

The Sadrist Movement in Iraq

Death Squads in Iraq, US war preparations and "Surge"

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Global Research, March 07, 2007

Asia Times 7 March 2007

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [IRAN: THE NEXT WAR?](#),
[IRAQ REPORT](#)

Dr Munthir al-Kewther was born in Najaf, Iraq, in 1965. He has studied Islamic and Western philosophy at various Western and Iraqi universities. Kewther completed his PhD in Islamic philosophy at Iraq's Kufa University in 1995.

Kewther is currently dean of the faculty of media and journalism at al-Huraa University in the Netherlands. He has an extensive background as a television presenter and broadcaster. From 2001-06 he was a newsreader and program presenter at Al-Mustaqillah TV in London. Kewther spoke with Mahan Abedin. *Mr. Abedin is an expert on Iran, Iraq and Islamic movements and ideologies.*

Mahan Abedin: Let's begin by discussing the so-called "surge" of American troops into Baghdad. What is the real American military objective behind this campaign?

Munthir al-Kewther: Maybe they are preparing the ground for a military campaign against Iran. They feel they have to sort out the mess in Iraq before they attack Iran. But I don't think they can solve the mess in Iraq.

MA: Do you think it is too much of a coincidence that the briefing on alleged Iranian meddling in Iraq – including allegations that the Iranians are indirectly involved in the killing of American soldiers – came just before the start of the new military campaign in Baghdad?

MK: The two are clearly linked. They have been preparing the ground for a war against Iran for a long time. But obviously they are accelerating the media, propaganda and psychological warfare campaign as the date for their campaign approaches.

MA: What is your assessment of how the surge started? The Americans were very keen to start it in as low-profile a way as possible.

MK: That tells you that the Americans and their allies in Iraq lack confidence. They don't really know what they are doing. They expect to fail, so they confuse things and try to blame others for their failures. But the [Nuri al-]Maliki government ends up getting most of the blame because its only role is to enforce American edicts in Iraq. The Americans use Maliki as a scapegoat.

MA: The Americans claim the surge is targeted equally at the mostly Sunni insurgents and the mostly Shi'ite militias. Do you believe them?

MK: The real objective is to weaken the Jaish al-Mehdi [Mehdi Army] because this is – by far – the largest and most popular resistance movement in Iraq. The Americans are also hoping to weaken the Sadrist movement as a whole. For the Americans there is no difference between Shi'ites and Sunnis. The Americans fight anyone that resists them, but they talk about Shi'ites and Sunnis in order to pretend the problem is among the Iraqis themselves, not between the American occupation army and the Iraqi resistance.

MA: Do you believe the Americans want a full-scale confrontation with the Mehdi Army? I say this in light of information that both sides are trying to avoid a full-scale confrontation.

MK: The Americans have started a low-profile assassination campaign against key Mehdi Army and Sadrist figures. In recent months they have assassinated some of the best and most moderate people in the Sadrist movement – the kind of people that were effective at helping the poor and oppressed.

The best example was the assassination last December of Sahib al-Ameri in front of his wife and children in his house in Najaf. Al-Ameri was the secretary general of the Shahidollah Institute, a charitable organization that helps poor and displaced people. He had no connections whatsoever to the Mehdi Army.

MA: How long is the surge likely to last in Baghdad?

MK: I doubt it will last long. It is not likely to succeed, and the Americans are the first people to know this. Baghdad is a city of 6 million people. Stability for Baghdad requires one soldier or policeman for every 50 people. Therefore, to restore stability to a city of 6 million people, the Americans need at least 120,000 troops.

The Americans cannot commit this number of troops. And even if they could, they would still probably not succeed, because the local population is utterly hostile to them. I am talking about the Iraqi people as a whole – Shi'ite and Sunni alike – they all despise the Americans and are bristling for revenge. No amount of troops can overcome this level of hatred and determination.

MA: It seems that the only certain outcome is a sharp increase in American casualties.

MK: Exactly. But the important thing for me is that a lot of innocent people are going to die as a result of this. Many more poor Iraqis will die at the hands of the American occupiers and their local puppets.

MA: There are reports that Muqtada al-Sadr has fled to Iran to escape the American crackdown. Is this true?

MK: This is a war, and these reports are part of the American propaganda and psychological-warfare campaign against the Sadr movement. Sayed Muqtada is a high political figure. He visited many countries before and he can visit Iran or other countries at any time he likes. That does not mean he is abandoning his country and his people. Remember, Sayed Muqtada stayed in Iraq throughout the tyranny of Saddam [Hussein], unlike many others who fled to the safety of Iran and the West.

