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Published online: 16 Aug 2021.

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The Big Man Muqtada al-Sadr: Leading the Street in Iraq under Limited Statehood

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ABSTRACT

The article conceptualises the Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr as a big man to explain his proven capability for navigating the hazardous terrain of Iraqi politics. Introduced in Sahlins' anthropology on Melanesia and refined in African studies, the notion of the big man has been underexploited in accounts of the Arab region. This article defends its relevance for sociopolitical analyses of Iraq and for the study of religious actors. Personal authority is the defining characteristic of a big man, and the mobilisation of followers is the key to his renown. In situations of limited statehood, the ability to build support upon extra-institutional foundations can yield long-lasting political results. Muqtada al-Sadr has relied on an exceptional combination of resources to establish himself as a kingmaker on the political scene. We trace the roots of his ascent and foreground the strategies he has used to accumulate authority in his person. The article analyses Muqtada's response to the wave of popular protests that swept Southern Iraq in 2019, observing a shift from initial support to open confrontation with the demonstrators. We argue that this shift threatens his status because it undermines his most important power resource: the ability to lead the street.

Introduction

Muqtada al-Sadr has demonstrated a remarkable capability for navigating the hazardous terrain of Iraqi politics. Beginning from a marginalised position in the Baghdad suburb of al-Thawra, he took on the powers-that-be, from the United States to the Shia religious authorities, withstood armed attacks from the government, came through a civil war, entered into electoral coalitions, defied Iran, and established himself as a pivotal political player. In the 2018 parliamentary elections, he campaigned on an anti-corruption and Iraqi nationalist platform, and surprised observers by winning the single largest number of votes for his coalition (Robin-D'Cruz 2019).[1]

Analysts struggle to make sense of Muqtada al-Sadr. He is an enigmatic figure who is willing to make deals with conflicting forces from Iran to Saudi Arabia, whenever he perceives that such deals will favour Iraqi national interests or promote his own standing as a leader. The movement he leads is loose and has many internal cross-currents:

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politicians, clerics, and military officers pull the Sadrist trend in conflicting directions. Muqtada's own political opinions also shift frequently. He steers an unpredictable course, despite an ostensibly ideological discourse.

To advance the understanding of this ambiguous actor, we draw on Sahlins (1963) concept of the big man. The distinguishing characteristic of a big man, Sahlins explains, is personal power. A big man creates a following for loyal, lesser men by building renown and privately assisting his followers. He does not owe his influence to a formal political position. Instead, a big man *is* his office, by virtue of his personal ascendancy. The article begins by tracing the origins of the big man concept and discussing its relevance in Iraq. After some notes on data and method, we analyse how the Sadrist leader transformed himself from a fairly insignificant figure into a political heavyweight, with emphasis on the measures used to accumulate authority in his person. In the third part of the article, we study Muqtada's response to the popular protests of 2019–2020. Finding that he turned from initially supporting to eventually repressing the protesters, we show that his habitual recipe for gaining leverage in Iraqi politics failed this time around. The mainstay of the Sadrist leader's big man position is his ability to mobilise the street. With the emergence of a new form of anti-establishment popular mobilisation that is hostile to politico-religious actors, this pathway to political influence has become more challenging to pursue.

Conceptual framework

The term 'big man' originates in anthropology, and specifically ethnographic experience in Melanesia (Lindstrom 1981). It refers to 'an informal style of achieved leadership', as opposed to formally elected office or inherited rank and status (Lederman 2015). Etymologically, the term is a Pidgin adaptation of the phrase *bikpela man*, designating a 'prominent man' in Melanesian lingua franca. It describes 'male leaders whose political influence is achieved by means of public oratory, informal persuasion, and the skilful conduct of both private and public wealth exchanges' (Lederman 2015, 567). The parallel with Weber's idea of charismatic authority is noted (Brown 1990).

Marshall D. Sahlins (1963) theorised the big man in his 1963 analysis of political types in Melanesia and Polynesia. He contrasted the 'chief', whose authority derived from taking office, with the big man, whose strength was self-made. The chief came *to* power because he was installed in a societal position. The big man made his own crowd and was his office, in and of himself. Self-made authority relied on a coterie of loyal followers. 'The making of the faction', Sahlins wrote, 'is the true making of the Melanesian big-man'. Importantly, the big man catered to his followers. 'It is essential to establish relations of loyalty and obligation on the part of a number of people such that their production can be mobilised for renownbuilding external distribution' (Sahlins 1963, 291).

The framework has been further developed in African studies. Médard (1992, 171) tied big man status to systems of personal power that permeate the African state. Mats Utas adopted a contrasting view, contending that big man power is a response to a lack of formal structures, an 'alternative form of governance' in spaces where the state has little reach. With weak or absent state institutions come 'more influential and stronger informal

networks governance' dominated by big men (Utas 2012, 5). In war-torn countries, the phenomenon is particularly common.

