DYNAMICS BEHIND SADRIST-IRANIAN RELATIONS 2003-2018: A SOCIAL MOVEMENTS THEORY PERSPECTIVE

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MUSTAFA KAYMAZ

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This is to certify that we have read this thesis and that in our opinion it is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Political Science and International Relations

Examining Committee Members:

	DECISION	SIGNATURE
Assoc. Prof. Hasan Tarkan Kösebalaban (Thesis Advisor)	ACCEPTED	
Assoc. Prof. Burak Bilgehan Özpek	Accepted	
Assist. Prof. Şirin Duygulu Elcim	ACCEPTED	

This is to confirm that this thesis complies with all the standards set by the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences of İstanbul Şehir University.

Date:
19.07.2019

Seal/Signature

I hereby declare that all information in this document has been obtained and presented in accordance with academic rules and standards of ethical conduct. I also declare that, as required by these rules and standards, I have fully cited and referenced all material and results that are not original to this work.

First Name, Last Name: Mustafa Kaymaz

Signature:

ABSTRACT

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Kaymaz, Mustafa.
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The study of armed non-state actors (ANSAs) in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has gained momentum since the onset of Arab uprisings of 2011, and particularly upon the developments in Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. While the literature on proxy war mainly views these actors as a foreign policy tool of regional and global powers, this thesis offers a broader perspective based on the Social Movements Theory (SMT) focusing on the side of armed groups. Using the Iraqi Sadrist Movement's relations with Iran from 2003 to 2018 as a case study, it argues that the social basis of the movement, the Shia underclass who were most severely affected by the Iranian intervention in Iraq and adopted an Iraqi nationalist ideology has primarily shaped the said relationship. Due to their social basis resentful against Iran, Sadrists had to maintain their independence from the Tehran regime even at times of short-lived rapprochements. This study contributes to the literature on armed groups by exploring the role of the social basis as well as to the SMT by analyzing a movement with an armed group and demonstrating the role of leadership. Finally, the thesis shows that sectarian identity does not necessarily build alliances or cause conflicts in the MENA region by observing that there are intra-sectarian rivalries as well as inter-communal alliances.

Keywords: Sadrist Movement, Iran, social movements, militias

ÖZ

SADR HAREKETİ-İRAN İLİŞKİLERİNİN ARKASINDAKİ DİNAMİKLER 2003-2018:
BİR TOPLUMSAL HAREKETLER TEORİSİ PERSPEKTİFİ

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Ortadoğu ve Kuzey Afrika (MENA) bölgesindeki devlet dışı silahlı aktörler hakkındaki araştırmalar 2011 Arap isyanlarından sonra ve özellikle Libya, Suriye, Irak ve Yemen'deki gelişmeler üzerine ivme kazandı. Vekâlet savaşı literatürü bu aktörleri bölgesel ve küresel güçlerin birer dış politika aracı olarak görürken bu tez, silahlı gruplar tarafına odaklanıp Toplumsal Hareketler Teorisi (THT) üzerinden daha geniş bir perspektif sunmaktadır. Sadr Hareketi'nin 2003-2018 arasında İran ile olan ilişkilerini vaka çalışması olarak kullanan bu tez, İran'ın Irak'taki müdahalelerinden en ciddi şekilde etkilenen Şii alt sınıfın Irak milliyetçisi bir ideoloji benimseyerek söz konusu ilişkiyi büyük oranda biçimlendirdiğini savunmaktadır. İran'a karşı kızgınlık besleyen toplumsal tabanlarından ötürü Sadrcılar, kısa ömürlü yakınlaşmaları dönemlerinde bile Tahran rejiminden bağımsızlıklarını korumak zorunda kalmıştır. Bu çalışma, toplumsal tabanın rolünü ele alarak silahlı gruplar literatürüne ve silahlı kanadı olan bir toplumsal hareketi inceleyip liderliğin rolünü göstererek de THT'ye katkı yapmaktadır. Son olarak bu tez, hem mezhep içi rekabetlerin hem de mezhepler arası ittifakların bulunduğunu gözlemleyerek mezhep kimliğinin MENA bölgesinde zorunlu olarak ittifak veya çatışmalara neden olmadığını göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sadr Hareketi, İran, toplumsal hareketler, milisler

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract iv
Öz v
Acknowledgments vi
Table of Contents vii
CHAPTERS
1. Introduction 1
2. Theoretical Framework 6
    2.1. The Study of Social Movements 9
    2.2. Theoretical Tools Used in the SMT 9
    2.3. Social Movements Theory and Islamic Movements in the Middle East 11
    2.4. Social Movements Theory and the Sadrist Movement 13
3. Historical Background 16
    3.1. Baqir al-Sadr's Activism and Roots of the Sadrist Movement in the 1960s and 70s 17
    3.2. Sadeq al-Sadr and the Establishment of the Sadrist Movement in the 1990s 18
    3.3. Muqtada al-Sadr and the Rise of the Mahdi Army 19
    3.4. The Civil War of 2006-2007 and the Disbanding of the Mahdi Army 20
    3.5. Muqtada's Return to Iraq as an Opposition Figure 21
    3.6. Saraya al-Salam and the fight against ISIS 22
    3.7. Electoral Participation of the Sadrist Movement 2005-2018 23
4. Sadrists' Relations with Iran 26
    4.1. Baqir al-Sadr and Sadeq al-Sadr's Relations with Iran 27
    4.2. The Sadrist-Iranian Relations in the Post-Saddam Era 28
    4.3. The Mahdi Army and Iran 29
    4.4. Relations with Iran while al-Sadr was in Iran and after His Return 31
5. Sectarian Identity and Political Ideology of the Sadrist Movement 35
    5.1. Sectarian Identity of the Sadrist Movement 35

5.2. The Political Ideology of the Sadrist Movement 37
5.2.1. Iraqi Nationalism 38
5.2.2. Demand for Technocratic Rule 40
5.2.3. Political Activism versus the Quietist Trend 41
5.3. Conclusion 42
6. Leadership: Muqtada Al-Sadr and Relations with Iran 44
6.1. Family Name: Ahl al-Bayt and al-Sadr 44
6.2. Speaking Style and Addressing to the Hearts of the Audience 45
6.3. Flexibility in Strategy Changes 46
7. Social Base of the Sadrist Movement and Relations with Iran 48
7.1. The Outlook of Iraqi Society 49
7.2. Who are the Sadrists? 52
7.3. The Sadrist Social Base and Relations with Iran 56
8. Conclusions 59
Bibliography 67

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1: Seats won by Sadrist blocs in Iraqi parliamentary elections 2005-2018...24

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 7.1: GDP per capita in Iraq in the 2003-2017 period adjusted for the 2010 USD 49
Figure 7.2: Distribution of Iraqis worrying about unemployment and civil war 51
Figure 7.3: Level of Confidence in public and religious institutions 51
Figure 7.4: Level of education among al-Ahrar supporters and Iraq in general 53
Figure 7.5: Perceived social class among al-Ahrar supporters and Iraqis in general 54
Figure 7.6: Employment status among al-Ahrar supporters and Iraqis in general 55

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The study of armed non-state actors (ANSAs) in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has gained momentum since the onset of Arab uprisings of 2011, and particularly upon the developments in Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. As the ANSAs increased their activities and became more influential in the turn of events, many questions regarding their political and security roles were raised by academics and decision-makers alike. Among such questions is the role of ANSAs in the so-called proxy wars across the region, which is mostly regarded in terms of foreign policies of states that “use” them as a means to achieve their goals in the region. While acknowledging the importance of such an approach, this thesis proposes a complementary perspective that is studying the question from the other angle of the equation: the specific ANSA itself. In other words, what characteristics of an ANSA shape its relations with a foreign state? Why does an ANSA choose to (or not to) ally with a specific state?

After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the new regime sought to import the idea of revolution to other Muslim-majority countries, especially to those who adhere to Shia Islam. As part of such a goal, Tehran built alliances with Shiite social and political movements. While many of the Shiite groups in Iraq established stable alliances with Iran especially after the fall of the Baath regime in 2003, the Sadrist Movement led by a young cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr chose not to. Despite some short-lived rapprochements, Sadrists emphasized their independence from any foreign actor. The reasons behind such a preference will shed light onto non-state actors’ relations with states. Hence, this thesis will attempt to answer the question “Why the Sadrist Movement had distanced itself from Iran during the period 2003-2018 as opposed to most of the Iraqi Shiite movements and militia groups allying themselves with the Islamic Republic?”

Emerged in the 1990s in poor neighborhoods of Baghdad under the leadership of Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr, the Sadrist Movement provides a relevant case to investigate the question mentioned above. The founder of the movement, Sadeq al-Sadr, had not embraced the *welayat e faqih* doctrine of Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The doctrine that envisages the leadership of the most knowledgeable jurist among the Shiite religious scholars had found many followings among the Shia communities in the Middle East, including Iraq. The Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) that was found shortly after the Iranian Revolution sided with Iran through its military wing, the Badr Brigades during the Iran-Iraq War 1980-1988. From the beginning, the Sadrists were critical of such an alliance. Sadeq al-Sadr was killed by the Saddam regime in 1999 resulting in an inactivity period for his movement until the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The son of Sadeq al-Sadr, Muqtada, took over the movement after his father. With his militia group named the Mahdi Army, Muqtada launched a war of resistance against the US invasion. The reports claiming that the Mahdi Army received military and financial support from Iran were denied by both sides. Muqtada's Mahdi Army, as well as Iran-aligned Shiite militias, inflicted significant damage on the US and coalition forces. During that time, Muqtada was being viewed as "the man of Iran in Iraq" by the media and analysts. However, Iran became more interested in the political reconstruction of Iraq that would be dominated by the Shiite elites most of whom had just returned from exile in Iran. Hence, the Sadrist-Iran rapprochement through the Mahdi Army was short-lived. Despite the claims, the Sadrists stressed their independence. In 2008, upon pressures from the US, the new Iraqi government after Saddam, headed by the PM Nouri al-Maliki, suppressed the resistance. Sadr disbanded the Mahdi Army and went to Iran, stating religious education in Qom as the main reason. He returned to Iraq in early 2011. After his return, he began to publicly embrace an Iraqi nationalist discourse rejecting any foreign interference in Iraq. When many Shia militia groups, such as the Badr Brigades and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq sent fighters to first, protect the Shiite shrines in Syria against the

IS and then fight alongside Iranian militias and Hezbollah in support of the Assad regime, the Sadrist Movement did not join the ranks. However, when in 2014, after the ISIS takeover of Mosul and establishment of Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), or *Hashd al-Shaabi* in Arabic, an umbrella organization consisting of over 40 militia groups some of which had already been in operation and some newly-formed after the *fatwa* by the Grand Ayatollah Sistani, the Sadrist movement joined in to the fight against ISIS with their own militia group, *Saraya al-Salam* or Peace Brigades.

During the war against the ISIS in Iraq, Sadr's militia group indirectly received Iranian support as part of the aid provided to the PMUs despite distancing themselves in rhetoric. After the declaration of victory against the ISIS by the then Iraqi PM Haider al-Abadi, Sadr called for the disarmament of all militia groups saying that they were no longer needed. In May 2018 Parliamentary Elections, the list endorsed by the Sadrists, *Sairoon*, came first with 54 of 329 seats followed by the *Fatah* Coalition with 47 seats, an Iran-aligned list consisting of PMU members who resigned from their militia posts to be elected.

The Sadrist Movement was not aligned with Iran from the beginning. They then received military and financial support from Tehran during the Mahdi Army's fight against the US but still maintained that they were independent of Iran. Throughout the post-2003 era, they resumed such a discourse. When some Iraqi Shiite militias sent their members to fight on the side of the Assad regime together with Iran and Hezbollah, Sadrists refused the call. They joined, however, to battles against the ISIS in Iraq. So, why do Sadrists had distanced themselves from Iran for the most part while other Shiite groups' alliance with Tehran remained relatively stable? This thesis argues that the social basis of the Sadrist Movement, the so-called Shiite underclass is the main factor behind the movement's resistance against Iranian interference and that the short periods of rapprochement can better be explained as transactional. For such purposes, the theoretical tools of Social Movements Theory will be employed.

The next chapter will introduce the Social Movements Theory and current approaches regarding behaviors of ANSAs. The analytical tools from this chapter will help us understand the Sadrist Movement's relations with Iran in a more organized and comprehensive manner. They will also prevent us from diving into unnecessary details and guide us about the relevant data.

The third chapter will be an analysis of the historical background of the Sadrist Movement. The conditions under which it was formed, the identity, ideology, and political views of its founder are essential in understanding its relations with Iran that will be explained in the fourth chapter. Chapter four will analyze the discourse and political behaviors of the movement concerning Iran. It will present the case before investigating why we observe such a distancing behavior in Sadrist-Iranian relations.

Chapter five, the Sectarian Identity and Political Ideology, will discuss the ideational aspects of the movement in comparison with other Shia socio-political movements in Iraq. Although they all adhere to the Twelver Shiite Sect, the Sadrist Movement disagree with others on and refuses the Khomeini's *welayat e faqih* doctrine. As for political ideology, the Sadrist Movement professes support for a political system in which Iraq is a sovereign nation, independent from any foreign interference, organized in such a way that the lower classes of the society get their share of the benefits from the oil-rich country's revenues.

Chapter six will present the character, lineage, rhetoric, and ability to adapt to changing conditions of the leader of the Sadrist Movement, Muqtada al-Sadr. As the charismatic leader of the movement since 2003, Sadr indeed played a crucial role in shaping the political behavior of the Sadrist Movement. Hence, discussing his character, the way he leads the movement and handles matters is vital in understanding the Sadrist-Iranian relations. The seventh chapter, Social Basis, will discuss the popular aspect of the movement as the main factor in determining its relations with Iran. It is due to the nature

of this basis, it is argued, that the Sadrist Movement kept its distance from Iran and engaged with the latter only in a pragmatic way in times of need against mutual foes. This social basis, also called the Shia underclass, is the poorest segment of Iraqi society with lower-class Sunnis, excluded from the political process other than elections, and does not receive public services including even clean water and electricity in some areas and some periods of the year. They view the political elite as being self-interested and keeping all the benefits of the oil-rich country to themselves while serving the interests of foreign countries like Iran and the US. Hence, they oppose the Iran-aligned political forces and see Iran as the leading cause of their deprivation. Finally, the last chapter will conclude the points made in the thesis.

The sources of this thesis will be multi-faceted due to the multi-dimensional nature of its question. Depending on the topic, statements by and interviews movement's leaders, particularly Muqtada al-Sadr as well as news concerning a specific statement or behavior will be used as primary sources. Academic works and think tank reports and analyses on the movement and the politics of Iraq, in general, will constitute the secondary sources of the thesis.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This thesis will employ the analytical tools offered by the Social Movements Theory. Hence, this section will introduce SMT first. Then, it will explore the concepts and methods used in SMT literature. The third issue that needs to be dealt with is the use of the SMT in the context of Islamic Movements in the ME. Finally, the section will attempt to show why the SMT provides a better understanding of the Sadrist Movement concerning its relations with Iran.

