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## **Sadrists in the Public Sphere : An Ethnography of Political Shi'ism**

*Les sadristes dans la sphère publique : une ethnographie du chiisme politique.*

**Benedict Robin-D'Cruz**

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Benedict Robin-D'Cruz\*

## *Sadrists in the Public Sphere*

### *An Ethnography of Political Shi'ism*

**Résumé :** *Les sadristes dans la sphère publique : une ethnographie du chiisme politique.* Cet article s'intéresse à la participation à la sphère publique du mouvement sadriste en Irak. Il expose la façon dont l'articulation entre la sphère publique comme espace particulier de l'activité sociale, et les pratiques sociales des sadristes « ordinaires » et de leurs leaders politiques et religieux, a façonné un processus de sécularisation des pratiques politiques du mouvement. Dans le même temps, ce processus de sécularisation continue d'être freiné par l'usage messianique que font les sadristes de l'autorité religieuse, et par leur manque de professionnalisation politique. La contestation de ce processus s'insère dans une lutte idéologique plus large entre les niveaux militant et clérical du mouvement. L'article lie cette lutte à une différenciation structurelle interne qui voit le mouvement sadriste partagé sur des lignes sectorielles de plus en plus clivantes. Cette division contribue à consolider l'hétérogénéité idéologique du mouvement, qui reflète une distinction dans les vocations des acteurs engagés dans diverses formes de militantisme politique et celles des acteurs dont les pratiques relèvent d'abord du champ religieux.

**Mots-clefs :** sadristes, Muqtada al-Sadr, islamisme, chiisme, islam politique chiite, sphère publique, Irak, mouvements sociaux

**Abstract:** This paper analyses the participation of Iraq's Sadrist movement in the public sphere. It reveals how a secularisation of the movement's political practices has been shaped by the interaction of the social practices of ordinary Sadrists and their political and religious leaders with Iraqi political public space as a particular context for social action. At the same time, this secularizing process is in tension with the Sadrists' messianic mode

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\* University of Edinburgh, Édimbourg, Royaume-Uni.

of religious authority and the movement's distorted process of political professionalisation. The contestation of this secularising process is also linked to a wider ideological struggle between the political activist and clerical strata of the movement. This struggle relates to a factor of internal structural differentiation as the Sadrist movement became distributed across increasingly distinct sectoral boundaries. Consequently, greater ideological heterogeneity has emerged within the movement, reflecting the distinct vocations of those engaged in forms of political activism, and those whose practices belong primarily to the religious field.

**Keywords:** Sadrists, Muqtada al-Sadr, Islamism, Shi'ism, Shi'i Islamist movements, public sphere, Iraq, Shi'i politics in Iraq, social movements

## Introduction: Ethnography, Sadrists and the public sphere

On 22 March 2016, two figures from Iraq's Shi'i Islamist Sadrist movement sat down alongside two actors in Iraq's secular-leftist civil trend<sup>1</sup> for a highly unusual televised debate. The backdrop was a huge sit-in demonstration outside the gates of the fortified Green Zone in Baghdad where thousands of Sadrist protesters had gathered to demand political reform. What made this event so unusual was that the Islamist and secularist participants did not appear on opposing sides, but as allies. They were united behind a shared political vision that called for ending the so-called *muḥāṣaṣa* (quota system), an informal practice for distributing political power that had entrenched sectarian politics and party factionalism in Iraq's governing institutions. Instead, protesters called for 'technocratic' ministerial appointments. Participants in the "sit-in debate," which was broadcast live on Iraq's popular secular-liberal television channel *al-Mada*, sought to articulate the protesters' demands while fielding questions about their unlikely cross-ideological alliance. This article uses ethnography to unpack the sit-in debate as a case study of Sadrist engagement in the public sphere, an example of political Shi'ism in action.

I argue that an ethnographic approach can help explain apparent transformations in the Sadrist movement that have been the centre of fierce debate, especially since the movement's stunning victory, alongside their newfound leftist allies, in national elections held in May 2018.<sup>2</sup> What are the basic contours of this debate? Some argue that the Sadrist movement has transformed from a radical, sectarian Islamist group into a more moderate force that advocates political reform and may hold

1 *Al-tayyār al-madani* ("the civil trend") is a term that emerged in Iraqi public discourse to denote a network of political parties, civic groups, journalists, intellectuals and writers who coalesced around a secularist political orientation. Its most powerful political entity is the Iraqi Communist Party (*al-ḥizb al-shuyū'i al-'irāqī*, ICP).

2 Iraq analyst Kirk H. Sowell wrote that Muqtada's victory in the elections 'sent a shockwave through the establishment and reset expectations regarding the formation of the next government.' See, Kirk H. Sowell, 'Understanding Sadr's Victory,' *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 17, 2018. Available at: <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/76387>.

the keys to Iraq's future.<sup>3</sup> Muqtada, according to this view, is now "championing" a "secular-oriented politics".<sup>4</sup> The evidence for this rests primarily on shifts in Sadrist political rhetoric, which seems to have eschewed previously dominant forms of identity-based politics, and to have abandoned Shi'i religious symbols and ideology, in favour of adopting the more moderate and secular practices of their leftist allies. Muqtada's own rhetoric has ranged more widely still, critiquing the entire edifice of political Islamism in Iraq. Thus, he stated during a television interview: "I'll say this despite the *'amāma* [turban] on my head, we tried the Islamists and they failed miserably, it's time to try independent technocrats."<sup>5</sup>

Others have been less impressed by these claims of Sadrist moderation and secularisation. Many Iraq specialists speculate whether this transformation is genuine (almost certainly not), or merely a ruse or temporary strategic manoeuvre (almost definitely).<sup>6</sup> Conventional wisdom holds that Muqtada is almost entirely inscrutable, not guided by a stable set of political ideas or principles, but twisting and turning in unpredictable ways as he searches for "relevance" within the domain of Iraq's elite power politics.<sup>7</sup> This view coheres with a tendency toward psychological and elite-centric interpretations of Sadrist behavior. Some have highlighted the importance of Muqtada's supposed "obsession" with the return of the Hidden Imam (Baram, 2010: 152). This radical Mahdism aligns with the ubiquitous image of the "firebrand cleric" with an "unstable personality" and a "cultlike following" through which he foments a "powerful but chaotic...street (or barrio) politics" (Nasr, 2006: 191). Such accounts, with their orientalist undertones, see the Sadrist phenomena as characterised by primordial irrationalism, unbridled emotionalism, and elite manipulation. In fact, attempting to rationalise Sadrist behaviour has come to be considered something of a fool's errand since, as Nibras Kazimi writes: "No one... has any unique insight into Sadr's thinking, or the means to influence it. His mind is quicksand...[he] lurches haphazardly to and fro, and his movements might as well be described as policy by divination."<sup>8</sup>

3 Ranj Alaaldin, "Could Muqtada al-Sadr be the best hope for Iraq and the region?" Brookings, August 21, 2017. Available at: [<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/08/21/could-muqtada-al-sadr-be-the-best-hope-for-iraq-and-the-region/>] and Richard Spencer, "West's hopes for Iraq rest on Moqtada al-Sadr, the rabble-rousing cleric who fought the occupation", *The Times*, May 7, 2018. Available at: [<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/west-s-hopes-for-iraq-rest-on-moqtada-al-sadr-who-fought-occupation-ct87t76fc>].

