THE DAYS OF REVENGE:
Part I

When I hear my name, I want to disappear.
When I see my face, I want to disappear.
-White Stripes/J. White

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It is midnight and across Jadriyah boulevard lies a dark reef of palms and blacked out houses spread out like the edge of a dead continent. The moon lies in the center of the sky, shining dully through a shroud of dust. It is the only steady light now that the power has failed. When I arrived in Baghdad on the 25th of May, I looked out these same windows over a dark space and heard the sound of a kalashnikov. It was someone emptying an entire magazine at a target at two in the morning, and then after pausing to reload, emptying a second clip for good measure. There was no answering rifle, no further information. A donkey woke and began to scream.

As the U.S. military takes a much lower profile in the capital, other forces, not just the fledgling Iraqi Army and widely-distrusted police, have come to dominate the city and its anxious population. The days of relative openness in Baghdad, which also happened to be the days of uprisings against the US occupation, are long over. The war has gone underground and militia groups are now filling a social vacuum, offering what the Iraqi government cannot, a measure of protection and harsh justice. This sea change in Iraqi society arrived with a steady increase in the flow of corpses to the Baghdad morgue, with scores found in shallow graves in fields or simply abandoned in the

place of execution. The mode of killing varies with the group and the area, but most of the bodies show signs of torture. “You know the difference between the Mahdi Army and the Sunni groups?” a young filmmaker asked me recently. “The Mahdi Army bury the dead, and the Sunni militias throw them on the trash.” Statistics from the ministry of health show that the average number of assassination victims reaching the health ministry over the first four months of the year, is roughly forty, a figure that does not include bomb victims, but the true numbers are higher. Not all bodies make their pilgrimage to the morgue.

Baghdad, and its five million people, has made its way steadily toward an era of mass revenge-taking, with entire neighborhood populations moving to safe areas, or areas thought to be safe. I can now count half a dozen Iraqi friends who have already fled the country and the same number who are actively making plans to leave. Everyone in Baghdad seems to be the run, or changing neighborhoods, including the manager of the storied Dulaime hotel. Sadiq al Dulaime recently moved his wife and three young children into the hotel to avoid Shia militiamen on the road to his house. “When I asked my father what I could do for him, he told me, ‘What I want you to do is stay in the hotel, nothing more. That is what I want.’ The road is very bad now,” Dulaime has no connection to armed groups of any kind, and his family are all Baghdadis, very well known in the city. Small pockets of urban refugees have been turning up in the hotel complex, keeping quiet about their problems in the hope of not making them worse.

On a white hot day in early June, I went to the Shia neighborhood of al Shu’ala to speak to the Mahdi Army men who ran things. The building was crowned with a new sign in English which stated that it was, “The Sadreen Institute for Strategic Studies,” as twenty young men wearing the uniform of black shirts and close cropped hair were piling quickly out of late model cars. The sign suggested a university of militiadom. As the entire Mahdi cell

walked to the office in close formation, the men adjusted the pistols in their belts and pulled their shirts down over them. I waited at the door as the fighters were checked by the guard and were allowed into the office. One by one, as the office guard recognized the men, he gave them each a quick tap on the shoulder. A few minutes later, after the cell disappeared into the office, Hamdullah Rikabi, a Mahdi Army representative for Al Shu'ala, invited me in.

The Sadr office was packed with Iraqis asking for assistance with everything from ID cards, to death payments to information about BKC machine guns. The Mahdi Army is doing a booming trade in community relations these days, and a citizen does not have to be a Shiite or even a Muslim to ask for their help. As uncounted numbers of Shiite families flee the extreme violence to "safe" neighborhoods, the Mahdi Army is welcoming a ready-made constituency of desperate and frightened people from all over Iraq.

"We respect all journalists and their opinions," Rikabi told me warmly, before going on a conspiracy-laden rant about how American soldiers were in league with Sunni extremists. "The American soldiers were behind the Al Askari shrine bombing, directly or indirectly. If they had allowed our guards to carry weapons, we could have stopped the attack. The American soldiers must leave Iraq immediately, this is what Sayyid Moqtada says," he explained.

The thin and intense Rikabi was friendly even if his speech was pre-programmed, then went on to say that Mahdi Army soldiers were helping poor people, as I could see, and did not even carry weapons, a funny and obvious falsehood, since nearly two dozen armed men had just entered the building. It is true that the militiamen being more discreet about their weapons, but it if the past is any guide, the heavier stuff is cached close at hand. In Najaf, during the siege in 2004, the Mahdi Army leadership used a nearby religious

school as an armory, and on the day the fighting ended, when Ayatollah Ali al Sistani's pilgrims flooded the city, the militia quietly disappeared with its entire stock of weapons. Najaf was a demonstration of faith and a shattering military defeat for the young militia, but those awkward adolescent days are gone, and Moqtada Sadr's followers are more disciplined and have more support than they did in the violent summer of 2004. A trace of the old days remains, and I could hear an almost plaintive note in Rikabi's accusation of U.S. complicity in the attack on the holy al Askari shrine. The Mahdi militia has good reason to want the immediate departure of US forces, since they are the only power in Iraq they fear and cannot influence.

