



BRILL



brill.com/popu

The Epistemic Modes of Muqtada al-Sadr's Charisma Production on Hybrid Media

Ali Alsayegh | ORCID: 0000-0003-0089-8925

PhD Middle East Politics, Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies,
University of Exeter, Exeter, UK

alsayegh.ali@outlook.com; aan26@exeter.ac.uk

Received 15 August 2024 | Accepted 30 December 2024 |

Published online 3 February 2025

Abstract

Muqtada al-Sadr's charismatic authority helps enable his power to emotionally motivate millions from the religious populist Sadri movement to partake in elections, protests, and armed struggle in Iraq. Hybrid media is a significant space that promotes his charisma via 'epistemic modes', which are contestations over what types of knowledge are deemed true. This paper conducts a virtual ethnography of Sadri hybrid media, whilst contending for the 'affective bond' as a suitable conceptual framework to analyse content that propagates al-Sadr's image. The affective bond treats charisma as absolute trust, premised upon followers' recognition of their leader as a symbol of legitimacy, hope, and authenticity. This highlights the interrelationship between these perceptions in creating charisma. Concurrently, the affective bond renders visible how everyday online communicative and interpretive practices transform Sadri hybrid media into a space whereby performance, culture, stories, narratives, structural circumstances, and religio-populist identity, intersect to produce Muqtada's charisma through audiovisual materials.

Keywords

charisma – epistemic modes – affective bond – hybrid media – religious populism – Muqtada al-Sadr

1 Introduction

Muqtada al-Sadr is the religious populist leader of the millions-strong Sadri movement in Iraq. Al-Sadr's charisma underpins his capacity to emotionally motivate his followers to vote, demonstrate, and engage in armed mobilisation. Today, hybrid media space contributes to producing his charisma via epistemic modes¹ by his social media accounts and his followers'. The present work locates and analyses how hybrid media content epistemically promotes al-Sadr's charisma. Here, charisma is understood as an 'affective bond' between followers and their leader, as delineated by the new interdisciplinary theoretical paradigm, 'emotional entrepreneurship'.²

The affective bond conceptual framework categorises the core perceptions constituting Muqtada's charisma as 'symbol of legitimacy, hope, and authenticity'. In Alsayegh's research, followers' recognition of Ayatollah Sistani embodying these symbolisms generates the charismatic aura that shores up his capacity to motivate his followers to partake in varying political mobilisations.³ The symbolisms function as such because they produce the 'absolute trust' Weber theorised followers have in charismatic leaders.⁴

Originally, the affective bond was developed to compensate for charisma literature's shortcomings, which instead focus on elements of charisma such as being passion-inducing, inspiring personal devotion, or having a special relationship with God. A figure's inherited legitimacy, belief in his/her capabilities to produce change, and morality, were mentioned by charisma scholars as constituting charismatic authority.⁵ However, their crucial limitations were in addressing 1) how leaders validate their inheritance of legitimacy, 2) relevance of relatability for charisma accumulation, 3) coalescence of the aforementioned perceptions in a mutually-reinforcing manner to produce absolute trust, 4) their interrelation with followers' identity, cultural practice, and structural circumstances, 5) how charisma formulates the cognitive basis

-
- 1 Which are contentions "over *what kinds of knowledge are prioritized and legitimized*" – Valaskivi, K. and Robertson, D. "Introduction: epistemic contestations in the hybrid media environment." *Popular Communication* 20 (3) (2022), 153–161.
 - 2 Alsayegh, A. *Emotional Entrepreneurism (EE): The Case of Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Husayni al-Sistani*, PhD Thesis (Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter, 2024).
 - 3 Alsayegh, A. "The content of Ayatollah Sistani's charismatic authority: the affective bond." *Antropolítica – Revista Contemporânea de Antropologia* 56 (3) (2024), 1–25.
 - 4 Weber, M. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (London: Willam Hodge and Company Limited, 1947), 330.
 - 5 Adair-toteff, C. "Max Weber's Charisma." *Journal of Classical Sociology* 5 (2) (2005), 189–204.