4 Mehiyar Kathem, "Iraq's New Statesman" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 3, 2018. Available at: [<https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/05/03/iraq-s-new-statesman-pub-76244>].

5 Muqtada al-Sadr, 21 Nov, 2017, [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3c7WAefoUw0&feature=youtu.be>].

6 For example, see Kirk H. Sowell, "Iraq's Fake Populism and Anti-sectarianism", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 9, 2016. Available at: [<http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/63777>] and Zalmay Khalilzad, "Why American Needs Iran in Iraq," *Politico Magazine*, May 2, 2016. Available at: [<http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/05/why-america-needs-iran-in-iraq-213865>].

7 Nibras Kazimi, "Iraq: What was that all about?" *Talisman Gate*, May 10, 2016. Available at: [<https://talisman-gate.com/2016/05/10/iraq-what-was-that-all-about/>].

8 Nibras Kazimi, "Iraq: What was that all about?" *Talisman Gate*, May 10, 2016, [<https://talisman-gate.com/2016/05/10/iraq-what-was-that-all-about/>].



An ethnographic approach can help chart a way out of these arguments by replacing their narrow focus on Muqtada's statements and actions, and futile attempts to divine his mental states and "true intentions," with a focus on a broader range of Sadrists and forms of practice. A practice-oriented approach pays attention to action, but also to the meanings which actors attach to practices and how these structure, and are structured by, a meaning-giving environment for political action (Schwedler, 2006: 118-119). Iraq's Sadrist trend has rarely been a topic for ethnography of this type. Literature on what this volume terms "political Shi'isms", defined as representations and political practices informed by reference to varieties of Shi'i Islam, has tended towards the study of political ideas contained in textual discourses, rather than their embodiment in social practices. This approach has been less useful for generating insights about the Sadrists owing to the movement's lack of programmatic political ideology or highly-developed textual culture. Scholars observing the Sadrist movement are unlikely to find the sorts of internal ideological debates on the doctrine of *wilāyat al-faqīh* that characterised Lebanese Hezbollah's political evolution in the 1990s (Alagha, 2013: 244-255), for example.

By focusing on the social practices of ordinary Sadrists and their political and religious leaders, this article shows how ethnography can uncover aspects of the Sadrist movement obscured by a narrow focus on Muqtada's political behavior and rhetoric. It can reveal how less theory-laden ideological beliefs, political identities, and relations of power, that may not find expression in textual form, or in Muqtada's speeches and religious edicts, are nevertheless visible in the social world via their embodiment in social practices. It can also show how what may appear abrupt and radical shifts in Sadrist political behaviour, which *seem* to hinge on the unpredictable and ultimately unknowable mental states of the movement's leader, are actually related to more deep-lying, and slow-moving social structures and their transformation via less tangible historical processes.

Ethnography is used here to examine Iraqi political public space as one such historically-constituted structuring context for political action.<sup>9</sup> The emergence of this public sphere is linked to the development of a contestable Iraqi political field post-2003. Sadrist integration into formalised national politics meant participation and investment in this new social domain which increasingly assumed its own structure and corporate identity distinct from the religious field. This introduced an increasingly powerful factor of internal structural differentiation into the

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9 There has been a tendency in analyses of Iraqi politics, and of the Sadrist movement in particular, to make recourse to "power politics" as an explanatory model. I argue this model comes with unacknowledged theoretical baggage concerning the relationship between actors' identities and interests and the social context of their actions. Power politics, in my view, stands in for a particularly de-contextualised form of rational choice theory, and as such, it suffers from the same problems of ahistoricism and lack of attention to the role of cultural factors, principles and identities, and their socio-historical construction. By trying to unpack political public space as an historically constituted context of political action, which shapes actors political identities and preferences, I try to both problematize the power politics model, and show an alternative approach that provides a deeper understanding of the relationship between political actors and their environmental context.

Sadrist movement that had important implications for its development. Thus, I argue for the existence of an emergent heterogeneity in terms of political ideas, identities, and world views within the movement as a result of this internal structural transformation. This contrasts with the conventional approaches, outlined above, which treat the Sadrist movement as a homogenous entity in which transformations, or lack thereof, are causally linked to Muqtada's supposedly erratic mental states. I also reject popular interpretative concepts, used to explain transformations in Islamist movements, that envisage homogenous linear movement (radical-moderate, Islamist-post-Islamist), focusing instead on this dynamic of internal differentiation.

I draw on two theoretical traditions, one rooted in Weber and the other in Habermas to elucidate these processes of secularisation. First, political participation engaged the Sadrists in contrasting forms of routinized social practice: those engaged in political activism (meaning not just politicians but journalists, intellectuals or any other role which seeks to influence the distribution of power between and within political structures) (Weber, 2015: 142); and those whose practices belong primarily to the religious field. Or, in Weber-inspired terms, a contrast between the struggle to exert or share a monopoly on legitimate physical violence, and management of the goods of salvation (Pierret, 2013: 331). This vocational differentiation reflects contrasting pathways of socialisation and the accumulation of different combinations of social capital that gives rise to different, and often conflicting, political behaviours, postures, and ultimately contrasting world views (Lacroix, 2011: 33).

Second, the political public sphere is structured so as to impose certain conditions on those who wish to participate in its discourses. I conceptualise this aspect of the public sphere not in terms of a spatial metaphor, but in Habermasian terms as a particular mode of communicative rationality. This entails participants reimagining their subjectivity as an abstract individualism which fuses disparate social identities into a unitary, if unstable, subject – “the public” (Mah, 2000: 153-182). Thus, participation in Iraq's political public space structures Sadrist discourses and practices in a particular way, i.e. in seeking to participate in, and become, the manifestation of the public subject, particularistic elements of Sadrist social identity, including those rooted in the movement's Shi'i Islamic tradition, are abandoned.