The Sadrist Movement is a hybrid organization consisting of leadership, a political party represented in the parliament, a network of organizations providing certain social services such as charity aid and religious education, a social base, and an armed unit. There are four main points of focus in the literature on the movement. The first group approaches the movement from a security perspective with the armed organizations and activities of the movement at the center (E.g., Hubbard, 2007; Marston & Malkasian, 2008; Patten, 2007; Schlichte & Schneckener, 2015). The Mahdi Army, the militia group of the movement from 2003 to 2008 and Saraya al-Salam that joined the fight against the IS between 2014 and 2018, are the two major armed actors studied by this set of research.

The second group of studies focuses on the leadership of the Sadrist Movement (E.g., Bayless, 2012; Costel, 2008; Paley, 2008; Rahimi, 2010). This set of research places the personality, heritage, political maneuvers, and leadership skills of al-Sadr at the center of their analysis. From this perspective, al-Sadr is the primary decision-maker of the movement who sets the tactics and strategies and defines the allies and enemies for his followers. Hence, understanding him illuminates the analysis of the activities of the movement.

The focus of the third set of research is the electoral activities of political parties supported by the movement (Alaaldin, 2014; Matthew J. Godwin, 2012; Katzman, 2008; Plebani, 2013). This group analyzes the electoral coalitions the group joined as well as their performance in local as well as general elections. Starting from the December 2005 parliamentary elections, the Sadrists became a key player in the politics of Iraq with winning the largest number of seats, 54, in the May 2018 general elections. This approach helps better understand the political stances of the movement as the leader determines and publicly endorses the list of candidates that later is supported by the base.

Finally, there are studies analyzing the Sadrists as a socio-political movement, accounting for all of the aspects of the group with a comprehensive approach (Abood, 2013; Jabar, 2018; Longtin, 2010; Thurber, 2014). This group applies the social movements theory to the Sadrist Movement to analyze their in-group dynamics, ideology, identity, leadership, and social base; social and political activities including charity works and electoral participation; and the political opportunity structures that enable or constrain the success of the movement. This thesis follows this trend due to three reasons.

Firstly, the other approaches, namely the security, leadership, and political party perspectives, are insufficient in answering the question of this thesis. Security approaches limit the focus on the militia groups of the movement that are under control of Muqtada al-Sadr and financed by other segments of the movement. The Mahdi Army was active from 2003 to 2008, and its deactivation did not bring an end to the movement’s other activities. From 2008 to 2014, the movement’s actions were mainly social and political. Even at times of armed conflicts, other activities of the movement continued. Therefore, limiting the focus on the militia does not help in the context of this thesis.

On the other hand, while Muqtada al-Sadr is a crucial part, and in a sense, the driver of the movement, his choices are limited by the movement itself. He has to maintain his popularity among his followers; otherwise, his influence and power in the Iraqi political landscape will be negligible. As for the electoral participation approaches, they are limited to domestic politics and the Sadrist MPs and ministers are not the ones who establish relations with Iran or other states.

Secondly, the research question of this thesis requires a holistic approach as it explores the influence of the internal dynamics of the movement on its relations with Iran. As mentioned above, there are limited options before the leadership of the movement when they are to make a decision. The internal dynamics of the movement, as well as domestic politics of Iraq, impose constraints on the leadership. Since the SMT covers both types of limitations, it is more suitable for the purposes of this thesis. As will be discussed in this chapter, analytical tools used in the SMT such as political opportunity structures, framing, ideology, identity, and leadership provide a better understanding of the dynamics behind Sadrists' relations with Iran.

Lastly, the Sadrist Movement is a social movement. Although the SMT developed to understand social movements in Western democracies, its use is also common for movements in other parts of the world. The Sadrist Movement's armed units were involved in systematic violence during conflicts in Iraq, but this does not discredit their categorization as a social movement. It started with charity networks organized by Sadeq al-Sadr in the early 1990s, and that core movement continued its activities in the post-Saddam Iraqi politics. As will be discussed in the chapter on their history, Sadrists organized many demonstrations as well as participated in protests organized by other factions.

2.1. The Study of Social Movements

The social movements theory focuses on the social movements as socio-political actors distinct from and broader than institutions, organizations, political parties, and professional associations. Tilly and Wood (2012) understand social movements as a different form of 'contentious politics' (2012, p. 3), which emerged during the second half of 18th century in Europe and North America. To them, a social movement has three distinct characteristics: (1) it should publicly raise the demands of its constituents in the face of government authorities in a non-spontaneous fashion. (2) It also needs to involve in a set of political actions such as creating associations and coalitions with specific purposes, organizing public protests, or distribute statements. (3) Lastly, its participants need to demonstrate 'worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment' -what they abbreviate as WUNC (Tilly & Wood, 2012, pp. 3–4).

The study of social movements revolves around four sets of questions. The first set is regarding how structural change and phases of social conflict are related. The second set is related to the way manifestations of culture contribute to the formation of group identity for the social movement, a feature necessary for collective action. The third set includes the process whereby such manifestations and interests channel to that collective action. The last set is about the social, political, and economic circumstances under which the movement operates and how such conditions affect the nature of the actions, attitudes, chances of success, and the consequences of the collective action (Della Porta & Diani, 2006).

The SMT is an approach that combines elements of structural theories and rational choice theory. Structural factors such as the international order, the state apparatus and institutions, and legal framework that are beyond the reach of the individuals and groups and shape their overall actions are at the center of structuralism. Rational choice theory, on the other hand, evaluates the best course of action for an individual to achieve his or her goals. Putting the analysis of collective action at its core, the SMT capitalizes on the

structural elements that constrain a group's behavior as well as on the rational actions of individuals who participate in collective activities (Wiktorowicz, 2003).

2.2. Theoretical Tools Used in the SMT

The SMT provides specific conceptual tools in studying social movements. Among such tools are the analysis of collective action, resource mobilization and political opportunity structures, network theory, and framing and ideology. Analysis of collective action in the context of social movements helps us observe the process of actions of individual participants turning into a collective action such as a demonstration. We view the final product, a demonstration, for example, not the mere sum of actions of demonstrators but something more extensive and more coherent. We can treat it a single action which makes it easier to understand its content, dynamics, and consequences. Such analysis also enables us to track the challenges faced during the transformation of individual action into collective action (Hardin, 2015).

Resource mobilization theory deals with why individuals participate in social movements focusing on the organizational structures as an explanation. According to the theory, unlike the traditional account of non-rational reaction-driven participation in spontaneous collective actions, formal organizations lead individuals to come together in order to achieve clearly defined goals that meet their socio-political interests (Jenkins, 1983). Arguably, this theory applies to more organized social movements, such as the Sadrist Movement, in our case, as will be discussed at the end of this chapter.

Political opportunity structures are the political and legal conditions under which social movements operate. Such structures affect the development of movements as they constitute constraints on the movement and shape its actions. Being involved in contentious politics, i.e., a struggle in which an actor's success comes at the expense of the others, social movements are often at odds with the government or incumbent parties. Hence, the rigidity of its opponents is a crucial factor in the success or failure of

that movement. Availability of political opportunities such as a fragmented elite means that a social movement can form alliances with certain segments of the elite to achieve its goals (Almeida & Stearns, 1998). Under authoritarian rules, social movements face extreme pressures and are forced to adopt strategies, tactics, and organizational structures they would otherwise not embrace in a more welcoming environment (Thurber, 2014). The legal framework also falls into this category of opportunity structures; the laws of a country may be hostile or friendly towards the development of social movements and civil society organizations which in turn may have similar effects on such groups as other political opportunities do (Stroup, 2012).

Analyzing framing is another tool used in the SMT, which refers to how a problem, solution, or demand is presented to the public. Framing is highly consequential in the success of collective action; if the movement fails to use an appropriate framework that resonates with the target audience, it cannot attain the support it needs for its agenda. In other words, the message needs to be presented in such a way that it triggers the audience to participate in collective action (Reber & Berger, 2005). Framing is also directly linked to the ideology of a movement. Ideology informs the framing process as movements have to remain within the ideology of their societal bases (Johnston & Noakes, 2005).

2.3. Social Movements Theory and Islamic Movements in the Middle East

Social Movements Theory (SMT) developed in the Western scholarship and had mostly focused on the movements that emerged in Western societies, i.e., West Europe and North America. However, cases from other parts of the world such as Latin America, East Asia, Middle East, and Africa have also been studied within the framework of the SMT and further developed the theory. With the widening of the empirical scope, new approaches made their way into the theory. Islamic activism in the Middle East is among such cases (Wiktorowicz, 2003).

Wiktorowicz (2003) identifies the primary goal of Islamic movements as "to create a society governed and guided by the *shari'a* (Islamic law). (2003, p. 16)" Hence, Islamic movements can be viewed among new social movements that are involved, beyond class or political struggles, in cultural and identity politics. Throughout the Middle Eastern countries, Islamic movements have challenged the dominant political and cultural structure and developed various struggle methods resembling those employed in other regions of the world by different types of movements. They organize demonstrations, distribute pamphlets, run media outlets including new media platforms, build coalitions, and participate in electoral politics (where allowed) in addition to providing social services in various forms (Wiktorowicz, 2003).

As movements with cultural and political claims, Islamic activists are heavily engaged with framing. Their strategies and tactics are influenced by political opportunity structures in the countries they operate. In some places, they have been part of the government, whereas in other countries they limited themselves to charity and cultural activities due to state repression. In short, challenging cultural and political establishments in their respective societies, using strategies and tactics similar to non-Islamic movements and having societal bases and networks make the Islamic movement a subject of the social movements research. The SMT and its analytical tools help us better understand these movements, their actions, and roles within the broader contentious politics in their countries (Wiktorowicz, 2003).

The SMT has been applied mainly to civilian collective actions as opposed to armed organization. However, it is also applicable to multi-faceted movements that employ violent means periodically to achieve certain goals. Among such organizations are the Palestinian Hamas and Lebanese Hezbollah, both of which have armed wings but also involved in a variety of social and political activities. Armed struggle is a tactical element of such movements rather than a defining feature. Hence, reducing those movements into the armed organization would endanger the risk of ignoring other activities they do

as well as the interaction between violence and their social and political behaviors. (Wiktorowicz, 2003). This thesis argues that the Sadrist Movement is also such an organization, and understanding the influence of its internal dynamics on its relations with Iran requires the implementation of the SMT.

2.4. Social Movements Theory and the Sadrist Movement

The Sadrist Movement consists of leadership, societal base, organizational structure, political wing, and armed wing. As the most visible part of the movement together with their leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, the armed wing of the movement, Jaysh al-Mahdi/Mahdi Army (2003-2008) and Saraya al-Salam/Peace Brigades (from 2014 to present), has drawn most of the scholarly and media interest. Such a narrow approach, however, fails to observe the complex network of relationships among the leader, the base, the militia, electoral politics, and organization (Thurber, 2014). This section will attempt to show the need to view the Sadrist Movement as a sociopolitical movement in understanding its relations with Iran.

The Sadrist Movement has been studied from different angles. There is an extensive literature on both militia groups tied with the movement focusing mostly on security issues. Although their focus revolves around the militias, authors acknowledge the wider support group within Iraqi society (Hubbard, 2007; Marston & Malkasian, 2008; Patten, 2007; Schlichte & Schneckener, 2015). As a fierce leader who does not shy away to express his views on different social and political issues, al-Sadr has also seen a vast media coverage and scholarly interest (Bayless, 2012; Costel, 2008; Paley, 2008; Rahimi, 2010). The electoral activities of the movement have also been the focus of many studies (Alaaldin, 2014; Matthew J. Godwin, 2012; Katzman, 2008; Plebani, 2013). Finally, some studies analyze the movement as a socio-political movement (Abood, 2013; Jabar, 2018; Longtin, 2010; Thurber, 2014).

The Sadrist Movement's roots trace back to the activism of Baqir al-Sadr, cousin of the father of the current leader, Muqtada, who had joined the Dawa Party. In the Iraqi Shiite clerical tradition that adopts a quietist approach towards politics contrary to their Iranian counterparts, *ayatollahs* are supposed to keep a distance from daily politics and instead focus on religious education and guidance of the society as well as the provision of social services and charity activities. Therefore, the outspoken Baqir al-Sadr had to either adopt that perspective or part his way with the clerical establishment. After the crackdown on the Dawa Party members by the Saddam regime, Baqir al-Sadr was first put under house arrest and then executed. Building on such popularity of his cousin, Sadeq al-Sadr started the Sadrist Movement in the early 1990s around charity works to support rural migrants who arrived in Baghdad. He was also expressing his views on various problems faced by lower-class Shiites and assassinated by the regime in 1998 together with his older sons Mustafa and Moammal leaving the younger Muqtada as the heir to the movement (Thurber, 2014).

After the US occupation in 2003, Muqtada al-Sadr organized a militia group named *Jaysh al-Mahdi*/Mahdi Army among the supporters of his family and started a bloody insurgency against the occupation forces, which gained him his reputation as the symbol of the resistance in the eyes of Shiite youth who were not happy with the occupation. Although the militia group was the most visible component of the Sadrist Movement, it was not the only one. The movement had and has a relatively large social basis, involved in elections through nominating and supporting electoral lists, and formed political alliances with other groups in the country (Bayless, 2012). Hence, a social movements theory approach is better suited to understand the dynamics of its relations with Iran.

The Sadrist Movement, like other social movements in other parts of the world, organized many protests such as the sit-in demonstrations in the so-called Green Zone in Baghdad demanding an end to corruption and formation of a 'technocratic' cabinet (al-Tarafi & Jawad, 2016). As some others did (Tilly & Wood, 2012), the Sadrist

Movement also adopted a variety of tactics and strategies, both violent and non-violent, to influence the politics depending on the political opportunity structures in Iraq. During the 2003-2005 and 2014-2018 periods, the movement received direct and indirect financial and military aid from Iran (Cepoi & Lazăr, 2013). How the leadership of the movement explained such support to its predominantly anti-Iran basis can be understood through framing analysis. More importantly, the social movements theory provides a more coherent and comprehensive framework for the task at hand: understanding the complex dynamics behind the movement's relations with Iran.

In short, this thesis will employ the social movements theory to explain how the anti-Iranian sentiments among its social base have led the Sadrist Movement to adopt a political discourse that opposes the Iranian involvement in Iraqi politics. The SMT is more suitable than other approaches for this task due to several reasons: (1) the Sadrist Movement is a socio-political movement. The use of violence through militia groups can be viewed as part of the strategy of the movement. (2) Analytical tools used in the SMT such as analysis of collective action, resource mobilization theory, political opportunity structures, and analysis of framing and ideology apply to the Sadrist Movement. (3) A narrow focus on a single element of the movement, be it its leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, its militia groups, Mahdi Army and Peace Brigades, or its electoral participation will fall short in understanding the complex dynamics among all of its components.

