

Outside Sadr City's Mohsin mosque on a morning in January, with Friday prayers yet to begin, the rows of mats ran hundreds deep. There were about 25,000 men there in all, wearing robes, suits, tracksuits or dark leather jackets; on their heads they wore red and white kaffiyehs and black scarves tied at the back in the style preferred by Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi army. Sandals and shoes lay in piles between the prostrate men, and in front of every mat rested a prayer tablet made of Karbala clay, infused with the blood of the Imam Hussein, martyred there in 680. With Iraq's election only nine days away, the inhabitants of Baghdad's giant slum, Sadr City, had come for guidance: they would go to the polls only if the command came from Muqtada.

I was moving along the outer edge of the crowd when the pre-recorded high-pitched chants came to an end and the deeper bass of the live preacher began. The supplicants let out a collective wail, waving posters and newspapers, flags on thin poles, and framed photographs of Muqtada al-Sadr and his father, Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr. Behind the huge crowd an Apache helicopter cruised from left to right along the flat line of Baghdad's brown rim of smog.

Before his assassination in 1999, Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr used to preach before Friday crowds ten times the size of this one. He preached in Kufa, a town 60 miles to the south of Baghdad, at a traditionally poor man's mosque. The al-Sadrs are one of the oldest and richest families of the Shia clerical aristocracy that is headquartered in Najaf, yet in 1997 Muqtada's father started using simple slogans like, "Yes, yes to electricity. Yes, yes to clean water." Preaching to the poor from the pulpit at Kufa sealed his alienation from the Najafi establishment. Muhammad Sadiq introduced Friday prayers to Shia Iraq, a populist innovation that must have appeared a rabble-rousing heresy to his estranged cousins among the clerical elite. With a huge popular following established, Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr turned his rhetoric against Saddam during the last year of his life, and that was when the crowds at his Friday prayers hit the hundreds of thousands.

Back then, Sadr City was called Saddam City. The Mohsin mosque where I was watching Friday prayers is reputed to have been the scene of heavy fighting in 1999 when Saddam had Muhammad Sadiq killed in Najaf. There was more fighting two weeks later when the authorities shut down the mosque. It was reopened in 2000 but remained quiet during the last three years of Saddam's rule. Muhammad Sadiq's one surviving son, Muqtada, only 23 at the time of his father's death, had been lying low in a form of house arrest in Najaf. When Saddam fell in 2003, no one outside Muqtada's inner circle knew much about the young preacher. Then, at Najaf, in Sadr City and in the Shia cities of the south, Muqtada led Iraq's only Shia resistance to the US-led occupation on and off from April to September 2004. Ibrahim Jaafari and the Iranian-backed Shia parties, with their histories of bad blood with Muqtada's nationalist father, stayed at home while the Mahdi army fought. Muqtada is now in hiding, a 2004 arrest warrant for murder still on his head, so he preaches through representatives. As with other Shia religious leaders, Muqtada's words reach his people in places like Sadr City through a network of clerics who include his words in their weekly sermons.

The previous Friday I had watched a smaller, less buoyant crowd hear a carefully elusive message from Muqtada's intermediaries: "I personally will not participate in these elections, which I reject because no political activity can be legitimate in the presence of a foreign occupation. We do not support any list or candidate. But if you find someone who truly represents you, an honest man or party, then you must vote." It seemed to me Muqtada was refreshing his anti-occupation credentials while opening the door to participation in a process that appeared to be gathering momentum—and which could hold big prizes for him and his movement.

A few days earlier I was told by Abu Zeinab, a friend who used to run Muqtada's Baghdad office, that the al-Sadr movement had secretly entered the political process. There were signs that Muqtada's office had even placed representatives on the main Shia-dominated electoral list endorsed by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the most revered Shia cleric. The strategy had apparently been arranged by Muqtada's political chief, Sheikh Ali Smeisim. (In the autumn I had discovered close links between the movement and Ahmed Chalabi, the secular Shia politician (see Prospect November 2004), and I suspected that he would have had something to do with this strategy. As a friend of Chalabi's told me after this relationship had become more public: "Ahmed has brains but no guns, and the Sadris have the guns but not the brains.")