This leads me to suggest two forms of secularisation at play in this case. The first, a function of a division of labour and the consequent divergence in specialised practices. The second, a function of a particular mode of communicative rationality that draws participants into the creation of political subjects shorn of their socially particular accretions. Developing this line of thinking further, it can be said that political public space is particularly problematic for religious actors because its effects tend to unmoor their claims to authority and legitimacy from their anchoring in metaphysical rationality, and to recast them in terms of secular reasoning (Mendieta, 2002: 8). This, in part, is why Islamist movements



are often characterised by a duality, or divergence, between their clerical and lay activist strata as the latter develop and deploy new forms of (secular) authority and legitimacy that don't necessarily draw on the resources of the religious field. Normative clerical practice, by contrast, tends to limit self-exposure to the public sphere, restricting communication to distinctly religious mediums and contexts. The paradigm example of this in Iraq is the traditional *marja'īya* headed by Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani. However, this involves secularisation of another kind, i.e. through the formalisation of a division of labour by which, in this case, the practices of the *marja'īya* exteriorize a social domain in which its metaphysical forms of legitimation do not pertain. Messianic religious mobilisations constitute a third category of Islamic practice which resists both forms of secularisation (i.e. via a division of labour or via engagement in communicative rationality), striving instead to collapse religious-political boundaries and make metaphysical rationality and claims to authority immanent in social and political life.

The public sphere, then, favours actors who are not averse to its secularising implications and those who have accrued the types of social capital, political resources and forms of legitimation which pertain in this domain. Within Islamist movements this tends to be lay intellectuals and political activists with little or no stake in the religious field, e.g. the Sadrist political leader, Dhia al-Asadi, who did not attend the *hawza* but acquired a secular education in English literature and is well versed in European social theory (he is fond of quoting Habermas, for example). It also includes a more limited number of activist clerics with a distinct social background in leftist political thought and activism, e.g. Sadrist cleric Sheikh Sadeq al-Hasnawi, an important figure in this paper. Not only do these actors have the requisite social capital to compete in the public sphere (educational credentials, language skills, social networks etc.), they are also able to deploy the sorts of ideologically sophisticated and rationally coherent discourses which constitute the public sphere's communicative mode.

Consequently, I argue here that the apparent moderation and secularisation of Sadrist political practices is linked to a previously unnoticed social struggle between the movement's political activist and the clerical strata. This latter group have found their status threatened by the deployment of a new repertoire of Sadrist political practices that appear to make little or no claim on religious authority or legitimacy. This pattern would seem to follow Laurence Louër's analysis that the integration of Shi'i Islamist movements into national politics, "means that a process of secularisation, while often disguised in the clothing of religion, is at work... Hence behind the apparent domination of the clerics in the leadership apparatus of these movements, clerical hegemony over political affairs is put into question" (Louër, 2008: 265). However, my ethnography also reveals the effects of two features of the Sadrist movement that continue to resist these secularising processes: the Sadrists' early messianic form of religious leadership; and, consequently, the underdevelopment of their political professionalisation. Thus, despite the Sadrists being amongst the clearest examples of a Shi'i Islamist

movement integrated into routinized processes of formal institutional politics and their consequent engagement in political public space, a straightforward application of Louër's secularisation hypothesis would miss these important countervailing trends. Here, I shine a light on the contestation of this process of secularisation.

This article relies for its ethnographic observations on an hour-long video recording of the debate between Sadrists and secular-leftist activists broadcast from the site of the March 2016 sit-in. This debate represents an instance of public political space thrown up by media attention to leftist-Sadrist cooperation. By approaching this video ethnographically, I mean analyzing the practices contained therein from the perspective of the social context in which they are produced (Dupret, Pierret, Pinto, Spellman-Poots, 2013:2). These ethnographic observations have also been supplemented by data drawn from interviews with Sadrist and civil trend informants conducted during field work in Iraq during the summer of 2017, and textual analysis of Sadrist discursive materials. This data is used to illustrate how patterns identified through ethnographic analysis have echoes in broader developments in the Sadrist movement which reinforce the underlying theoretical interpretation in this paper. Before proceeding to the ethnographic description, this broader conceptual framework for interpreting Sadrist engagement in an evolving religious-political landscape in Iraq will be outlined. This focuses on the tensions that emerge between the movement's early messianic mode of mobilisation and its later engagement in processes of political professionalisation.

As a final note, my broader research on the civil-trend Sadrist cooperation<sup>10</sup> situates me in a particular location mediating between the two movements. This means that certain actors and discourses, namely those favourable to the convergence, have been more available and salient in my research. To mitigate this I have made a special effort to identify and interact with those contesting the convergence. However, they have inevitably been less forthcoming and willing to cooperate and this limitation should be born in mind when appraising the analysis presented here.

## **Sadrist religious messianism and political professionalisation**

Existing scholarship has tended to emphasise religious, rather than political, dynamics of social struggle as the key to explaining the Sadrist phenomenon. Faleh A. Jabar, for example, argued that Muqtada "has no clear vision of an Islamic state" and is "not very political," noting that "his endeavours are geared mainly towards the assertion of his supremacy in clerical leadership" (Jabar, 2003: 25).

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<sup>10</sup> See Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, "Social brokers and leftist-Sadrist cooperation in Iraq's reform protest movement: Beyond instrumental action", *The International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Volume 51, Issue 2, May 2019, p. 257-280.





More recently, Amatzia Baram emphasised the centrality of Muqtada's perpetuation of the *ḥawza nāṭīqa/sāmita* struggle within the Najafi *ḥawza*.<sup>11</sup> According to Baram, Muqtada draws on Shi'i mysticism, his personal connection to the Hidden Imam, to establish a claim to messianic religious leadership (as *walī amr al-muslimīn*), seeking to transcend political-religious divides (Baram, 2011: 152-155). Like Baram, Pierre-Jean Luizard saw this appeal to Mahdism as "a means to bypass the *Marja'īya*", challenging its normative religious hierarchies and boundaries (Luizard, 2010: 268). The Sadrists' assertive Iraqi nationalism has also been understood as structured primarily by the logic of religious competition. Louër, for example, has argued that "by denouncing the influence of the Iranian and other foreign clerics over Najaf, Muqtada al-Sadr strove to extract the holy city from its transnational religious geography to bring it into the strict framework of the Iraqi nation state". This dynamic shaped Sadrist identity as a particularistic mode of Arab ethno-nationalism (Louër, 2008: 260-1).