of a leader's capacity to stimulate emotionalised motivations *based on* absolute trust, and 6) how charisma can be challenged and safeguarded.⁶

The full depth of the affective bond's scope is not utilised in this study. Rather, it is redeployed here to contend for its usefulness as a heuristic to understand and condense Muqtada's charisma in an accessible manner, and better capture the epistemic implications of hybrid media content that promote his image. In doing so, the affective bond becomes an analytical lens for how hybrid media content caters to differing elements of Muqtada's charismatic authority. The affective bond and its symbolisms are defined further on.

This work undertakes a virtual ethnographic approach to uncover the epistemic modes of Muqtada's charismatic authority production in hybrid media space. Virtual ethnography refers to the deployment of ethnographic investigative tools to study the internet as a sociological setting, highlighting how content and interactions on various digitised platforms become meaningful socially.⁷ These virtual spaces reflect and effect phenomena in the offline world, and create a new environment through which everyday communicative and interpretive life-worlds of people are captured. This work therefore gathers videographic data from Instagram and YouTube sources that depict al-Sadr's image, and monitors, when relevant, audience comments to these videos. These sources come from (ostensible⁸) fan-pages of Muqtada, and al-Sadr's official YouTube channel. The paper qualitatively analyses this data through the affective bond framework to explain how Muqtada's charisma is conveyed and understood in hybrid media.

Though, a few acknowledgements must be made. High number of videos on Muqtada means it is impossible to capture the varying content on hybrid media space about his image. This research should be treated as a humble starting point of exploration into this relatively untapped world of material. Videos were selected based on their popularity (i.e. which had relatively high levels of interactions/views/shares). There could be fan content that cannot be easily or holistically explained through the affective bond, which is acknowledged. Instagram and YouTube content are specifically utilised because they offered audiovisual material with high interaction rates on Muqtada's accounts and

6 For more on charisma literature's shortcomings and how the affective bond compensates for this, see: Alsayegh, A. *Emotional Entrepreneurism ...* op. cit., 48–59 and 345–356.

7 Hine, C. *Virtual Ethnography* (London: SAGE, 2000).

8 It is difficult to confirm whether these accounts belong to followers of Muqtada, or to hired Muqtada networks posing as ordinary Sadri movement constituents. These distinctions are also not mutually exclusive. One can be a paid employee of Muqtada *and* a genuine follower. Additionally, earning the trust of the content creators to reveal their affiliation/non-affiliation to Muqtada's network base, is improbable. What's more, some accounts used here no longer exist, which adds more hurdles to verifying the identity of content creators.

his fans' (or networks'). Such videos also provide an opportunity to flesh out how charismatic communicative practice manifests through a complementary mixture of aesthetic and discursive means.

Finally, this article's findings are not comprehensive. There exists offline structures, rituals, narratives, imagery, and events that contribute to the epistemological dynamics of Muqtada's charisma production. Moreover, fieldwork ethnography can provide crucial first-hand accounts on how al-Sadr's charisma is interpreted and promoted. Such fieldwork could also help ascertain the 'impact' of Muqtada's hybrid media content on reinforcing pre-existing charisma recognition (among followers), or convincing non-followers of al-Sadr's charisma, which is out of this paper's scope. Such accounts should be recognised as capable of complementing, challenging, and/or nuancing, this paper's findings.

In what follows, the article begins by delineating the relationship between leaders' religious populism and hybrid media. The latter is seen as modern that facilitates the former's image-building enterprise. Forthwith, pre-existing literature's understanding of Muqtada's image is addressed. The paper then presents the affective bond as an adequate concept that resonates with, and condenses, the literature's account of al-Sadr's image profile. More reasons on why the affective bond framework is adopted for this paper are found there. The affective bond, and its three constituent symbolisms, are then conceptually defined and a brief illustration of how Muqtada's charisma empirically manifests them is provided. By extension, a discussion proceeds elaborating upon the nature of the interrelationship of legitimacy, hope, and authenticity.