The concept of the big man helps to explain how leaders maintain authority under conditions of limited statehood. Where the state is virtually absent, authority-building must rely on extra-institutional resources. Weber traced non-legal domination to charisma, i.e. the extraordinary qualities of the leader's personality (Adair-Toteff 2005). However, in the absence of a state that offers services to its population, the leader's ability to cater to his followers' needs may be equally important. Here, Sahlins' observation is instructive. A big man is only partially made from the personal qualities he possesses. Patronage and the ability to mobilise a network of dependent followers make up the other side of the story.

Scholars in the Middle East have not appropriated the big man theme or sought to adjust it to their context. Part of the reason may be that, compared with the Sahel and most of sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle Eastern states have been stronger. Arguably, though, the weakening of formal ruling structures in countries like Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen has made the big man concept more relevant. In this article, we defend its applicability for sociopolitical analyses of Iraq and for the study of religious actors specifically.

Iraq has been a fertile ground for big men since the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003. The state never recovered from the US-led invasion and disbanding of the national army, and society was split along ethnic and confessional lines (Dodge 2010; Ismael and Ismael 2015). The 2005 constitution introduced a consociational power-sharing system, in which leaders of the different identity groups would all have their 'shares' (Bogaards 2019). Armed groups stoked civil war and undermined the central government's authority, subjecting neighbourhoods, villages, and cities to their rules (Doyle and Dunning 2018).

Muqtada al-Sadr is a prominent case of a big man who built his name in the context of the US invasion, state breakdown, and civil war. Without ever holding office, he has grown to become one of the most influential politicians in Iraq. Sceptics may ask why we apply the big man concept to a religious leader who was born into a prestigious family and prides himself on his 'modest' lifestyle. Religion is not a focus in the literature on the African big man, who is known rather for a conspicuous display of wealth and consumption. How does an Iraqi cleric, who campaigns on fighting corruption and the political elite, fit into this category?

We argue that the ultimate rationale for thinking about Muqtada al-Sadr as a big man is the accumulation of authority in his person. The observation that his speech and frame of reference are moulded by Islam does not change this basic fact. What matters is the power Muqtada al-Sadr has over his crowd, and the way he capitalises on it to build renown. Muqtada is one of very few Iraqis who can mobilise thousands of followers in the street at any time. He uses this asset to put pressure on his opponents and has gained the reputation of being influential.

The factors that enable a big man's rise will naturally differ from one place to another. The cultural environment helps determine the options and resources available to build a following and prestige. Over the past decades, political Islam has been a forceful mobilising language in Iraq. Moreover, we maintain that displays of 'piety' facilitate the attainment of big man status in the Iraqi context. The reasons are that religion has

a strong position in society, that politics is perceived to be 'dirty', and that men of religion have retained a certain distance to the state. In contrast to Iran, where the clergy's close association with government has lowered its standing within broad parts of the population, Iraqi *'ulama* still enjoy considerable respect.

Shia Islam's theological tradition builds on the principle of guidance by exemplary individuals whose legitimacy is rooted in knowledge and piety. Muqtada al-Sadr does not possess the erudition normally required to fill this role, but compensates by connecting with the reputation of his father, the late Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr. As we analyse in more detail below, Muqtada poses as the embodiment of the Grand Ayatollah. He is not the classical religious leader who draws authority from the mastering of orthodoxy; rather, he cultivates an image as 'the chosen one'. The centrality of the *person* Muqtada al-Sadr in this legitimation claim shows the pertinence of the big man concept. He is a religious version of the *bikpela man*.

Data and method

The analysis below builds on participant observation in the 2019 Arba'in pilgrimage walk from Najaf to Karbala, informal conversations with Sadrists, and content analysis of tweets and YouTube videos (Snelson [2016]). The field trip provided contextual understanding of Muqtada al-Sadr's reputation as a powerful leader, his followers' dedication to him, and the patronage he provides in the form of educational, medical, and housing services. The media content analysis was motivated by Muqtada's extensive engagement with the public on social media platforms. As we will demonstrate in our analysis, his big man standing is backed up by a conscious communication strategy. We collected Arabic language primary data from Muqtada al-Sadr's Twitter account, YouTube channel, and official website,[2] and from the website and Twitter account of Salih Muhammad al-Iraqi,[3] which communicate his positions. A central aim of the research was to document the Sadrist leader's stance on the 2019–2020 protests. Accordingly, we analysed all the post on his Twitter account from the beginning of the unrest on 1 October 2019 until 15 February 2020–43 in total – many of which linked to political statements. By combining speech analysis with careful tracking of events based on news reports, social media monitoring, and secondary literature, we could trace changes in Muqtada's political language and interpret their significance in context. Both authors read Arabic, and the translations we cite in the text are ours.

The making of a big man

Muqtada's rise to prominence in Iraqi politics is spectacular and the means of his ascent were unconventional. He took a different approach to politics and religion than either traditionalists, such as 'Ali al-Sistani, or the Islamists who based their activism on political parties. He used the language of the street to gain popularity and legitimacy and mobilised his followers to show political force. The single most important propeller of his rise was armed resistance to the US occupation.