CHAPTER 3

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

This section aims to introduce a brief historical background of the Sadrist Movement, which will help us better contextualize the movement and its relations with Iran. As mentioned above, many authors trace the history of the movement to 1960s and 70s when Baqir al-Sadr joined the Dawa Party. His popularity further spread with his death at the hands of the Saddam regime provided his cousin, Sadeq al-Sadr a support network that enabled him to start a grassroots movement consisting mostly of charity activities towards rural migrants who arrived in Baghdad in the 1990s. Like his cousin, he, together with his two eldest sons, also was assassinated by the regime. After his assassination, the movement continued its support activities mostly unnoticed until the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Sadeq's younger son, Muqtada mobilized a militia group called *Jaysh al-Mahdi/* the Mahdi Army (JM) with the goal to push the invasion forces, the US and its allies out of Iraq. JM first targeted the coalition forces but then was involved in the fight against Sunni insurgents until 2008 when the Maliki government took harsh measures against militias and suppressed the insurgency and civil war. Muqtada, then, fled to Iran under the pretext of studying at the religious education centers in Qom. After his return, he positioned himself as an Iraqi nationalist who was against not only the US presence in Iraq but also Iranian influence in Iraqi politics. When the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) took over the second largest city of Iraq, Mosul and declared its caliphate, Shiites as well as other some other groups formed militias to fight the ISIS with the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). One of the militia groups created was Saraya al-Salam (Peace Brigades) organized by Muqtada from among his supporters in addition to the former JM fighters who remained loyal to him. This section will end with the electoral performance of lists endorsed by the Sadrist Movement between 2003 and 2018.

3.1. Baqir al-Sadr's Activism and Roots of the Sadrist Movement in the 1960s and 70s

In 1958, a military coup under the leadership of General Qasim toppled down the Hashemite King Faysal II of Iraq. Inspired by the Pan-Arab ideology, the junta also gained the support of the Communist Party of Iraq and started to spread communist ideas. The clerical establishment divided into two camps regarding how to deal with this new situation: the traditionalists argued for quietism and remaining outside the political life while others took a more activist approach and wanted to fight against the regime's doctrines and attacks on Islamic thought. As a young cleric who was yet to join the higher clerical circle of *mujtahids,* the title given to experts of Islamic law who produce solutions to new problems based on the Islamic jurisprudence or *fiqh* Baqir al-Sadr aligned himself with the activists and took part in the writing of statements of the group (*Jama'at al-Ulama*/The Scholarly Community) (Aziz, 1993).

Baqir al-Sadr wrote a book, *Falsafatuna* (Our Philosophy) in 1959 in which he defended the Islamic thought against the contemporary ideologies, capitalist democracy, and communism, in particular. His second book published in 1961, *Iqtisaduna* (Our Economy) was aiming to present an Islamic system of economics. The two books were also a response to the government propaganda and a way of preventing Shiite young Muslims from joining the Communist Party or adopt the new regime's ideology. Baqir was also in the leadership of the Islamic Dawa (Call) Party. Together with his climbing of the scholarly ladder and becoming a *mujtahid*, he was also involved in publishing and educational activities (Aziz, 1993). He wrote articles on many social, political, and religious topics salient in his time. As a result of his social and political activism, his popularity increased (Thurber, 2014).

During the 1970s, Baqir al-Sadr was in opposition to the Baath Party that took power in 1968 by ousting Qasim's regime. With his religious credentials, he became one of the highest-ranking *mujtahids* and *marja'iyya*, the religious experts who are to be followed by ordinary Muslims according to the Shiite doctrine. In 1977, the government banned

the Shiite pilgrims from walking from Najaf to Karbala as part of their annual commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad in Karbala. Pilgrims rioted in Najaf and tried to complete their tradition. The government forces could not prevent their arrival in Karbala but detained hundreds of people. Suspected to be behind the public resistance, Baqir al-Sadr was also detained and questioned but was released following massive demonstrations demanding his release. He also showed his support for the Islamic Revolution of 1978 in Iran through his public statements as well as essays that present his understanding of an Islamic system of governance. The events following his house arrest further complicated the conflict with the Baath regime. Refusing to denounce his earlier *fatwa*, a religious ruling, forbidding Muslims from joining the Baath Party, Baqir al-Sadr was executed by the government in 1980 (Aziz, 1993).

Baqir's struggle against and eventual death at the hands of the Baath regime made him a symbol of resistance against a suppressive regime for the Shia population in Iraq. Such high regard led widespread respect for the Sadr family among Shiites and laid the foundations for the formation of the Sadrist Movement in the 1990s by Baqir's cousin Sadeq al-Sadr (Thurber, 2014).

3.2. Sadeq al-Sadr and the Establishment of the Sadrist Movement in the 1990s

The 8-year-long Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) had left both countries economically devastated. Saddam's government lost its internal control over the North –as a result of the establishment of a no-fly zone by the US and formation of an autonomous Kurdish government- and the South where the Shiite majority of the country lives. Fleeing from harsh conditions and poverty in rural areas of Iraq, many Iraqis from the lower classes arrived in big cities such as Baghdad in search of work. Such political opportunity structures created a suitable environment for the Sadr family and Sadeq al-Sadr to establish a movement (Abood, 2013).

Sadeq al-Sadr was an ayatollah and was a pupil to Baqir al-Sadr, Baqir al-Hakim, and even the leader of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, Khomeini who had been in exile in Iraq at the time (Thurber, 2014). Through connections with Shia tribe members who migrated to Baghdad, Sadeq al-Sadr gained the support of their tribes at large. Like his cousin, he also was a vocal critic of the regime and had conflicts with the quietist clerical establishment. With his Friday sermons, *khutbas* he was able to speak to a large number of people directly. His activism, however, was different from that of his cousin. While Baqir's activities can be categorized as political activism and directed towards the educated class, Sadeq was more of a social activist who built informal networks with lower classes (Abood, 2013). His growing popularity through the late 1990s brought attacks with it.

Sadeq al-Sadr, with the support the masses behind him, did not pledge loyalty to Iran and became the target of criticisms by the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), the organization once his cousin Baqir was involved. In his speeches during Friday prayers, he tackled the problems of the Shia poor and was critical of the Saddam regime, which in turn led the government to target him. In February 1998, he was killed by the Saddam regime alongside with his eldest sons, Mustafa and Muammal (Thurber, 2014). The following years until the fall of the Saddam regime in 2003 at the hands of the US and the international coalition of its allies was marked with a relative passivity for the Sadrist Movement. With the US invasion, the Iraqi society, in general, and the Sadrist Movement in particular, entered a new era.

3.3. Muqtada al-Sadr and the Rise of the Mahdi Army

The US invasion in 2003 destroyed the Saddam regime together with the existing institutions of the Iraqi state, including the army. The allied forces were unable to provide order and security in the regions remaining in the south of the Kurdistan region. The chaos provided a fertile ground for armed groups, Sunni and Shia alike to mobilize and start insurgencies. Among them was Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army (Bayless, 2012).

Muqtada al-Sadr is the son of Sadeq al-Sadr and married to the daughter of Baqir al-Sadr. Though being young and lacking religious credentials enjoyed by his father and father-in-law, Muqtada was able to capitalize on the popularity of his family name. By building a militia group, the Mahdi Army, and attacking the invasion forces, he eventually became one of the symbols of resistance against occupation (Matthew Jeffrey Godwin, 2011).

The Mahdi Army and other Shiite insurgent groups were the recipients of Iranian support both military and financial. The Mahdi Army fought against the occupation forces and organized many attacks on the US and allied military bases and soldiers. At the time, the Muqtada al-Sadr received broad media coverage as "the most dangerous man in Iraq" (Helwig, 2006; North, 2009). The naming of the group is also significant and has apocalyptic connotations. The Twelver Shiites believe that the last Imam, Mahdi, ascended to heavens after the death of his father and will return before the doomsday together with the Christ to lead humanity into a period of peace and prosperity after fighting *Dajjal*, the equivalence of anti-Christ in both Sunni and Shia traditions, and his armies. There have been many '*Mahdis*' throughout Muslim history, and they called their nemesis *Dajjal* (Sachedina, 1981). Although Muqtada al-Sadr has never claimed to be Mahdi himself, the naming of his militia contains a claim of being on the path of Mahdi struggling against the precursors of Dajjal, in their view.

The Mahdi Army presented its goal to drive the occupation forces out of Iraq and establish order in the country. An objective that we still observe to be claimed and pursued by Muqtada al-Sadr. However, they were also involved in the bloody sectarian civil war against Sunni armed groups (Abood, 2013).

3.4. The Civil War of 2006-2007 and the Disbanding of the Mahdi Army

On February 22, 2006, members of Al-Qaida of Iraq attacked one of the most revered religious sites for Shiites in Iraq, the Askari shrine in the city of Samarra. Although there

were conflicts among Shiite and Sunni armed groups before the event, the attack sparked an unprecedented wave of violence in Iraq. In July 2006, more than three thousand civilians were killed as a result of strikes. Almost every day during the period a bomb attack was launched against either Shia or Sunni civilians at places of gathering including mosques, shrines, and bazaars. The documented average number of civilian victims was fifty a day (Haddad, 2011).

The Mahdi Army was part of the civil war and reportedly committed many atrocities against Sunni civilians beside fighting Sunni -and sometimes Shiite- groups (Wong, 2006). Although the civil war lost its intensity in late 2007, the problems caused by militias and the pressure from the US administration forced the then PM Nouri al-Maliki to take action against armed groups in the country. As a result of the operations against and conflicts with the Mahdi Army among other militias, Muqtada al-Sadr declared the disbandment of the Mahdi Army and his decision to go to Qom, Iran for religious studies to become an *ayatollah.* Apart from residing in Tehran and regularly visiting Qom for studying, not much is known about his activities in Iran. Even his tutor's name is unknown (Rahimi, 2009). Many observers think that the main reason was to remain out of public view and distance himself from following actions by his militiamen (Bayless, 2012).

3.5. Muqtada's Return to Iraq as an Opposition Figure

In early 2010, Muqtada al-Sadr returned to Iraq as a political leader after the success of his electoral list in March 2010 parliamentary elections in a coalition with other Shia parties. The details of the electoral performance of the Sadrist Movement will be discussed later at the end of this section. Although Sadr attempted to reorganize the Mahdi Army under the pretext of assisting the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in providing security for Shia neighborhoods (Rahimi, 2010), the main focus of his movement was socio-political activities up until 2014 when the ISIS took over Mosul.

Before leaving to Iran, Muqtada had decreed the Mahdi Army members to continue the struggle on an intellectual level, what he called 'intellectual jihad' (Bayless, 2012, p. 149). The names of the new organizations were *Mumahidoon* (meaning those who open the path in Arabic) and *Munasiroon* (the supporters). He set out the objectives of these organizations to provide for the poor segments of the Shiite community in Iraq and engage in other civic activities (Bayless, 2012). After his return to Iraq following the US withdrawal, he positioned himself as an Iraqi nationalist opposing sectarian and divisive policies of the Maliki government. One major event was his attempt to hold a no-confidence vote against Maliki, as an opposition against the latter's failure to take inclusive actions towards the Sunni population. Although the proposal had failed, it shows the change in the discourse of Muqtada al-Sadr who previously was being depicted as one of the main culprits of the sectarian civil war of 2006-2007. Now, he was siding with Sunnis against his fellow Shias. However, from a broader perspective and considering his career and political maneuvers, that move was interpreted as another pragmatist tactic to corner his opponent, Nouri al-Maliki (Plebani, 2013).

3.6. Saraya al-Salam and the fight against ISIS

In 2014, the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS) took over Mosul, the second-largest city of Iraq after Baghdad. The relatively small number of ISIS militants, less than a thousand, who conducted the takeover and the fleeing of Iraqi soldiers without a fight, showed the incapability as well as the unwillingness of the Iraqi army to do its job, protecting the country. Capitalizing on the shock felt by the state and the public, the ISIS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared himself as the caliph of Muslims in a *khutba* in Mosul. The Grand Ayatollah in Iraq, Ali Sistani issued a fatwa calling on all abled men to take up arms to defend their country. Soon, thousands volunteered and formed new militia groups or joined the already existing ones. Muqtada al-Sadr also found a new group called Saraya al-Salam (Peace Brigades) to join the fight (O'Driscoll & van Zoonen, 2017).

Although the militia groups whose number exceeded 60 participated in an umbrella organization called Hashd al-Shaabi or Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) united under the office of Prime Ministry, the Shiite militias were divided along three lines: those formed upon the call of Sistani, those who were already active on the ground and loyal to Iran, and Sadrists who presented more independent *modus operandi*. While Iran was the major foreign supporters of the PMU both financially and militarily in the form of arms and training, the international Coalition was providing aerial support by bombing the ISIS target and cleaning the way for militias and ISF for land attacks (O'Driscoll & van Zoonen, 2017). Towards the end of 2017, Muqtada al-Sadr began to criticize the militias under the PMU by calling them 'sectarian' and saying that they 'have no place in Iraq' (Rasheed, 2018; Steele, 2017). In 2018, the PM Haider Abadi declared victory over the ISIS and Iraq was set to run parliamentary elections in May 2018. Before the elections, many alliances were formed, dissolved, and re-established between different political actors, including the Iran-aligned Shiite militias, former PM Maliki, the then PM Abadi, and Muqtada al-Sadr.

3.7. Electoral Participation of the Sadrist Movement 2005-2018

The Sadrist Movement participates in elections by either supporting a party or a list of candidates in coalition with other groups. Through the seats they gain in the polls, they negotiate and bargain for ministry offices and government posts. Due to the electoral system of Iraq that allows those who win sufficient votes to be elected whether as parties or independent runners, the number of factions and parties in the parliament is high. As a result, no single party or coalition blocks formed before the elections can form the government by themselves. Hence, they need to form coalitions with other factions, which increases the leverage held by small but key groups who, in turn, use their position to get as many offices and posts as they can (Mansour & van den Toorn, 2018). Consequently, the formation of the cabinet usually takes months if not more than a year, which is the case for the current Iraqi government some of its ministry offices of which are still (in May 2019) vacant after the May 2018 elections.

Table 3.1. Seats won by Sadrist blocs in Iraqi parliamentary elections 2005-2018 (Crisis Group, 2006; Katzman, 2008; Mansour, 2019)

Elections	December 2005	March 2010	April 2014	May 2018
Sadrist Faction	Within National Iraqi Alliance	Within National Iraqi Alliance	Al-Ahrar	Al-Sairoon
Seats Won	32	39	28	54

The Sadrist electoral blocs entered the elections within different coalitions in post-invasion Iraq. However, they did not participate in the parliamentary elections held in January 2005 to elect the lawmakers who would write the new Iraqi constitution. Their electoral performance has ups and downs with them coming the first in the May 2018 elections. Before the elections, they, al-Ahrar bloc allied with Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) named Alliance Towards Reform widely known with its shortened Arabic name al-Sairoon (meaning Forward) (Mansour & van den Toorn, 2018). Although from the 54 seats won only two were allocated to the ICP, the coalition received criticisms of being 'communists and liberals' as was the comment by the international advisor to the Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei, Ali Akbar Velayati (Mamouri, 2018).

