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IRAQ

Preventing a New Generation of Conflict

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insurgent groups in general refrained from attacking ballot boxes and supported the election campaigns.

74. See the program of Tawafuq, *Barnamijuna al-siyasi* (Our Political Program), on the website of the Iraqi Consensus Front, www.altawafuk.com.

75. For an interesting analysis of the concept of *tawafuqiyya* by Jabir Habib Jabir, see in *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 19 February 2006.

76. The opposition between these two principles has defined the political struggle between Shia and Sunnis since the general elections in December 2005. See examples for the content of these terms in *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 25 April 2006.

77. For the different demands, see interviews with Ayad Allawi in *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 1 February 2006; and the interview with Salih al-Mutla in *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 11 February 2006.

78. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 27 January 2006. For the formal formation of the Political Bloc, see *Al-Hayat*, 15 February 2006; and *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 10 February 2006.

79. See the interview with Kurdish negotiator Fu'ad Ma'sum in *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 20 February 2006.

80. *Al-Hayat*, 26 March 2006.

81. *Al-Hayat*, 11 May 2006.

82. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 1 May 2006.

83. For earlier remarks on the sectarian character of the government by Salih al-Mutlaq, see *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 12 May 2006. For more on Salih al-Mutlaq's political demands, see interview with Talabani in *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 16 May 2006 and 19 May 2006. See also the critique of Shaikh Khalaf al-Ulyan in *Al-Hayat*, 23 May 2006.

84. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 1 May 2006.

85. See the remarks of Nuri al-Maliki, *Al-Hayat*, 21 May 2006.

86. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 2 May 2006.

87. See also the article on the response of the five groups in Islam Online, www.IslamOnline.com, 16 and 17 May 2006.

88. See the *bayan* of the Jaysh al-Mujahidin, "*Radd 'ala da'wa Tariq al-Hashimi*" (Answer to the Call of Tariq al-Hashimi), 16 May 2006.

89. For the comments of the insurgency, see *Al-Hayat*, 23 May 2006. The Shura Council of the Mujahidin stated it would hit the new government "as hard as possible" and that it considered the new government "apostates" and that it was legitimate to kill its members. The Battalions of the Revolution of 1920 stated that "there is no life, no power and honour except in the jihad in the way of God." For an analysis of the relations between the government and the insurgency, see the article by the Jordanian journalist with excellent connections with the insurgency, Yasir al-Za'atara, in *Al-Hayat*, 24 May 2006.

90. Interview with Tariq al-Hashimi in *Al-Arabiyya*.

91. See the articles in the *Washington Post* covering this issue: "Sunni Bloc Denounces Legislation to Split Iraq," 11 September 2006; "Sadr Holds Out Against Plan to Divide Iraq," 12 September 2006; "Federalism Plan Dead, Says Iraqi Speaker," 13 September 2006; "Iraqi Parties Reach Deal Postponing Federalism," 25 September 2006; and "Parliament Approves Measure Allowing Autonomous Regions," 12 October 2006.

92. "Draft Law Keeps Central Control over Oil in Iraq," *New York Times*, 20 January 2007.

93. "Shiite-Led Iraqi Ministry Seeks Arrest of Top Sunni Cleric," *Washington Post*, 17 November 2006.

7

Shia Militias in Iraqi Politics

Juan Cole

AMONG THE MORE pressing problems in contemporary Iraq is the role of the ethnic and sectarian militias. These paramilitaries provide local security at a time of guerrilla war and criminality on a vast scale. But they also can form death squads and engage in their own excesses. They deny the new state its monopoly on the use of force, a key definition of state success. This chapter focuses on Shia militias, specifically the Badr Corps paramilitary of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). How did the Badr Corps gain its current power in southern Iraq? What security and political roles has it played? Is it a force for stabilization or destabilization in the new Iraq?

Using the Badr Corps as a case study, this chapter will argue that such militias have too much in the way of specialized, sectarian interests, along with a long history of seeking political power, to be compatible with state building in post-Baathist Iraq. The Badr Corps is among the more disciplined of the militias, but even it poses severe security problems in places such as Basra, and seems to have been involved in death-squad activities in Baghdad.