I left the Sadr office and drove for five minutes down Al Shu'ala's dusty main street, and turned off onto a side road. Walking alone under the crucible sun in her black abaya was a woman of middle age hauling groceries. When I stopped the car to give her a ride, she climbed in, gave a blessing, and immediately pulled out the death certificate for her son and began to weep. We had just turned off the main road onto an abandoned Army base were half-constructed houses stood among piles of yellow bricks. This was Chikook, a squatters camp for Shiite families fleeing sectarian violence, managed by the Mahdi Army. Two police SUV's guarded the entrance and I was able to drive straight through without being stopped. The woman, who's name is Leila Hassan Hammadi, directed me to her house, a section of the army barracks and invited us to come inside to the cool dark of the house. A thousand dollars paid to someone she would not name bought her two rooms, joined by a hole punched in the concrete wall. Hammadi's three school age daughters quietly materialized from behind a partition to bring out orange drink and bruised apples. Hassan, who is desperately poor explained that her family had fled Taji where some of the worst sectarian attacks have been.

"My son was only a child and they threw him in the trash," Hammadi said, in a seizure of anguish. From a plastic bag where she kept her important

papers, she took out postage stamp sized pictures of her eighteen year old son Ali and her husband and handed them to me. “They kidnapped my husband.” When I asked who killed her son and taken her husband, she said she didn’t know and was silent for a moment. “After they killed Ali, we received a letter at our house that said we had to leave in one week. It said if we see you a week from now, we will kill all of you. We didn’t leave. That’s when my husband was kidnapped.” The date on Ali’s death certificate was November 6, 2005. Hammadi and her daughters had been displaced for more than seven months. Without a man in the house, her only source of support was the Mahdi Army. Hassan’s refusal to describe the attackers is completely normal in Iraq. As I left, Hammadi begged for my help, for any contacts with human rights group who can support widows. “I am in a special situation,” she said. “Please.”

A particular breed of captor will inflict pain on the captive because of his mere existence than on the basis of any real evidence. As for the likely execution that follows, the confession, extracted under torture, takes care of the reason for it. Noting this trend in violence here, writers on Iraq resurrected the dreaded term of art, death squad. Both sides in the sectarian conflict, if such a binary division is possible, have them. Iraq is now busy giving birth to secret courts that order the execution of prisoners, and the body dumping grounds they require. As to who is more brutal and less discriminating in their violence, it is Sunni extremist groups which include Al Qaeda by far; their members regularly target places where Shiite civilians gather (with an emphasis on markets and mosques), attacking with car bombs and suicide bombs to create daily scenes of massive carnage. What is perhaps worse, is that there are some ordinary Iraqis who support such attacks.

One thirty year old engineer from the Saydiyah neighborhood who I have known for more than a year, has become increasingly religious after a trip to Mecca, said in a confused phone conversation, “You know, Zarkawi was a

good man because he protected Sunnis." Last year he had told me, "I hate the Shia. I hate them so much." When I asked what they had ever done to him he said, "Nothing." The young man's hatred is categorical, beyond reason.

Since the fall of Baghdad members of the Saddam's brutal security apparatus, the Mukhabarat, expanded their networks (the networks were never reallly destroyed) and forming alliances with the fundamentalist groups, who are in turn funded by people in other countries, such as Saudi Arabia. The result is a thoroughly efficient approach to creating a civil war, organized in large part by the same people who were the state killers under the old regime. Abu Musab al Zarkawi, the marketing genius behind the mass destruction of Shiites, is now a ghost who hovers patiently in the realm of the undead waiting for the day when the bloodletting becomes a flood tide. The old, secular, insurgency of former Iraqi army officers has now lost most of its influence to the religious fighters and their constant stream of funds from abroad.

On June 9th, a day after Zarkawi's death, Prime minister Nouri al Maliki's government instituted a sweeping Baghdad security plan which has not slowed the pace of bombings for much longer than a few days, a lull that might have been due to the mourning period for Zarqawi. Traffic moves at a perpetual crawl, and the simplest trips around Baghdad can take several hours. Meanwhile, new sections of the city in thrall to militia groups are becoming fundamentalist enclaves.

In Mansour, one of Baghdad's upscale neighborhoods, a flyer is circulating which says that any man caught wearing jeans would be killed. "We used to see things like that under Saddam," a nineteen year old rock and roll musician named Ahmed told me. "That's why I think it's the same people. If they caught a man wearing hair that was too long, they would beat him in the street. Those ideas of not wearing jeans and not wearing shorts, those

are Saddam's sick ideas, and they just wanted to keep people freaked out." Ahmed explained that the advice in the flyer closely matched the threats the security services delivered under the old regime, that it had their style. In Mansour, it is now also a crime for a woman to go out with her hair uncovered, and she can be publicly beaten for it. By contrast, in Sadr city, where poor Shiites from the countryside are more conservative, such strictures are old news. In Mansour it is shocking development, but it also gives a clue about the nature of the insurgency and what the current alliances are. It is a natural metamorphosis for the former intelligence men, skilled in torture and abduction, to exchange the tyranny of Saddam regime for the blind absolutism of Al Qaeda, it merely requires a change of clothes.