This populist movement, which derives its identity from political and economic exclusion and whose street support was vehemently against the elections, appeared to be co-operating with those same elections, and to be formally involved in party politicking. As I began to pick up the clues that its leaders were secretly involved in the elections, it became apparent that the transition from rebel fringe to political establishment was challenging the coherence of the movement and testing the support of its base.

After the Friday prayers in Sadr City, soccer players and goats were soon back staking their claim to the open space around the mosque. Loudspeakers boomed out advertisements for videos featuring blindfolded foreigners and RPG attacks on US troops, cut with scenes from Black Hawk Down. I bumped into Abu Bakir, a Sadri guerrilla whom I had met when I was in Sadr City last year during fighting between the Madhi army and US forces. Abu Bakir told me before the sermon that he had no idea what Muqtada would say on the elections. Now that prayers had ended, he was no more enlightened. "There was no direct talk about the election. People will be confused. Many people won't understand what Muqtada said."

Later, I stopped one of Muqtada's officials, 40-year-old Abu Heidar, whom I knew from the medina, as Sadr City is called in Baghdad, and asked him what he thought about the previous week's two-sided message. "It was a great political speech," he said. "Muqtada expressed his concerns about an election under foreign occupation, but also said everyone has the right to vote for any list. The message is that he is not seeking a seat for himself, or any personal advantage, and he is not supporting any list. But he is against all dictatorship and he believes people must be free to choose for themselves." Here were the cautious ambiguities of the politician, not the bellicose certainties of the radical.

That was the second day of Eid, the holiday when Iraqi Shia families with a relative who has died during the past year provide a large meal for neighbours, friends and the poor. I joined Abu Heidar for lunch at the house of friends of his, a family whose young son had become a shahid (martyr) in fighting against the Americans in September.

Outside the house there was a long tent with rows of white plastic chairs facing each other under a striped canvas. A black banner was draped across the front of the structure, with the martyr's name and the date of his death painted on it in white. Back in September these death proclamations had been all over the medina. Inside the house we sat the way men sit in poor houses all over Iraq: on the floor in stockinged feet, with our legs crossed or one knee up. A few of the men rested on pillows; most of us leaned against a wall. "It is an honour to have a shahid in our family," one of the men announced after describing the deeds of his cousin. "He died for Muqtada."

We picked from plates of bright green parsley and spicy rashad on tin trays in front of us. The kinsmen of the martyr explained that they would not vote in the elections. They believed the occupation would pick the winner. "Muqtada rejects the occupation," one man said, "so I won't vote under it." In the five weeks I spent in Sadr City, starting ten days before the elections, this sentiment summarised the way Muqtada's core supporters poorer men between 17 and 35 regarded the political process. I heard similar statements from his officials too. Sheikh Muhammad Fartosi, Muqtada's top cleric in Sadr City, told me, "These elections will be controlled by the occupation." He compared them to the recent vote in Afghanistan, "where the people did not elect Karzai."

Abu Heidar, the Sadri who had been most enthusiastic about the elections, took a drag from his cigarette and loudly cleared his throat. He asked the men in the room why, if they were such devoted followers of the movement, they had not been at last Friday's prayers. Muqtada had made his position clear, Abu Heidar told them: people were free to vote if they chose to. But the men repeated their reservations: that the American-backed and Ba'ath-tainted Allawi government would be reinstated under spurious democratic cover, and that Muqtada rejected the elections for those reasons and therefore so did they. Abu Heidar shrugged. As we stood up to leave, he took a DVD out of his jacket pocket. "Watch this," he said, "see for yourselves whether Muqtada was rejecting the elections."

Later, when Abu Heidar and I were at his house eating little Eid cakes on his floor beside a kerosene heater, he told me that he was a candidate for the grand Shia coalition, the "Sistani list," which would later win almost half the national vote. He said he was 112 on the list, a slot that would probably guarantee him a seat in the national assembly. Surprised, I told him I didn't understand his earlier ambivalence about the elections. Again he shrugged. I asked him what the Shia coalition was doing to get out the vote among the Sadr City militants. "We encourage people through all the media," he said. "And Sistani is encouraging people to vote and is backing our list."