■ The Badr Corps in Iraqi Politics

The Badr Corps of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq was formed in the 1980s in Iran among Iraqi exiles from radical Shia parties seeking to overthrow the Baath regime from abroad.¹ The Shia form over 60 percent of the Iraqi population but have historically been repressed by the Sunni Arab minority. The secular, Arab nationalist Baath Party that came to power in a 1968 coup was dominated at its upper echelons by Sunni Arabs and had persecuted activist Shiites. Badr fighters were trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, and came to be ten thousand to fifteen thousand strong. They conducted guerrilla strikes and suicide bombings against

Baath targets all through the 1980s and 1990s. Their cells inside Iraq played a vigorous role in the failed uprising of spring 1991, after Saddam Hussein's defeat in Kuwait at the hands of the international coalition led by the United States.²

As the Bush administration made it clear it would invade Iraq to unseat Saddam Hussein, expatriate Iraqi parties had a choice of cooperating (and being rewarded in the new order) or of remaining on the sidelines. Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim agreed to talk to the US government, though he hoped they would back his Badr Corps to fight and take Iraq, just as Washington had taken Afghanistan by backing the Northern Alliance. Al-Hakim was deeply dismayed to discover that the United States instead planned to invade and occupy Iraq with its own army, and to rule it by fiat thereafter. He nevertheless continued to keep in close contact with the US government and never could bring himself to break with it.

Given the close ties between Badr and the Iranian regime, some of the militia's leaders disagreed with Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim's alliance of convenience with the United States. A dissident faction of SCIRI released a communiqué, in March 2003, complaining that al-Hakim had packed the organization's council with yes-men and remarking, "[W]e support the Badr Brigade leaders in their latest initiative in which they rejected Baqir al-Hakim's unilateral policies and denounced his move to throw himself into the lap of the Americans."³ Since the titular Badr leader was Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, this report raises the question of whether he differed with his older brother on policy.

Despite some internal dissension, most Badr units became committed to joining in the war effort against Saddam. They began doing maneuvers at their base at Darbandikhan in Iran, near the border with Iraq. Badr fighters came first of all into Kurdistan, where the Kurds welcomed them as allies. In late February 2003, "ten truck loads" of Badr fighters are said to have crossed over from Iran, deploying in Khaniqin and Penjwin.⁴ On March 16, on the eve of the war, the major Iraqi opposition parties that maintained paramilitaries met in Kurdistan to set up a joint military command that included the Badr Corps, the Kurdish *peşmarga*, and other forces. A Kurdish leader gave a telephone interview with the Kuwaiti daily *Al-Watan* in which he insisted that the paramilitaries "will play a major role" in the overthrow of the regime.⁵ SCIRI figure Muhsin al-Hakim gave a press conference in Tehran just after the United States invaded, in which he affirmed, "The Badr Corps will continue its activities in northern and central Iraq, as well as in Baghdad and important southern cities."⁶

In late March, aware of the Badr infiltration, US secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld identified the group as a cat's paw of Iran and threatened to have the advancing US military treat them as enemy combatants. SCIRI spokesman Muhsin al-Hakim denied that Badr was an extension of the

Iranian Revolutionary Guards.⁷ The regime fell in April, but the United States and Britain still did not have effective control of the center-north of the country, giving an opening to the Badr fighters. Presumably having come down to nearby Diyala province from Kurdistan, in April the Badr Corps battled the remnants of the Baath military for the city of Baquba, northeast of Baghdad, which US Marines had not yet entered. A Kurdish newspaper reported:

Every night there are clashes near Badr Army headquarters. Sometimes the fighting lasts two hours, and most of the time people are killed and injured. The people of Baquba are not satisfied with the presence of the Badr Army. In a recent development, a group was formed asking all political parties in the area to cooperate with it in order to force the army out. It is worth mentioning that the Badr Army was prevented from entering the liberated areas but it infiltrated into some other areas and carries out its political activities.⁸

In mid-April, the Kuwaiti daily *Al-Watan* warned that its source was saying that "elements of SCIRI's Badr Brigade have entered certain areas in the southern city of Al-Kut in civilian dress and have mingled with the population. He estimated their number at 9,000." The source expressed fears that the Iran-backed paramilitary would next attempt to infiltrate Basra province.⁹ The numbers mentioned are certainly exaggerated, but that the Badr was coming into Iraq is perfectly plausible. By April 25, the US military was making a concerted effort to detain Badr Corps combatants, seeing them as proxies of Iran.¹⁰