Wealth in people

A big man cultivates interpersonal ties of obligation, a network of dependents known 'wealth in people' (Caroline H. Bledsoe 1980; Guyer 1993). He needs to be able to instigate mass action by appealing to a group of loyal adherents (Utas 2012, 6). Muqtada has a reservoir of followers in the Shia Muslim Sadrist trend. The Sadrist trend is the continuation of the social movement formed in the 1990s by Muqtada's father, Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr (1943–1999), which in turn built on the legacy of Muqtada's father-in-law Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (Aziz 1993; Mallat 1993). It consists of a loosely defined group of actors who are tied not so much by formal ideological or organisational structures as by shared identity and devotion to their deceased leader (Harling and Hamid 2007). It has a distinct sociogeographic origin in the tribes that migrated, during the monarchy, from the south-eastern marshes to the peripheries of Baghdad, Basra, and other towns in the South (Batatu 2012). Muhammad al-Sadr built his popular bases in the al-Thawra district of Baghdad and in the Maysan Governorate. Over time, the Sadrists acquired a stronghold in Najaf as well.

The Marsh Arabs were socially disadvantaged and formed an insular society with a different culture and opposing interests to the Shia elites in Najaf and Karbala (Crisis Group 2006). Muhammad al-Sadr accused the theological seminaries known as *hawza*[4] of political passivity and being a tool for the upper class. Lamenting their 'silence', he championed the activist alternative of the 'speaking hawza' (*al-hawza al-natiqa*). He cultivated popular forms of religiosity, including a millenarianism that departed from orthodoxy and was centred on the return of the hidden Imam. When Muqtada al-Sadr began to revive his father's legacy in response to the 2003 US invasion, the militants he mobilised belonged to the generation that had suffered the most from the embargo against Iraq in the preceding decade and held strong anti-American views (Harling 2012).

Muhammad al-Sadr was assassinated on the orders of Saddam Hussein in 1999, due to his growing popularity among ordinary Iraqis and his explicit defiance of the Baathist regime. His killing by gunfire in a moving car with two of his sons bestowed on him the status of a martyr (Cole 2003). More than two decades later, the Grand Ayatollah's memory is vividly alive and honoured by Shias even outside the Sadrist trend. In the streets of Najaf and Karbala, pictures, words, and symbols related to him are found on every corner.

Our personal encounters with Sadrists in the Arba'in pilgrimage walk confirmed that followers of Muhammad al-Sadr consider him to be a sacred and spiritual authority, comparable to the Prophet Muhammad and the Shia Imams (Shadid 2005, 169). They hold that the Grand Ayatollah had – and continues to have – supernatural blessings that set him apart from ordinary humans. Visitors to his shrine at the Wadi al-Salam ('valley of peace') cemetery in Najaf, the world's largest burial ground, can observe that, in the eyes of many Iraqis, he is in fact not dead (Raj and Griffin 2017, 112). Worshippers come to his grave with a sincere belief in his sacred status and connection with divine power. For example, it is reported that he heals people from incurable diseases.[5]

The devotees of Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr form a large and very committed crowd that is a potential source of 'wealth in people'. However, Muqtada al-Sadr's ability to capitalise on this resource was not a given. As the family's fourth son, he was young and

inexperienced when his father was killed, and had few religious credentials. He appeared to lack charisma and educational skills and nobody foresaw that he would have a bright future (Crisis Group 2006). Nevertheless, a big man makes his own authority and, for Muqtada, the insurgence against US occupation became an opportunity to show his strength. He mobilised the Mahdi army (*jaysh al-mahdi*) in al-Thawra, renamed Sadr City in 2003, and engaged the superpower in battle.

Armed resistance distinguished the Sadrists from other prominent Shia forces like the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI, later ISCI) and the Islamic Da'wa Party, which collaborated with the occupying force (Isakhan and Mulherin 2020; Shanahan 2004). It boosted Muqtada's reputation among the Shia rank-and-file – who were opposed to the military occupation of their country – as an independent, nationalist leader. Muqtada further capitalised on the fact that he had stayed in Iraq throughout Saddam Hussain's repressive regime, in contrast with other Shia politicians who had left the country, such as Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, Abdul-Majid al-Khu'i, and Nuri al-Maliki, to strengthen his patriotic credentials. He even stressed his devotion to Iraq by alluding to Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani's Iranian origins.

Besides providing ammunition for his legitimating discourse, the Sadrist movement's embeddedness in Iraqi society helped Muqtada organise the armed resistance. After decades of Baathist rule and the dismantling of the Iraqi state by the US in 2003, society was atomised, and actors with access to organisational structures had a huge comparative advantage. Muqtada repurposed the clerical and grassroots networks established by his father for fighting the insurgency (Robin-D'Cruz and Mansour 2020). He also penetrated deeper into local communities by offering sorely needed social services. Following the state's collapse, Iraq descended into chaos and eventually civil war. While the Mahdi army took active part in the intercommunal violence that spiked in 2006–2007 (Haddad 2013), Muqtada strengthened his repute as a big man by offering his followers protection.