Both their pre-electoral alliances and post-electoral coalitions for government formation indicate that the Sadrist Movement follows a highly pragmatic approach to elections. The main goal is to gain as many government offices as possible. Their non-electoral political participation shows an anti-elitist perspective with a demand for effective governance. A notable example in this regard is their storming of the Green Zone in Baghdad in 2016, where international representatives and the parliament and ministries are located. The Sadrists breached the security walls of the Zone and protested the Abadi government and corrupt bureaucrats and politicians and demanded the government be replaced by a non-partisan technocratic cabinet (al-Tarafi & Jawad, 2016). The political ideology of the movement will be analyzed in the Ideology section.

In summary, with roots going back to Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr's political activism of the 1960s and 1970s, the Sadrist Movement was established by Baqir's cousin, Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr in 1990s. With the Saddam regime losing its grip on the Iraqi North, where Kurds established a de facto autonomous region and the Shia majority South, the Shiite social and political movements found an opportunity environment to mobilize. The Sadrist Movement led by Sadeq al-Sadr involved in charity activities and built informal networks with lower-class Shiites as well as rural migrants who arrived at cities in search of work. As a vocal critic of the Saddam regime, Sadeq was assassinated by the government. With its leader killed, the movement entered into an era of passivity until the fall of Saddam in 2003. Supported by Iran, the youngest son of Sadeq al-Sadr, Muqtada, formed a militia group among his supporters called the Mahdi Army with the goals to repel the invasion and establish order and security in Iraq. The militia was also involved in the civil war of 2006-2008. After the crackdown on his armed group by the Maliki government, Muqtada went to Iran to study in Qom and increase his religious credentials. When he returned to Iraq in 2010, however, he became a critique of the Maliki government and Iranian intervention in Iraqi affairs. He formed another militia called the Peace Brigades to join the fight against ISIS in 2014. During the war, his militia took a more independent path from Iran as opposed to the Badr Organization who directly coordinated with the Commander of the Qods Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps of Iran. In terms of electoral participation, we observe that the Sadrist Movement follows a pragmatist approach with the primary goal to obtain as many government offices as possible. The next section will discuss the movement's relations with Iran from 2003 to 2018 after briefly touching upon the previous state of affairs.

CHAPTER 4

SADRISTS' RELATIONS WITH IRAN

Before discussing the factors behind Sadrist-Iranian relations, it is necessary to present the nature of that relationship. Although the scope of this thesis is the period between 2003 and 2018, briefly introducing the relations during the times of Baqir and Sadeq al-Sadr will also guide us regarding the factors behind such relations after 2003. Hence, this chapter will analyze the Sadrist-Iranian relations starting with Baqir and Sadeq al-Sadr. Then, the tone of the relations in the aftermath of the fall of the Saddam regime until 2018 will be detailed. In this period, there are significant developments that illuminate the nature of relations.

First, the creation of the Mahdi Army in 2003 with the financial and military support of Iran had been observed by many analysts as an indication of Muqtada al-Sadr's being a proxy of Iran. His fleeing to Iran after the crackdown on his militia group by the Maliki government reinforced such an observation. However, during that period, he stressed his independence from the influence of any foreign actor, and when he returned to Iraq in 2010, he began to position himself as an opposition leader who supports the independence of Iraq from any foreign intervention, including Iranians. Later when a civil war broke out in Syria and when Iran and several Shiite militias including the Lebanese Hezbollah and some Iraqi groups such as the Badr Organization and Asaib Ahl al-Haq deployed their forces in Syria to support the Assad regime, Sadr did not follow the call. Towards the end of the 2012 and in early 2013, Sunni Arabs of Iraq organized rallies to protest what they viewed discriminatory and sectarian policies of the Maliki government. Sadr voiced his support for the Sunni demonstrators against the Shia majority government. Then, in 2014, with the rising power of the Islamic State in Iraq, the Shiite militias and new volunteers following the call of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani as well as several other groups from Sunni, Kurdish, Christian, and Yazidi minorities joined the fight on the side of the Iraqi Security Forces against ISIS. Sadr has also formed a militia called

Saraya al-Salam. Despite internal tensions, these groups under the umbrella of Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) fought together with the military and financial support of Iran and aerial backing of the US and allied forces. Finally, the chapter will discuss the anti-Iranian statements of al-Sadr and his visit to Saudi Arabia and the UAE in 2017 before concluding remarks.

4.1. Baqir al-Sadr and Sadeq al-Sadr's Relations with Iran

As mentioned earlier, Baqir al-Sadr believed in the necessity of building an Islamic government that follows Islamic guidelines for governance. He had good relations with Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revolution of Iran and supported the latter's toppling down of the Shah regime and forming the Islamic Republic of Iran (Aziz, 1993). In Baqir's case, the support is ideological, and revolutionary Iran is the recipient. However, Baqir al-Sadr's understanding of the role of the *ulama* in Islamic governance was not the same as Khomeini's doctrine of *wilayat e faqih* (Mavani, 2013a). Nevertheless, he endorsed the Islamic revolution in Iran until his execution at the hands of the Saddam regime a year after the revolution (Bayless, 2012).

Sadeq al-Sadr, on the other hand, focused more on the challenges poor Shiites faced in cities and the Baath regime that he viewed as the leading cause of grievances of people. Unlike his cousin, Sadeq al-Sadr distanced himself from the Iranian government. In the 1990s, Sadeq al-Sadr parted his way from *Hawza*, the religious establishment in Najaf and the SCIRI, the pro-Iranian organization in Iraq. According to some, Sadeq al-Sadr collaborated with the Saddam regime in the early 1990s, and that was the reason why both the clerical establishments in Iraq and Iran attacked him. However, in 1997 he began to fiercely attack the Saddam regime in his Friday speeches, which eventually brought the fury of the government against him and cost his life. (Baram, Rohde, & Zeidel, 2010).

In short, the two predecessors of Muqtada al-Sadr had different relations with Iran. Until the revolution of 1979, Iran was viewed by Baqir al-Sadr as just another secular state. When the protests that led to the revolution began in 1978, Baqir al-Sadr supported them and continued his endorsement after the revolution. Sadeq al-Sadr, however, followed different path focusing on the local issues. Together with his feud with the *Hawza* and SCIRI, he was disliked by the Iranian regime as well. Despite Baqir al-Sadr's enthusiasm towards the Iranian regime, there no evidence that the latter provided him with any material support. Neither Sadeq al-Sadr was a recipient of Iranian backing as he was not in favor of its regime. Upon his assassination at the hands of the Baath regime in 1999, the Sadrist Movement and al-Sadr family was under the scrutiny of the government. The situation radically changed in favor of the Shia majority of Iraq, including the Sadrists.

4.2. The Sadrist-Iranian Relations in the Post-Saddam Era

After the fall of the Saddam regime at the hands of the occupation forces and with the non-action decision of the clerical establishment headed by the Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, the Shia majority of Iraq and their political representatives finally found the opportunity to have a say in the political process of their country. However, not all were happy with the course of events, especially the occupation of Iraq by the US and allied forces. Among them were Iraqi Sunni Arabs and some Shiite factions including the Sadrists. With the dissolution of the Baathist security cadres both in the army and police forces, the occupation forces had to maintain order and form a new Iraqi security apparatus. As the occupation forces lacked the experience in Iraq, those who opposed them found an environment to mobilize and launch a resistance campaign easily. It was in this environment where Muqtada al-Sadr, the youngest son of Sadeq al-Sadr formed his militia group called *Jaysh al-Mahdi*/the Mahdi Army.

4.3. The Mahdi Army and Iran

The Mahdi Army was established by Muqtada al-Sadr and imams who follow him using mosques to collect volunteers after the fall of the Saddam regime in July 2003. The volunteers came from the social base who were following Sadeq al-Sadr when he was alive. Their numbers proliferated, and they took control of districts where they formed bases of resistance while providing the residents with social services as well as security. However, the volunteers were mostly uneducated and poor, hence did not have much to contribute financially. Looting and appropriating state-owned properties constituted the primary sources of financing a resistance in addition to the legacy of Sadeq al-Sadr's vast charity networks. Iranians provided another financial source, although limited (Crisis Group, 2006).

In June 2003, Muqtada al-Sadr was invited to Iran for the commemoration ceremonies held for the death of Ayatollah Khomeini and met with several Iranian leaders including the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. He managed to secure financial support from Iran and one month later, announced the formation of the Mahdi Army. Iran, reportedly, provided financial support to the Mahdi Army as well as weaponry and training to its members. However, Iran has not acknowledged such support (Rousu, 2010).

The Mahdi Army, although may have received some support from Iran as both parties wanted to harm the US presence in Iraq, several incidents show that it was a transactional relationship rather than a genuine partnership in the 2003-2008 period. First, Iran had other priorities such as the writing of the Iraqi constitution and establishment of an Iran-aligned government after the December 2005 elections. Sadrists' involvement in violence posed a danger to the political process in Iraq that was slowly moving towards Iran's interests. Hence, Iran, together with al-Sistani blamed the Mahdi Army for damage occurred in Najaf as a result of clashes between them and the occupation forces and forced al-Sadr to withdraw his forces from the city and disband

them in 2004 (Crisis Group, 2006). Although the Mahdi Army remained active until 2008, the level of violence was relatively low until the civil war of 2006-2007.

The second indicator of a relationship of distancing between Sadrists and Iran is the former's Iraqi nationalist approach that will be discussed in the ideology chapter. The International Crisis Group's reports (2004, 2006) contain many details about Sadrists' attacks, both physical and verbal, on the Shia political elite represented by the Dawa Party and the SCIRI who returned from exile in 2003 and collaborated with the US for the reconstruction of the Iraqi political system and the quietist establishment that remained silent in the face of the invasion. A critical incident, in this regard, was Sadrists' enclosure around Sistani's house and forcing him and some other clerics to leave Iraq. Even though the attempt failed due to the repelling of Sadrists by tribal forces loyal to Sistani (Crisis Group, 2006), it shows the level of discord between them and Sadrists. The factions attacked by Sadrists, particularly the Dawa Party and the SCIRI were allies with Iran and al-Sadr accused on many occasions Sistani of being an Iranian agent based on his Iranian origins (Crisis Group, 2006).

Thirdly, although Sadrists participated in the December 2005 elections in coalition with the Dawa Party and SCIRI within the electoral bloc National Iraqi Alliance and won 32 seats in the parliament, they used their crucial role to elect Nouri al-Maliki who, at the time, was viewed as less pro-Iran despite being in the Dawa Party. This insistence on al-Maliki shows Sadrists' aspirations to limit Iranian involvement in Iraq. The fourth indicator is al-Sadr's visit to neighboring countries, namely Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan in February 2006 (Crisis Group, 2006). Such visits presented al-Sadr as a regular politician who was not aligned with a specific foreign country but was in communication with regional powers.

In summary, despite a probable brief alliance with and temporary support from Iran, Sadrists' distanced themselves from Iran as opposed to other groups such as SCIRI (later

known as ISCI – Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq) and the Dawa Party. On the other hand, in late 2007, as a result of Maliki government's crackdown on the Mahdi Army and Sadrists following their involvement in clashes with Sunni groups as well as some other Shiite militias such as the Badr Brigades and pressure from the US, al-Sadr had to disband the Mahdi Army and flee to Iran.

4.4. Relations with Iran while al-Sadr was in Iran and after His Return

Muqtada al-Sadr went to Iran under the pretext to further his religious credentials in Qom. As discussed previously, there is not much information about his time in Iran. During this time, his movement was somewhat out of his control but maintained its presence until his return in 2010 despite some defections who formed smaller groups like Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq (Guzansky, 2011). Muqtada's return as an opposition figure to the Maliki government that enjoyed Muqtada's backing in 2005-2006 but turned against him afterward as well as his emphasis of Iraqi independence from all sorts of foreign intervention suggest that his time in Iran did not help him build good relationships with the Iranian regime. The period between 2010 and 2014 is marked with al-Sadr's opposition to Maliki until the latter's resignation in August 2014. Sadrists rallied many protests against the Maliki government in these years as well as announced support for other anti-Maliki demonstrations including the ones held by Sunnis. Iran, as well as the US, for their part, were behind Maliki. Hence, those protests were not in line with Iran and showed Sadrists' divergence from the Tehran regime.

In September 2011, Sadrists took the streets of Baghdad, Najaf, and Basra to protest Maliki regime's policies and failure to provide public services such as electricity and water as well as the high levels of unemployment. They demanded the services be provided, jobs be created, and oil revenues be shared with the people. Their numbers were estimated to be around 25 thousand (Dreazen, 2011). Besides these protests and several others throughout the 2010-2014 period, Sadrists, in coalition with the President of Kurdistan Region Masoud Barzani and Sunni political leader Iyad Allawi, had also

pushed for a vote of no-confidence against al-Maliki in 2012, a move that was halted mainly with the help of Iran (Mansour & Clark, 2014; Plebani, 2014).

Another issue of distancing from Iran was the involvement of Tehran and its Shia armed groups allies in the Syrian civil war. Tehran has sent financial and military support to the Assad regime and brought foreign fighters from Afghanistan. The Lebanese Hezbollah and some Iraqi militia groups such as the Badr Corps and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (Al-Tamimi, 2015). Such involvement drew criticism from the Sadrists, as al-Sadr framed the conflict as a matter between Syrians and opposed others' involvement while another Sadrist leader accused Hezbollah of killing more Syrians than Israel did (Mansour & Clark, 2014). After 2014, however, Sadrists viewed the Iranian involvement in the war against the IS in Iraq somewhat beneficial.

As mentioned earlier, after the takeover of Mosul by the IS militants in 2014, the Popular Mobilization Units was established as an umbrella organization incorporating existing militia groups as well as newly formed ones by the volunteers following al-Sistani's call. Sadrists mobilized their militia called the Peace Brigades and joined the fight. Iran was the first foreign power that provided aid to Iraqis against the IS. In an interview (FRANCE 24 English, 2015), al-Sadr describes the Iranian involvement in the fight as positive while maintaining that his militia is independent and he is not under the control of anyone. He also makes a distinction between the intervention of neighboring countries, including Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia and the EU and the UN and that of the US. He presents the former as 'non-occupying' forces while calling the US an occupying force. Moreover, he blames Maliki government's policies of sectarianism for leading to the worsening of the sectarian problems in Iraq.

Another case of distancing from Iran is al-Sadr's visit to Saudi Arabia (Reuters, 2017a) and the United Arab Emirates (Reuters, 2017b). Those visits helped Sadrists to present themselves in a comprehensive framework away from Iran as well as sectarianism. Later

towards the May 2018 elections, Sadrists formed the Sairoon Alliance incorporating seculars and communists, a move that received harsh criticisms from Iran (MacDonald, 2018).