Badr fighters quickly discovered that they were not the only Shiite paramilitary. Young men in the Shiite slums loyal to young clerical firebrand Muqtada al-Sadr of Kufa established patrols, dominated mosques and clinics, and ran protection rackets. They were eventually dubbed by Sadr the "Mahdi Army." They were loyal to the memory of Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, killed by Saddam in 1999, and they ridiculed the al-Hakims for having fled Iraq for the safety of Iran in the Baath period. They largely kept SCIRI and Badr out of east Baghdad, which they dubbed "Sadr City," and competed for influence in southern provinces such as Maysan. Yet, by avoiding clashes with the United States and utilizing the contacts established along their rat lines, which they had used to infiltrate Iraq from Iran, the Badr Corps established itself as a stronger and more mature force in much of the south than the Mahdi Army.

With the fall of Saddam, SCIRI and Badr leaders began returning to Iraq. The corps commander, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, came to Najaf in mid-April. On May 10, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim crossed from Iran to Basra, where he addressed ten thousand admirers at a stadium. The British military offered him protection, fearing that he might meet the same

fate as Abdul Majid al-Khu'i, who returned to Iraq from London with coalition backing and was cut down by a mob in Najaf on April 10. Al-Hakim insisted on being guarded by Badr Corps fighters.¹¹

In mid-May, US civil administrator L. Paul Bremer issued an order demanding that all armed groups in the country give up their heavy weapons and apply for permits to carry light arms. The Agence France-Presse interpreted this decree as the dissolution of all militias save the Kurdish *peshmerga*.¹² In fact, the United States never had the troops available to enforce a ban on owning light weapons, so only the ban on heavy weapons was effective, and then only with regard to carrying them in public. Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim rather disingenuously replied that the Badr Corps had no weapons!¹³ In any case, in late May, US military commanders reported that Badr members were "playing by the rules" and seemed to pose no threat.¹⁴

In a May 31, 2003, interview on Al-Jazeera, the anchor asked Abdul Aziz al-Hakim whether Badr would give up its heavy arms. He replied in the affirmative:

As you know, the Badr Corps had been working against the criminal Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein. After the collapse of this regime, there is no justification for the Badr Corps to keep its heavy weapons. Therefore, it left these weapons. The Badr Corps intends to work in the fields of construction, keeping security, and supporting the Iraqi people in their political demands of establishing a national Iraqi government that is elected by the Iraqis.¹⁵

He rejected, however, US demands that the Badr Corps disarm completely, abandoning even its light weaponry, and complaining that it was unfair to make such a demand of the Shia while allowing the Kurdish *peshmerga* to retain their arms: "There should be no discrimination between the Iraqis, although we are proud of our Kurdish brothers."

On June 5, L. Paul Bremer's staff told the Arab press about a plan to disarm the Badr Corps and said it would not be incorporated into the new army. He said that armed groups would be given an amnesty until June 14 to turn in their heavy weapons and would only be allowed to retain pistols and hunting rifles if kept at home.¹⁶ SCIRI leader Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim became forthright in continuing to defend a role for an armed Badr Corps. In his first major Friday prayer sermon in Najaf after the fall of Saddam, on June 6, 2003, he replied to the proposal for disarming the militias, saying that "criminal groups should first be disarmed. The followers, henchmen and remnants of the regime who are still armed and are committing crimes should be disarmed first. Looting gangs must be disarmed. These gangs are wreaking havoc in the land."¹⁷ Also in early June, al-Hakim gave an interview with *Der Spiegel* in which he said that Badr no

longer needed tanks or artillery, but would continue to deploy light weapons. Indeed, he said, Iraqis in general needed such weapons for self-defense. He wondered how the United States could allow armed bands, including Saddamists, to roam with weapons but wanted to disarm the Badr Corps, which was "an integral part of the Iraqi people."¹⁸

The United States' need for armed Kurdish allies in the north led them to face difficulties in arguing for disarming the militias of the Shia south, since such a policy was clearly invidious. Tensions between the United States and the Badr Corps continued to flare up from time to time. On June 7, the US military announced that it had detained twenty members of the Supreme Council and the Badr Corps who were making their way into Iraq from Iran.¹⁹ Typically, such captured figures were released fairly quickly.