With or without DVDs of Muqtada's confusing message, it did not seem like much of a campaign. In Sadr City, among Muqtada's foot soldiers, few wanted to be seen to be backing "Bush's" elections.

I shared a house in Sadr City with ten to 15 Sadris Mahdi army men, mostly who ranged from teenagers to an old haji with a walking stick. There was no furniture, just carpets, a few pillows, and a television. At night it was usually as dark inside as out the electricity operated for only a couple of hours a day and the private generators either ran out of expensive benzene or conked out. When the electricity did come on, the men sitting around the bare room with me would watch Jean Claude van Damme or Bruce Willis movies, and click the ammunition clips in and out of their pistols. They would talk to me about women, or compare the smoothness of the clip release between a Glock and a Sig Sauer.

Five times a day they would put their tablets of Karbala clay down on the dirty carpet and pray, usually one or two of them at a time, while the rest of the room moved and talked around them. Sometimes I couldn't tell if they were looking for scattered bullets, or fixing a piece of the generator, or praying.

The men told me they would never participate in politics organised under occupation, although of course if Muqtada told them to they would. "If we have stability, the Americans will have no excuse to stay," one of them said, to general approval. "So America and Israel prolong the violence. We are waiting for the last Friday prayers to receive our instructions about the elections."

When I was leaving Sadr City last autumn, the Mahdi army had just begun organising its clean-up after the long summer battle. Muqtada's militia now works unofficially with the Baghdad mayoralty to oversee security, rubbish collection and road repairs in the slum. I had thought, mistakenly, that the Mahdi army dominated Muqtada's movement, or that they were the movement. But as I watched the Sadr movement navigate the new political environment, it was clear that the army was just one element and, being totally loyal to Muqtada, the most passive one. Muqtada's political planning took place in a realm apart from these street fighters. I would have to look higher for answers to the question of what the Sadris were really doing about the elections and what the elections were doing to the Sadris.

Shia Islam is often polarized by a struggle between its two centres, Najaf, near Kufa, and the Iranian city of Qom. There is a deep philosophical divide between the Iranian and Iraqi approaches to the political side of Shiism. The Iraqi tradition, known as quietism, claims that worldly power corrupts Islam and that worldly justice is impossible before the return of the occulted imam Muhammad al-Mahdi. It maintains that clerics should stay out of formal political roles. The Iranian tradition, on the other hand, called the "Guardianship of Jurors," is expressed by Khomeinist clerical rule. (Although Ali al-Sistani was born in Iran into a family that hails from the Persian region of Sistan, and speaks Arabic with a Persian accent, he is a devoted adherent of Iraq's interpretation of the role between the state and Shia Islam.)

Many people in the medina recalled to me the warm welcome they gave the Americans in 2003. They still refer to the US arrival as the tahrir (liberation). It is

difficult to untangle the knot of accusations and counter-accusations between the Mahdi army and the occupation regarding the fighting last April and why it kept flaring up in Sadr City, Najaf, Kufa and the south until September. Sadrists say that Iraq's two big pro-Iranian Shia parties, Jaafari's Da'wa and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution (SCIRI), "sold the occupation the lie" that Sadrists were terrorists and the murderers of Sistani's moderate predecessor, Abdul Majid al-Khoei. It is a version of events that flatters Muqtada, implying that SCIRI and the others viewed the Sadrists as a serious political threat. With the fighting in 2004, the Sadrists confirmed their unaccustomed place at the top table of Iraqi politics, having won over the more passionate strain of anti-occupation nationalism among Iraq's Shias. As the poor young men of Sadr City and Basra see it, Muqtada was the only one to stand up to the Americans and British—just as his father was the only one to stand up to Saddam. But how would the movement get on playing hardball with backroom pros like Ahmed Chalabi, or Ibrahim Jaafari and the other Iran-based players in Iraq's Shia politics?