Theological justification

Even as Muqtada proved his prominence in the street, he also worked to establish himself as a religious leader. His religious education was thin, but there was potential in his lineage. Thanks to a theological novelty introduced by his father, he could claim a religious following. According to Shia orthodoxy and the institution of *marja'iyyat al-taqlid*, in Islam, leadership is the prerogative of the most knowledgeable. The ordinary believer must imitate the acts of a qualified religious scholar, who serves as his or her 'source of emulation'. Ayatollah Muhammad al-Sadr had held this elevated status. In an interview recorded in October 1998, however, he expressed support for another form of religious leadership. Hinting at the possibility of his murder by the Baathists, the ayatollah spoke about the aftermath of his 'being swept away from the scene' (*zawal 'an al-sahat*). He stated that Ayatollah Kadhim al-Ha'iri was qualified to become the next *marja'ˆ*, but added that since he did not live in Iraq,[6] Iraqis needed another leader to guide them in questions outside the scope of Sharia laws (Al-Sadr 2012).

As the solution to society's problems, Muhammad al-Sadr introduced the idea of 'non-emulative leadership' (*qiyadah la tumassil al-taqlid*). By this, he meant an office in the Islamic Seminary that would have a leadership function but not answer inquiries regarding Islamic jurisprudence. He described this office as religious and not political. However,

it was evident that he encouraged the continuation of the sort of religious activism that the Ba'th regime perceived as antagonistic (Haugh 2005). There was no indication in his speech as to whether the purportedly religious office had to be held by a certified practitioner of juristic reasoning (*ijtihad*), i.e. a qualified *mujtahid* (Atwan 2017).

This ambiguity paved the way for competing understandings of the meaning of non-emulative leadership in the ayatollah's absence. According to a conservative interpretation, the leadership should be held by the *mujtahid* who offered the best match with Muhammad al-Sadr's qualifications (Ali 2016). One of those who holds the position is Ayatollah Muhammad al-Ya'qubi, who claims to personify the late ayatollah. He asserts that only a certified practitioner of *ijtihad* can meet the requirements of the suggested model (Al-Yakoubi 2017). In contrast, the Sadrists argue that Muqtada is best suited to protect the legacy of activism because he carries on the late ayatollah's social and political commitment (Al-Zaydi 2017). He has proved his credentials by building the most effective opposition movement in Iraq and, as Jabar (2003, 25) put it, promoting 'clerical supreme authority by means of street politics'.

Posing as the father

To back up his claim of being Ayatollah Muhammad al-Sadr's rightful heir, Muqtada adopted a strategy of becoming the embodiment of his father. He has developed a look and an intellectual style that evokes the ayatollah's continuing presence (Godwin 2012). Muqtada dresses as his father used to do, wearing a white shroud on top of his customary clerical clothing. The shroud is one of the Sadrists' foremost symbols, used during street protests, Friday sermons, and other collective events (Cockburn 2018, 5).

In Shia Islam, the white shroud is traditionally associated with funeral processions. It is an iconographic, cultural sign which represents the sincere struggle for justice and a willingness to sacrifice one's soul in the path of Allah (Flaskerud 2012). Ayatollah Muhammad al-Sadr wore it to communicate his preparedness for martyrdom (Cockburn 2018, 80). His followers have continued to display it. During the 2019 Arba'in ceremony we observed in Karbala, thousands of Sadrists, well-organised and dressed in white shrouds, shouted anti-corruption and anti-colonialism slogans.

Equally, the Friday sermon holds symbolic importance for Muqtada because it is a direct legacy of the late ayatollah (Baram 2010, 155). Muhammad al-Sadr introduced the practice following Ayatollah Khomeini's example in Iran. Despite the Ba'th regime's interdiction of the politically loaded Friday sermons, thousands of followers took part in them (Sakai 2001). It is widely believed that Muhammad al-Sadr's sermons paved the way for his death, and he has been called 'the martyr of the Friday prayer' (*shahid al-salat al-jumu'a*) (Baram 2011, 112–114).

Muqtada regularly delivers the Friday sermon in the Grand Mosque of Kufa, precisely where his father also spoke (Baram 2011, 117). He comments on present-day affairs, mobilises listeners to action, and announces the latest decisions of the Sadrist trend. He follows his father's traditions and methods in minute detail. For example, he asks listeners to chant his father's iconic slogans: 'No, no America!' (*kalla kalla amrika*) and 'No, no Israel!' (*kalla kalla isra'il*) (Al-Sadr 2018).

Personality cult

Muqtada's attempt to build authority in his *person* includes more than imitation of the late ayatollah. In Sadrist media channels, he is also portrayed as a father, an ordinary man, and a saviour. Muqtada is thoroughly captivated by the very notion of 'paternity' (*al-abawiyah*). In parallel with his veneration of his father, he cultivates his own image as a father figure for the Iraqi nation. In pictures and words, he frequently associates his activism with fatherly attributes and duties. Fatherhood signals thoughtfulness and benevolence. After a meeting with the former Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi in May 2018, Muqtada made the following statement:

> This meeting … has a clear and certain message to the Iraqi nation, that your (prospective) state will be *paternal* … a *fatherly rule* that cares about the nation with all its different communities (Al-Sadr 2018).

