

Sadr Eases Baghdad Fuel Woes

Author: [IWPR](#)

Muqtatda's men ensure residents pay fair price for their gas.

In a bid to win the support of the local population, firebrand Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army has begun organising fuel distribution in eastern Baghdad to ease the growing shortages.

With fuel shortages and distribution problems now affecting people in almost every Iraqi city, inhabitants of the areas covered by the Mahdi Army have been widely appreciative of their efforts.

Baghdad's fuel crisis reached its height in December after a series of sabotage operations hit pipelines. Added to administrative incompetence and corruption at the oil ministry, this ended up with cars queuing for up to three kilometres at some gas stations as they waited to fill up.

Abu Hazim al-Khazali, a member of the economic committee of al-Sadr's organization, said, "We formed a special committee in the Mahdi Army to prevent black market fuel sellers touting outside petrol stations.

"We control the petrol stations in Sadr city fairly, and we have been cooperating with businesses, such as the Gas Company of Al-Habibia, to make sure they sell to citizens at the official price."

At the petrol station in sector 55 of Sadr city, which the Mahdi Army has been running in recent days, cars were filling up as normal, as armed Sadrists patrolled to ensure the process ran smoothly.

For taxi driver Samir Tariq, this turn of events has been a godsend. "We are really thanking these guys and we want them to continue this operation," he said.

Civil servant Haider Al-Jubori said the Sadrist intervention meant that petrol distribution was now more orderly and efficient, "They saved us from a very long wait - until now, I have been finishing work and then queuing for hours and hours just to get fuel. Now it takes me one hour or less just because we have Sadr's men controlling this petrol station."

Asaa'd Kamel, who runs a grocery store in Sadr city, said he was relieved the racketeering was over, "The Mahdi Army stopped the black market dealers exploiting people. They were stealing fuel and then selling it at massively inflated prices right outside the petrol stations."

As well as controlling petrol stations, Sadr's men have also been distributing gas tanks and kerosene in local neighbourhoods.

"The Mahdi Army comes round and we just pay the official prices," said appreciative Sadr city housewife Safia Mahmoud.

Al-Khazali explained the Sadrists initiative was intended to show that the organisation was prepared to assist all Iraqis, "We have been doing this for the past few weeks and it's been working really well. The Mahdi Army is ready to help and assist anyone who needs it, even the government itself."

He added that the Mahdi Army would be pulling back from all the petrol stations it controls by the New Year, to give the National Guard a chance to take over its work and guarantee supplies to the fuel-hungry capital.

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