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After setbacks, Sadr redirects Mahdi Army

Moqtada al-Sadr instructed his militiamen to join a new social wing of his anti-American Shiite army.

By [Tom A. Peter](#) | Staff writer of *The Christian Science Monitor* from the August 11, 2008 edition

Baghdad - Moqtada al-Sadr has taken yet another step in an attempt to transform his Mahdi Army militia from a force intent on battling US soldiers into a much broader social and political network that can still hold sway in the shifting landscape of Iraq.

During Friday prayers in Sadr City, clerics read instructions from the young anti-American leader ordering his militiamen to join a new religious and cultural wing of the movement that he is calling the Momahidoun, or "those who pave the way."

The move comes just months after Mr. Sadr's movement was dealt a serious blow in springtime battles with both American and Iraqi forces in Baghdad and Basra that ended when Sadr called off his fighters after the deaths of hundreds of his followers and innocent Iraqis.

"The Mahdi Army is in a real crisis," says Abdul Kareem al-Mohmedawi, a native of Sadr City and deputy editor of Al-Jamaher, a liberal newspaper in Baghdad. "There is a weapons shortage and a shortage of volunteers."

Additionally, since last summer at least 30 senior Mahdi Army members have been killed and some 60 detained, according to an internal document attained by the Associated Press late last month. Now, most of the group's top officials, including Sadr, are in Iran.

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Mr. Mohamedawi adds that local residents have become less tolerant of the group's insurgent activities and have begun reporting them to American and Iraqi security forces with increasing frequency.

"If they continue killing people, they won't win any seats in the next election," he says. Sadrists currently hold 32 of the 275 seats in the Iraqi parliament. It remains unclear how this change will affect the Sadrist bloc in parliament.

Sheikh Salah al-Obeidi, Sadr's chief spokesman, says that the new direction is part of a gradual shift.

"We've been seeing a change in the position of politicians," he says, referring to the possibility of a firm timetable for the withdrawal of US troops. If there is a plan in place, he says, "there will be no need for more opposition."

Sadr also said he would consider disbanding his Mahdi Army altogether if the Americans name a date to leave Iraq.

While the new decree calls for the Mahdi Army's rank and file to disarm, the militia says it will maintain an elite group of fighters for emergency situations.

The new social efforts will center on literacy programs and assistance to those in need, such as orphans or individuals who lost family members during Saddam Hussein's rule. It will also offer general Islamic education, not just Shiite teachings, and ethics courses to counter the culture of killing that Mr. Obeidi says Al Qaeda brought to Iraq.

Courses and services will be available for everyone, regardless of their religious or political beliefs, say leading Sadrists.

"We want to change the views of ordinary people who are against the Sadr movement," says Sayeed Fares al-Jazari, leader of a Sadrist mosque southeast of Sadr City. "I expect it will be a successful political shift for the Sadr movement and a change from guns to culture."

However, there is concern, both in and outside the Mahdi Army, about criminal elements who reportedly falsely identify themselves as members of the Shiite group. These rogue elements have traditionally ignored direction from Sadr, but continue to act in his name.

"The problem is that these terrorist groups are not motivated by only one or two reasons," says Michael Kanner, a professor of political science at the Colorado University in Boulder who specializes in security studies. "The leadership is not always in complete control."

Many people who become involved with violent resistance groups like the Mahdi Army or even the Irish Republican Army have criminal inclinations that create problems when the group tries to move into the mainstream, says Professor Kanner.

"There are groups that say they are from the Mahdi Army, but they are not and they've destroyed what Mahdi Army has built," says Sheikh Shawkat al-Rubbai, a Sadrist and leader of Al-Zihara Mosque in Sadr City.

Sadrists say that they will work to rein in these groups, reporting them to the authorities if necessary.

They are in the process of starting a community policing program modeled after the Sons of Iraq, but will use a different name.

"If [Sadr] can't control the special groups, how can [he] expect to disarm them? His call to disarm them will disappear with the wind," says Mohmedawi, who speculates that fighting could emerge between Sadrists and the breakaway groups or that the Mahdi Army is abstaining from violence only until after the Iraqi elections this fall.

The US military, which was engaged in intense combat with the Mahdi Army until a cease-fire agreement in late May, shares in Mohmedawi's reservations.

"We welcome this announcement that appears to be an effort to help the Iraqi people," said a spokesman for the Multi-National Force – Iraq, the US-led military coalition, in an e-mail. "The proof is always in the actions and not just the words."

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