These scholarly accounts accurately reflect the nature of the Sadrist phenomenon as it began to take shape following the 2003 invasion.<sup>12</sup> In this period, the Sadrists' struggle with the Najafi *ḥawza* was bitter and often violent. This began with the killing of 'Abd al-Majid al-Khoei (elder son of Ayatollah Sayyid Abul-Qassim al-Khoei) outside the Imam 'Ali shrine in Najaf, and the killing of Haydar al-Rufay'i, the *kalidar* (guardian) of the shrine, and the confiscation of its sacred key. On 15 October 2003, Sadrist militiamen tried to invade the shrines of Imams Husayn and 'Abbas in Karbala, disrupting the ability of the *marja'īya* to collect money from pilgrims (Luizard, 2010: 260). Between April and August 2004, when the confrontation reached its height, the Sadrists laid siege to the homes of Ayatollahs Sistani and Ishaq al-Fayyad and the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf fell under their control (Luizard, 2010: 263). A war of words between the Najafi *ḥawza* and the Sadrists ensued, with the former denying Muqtada's religious credibility to issue *fatwa*. The confrontation culminated with the return of Sistani from London (where he had been receiving medical treatment) on 25 August 2004 and his now famous procession from Basra to Najaf, "in defense of the Holy Places". During this episode Sistani was ostensibly acting as mediator between Muqtada and the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). However, the contestation of sacred spaces, symbols, and revenues from religious rites, illustrates this was primarily a struggle for control of the material and symbolic resources of the Shi'i religious

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11 The *ḥawza nāṭīqa/sāmita* distinction refers to a struggle which emerged within the Iraqi *ḥawza* between its quietist tradition and a divergent path taken by Muqtada's father, Ayatollah Muhammad Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr, which sought to make religious leadership immanent in social and political affairs.

12 In this article I am not primarily concerned with the pre-2003 mode of religious leadership offered by Muqtada's father, Sadeq al-Sadr. Nevertheless, the conceptual framework I outline here can also help to explain the dynamics of religious struggle in the Shi'i religious field and how these were structured by the pattern of field boundaries that was generated by Ba'thist authoritarianism. There are undeniable continuities between these patterns and their influence in shaping the post-2003 Sadrist movement that are beyond the scope of this article to fully address.

field encapsulated by the Muqtada-Sistani confrontation and culminating with the highly symbolic surrender of the key to the Imam 'Ali shrine by the former to the latter.

Sadrist strategy in this period sought to politicise the social dynamics of the religious field. This is a feature of messianic religious movements that seek to collapse the metaphysical and eschatological into the mundane everyday world and strive to make religious authority immanent in social and political life. I link Sadrist messianism to a structural factor, what Michel Dobry has termed “de-sectorization,” a process engendered by social crises wherein dominant social logics of societal sectors are suspended or thrown open to reconfiguration (Dobry, 2009). The collapse of Ba’thist authoritarianism was clearly such a crisis. Immediately following the invasion a distinct and autonomous political field had yet to form. The Shi’i religious field, by contrast, stood as one of the only surviving fairly autonomous social domains not integrated into the now defunct Ba’thist regime. A range of actors, including the Sadrists, attempted to exploit the field’s material and symbolic resources to build political power.<sup>13</sup> By seeking to politicise the social dynamics of the religious field, Sadrist messianism challenged the inherent secularism of Najafi religious orthodoxy whose practice tended to reinforce social compartmentalisation, and thus also to exteriorize social spaces for secular social and political life. Sadrist messianism, by contrast, sought to grab political power by exploiting the erosion of these boundaries. This points to a homology, a structural resonance, between messianic religious mobilisation and de-sectorization in periods of social crisis.

However, from late 2004-05, following this failed bid for religious supremacy, Muqtada and the Sadrists became increasingly engaged in the emergent political field, establishing a Sadrist political party which contested the 2005 elections as part of the Shi’i Islamist United Iraqi Alliance (UIA). Political engagement brought parts of the Sadrist movement within a process of political professionalisation. This shift in Sadrist strategy reflected, in part, the consolidation of sectoral distinctions in Iraqi society as the new political field began to take shape with its own structure and corporate identity. The distribution of the Sadrist movement across sectoral boundaries changed the structural environment shaping Sadrist behavior. By 2008, the most acute dynamic of Sadrist conflict was no longer taking place on religious terrain. From the “Charge of the Knights” operation in March that year, which saw the Iraqi army drive Sadrist militia from Basra, Muqtada’s chief antagonist emerged as the Da’wa Party’s Nouri al-Maliki, a suit-wearing lay activist not a turbaned *marja’*. Nor was the primary terrain of contestation over religious norms, sacred spaces, symbols, or revenues from religious rites. The centre of struggle had shifted to control of government ministries and their attendant resources, and physical

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13 Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, returning to Iraq in May 2003, also attempted to politicise the *marja’iyya* but in a different way that sought to come to an accommodation with the *hawza* rather than overturn or displace it. For more, see Allawi, 2007.

territory which provided revenue from racketeering. In this confrontation Muqtada and the Sistani-led *hawza* became increasingly aligned and the two worked in concert to push Maliki from power in 2014.

Political professionalisation also diversified the leadership and range of social functions within the movement. In its early days, the Sadrist movement was marked by an exclusively clerical leadership. This was limited to a small number of clerics who functioned as Muqtada's trusted advisors and lieutenants in a highly informal organisational structure. Thus, clerical figures such as Sheikh Qais al-Khazali, Sayed Mustafa al-Ya'qubi, and Sayed Haidar al-Mussawi formed an inner circle around Muqtada, consulting on political decisions, dealing with financial matters, managing external relations, while, in some cases, also being militia commanders. As political professionalisation has unfolded, the movement has developed a more formalized division of labour and diversified its leadership ranks. Muqtada's Private Office (*al-maktab al-khās*), which functions primarily to coordinate external relations, meetings, and issue statements, is run by Sheikh Mahmoud al-Jiyashi, and Muqtada's Shura Council is a clerical body that deals with fatwa and issues of religious doctrine (*'aqīda*). However, the movement's political body, *al-hay'a al-siyasīya*, is run by non-clerical lay activists and intellectuals with secular educational backgrounds e.g. Dr. 'Alaa al-Mawla, Dr. Dhia al-Asadi, and Ahmad al-Sadr (Muqtada's nephew). Others from similarly non-clerical social strata are responsible for the movement's media and journalistic output e.g. Dr. 'Abd al-Jabar al-Hidjani who manages Sadrist media relations, and 'Alaa al-Baghdadi who produces the Sadrist magazine *Rusul* (Messengers). These actors bear different social and symbolic resources to their clerical counterparts, and their social practices are largely contained within, and structured by, distinct social fields with their own social logics. This entails divergent trajectories of socialisation and an emergent diversification of interests and world views.

