

Muqtada al Sadr and the Fall of Iraq by Patrick Coburn.  
faber and faber 2008.

Few writers on Iraq today are as well informed, measured or authoritative as Patrick Coburn, and all these qualities are to the fore in his latest book, an analysis of the malign phenomenon that is Muqtada al-Sadr.

Al-Sadr, scion of an eminent Shia family cruelly persecuted during the regime of Saddam Hussein, is probably the most significant non-governmental figure in post-Saddam Iraq and will undoubtedly have a huge role to play when the time comes that the Shia-dominated south of the country splits from the rest and seeks a closer relationship with Iran.

Cockburn sets the personal story of Al-Sadr against the history of Shia Islam, especially in Iraq where its holiest cities are to be found, and this is hugely helpful in understanding not only the way events have unfolded since the US invasion of 2003, but also the complexity of multiple inter-relationships in the region which the Americans so consummately failed to understand before they invaded and to which they have responded so ineptly since.

Cockburn describes the courage of the Al-Sadr family, particularly Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir Al-Sadr, the first martyr, Muqtada's cousin, and Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, Muqtada's father, the second martyr, the former horribly murdered by Saddam in 1980, the latter gunned down in 1999, and this family background makes Muqtada's actions, and the sway he holds over many Iraqi Shia, entirely comprehensible.

Cockburn also details the journey that Muqtada has made since 2003 from militia leader to nascent politician, and although al-Sadr clearly has much blood on his hands, not least that of the saintly Sayyid Majid al-Khoei (whom I once had the great pleasure of meeting) the man who emerges from this book is undoubtedly going to be a key player in the future of Iraq providing he survives his many enemies.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh