedly attacked Sunni Iraqis, especially during the most intense sectarian violence in Iraq between 2004 and 2007. Though the Mahdi Army mainly targeted Sunni militant groups, Mahdi Army fighters reportedly beat, raped, and killed Sunni civilians.<sup>139</sup> After capturing territory, the Mahdi Army often forced Sunni residents to relocate and dumped bodies of Sunni fighters in Sunni neighborhoods as a fear tactic.<sup>140</sup> In places where Mahdi Army territory remained a mix of Sunni and Shiite citizens, Sunnis were often denied resources, such as gasoline.<sup>141</sup> There is also evidence that the Mahdi Army sponsored death squads during the sectarian civil violence in 2006-2007 that targeted Sunni neighborhoods in and around Baghdad to drive Sunni civilians from their land.<sup>142</sup> However, it is unclear whether top Mahdi Army commanders actively sponsored this sectarian violence or whether it was the work of rogue commanders outside Sadr's control.<sup>143</sup>

After Mumahidoon's formation in 2008, the Mahdi Army moved away from armed resistance to focus on social service provision. In response to the state's generally infrequent social service provision, the Mumahidoon provided local Shiite populations with Koran lessons, recreational soccer teams, neighborhood reconstruction, and trash collection.<sup>144</sup> Concurrently, Sadr also ran the Promised Day Brigades, a better-trained and equipped military force than the regular Mahdi Army.<sup>145</sup> Sadr asserted careful control over the Promised Day Brigades, limiting their targets to the coalition forces while enacting strict punishments for attacks on civilians or against Iraqi Security Forces.<sup>146</sup> Like the Promised Day Brigades, the rebranded Peace Brigades appear to have a higher level of training than the original Mahdi Army.<sup>147</sup>

### MAJOR ATTACKS

**Disclaimer:** These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

**April 4, 2004:** The Mahdi Army coordinated attacks in Sadr City, Najaf, Kufa, and Amara, killing at least 35 coalition troops and wounding over 200. This was the first major attack by any Shiite militia against the American-led coalition (35 killed, 200+ civilians, Mahdi Army fighters, and coalition troops wounded).<sup>148</sup>

**August 13, 2004:** Mahdi Army members kidnapped an American journalist and his Iraqi translator in Nasiriyah, Dhi Qar province. The two hostages were released nine days later (0 killed, 0 wounded).<sup>149</sup>

**November 2004:** The group engaged in a three-week battle against American forces over an important Shiite shrine in Najaf (200+ killed, unknown wounded).<sup>150</sup>

**October 27, 2005:** A group of Mahdi Army militiamen set several homes northeast of Baghdad on fire (20 killed).<sup>151</sup>

**August 28, 2006:** The Mahdi Army clashed with Iraqi soldiers in Diwaniya (28 killed, 70 wounded).<sup>152</sup>

**October 20, 2006:** The group attacked Iraqi police stations in Amarah following the arrest of a senior member of the Mahdi Army (15 killed, 90 wounded).<sup>153</sup>

**May 16, 2007:** Mahdi Army fighters attacked the Nasiriyah mayor's office with mortars and explosives. Militants also launched rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) at a police officer's home. The attacks followed the arrest of two Mahdi Army militiamen the night before (12 killed, 75 wounded).<sup>154</sup>

**June 2007:** The Mahdi Army launched a series of attacks targeting Sunnis in Baghdad to force Sunni citizens to relocate away from predominantly Shiite neighborhoods (unknown casualties).<sup>155</sup>

**August 2007:** Mahdi Army members engaged in a firefight in Karbala against the Badr Organization, which resulted in the deaths of 50 Shiite pilgrims and injured over 200 more. More than 300 militants were arrested in conjunction with the violence, while the Mahdi Army was widely blamed for the incident (50 killed, 200 wounded).<sup>156</sup>

**August 2007:** According to the Iraqi government, the Mahdi Army was responsible for the deaths of the governors of the southern Muthanna and Qadisiyah provinces, who were killed in two separate roadside bombings. The group denied any culpability (6 killed, unknown wounded).<sup>157</sup>