The paper then analyses videographic content on Muqtada's image through the affective bond. Doing so makes legible the content's epistemic modes through the heuristic, and how those epistemic modalities resonate with the interrelated nature of the affective symbolisms. The paper's final section then analyses content that confirms Muqtada as a charismatic figure. It does this by illustrating how the content depicts 'absolute trust' in al-Sadr's leadership as stemming from the recognition of him embodying the affective symbolisms.

2 Hybrid Media and Religious Populism

Hybrid media can act as a mechanism for religious populism. Arruda et al.'s research⁹ highlights how WhatsApp content helped produce pastors'

9 Arruda, G., Freitas, D., Lima, C., Nawrotek, K., and Pataro, B. "The production of knowledge through religious and social media infrastructure: world making practices among Brazilian Pentecostals." *Popular Communication* 20 (3) (2022), 208–221.

charisma¹⁰ in the Brazilian Pentocostal Igreja Universal do Reino de Deus (IURD). This speaks to media space's functionality in developing personalised relationships between populist figures and their audience, continuously emotionalising that relationship, and fomenting anti-establishment outlooks.¹¹ Hybrid media therefore becomes a space where epistemic modes are undertaken by populist figures.¹² Originally, this was argued to underscore how elites and conspiracy theorists reinforce bodies of knowledge, strengthening their stance on topics of interest. Though, epistemic modes extend beyond this, as reflected by pastors' charismatic-image-production on WhatsApp.

However, epistemic modes are not exclusively enacted by populist figures. The means of Muqtada's charismatic-image-building is also undertaken by followers' pages on social media. Valaskivi and Robertson note, "[f]an culture, participation, collective knowledge production, and the utopian possibilities of media technology are mainly focused on possibilities to generate voice, recognition, emancipation and solidarity".¹³ In al-Sadr's case, fan culture becomes a means by which he becomes a commodity in today's algorithm-driven hybrid media economy like the conspiracy theories explored in the authors' work. Indeed, the present research benefitted from this realism as the hybrid media content of Muqtada's image was located through suggested material from Instagram and YouTube. These videos are constantly reproduced and embedded within other accounts (according to Instagram statistics many of them were forwarded over 1,000 times). This content therefore symbolises a core part of the ebb and flow of videographic material comprising the economy of Sadri media space. More importantly, the proliferation of such content must be explored as a modem for Muqtada's religio-populist image-building practices. To understand why, it is prudent to provide an understanding of religious populism.

Populism can be understood as a discursive, symbolic, and aesthetic communication of anti-establishment attitudes, and the demands of a collective identity group.¹⁴ Conjoining religion with populism is therefore when such

10 Albeit the authors' definition of charisma was different than the one deployed for this paper.

11 Mazzoleni, G. "The media and the growth of neo-populism in contemporary democracies." In *The media and neo-populism: A contemporary comparative analysis*, eds. Mazzoleni, G., Stewart, J., and Horsfield, B. (Westport: Praeger, 2003), 1–20.

Mudde, Cas. *Populist radical right parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

12 Valaskivi and Robertson, "Introduction ..." op. cit.

13 Valaskivi and Robertson, "Introduction ..." op. cit.

14 Moffitt, B. *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

communication is heavily steeped in the populist group's religious terminologies. Sumiala et al. recognise this as the correlation and combination of sacralisation and anti-elitism.¹⁵ The authors exemplify this by highlighting how Jesus (AS) was depicted as a holy figure who challenged Jewish elites. Further, religion *can* sacralise populist actors. In the following sections, Muqtada content blends between the sacralisation and anti-elitism dimensions of religious populism to epistemically indicate how the populist leader's charisma should be understood. Though first, a brief overview of pre-existing literature's image profile of Muqtada must be accounted for.