MA: How would you describe the relationship between Iran and the Sadrist movement?

MK: The Sadr movement is Iraqi through and through. It will establish relationships with

foreign entities as long as these do not clash with the best interests of the Iraqi people. But the Sadr movement is also a liberation party, and as such it seeks close ties with other liberation movements, particularly people who challenge American hegemony. The Islamic Republic of Iran is full of such people.

MA: What do you make of allegations that Iran is meddling in Iraqi affairs?

MK: At the moment many countries – big and small – are meddling in Iraqi affairs. The occupation is the source of all this interference. Recently, Saudi Arabia declared bluntly that it was going to support some sections among Iraqis to stand against other sections in the event of a civil war. In the region, Iran is the only democracy with sophisticated and powerful institutions.

Other countries are still essentially tribal in nature, their modern facade notwithstanding. Given Iran's development and its impressive resources, it would be very strange if it ignored the situation in Iraq. After all, what happens in Iraq could potentially affect Iran, and the Iranians are naturally worried about developments on their western border.

What would anyone expect from Iran other than supporting people and parties in Iraq who are friends with Iran and share the same ideology and interests? It is the American media machine that tries to manipulate the Arabs into forgetting about Israel and America and to think of Iran as the real threat.

The facts speak for themselves. Israel – with the unconditional support of America – occupies Palestine and does everything in its power to frustrate the legitimate aspirations of the Arabs and Muslims. It is America and not Iran that occupies Iraq and is trying to spark off a civil war. Unlike America, Iran is a friend of Iraq.

MA: Do you envisage this being the last major American military operation in Iraq?

MK: I hope the Americans just pull their troops out of Iraq. This war is not going to be won by anyone. Even if the Americans leave tomorrow, the Iraqi people will not be able to declare victory. The Iraqis have lost too many people to declare any form of victory.

MA: You want an immediate American withdrawal?

MK: Yes!

MA: But isn't this going to exacerbate the situation, at least in the short term?

MK: This is what the Americans and some people in the Iraqi government – who are fearful of losing their positions – want you to believe. The reality is there might be a conflict for a few days ...

MA: Days?!

MK: I don't envisage the conflict lasting more than two weeks.

MA: Given the intensity of the sectarian war in the past two years, will all the deaths, displacement, misery, resentment and thirst for revenge that go with it; you really think all this can be settled in a two-week war?

MK: Yes, all of this can be sorted out in a week, maximum two weeks.

MA: This is an extraordinary claim! Please explain how.

MK: The American and British militaries are responsible for the sectarian conflict. The respectable leaders on both sides are not calling for this war. You are right, there are bad feelings, but the respectful and popular leaders do not want conflict.

I am not talking about the key people in government; nobody follows them and they don't matter. They will be swept away within hours once the occupiers leave Iraq. But take popular leaders like Grand Ayatollah [Ali] Sistani and Sayed Muqtada al-Sadr; they speak for all Iraqis, not just the Shi'ites.

MA: But many Sunnis intensely dislike Muqtada al-Sadr.

MK: Some Sunnis dislike him, but the great majority recognize him as an Iraqi nationalist leader fighting against occupation and its local servants. Sayed Muqtada al-Sadr is fighting for the rights of all Iraqis, and the majority of Iraqis, including Sunnis, recognize that.

MA: So you are claiming that once the Americans pull out, responsible leaders on both sides will come forward and reach agreement?

MK: Yes!

MA: But what about the people in government? Some of them have large militias; don't you think they will fight hard to maintain their privileges?

MK: We are talking about individuals. They don't have any following, and their armed groups will collapse. They will depart the scene quickly lest they incur the wrath of the Iraqi people.

MA: What about the foreign component of the terrorist campaign? I am referring to the so-called jihadi Salafis and the *takfiris*; what are you going to do with them?

MK: These people took advantage of the American occupation of Iraq. Their propaganda rests on the claim that they are in Iraq to fight the Americans. Once the Americans leave, their support bases in Iraq will evaporate overnight. I don't think these people will give the Iraqis too much trouble. In any case, the Iraqis have the capability to deal with them in a quick and decisive manner.

MA: Let's talk about the Mehdi Army now. What is the primary role of the Jaish al-Mehdi?

MK: Its primary role is a social and charitable one. Iraq currently lacks proper institutions. Even during Saddam's reign the only effective institution in Iraq was the army. Of course that was disbanded after the invasion, so right now we have no national institutions to speak of. There is a huge vacuum, and the Jaish al-Mehdi is filling it with its socio-economic, educational and charitable activities. They also provide security for vulnerable communities, especially in Baghdad.