This chapter attempted to present the complex nature of Sadrist-Iranian relations from the time of Baqir al-Sadr until 2018. Baqir al-Sadr viewed the Shah regime of Iran as an evil force in contradiction of Islamic rule. He was in favor of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and had good relations with its leaders, but he lived only one year after. His cousin and the founder of the Sadrist Movement in the 1990s, on the other hand, had his differences with Iran and was in rivalry with the Iran-aligned Shia movements in Iraq and the clerical establishment in Najaf. The post-Saddam relations under Muqtada al-Sadr, however, were relatively more complicated.

After the fall of Saddam, Iran-aligned Shia political elites, the ISCI and Dawa Party, returned to Iraq to participate in its reconstruction. Muqtada al-Sadr, on the other hand, with limited aid from Tehran, established a militia and declared war on the occupation forces. For a limited time, Iran saw a benefit in supporting him but later focused more on the political process and writing of the constitution in 2005. Sadrists kept their rivalry against other factions and entered into politics. The tensions led to armed conflicts with Badr Brigades who were incorporated into Iraqi Security Forces and finally al-Sadr was forced to disband the Mahdi Army and flee to Iran. Although little is known regarding his time in exile, his return as a nationalist opposition figure in 2010 indicates that he could not build a good relationship with Tehran.

The 2010-2014 period witnessed a fierce rivalry between Sadrists and Maliki, who was backed by Iran (and the US). Sadrists organized many demonstrations against the government and showed their support for other protestors, including Sunnis. They have also made a failed attempt to undermine Maliki's position by allying with Kurdish and Sunni politicians. Finally, by not sending fighters to assist the Assad regime and criticizing

those who sent, Iran and other Shiite militias, they positioned themselves away from Iran-aligned camp. In the 2014-2018 period marked by the fight against the IS in Iraq, Sadrists eased the tensions with Tehran while emphasizing their independence.

In short, in the 2003-2018 period that is the scope of this thesis, Sadrist-Iranian relations had some ups and many downs, but Sadrists pronounced their distance to and independence from Tehran by both words and actions. After such a look at the relations, we now can proceed to other components of the Sadrist Movement, namely its religious and political ideology, leadership, and societal base, and discuss their explanatory power for the said relationship drawing upon the SMT.

CHAPTER 5

SECTARIAN IDENTITY AND POLITICAL IDEOLOGY OF THE SADRIST MOVEMENT

Politics of the Middle East and North Africa region are often portrayed through sectarian lenses. Alliances, the argument follows, are within the same sectarian group while conflicts occur between sectarian groups, namely, Shiites and Sunnis. Although many times conflicts and alliances coincide with sectarian identities, the argument has long been challenged and shown to be insufficient to explain the complex nature of the political and military developments of the region in general and Iraq in particular (Haddad, 2011). Nevertheless, this chapter will touch upon the sectarian identity of the Sadrist Movement and evaluate its explanatory power in understanding Sadrist-Iranian relations.

As discussed earlier, under the theoretical framework, political ideology is a crucial element of social movements. While shared worldviews help movements to maintain their existence and coherence, movements that emerge merely around specific issues often dissolve in a relatively shorter time. To maintain their coherence, movements that have shared ideologies need to keep their ideological integrity; otherwise, they will face defections and splits (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). Therefore, this chapter will also discuss the political ideology of the Sadrist Movement and examine its validity as a factor behind Sadrist-Iranian relationship.

5.1. Sectarian Identity of the Sadrist Movement

The Sadrist Movement began as a religious, socio-political movement and have remained so thus far. Its roots go back to the activism of an ayatollah, Baqir al-Sadr; its founder was another ayatollah, Sadeq al-Sadr; and its current leader, Muqtada al-Sadr portrays himself as a Shiite cleric. The movement and the mentioned leaders belong to the Twelver Shiite sect of Islam. While they share the same sectarian identity with the Iranian

regime, their relations were not a stable alliance (Thurber, 2014). Hence, sectarian identity cannot explain why they distanced themselves from Iran.

Although there are many sects of Islam, Sunnis and Shiites constitute the majority of Muslims. While there are numerous interpretations of Shia Islam, the main ones are Twelver Shiites and Zaydis. The Sadrist Movement follows the Twelver interpretation together with the Iranian regime, other Shiites in Iraq, Bahrain, and Lebanon. The Twelver Shiites believe that the rightful successors of the Prophet of Islam were his son-in-law Ali and his two sons Hassan and Hussein, and Hussein's nine descendants, hence the name Twelver (*ithna ashariyyah* in Arabic). *Ja'fariyyah* is another designation for Twelver Shiites as their doctrine is believed to be systematized by the sixth of the twelve imams, Ja'far. Throughout the centuries, Najaf had been the major seat of Twelver Shiism with its religious education centers, madrasas until the Safavid dynasty invested in Qom, Iran to make it the center in the 16th century (Ayoub, 2011). While Qom became an equivalent of Najaf, both cities were under the oppression of the Shah and Baath regimes, respectively. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 gave rise to the former, yet the latter remained weak until the fall of the Saddam regime in 2003. Despite following the same interpretation, Qom adopted the *wilayat e faqih* (the rule of the jurist) doctrine of Ayatollah Khomeini, but the Najaf school did not (Norton, 2011).

The rule of the jurist is a doctrine developed by Khomeini and has been guiding the Iranian governance system since the revolution. In sum, it suggests that the cleric most knowledgeable in Islamic jurisprudence should rule the Islamic community until the return of the Twelfth Imam, Mahdi who is believed to be ascended to the heavens and will come back near the end times to fill the world with justice together with the Prophet Jesus. The establishment of Najaf kept their quietist approach and distanced themselves from politics as much as possible and maintain that one should wait until the return of Mahdi. Najaf's clerics maintain that governments can come and go, but Muslims should focus on the welfare of the public until Mahdi returns (Mavani, 2013b). Although the

blessing of the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani is sought by Shiite politicians, he does not insist on the establishment of an Islamic state. Although Baqir al-Sadr had an understanding of Islamic governance similar to Khomeini's, neither Sadeq and Muqtada al-Sadr nor the Sadrist Movement, in general, adopted such a doctrine. Though unlike al-Sistani's line, they remained politically active (Thurber, 2014).

In short, the Sadrist Movement distanced itself from Iran despite their shared sectarian identity. The doctrinal differences cannot be a significant factor behind the relations as they received limited support from Iran, and there have been times of rapprochement while the similarities and differences did not vary over time. The doctrinal differences are not obstacles for stable alliances as is the case with Hezbollah-Iran alliance. The next section will delve into the political ideology of the Sadrist Movement as a potential explanatory factor in its relations with Iran.

5.2. The Political Ideology of the Sadrist Movement

Political ideology is one of the main factors that keeps people together in a social movement. Supporters of a movement expect consistency in its actions, lack of which may disintegrate (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). However, a movement cannot always be in line with its ideology under changing circumstances in which case it needs to frame its action in such a way that will convince its supporters of the necessity of that action or its conformity with the principles of the movement (Reber & Berger, 2005). The Sadrist Movement is no exception. When it seemingly failed to maintain its ideological integrity, it resorted to justifying its actions as a necessity of the time. That was especially the case when there were reports of support from Iran to the Mahdi Army and Saraya al-Salam's participation in the fight against the IS under an Iranian-supported organization, the PMUs. This section will first explain the main elements of their political ideology that are Iraqi nationalism, technocracy, and political activism. Then, it will evaluate their role in Sadrist-Iranian relations.

5.2.1. Iraqi Nationalism

Iraqi nationalism is one of the critical components of the Sadrist ideology. Although the discussions over meanings of nationalism are valuable, they are outside the scope of this thesis. Instead, this section will focus on what nationalism means in the Iraqi context and for the Sadrist Movement (Schmidhauser, 2013). In this regard, Iraqi nationalism can be viewed through four main components: seeing all Iraqis as a people regardless of their ethnic or religious/sectarian background; refusing foreign intervention; emphasizing Iraq's territorial integrity, and opposing sectarianism.

The emphasis of Iraqis as a nation can be observed in the discourse of Sadrists throughout the 2003-2018 period. In this regard, their version of nationalism can be described as a civic nationalism based on citizenship. Such a view is the only acceptable discourse in the post-Saddam era, and explicit discriminatory language is a taboo. This approach, however, may not reflect the actions and realities of Iraqi politics. Hence, discrimination needs to be justified by framing it differently (Haddad, 2011). For instance, oppression of Sunnis needs to be presented as taking actions against 'extremists' or Baathists. An example of inclusive rhetoric is al-Sadr's demanding of innocent Iraqi women (seven Shiite and four Sunni) be released from prison (Al Jazeera Arabic, 2008). In the same interview, he stresses his commonalities with Sunni politicians. Throughout this conversation, as well as his interview in 2015 (FRANCE 24 English, 2015), he talks of Iraqis as one nation that should work for their shared interests and against common enemies.

Refusal of foreign intervention is another critical element of Sadrists' Iraqi nationalism. The Mahdi Army was established to fight the foreign occupation, in their view. In an interview in 2008 (Al Jazeera Arabic, 2008) Muqtada al-Sadr maintains that the Mahdi Army's and Sadrists' goal is the liberation of Iraq from occupation be it military, cultural, or political. He also calls on regional countries, including Iran and Saudi Arabia, to assist

the Iraqi people's fight for liberation by any means without intervening in Iraqis' affairs. He calls on all neighboring countries not to meddle with Iraqi politics in a statement before the 2014 parliamentary elections (al-Sadr, 2014).

On the other hand, he points out the positive effects of the intervention of Iran in an interview in 2015 (FRANCE 24 English, 2015). In short, Sadrists' refusal of foreign intervention is not categorical; instead, it is a nuanced opposition to interferences that harm Iraq's independence and sovereignty but open to collaboration in times of need. Such an understanding is open to framing and can change its meaning depending on the context.

The third element of Sadrists' nationalism is Iraq's territorial integrity. Although al-Sadr stated his openness to accepting federal arrangements on the condition that there was no US interference (Al Jazeera Arabic, 2008) and allied with the leaders of the Kurdistan Region against Maliki, Sadrists refuse any secession as was the case in KRG's 2017 referendum for independence. Al-Sadr demanded from Masoud Barzani to cancel the poll (Rudaw, 2017).

Finally, nationalism for Sadrists means opposing sectarianism. Anti-sectarianism is a common emphasis in Sadrists' discourse similar to all major Iraqi social and political actors. While the practice is more complicated and contains conflicts as well as alliances with Sunnis, their rhetoric had always been anti-sectarian. However, sectarian discrimination can also be framed as anti-sectarianism if the distinction between a Sunni and an extremist/sectarian becomes blurred. The atrocities against civilian Sunnis during the 2006-2007 civil war by the members of the Mahdi Army could easily be framed as part of the fight against the Al-Qaeda in Iraq or former Baath members (Haddad, 2014). In summary, the Sadrist Movement can be seen as Iraqi nationalist with certain remarks. First, the definition of Iraqi nationalism is loose and open to interpretation. Second, it is dynamic and can be reframed in different contexts. Third, the rhetoric does not always

match the practice. Lastly, it is relevant in the context of Sadrist-Iranian relations, as will be discussed in the conclusion of this chapter. Besides Iraqi nationalism, technocracy also is a popular demand in the ideological discourse of Sadrists.

5.2.2. Demand for Technocratic Rule

Sadrists view high levels of corruption as a result of politicians who get their posts due to their allegiances to certain political groups rather than their competency for the jobs. They demand ministers be experts, not politicians, and apply this rule to their ministers. Using their seats in the parliament as leverage in bargains over ministries, Sadrists tend to go for service ministries such as health and transportation instead of ministries of defense or internal affairs. This way, they gain resources and control over public services and can distance themselves from relatively more politically charged ministries that they view corrupt. Finally, they prioritize a pious society over an Islamic state. In other words, they do not believe in a top-down Islamization of the community but view the government as a mere means for the provision of services that they think can be done more effectively by a technocratic government.

The demand for a technocratic government as a solution to corruption in Iraq is present in many statements by al-Sadr as well as slogans chanted during anti-government demonstrations. The one that gained media attention was when demonstrators loyal to al-Sadr occupied the Green Zone where all governmental and international representation offices are located in Baghdad in the spring of 2016 to protest against corruption. They demanded the cabinet be replaced with professionals who are not aligned with political factions (Sowell, 2016), a demand raised many times by al-Sadr himself who even threatened the Abadi government with a vote of no-confidence to push him to change his cabinet with ‘technocrats’ (Chmaytelli, 2016). Sadrists seem to follow this idea in the ministries they bargain over.

As mentioned earlier, Sadrists tend to fill ministries that are related more to public services rather than politics. Although all ministries are for the provision of services one way or another, some are more technical than others. As an example, in the cabinet formed after the December 2005 elections, Sadrists held Ministries "of Health, of Transportation, and of Agriculture" in addition to the Ministry "of State for Tourism and Antiquities" (Katzman, 2008, p. 5). Besides providing a politics-free arena, such a preference also enables the Sadrist Movement to control a budget with which they fund their activities, create employment for their followers as well as winning over the people with service provision. Part of the reason for distrust in politics is Sadrists' view of the political arena as inherently corrupt and their prioritization of society's piousness over Islamization at the hands of the state.

Sadrists do not embrace the doctrine of the rule of the jurist or another form of Islamic governance. They believe that justice cannot be established until the rightful ruler, Imam Mahdi returns. Hence, existing governments are unjust, no matter how hard they try to be. What matters for them is society's religiousness and welfare. However, beliefs do not always translate into actions, and Sadrist ministries, as well as municipalities, are also reported to be involved in corruption (Thurber, 2014). In short, Sadrists position themselves against partisan politics despite being in the parliament, cabinet, and municipalities. Although similar to al-Sistani's trend, they do not follow an aspiration to build a state based on the Islamic principles of governance, they are still politically active and refuse the quietism of the clerical establishment of Najaf.

5.2.3. Political Activism versus the Quietist Trend

Both Baqir al-Sadr and Sadeq al-Sadr were for political activism and rejected the idea that a religious figure should refrain from politics until the return of Mahdi. Their activism drew harsh criticisms from the clerical establishment who were quietists. While the post-Saddam era provided an opportunity for Shiite groups to participate in politics and governance, the establishment remained silent, albeit occasional interventions into

politics to settle conflicts. Sadrists were among those who entered the political arena with violence as well as electoral participation.