Thus, the persistent emphasis on the logic of competition within the religious field as the driving force of Sadrist behaviour, and Muqtada's continuing dependence on messianic forms of religiosity in his struggle for power (Baram, 2011: 152) fails to recognise the extent to which political routinization has entailed the development of new repertoires of Sadrist political resources which make little or no claim on the religious field. Nor does it recognise the extent to which the loci of Sadrist struggles have shifted to non-religious domains. This structural differentiation has ultimately produced in Muqtada an Islamist leader who often appears less concerned with a struggle for pre-eminence in the religious field or with a mystical Mahdism (as Baram puts it), and more engaged with mundane and this-worldly political objectives. What Juan Cole once saw as a "sectarian phenomenon... characterised by a high degree tension with mainstream society, employing a rhetoric of difference, antagonism and separation" (Cole, 2003: 544), appears to have transformed, especially in political contexts, into a more moderate and secularised mode of politics, a more pluralistic rhetoric of citizenship, an effort

to build bridges with non-Islamist forces, and a dissipation of the antagonism with the Iraqi *hawza*.<sup>14</sup>

However, looking beyond Muqtada's political rhetoric and actions reveals a more complex picture than a straightforward process of moderation and secularisation. The movement's early messianic mode of religious mobilisation has left a crucial legacy in terms of the mode and structure of authority in the movement which has distorted the process of political professionalisation. Thus, despite the formal establishment of a Sadrist political party, political integration has not yet entailed the development of other aspects of political professionalisation, such as a clear programmatic political ideology, clear formal mechanisms for political indoctrination of activists, or a distinct party-political mode of authority. Consequently, Muqtada's messianic religious authority remains an active element in Sadrist political practice. The lay activist cadres in the political and cultural dimension of the movement, outlined above, thus lack the political resources and authority to turn Muqtada's new political rhetoric into a more concrete reality.

To illustrate this point by way of comparison, Jabar and Louër have shown how the formation of the Islamic Da'wa Party in the late 1950s and 1960s established new patterns of party-political authority distinct from that of the *marja'iya*. Da'wa also expanded its pool of ideological resources from Shi'i Islamic doctrinal sources to incorporate the output of lay intellectuals from Sunni Islamist and Marxist traditions. This new ideological content was transmitted to activists through the party's own indoctrination programme, decentring the *hawza's* hegemony over ideological production and political leadership (Louër, 2008: 84-86; Jabar, 2003: 80). The outcome, in contrast to the Sadrists, has been a much cleaner break between Da'wa's political activists and the religious field whose clerical strata had been instrumental in the party's creation. The Sadrist phenomenon, then, speaks to the distinct experience of messianic religious movements which enter formalised politics. Consequently, the ensuing tension between modes of authority and legitimation, explored below in the ethnographic section of this article, more closely resembles the experience of Egypt's Sheikh Hazem Salah Abu Ismail and the "revolutionary Salafi movement" following the fall of Mubarak in 2011 (Lacroix, 2016: 173-174), than that of other Shi'i Islamist political movements in Iraq, such as Da'wa, or elsewhere in the Islamic world, such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

Finally, based on the understanding of the Sadrist movement I have sketched above, I argue that the movement's apparent shift towards more moderate and secular political practices should not be presented as merely superficial and dependent on Muqtada's whims, nor as a uniform movement along a linear spectrum (radical to moderate, or Islamist to post-Islamist). Rather, it reflects the emergence of greater ideological heterogeneity within the movement as field

14 For examples, see Muqtada al-Sadr's press conference outlining his political project, March 19, 2017, available at: [[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=spN8qq\\_dRWo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=spN8qq_dRWo)]; and Dhia al-Asadi's interview with *al-Niqash*, June 21, 2012, available at: [<http://www.niqash.org/ar/articles/politics/3076/>].

divisions, and their vocational specialisations, produce actors bearing different types of mobilising resources and capacities and subject to different structural incentives and constraints. For Muqtada, and for activist clerics such as Sheikh Sadeq al-Hasnawi, who operate across multiple fields, this manifests as a duality in their political and religious practices. For example, Muqtada now advocates cooperation with secular-leftist actors and seeks their symbolic legitimation in political matters, while continuing to exhort his followers to aggressively resist the creeping predations of secular and atheistic trends in religious domains.<sup>15</sup> However, most Sadrists are far more specialised in their vocations, being engaged *either* in political activism *or* clerical vocations, giving them distinct, and often conflicting, world-views. Political cooperation with secular-leftist elements through the 2015 protest movement has crystallised and catalysed these divides as Sadrist religious actors found the value of their social capital threatened by a new Sadrist repertoire of political practices that appear to make little or no claim on the religious field. An intra-Sadrist struggle has coalesced to contest this dynamic of secularisation. The following ethnographic description of Sadrist engagement in political public space captures a snapshot of how some of these contentious dynamics become embodied in the social world.

## Ethnography of the “Sit-in Debate”

On 22 March 2016, *al-Mada*, Iraq’s foremost secular cultural channel, broadcast a special episode of one of its flagship programmes, *Nās wa-Ḥukūma* (People and Government), live from the sit-in protest outside the Green Zone. Over the course of an hour, the show’s anchor, Hamid al-Sayed, conducted a discussion between four individuals from the Sadrist and civil trends: Sheikh Sadeq al-Hasnawi, a member of Muqtada’s Shura Council; Salam Ayesh, a Sadrist lay political activist and organisational leader; Jassim al-Helfi, a senior member of the ICP Politburo; and Dr. Ahmad Sharji, an artist and secular cultural figure. The guests, surrounded by an audience of ordinary Sadrists protesters, discussed their participation in the protest movement that was attempting to drive forward Muqtada’s political “reform project”. Here, I use ethnographic description of this Sadrist performance in political public space to reveal the social dynamics both advancing and resisting the secularisation of Sadrist political practices. By drawing in wider sources from interviews and analysis of Sadrist discursive materials, I try to situate these dynamics within the context of a broader ideological struggle between the movements’ political activist and clerical strata.

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15 For examples, see text of Muqtada al-Sadr’s sermon at al-Kufa Mosque, November 17, 2017, available at: [<http://jawabna.com/index.php?news=10314>] & Muqtada al-Sadr, “Atheist and secularist trends have arrived in the *Hawza*”, January 2, 2016, available at: [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NaUWGRbMrw>].

