

An Enemy We Can Work With

WHEN the populist Shiite cleric Moktada al-Sadr emerged from 14 weeks of invisibility on May 25, it was hard not to focus on his typically passionate anti-Coalition rhetoric: “No, no to America; no, no to occupation,” he thundered from the mosque at Kufa, Iraq, a ragged town a few miles north of rich holy city of Najaf.

It reminded me of my first visit to the Kufa mosque, in August 2004. I had just walked and driven up from Najaf, where Mr. Sadr’s second great uprising against Coalition troops was in its dying stages after more than three weeks. I was the only visible foreigner in the mosque for an unusually packed and angry Friday prayers.

The mosque, which Mr. Sadr’s Mahdi Army was using as a hospital of sorts, had just been hit by something that everyone said was an American rocket. The shoes of dead fighters lay in piles inside the entrance. Outside, thick, angry crowds milled around.

That was almost three years ago. Mr. Sadr’s re-emergence — American officials say he had been hiding in Iran, while his followers say he was lying low around Najaf — in such a suggestive place was undoubtedly meant to be a reminder of the young cleric’s disruptive potential. But I think the real

lesson about Mr. Sadr's return is subtler, and far more positive.

It is no accident that he preaches from the Kufa mosque rather than the more prestigious one at Najaf. As the site of the tomb of Imam Ali, the great martyr of Shiism, Najaf is the center of the Shiite clerical hierarchy, a Vatican of sorts for the faith. It is a rich city.

But Moktada al-Sadr leads a movement of the poor, inherited from his father, who inherited it from an uncle. His singsong exhortation in Kufa last week was a direct reference to the most famous cry from his father's epic, and ultimately suicidal, sermons under Saddam Hussein in the 1980s: "Yes, yes, to electricity. Yes, yes, to water." Young Mr. Sadr speaks not for the elites but for the biggest and most deprived group of people in Iraq: the Shiite lower orders.

And this is why if he really wanted the Americans to leave tomorrow, we would know about it. He is the only Iraqi religious leader to have militarily stood up to the Coalition in the four years since the invasion (he did so twice, first in the spring and then in the late summer of 2004). When Mr. Sadr fights, he fights. His followers may continue to participate in a few freelance kidnappings and homemade bomb attacks, but a true Sadrist uprising is more like an earthquake.

Fortunately, Mr. Sadr is supporting what remains of hope in

Iraq far more actively than it appears. For example, when the current security plan began in Baghdad in January, one of the first moves was the setting up of a joint American-Iraqi outpost in the slum of Sadr City, the young cleric's "back yard."

I remember being in Sadr City during one of the 2004 uprisings. I watched as Iraqis tied an American soldier's boot to a balcony, a gruesome trophy. A year later I saw the same boot in the same place. It was a warning symbol: the area was essentially no-go for the Americans. During the long spells of relative peace American platoons would roll through on quick patrols or stop on a street corner to oversee distribution of gasoline for maybe half a day. But they wouldn't linger.

Sadr City is Moktada al-Sadr's place, and the Americans have never come close to subduing it. There would not be an American forward outpost permanently stationed there, with patrols going out every day, if Mr. Sadr didn't want it. The fact is that back in January, the whole thing was closely and specifically negotiated between the Americans, the Iraqi government and Mr. Sadr's people.

Likewise, when Mr. Sadr withdrew all six ministers of his party from the cabinet in April, it was greeted by the press as a prelude to Iraq's next great cataclysm. Few recalled that he had done more or less the same last fall, in protest at Prime

Minister Nuri al-Maliki's meeting in Jordan with President Bush. That gesture, greeted with similar alarmism, was followed two months later, as this one will be, by a return of the Sadrists to their posts.

Nor did most commentators note that even as he pulled out of the cabinet, Mr. Sadr was keeping his 30 members in Parliament, or that the ministries he was given sway over in the power-sharing agreement were still being run by their Sadrist appointees.

The Sadrists' cooperation with their own government gets ever deeper. An Iraqi friend of mine in Baghdad recently tagged along with a Mahdi Army element on a mission to Baghdad's Dora neighborhood, a particularly bloody place where the Mahdi Army used to play an active role in protecting Shiites from Sunni "cleansing." My friend and the Sadrists drove to Dora at midnight, confirmed that the Iraqi Army was there and keeping the Shiite families safe, and went home.

There is also much concern in Washington and elsewhere that Mr. Sadr may be a pawn of the Iranians. This notion ignores the history of his movement and the essential nationalism underlying his project. By allying themselves with and speaking for the Shiite poor, Mr. Sadr and his father have long differentiated themselves from the traditional Shiite hierarchy in Najaf, with its great wealth

and its ties to Iran.

The Sadrist movement has always been about Iraq for the Iraqis. They might accept help from Iran — and I saw Iranian supplies in their compounds in Najaf in 2004 — but the movement is not for sale. Mr. Sadr gets his strength from the street. And the Arabs of the Iraqi street have no time for Persian bosses.

Nor do they seem to want to foment an all-out civil war. For all the time I have spent with Sadrist death-squad leaders who focus on killing former Baathists and Al Qaeda's supporters (Sunnis all), I have spent just as much time with Mahdi men who have been sent by their leaders to protect Sunni mosques after Sunni provocations, lest Shiites retaliate too broadly.

It was no coincidence that in February, a few weeks after the Baghdad security plan started, a Sunni mosque was reopened in Sadr City. Nor is it a coincidence that the current plan, while it has largely failed to stop car bombs, which are primarily a Sunni phenomenon, has for the moment more or less ended the type of violence in which the Mahdi Army participated most: roving death squads.

Why would Mr. Sadr cooperate with the Americans and Mr. Maliki's government? While he runs the biggest popular movement in the country, his followers are far from a

majority. He is doing exactly what any other rational actor would do: He keeps up the angry rhetoric, and he plays ball with the democratic project.

For proof, look back to the key political event in post-invasion Iraq: the December 2005 elections. For months beforehand, Mr. Sadr railed against the legitimacy of elections held under foreign occupation. The press salivated over the coming apocalypse. But I spent several weeks at that time living with the Mahdi Army in Sadr City. Behind the scenes, they were committed to full, active and peaceful participation. Eventually Mr. Sadr joined the main Shiite coalition, the United Iraqi Alliance, and placed 29 of his candidates in Parliament, the second-largest among the Shiite bloc.

The real story about Moktada al-Sadr is not his exciting sermons but his broad underwriting, both passive and active, of the official project in Iraq. Since he stood down his forces in August 2004, he has provided the same narrative time and again. It is what we should expect from the canniest politician in Iraq: the rhetoric of the dispossessed, and the actions of an heir to power.

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