Fatherhood is associated with authority and as such underpins Muqtada's big man status. To grow 'big', however, he simultaneously needs to display humility. Muhammad al-Sadr was praised for his carefulness, disinterestedness, virtuousness, and piety (Ali 2011, 238). Likewise, Muqtada communicates that he follows a principled lifestyle, emphasising that he does not seek any personal advantage. He presents himself as a regular citizen (*muwatin*) who shares the ordinary man's concerns. Like a father who prioritises his family over all, his declared ambition is the reconstitution, prosperity, and sovereignty of Iraq (Boduszyński 2016).

This claim to live a pious life carries weight in a country whose politics are permeated by corruption.[7] It also resonates with religious culture and the Prophet Muhammad's example. Stories about the Prophet emphasise his modesty. To give an example, a widely shared *hadith* collected by al-Bukhari describes a man who arrives at a mosque where the Prophet is present. He asks, 'Which one of you is Muhammad (*ayyukum Muhammad*)?' The congregation then points towards the Prophet (Hajar al-ʿAsqalani 1980, 148–9). The significance of the story is that the messenger of God is indistinguishable from ordinary people because of his modest appearance. A picture on Muqtada al-Sadr's official website evokes the spirit of this story.[8] It displays the big man offering food to pilgrims at the al-Sadr family *mawkib* (ritual service station) at the shrine of Lady Fatemeh Masoumeh in Qom (Al-Sadr 2019). Muqtada appears like an ordinary clergyman engaged in voluntary work. His only sign of distinction while catering to his followers is the black turban, which signals that he is a *sayyid*, a descendant of the Prophet. Being a *sayyid* is a source of respect among Shia Muslims. It partially makes up for Muqtada's unexceptional religious education.

The challenge of Muqtada's branding is to rise above the crowd while remaining down-to-earth. His family tree helps prop up the third leg of his personality cult: the image of a religiously guided saviour. Ultimately, this 'man of the people' is not like everybody else. Sadrist media channels compare his leadership with divine authority, associating the person Muqtada al-Sadr with the saints. Consider the following excerpt from a video posted on YouTube, where Muqtada speaks about the need for leadership in adversity. The leader he alludes to appear to carry the authority of an Imam:

> [A]t any point in time, when society needs protection, development and fulfilment (*takamul*), a person is sent to protect it. The more calamities there are, the greater this person must be and the more useful for the community.

Muqtada's message is in line with the Twelver Shia doctrine of the Imamate (*al-imama*) according to which the Prophet passed on his spiritual and political leadership to the Imams. They are described as 'infallible' human beings, who are close to God and understand the hidden meaning of the Quran. Muqtada makes a case that the Prophet's mission is perpetuated by a selected leader at any given point in time. Conscientious Muslims need to acknowledge their true leader and prove their loyalty to him. The question is: who is the selected leader in our time? The YouTube video leaves open the possibility that it might be Muqtada himself. He promises to guide the community through hardship. Although there is an ambiguity in the message, allowing him to maintain deniability, Muqtada arguably compares his own leadership with the divine. He poses as the saviour who is guided by God and will guide the population in turn.

Master of upward mobility

Religious authority as such is not the same as big man status. The important question is how the authority is used. In Sahlins' conceptualisation of the big man, 'a leader's career sustains its upward climb when he is able to link other men and their families to his faction, harnessing their production to his ambition' (Sahlins 1963, 292). Concretely, 'this is done by calculated generosities, by placing others in gratitude and obligation through helping them in some big way' (Sahlins 1963, 292). A big man is big because he can help others attain a higher societal position. He is the master of upward mobility and, by the same token, he can also take people down.

The Sadrist leader excels in such big man practices. His capacity to facilitate people's social ascension extends from the streets of Sadr City to the pinnacle of the state. At the grassroots level, Muqtada extends services to the followers of his movement. The recruitment of lower-class young men to positions they would not achieve without the leader's backing is a major reason for the Sadrist trend's success (Thurber 2014). Higher up, Muqtada throws his weight behind the politicians who are loyal to him. He has personally never held political office, as mentioned. However, many politicians have gained office thanks to him.

All Iraqi politicians are aware of Muqtada al-Sadr's political influence at the national level. Muqtada has repeatedly played the role of kingmaker in the selection of Iraq's prime ministers in the post-invasion era. While doing so, he has also placed his followers in influential positions. In 2005, he supported the choice of Nuri al-Maliki as prime minister. As a sign of gratitude, al-Maliki allowed him to select the ministers of Health, Transportation, and Agriculture in return (Cochrane 2009, 18). After the March 2010 elections, Muqtada re-confirmed al-Maliki's premiership and was rewarded with eight seats on the ministerial board, gaining influence over Housing, Planning, Labour and Social Affairs, and Tourism and Antiquities (Katzman 2014, 13). In 2018, he endorsed Prime Minister 'Adil 'abd al-Mahdi and won control over four central ministries, including Health, Oil, and Electricity (Mansour 2019). Muqtada has also used his authority to appoint his people to other influential posts, including in parliament, as ambassadors, as local

governors, and as chief executive officers. According to Reuters, members of the Sadrist movement 'have taken senior jobs within the interior, defence and communications ministries. They have had their picks appointed to state oil, electricity and transport bodies, to state-owned banks and even to Iraq's central bank' (Davison and Rasheed 2021).