**October 2007:** Following the assassination of a Mahdi Army commander, the group clashed with the Iraqi military and police in Basra. The Mahdi Army was in complete control of the city and had captured 50 soldiers and police officers by the time fighting ceased (4 killed, 10 wounded).<sup>158</sup>

**March 2008:** Over several weeks, Iraqi and coalition forces attempted to wrest control of Basra from the Mahdi Army during Operation Charge of the Knights. There were retaliatory attacks by the Mahdi Army in Sadr City and throughout Baghdad. Ultimately, Iraqi Security Forces successfully took control of the city from the Mahdi Army and largely disarmed the group in the region (~2000 Mahdi Army members killed, 1000+ wounded).<sup>159</sup>

**June 17, 2008:** The Mahdi Army detonated a car bomb in a Shia neighborhood in Baghdad. Al Qaeda in Iraq was initially blamed for the attack (51 killed, 80 wounded).<sup>160</sup>

**February 5, 2020:** Members of Saraya al-Salam attacked and cleared a protest camp in Najaf (23 killed, 182 wounded).<sup>161</sup>

**November 27, 2020:** Members of Saraya al-Salam armed with light weapons and petrol bombs attacked a protest camp in Nasiriyah's Haboubi Square (3+ killed, dozens wounded).<sup>162</sup>

## **INTERACTIONS**

### **A. DESIGNATED/LISTED**

As of March 2021, the Mahdi Army has not been designated as a foreign terrorist organization by the United States, United Nations, or European Union.

### **B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS**

The Mahdi Army, for the most part, has had a positive relationship with the Iraqi Shiite population because the group provided social services to impoverished Iraqi Shia. Even before the establishment of the Mumahidoon in 2008, the Mahdi Army frequently provided public services to Shiite communities; for example, beginning in 2004, the Mahdi Army provided religious courts, police patrols, and town councils to gain popular input on social program planning in the areas the group controlled.<sup>163</sup>

The Sadrists have had a complicated relationship with Iraq's clerical establishment, represented chiefly by the Najaf seminarian Ali al-Sistani. Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, an eminent Shiite cleric and father of the Sadrism movement/Mahdi Army's current leader Muqtada al-Sadr, was considered a more radical, activist-inclined figure than the quietist Sistani, who has at times wielded his substantial influence in support of political aims but has generally advocated for clerics to avoid direct involvement in civil administration.<sup>164</sup> With the elder Sadr's death in 1999, the mantle of the Sadrism movement fell to his son, Muqtada al-Sadr. As Sadr lacks the status of Ayatollah, Sistani, as his effective superior, has long been able to wield influence over Sadr. Namely, Ayatollah Sistani reportedly sought to bring him closer to the clerical mainstream to decrease the severity of violence between Sadr's followers and the coalition authorities.<sup>165</sup> This brought about a brief period of peaceful relations between Sadr and Sistani, who reportedly viewed Sadr's Mahdi Army as a helpful tool to combat Sunni extremists and maintain order within Iraq's holy cities.<sup>166</sup>

However, despite sharing various goals, Sadr and Sistani's perspectives generally remain at odds. In the wake of Operation Charge of the Knights, a 2008 Iraqi and coalition-led operation to dislodge the Mahdi Army from its stronghold in Basra, Sistani condemned the Sadrists/Mahdi

Army's use of illegal and violent means to combat the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq.<sup>167</sup> For a period, both Sadr and Sistani supported Iraq's anti-corruption protest movement, which began in earnest in October 2019. In a sermon delivered in November 2019, Sistani lent support to the protesters' anti-corruption and pro-reform demands; Sadr, for his part, lent rhetorical and physical support to protesters (further details below).<sup>168</sup> However, with the Sadrist's change in opinion toward the protest movement (further details below), the two were at odds once again. After Sadrists attacked protesters and cleared protest encampments in Najaf, Karbala, and Baghdad in February 2020, Sistani issued a sermon in which he condemned the Sadrist's violent acts, calling on security forces to protect demonstrators from further attacks.<sup>169</sup>