3 Muqtada in Pre-existing Literature

Some key works investigating Muqtada's image are Cockburn,¹⁶ and Selvik and Amirteimour.¹⁷ While Cockburn labels al-Sadr's image as 'charisma', the latter authors understand Muqtada as a 'big man' figure. However, Selvik and Amirteimour do not disagree with the 'charisma' of Muqtada. In their work, they acknowledge the parallel of big man with charisma.¹⁸ Rather, the big man framework provided alternative analyses which overlapped with Cockburn's, but also highlighted other components of Muqtada's image.

Here, the analysis should begin on the collective identity of the group Muqtada leads. As Cockburn notes, Sadri constituents "were the millions of impoverished Iraqis whose lives had been destroyed by the disasters of war, insurrection and sanctions that had shattered Iraqi society after 1980".¹⁹ These events include the 1980–88 Iran-Iraq war, Saddam's defeat in Kuwait, international sanctions, massacres following the 1991 Sha'ban Uprising (which the Sadris participated in), and the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. This left many Sadri movement followers structurally disenfranchised, marginalised, and

DeHanas, D. and Shretin, M. "Religion and the rise of populism." *Religion, State & Society* 46 (3) (2018), 177–185.

Laclau, E. *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).

15 Sumiala, J., Hoover, S., and Laughlin, C. "Religious Populism? Rethinking Concepts and Consequences in a Hybrid Media Age." *International Journal of Communication* 17 (2023), 2795–2804.

16 Cockburn, P. *Muqtada al-Sadr and the Fall of Iraq* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2008).

17 Selvik, J. and Amirteimour, I. "The Big Man Muqtada al-Sadr: Leading the Street in Iraq under Limited Statehood." *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 5 (3–6) (2020), 242–259.

18 Selvik and Amirteimour, "The Big ..." op. cit., 243.

19 Cockburn, *Muqtada ...* op. cit., 217.

perpetually looking towards their leaders for inspiration and guidance. Prior to Muqtada, these leaders were his father-in-law (Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr) and father (Muhammad Muhammad-Sadiq al-Sadr). The former is popularly referred to as *al-shahid al-awwal* (the first martyr) or *al-Sadr al-awwal* (the first Sadr), and the latter, *al-shahid al-thani* (the second martyr) or *al-Sadr al-thani* (the second Sadr). These leaders formulate the foundations of Muqtada's legitimacy. As such, their religio-political ideology and character must be briefly addressed.

Both Sadri leaders, coming from a noteworthy Shi'i Muslim Sayyid²⁰ clerical family background, were clergymen active in the political and religious fields. Their ideological thinking focused on creating an Islamic society and state to prepare for the coming of Imam Mahdi (AS).²¹ Imam (meaning leader) Mahdi is a messianic figure in Shi'i eschatology who will leave his occultation towards the 'end times' to create an earthly utopia until the day of judgement.²²

The Sadris proudly envisaged themselves as *al-hawza al-natiqa* (the speaking seminary), willing to risk activism in autocratic settings to prepare Iraq for the messiah's coming. The 'speaking seminary' term was developed by Muqtada's father which rhetorically juxtaposed his movement to the traditional clerical elite in Najaf who were less radical in their approach to politics.²³ The latter are lambasted as *al-hawza al-samita* (the silent seminary). Similar to the IURP's founding fathers' opposition to the elitism of the Nova Vida Church and establishment Brazilian politicians,²⁴ the Sadris positioned themselves as an alternative to the traditional clerical and political elite.²⁵

The Sadris' appeal was buttressed by demonstrating that they champion the demands of the downtrodden. A famous story once arose of a poor Shi'i Iraqi who visited Sadr II and quizzed him about tomato prices.²⁶ After successfully answering the visitor's questions, a disciple of Sadr II followed the man and inquired about why he asked such questions. The man responded

20 A title given to descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (SAWW). In Shi'i culture, spiritual reverence is placed upon Sada (plural of Sayyid). Sayyid clerics are distinguished from non-Sayyids through their black turbans (like Muqtada's).

21 Cockburn, *Muqtada* ... op. cit., 142.

22 Najmuddin Tabasi, "Soldiers of Imam al-Mahdi (a.t.f.s)," *Al-Islam.org*, 2020, <https://www.al-islam.org/overview-mahdis-atfs-government-najmuddin-tabasi/soldiers-imam-al-mahdi-atfs>.