In his interview with Aljazeera in 2008 (Al Jazeera Arabic, 2008), al-Sadr insists that the people of Iraq need guidance and service in all areas of life, including politics. He emphasizes the role of politics as serving the Iraqi nation. Despite their refusal of the legitimacy of the transition government until 2005 on the grounds that they were under the control of occupiers, Sadrists eventually entered into politics and accepted the government formed after the December 2005 elections as legitimate by being a part of it (Thurber, 2014). Sadrists involve in politics both on the streets and the government offices. A verified Twitter account under the username @Mu_AlSadr created in 2015 publishes statements by al-Sadr on religious and socio-political issues alike. Their official website (http://jawabna.com/) also contains both political statements and religious rulings, *fatwas*. Al-Sadr is mentioned as a leader and 'commander' beside his religious honorary titles. In short, the Sadrist Movement is a highly politically active movement contrary to the clerical establishment in Najaf. However, such an approach does not bring them closer to Iran.

5.3. Conclusion

This chapter introduced the religious identity and political ideology of the Sadrist Movement as potential dynamics behind the Sadrist-Iranian relations. Sadrists are a religious, social movement belonging to the Twelver interpretation of Shia Islam. Sharing this religious identity with Iran, however, did not bring them closer to Iran. On the other hand, Sadrists were involved in intra-Shia rivalries in Iraq. Therefore, the sectarian identity cannot be among the factors explaining the nature of Sadrist-Iranian relationship.

As for their political ideology, this chapter listed three key components: Iraqi nationalism, technocracy, and activism. Iraqi nationalism defended by the Sadrists seems

to explain their non-alignment with Iran. Especially, their refusal of foreign intervention requires distancing from Iran. Muqtada al-Sadr, throughout the 2003-2018 period, had been stressing on his independence from any international patron. Such an emphasis, however, did not prevent occasional rapprochements between Sadrists and Iran. To answer criticisms of inconsistency, al-Sadr (FRANCE 24 English, 2015) stated that the Iraqi people needed assistance from any 'non-occupying' neighboring country against the IS. This example shows how Sadrists try to frame their actions that seem to contradict their ideology as a necessity. As Sadrists argue for Iraq's sovereignty and independence, they view Iran, Saudi Arabia, and any other country as equal partners with whom Iraq can form alliances in accordance with its interests and needs, provided that Iraq does not become a puppet state of any of such partners. Other components of the Sadrist ideology do not seem relevant in their relations with Iran but have more to do with domestic politics of Iraq. Demands for a technocratic government and political activism as opposed to quietism of al-Hawza are dynamics in the political rivalry between Sadrists and other political factions and religious competition with al-Hawza. Although Iraqi nationalism seems to have some explanatory power, why Sadrists are inclined to this particular ideology remains unexplained.

This thesis claims that the social basis of the movement is the determining factor behind Sadrists' ideology as well as their relations with Iran, which will be discussed in the chapter on the social base. Before that, however, the next chapter will analyze the personality of Muqtada al-Sadr as the leader of the movement. His leadership, symbolism of his family, rhetoric, and maneuvering capabilities are relevant in our discussion as they are crucial in the activities of the movement. He brought the movement from the sidelines of the new Iraqi political landscape to its center through his leadership.

CHAPTER 6

LEADERSHIP: MUQTADA AL-SADR AND RELATIONS WITH IRAN

The role of leadership in social movements is often overshadowed by other factors such as collective action, socio-political structures, ideational elements, and economic conditions in the literature (Stutje, 2012). Such a neglect of leadership is understandable for movements that are spontaneous, non-hierarchical, or professionally organized but for those that have leaders who make most of the essential decisions, leaders' background, personality, rhetoric, and strategic capabilities are crucial in analyzing those social groups (Valls, Aubert, Puigvert, & Flecha, 2017). As a religious, social movement, Sadrists fall into the latter category. Therefore, this chapter will introduce the components of Muqtada al-Sadr's personality, namely, his family name, speaking style, success in resonating the expectations of his audience and appeal to their emotions, and maneuvering skills when the situation requires a shift. Framing analysis used in the Social Movements Theory helps us understand how Muqtada al-Sadr was able to justify the shifts in the movement's tactics and strategies. His primary source of power is this ability to frame his ideas in a way that resonates with his supporters.

6.1. Family Name: *Ahl al-Bayt* and al-Sadr

Muqtada al-Sadr is the youngest son of Sadeq al-Sadr and son-in-law of Baqir al-Sadr and a descendant of the Prophet Mohammed through his grandson Hussein. The family legacy and religious credentials of both of his predecessors, their popularity among the Shiite community in Iraq and martyrdom at the hands of the Baath regime contributed young Muqtada's (he was only 29 in 2003) success in taking control of the Sadrist Movement and build the Mahdi Army (Bayless, 2012).

The Shiite community, as well as Sunnis, revere the descendants of the Prophet but the status of Sayyids and Sharifs (Imam Hasan's descendants) among Shia Muslims is even higher. Ayatollahs and grand ayatollahs are usually sayyids who are the sources of

emulation. As members of the family of the Prophet (*Ahl al-Bayt*), they lead people in religious and socio-political matters alike (Mavani, 2013b). Hence, despite not being an ayatollah himself, Muqtada al-Sadr enjoys the respect of the Shia Muslims in Iraq because he is also a sayyid. Additionally, being a member of the al-Sadr family increases his popularity even further (Taha, 2019).

The legacy of Baqir and Sadeq al-Sadr is a significant source of legitimacy for Muqtada al-Sadr. The strife both his predecessors suffered, and their eventual martyrdom makes even those who were against them when they were alive to show their respect while talking about them. Being a martyr (*shaheed* in Arabic) is viewed as the highest degree a Muslim can achieve for both Shiites and Sunnis. In many of his speeches, Muqtada al-Sadr refers to his predecessors as *al-shaheedayn* (the two martyrs) and quotes their views and behaviors. Although such a legacy is not sufficient in explaining al-Sadr's popularity, it certainly amplifies his other characteristics.

6.2. Speaking Style and Addressing to the Hearts of the Audience

Compared to other religious leaders, Muqtada al-Sadr speaks in a less scholarly manner. He uses a more common Arabic, one that is used by ordinary Iraqi Arabs in daily life. His unique style distinguishes him from the elites, both political and religious, and brings him closer to the ordinary people. Further, similar to his father, he addresses the problems faced by lower-class Iraqi Shiites, be it social, political, or religious. He also makes his audience repeat slogans or sections from poems after him.

For example, a speech by Muqtada al-Sadr posted on YouTube by the channel Sadr Commander Lovers (عشاق الصدر القائد) (2017) contains all the elements of his rhetoric. With a simpler Arabic, he addresses ordinary people. He makes his audience to repeat slogans such as "Yes to Iraq!" "Yes to reform!" and "No to the occupier!" while addressing their issues. The recording shows the excitement of the audience, as well. In short, through

his rhetoric, Muqtada al-Sadr engages and connects with his audience, which brings him closer to the people and increases his popularity.

6.3. Flexibility in Strategy Changes

Muqtada al-Sadr has been successful in changing strategies in accordance with what the situation requires. During the first two years of the occupation, 2003-2005 he fought against the occupation forces with the Mahdi Army and refused the legitimacy of the political order created by the US and allied forces. However, when he saw the opportunity in participating in politics and that he cannot solely rely on violent resistance, he decided to engage in elections, and as a result, his followers made it to the parliament in the December 2005 elections.

After conflicts with the government forces, al-Sadr understood that he could no longer keep his militia, and declared the Mahdi Army members to form a smaller armed group and participate in cultural and educational activities as other forms of resistance. When he felt that he is in danger in Iraq, he fled to Iran only to return two years later in 2010 as an Iraqi nationalist and opposition figure against the Maliki government. In 2014, he mobilized another militia group, Saraya al-Salam to join the fight against the IS in Iraq. He also did not hesitate to meet with his rivals and enter into coalitions with those he harshly criticized.

In summary, Muqtada al-Sadr, as a member of the al-Sadr family and a descendant of the Prophet Mohammed, is a prominent religious figure and community leader in Iraq. His family legacy, oratorical style, and flexibility in strategic shifts enable him to enjoy widespread respect among Iraqis. He managed to establish himself as a resistance and opposition leader who speaks for the people. As he is the principal decision-maker, together with a small circle of advisors in the Sadrist Movement, his leadership can be a factor behind the Sadrist-Iranian relationship.

Sadrists' strategies, alliances, and conflicts cannot be understood without Muqtada al-Sadr. That is why many studies on the Sadrist Movement revolve around al-Sadr's statements and actions. On the other hand, al-Sadr's success mainly depends on his ability to resonate with his target audience. He needs to respond to the expectations of his followers, convince them about the merit of his decisions, and justify his actions. Otherwise, he and his movement will lose popular support as it was the case in 2008 when they were defeated by the government and had to dissolve their militia group, and the movement faced defections and splits. In short, al-Sadr's leadership is vital in understanding Sadrist-Iranian relations, but the social base of the movement has more explanatory power as it guides al-Sadr's decisions.

CHAPTER 7

THE SOCIAL BASE OF THE SADRIST MOVEMENT AND RELATIONS WITH IRAN

The main argument of this thesis is that the social base of the Sadrist Movement has the highest explanatory power regarding the Sadrist-Iranian relationship. Hence, after briefly introducing the general outlook of the Iraqi society, this chapter will explain the profile of the basis of the movement and discuss its role in the said relations. The Sadrist Movement began with the rural migrant Shiites who arrived in big cities in search of employment. Capitalizing on the popularity of his late cousin Baqir al-Sadr, Sadeq al-Sadr started to build charity networks to help the urban poor find jobs and receive certain services the Baath regime would not provide in the 1990s. When the young Muqtada al-Sadr emerged as the successor of his father in 2003, he mobilized the same base to build a militia group and start an armed resistance against the US and allied forces. Throughout the 2003-2018 period, al-Sadr was the leader of the Sadrist Movement and could transform it into one of the largest socio-political movements of Iraq that also had an armed wing. The basis of the movement arguably shaped its political stance, including relations with Iran.

There is an agreement in the literature on the Sadrist Movement regarding its social base being the Shia urban poor. That segment of the society suffered the most under the Baath regime, but their situation did not change after the toppling of Saddam and the rule of Shia-dominated governments of the post-2003 era. The financial benefits of the oil-rich country, as well as international aid, remained among the political elite while the lower classes did not receive much. The high level of corruption, insufficient public services, and lack of security hit the poor the hardest. They, in turn, saw the new political elite most of whom were in exile in Iran during the Baath era and returned to Iraq after the US occupation to collaborate with the occupiers in the reconstruction of the political system as the main culprit behind their suffering. As Iran supported those governments, its influence in Iraq is seen as the source of the said problems. Hence, the Sadrist

Movement could not build a sustainable alliance with Iran as it would alienate the movement from its base. To keep its integrity and grow its base, Sadrist leaders had to appear independent from Iran (and the US) even at times of short-lived rapprochements. To contextualize the issue, we need to first view the Iraqi society and its problems as a whole. Then, this chapter will discuss the profile of the movement based on the literature and data from World Values Survey Wave 6 that was collected in 2013 in Iraq. Finally, the role of the social base of the movement in Sadrist-Iranian relations from 2003 to 2018.

7.1. The Outlook of Iraqi Society

This section will provide a general view of the Iraqi society through statistical data on the wealth of Iraq, and levels of corruption and unemployment and discuss the lack of security. Then, using data from World Values Survey Wave 6 (WVS 6), it will show worries of Iraqi people regarding civil war and unemployment. Before discussing the insufficiency of the government to provide public services such as electricity and water and the protests against them, it will analyze the level of trust in governmental bodies and political parties using the same dataset.

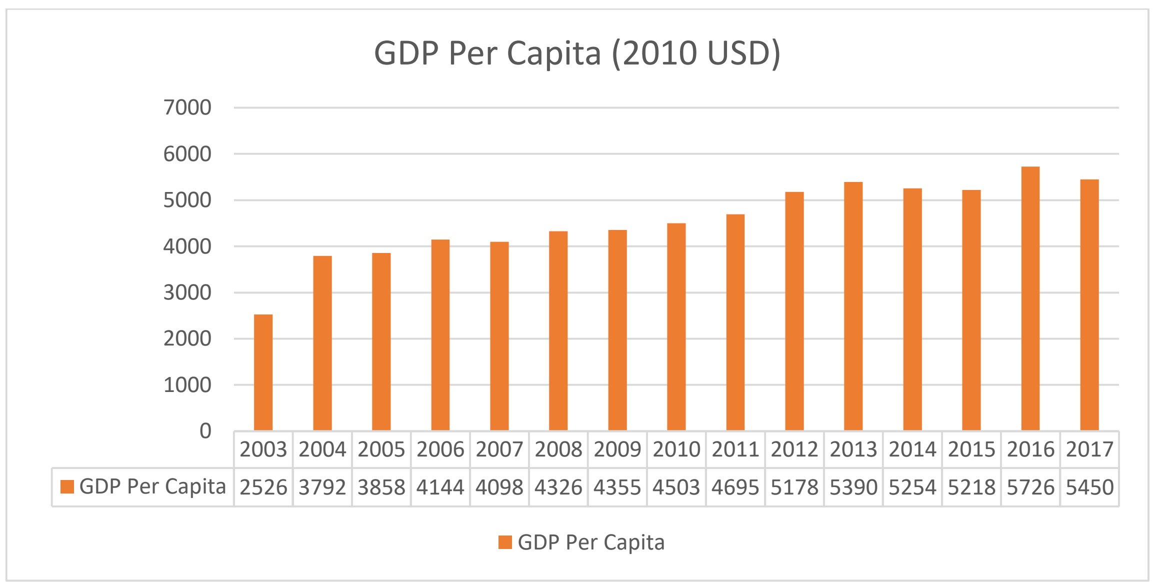

Figure 7.1: GDP per capita in Iraq in the 2003-2017 period adjusted for the 2010 USD Value Source: World Bank Data (2017)

As shown in Figure 7.1, the per capita income of Iraqis increased from $2526 in 2003 to $5450 in 2017 adjusted for the USD value of 2010. However, due to periods of conflict in 2003-2008 and 2014-2018 and extreme levels of corruption, this wealth did not reach to average Iraqis in the form of income, employment, and social services. Notably, the high levels of unemployment among young people is a severe challenge to the Iraqi economy, but little had been done to address the issue. Corruption is the primary reason behind such neglect (Sassoon, 2016).

Post-2003 Iraq had extreme levels of corruption that hit the poor the most. Citizens are forced to bribe officials to receive services to which they are legally entitled. According to IMF estimations, between %10-20 of jobs in Iraq are non-existent meaning that their salaries are going to somewhere else. Hence, the unemployment level is even higher, considering its calculation method as the ratio of jobs to the labor force (Abdullah, 2017; Sassoon, 2016).

Lack of security is another issue that affects the livelihood of Iraqis. In the 2003-2008 era, Iraqis faced invasion and violent conflicts between the allied forces and resistance groups such as the Mahdi Army in addition to a bloody civil war between various armed groups and government forces, during which more than a million civilians lost their lives. Moreover, Iraqis faced the IS threat between 2014 and 2018. Though the government declared victory against the militant group, its cells are still a threat for Iraq. To make the situation worse, the incompetence of Iraqi Security Forces in providing security to the people, numerous militia group had been operating in the country between 2003 and 2018 (Green & Ward, 2009; Hazbun, 2018). Corruption, unemployment, and insecurity made Iraqis fear unemployment and civil war while decreasing their trust in state institutions and political parties.