SCIRI leadership, for all its impatience to be rid of the United States and Britain, imposed strict discipline on the Badr fighters. In late July, Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim gave an interview in which he said that he supported peaceful resistance to the US occupation so as to convince them that Iraqis were perfectly capable of managing their own affairs. He darkly hinted that if the United States did not respond to Iraqi demands, "it will be a different story." He complained that Iraqis suffered insecurity at US hands, and could not even leave money at home because the foreign troops would steal it. He "categorically denied any connection between the Badr troops and the ongoing armed Iraqi resistance."²⁰

As security and services deteriorated in southern Iraq, some observers became alarmed about Badr's ambitions. In mid-August, riots broke out against the British in the large southern port city of Basra, over lack of fuel and services. A Kuwaiti daily reported that the Badr Corps had become a state within a state and was responsible for the killing of several truck drivers: "It has begun powerfully organizing its ranks in order to establish hegemony over the southern regions of Iraq, encompassing the area from southern Baghdad to the Faw Peninsula." It accused the corps of recruiting ex-Baathists and criminal elements in order to establish a powerful army, and of funding itself by car theft rings: "Reliable sources tell *al-Watan* that the commander of the Corps now dominates entire districts of Basra and that he is readying 'prisons and special sites' wherein he will imprison all those who attempt to stand in his way." Badr stood accused of requisitioning trucks and tankers and stealing tools and equipment.²¹ While at the time this report might have read as breathless, in light of subsequent events it seems plausible. On August 25, Kuwait's *Al-Watan* reported that coalition forces were planning to move against Badr in Safwan and elsewhere in the south.

If the coalition did entertain such plans, they were derailed by an enormous explosion. On August 29, 2003, guerrillas assassinated Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim with a massive truck bomb in front of the shrine of Imam

Ali in Najaf, as he was exiting Friday prayer ceremonies. Hundreds of members of the Badr Corps immediately headed for Najaf. A Middle East wire service reported, "The witnesses told the MENA correspondent that hundreds of the brigade's elements were seen in military fatigues bearing weapons and rocket propelled grenades (RPGs) and assembling in different places in Baghdad before heading for Najaf."²² They were said to be threatening revenge. The assassination produced a crisis in the relationship between the United States and its allies among the Shia religious parties, a threat the United States could ill afford at a time when the Sunni Arab guerrilla movement was growing.

The very next day, SCIRI and its allies, according to the *New York Times*, pressed the United States on the "possibility of forming a large Iraqi paramilitary force to help improve security in the country." The United States appears seriously to have considered the idea of setting up such a force, thousands strong, which would eventually patrol Iraqi cities as US troops withdrew. The Iraqis insisted that they could form such a force in just over a month. Dexter Filkins quoted a participant in the talks, Mudhar Shakhawt, as saying, "The situation has changed, and there is a new receptiveness to the idea. . . . This force could move inside the cities and allow coalition forces to withdraw to places outside."²³ Shiite leaders worried that they would not be able to keep control of the Shiite masses, enraged by the blasphemous killing of a prominent ayatollah outside their holiest shrine. Followers of Muqtada al-Sadr blamed the US military for the blast, and demanded that they leave Iraq.

Even though the idea of a combined Shia militia force for the south was quickly shelved, as the feared massive unrest among Shiites did not materialize, the United States appears to have backed off pressuring the Badr Corps after this incident. Its commander, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, emerged as the new leader of SCIRI, ensuring that it would continue to enjoy the support of its civilian parent party.

In late October 2003, the political adviser of the Badr Corps, Muhsin al-Hakim, announced that it had become an Iraqi reconstruction organization. Henceforward, he said, the group would be known as the Badr Organization. He maintained that the militia no longer had any heavy arms to turn over. The new focus on reconstruction would involve a "structural change." It seemed clear, however, that Badr would not change its stripes too radically. The spokesman admitted, "Security is one of the requirements of development and the Badr Organization will participate actively in order to achieve development."²⁴ Moreover, only the previous day *Al-Adalah*, the newspaper of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, had carried an editorial arguing that "Only the Mujahidin [i.e., Badr] are capable of maintaining the Iraqi people's security."²⁵ The new emphasis on development would position the organization to receive monies earmarked for that purpose, at the same

time that its leaders appear to have hoped such activities would soften their image. In this regard, they may have learned something from the Pentagon, which was having its troops do development work as well.