23 Raphaeli, N. (2004). "Understanding Muqtada al-Sadr." *Middle East Quarterly* 11 (4) (2004), 33-42.

24 Arruda, et al., "The production ... op. cit., 3.

25 Brief cooperation occurred with Saddam's regime to covertly build the movement's oppositional capacity. – Cockburn, *Muqtada* ... op. cit., 121.

26 Cockburn, *Muqtada* ... op. cit., 113.

by stating that when choosing who to emulate as a *marja'*,²⁷ he needs to know that the cleric understands his constituents' hardships. Muqtada, as will be demonstrated, imitates his father in this regard and consistently shores up his closeness to his constituents' day-to-day circumstances and lifestyles.

Before delving deeper into Muqtada's image, it is noteworthy that his predecessors are known as *al-shahid al-'awwal* and *al-shahid al-thani* due to Saddam murdering them for their regime-defying activities. In Sadr strongholds (Sadr City, Kufa, and elsewhere), their posters adorn lampposts, walls, and buildings. Until today, videos circulate online²⁸ of Sadr II and his famous altercation with a Saddam officer where he placed his walking stick on the officer's chest, pushed the officer, and rebelliously said "tell your master I will not stop prayers as long as I am alive" (in response to Saddam trying to prevent Sadr II from holding Friday Prayers).²⁹ Shortly after this, Sadr II was assassinated.

Effectively, to the Sadri masses, the Sadrs became symbols of resistance against tyranny, and the epitome of ultimate sacrifice for a defiantly righteous cause. Sadr I and II have therefore embedded themselves into the lore of divine heroism for many disenfranchised Shi'i Iraqis. As Muqtada would claim, the Sadri movement included all who follow the teachings of Sadr I and II.³⁰ Such teachings are steeped in religious populist terms. Moreover, to bask in his predecessors' charismatic aura, Muqtada needed to demonstrate himself as the legitimate extension of his father-in-law and father's legacy, especially within the context of succession competition after his father's assassination in 1999.³¹

Cockburn reports, "[w]hen Saddam fell Muqtada stepped forward to claim his forebears' political inheritance and consciously associated himself with them on every possible occasion".³² Regularly, Muqtada mimics his father's behaviourisms such as speech style, gestures, and even giving speeches in the Great Mosque of Kufa. Selvik and Amirteimour also highlight, "[t]o back up his

27 *Marja'* means source of emulation. In Twelver Shi'i Islam, Muslims must choose a cleric who has attained the level of *marja'iyya* in religious learning, and who they believe is the most knowledgeable cleric. Choosing one's *marja'* jurisprudentially obligates one to follow the cleric's edicts. For more on Shi'i seminary's religious authority hierarchy see:

Alshamary, M. *Prophets and priests: religious leaders and protest in Iraq*, PhD Thesis (Department of Political Science, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2020).

28 @_dijlah. "Bil-rughum min quwat al-nizam 'anidhak 'ala 'an quwat al-'iman wa kalimat 'al-haq fawq kul shai". Instagram, April 7, 2024. <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C5dktEmqzga/?igsh=ZjlkOG84anV2aGpo>.

29 Cockburn, *Muqtada* ... op. cit., 121.

30 Cockburn, *Muqtada* ... op. cit., 142.

31 Cockburn, *Muqtada* ... op. cit., 141.

32 Cockburn, *Muqtada* ... op. cit., 249.

claim of being Ayatollah Muhammed al-Sadr's rightful heir, Muqtada adopted a strategy of becoming the embodiment of his father."³³ Another example is Muqtada wearing a white shroud atop his clerical garments, like his father. The white shroud represents a perpetual willingness to be martyred whilst fighting oppression.

