

Iraq's New Power Couple

New York Times October 15, 2004

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Muktada al-Sadr's headquarters in Najaf is in a tiny alley next to the city's famous shrine of the Imam Ali. As the fighting between American forces and his Mahdi Army wound down in August, I went there with two of his men, who showed me a piece of paper bearing two seals: one belonged to their boss, the other to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the ultimate Shiite religious authority in Iraq. Below the seals were the five promises of Mr. Sadr's cease-fire, including his commitment to "participate actively in the political process" and to "work cooperatively" toward Iraq's January elections.

At the time, many observers scoffed at the deal, citing Mr. Sadr's previous broken promises and the failure of his men to turn over their arms after the Najaf siege. Yet two recent developments -- one covered in the international press, the other unnoticed -- show that such skepticism may have been misplaced.

The first is Mr. Sadr's stated intention to form a political party; the second is the behind-the-scenes rejuvenation of Ahmad Chalabi, the former exile leader and longtime favorite of the Pentagon who so notoriously split with his American sponsors in May. Mr. Sadr's commitment is for real, it represents momentous progress for the democratic project in Iraq and it signals the emergence of a broad and powerful Shiite front -- with Ahmad Chalabi at its center.

The weapons handover in Sadr City, the huge Baghdad slum named after Mr. Sadr's father, is just the latest promising sign. Mr. Sadr's people told me in confidence after the Najaf uprising about plans to start a political party for the upcoming elections. They had planned to call their political organization the Mahdi Party, in homage to a 12th-century imam whose return, Shiites believe, will bring Iraq's majority group its era of justice. Now they have gone public with their electoral plans and, in a sign of growing political sophistication, they have chosen the more accommodating name of the Patriotic Front.

The Mahdi Army insurrections this summer in Najaf and Sadr City had nothing to do with Mr. Sadr's thinking that he could achieve military goals against American forces. If he had wanted to derail the occupation, he would have done what the Sunni insurgents do: keep his men out of harm's way and focus his violence toward fellow Iraqis, foreign civilians and government targets like power stations.

Rather, he was moving to ensure his future role by seizing political momentum among the Shiite demographic that matters to him: the young urban poor.

Similarly, it is not weariness and attrition that are now making him lay down his weapons. It is easy to buy or make more weapons in Iraq. And the ranks of his followers can be as endlessly replenished as were those of the Vietcong. I have spoken to members of every age group among them: the 21-year-olds with their black militia garb and rocket-propelled grenades, the 15-year-olds melting holes in the asphalt where the howitzer shells can be placed to lie in wait for American vehicles, the wounded 6-year-olds in hospital beds whose fathers brag that the little boys will be fighting in five years' time.

Mr. Sadr's new party and the older Shiite groups are likely to form the basis for a unified list of candidates that should capture at least 55 percent of the vote in January -- and possibly more if Kurdish and Sunni groups can be brought into the fold. If this front includes all Shiite factions, it will receive Ayatollah Sistani's approval. But if it leaves out any important Shiite components -- including Mr. Sadr -- the old man will remain silent.

Thus Mr. Sadr's new direction, like his efforts in Najaf, is not a military move but a political one. Just as most of his country's violence consists of Iraqi attacks against fellow Iraqis, the basic fact of Iraqi politics is not opposition to the occupation, but maneuvering between Iraqis in the game of sectarian and ethnic politics.

Meanwhile, Ahmad Chalabi's resurgence is natural. While American officials have been embarrassed by reports that he convinced them of exaggerated claims about Saddam Hussein's weapons, most Iraqis do not care if he hoodwinked Washington. He is an Iraqi, and his loyalties and destiny lie with his own country, not America. What does matter to Iraqis is that if there is one man alive without whom Saddam Hussein would still be in power, that man is Mr. Chalabi.

President Bush may lose his job over his Iraqi adventure. The Kurds in their mountains may not really care whether the rest of Iraq was liberated or not. The Sunnis may be sorely missing the perks of Baathist rule. But Mr. Chalabi's fellow Shiites have benefited greatly from the removal of a regime that persecuted them brutally, and they thank him for it.

And many Shiites see that Mr. Chalabi, always the savviest Iraqi politician, has continued to make the right moves since the 2003 invasion. He has publicly fallen out with Washington. The interim government under Ayad Allawi has ransacked his house and issued a bizarre warrant accusing him of counterfeiting Iraq's worthless old currency. When I last saw Mr. Chalabi, he had just survived an ambush laid by Sunni insurgents in which two of his guards were killed.

Saddam Hussein, Washington, Mr. Allawi and the Sunnis: Mr. Chalabi has the right enemies, at least in the eyes of most Shiites. As he said with a laugh when I mentioned his many opponents to him, "That's not a bad thing."

Equally important, he has the right friends. A member of a leading family from

Baghdad's secular Shiite merchant class (Chalabi means "head merchant"), he is well connected and working harder than ever behind the scenes. The ambush that killed his bodyguards took place as he was returning to Baghdad from a meeting in Najaf with Grand Ayatollah Sistani. Mr. Chalabi

told me has met with the paramount spiritual leader "10 or 12 times" -- far more than any other politician can claim. He is also one of the few politicians to have spent time with Mr. Sadr. And the rebel leader's deputies have met a dozen times with Mr. Chalabi's political organization. Not bad for a man given up as politically dead just this summer.

Mr. Chalabi has created two groups, the Shiite House and the Shiite Political Council, which bring Iraq's various Shiite political movements and parties together under a loose umbrella. This is reminiscent of the Iraqi National Congress that he ran from London during the last years of Saddam Hussein. When we spoke last month, he had just arranged for Ali Smesim, Mr. Sadr's top lieutenant, to visit the Kurdish leadership at Sulaimaniya. Similar delegations have been sent to various Sunni groups.

While Washington may not be pleased to hear that militant Sunnis are talking to Mahdi Army representatives, Mr. Chalabi and Mr. Sadr may well help get American troops out of the country. After five centuries under Sunni rule, Iraq's Shiites majority will get its elections in January. In the end, Mr. Sadr and the occupation have common cause on the issue that matters most: a stable democratic outcome.

This shared goal is the basis for the accommodation that can save the country: the Shiites plus the Kurds plus those Sunnis who are not Baathists or religious extremists make up about 90 percent of the

country. And Mr. Chalabi, who in the 1990's held together a coalition of secularists and Islamists, Kurds and Arabs, Sunnis and Shiites, monarchists and socialists, is uniquely suited to arranging an electoral alliance among Iraq's Shiite factions. And as a secular pragmatist, he is the Shiite most likely to understand the need to assure Iraq's minority groups that "democracy" is not simply shorthand for "tyranny of the majority."

Muktada al-Sadr has shown a knack for politics since he emerged from the rubble of Saddam Hussein's fall. Now he has shown a willingness to play Alexander to Ahmad Chalabi's Aristotle, learning the game from the master. The Americans, and the interim Iraqi government, would do well to stop seeing these men as enemies and start working with them on building a free Iraq.