There is an obvious advantage for Muqtada to this way of exercising power while staying away from office himself. It helps maintain a transcendental standing in a context where politics is 'dirty'. The Sadrist leader gains influence at the state level while keeping a symbolic distance from its dysfunctions. He has been able simultaneously to nominate followers to influential positions and criticise the corruption of the governing elite. His anti-establishment and pro-reform agenda has resulted in electoral successes. In 2018, his electoral coalition Sa'irun became the single biggest bloc in parliament. However, this political strategy is not without its problems. When a wave of popular protests swept Iraq in October 2019, Muqtada al-Sadr himself became the target of anti-elite slogans.

Big trouble: the 2019 protests

The shifting tides of 2018–2019 revealed both the strengths and the limitations of Muqtada's big man approach. Muqtada proved his political flair in the 2018 parliamentary elections, securing an unexpected win. He keeps his ear to the ground and is good at adapting his message to the public mood. He understood that the electorate was starting to grow tired of Islamist political parties and was longing for something new. Accordingly, he formed an electoral coalition with the Iraqi Communist Party and other secular and leftist political groups (Robin-D'Cruz 2019). He campaigned on tearing up the political elite by the root' (*shala' qala'*), forming a 'technocratic government', and offering criticism of political Islam. For a cleric and the head of an activist Islamic movement, this was a considerable shift. Thanks to the concentration of authority in his person, he had the flexibility to do it. He is not bound by ideology or a political party but can adjust course without losing his followers.

The 2019 unrest, however, raised complicated new issues for Muqtada. This year, a leaderless popular movement staged the largest collective protests in Iraq since the US invasion, mobilising in traditional Sadrist strongholds like Sadr City and Basra and raising demands habitually associated with Muqtada's agenda, such as revolution against corruption, the need to improve public services, and the rejection of elites.

This mobilisation was the prolongation of a social movement that erupted in Shia-majority cities in central and southern Iraq in 2015 with a political agenda of fighting the post-2003 ethno-communal power-sharing system (*muhassasa*) and its corrupt elites. According to Jabar (2018), the movement marked a shift from identity to issue-based politics and a popular rejection of the Shia Islamist parties. One of its most chanted slogans was: 'In the name of religion the thieves have robbed us.'

First phase

Muqtada's response to the demonstrations that began on 1 October 2019 can be divided into three phases. During the first month, he extended his support to the protesters and tried to position himself as their leader. On 2 October, he criticised the prime minister for

excessive use of force and on 15 October, he called on all Iraqis to stage a 'million man march' against corruption (@Mu_AlSadr, 15 October 2019). He sent unarmed members of his 'peace brigade' militia into the streets, wearing blue hats, with orders to protect the protesters (BBC News Arabic 2020). On 29 October, he drove through a mass rally in Najaf. He withdrew support for Prime Minister 'Adil 'Abd al-Mahdi in a tweet and invited Hadi al-'Amiri, the leader of the Fatah Alliance, the second-largest bloc in parliament, to join in voting the prime minister out of office. Muqtada warned that if parliament did not act, the people would have to take matters into their own hands. He signed his tweet 'the revolutionary Muqtada al-Sadr'.

Hitherto, the Sadrist leader's hallmark had been his connection with the street. He was accustomed to either mobilising protesters himself or getting in front of emerging popular mobilisation and taking credit for it. He would often have his armed groups repel assaults by the police and other security forces (Osman 2020). In this way, the big man gained standing among the crowd and leverage vis-à-vis state officials. Muqtada at his best had stayed one step ahead of the street. He mastered the art of formulating demands and discourses that captured the spirit of the moment.

Now, however, Muqtada lost his sway over popular opinion. Hadi al-'Amiri declined his invitation to collaborate in parliament and the protesters turned down his courtship. Shouting 'all of them means them all (*kulhum ya'ni kulhum*)!', they insisted that 'Muqtada is just one of them! (*al-sayyid wahid minhum*)'. The protesters implied that Muqtada was in fact part of the system and denounced his anti-establishment discourse as hollow. On social media, the accusations went further. One poster charged: '[You have] 5 ministries, 54 members of parliament, 52 special-grade officials (*daraja khasa*) and 22 general directors – and you say that you are not part of the elite?' (@AhmadRadhi_, 18 November 2019).

Second phase

In the second phase, November–December 2019, Muqtada toned down his revolutionary posture and sought to reposition himself as a mediator between the security forces and the protesters. On 2 November, as sentiments on the streets continued to rise, he left Iraq and travelled to Iran. The move was controversial because anti-Iranian sentiments ran high in the popular movement. The protesters attacked Iranian diplomatic missions in Najaf, Karbala, and other Iraqi cities; pulled down Iranian flags and pictures of Iranian leaders; and destroyed offices of Iraqi parties deemed to hold friendly ties with the Islamic Republic. Iran put pressure on Muqtada to take a stance against the attacks on its diplomatic missions.