However, Cockburn emphasises, "[t]here was more here than a leader exploiting his connection to a revered or respected parent. Muqtada ... emphasised the Sadrist ideological legacy: puritanical Shia Islam mixed with anti-imperialism and populism".³⁴ To his followers, Muqtada's leadership was a vehicle for their equivalential chain of demands³⁵ against religious and national elites, and US forces. Muqtada had to symbolically emulate his predecessors, but also enact policies and actions on-the-ground that can be deemed a manifestation of Sadri ideology. Persistently doing so, as Muqtada did through his antagonistic approach to elites via his political party, and his violent resistance to US imperialism via his Mahdi Army,³⁶ is to validate his claim of being *the* legitimate extension of Sadri legacy.

Simultaneously, Muqtada sets himself as a harbinger of change and survival for his follower base. Cockburn reports that a man once explained why the poor love Muqtada, stating "[t]hey love Muqtada because he keeps them alive".³⁷ The populist leader does this by employing his constituents and providing services to them. Interestingly, Muqtada achieves a reputation which Selvik and Amirteimour call "[m]aster of upward mobility"³⁸ out of poverty, due to his capacity to move his followers from the grassroots to the state through his influential power. Such power was gained by cooperating with state elites to create governments, where in return, he is rewarded with ministries to employ his constituents. Jobs include posts in parliament, the foreign ministry, local governates, and even executive officers.

33 Selvik and Amirteimour, "The Big ..." op. cit., 248.

34 Cockburn, *Muqtada* ... op. cit., 249.

35 Equivalential chains are when a string of demands, stemming from differing social issues and groups, coalesce to create a shared political identity that challenges for hegemony against elites. This is crucial to form populist movements. – Laclau, *On Populist* ... op. cit., 76–7.

36 Mahdi Army was disbanded in 2008 due to pressure from Najafi clerics, human rights abuses, and defeats by the US army. It returned in 2014 as Saraya al-Salam (Peace Brigades), which Muqtada claims was in response to Ayatollah Sistani's jihad fatwa against ISIS. – Al-Tamimi, J. "Shi'i Militias in Iraq and Syria." *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 19 (1) (2015), 79–83.

37 Cockburn, *Muqtada* ... op. cit., 214.

38 Selvik and Amirteimour, "The Big ..." op. cit., 250.

Ironically, Muqtada cooperating with the government (sometimes³⁹) is not seen by his followers as a betrayal of his populist roots, rather, a well-reasoned strategy to support the impoverished and forward his vision of preparing Iraq for the messiah. As will be demonstrated, Muqtada hybrid media content venerates him as a leader willing to challenge state elites when necessary and offer everything he has to support his constituents. Within such reputations, the fiery cleric is painted as a divine saviour, a premonition of the long-awaited Imam Mahdi.⁴⁰

It is also worth highlighting how Muqtada is seen as a genuine and caring character. Cockburn neglects this, but Selvik and Amirteimour compensate by underscoring that Sadr's divinity lends itself weight through his perceivable fatherly care for the Iraqi nation's 'children' (citizens).⁴¹ Aside from being implied or overtly stated as a reason behind his populist policies, this care is also promoted through demonstrations of modesty, carefulness, humility, virtuousness, and piety.⁴² This aspect of Muqtada's image, as will be addressed, formulates a core backbone of his charismatic-image-producing hybrid media content. It balances between Muqtada's need to be seen as an authoritative leader whilst maintaining an image of being an ordinary, but caring, person that people relate to as one of their own.

Having established the core characteristics Muqtada embodies, it is crucial to condense them into ready-made categories before analysing his hybrid media content. Doing this through the affective bond framework should provide a clear-cut heuristic to understand how this content contributes to Muqtada's charisma production. Additionally, the affective bond will elaborate upon the implications and interconnectedness of the perceptions of Muqtada's image in a manner unrecognised by previous literature.

