

# AN UNENVIABLE ROLE

Running Iraq's health department is not only logistically difficult but dangerous.

**Owen Dyer** talks to the new minister about the challenges

Iraq's beleaguered government has sought outside help to run its troubled health ministry—in the form of a Kent psychiatrist. Dr Sabah Sadik, who until recently was medical director of Kent and Medway NHS and Social Care Trust, will take on a ministry heavily infiltrated by the political faction loyal to Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and its feared militia, the Mahdi Army. “A lot of people—especially Iraqis—have told me I’m crazy to go,” he said.

Six Sadrist ministers quit the government in April, including Ali al-Shemari, the health minister. Iraq's government saw an opportunity to break the militia's grip on the health system, says Dr Sadik. “That's the main reason why I've decided to accept this job now. There seems to be a new determination to get the sectarianism out of the ministries and appoint neutral technocrats. If that is serious, I'm willing to be one of them.”

Dr Sadik qualified in Baghdad in 1974, and has worked in Britain for nearly three decades. He comes from a “very liberal Shiite family,” but lived from age 10 in Baghdad's heavily Sunni Kharq district, attending the same secondary school as Saddam Hussein. He spent a year in Iraq in 2004–5, working as national adviser for mental health.

## Unstable system

Five health ministers have come and gone since the 2003 invasion, but Iraq's health system has continued its long slide into disrepair. A report published by Oxfam last week showed every public health indicator heading in the wrong direction.<sup>1</sup>

The health ministry's problems, however, go far beyond a lack of resources. As the Sadrists' grip tightened throughout 2006, the ministry descended into gangsterism. In an effort at inclusiveness, Sunni parties were allowed to nominate one deputy health minister. Their candidate, Ali al-Mahdawi, entered the health ministry last June for an appointment with the minister, Mr al-Shemari. He and his bodyguards have never been seen since.

Last summer, horrific stories began to emerge of Shiite death squads prowling Baghdad's hospital wards. It's unclear to what extent the health

ministry controls these men. Many wear the uniforms of the Facilities Protection Service, ministerial private armies staffed with party militia. The service is particularly notorious, and numbers about 15 000 armed men.

Last autumn, the health ministry became embroiled in a violent feud with the Sunni controlled Ministry of Higher Education, culminating in armed attacks on both ministry headquarters.

## Restoring confidence

Will Dr Sadik purge the ministry? “It's fair to say,” he acknowledges, “that the Sadrist influence runs through the ranks. In Iraq, everyone expects the new man to clean everyone out and replace them with his own people. They expect a dictatorial leadership style. I prefer not to operate that way. I think everyone deserves a chance to show that they can look beyond sectarian loyalty and work for all Iraqis. But if someone can't do that, then yes, ultimately they must go.”

Some have already gone. A kidnap ring operating from the heart of the ministry was shut down last August when US forces arrested seven bodyguards of Mr al-Shemari. But in November, deputy health minister Ammar al-Saffar was kidnapped from his home. He has never been found. The next day, two bodyguards of another deputy health minister, Hakim al-Zamili, were killed when his convoy was ambushed. “We as health ministry officials have become targets,” Mr al-Zamili told reporters.

This February, US forces named a suspect in Mr al-Saffar's disappearance—his fellow health minister Mr al-Zamili, whom they arrested in his office along with five bodyguards. Mr al-Zamili was also accused of diverting ministry funds to the Mahdi Army.

Dr Sadik is aware of these incidents, but he is not deterred. “Certain political groups may be unhappy with my appointment. But there is



Kent psychiatrist, Sabah Sadik

always the knowledge that if you don't do it, who will?

“I'm under no illusion that progress will be quick or easy. But I think there are some quick fixes available. Communications within the government can definitely be improved,” says Dr Sadik, who recounts that during his year as Iraq's national adviser for mental health, he never met his health minister.

“My first priority will be to go to the hot spots myself. People won't trust

their government if it won't show its face.” He plans an early visit to the bitterly divided province of Diyala.

Dr Sadik does not dispute the widespread claim that more than half of Iraq's doctors have fled the country. “There were 150 psychiatrists in Iraq in 2003. Now there are 65. I believe that's representative. But no doctors are getting jobs in neighbouring countries any more, as they've stopped giving work visas.

“My greatest concern is for those who can't afford to leave, who must stay and face difficult conditions.” He worries about nurses, whom he considers key to rebuilding the health system. “We must quickly raise salaries for both doctors and nurses,” he says.

On the US led invasion, Dr Sadik pronounces himself “ambivalent.” He is critical of reconstruction efforts and describes casualties in Iraq as “unknowable but unacceptable high.”

He is awaiting confirmation by Iraq's parliament, which is now in recess for August and has recently been short of a quorum because of walk-outs by members of parliament.

When he does leave for Iraq, his British born wife and four sons will stay in Kent. “They will visit later,” he says, “when things settle down a bit.”

Competing interests: None declared.

1. Oxfam. Rising to the humanitarian challenge in Iraq. [www.oxfam.org/en/policy/briefingpapers/bp105\\_humanitarian\\_challenge\\_in\\_iraq\\_0707](http://www.oxfam.org/en/policy/briefingpapers/bp105_humanitarian_challenge_in_iraq_0707).

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