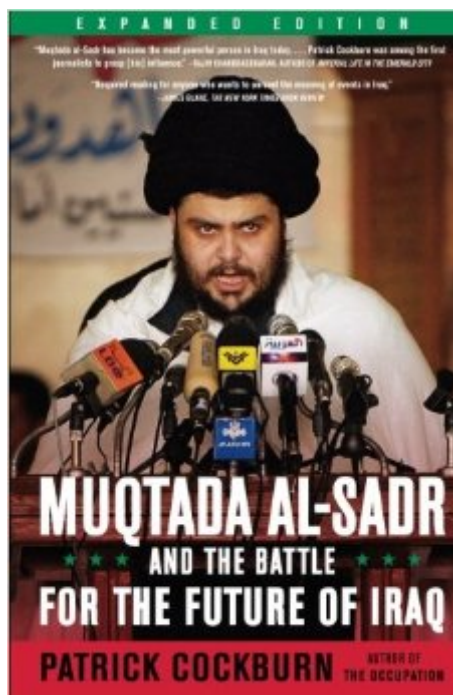


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Muqtada Al-Sadr And The Battle For The Future Of Iraq



Synopsis

Time magazine listed him as one of its "100 People Who Shape Our World." Newsweek featured him on its cover under the headline "How Al-Sadr May Control U.S. Fate in Iraq." Paul Bremer denounced him as a "Bolshevik Islamist" and ordered that he be captured "dead or alive." Who is Muqtada al-Sadr, and why is he so vital to the future of Iraq and, arguably, the entire Middle East? In this compellingly readable account, prize-winning journalist Patrick Cockburn tells the story of Muqtada's rise to become the leader of Iraq's poor Shi'ites and the resistance to the occupation. Cockburn looks at the killings by Saddam's executioners and hit men of the young cleric's father, two brothers, and father-in-law; his leadership of the seventy-thousand-strong Mehdi Army; the fierce rivalries between him and other Shia religious leaders; his complex relationship with the Iraqi government; and his frequent confrontations with the American military, including battles that took place in Najaf in 2004. The portrait that emerges is of a complex man and a sophisticated politician, who engages with religious and nationalist aspirations in a manner unlike any other Iraqi leader. Cockburn, who was among the very few Western journalists to remain in Baghdad during the Gulf War and has been an intrepid reporter of Iraq ever since, draws on his extensive firsthand experience in the country to produce a book that is richly interwoven with the voices of Iraqis themselves. His personal encounters with the Mehdi Army include a tense occasion when he was nearly killed at a roadblock outside the city of Kufa. Though it often reads like an adventure story, Muqtada is also a work of painstaking research and measured analysis that leads to a deeper understanding both of one of the most critical conflicts in the world today and of the man who may well be a decisive voice in determining the future of Iraq when the Americans eventually leave.

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Customer Reviews

General Petraeus' recent report to Congress contained the name of only one person. It was not Nouri Al-Maliki (Prime Minister of Iraq) or Abu Ayyub Al-Masri (head of Al-Qaeda in Iraq), but Muqtada Al-Sadr, the subject of this book. That, combined with the fact that it is the only biography of Sadr on the market establishes its importance. In the first chapter, the author establishes his bona fides showing that he is not a journalist that never ventures out of the Green Zone. He gives a dramatic account of an incident with Sadr supporters at a check-point as he was attempting to travel to Najaf to interview an official within the Sadrist movement. In the subsequent chapters, the reader receives a thumbnail sketch of the Shia in Iraq and offers a biography of Muqtada's predecessors in leading the movement, who were his father and his father's cousin. While seemingly sparse, it is actually the fullest account of their lives that can be found (in English, at least). Also, while some may balk that there are so many chapters that do not deal with Muqtada himself, it is absolutely vital context that allows the reader to understand the nature of the movement that Muqtada became the leader of. Most of the balance of the book is devoted to Muqtada's role in the events following the invasion of Iraq. As was the case with the first chapter, the coverage is enhanced due to Cockburn's 'outside the safe zone' reporting. The strength of the book lies in the biographical details on the Sadr's gained from personal interviews. They are to be found nowhere else and will certainly be a building block for any subsequent biographies. The book makes for lively reading and because of that, can easily be read in the span of an evening or two.

"Stalingrad in Iraq" deserves to be a subtitle of this thin but illuminating volume. The US Army is as entombed in Iraq as the German 6th Army was in the Soviet city along the Volga. The end results are the same in both cases: strategic defeat. Not defeat yet to come, but defeat that is already an accomplished fact: none of the Army's tactical victories can or will alter the fact. I suspect much of the Iraqi resistance knows this while the US refuses to admit it; the Germans never did until it was too late to matter. Interestingly, the book's main character, Muqtada Al-Sadr, doesn't really make an appearance until the end. The author justifies this by stating that the man cannot be understood apart from his family history and the history of Shia Islam. Even before the war began I never believed that the US or its British poodle would have a snowball's chance in Hell of succeeding. Certainly the US experience in Vietnam, the French experience in Vietnam and Algeria, and the British experience in Iraq should have provided some clue to the Coalition's clueless leaders. The

religious dimension is crucial to understanding the unfolding catastrophe. The emergence of Shia Islam in Iraq as THE major player alters the region's whole balance of power and threatens to destroy American predominance there for good or certainly for the foreseeable future. The Shias have a very long memory, as this book well explains: what happened 1400 years ago is as current to them as yesterday's news is to us. They never forget and know that their moment has come. Iraq is the spiritual and historical heart of Shia Islam. More than anyone else, so millions believe, Muqtada Al-Sadr exemplifies this conjunction of faith, power and political savvy. The US demonizes him as they demonized Saddam.

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