On one of the days I spent with Abu Heidar as he campaigned listlessly in the medina, he recounted how he had joined the al-Sadr movement. During the 1991 uprising, he said, when George Bush Sr encouraged the Shias and Kurds of Iraq to rise up against Saddam, he and some friends had taken over an Iraqi army weapons depot near Baghdad and distributed arms in Sadr City. "Then we waited for the Islamic parties, Da'wa and SCIRI, to come from Iran," he told me. "They never came. Jaafari and [Muhammad Baqir] al-Hakim betrayed us." When he learned of Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr's assassination in 1999, he said, he vomited blood. He sold his used clothes business and car and bought weapons, forming a group of three five-man cells to hunt and kill senior Ba'athists in the medina and elsewhere in Baghdad. After four months he fled to Iran via Iraq's northern Kurdish areas. In Qom in 2001, Da'wa and SCIRI invited him to join them.

"I was very bitter," says Abu Heidar. "I told them: 'You sold the blood of the Iraqi people. When Muqtada's father resisted Saddam, you did nothing. We rose up in 1991, and we waited for you and you did nothing.'" When the Shias of Iraq next rose up, it was against the Americans in 2004, after a year of disappointments and alleged provocations. Again Jaafari and the Iranian-backed parties stayed away.

Fattah al-Sheikh, another Sadrist I had met during the uprising the previous year, who was now running his own list in the elections, seemed to be campaigning for office with much more vigor. I found Fattah at the internet café just outside Sadr City from where he produced his newspaper, Sadr Dawn. Fattah is trim and in his late thirties. He speaks well and quickly and frequently smiles. "I am a true Sadr City person," he said. "I stick up posters on my own. I can move around the city without bodyguards. All the members of my list were born in this poor city." I asked him how it must feel for the Shias to be experiencing free political expression after so many centuries of oppression. "This is a special moment for all Iraqis, Sunni and Shia," Fattah said with the practised phrases of a stump speech. When I asked how people were responding to his campaign, he sounded even more polished and self-assured. "You should go and speak to the people themselves," he said with a smile.

Fattah had nothing to do with the Sadri movement's hierarchy, and when he filed for a place on the ballot on a Sadrist platform it was without the movement's knowledge. For Fattah, a Sadr City man but an outsider to the movement, it must have looked like a unique opportunity to claim some political power.

Abu Heidar, an old cadre representing the movement's impoverished rebel origins, seemed a less enthusiastic democrat. Four days before the election, he took me to the offices of the Al-Noor society, which was set up last autumn to provide aid to wives of shuhada (martyrs) killed fighting the Americans. There we met Haji Shibil. Slight and with a polite demeanour, Shibil seems like an intellectual or mid-level functionary, but is believed to have been the Mahdi army's military leader during last autumn's fighting in Najaf, when his men held four streets against American marines and cavalry for three weeks. I heard from one source that Shibil used to run anti-Ba'athist death squads, and someone else said that he now hunts Wahhabis whom the Sadris suspect of attacking them. He is possibly the most admired street fighter and military leader in the medina.

"We reject all the laws of this interim government," Shibil told me. "And we reject the elections. There is no real census. There is cheating by the government parties. Sunnis will not participate." I waited for Abu Heidar to say something in defence of the elections in which he was a candidate, but he remained silent. "So the elections will be illegal," Shibil continued. "They will lead to civil war and military resistance." Shibil was as committed as Sadris get. His passion made me wonder whether the whispers of political participation could really be true. Meanwhile Abu Heidar with his safe seat on the "Sistani" list was murmuring awkward agreement.

"But Abu Heidar," I said later, "you're running for office. You're on the list. What do you have to say about all this talk against the elections?"

"Yes, I am on the list," said Abu Heidar. "But as a member of the al-Sadr movement I follow my leader. In the assembly I will represent the movement."

I sought out Abu Heidar the day after the elections, to talk to him about the high turnout in the medina despite the violence in the parts of the slum that I walked through that day: intermittent mortar rounds, near-constant small arms fire, and a car bomb that killed four. The mood had been buoyant. I asked Abu Heidar if he had voted, as he had been ill the previous few days. He showed me his inky forefinger and smiled. I asked him how it felt to be a member of parliament. "I won't take my seat," he said. "In Ahmed Chalabi's house last Friday I decided to leave the list." Chalabi's Baghdad villa is the main gathering place for the Iraqi Shia political groups that are not affiliated with Iran. "Chalabi wanted me to be in the assembly, but I withdrew." Abu Heidar said he had voted for Fattah al-Sheikh.