The Mahdi Army has always been popular in Sadr City, a suburb of Baghdad named for Muqtada al-Sadr's father.<sup>170</sup> In Sadr City, the group became even more popular through its coordination of reconstruction programs within the city, funded in part by the over \$41 million grant given to the city by the Maliki government in 2007.<sup>171</sup> As one resident of Sadr City put it, the group "is an army of volunteers... They are clerics at night and heroes during the day. [...] This army is helping society. They clean the streets, protect our schools and distribute fuel and gas."<sup>172</sup>

However, as security in Iraq improved over time, some communities became disillusioned with the corruption and "thug-like behavior" of the Mahdi Army.<sup>173</sup> The group became known for its crime, robberies, murders, and rapes, as well as for kidnapping both Sunnis and Shiites for ransom despite Muqtada al-Sadr's documented objections to the use of violence against civilians.<sup>174</sup> In one Shiite neighborhood in Baghdad, residents were forced to pay over 3,000 Iraqi dinars to the Mahdi Army in return for its protection.<sup>175</sup> As sectarian violence escalated, many citizens felt they were paying for protection from a problem of the Mahdi Army's own making.<sup>176</sup>

The Mahdi Army/Saraya al-Salam has had a mercurial relationship with Iraq's protest movement. As protests erupted across the country in October 2019, Saraya al-Salam initially supported anti-government protests, protecting demonstrators from reprisal from police and Iran-backed militias.<sup>177</sup> The Sadrists and Saraya al-Salam initially sought to align themselves with the protest movement as a bid to transform popular anger against Iraq's political elite into electoral gains. However, in early 2020, Saraya al-Salam withdrew its support from the protest movement after the protesters' aims began to challenge the Sadrist's interests. When it became apparent that protesters had rejected the Sadrist's populist overtures, Muqtada al-Sadr ordered his supporters to vacate protest camps and to punish "anyone who impedes the return to work and normal daily life."<sup>178</sup> From this point, Saraya al-Salam has sought to suppress Iraq's protest movement by either directly committing acts of violence against protests or through non-intervention against other militias' own efforts to suppress protesters – causing an untold number of casualties.<sup>179</sup>

### C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

The Mahdi Army has been tied to Lebanese Hezbollah since its inception. In April 2003, many of the Mahdi Army's initial members were sent to Hezbollah camps for training.<sup>180</sup> On August 21, 2007, in an interview with *The Independent*, Sadr admitted to working closely with Hezbollah.<sup>181</sup> He stated: "we have formal links with Hezbollah, we do exchange ideas and discuss the situation facing Shiites in both countries."<sup>182</sup> The following day, however, a

spokesman for Sadr claimed the interview was fabricated but did not deny the group's connection with Hezbollah.<sup>183</sup>

Despite sharing some common ideological leanings, the Mahdi Army has often clashed with the Badr Organization, another major Shiite group in Iraq that was closely affiliated with Nouri al-Maliki and his government.<sup>184</sup> The rivalry between the groups – often referred to as “Badr vs. Sadr” – is a fixture of Shiite politics in Iraq.<sup>185</sup> Their rivalry stems from several personal and political disagreements between the groups, such as the Mahdi Army's disapproval of the Badr Organization's close relationship with Iran.<sup>186</sup> There have also been instances of violence between the groups. Both groups have fought for control and influence in the Shiite-dominated areas of central and southern Iraq, including the suburbs of Baghdad. In Sadr City, a neighborhood of Baghdad and Sadrist stronghold, clashes between Badr and the Sadrists killed five people and wounded an additional 20.<sup>187</sup> In August 2007, violent clashes erupted between the Badr Organization and the Mahdi Army in Karbala – a city which Badr-affiliated security officers dominated. The clashes killed 50 and wounded 200 others; among the victims were an untold number of civilians.<sup>188</sup> This inter-group violence peaked in 2007. As of June 2021, it appears that clashes between the two groups have declined..