As Badr became involved in politics, it began to reach out to possible constituencies. A paraphrase of a 2003 article in SCIRI's official newspaper informs us that "the tribes in holy al-Najaf held their first conference in coordination with the branch of the Badr Organization in the city on December 16" and that "many political, social, and cultural figures attended the conference." Among the issues addressed in the speeches given was "the effective role the Iraqi tribes are supposed to assume at this stage in the history of the country."²⁶ The rural tribes are armed and organized on a kinship basis, and if Badr was looking for new members, they would have been prime recruits.

Badr was already beginning its transformation into a political party in its own right. In late December 2003, an Arab journalist who visited the small city of Samawah in the south reported that its municipal council "was totally dominated by the *Da'wah* party, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, and the *Tha'r Allah* group of the Badr forces."²⁷ Badr Corpsemen were said in January 2004 to be dividing up policing and security duties in Samawah with Al-Dawa Party activists.

This sort of situation existed in many small towns and villages in the Shia south, as came to light in early March, when British troops in the small town of Qal'at Salih south of Amara were fired on by a Badr fighter, who took refuge in the Badr Organization offices. They followed him there and arrested all the activists within, but then a town crowd gathered to protest and set their vehicle on fire. Four British troops were killed in the melee, and, it was said, a civilian woman. Such firefights between the British and Badr were rare, but the real moral of the story was the obvious loyalty of the townspeople to their militia.²⁸ Throughout 2004, Sunnis charged that Badr was engaged in a secret, dirty war of assassination against former Baathist officials and other perceived enemies.

By late 2004, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim was boasting that the Badr Corps had one hundred thousand men under arms (almost certainly a vast exaggeration), and he proposed that they be deployed to guard polling stations during the January 30, 2005, elections. Informally, this may have been done in some of the Shia south, where violence was kept to a minimum. Sunni Arab critics raised alarms about the offer, pointing to what they considered the group's terrorist past and implying that Badr guards for the elections were a surefire way to ensure that SCIRI and the Badr Corps stole the elections.²⁹ The Badr Organization ran as a party in its own right, as part of the United Iraqi Alliance, the coalition put together by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. It held a small bloc of seats in the federal parliament, as part of the ruling coalition (the UIA gained 51 percent of seats).

The UIA victory gave SCIRI control of the Ministry of the Interior, which in Iraq was long responsible for domestic spying and repression. The new minister, Bayan Jabr—a nom de guerre for Baqir Sulagh—was a Turkmen SCIRI activist long resident in Damascus with strong ties to Badr. He inducted large numbers of Badr fighters into the new units of special police commandos, which were given names such as the Scorpion Brigade and the Wolf Brigade. Under Jabr, the interior ministry also pushed for the Badr Corps to dominate the police in cities such as Amara in the south.³⁰ In the January 2005 elections, the Badr Organization also won seats on the provincial councils. In the Shiite holy city of Najaf, the new elected governor hailed from the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, and the deputy governor was from Badr. Everywhere the Badr Organization won provincial council seats it became an ally for the federal Interior Ministry in facilitating the recruitment of Badr fighters into the official police force. This process occurred in Basra, Najaf, Karbala, and elsewhere, though its exact details are murky. The police chief of Basra gave an interview in the summer of 2005 in which he admitted that much of his force was of dubious loyalty and mainly oriented to militias and religious parties.

In the negotiations over the formation of a new government in spring of 2005, after the victory of SCIRI and Al-Dawa in the national polls, Kurdish MP Arif Tayfur complained that SCIRI was pushing for the Badr Corps to have the sort of security duties in the south that the *peshmerga* or Kurdish militiamen had been given in Kurdistan.³¹ Since the Kurds refused to allow federal troops on their soil and depended for security wholly on the *peshmerga*, which they recognized as the official armed forces of Kurdistan, the analogy suggests that Abdul Aziz al-Hakim was already envisaging a wide-ranging role for Badr.