An unintended side effect of the elections is that Shiite militias have so deeply infiltrated the government, that it is not clear exactly where to draw the line between legitimate organizations and the armed gangs. The interior ministry managed a secret facility that was used as a torture site for its prisoners. In Iraq, it is the interior ministry that controls the police. Militias also control the government prisons, the transportation ministry and have serious leverage over some of Baghdad's large hospitals.

As the armed groups have enjoyed a spike in popularity and power, I wanted to understand how the Mahdi Army is responding to the attacks on Shiite civilians, a side of their movement they do not readily discuss with outsiders. A Shia contact in Baghdad made a telephone call and organized a meeting with a commander in charge of a number of smaller Mahdi cells, and this places him not too far up the chain of command, but in the middle. On the 6th of June, I was instructed to wait at the Habaibna restaurant in Talbiyah, a mixed neighborhood known for bomb attacks, and within five minutes of the scheduled appointment, two serious men in a BMW rolled up in the parking lot and told us to follow them. Instead of taking us back to Sadr city, the

Mahdi Army stronghold, we headed all the way back into town, to the Sunni neighborhood of Zayouna.

In a house set back from the highway, on a street barricaded by palm logs and debris, a dozen Mahdi Army men gathered in the living room of Salman Al Darragi's house, ranging from their early twenties to forties, a few were veterans of the street fighting in 2004. Everyone was polite and ready to participate in the discussion, but they let Al Darragi speak first and listened quietly to our discussion.

The genial and Buddha-like Al Darragi is well respected in the militia and his group makes money by running a propane gas franchise behind the house, part of the vibrant sectarian militia/business environment found in Baghdad these days. Al Darragi relaxed against his wall as soft drinks were brought in by one of his kids. The young men, all fighters without weapons, came and sat on cushions against the wall and brought their difficulties to him. One young fighter complained that Iraqi police kept cutting in line for fuel at their gas station and it was causing problems. We did not talk about where al Darragi got his fuel stock, but behind the house was a government gasoline tanker unhitched from its cab. The Mahdi commander, after laying out a long and ridiculous conspiracy theory that involved American soldiers burying IED's in Sadr city, began to talk relatively freely about the Mahdi Army's military operations. This is unusual for the militia and may have only happened because the political leadership in Sadr city had no idea he was meeting with a reporter.

We were talking about Sunni groups which were targeting Shiite civilians when Al Darragi volunteered that the Mahdi Army in Sadr City had a suspect in a mosque bombing who was scheduled for execution. "If he is guilty of killing, then he must be killed. That is the Sharia law. This man already confessed that he was killing people." Al Darragi shrugged as if to say, "This

is how it works, what can I do?" The police regularly find bodies, bound and executed at the edge of Sadr city, in a place called Al Seddeh. I listened as Darragi was talking about a secret court in Sadr city where the Mahdi Army held people they captured, tried them and passed sentence. When I asked to visit the sharia court and talk to the mosque bombing suspect, Darragi said, "I would have to blindfold you and that would be embarrassing for both of us. The court is in a secret place, but I will ask if it is possible." When I called Darragi the next day, his phone was switched off. I went to pay him a visit a few days later after not being able to reach him and he was gone, one of his men said he was in Turkey. Al Seddah has a nickname. Iraqis call it "The Happiness Hotel."

Before I left Darragi's house, the commander talked about his frustration with the current arms ban in Baghdad only the Army, the police and US forces are allowed to carry arms on the street. "If I could bring my weapons I could go to al Rusafa (Baghdad west of the Tigris) and capture the terrorists who are building the bombs and sending them to this side of the city. Now, I can do nothing." If the pressure was off Darragi and his men, it is a safe bet that there would be open conflict on the streets of Baghdad, this time not with the Americans, but between the Shia and the Sunni groups. The battle for the control of Iraq will be fought in these neighborhoods.

The Mahdi Army is a many-headed creature, a fundamentalist Shiite religious movement, an armed group, and a social welfare agency, which has been long underestimated by the United States. The militia leadership quickly moves to set up its own sharia courts where it has unquestioned authority. In the summer of 2004, clerics with the Sadr movement ran such a court in Najaf in a small alley near the shrine where clerics schooled in Islamic Law would adjudicate and render decisions, about small disputes and more serious cases. In Sadr City, the Mahdi Army is again carrying out its own justice, leaving the bodies of the killed in a bare patch of ground. This is

not activity by rogue or undisciplined elements within the movement, it is a carefully orchestrated response to the attacks of Sunni extremists.

With each new mosque bombing and assassination it is easy to imagine the advent of maximum darkness, a situation where no Sunni Arab family is safe in Iraq and the entire society has fallen into the orbit of the militias. Forming only a fifth of the population, the Sunni population is a minority and both sides are preparing for a fight.

Ahmed, the guitar player son of Shiite and Sunni parents, who is often philosophical told me, “The killings are becoming something that’s normal. When you hear about someone you know who has been killed, there’s a part inside of you that shakes. Now when I hear that someone I know has been killed. I don’t feel anything. It’s like a part of me has died.” ■