The Sadrist performance during the sit-in debate reveals how Iraqi political public space imposes conditions on participation that have secularising implications for the representation of Sadrist political identity. Most immediately striking is the degree to which not only Shi'i Islamic but also specifically Sadrist symbolologies have been expunged from Sadrist self-representation in the public sphere. These religious symbols and icons have been replaced by a single motif of the Iraqi flag which adorns tents, is waved by protesters, and constitutes the ubiquitous uniforms of the ordinary Sadrists. Unusually, no pictures or banners depicting sacred figures from the al-Sadr family are anywhere to be seen. This secularisation of symbols also finds expression in Sadrist discourse during the debate. For example, when Salem Ayesh is called upon by the anchor to justify Muqtada's role as a political leader, he initially attempts to do so in terms one might expect to hear from, or of, any secular political figure inside, or outside, Iraq: "He [Muqtada] is a nationalist man, an Iraqi man, and a humane man, he takes humanity into consideration and respects all the people, including the Iraqi people and all their sects". This statement makes no claim on religious or metaphysical sources of legitimacy.

This turning away from Shi'i Islamic resources and sources of authority and legitimation in the public sphere finds echoes in other contemporaneous aspects of Sadrist practice. For example, following Muqtada's rebranding of the Mahdi's Army as *Sarāyā al-Salām* ("Peace Companies"), itself indicative of a shift away from messianic religious motifs, he issued a statement on 21 June 2014 providing "special instructions to the *Sarāyā al-Salām*". These instructions forbade the militia from "raising pictures of the Honoured al-Sadr [Sadeq al-Sadr], not on clothes or any other place." Rather, the map of Iraq is the only image to be allowed.<sup>16</sup> This logo of Iraq's territorial map anchors political identity in the profane realm of territorialised nation states, as opposed to metaphysical cosmologies (Anderson, 2006: 170-171). This is quite a departure from the norm for an Islamist movement whom scholars have argued draws its ideological legitimacy primarily from a combination of a Shi'i religious mysticism and from the "primordialization" of the symbolic resources of the Sadr family legacy (Jabar, 2003: 25).

While abandoning Shi'i Islamic and Sadrist legitimating resources in the public sphere, the sit-in debate also demonstrated the extent to which the Sadrists have reached for alternative secular forms of legitimation. That Sadrists would wish to participate in a show like *Nās wa-Hukuma* on *al-Mada TV*, with its small audience of secular-liberal elites, demonstrates the extent to which at least some Sadrist leaders value the forms of legitimacy that these secular cultural elites can confer. This is a difficult gap for the Sadrists to bridge given the degree of cultural alienation between the two groups. It is not uncommon for Sadrists to be associated with derogatory terms such as *shroud/shrougi* ("uncivilized" Shi'is from the south, especially al-'Amarah); *ghawgha* (lower class mob); and *mi'dan* (Buffalo herder,

16 June 21, 2014, Muqtada al-Sadr's *bayan*, available at: [<http://jawabna.com/index.php/permalink/7498.html>].



used to insult people from al-‘Amarah and the southern marshlands). However, such language is more common amongst the urban Sunni population. Many of the Shi‘i secular elites who constitute the ICP’s cadres are likely to have their roots in the south and places like al-‘Amarah too. They are more likely to be heard referring to the inhabitants of Sadr City as “*al-almānīyīn*” (the Germans) or “*al-ītālīyīn*” (the Italians), an ironic joke highlighting their “uncivilized” and “uncultured” character. These prejudices are also reflected in the orientalist undertones of Western scholarship which emphasises the Sadrist’s irrationalism and emotionalism (see above). These tropes find articulation during the sit-in debate too. The anchor, Hamid al-Sayid, for example, at one point asks of the Sadrist participants: “How can you reassure viewers that these protesters are not emotional and unpredictable?”

Sheikh Sadeq al-Hasnawi provides an interesting example of how Sadrists are attempting to counter these negative stereotypes and reach for legitimization from Iraq’s secular cultural elites. Hasnawi thus uses the sit-in debate to burnish his secular cultural credentials. At one stage he interrupts the other speakers to launch a somewhat tangential and apparently pre-prepared monologue in defence of Iraq’s deprived intellectual class:

If you permit me to interrupt here, I follow the writers, I follow Iraqi cultural production. Today if we follow what is printed inside Iraq you will find little of value... where is the role of the Ministry of Culture? In the past there was *Dār al-Rashīd*, which transformed later into *Dār al-Shu‘ūn al-Thaqāfiya*, there was *Dār al-Ma’mūn li-l-Tarjima wa-l-Nashr*, *Dār al-Ḥuriya li-l-Tibā’a*, and other artistic institutes. These have collapsed to the ground, there is no printing, no support for the intellectual who lives as a tramp, regrettably.

In making this declaration, Hasnawi attempts to reconfigure the Iraqi public imagination, presenting the Sadrists as allies and protectors, rather than enemies, of secular cultural activity. Enumerating this list of prestigious cultural institutions, he seeks to portray a deep familiarity and respect for Iraq’s secular cultural tradition. This performance in political public space reveals that aspect of Sadrist practices that are projected outward towards other social groups who can confer valued forms of social prestige and legitimacy.

In political public space, then, the practices of Sadrist leaders and ordinary members of the movement appear to signal a move away from political Islamism and towards a more secularised and universalistic political identity. They have reached for secular political resources rather than politicise Shi‘i Islamic materials. This manifests in a performance in political public space that has shed Shi‘i religious and Sadrist symbols and icons in favour of strictly secular-nationalist alternatives. They have also disclosed, through their discourse and practices, a tendency to value the forms of symbolic legitimization that can be conferred or withdrawn by Iraq’s secular cultural elites. The Sadrist performance appears to construct a distinctly secular and universalistic political identity in the context of political public space, which stands in contrast to its religious and socially particular Shi‘i-Sadrist counterpart.



However, ethnographic analysis of this Sadrist performance also discloses the limitations of this secularising process. While its outwardly-directed dimension has been stripped of religious and Sadrist legitimating markers, Sadrist practices during the sit-in debate also function to stage, and reproduce, the movement's internal structure of authority and relations of power. In this latter sense, an ethnographic reading of the sit-in debate also reveals the endurance of the movement's messianic religious authority and the specification of a rigid hierarchy of social roles which limits political agency to specific individuals. It is personal proximity to Muqtada, not their formal function within party structures, which determines the scope of Sadrist political activity. This religious mode of authority becomes active when the absence of elements of political professionalisation (ideological resources, a party-political mode of authority) is felt most keenly, forcing Sadrists to make recourse to alternative religious resources to interpret and legitimate their political behaviour. Thus, ethnography reveals the unarticulated tension between the political performance, and the underlying structure of authority and relations of power.