I was stunned. Once, when Abu Heidar and I had returned to his house to find a Fattah election poster stuck to the street side of his back wall, he had grumbled: "This is democracy, I suppose." I began to see Abu Heidar and Fattah as representing opposite Sadri responses to the electoral challenge: Abu Heidar, displaying the schizophrenia and secrecy of the movement's hierarchy, its discomfort

with a game very different from street-fighting, versus Fattah, with his bullish opportunism and relish of the game.

"The Sistani list is in the pocket of the Americans. I voted for Fattah because he had no help from the Americans and Allawi," said Abu Heidar. Why then did he join the Shia list in the first place? He gave no answer. He looked tired and ill as he smoked by a heater on the floor of his small furniture-less front room, with his son Heidar climbing on his shoulder. When I asked why he had voted at all, he said, "I reject this constitution, but I voted yesterday to show the people what democracy is." He ran his hand through the floppy hair of another son, Jebrail, who had fallen from a roof and had a plaster on his head. I said that protest and exclusion seemed to be the basis of politics here in Sadr City. He nodded in agreement. But it was dark and he was weary, so I left.

Later that afternoon I found Fattah at home. Supporters were coming in and out and the telephone rang constantly. Fattah told me, "Yesterday was a happy day for me. When I put my ballot in the box it felt like putting a bullet into the chest of Saddam." I told Fattah about Abu Heidar voting for him and saying he would turn down his seat in the assembly. "Abu Heidar was on my list initially," said Fattah. "Then he withdrew to the Sistani list. Maybe he feels guilty, maybe that's why he voted for me. He's a good man. He loves the movement." More men entered Fattah's living room, one of them bringing news from the marsh region in the south. Then the phone rang with calls from London, Denmark and Basra, and Fattah gave me a thumbs-up as I left.

The only thing on the walls at Fattah's place is a poster-size photo of him sitting alongside Muqtada, Fattah looking unrecognisably modest. Shouting into his mobile phone, zapping Al-Jazeera on the satellite receiver, welcoming ever more assistants with ever more good news, shooing kids from the room, Fattah seemed to have arrived at some desired terminus that had been built specially for his personal express.

The two men looking out for me in Sadr City Abu Zeinab, the former Sadr administrative chief, and Shibil, the military commander were spending the post-election days at Ahmed Chalabi's house. Since last April, the secular Shia politician has been the Sadris' tutor in the political process. Unable to solve the riddle of Sadri political participation at the street level, or even with mid-level players like Abu Heidar and Fattah, I decided to look for the answers further up the hierarchy. I tagged along with Shibil and Abu Zeinab, trying to catch up with the political manoeuvrings.

Chalabi's house is in a district called Mansour, four miles from the medina, near the embassies and villas where foreign reporters and aid workers used to stay before they left Iraq or moved to hotels or the protected green zone. I was hoping to meet Sheikh Ali Smeisim, Muqtada's top lieutenant. If the movement had indeed participated in the elections by choosing representatives to sit on the main Shia list and negotiated positions on it while keeping the operation secret from the street, Smeisim had to have been one of the architects of the plan.

While I waited to speak to Sheikh Ali, I sat in a big room with ten Iraqis who had come to plan and lobby. Tea came out on trays every half hour, hotter than in the

medina and less bitter. A man sitting next to me told me he was an atheist, and that his grandfather, an Ottoman governor of Bosnia, had been forced by the Porte to eat poison like Rommel.

In the next room, separated from us only by glass doors, seven or eight men sat around three sides of a square table. At one tip of the horn in a room lit only by candlelight, I could see Sheikh Ali's white turban, and at the other there was the long white cotton headdress belonging to Abu Hattem, the leader of Iraq's Hizbullah, who had led the 1992-99 fighting against Saddam in the southeast of Iraq, a battle that had led Saddam to drain the Shatt al-Arab marshes. In Sadr City, to where most families had migrated from the southeast during the 1960s and 1970s, people called Abu Hattem "prince of the marshes."