The affective bond heuristic investigates the populist leader's charisma to also underscore a core outcome of recognising Muqtada's charismatic characteristics: absolute trust (hero worship and acknowledging divinity being the others). This trust formulates the cognitive fabric of charismatic leaders' capacity to imbue their calls to action and subsequent framing with emotional resonance that can motivate followers to partake in different political actions. While this paper does not explore Muqtada's mobilisation-motivational

39 Sometimes he joins coalitions with state elites. At others, he forms the opposition against the government. Regularly, Muqtada would also completely refuse to partake in Iraqi national politics through institutional means (such as today).

40 Cockburn, *Muqtada* ... op. cit., 143.

41 Selvik and Amirteimour, "The Big ..." op. cit., 249.

42 Ali, A. "Displacement and Statecraft in Iraq: Recent Trends, Older Roots." *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 5 (2) (2011), 231–245.

capacities, it operates, partially, as a research that provides added input into why millions of his followers are readily willing to mobilise at his behest. The affective bond conceptual framework also enables openings for future research emphasising upon how the affective perceptions are challenged.⁴³ This can set up future works to analyse how Muqtada's opposition epistemically attack the leader's image, particularly through memes.

4 Muqtada al-Sadr's Charisma as an Affective Bond

The emotional entrepreneurship theory contends that charisma be understood as an affective bond between followers and their leader. This cognitive-emotional relationship is defined as:

Followers' belief in the legitimacy, problem-solving capacities, and authenticity of their leader, culminating into a sense of absolute trust in that leader's judgements on matters within his/her perceived jurisdiction.⁴⁴

Discussing how 'absolute trust' influences people's emotional willingness to comply with leaders' calls to action and framing is not within this paper's scope. Rather, it is the perceptions of legitimacy, hope (problem-solving capacities), and authenticity that underpin the affective bond's utility to understand Muqtada's charisma. This section will define legitimacy, hope, and authenticity, and elaborate upon how al-Sadr empirically manifests these symbolisms based upon pre-existing literature. It subsequently analyses the symbolism's interrelationship and its analytical implications.

4.1 *Muqtada – a Symbol of Legitimacy*

As Alsayegh contends: "symbol of legitimacy refers to, the perception that an actor wields the relevant credentials to have a claim to leadership. These criteria are met by being seen as a valid and acceptable extension of an institution that the follower deems to be authoritative in the relevant components of his life ... a charismatic leader's legitimacy is not only institutionally-inherited, but also historically-anchored. The latter form of legitimacy refers to how the charismatic leader validates the inheritance of legitimacy from the institution

43 Alsayegh, A. *Emotional Entrepreneurism* ... op. cit., 348–355.

44 Alsayegh, A. *Emotional Entrepreneurism* ... op. cit., 345.

he/she claims to represent.”⁴⁵ Legitimacy, therefore, is the ideological credibility of leadership that is both passed down, and thereafter, substantiated.

In line with discussions on Muqtada’s image, his institutionally-inherited legitimacy is the degree of reverence and authority his followers place upon the Sadri movement as a religio-populist ideology embodied by Muqtada’s predecessors. As such, al-Sadr’s claim to legitimacy is fundamentally built upon the legitimacy of the movement he represents and its forefathers. Secondly, the populist leader’s historically-anchored legitimacy is understood as how he validates himself as a sound extension of his predecessors’ legacy. This is seen through Muqtada’s policies of anti-elitism, anti-imperialism, service provisions, imitating his father’s speech and clothing styles, and regularly mentioning his father and his teachings through his speeches. Posters and images of Muqtada himself alongside pictures of his father and father-in-law also aesthetically indicate his closeness to them.

4.2 *Muqtada – a Symbol of Hope*

As Alsayegh states: “symbol of hope refers to, the perception that an actor has the relevant capacities to find solutions to ongoing problems. Firstly, ‘problems’ are subjectively understood, meaning that what is a conundrum for one person/community is not the same for others. Moreover, the leader in question cannot be seen as a symbol of hope if he/she promoted him/herself as the solution to issues that do not concern a particular group of people. Secondly, ‘capacities’ relate not only to the necessary skillsets of the leader, but also the leader’s history of perceived successes.”⁴⁶ As such, hope connotes the knowledge and power of leaders to bring about desired outcomes.