The special police commandos with a Badr background had been trained by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, and they were increasingly accused of engaging in death-squad tactics against those they suspected of belonging to or aiding the Sunni Arab guerrilla movement. Men dressed, at least, as special police commandos began invading Sunni neighborhoods and even mosques and kidnapping the men within, who often later appeared in the streets dead, with a bullet behind the ear. In April and May of 2005, a major dispute broke out when the hard-line Salafi Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS) openly accused Badr of running anti-Sunni death squads from the Ministry of the Interior. SCIRI and Badr officials angrily denied the charges, and violence threatened to erupt.³² Ironically, an emerging crisis was somewhat defused when young clerical leader Muqtada al-Sadr stepped in to mediate between the two.³³

The special police commandos set up secret prisons where they tortured suspected guerrillas. US forces invaded one of these prisons in late summer 2005 and released its inmates, who showed clear signs of abuse, torture, and

starvation. In contrast, Badr fighters appear not to have been able to infiltrate the ranks of the new Iraqi army in any numbers.

Having become a force in southern Iraqi politics, the Badr Organization, like SCIRI, increasingly saw itself as a regional political force, based in the south. Its leader, Hadi al-Amiri, therefore backed a provision in the new constitution drafted in summer 2005, which allowed the formation of provincial confederacies (several of Iraq's eighteen provinces could band together to establish a joint administration and increase their weight vis-à-vis Baghdad).³⁴ Provincial confederacies, modeled on the Kurdish Regional Government in the north, would be able to claim 100 percent ownership of all future petroleum and other natural resource finds, denying them to the weak federal government. The likelihood is that such provincial confederacies, if founded, will be theocratic mini-states under the dominance of Shiite religious parties such as SCIRI and Al-Dawa.

Such a loose federalism was opposed by the other Shia forces, the Al-Dawa Party, and the followers of Muqtada al-Sadr. In September of 2005, Mahdi Army militiamen clashed with Badr fighters in Najaf and Karbala, raising alarms of an intra-Shiite war. Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani and other Shia notables stepped in, however, to calm the dispute, which subsided.

In the run-up to new elections on December 15, 2005, the United Iraqi Alliance admitted the Sadr bloc, promising it that an effort would be made to allot it thirty seats. After the elections, in which the UIA won 46 percent of seats, the Sadrist made an alliance within the coalition with the Al-Dawa Party. SCIRI and Badr lost their dominance within the UIA, as a result. They were unable to get their candidate, Adil Abdul Mahdi, nominated for prime minister. The UIA first chose Ibrahim al-Ja'afari, who proved unacceptable to all the other major parties and to the United States. The UIA therefore relented and replaced him with another Al-Dawa leader, Nuri "Jawad" al-Maliki, who had long been in exile in Damascus.

When, in late February 2006, guerrillas blew up the Al-Askariya Shrine in Samarra, the site of the tombs of the tenth and eleventh Imams and a place associated with the messianic twelfth Imam for Shiites, communal violence broke out on a scale seldom seen in modern Iraq. Shia mobs roamed Baghdad's streets looking for Sunni Arabs to kill. Over 100 Sunni mosques were attacked, several being burned to the ground and dozens damaged. In early March, a United Nations envoy charged that Badr had been involved in hundreds of killings and assassinations.³⁵ In contrast, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim and Hadi al-Amiri used the Samarra attack to defend the Badr Corps, suggesting that had it been allowed to operate freely instead of being repressed under US pressure, and had it been guarding shrines like the Askariyyah, the desecration would never have occurred.

After a late March US raid on a Sadrist religious center, or Husayniya, which went awry and resulted in the deaths of several civilians, al-Amiri

even at one point became so bold as to demand the expulsion from Baghdad of US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, who had decided to mollify the Sunni Arabs by reining in Badr.³⁶ This demand went too far, and, given the fact of US power in Iraq, damaged Badr's case rather than helped it. It was not repeated. Badr Corps fighters were accused of again using death-squad tactics against Sunni Arabs in the weeks that followed. In one specific incident, Interior Ministry special police commandos, mostly Badr Corps fighters, attempted to invade a largely Sunni Arab Baghdad district, but were repulsed by local Sunni neighborhood militiamen.