However, the groups have also experienced short periods of cooperation; for example, the Sadrists and Badr were both key components of Nouri al-Maliki's coalition following the 2005 and 2010 parliamentary elections.<sup>189</sup> However, the Sadrists' differences with Maliki reemerged shortly after both the 2005 and 2010 elections, and Sadr's Mahdi Army and the Badr Organization reverted to open hostilities.<sup>190</sup> Politically, the Badr Organization supported former Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki, while the Mahdi Army frequently called for Maliki's resignation.<sup>191</sup> The Sadrists have also challenged Badr's control of important elements of Iraq's bureaucracy. For example, Iraq's Ministry of the Interior, which oversees the country's federal police, had effectively been under Badr's control since the formation of Iraq's first post-invasion elected government in 2005.<sup>192</sup> However, beginning in 2007, Sadrists joined the rank-and-file of the federal police, giving the Sadrists official cover for some of their activities and disrupting Badr's near-total control of the police and the interior ministry.<sup>193</sup>

In October 2019, as mass protests in Iraq grew in intensity and protester casualties mounted, Badr Organization leader Hadi al-Amiri reportedly played a central role in forestalling then-Prime Minister Adel 'Abd al-Mahdi's resignation.<sup>194</sup> In doing so, Amiri came into conflict with Muqtada al-Sadr, who had at that point sought to position himself as the “leading voice” of the protesters and had become one of the most prominent figures demanding Prime Minister 'Abd al-Mahdi's resignation. As a result of their disagreement, Sadr said that his followers would not work with Amiri or Badr again.<sup>195</sup>

The Mahdi Army's relations with Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), a major Shiite militia with significant ideological and strategic ties to Iran's IRGC, have historically been tense. Currently led by Qais al-Khazali, AAH split from the Mahdi Army in 2006 to pursue greater strategic autonomy and closer ties with Iran. AAH's close alignment with the IRGC clashes with the Mahdi Army's nationalistic outlook and its related suspicion of Iranian political and military designs in Iraq. As a result, Muqtada al-Sadr has described AAH as “a murderous group without

any religion.” Moreover, an AAH spokesman claimed that Sadr’s accusations serve as “an attempt to carry out a [Sadrism-led] political takeover” within Iraq.<sup>196</sup>

Competition between the groups has extended beyond the rhetorical and ideological levels. Tensions rose for several years until AAH began an assassination campaign against Sadrism political leaders in 2012 in an attempt to weaken the Sadrists’ standing prior to the 2013 regional elections. Although both groups fought alongside one another against the Islamic State (IS), relations improved very little during this period. For instance, in 2014, Sadr wrote off AAH as little more than a Maliki-sponsored militia and accused it of carrying out purges of anti-Maliki Sunni tribesmen in southern Iraq. AAH responded by attacking Sadrists in the Shia-majority neighborhoods surrounding Baghdad.<sup>197</sup> Tensions between the two groups continued to rise throughout Iraq’s mass protests, which began in October 2019. Sadr/Saraya al-Salam initially lent rhetorical and physical support to the protest movement; AAH has both unilaterally repressed and assisted security forces in repressing the protests.<sup>198</sup> Tensions between the two groups came to a head when, on October 26, 2019, members of Saraya al-Salam engaged in a firefight with AAH members who were attacking protesters in the southeastern city of Amarah.<sup>199</sup>

Recently, the relationship between AAH and the Sadrists has shown signs of improvement. In December 2020, Muqtada al-Sadr announced that he and Sairoon intended to campaign in Iraq’s 2021 parliamentary elections with a call to “restore the Shiite home” via the establishment of “moral governance” in Iraq.<sup>200</sup> A spokesman for AAH’s political wing, al-Sadiqoon, welcomed Sadr’s statement and noted that the group considered Sadr’s message “very important” because it promotes an “inclusive national interest” that transcends Iraq’s sectarian divisions in pursuit of good governance.<sup>201</sup> The spokesman added that “the strength and unity of the [Shiite bloc] reflects positively on the strength and unity of Iraq,” hinting that AAH may pursue closer relations with the Sadrists ahead of Iraq’s upcoming elections.<sup>202</sup> However, this possible rapprochement did not pan out, as the Fatah coalition, of which AAH’s al-Sadiqoon is a member, sought to form a post-hoc alliance with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, another major Kurdish party.<sup>203</sup>