MA: Is the Mehdi Army attacking coalition forces?

MK: Their policy has been to engage with the government in order to coax it away from the

occupation and its infrastructures. Therefore, they are not involved in military operations, as that would compromise their position inside the government. But recently they withdrew from the Parliament for several months and urged the government to pressure the Americans into declaring a timetable for their withdrawal.

MA: So if the Mehdi Army is not confronting the occupation militarily, which group on the Shi'ite side is?

MK: The people involved in the resistance do not usually disclose their identity. So I can't really answer your question. But as far as the Mehdi Army is concerned, they are not fighting the occupation militarily.

MA: Is the Jaish Al-Mehdi subject to strong discipline?

MK: It is disciplined at the higher levels. But there are many groups and elements that have attached themselves to the Mehdi Army, and it is very difficult to control their activities. They may undertake activities which would not meet the approval of the commanders of the Mehdi Army.

MA: How large is the Mehdi Army?

MK: I don't know the exact figure. But there are millions of people throughout Iraq who are ready to accept orders from Sayed Muqtada al-Sadr.

MA: But how large is its core? Are we talking of 10,000-20,000 people?

MK: As I said, I don't have exact figures, but I believe it is larger than that.

MA: You mentioned the problems associated with size and how different groups are attaching themselves to the Mehdi Army. There are also reports of splinter groups operating under the Mehdi Army umbrella. Are these reports accurate?

MK: I would not say there are large splinter groups. But there are small, roguish groups and individuals operating under the umbrella of the Jaish al-Mehdi. However, the Mehdi Army cannot be held responsible for their actions. There are also charismatic leaders within the Mehdi Army who also have links to other groups. But these people, by and large, are loyal to Sayed Muqtada al-Sadr and would not disobey his orders.

MA: Many Sunnis and some Americans allege that the Mehdi Army is behind the death squads; what do you say?

MK: This is completely untrue! This is American propaganda that is pushed by people who do not wish the Iraqi people well. The Mehdi Army is composed of people who love all of Iraq and do not discriminate against their countrymen on the basis of religion, sect or culture.

MA: So who is responsible for the death squads?

MK: The Americans are either directly or indirectly responsible for the massacres. By creating conflict situations, they inflame passions on both sides and sour relations between Iraqis. The occupation is the source of all the violence in Iraq. Once the occupation begins to wind down, the conflict will ease accordingly.

MA: What about the recent arrest of Deputy Health Minister Hakim al-Zamili, and the accusation that the Sadrist movement is using hospitals as a cover for conducting sectarian warfare?

MK: It is propaganda, pure and simple. They spread these lies because the Sadrist movement is too popular and the Americans can't accept this. In every section of Iraqi society, the Mehdi Army and the Sadrist movement [are] growing in strength and popularity, and the Americans just don't know how to handle this.

MA: What about your rivals in the Sunni community? They are making accusations as well.

MK: Some of them have made the drastic mistake of falling for American propaganda. But if they cast their minds back, they should remember that the Mehdi Army stood with the Sunnis during the siege of Fallujah. This is the same Mehdi Army. The only thing that has changed is that this army has grown in strength and popularity.

MA: What are the likely political implications of the surge?

MK: If this operation does not succeed – and I expect it will not succeed – at the very least the Maliki government will collapse.

MA: Will the Americans then get rid of the democratic process and establish a military dictatorship led by a few generals, as some people in Washington are advising? And will this be the beginning of the end of the occupation?

MK: I don't think the Americans have a coherent plan. Just look at this latest operation. The [George W] Bush administration has ignored all the advice given to it and launched a new round of aggression against the Iraqi people. Maybe Bush will fight in Iraq until the end of his presidency in January 2009. The next administration will then start the process of withdrawal.

MA: How will all this affect the Sadrist movement?

MK: I am 100% sure that the Sadrist movement will emerge stronger. They have faced more daunting challenges in the past and come out stronger. The situation will go from bad to worse in Iraq until the Americans decide they have had enough and pull out. I expect we will reach that moment in early 2009. From now until then, the situation in Iraq will just steadily deteriorate. Many more innocent Iraqis will die.

MA: How do you see the future role of Muqtada al-Sadr? Can he ever become a national Iraqi leader?

MK: He can, but he is not power-hungry. He is very clever and exceptionally charismatic. He is a natural leader and I am sure he will fulfill his potential.

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