As the new government was forming in spring of 2006, the continued prominence of militias in Iraq had become a central issue in high politics. Al-Maliki pledged to disband them and to allow their members to be recruited into government security forces. The Badr Corps and its dominant position in the special police commandos was an issue that inspired a great deal of politicking, with attempts made to ensure that SCIRI lost control of the Ministry of the Interior. In late April, reports surfaced that large reconstruction contracts, as well as bribes to permit the work, had been granted to Badr and other militias.³⁷ In contrast to the al-Maliki approach, the ex-Baathist secularists Salih al-Mutlaq and Ayad Allawi agreed that the militias had to be disbanded, but rejected the idea of incorporating organizations such as Badr into the new security forces.³⁸ In any case, both the Supreme Council and Sadrist leaders disingenuously denied that their militias any longer existed as such, saying that they were popular political forces.

In late spring 2006, the militia issue was broached with special urgency in the southern port city of Basra, which witnessed a wave of assassinations in April and May (one every hour for the previous month, according to the Iraqi government). Some of the assassins appear to have been Marsh Arab tribesmen who had come into the city after the fall of Saddam, and their victims seem to have included political rivals. Iraqi government sources reported that the police mostly refused to attempt to apprehend the perpetrators, fearing reprisals from their tribesmen. Sources told the Iraqi newspaper *Al-Zaman* (May 16, 2006) that Basra was in chaos and dominated by militias and lawless gangs. Automobiles with darkened windows cruised the streets, armed militiamen within, imposing their law on the city. These sources blamed Kuwait and Iran for the situation, alleging that their intelligence services were funding and arming the Iraqi militias for their own purposes (the allegation is probably that Iran was funding the Badr Corps). Tribal firefights between the Marsh Arab Al-Bait Sa'idah tribe and the Bani Mansur were common—as were feuds between the Bani Ammar and Al-'Ashur. The sources said that Basra was without authority save that of the militiamen. The major political parties, they said, were unable to dampen down the violence because they were so divided against one another (this

allegation is probably a reference to the divisions on the city council between the Fadila Party and SCIRI).

The governor of Basra, Muhammad Misbah al-Wa'ili of the Fadila Party, attempted to fire his police chief. He complained that the Basra police had not undertaken a single investigation of the hundreds of assassinations. He further charged that some in the Iraqi border patrol and the army had suspicious ties to the assassins. Al-Wa'ili also insisted that two clerical representatives of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani were involved in the collapse of security. This dispute between governor and police chief had overtones of a conflict between the Fadila ("Virtue") Party and the Badr Corps, which had a privileged position inside the Basra police force because of the influence of the SCIRI-controlled Interior Ministry in 2005 and 2006.³⁹

In early May, persons dressed as Iraqi policemen lured the head of the Al-Karamisha Marsh Arab tribe in Basra into a trap and killed him. In the aftermath, the furious tribesmen warred with police and with Shia militias in several districts of the port, at a time of vacuum in municipal government. Majid al-Sari, adviser to the minister of defense, reported that Al-Karamisha tribesmen came out into the streets of the city heavily armed, and killed eleven policemen in the course of an attack on a police station in the Dayr quarter to the south of the city.

They also burned down two buildings used in the Intisar district of the Dayr quarter by the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq. The hostility of the Karamisha to SCIRI and their torching of that party's district headquarters suggest strongly that they believed the policemen who attacked their chief had actually been Badr Corps. The assassination, in turn, may have itself been vengeance for Karamisha operations against Basra police, themselves often recruited from militias such as the Badr Corps and the Mahdi Army. Two organizations, Rebels of the Uprising and the Revenge of God (Tha'r Allah, a branch of the Badr Corps), staged demonstrations on successive days against Governor al-Wa'ili in protest against the collapse of security in the city. Here we see another Badr connection and increasingly can conclude that these events derived from a growing feud between the Karamisha and Badr, both as the latter was organized within the police and as an independent militia. A Basran living in Jordan e-mailed me in late May that reports from the city spoke of the tribes battling Iranian-influenced elements. Since native Iraqis often coded Badr as an Iranian cat's paw, this allegation is further evidence of the character of the struggle.⁴⁰