Despite instances of mutual bad blood, the Mahdi Army, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, and Kata’ib Hezbollah have occasionally cooperated in recent years. For example, these groups released a joint statement against further U.S. intervention in Iraq on September 15, 2014, and have often coordinated their efforts to protect Shiite neighborhoods from jihadist groups.<sup>204</sup> However, the groups differ significantly on ideological grounds: whereas Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata’ib Hezbollah are heavily financed and influenced by Iran and the Quds Force, the Mahdi Army is more nationalist and largely rejects Iranian interference in Iraqi affairs.<sup>205</sup> The Mahdi Army’s outlook can be attributed to the Sadrists’ suspicion of Iranian aims within Iraq, which clash with its staunchly nationalist and populist outlook. As such, the Mahdi Army/Saraya al-Salam may be understood as a political, military, and ideological competitor to the major Iranian proxies operating in Iraq, such as Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata’ib Hezbollah.<sup>206</sup>

The Mahdi Army has a history of conflict with Al Qaeda in Iraq and its successor group, the Islamic State (IS).<sup>207</sup> This opposition is not surprising given IS’s hatred of Shiites and its brutal treatment of Shiite civilians. Following IS’s takeover of Mosul, Sadr resurrected the Mahdi



Army, renamed Saraya al-Salam (the Peace Brigades), to combat IS.<sup>208</sup> Saraya al-Salam joined several other Shiite militias in the fight against IS as a part of the Popular Mobilization Forces.<sup>209</sup> PMF brigades known to be under Saraya al-Salam's control include the 313<sup>th</sup>, 314<sup>th</sup>, and 315<sup>th</sup> PMF brigades.<sup>210</sup> However, there appears to have been limited military activity involving Saraya al-Salam and other groups between 2016-2018. Nevertheless, the group remained politically active and participated in the 2018 Iraqi elections.<sup>211</sup> In May 2018, Sadr's political alliance between the Sadrist Movement and Iraq's Communist Party, called the Sairoon Alliance, won the most seats out of any coalition in the Iraqi parliamentary elections.<sup>212</sup>

#### **D. STATE SPONSORS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES**

Although Sadr studied in Iranian seminaries at several points in his life, his relationship with Iran has been strained at best.<sup>213</sup> Unlike Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and other so-called "special groups," the Mahdi Army has largely rejected Iranian influence in Iraq (though it occasionally accepted material aid from Iran).<sup>214</sup> Regarding Iran, the Sadrists believe that Iraq's Shiite Arabs, whose interests the Sadrists seek to advance, are the rightful leaders of the Iraqi Shiite community – as opposed to the "Persian interlopers." In line with this belief, the Sadrists have asserted that Iraq's government should put Iraqi interests first, regardless of Iran's wishes.<sup>215</sup>

Nevertheless, Iran has likely helped train, supply, and finance the Mahdi Army at various points in the group's history.<sup>216</sup> For instance, Iran allowed Sadr to run Mahdi Army operations during his stay at Qom between 2007/2008 to 2011. In addition, analysts speculate that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps may have helped Sadr reorganize the Mahdi Army during his exile. In return, Sadr acquiesced to Iran's insistence that he back Maliki in the 2010 parliamentary elections. In late 2019, Sadr began making periodic visits to Qom once again. Analysts believe Sadr is spending more time in Qom for two reasons: 1) to undertake religious training in Qom in a likely bid to increase his standing among the Iraqi Shiite clerical establishment; and 2) because Iran offered Sadr temporary security from his rivals during a particularly fractious period in Iraqi politics.<sup>217</sup> Analysts have also suggested that Sadr's increased time in Qom indicates that his independence from Iran's clerical authorities has begun to dwindle, pointing to his visits' coincidence with the beginning of Saraya al-Salam's opposition to Iraq's protest movement, which Iran and its Iraqi proxies have aimed to suppress.<sup>218</sup>

There is also evidence that Hezbollah helped train Mahdi Army fighters during the first years of the group's existence.<sup>219</sup> According to the U.S. military, 1,000-2,000 Mahdi Army troops visited Lebanon for extensive training with Hezbollah operatives in 2003.<sup>220</sup> While receiving training from Hezbollah fighters at militant camps in Iran, Mahdi Army fighters reportedly received four to six weeks of training in the use of mortars, rockets, sniper tactics, intelligence gathering, kidnapping operations, and IEDs.<sup>221</sup> Iran has primarily facilitated the two groups' interactions, although Syrian officials may also have played a role.<sup>222</sup>

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- Iraq

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