When Muqtada spoke out against the burning of ambassadorial institutions and suggested that the US embassy in Iraq was a better target for the opponents of foreign intervention, he was dismissed as an Iranian stooge (@Mu_AlSadr, 28 November 2019). Pointing to his Shia Islamist background and frequent visits to Qom for family and professional reasons, his detractors pejoratively referred to him as a 'tail' (*zil*) for Iran in Iraq. In one of the many attacks on him in the media, he was accused of being an 'Iranian Trojan horse' (MiddleEastOnline 2019).

Muqtada's difficulty in finding a line of defence against the accusations lay in the fact that the protesters attacked him on his turf. He had traditionally mobilised support around Iraqi nationalism, anti-elite sentiments, and proximity to the street (Herbert

2018). Here was a popular movement that turned these very weapons against him. On 13 November, he confirmed his commitment to street politics in a statement, while still conveying criticism against them: 'Despite some errors that the protests and strikes have committed', he said, 'we stand with them' (@Mu_AlSadr, 13 November 2019). He went on to argue that the protests were in fact the natural continuation of the 'popular reform project' (*mashru' al-islah al-sha'bi*) he had championed for the Iraqi polity. In other words, Muqtada indirectly asserted that his street mobilisation had paved the way for others to express their frustration with the government. He claimed to have planted the seeds of political awareness among Iraqi youth by introducing the practice of politics by protest (Robin-D'Cruz 2019).

Unimpressed, the protesters responded by directing a new charge against him. Asserting that he was 'riding the waves', they dismissed his support of the street as opportunistic. Muqtada denied this charge in a 28 November tweet in which he complained that he was either suspected of riding the waves or 'hiding under outer garments' (@Mu_AlSadr, 28 November 2019). When not seen as using the protests for his political benefit, he was accused of looking on with indifference as protesters were repressed. The fact that Muqtada acknowledged the public criticism of his role was noteworthy. Usually, he stands above the messiness of everyday politics in Sadrist discourse. However, public anger forced him onto the defensive. Now he was responding to, instead of leading, the protesters.

Faced with a street that rejected his leadership, Muqtada opted for a different approach. He claimed the role of mediator between the security forces and the protesters. While expressing support for the protests, he was also careful to address the agents of repression in polite terms. For example, in his 13 November statement, he invited the protesters and the 'honourable security forces' (*al-quwat al-amniya al-sharifa*) to work together to achieve the project of reform. Muqtada admonished protesters to maintain order and law enforcement troops to maintain patience and self-control in face-offs against demonstrators. He offered to help both sides overcome their differences and get the country out of crisis (@Mu_AlSadr, 13 November 2019).

As argued above, Muqtada accumulates political authority in and around his person. In his comments on the unrest, he presents himself as being uniquely positioned to find solutions between the people and the politicians. He self-identifies as an ordinary citizen as much as a political heavyweight. He is the top player who also stands with the protesters. Muqtada's confidence in the power of individuals to solve Iraq's problems was evident in an 11 November tweet in which he objected to US interference in Iraqi domestic affairs: 'we have had enough of your interference', he exclaimed; 'there are *big people* (*kibar*) in Iraq who can take care of its protection' (@Mu_AlSadr, 11 November 2019).

Third phase

The third phase in Muqtada's approach to the protests began after the US assassinated the Iranian Major General Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the deputy leader of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Forces, in a drone strike in Baghdad. Over the course of January–February 2020, the Sadrist leader withdrew his support for the popular movement and ordered his Blue Hats to help the security forces repress it. The targeted killing of Soleimani and Muhandis was a game-changer for Muqtada, as it pushed the bounds of US military intervention and put any resistance commander at risk. He extended his

immediate condolences, warning that 'the global arrogance [of the US] is targeting the jihad, resistance, and international spirit of revolution'. He called on his fighters in the Mahdi army and the Promised Day brigade to be fully prepared, signing himself 'the holy warrior (*al-mujahid*) Muqtada Sadr' (@Mu_AlSadr, 3 January 2020).

The assassination drove Muqtada closer to Iran's position and deepened the rift with the protest movement. Resistance was again his number one priority and he grew increasingly suspicious of the motives of the protesters. The rumour was that the US and the regional enemies of Iran were fanning the flames of the protests (Foreign Policy 7 October 2019). With the increased Western threat, Muqtada saw this as no longer acceptable. He wanted civil activists to prove their loyalty in a 'million-man march' against the US presence in Iraq on 24 January, but attendance fell short of expectations (The National 2020). From that point on, his patience with the street was at an end. Muqtada withdrew his support from the protesters (Nabeel 2020). On 2 February, he exhorted the 'heroic national security forces' to 'discipline' the revolution and forcibly open closed-off roads (@Mu_AlSadr, 2 February 2020). He had the Blue Hats participate in quelling the unrest (Zeed 2020).

The repression of civilians whom Muqtada had originally pleaded to protect caused a public outcry, which he addressed by ostensibly demobilising the Blue Hats. His troops removed their caps, but remained in the streets. In D'Cruz and Mansour's (2020, 17) assessment, Muqtada uses his ability to mobilise and de-mobilise protesters as a bargaining chip vis-à-vis Iran while seeking influence in the Iraqi Shia Islamist sphere. Hence, his flirt with the protest movement was over. The activists in the street felt deeply betrayed.