In this regard, the first thing to note is the spatial arrangement of participants in sit-in debate. The ordinary Sadrists are sat on the floor at the feet of their leaders. This spatial partition is reflected in a visual differentiation since only the ordinary Sadrists wear uniforms (bibs in the colours of the Iraqi flag). The effect is to reinforce a rigid demarcation of Sadrist hierarchy, creating a didactic teacher-pupil dynamic in which participation in political discourse is limited to certain roles. The identical uniforms of the ordinary Sadrists also mark them out by their lack of individuation as they take the form of a collective social body.

This symbolic representation takes an embodied form in the movement of the ordinary Sadrists through physical space. For example, halfway through the debate, Sheikh Hasnawi leaves for another engagement. His departure acts as a cue for the Sadrists in the audience to collectively rise from the floor, physically turn away from the debate, and begin eating their meal while the other participants continue their discussion. This choreographed move signifies both an externally imposed discipline on the Sadrist social body, and the hierarchy amongst the speakers, with Hasnawi, Muqtada's direct representative at the talks, clearly revealed as the most important actor present. Thus, the role of the ordinary Sadrists, not as active participants in political discourse, or as citizens amongst equals, but as publicly staging Muqtada's authority, reproducing relations of power within the Sadrist movement, is revealed.

The role of Salam Ayesh as a Sadrist political activist and organisational leader also reinforces this observation. He describes the administrative processes of organising the protests in exhaustive detail. Ordinary Sadrists were registered at 181 registration centres where forms were completed detailing phone numbers, dates and place of birth, addresses and personal pictures. Each protester was issued with a numbered badge. Ayesh describes how "the Higher Committee decided that protesters should be divided into numbers, groups, and phases, each waits his turn, each phase is two thousand protesters, the total number of protesters being





six thousand". Each protester could participate in the sit-in for a limited three-day period. Their badge number determined their mealtimes which were also conducted in regulated phases. The total effect is to constitute the ordinary Sadrists in the public sphere as a highly regulated social body subjected to an externally imposed discipline. This social body can be divided, reorganised, and redistributed in social space as meets the requirements of the movement's leaders. It physically moves in a collective fashion within rigidly controlled phases. Individual subjectivities are subsumed within a system of numbered badges, uniforms, and bureaucratic rationalisation. This performance serves to internally reproduce social hierarchies and relations of power within the movement. However, it should also be recognised that it also has an outward-facing dimension i.e. its strict organisation and discipline is a response to the negative cultural stereotypes of the Sadrists as an unruly mob. Thus, the practical reality of the ordinary Sadrist as political agent and autonomous citizen finds resistance from forms of domination that are both internal and external to the movement.

As a lay activist, Salam Ayesh has no stake in the religious field. His participation is, therefore, revealing of the Sadrist movement's lack of political resources which such actors must bring to bear in the public sphere. This is a consequence of the movement's distorted process of political professionalisation. Thus, Ayesh rarely strays from discussing technical organisational aspects of the protest, resisting efforts by the anchor to elicit independent interpretations of political matters and deferring such questions to Sheikh Sadeq al-Hasnawi or directly to Muqtada. In doing so he reproduces the rigid boundaries between Sadrist social roles. Only specific individuals have latitude to independently articulate political beliefs. This latitude seems to depend on two factors. First, it is personal proximity to Muqtada which crucially defines the scope of a Sadrists' political autonomy. Second, this latitude is functionally restricted by an actors' lack of ideological resources that can be utilized as a heuristic tool to explicate and justify Sadrist political behavior in public discourse. Without such resources, Muqtada's religious authority remains an active element as a justification of last resort. One leftist academic who worked closely with the Sadrists during the 2015 protest movement explained this to me as follows:

Dhia al-Asadi [head of the Sadrist political bloc] might be the only cultured one among them [the Sadrists]. He has a degree in English literature, speaks English fluently, and studied Habermas, Gramsci, Marx etc. The others don't have to think so much because they get their basic political orientation from Muqtada in the moment. If now he said, "I will stop any convergence with the civil trend!" then after one minute all of them will say "OK! No more convergence with the civil trend!" Nobody will try to explain, give another opinion, or even just be silent, they should support that new orientation immediately. But for Asadi, *because he is a cultural person and he has a close relationship with Muqtada* he has more freedom in his speech and has more flexibility in his expressions<sup>17</sup> (my emphasis in italics).

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17 Interview conducted by author with leftist academic who has worked closely with the Sadrist trend since 2010. Erbil, August 7, 2017.

Ethnographic observation of Salem Ayesh's performance during the sit-in debate shines a light on these dynamics. His first contribution sets the limits his personal authority, confining this to the role of organiser and to establish that even this modest authority is derived from Muqtada:

In the name of God the Merciful, firstly, the organising committee for the national sit-in protest embarked on its work after a call from the leader, Sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr, may God preserve him, a call to protest in front of the gates of the Green Zone, then the committee began work on all the things required by the sit-in.

He is clearly uncomfortable in stepping beyond this role to engage in political discourse. A lack of ideological resources to bring to bear in the public sphere leads him to fall back on Muqtada's authority as a justification of last resort. However, this brings a form of religious authority and metaphysical rationalism into the secularising space of the public sphere. For example, he is repeatedly pressed by the anchor to give a "personal perspective" on the political matters under discussion. He resists these efforts, eventually appealing to Muqtada's infallible leadership and making clear that his political orientation comes from Muqtada, unconnected from any personal reflection:

Sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr requested that we protest, so we protested and called for others to join, all other measures and decisions are up to him... This is why he is the leader, because he has a level of thought beyond our own.

Thus, when conceptualising Muqtada's leadership during the debate, Ayesh articulates two distinct explanations: the first, addressed earlier, an entirely secular account that makes no claims on the religious field; the second, an entirely metaphysical reasoning in which Muqtada's religious authority is presented as transcending the mundane rationalism of the public sphere altogether. The awkward conjunction of these two articulations captures the tension between the secularising tendency of political public space, and the residual presence of Muqtada's messianic religious authority.

## **Dynamics of internal Sadrist social struggle**

It might be argued, then, that the moderation and secularisation of Sadrist political practices has been merely a shallow performance. And it might be tempting to once again make recourse to elite-centric and psychological explanations, reducing shifts in Sadrist rhetoric and actions to derivative by-products of Muqtada's mercurial mental states. However, I argue this would miss the importance of deeper structural dynamics shaping the movement. It is not that processes of moderation and secularisation are merely superficial and contingent on Muqtada's whims, rather, they are unevenly distributed throughout the movement, internally contested, and causally related to a factor of structural differentiation. Ethnographic observation



of the sit-in debate shines a light on some of these dynamics and how they relate to political public space as a particular structuring context for political action.