Figure 7.2: Distribution of Iraqis worrying about unemployment and civil war. Source: World Values Survey Wave 6 (Dagher, 2014)

As shown in Figure 7.2, the percentage of those who worry about being unemployed or not finding a job is close to %60, while those who fear the emergence of a civil war are %66. The data for Iraq was collected in 2013, before the IS. It shows how fragile the Iraqi society is. Further, there is a general mistrust in the government agencies and political parties while the confidence in religious organizations is quite high, according to Figure 7.3.

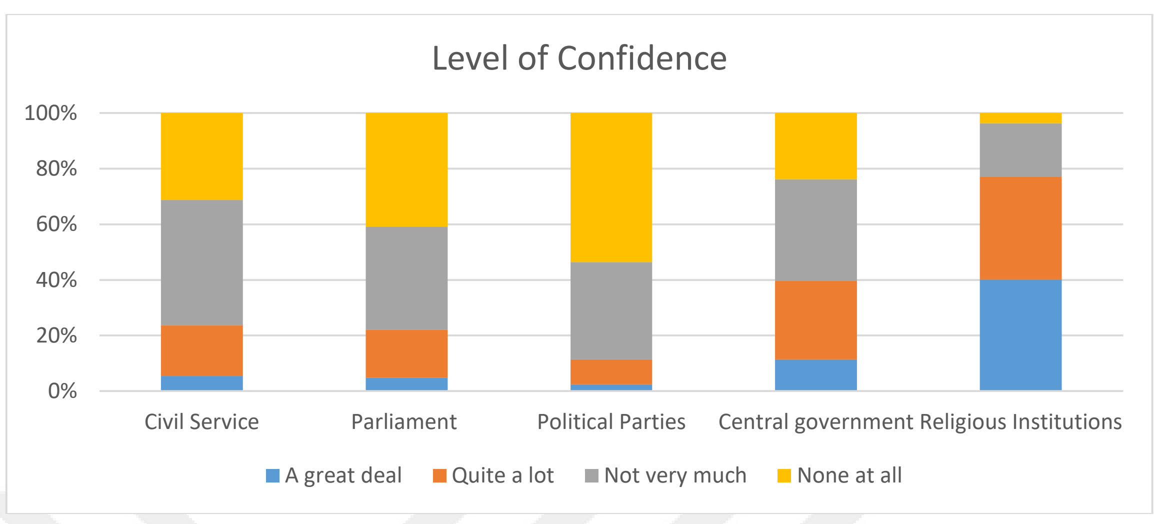

Figure 7.3: Level of Confidence in public and religious institutions Source: World Values Survey Wave 6 (Dagher, 2014)

Against the high levels of corruption and poverty, Iraqis took the streets many times and organized peaceful demonstrations throughout the 2003-2018 period. Across social segments, protesters mainly demanded the distribution of revenues of the state to the people, corruption be ended, and jobs and public services such as electricity and water be provided sufficiently (Isakhan, 2011; Jabar, 2018). In short, despite high amounts of state revenues and international aid during the 2003-2018 era in Iraq, the government failed to provide security, employment, and public services due to corruption. The people, on the other hand, worry about poverty and civil war; had lost its confidence in the government and parliament while putting its trust in religious institutions. Finally, they took the streets to protest the government and raise their demands. The next section will discuss the social basis of the Sadrist Movement within this context and its role in Sadrist-Iranian relations.

7.2. Who are the Sadrists?

The social base of the Sadrist Movement is consistently described as lower-class Shiites, mostly living in urban centers (Bayless, 2012; Mansour & van den Toorn, 2018; Thurber, 2014). This section will also use statistical data from the World Values Survey Wave 6 (Dagher, 2014) to illustrate the social basis of the Sadrist Movement further. The said dataset contains a question (V228) regarding party choice of respondents in case there

were elections the next day. Among the parties is the al-Ahrar party endorsed by the Sadrists Movement. Although a person who thinks to vote for a Sadrist-aligned electoral bloc is not necessarily a Sadrist, the sociological profile of those who would provide a general outlook regarding Sadrists.

As discussed earlier, the Sadrist Movement started with the initiatives of Sadeq al-Sadr in 1990s. After the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988, the devastated rural population of Iraq migrated to urban centers in search of employment. Sadeq al-Sadr, through charity networks, began to create a movement among those lower-class Shiite Arabs. Throughout the 1990s until his assassination in 1999, al-Sadr grew more popular among the said social group. His son, Muqtada al-Sadr, took over the movement and organized his Mahdi Army from among the same base and continued the line of his father in positioning himself as the voice of the needy and the oppressed (Thurber, 2014). Sadrists established themselves, throughout the 2003-2018 period, as the representatives of the poor and contrasted themselves to the “elite” the majority of whom returned from exile in Iran. To avoid repetition, as these developments were discussed in previous chapters, this section will continue with statistical data regarding the social base of Sadrists: their level of education, perceived social class, and employment status. To contextualize, general data on the same variables is added as Iraq.

WVS Wave 6 Dataset contains the level of education. To avoid confusion and better visualize the data, the author has combined related categories. While “no formal education” remained the same, “incomplete primary school” and “completed primary school,” options were combined under “primary school.” All the categories related incomplete and completed secondary school types are under “secondary school” while “university education” with and without a degree are combined under “university level.”

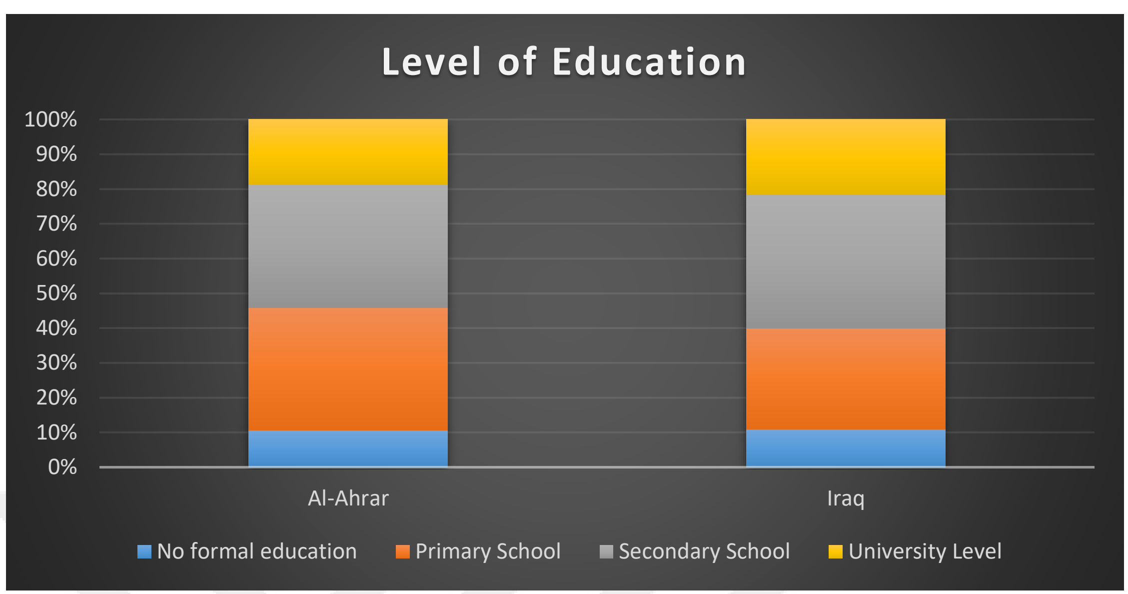

Figure 7.4: Level of education among al-Ahrar supporters and Iraq in general
Source: WVS 6

As indicated in Figure 7.4, less than 20% of al-Ahrar supporters had university-level education. Those who had primary and secondary school education constitute the majority of the supporters. The distribution is more or less representative of the Iraqi population.

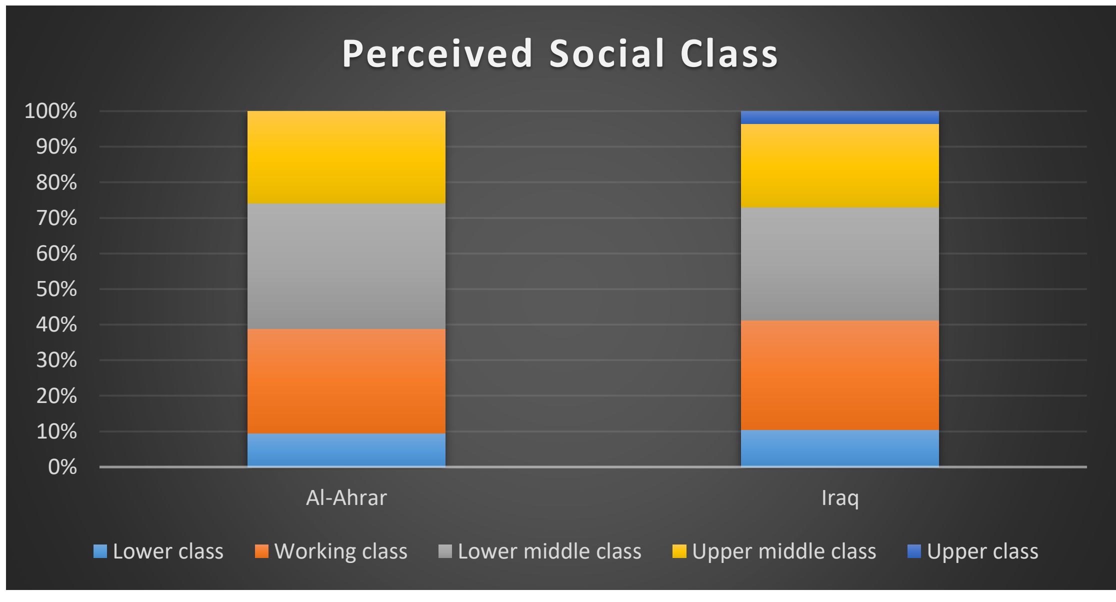

Figure 7.5: Perceived social class among al-Ahrar supporters and Iraqis in general
Source: WVS 6

As seen in Figure 7.5, more than 60% of al-Ahrar supporters considered themselves in the working and lower-middle classes and 25% in the upper-middle class while none placed themselves in the upper class. The middle class combined also exceeds %60. Although these findings appear to contradict the literature that places the Sadrist Movement in the lower class, the difference may be due to the differences between class definitions perceived by Iraqis and observed by scholars. As Figure 7.6 shows, only 36% of al-Ahrar supporters were in the active workforce.

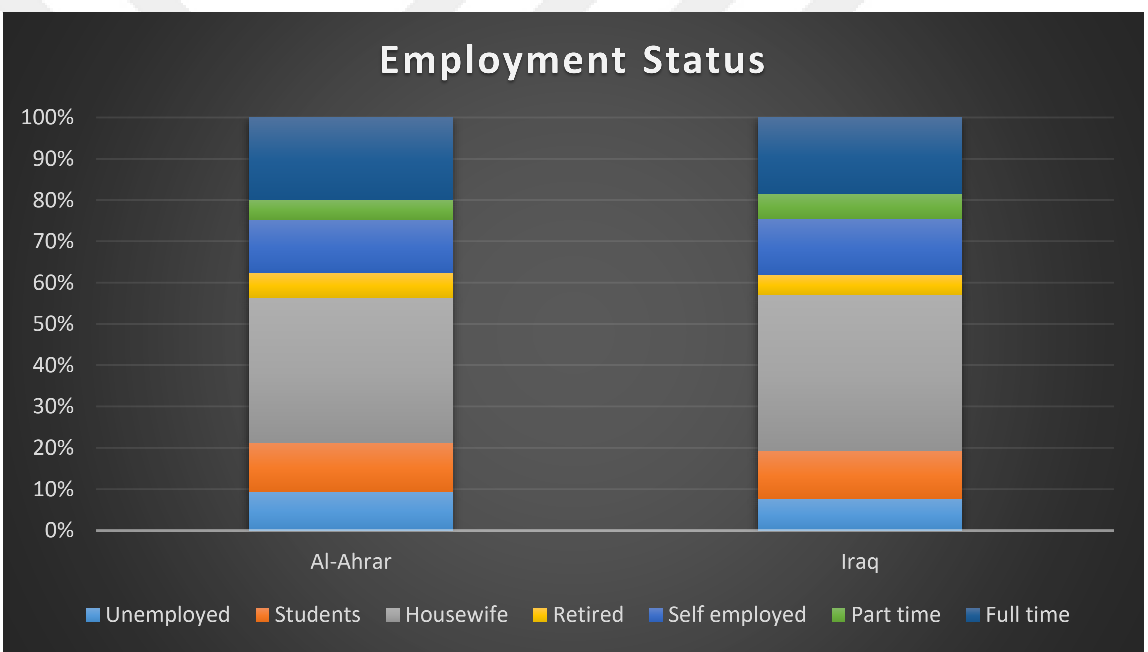

Figure 7.6: Employment status among al-Ahrar supporters and Iraqis in general
Source: WVS 6

Figure 7.6 indicates that similar to the general distribution, more than 60% of al-Ahrar supporters were unemployed, student, housewife, or retired while only 36% were in the active workforce. It also shows that there is a difference between one's actual and perceived social class. Apart from its shortcomings, the mentioned data from WVS Wave 6 that was collected in 2013 in Iraq gives a general idea about the social basis of the Sadrist Movement and Iraqi people in general.

In short, there is a consistent description of the Sadrist Movement in the literature, placing them into the lower and working-class category. To complement this consensus, this section included Figures 7.4, 7.5, and 7.6 derived from WVS Wave 6 dataset that presents a general outlook regarding the profile of Sadrists. Figure 7.4 demonstrated that less than 20% of Sadrists had university-level education, while the majority fell into categories of primary and secondary school education. Viewed together, Figures 7.5 and 7.6 showed that while over %60 of al-Ahrar supporters placed themselves into either lower or upper-middle classes, the fact that only %36 of them were active in the labor force indicated that there was a mismatch between one's actual and perceived social classes. Arguably, while Sadrists may be dominantly from lower and working classes, they indeed have middle-class members as well. Findings do not refute the consensus in the literature; instead, they complement it. What is the role of this social basis in Sadrist-Iranian relations?

7.3. The Sadrist Social Base and Relations with Iran

Previous sections of this chapter demonstrated the general outlook of the Iraqi society and the Sadrist Movement based on the literature as well as statistical data. This section will discuss the role of the Sadrist social base in the relations with Iran during the 2003-2018 period. It argues that consisting of lower and working classes, those who face many economic and security problems and put the blame on the governing elite backed by Iran, the Sadrist Movement, from its inception in the 1990s to the 2003-2018 period had distanced itself from Iran despite some short-lived rapprochements.