Discussion and conclusion

Making sense of Muqtada al-Sadr from the ideology he subscribes to or the political positions he takes is an intellectual dead end. His latest swing from 'civil society supporter' to willing partner of Iran is just another indication of that fact. After Muqtada's re-branding in the 2018 elections, it appeared that he had adopted a secular political agenda (Cambanis 2018; Kathem and Kathem 2018). However, the debate about whether he is Islamist or not is beside the point.

We have conceptualised the Sadrist leader as a big man, highlighting parallels with the way such characters are described in other parts of the world. He has never held political office but builds authority in his person, drawing on patronage distribution, relations of loyalty and obligation, street support, political brokerage, and an informal leadership style. His social relations provide him with great mobilising strength. Through the deft combination of multiple power resources, he has steered his way into a kingmaker position on the Iraqi political scene.

Muqtada al-Sadr used the popularity of his father, the late Grand Ayatollah, as a stepping stone, and did not build his base of support from scratch. We have nonetheless argued that he forged his own success by choosing a distinct path at a critical historical juncture. He did not inherit an office and has had to justify his claim to be the protector of his father's activist legacy through his actions. Moreover, although he imitates his father in his prayer style, dress, and words, he is in fact a very different religious actor. Muqtada al-Sadr is a maverick and has created a form of guidance that was previously unheard of. In this sense, he has made his own authority.

The fact that religion serves to shore up his personal esteem does not reduce the relevance of the big man framework. Muqtada operates in a cultural context where manifestations of modesty and piety are enablers of big man authority and a way to signal distance from a corrupt and dysfunctional state. Politics in Iraq are widely perceived to be 'dirty' and men of religion are seen to operate in a sphere that is distinct from the state's. Muqtada cultivates the double image of being an ordinary man and a divinely guided figure. By exercising power without taking formal office, he seeks to preserve a reputation of being 'pure'. Religion, moreover, adds layers of meaning to the patronage arrangements that unarguably are a fundamental source of support for the Sadrist leader. If the interactions between patron and clients were purely transactional, they would result in less robust authority structures. Muqtada's claim to leadership is founded on the aspiration of improving the lives of his followers and every believer who is suffering in Iraq. He has a social and religious agenda that sets him apart from big men who exclusively build their 'wealth in people' on crime.

Applying the big man lens to the Sadrist leader helps explain his success in navigating the political maelstrom of Iraq post-2003. Authority vested in his person and the nurturing of interpersonal ties of obligation facilitated the accumulation of political influence in the context of a deficient state and endemic corruption. It produced a layer of protection against the widespread frustration with the quality of public services and popular anger with the establishment. His big man style also gave him flexibility in the face of political crisis and the shifting moods of the Iraqi street. Muqtada is unrestrained by party discipline, ideology, or official position, and rapidly picks up on political trends. He has articulated discourses and demands that were in line with and sometimes ahead of the popular mood. In the post-invasion Iraq of US dominance and failed state-building, his anti-imperialist, anti-elite, and anti-corruption agendas have all hit sensitive nerves.

The 2019–2020 protests exposed limitations in Muqtada's political strategy and confronted him with an entirely new problem. For the first time in his political life, he faced sustained popular mobilisation against him. We have demonstrated that his customary approach to street protests failed to yield the expected results. Consequently, he retreated from his initial support of, and leadership aspirations for, the civil movement, to attempted mediation and eventually full-on confrontation with the protesters. When his Blue Hats assailed civilians and took control of squares filled with protesters, his credibility as a man of the people foundered.

The popular unrest posed a catch-22 situation for Muqtada. He could not stay silent without losing his prestige as protest leader. Nor could he fully join a movement that was adamant about overturning the political establishment of which he is a part. The fallout from the crisis is a threat to his status because it calls into question his most important power resource: his ability to mobilise or connect with the street. It may force him to rethink his political strategy.

This article has not exhausted the question of Muqtada's approach to politics and the relevance of the big man concept. More research is needed, particularly on the sociology of the movement he heads, the ways in which he builds relations of loyalty and obligation, and his interactions with other political actors. We would also gain much from more comparative studies, both inside Iraq and beyond. Muqtada is not alone in building and exercising big man-style power in the Middle East. The regional crisis of governance has

created rich opportunities for big men to thrive. Their operations and influence deserve more scholarly attention.

Notes

1. https://jawabna.com
2. https://saleh-iq.com/; https://twitter.com/salih_m_iraqi
3. *Hawza* is a seminary for Shia Islamic studies and may also refer to the religious authority in Najaf and/or Qom.
4. See this video from the Shrine of Martyr Al Sadr in 2014: https://youtu.be/SkuOi7tBzzM.
5. Kadhim Husayni Ha'iri was born in Karbala, Iraq, but lives in Qum, Iran.
6. Iraq is considered to be one of the most corrupt countries over the world. The Corruption Perceptions Index 2020 ranks Iraq 160 among 180 countries. See Transparency International https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/iraq.
7. The picture is available here http://jawabna.com/files.php?file=4_391097703.jpg
8. https://youtu.be/FqABaAINS6o

Acknowledgements

Funding

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