Drawing in data from my broader research on the Sadrist movement, and its engagement in the 2015 protest movement, I want to end this article by situating the dynamics highlighted above within the broader context of a previously unnoticed intra-Sadrist ideological struggle. This struggle arises from the distribution of the Sadrist movement across increasingly formalised and compartmentalised social sectors. Political professionalisation has led to a greater diversity of Sadrist actors in lay activist roles – politicians, journalists, and intellectuals – whose practices reflect their vocational specialisations and the particular social contexts within which they are contained. Sadrist religious actors thus find the value of their social capital threatened by a new Sadrist repertoire of political resources that appear to make little or no claim on the religious field. An intra-Sadrist struggle has coalesced to contest this dynamic of secularisation.

Several of my leftist and Sadrist informants described this as an emergent divide between “*al-munfatiḥīn*” and “*al-munghaliqīn*” (the “open-minded” and “closed-minded”) Sadrists. The *munfatiḥīn* tend to be lay activists engaged in political public space and whose social networks include a diverse range of actors within political and secular-liberal cultural domains. These networks are often forged through participation in institutional settings such as unions, universities, or intellectual cafes and salons. For example, one Sadrist I would describe as from the *munfatiḥīn* trend, ‘Alaa al-Baghdadi, is a lay activist who works as a journalist and editor of *Rusul* (Messengers), the Sadrist magazine. Baghdadi has used his editorship of *Rusul* to introduce articles from Iraqi leftist academics and intellectuals into a Sadrist discursive space. Baghdadi also frequents the secular cafes and salons popular with Baghdad’s secular intellectual elites and is a long-standing participant in various writers’ and journalists’ unions. Sheikh Sadeq al-Hasnawi is a more unusual case of an activist cleric with a background in leftist political thought and activism and strong personal ties to actors in Iraq’s civil trend. The practices of the *munghaliqīn* Sadrists, by contrast, tend to be contained within the religious field. They are struggling to assert the particular value of their social capital, and to reproduce extant relations of power within the movement, as clerical hegemony is put into question by the emergence of alternative discourses and claims to authority and legitimation that are not rooted in the religious field.

This intra-Sadrist struggle has been a feature of internal Sadrist discourse over the past few years. The Sadrist cleric, Sheikh Usama al-Musawi, the Imam and *khaṭīb al-jum’a* at al-Kufa Mosque, provides a perfect example. In one lengthy statement to his Sadrist followers on social media,<sup>18</sup> Musawi discussed the emergence of what he described as “an internal conflict within the Sadrist line [*al-khaṭ al-ṣadri*]”<sup>19</sup> from the perspective of the clerical strata. Musawi’s analysis of

<sup>18</sup> May 27, 2017, Usama al-Musawi on Facebook.

<sup>19</sup> Sadrists sometimes describe their movement using the phrase “*al-khaṭ al-ṣadri*” (the Sadrist line) as

this conflict maps exactly on to the structural differentiation and its implications as conceptualised in this paper. He groups Sadrist “political leaders” and “journalists, writers and philosophers” together as a nefarious alliance whose goal is “attainment of the centres of political decision making”. According to Musawi, this is “a purely political trend which thinks that all the human, economic, military and even religious capacities should serve only a single goal: the domination of authority and governing without any sacred or divine aspect.” He also describes this group as a “secular-liberal trend” within the Sadrist movement which “is not interested in the religious and doctrinal details, considering these as merely tools, abiding by religion as long as it benefits them.”

Opposed to this group, in Musawi’s analysis, is “the moderate religious [clerical] trend, which consists of the good people who adopt from al-Sadr the pure *walīya* approach... they are the purest and most good section, and at the same time the other trend considers them a source of danger for their projects,” he writes. This statement seeks to re-establish the normative supremacy of the clerical strata within the movement. It also attempts to differentiate it from other Sadrist social roles, limiting the clerical function, in highly Weberian tones, to the management of the goods of salvation in this life and the next. Thus, according to Musawi, clerics practice “the pure *walīya* approach through which they make the farthest goal God the Almighty, and the nearest goal the Imam Mahdi”. Consequently, clerical resistance to political professionalisation, and its attendant processes of secularisation, also functions to consolidate and reproduce sectoral distinctions between political vocations and the religious field.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have used an ethnographic approach to analyse Sadrist participation in the public sphere. I sought to shine a light on a process of secularisation of Sadrist political practices and how this relates to political public space as a particular structuring context for action. Drawing on Weber and Habermas, I explored two dimensions of the public sphere with transformative and secularising implications. The first related to a division of labour and vocational specialisation which leads to divergent trajectories of socialisation for the lay activist and clerical strata of the movement. The second related to the public sphere’s particular mode of communicative rationality which encourages participants to abandon religious and

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opposed to “*al-tayyār al-ṣadrī*” (the Sadrist trend). It is tempting to consider whether these terms reflect two sides of the ideological struggle explored in this paper. “*Tayyār*” (trend) situates the Sadrists as an political-ideological movement amongst others e.g. the civil trend, or the Islamist trend. By contrast, “*khaṭ*” (line) emphasises the movements (religious) genealogical character rooted in a concept of familial clerical inheritance of religious authority. It would follow from my arguments here that a cleric such as Musawi would use the phrase “*al-khaṭ al-ṣadrī*” to define and differentiate the Sadrists in this latter way, and avoid using “*tayyār*”.



metaphysical modes of legitimation and socially particular identities in search of rationalistic and universalistic political subjectivity.

However, I also argued that these processes of secularisation have been inhibited and distorted by the Sadrists' early messianic mode of religious authority which continues to generate tensions with processes of political professionalisation. Finally, I drew on my wider research into the Sadrist movement to illustrate how the contestation of this secularising process relates to a wider ideological struggle in the Sadrist movement between its political activist and clerical strata. This struggle reflects a deeper structural differentiation within the movement between those engaged in political activism and those whose practices belong primarily to the religious field. This understanding of the Sadrist movement moves the discussion away from a narrow focus on Muqtada's role as leader and his supposed mental instability. Instead, I highlight the importance of other Sadrist actors and forms of practice, including the ordinary Sadrists, whose role in producing and contesting the movement's ideology and its modes of authority, legitimacy, and relations of power, can be observed via a practice-oriented approach which addresses how these elements become embodied in the social world.

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