While the current political elite, members of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (currently called the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq) and the Islamic Da'wa Party had been in exile in Iran in 1990s, the Iraqi Shia had two sources of reference: Sadeq al-Sadr's movement and *al-Hawza*. While *al-Hawza* remained outside the political scene and focused more on religious affairs, Sadeq al-Sadr was involved in social and political issues of mainly poor Shiites through support networks and Friday sermons. When the

elite returned to Iraq in 2003 to reconstruct the political system of post-Saddam Iraq, they co-opted with the US while having the support of *al-Hawza* and Iran. In this context, Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army made Sadrists as symbols of resistance while the ills of the new system, lack of security and social services, high unemployment, and many other, were attributed to the new political leaders in Baghdad. Sadrists managed to keep themselves away from the blame even though they eventually participated in the government.

The new phase of the Iraqi political landscape placed the Shia majority to the center of power, but the lower classes of the Shia Arabs faced neglect, similar to Sunni Arabs. Regions, where they lived, were insecure and vulnerable against attacks by extremist groups. The US and the new elite were to be blamed in the eyes of many Iraqis. The Sadrist Movement and their militia filled the role of looking after the poor and providing security to the neighborhoods where their supporters lived. Despite the initial support the Mahdi Army received from Iran, Sadrists presented themselves as independence from foreign influence and blamed the rival groups as the puppets of foreign powers be it Iran or the US. Their stance appealed to lower and working classes who were close to Iraqi nationalism. To the extent that the Sadrist rhetoric was successful in resonating the sentiments of those classes, they grew their popularity. By siding with the protesters in 2015 and actively joining them, the Sadrist-Communist alliance, Sairoon, came the first in the May 2018 parliamentary elections. Stressing their independence from any foreign power, was another strategy employed by Sadrists to appeal to Iraqi nationalists.

Emphasis on being independent was a theme that appears in the rhetoric of Muqtada al-Sadr throughout the 2003-2018 period. Moreover, al-Sadr and the political factions he supported pushed for reform, criticized the governments they were also a part of as being corrupt and failing to establish order and provide security in the country. They always addressed the issues of lower and working classes even across ethnic and sectarian lines. This thesis argues that the support of Iran for the Iraqi governments it

fed anti-Iranian sentiments among those who suffered the most due to the said governments. The Sadrist Movement that had emerged among the lower and working classes had to distance itself from Iran to keep and further grow its social base. Even when they had limited alliance with Iran, they had to maintain an independence discourse.

In conclusion, this chapter attempted to establish that the Sadrist social base, the lower and working classes among Shia Arabs in Iraq, is the primary explanatory factor behind the Sadrist-Iranian relations. To do so, it first introduced the general outlook of the Iraqi society with its increased wealth in the post-2003 era and addressed significant problems faced by Iraqi people despite such an increase. It then discussed who were the Sadrists through the literature and statistical data. Finally, it showed that the growth of anti-Iran sentiments among the lower and working classes as a result of the Iranian involvement in Iraqi politics and backing of governments was the central dynamic behind the distancing relationship between Sadrists and Iran. To make it clear, it was the Sadrist leadership that adopted an ideology to appeal to the said segments of the Iraqi society. They needed to distance themselves from Iran and maintain a discourse of independence from any foreign actor in order to get popular support.

CHAPTER 8
CONCLUSION

Drawing upon the Social Movements Theory (SMT), this thesis attempted to explore the dynamics behind Sadrist-Iranian relations in the 2003-2018 period. This section will conclude the thesis by summarizing the chapters and explaining its contribution to the literature.

This thesis employed the social movements theory to explain how the anti-Iranian sentiments among its social base have led the Sadrist Movement to adopt a political discourse that opposes the Iranian involvement in Iraqi politics. The SMT is more suitable than other approaches for this task due to three reasons: (1) the Sadrist Movement is a socio-political movement. The use of violence through militia groups can be viewed as part of the strategy of the movement. (2) Analytical tools used in the SMT such as analysis of collective action, resource mobilization theory, political opportunity structures, and analysis of framing and ideology apply to the Sadrist Movement. (3) A narrow focus on a single element of the movement, be it its leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, its militia groups, Mahdi Army and Peace Brigades, or its electoral participation will fall short in understanding the complex dynamics among all of its components.

The SMT provided analytical tools that were crucial in understanding Sadrist-Iranian relations. In accordance with the resource mobilization theory, the thesis argued that the Sadrists adopted an ideology to mobilize the 'Shia underclass' and gain their support. Framing analysis showed that the Sadrist leadership tried to explain away their actions that were seemingly contradicting their ideology or presented such actions as 'necessity.' Political opportunity structures developed in the post-Saddam era helped explain the growth and increasing power of Shiite social and political movements, including Sadrists. Finally, the SMT guided the research of this thesis regarding the elements of the

movement, namely, the identity and ideology, leadership, and social base needed to be analyzed as potential factors behind Sadrist-Iranian relations.

With roots going back to Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr's political activism of the 1960s and 1970s, the Sadrist Movement was established by Baqir's cousin, Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr in 1990s. With the Saddam regime losing its grip on the Iraqi North, where Kurds established a de facto autonomous region and the Shia majority South, the Shiite social and political movements found an opportunity environment to mobilize. The Sadrist Movement led by Sadeq al-Sadr involved in charity activities and built informal networks with lower-class Shiites as well as rural migrants who arrived at cities in search of work. As a vocal critic of the Saddam regime, Sadeq was assassinated by the government. With its leader killed, the movement entered into an era of passivity until the fall of Saddam in 2003.

With initial, limited support from Iran, the youngest son of Sadeq al-Sadr, Muqtada, formed a militia group among his supporters called the Mahdi Army with the goals to repel the invasion and establish order and security in Iraq. The militia was also involved in the civil war of 2006-2008. After the crackdown on his armed group by the Maliki government, Muqtada went to Iran to study in Qom and increase his religious credentials. When he returned to Iraq in 2010, however, he became a critique of the Maliki government and Iranian intervention in Iraqi affairs. He formed another militia called the Peace Brigades to join the fight against ISIS in 2014. During the war, his militia took a more independent path from Iran as opposed to the Badr Organization who directly coordinated with the Commander of the Qods Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps of Iran. In terms of electoral participation, we observe that the Sadrist Movement follows a pragmatist approach with the primary goal to obtain as many government offices as possible.

In the 2003-2018 period that is the scope of this thesis, Sadrist-Iranian relations had some ups and many downs, but Sadrists pronounced their distance to and independence from Tehran by both words and actions. In the initial phase of anti-occupation resistance of the Mahdi Army, they received limited support from Iran. However, with Iran prioritizing the political process in 2005, the Sadrist-Iranian rapprochement came to an end. Until 2008 when the Mahdi Army was dismantled, and its members channeled to other activities, and al-Sadr was forced to flee to Iran, Sadrists were in an antagonistic relationship with Iran-backed political as well as armed groups. However, al-Sadr chose to move to Iran under the pretext of learning in Qom and lost control over some parts of his movement. The movement faced some splits. During his time in Iran, al-Sadr had disagreements with the Tehran regime so that when he returned to Iraq in 2010, he began to position himself as an opposition leader and Iraqi nationalist who opposes the US and Iranian interventions in Iraq alike.

From 2014 to 2018, Sadrists had another limited rapprochement with Tehran when they participated in the fight against the IS alongside the Iran-backed militia groups. Nevertheless, they always strived to emphasize their independence from any foreign power. Al-Sadr's visits to Saudi Arabia and the UAE were a part of that policy. The idea was that while they were independent, they wanted good relations with neighboring countries for the good of Iraqi people. Finally, in May 2018 parliamentary elections, they allied with seculars and communists to compete against the Iran-aligned electoral coalitions, which drew criticism from Tehran. In short, throughout the period, Sadrist had some rapprochements with Iran while always stressing their independence as a group. The nature of relations can be defined as 'distancing.' However, why?

To answer the question, this thesis discussed the role of three possible factors: ideational elements (religion and political ideology), leadership, and social basis. Sadrists are a religious, social movement belonging to the Twelver interpretation of Shia Islam. Sharing this religious identity with Iran, however, did not bring them closer to Iran. On the other

hand, Sadrists were involved in intra-Shia rivalries in Iraq. These points suggest that it cannot be among the factors explaining the distant nature of Sadrist-Iranian relationship. The political ideology of the movement, on the other hand, has three main components: Iraqi nationalism, technocracy, and activism. Iraqi nationalism defended by the Sadrists seems to explain their non-alignment with Iran. Especially, their refusal of foreign intervention requires distancing from Iran. Muqtada al-Sadr, throughout the 2003-2018 period, had been stressing on his independence from any international patron. Such an emphasis, however, did not prevent occasional rapprochements between Sadrists and Iran. To answer criticisms of inconsistency, al-Sadr (FRANCE 24 English, 2015) stated that the Iraqi people needed assistance from any 'non-occupying' neighboring country against the IS.

As Sadrists argue for Iraq's sovereignty and independence, they view Iran, Saudi Arabia, and any other country as equal partners with whom Iraq can form alliances in accordance with its interests and needs, provided that Iraq does not become a puppet state of any of such partners. Other components of the Sadrist ideology do not seem relevant in their relations with Iran but have more to do with domestic politics of Iraq. Demands for a technocratic government and political activism as opposed to quietism of al-Hawza are dynamics in the political rivalry between Sadrists and other political factions and religious competition with al-Hawza. Although Iraqi nationalism seems to have some explanatory power, why Sadrists are inclined to this particular ideology remains unexplained.

Muqtada al-Sadr, as a member of the al-Sadr family and a descendant of the Prophet Mohammed, is a prominent religious figure and community leader in Iraq. His family legacy, oratorical style, and flexibility in strategic shifts enable him to enjoy widespread respect among Iraqis. He managed to establish himself as a resistance and opposition leader who speaks for the people. As he is the principal decision-maker, together with a small circle of advisors in the Sadrist Movement, his leadership can be a factor behind the Sadrist-Iranian relationship.

Sadrists’ strategies, alliances, and conflicts cannot be understood without Muqtada al-Sadr. That is why many studies on the Sadrist Movement revolve around al-Sadr’s statements and actions. On the other hand, al-Sadr’s success is mainly depended on his ability to resonate with his target audience. He needs to respond to the expectations of his followers, convince them about the merit of his decisions, and justify his actions. Otherwise, he and his movement will lose popular support as it was the case in 2008 when they were defeated by the government and had to dissolve their militia group. The movement faced defections and splits. In short, al-Sadr’s leadership is vital in understanding Sadrist-Iranian relations, but the social base of the movement has more explanatory power as it guides al-Sadr’s decisions.

The social base of the Sadrist Movement is consistently described as the Shia lower and working classes. The movement started among the workers and rural migrants in cities after the end of the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988. Throughout the 1990s, Sadeq al-Sadr created support networks to provide for those people. When Muqtada al-Sadr began to mobilize his militia group, he appealed to the same social base and capitalized on his family legacy. Statistical data from World Values Survey Wave 6 also shows that Sadrists are mostly lower and working-class Iraqis but also have members among the middle class while almost two-thirds of them were not in the active labor force. As the basis of the movement, these groups mainly affected its positions both domestic and international.

The base of the movement, alongside with other Iraqis from the same socio-economic background, had suffered immensely from the Iran-Iraq War as well as the exclusionary policies towards the Shia majority of Iraq. The toppling of the Baath regime, however, did not do much for the poorer segments of Iraq due to ongoing conflicts in the country and high levels of corruption that prevented the increasing wealth be accessed by lower classes. High unemployment rates, state’s failure to provide public services, and lack of security led those people to grow a resentment against the Iraqi federal government as

well as its main supporters, Iran, and the US. As mostly consisting of Shiite political figures who were in exile during the Baath regime but returned to Iraq in 2003 to build the new system, the political elite is viewed as the main culprit behind such problems. Iran, after the US, as supporters of such elite also share the blame. As a result, having ties with the US or Iran makes a movement unappealing to those segments of Iraqi society. Therefore, to gain the support of these people, the Sadrist Movement needs to appear outside the elite and independent from Iranian and US influence.

Without popular support, a social movement cannot survive. As for the Sadrist Movement, they need to provide a political ideology that resonates with their target audience consisted predominantly of the Shiite underclass who refuse the Iranian influence in Iraq. Hence, this thesis argued, the movement had to adopt Iraqi nationalism, focus on the problems faced by its base, and provide solutions. That is why they also need to be seen as an independent force. In short, the main argument of the thesis is that the social base of the Sadrist Movement shaped its ideology that, in turn, determined Sadrists' non-alignment with Iran. Findings of this thesis contribute to the literature in several regards.

The thesis showed that militia groups in the context of Iraq are often parts of larger socio-political movements. Hence, without understanding the movements behind them, the study of such militias would be incomplete. A securitized perspective would fail to view the dynamics of militias as it would neglect the popular support behind them. As this thesis demonstrated, the Mahdi Army and Saraya al-Salam were two militia groups that emerged as armed wings of the Sadrist Movement in different contexts. Although they received relatively limited aid from Iran, they mostly act independently of the Tehran regime as opposed to other groups such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and the Badr Brigades. The reason behind such a non-alignment with Iran was the social base of the movement that was resentful against the said state. This finding contributes to the literature on armed

groups and is an attempt towards de-securitization of the research. A broader approach will help us better understand the alliances between state and non-state actors.

As for the Social Movements Theory (SMT), this thesis contributes to the literature with its case as well as its finding regarding the role of the leader. The SMT emerged and developed in the Western context but in time was applied to movements in other parts of the world, including the MENA region. The case of this thesis is a movement that has an armed wing that helped it provide security to its basis they needed in times of conflict and insecurity while contributing to its popularity. Notably, the participation of Iraqi socio-political movements in the fight against the IS with their armed forces increased their popularity to the extent that in the May 2018 elections, the Sadrist Movement's bloc came the first followed by the Fatah Alliance consisted of combatants against the IS who resigned their posts to join the elections. The role of leadership is another contribution of the thesis to the literature.

While some studies are focusing on the importance of leadership in the development of social movements, it did not receive a sufficient degree of scholarly interest. While the leader is not operating on his or her own, this thesis demonstrated the role of Muqtada al-Sadr's family legacy, rhetorical features, and ability to adapt to changing conditions while not losing his control over the movement is an essential part of the success of the Sadrist Movement in gaining popular support.

Finally, this thesis demonstrated that viewing MENA politics through sectarian lenses does not always help. As is the case with the Sadrist Movement, being a follower of Twelver Shia Islam does not make an actor ally with other Shiites against non-Shia groups. Intra-communal rivalries for power and other goals are also frequent. Sadrists, since their inception, competed and sometimes entered into armed conflicts with other Shia groups in Iraq while occasionally allying with Kurds, Sunni Arabs, and secular and communist Iraqis against their fellow Shiites. Political and economic dynamics are often

more explanatory than ethnic or religious differences and similarities. This way, the thesis contributes to the study of Middle Eastern politics by showing that other factors have more explanatory power than sectarian identity.

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