When Sheikh Ali came out to speak to me, we talked about the Sadri belief that SCIRI and Jaafari's Da'wa party had persuaded the Americans to try to destroy the al-Sadr movement, and how, according to Sheikh Ali, that had led to the 2004 fighting, which ended with a commitment by the Sadris to join the political process. "Chalabi," said Sheikh Ali, "was the only one who stood up for us during the most intense fighting. He was the only one to come to Najaf and help us negotiate with the Americans. When we entered the political process, he was the one who opened doors for us, showed us how to do things."

When I tried to pin Sheikh Ali down on just how formal and active the movement's participation in the elections had been, he said: "We had an official position of not participating, and we think this position achieved success without sacrificing our principles."

From the wry look in his eyes I was certain this was an acknowledgement of an aggressive strategy of participation. If this were true, there was a big gap between what the movement was doing and what it had told its followers. When I pressed Sheikh Ali further, he said: "It's too soon to be specific about this."

I mentioned that many people in the medina were still saying that no real Sadri would ever be on that list or any list. Sheikh Ali said, "I am aware of this contradictory position, and it has its advantages." I later learned that Sheikh Ali's brother, Jawad Qazem, held the number five slot on Sistani's Shia list.

During the period of vote-counting and internal Shia politicking over the choice of prime minister, while I was still trying to make sense of how the radical-Sadri base was handling Muqtada's deceptive involvement in the election, I visited Sheikh Mohamed Fartosi. About 29, he is Muqtada's top preacher in the medina.

He is tall and handsome, and when he greets me with three kisses on the cheek, his beard feels finer than most. When he talks about the ills of war in the name of religion for 20 minutes around the glow of the heater, the people in the room are rapt. During the 2004 uprising, I had met other senior Sadri "young guns" on similar floors in alleys by the Najaf shrine. They seemed skinny and nervous compared with Sheikh Mohamed, who has a calm I have seen in Marxist guerrillas, the ease of people whose theology is too complete for life to be marred by any real uncertainty.

He was my source for most questions about Shia observance, and he would occasionally ask me questions about Christianity: in America, do you see signs of Christ? Is it true that unjust violence is committed in his name, as it is in the name of the Prophet?

Sheikh Mohamed believed the elections were illegitimate, and that any officials elected would be pawns of the Americans. But didn't the al-Sadr movement hold the biggest component in the new ruling party? I calculated that there might be as many as 23 Sadris going to the new assembly. Sheikh Mohamed seemed hurt by this. "These people in the new assembly whom you call Sadris, they are not legitimate Sadris. Sheikh Ali Smeisim's brother might be number five on the Shia list, but he is not a member of this movement."

Two days later, getting my beard trimmed in a barbershop in the medina, I had a conversation with a young friend called Basim, whose brother, Ahmed, I was staying with. Basim once told me that as a deserter from Saddam's army, he had never learned the military skills necessary to be a fighter in the Mahdi army, but I am not sure that I believed him. He seemed to know a lot of details about ambushes in the medina during the 2004 fighting. Ahmed and Basim had lost a non-combatant brother to what they called an American cluster bomb, and another brother had been "martyred" in the 2004 fighting by five rounds in his abdomen after taking over a municipal building.

As I understood it, Basim was a minor foot soldier from a reasonably well-known Mahdi army family. His views on most things echoed those of scores of young men who seemed to represent Muqtada's core supporters. Basim told me that, yes, he had heard of the Sadri sympathisers going to the new assembly.

"But these candidates are involved as individuals," he said. "They have no connection to the movement."

"But I heard their whole involvement, their slots on the list and so on, were negotiated by the movement's top leadership."

"Seyid Muqtada would never do that," said Basim. "He would never co-operate with the occupation."

"It wasn't him who did the negotiating, it was his senior people."

"Muqtada's leadership means nothing to us. We care only about Seyid Muqtada."

"But the senior people speak for him."

"In a few days you will see some changes. I have heard that Sheikh Ali Smeisim is operating independently of Seyid Muqtada. I cannot tell you more now, but there will be changes."

A few days later, trying to meet with senior people as they came to and from Chalabi's house, I overheard someone gossiping in a hallway say that Sheikh Ali was

on the way out: a victim of the success of his own participatory strategy. Maybe the radical tendency represented by Sheikh Mohamed, Basim and Haji Shibil was indeed asserting itself.