In late May and early June 2006, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki attempted to deal with the situation in Basra. He visited the city and consulted with its notables and politicians. He established a provincial security council with representatives of all the major political factions in the city,

including SCIRI and Badr, and declared a state of emergency, placing troops of the newly formed Iraqi Tenth Division at major checkpoints. These steps do not appear to have restored security to the city, though the severe crisis of May 2006 passed. The party and tribal militias remained armed, active, and involved in massive smuggling of petroleum, which fueled their turf wars. In summer and fall of 2006, several firefights broke out between the Badr Corps (or Badr Corps-dominated police forces), not only in Basra but also in Amara and Diwaniyah, other important cities of the Shiite south.⁴¹

■ Conclusion

The full extent of Badr paramilitary control of the Shia south is difficult to estimate. It has rivals, such as the Mahdi Army of Muqtada al-Sadr, which predominates in east Baghdad (Sadr City). In Basra, the paramilitary of the Fadila (Virtue Party) also has influence in the police. But in much of the south, especially Najaf, Karbala, Diwaniyah, Nasiriyah, Samawah, and large swathes of Basra, the Badr Corps seems likely to provide what local security there is. The United States had proved unable to disarm it or curb its influence. In part, they failed because they depended heavily on the *peshmerga* in the north and so lacked credibility when they demanded that the Shia give up their paramilitaries. In part, the United States was threatened by the Sunni Arab guerrilla movement and could not afford to move dramatically against the Shiite militias, lest they lose their major Arab ally. And in part, their inability to ensure security in cities like Najaf, and the consequent assassination of Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, made a powerful argument to local political forces for their need for the Badr Corps.

If Badr has turned to death-squad tactics on a grand scale, it has, however, become more of a security problem than a security solution. At the same time, given how beholden the United Iraqi Alliance is to parties with strong paramilitaries, it remains to be seen if it has the political will to curb them. And, given that the United States dissolved the regular Iraqi military and that it will take years to form a new one, it is not clear that the new political class could survive a single day were it not guarded by its paramilitaries. Insecurity has become both the mother and the child of the chaos in Iraq, and the Badr Corps will not go gentle into that good night.

The narrative presented above suggests that the Badr Corps as a stand-alone militia poses significant and ongoing challenges to restoring security and building the new Iraqi state. Where there is a clear Shia majority and SCIRI political dominance, as in Samawah, it is possible that Badr's peace-keeping efforts are a positive force. In any case, the multinational forces have withdrawn from Muthanna province where Samawah is located, and so there may be few alternatives for the local population to dependence on

Badr or on a police force infiltrated by Badr. In such small-town, all-Shia settings, the Badr Corps appears to have behaved in a relatively disciplined and positive manner.

But where there is a mixed population, as in Baghdad, the Badr Corps has been involved in ethnic cleansing campaigns and death-squad activity against Sunni Arab forces and populations. Even in largely Shiite Basra, it has engaged in faction-fighting with other Shia militias and with Marsh Arab tribal gangs. Even when Badr elements have been regularized, as with their induction into the special police commandos of the Interior Ministry in 2005 and 2006, they continue to function as a rogue element, corrupting the national police and pursuing private vendettas. They also are likely vectors of continued Iranian influence-peddling in Iraq, often of an unhelpful character.

In conclusion, it has to be argued that the Badr Corps and other sectarian militias are for the most part a negative factor in Iraqi security and state building. In some limited contexts, they might contribute to local security by policing neighborhoods. But for the most part, they have behaved in ways that exacerbated sectarian tensions and decreased security for the entire population, and this has been true whether they functioned as independent militias or were integrated into official Iraqi security forces, mainly local police or the Interior Ministry special police commandos. The best thing that could be done with Badr Corps fighters is to decommission them as a paramilitary force and give them government desk jobs in the civilian bureaucracy. It would be dangerous to simply dissolve the Corps and leave its members unemployed. But they are not suitable recruits for the new Iraqi military and police, given their background and long experience as a specifically sectarian guerrilla force. The same conclusion would apply to the Mahdi Army of Muqtada al-Sadr, which is even less professional and disciplined than the Badr Corps. Ultimately, the Iraqi army and police will have to be built from scratch.

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