In accordance with the discussions on Sadri collective identity’s core demands, Muqtada is seen as a leader that challenges elites, creates tangible results, and provides a means of survival for his constituents. To promote the populist leader in this manner, as will be seen, requires a romanticisation of his capability and bravery in standing up to elites, belief in his capacity to produce positive change, and evidence of the benefit of his policies directed towards helping the poverty-stricken. In effect, his hope symbolism’s validity is premised upon Muqtada becoming an answer to the equivalential demands of the Sadri populist masses. This transforms al-Sadr into a magnet for his constituents’ aspirations in the day-to-day struggles for upward structural mobility, and simultaneously the dramatic moments of nationalistic contention against elites.

45 Alsayegh, A. *Emotional Entrepreneurism ...* op. cit., 348.

46 Alsayegh, A. *Emotional Entrepreneurism ...* op. cit., 350.

4.3 *Muqtada – a Symbol of Authenticity*

As Alsayegh notes: “symbol of authenticity pertains to, the perception of an actor as a reflection of the moral compass of the follower base’s dominant identity, and their day-to-day circumstances and practices ... Not only does a leader’s identity need to coincide with that of the followers, but to be a symbol of authenticity, there must be a perception that he/she genuinely embodies the ethical component of what it means to be part of that identity group.”⁴⁷ Effectively, authenticity is about a leader’s morality, genuineness, and relatability.

In correspondence with pre-existing literature, Muqtada’s paternalistic behaviourism as a caring, humble, virtuous, and modest character to his constituents, formulates a core part of his authenticity. This is because it indicates Muqtada’s morality and genuineness in upholding the values he claims to represent. Such values lend their resonance primarily from the recognition of their significance by the dominant identity of Muqtada’s followers as Shi’i Muslim Sadris. Enacting those values through acts of servitude towards his followers, or minimalist lifestyle choices, imbues Muqtada with a considerable degree of awe as the pinnacle of what his followers deem a righteous leader. Crucially, this awe stems from followers’ evaluation that despite Muqtada’s position as their authoritative leader, he refuses to live in a manner that reflects his prestige. Moreover, it is within the discrepancy between how Muqtada lives and how he *could live*, that followers perceive him to be an authentic leader. His day-to-day life also lends its appealing character from how his followers relate to it themselves. As discussed further on, these include content depicting Muqtada kissing Shi’i shrines, buying groceries, and cleaning a school.

4.4 *The Interrelationship of Legitimacy, Hope, and Authenticity*

As outlined earlier, the affective symbolisms are deeply interconnected.⁴⁸ Meaning that the existence of one perception can imply the existence of others. To elaborate, when Muqtada validates himself as a legitimate extension of the Sadri movement, to his followers, he can be de facto imbued with a significant degree of hope in his capacity to produce change, and belief in his moralistic character. Similarly, to successfully provide services or jobs for the impoverished primarily augments his hope symbolism, but concurrently also reconfirms his historically-anchored legitimacy and authenticity. This is because of the Sadri ideological emphasis on championing those marginalised by repressive elites, and that Muqtada is following through on his promises

47 Alsayegh, A. *Emotional Entrepreneurism* ... op. cit., 351.

48 Alsayegh, A. *Emotional Entrepreneurism* ... op. cit., 354–355.

rather than selfishly accumulating power and wealth. Acts of virtuousness, while primarily an authenticity performance, can bolster Muqtada's claim to leadership of his forefathers' legacy. A legacy premised upon religio-populist commitments, but also buttressed by the perceived righteous character of Sadr I and II. By extension, as mentioned, being deemed the legitimate head of a well-established movement of millions can enshrine Muqtada with a significant degree of *given* hope in his capacity to achieve socio-political feats.

Secondly, the affective symbolisms are mutually-reinforcing in processes of charismatic authority production. For leaders to obtain the 'absolute trust' of their followers, it is necessary that all three perceptions are concurrently present within followers' minds to encourage their recognition of charisma. Put simply, it is not only within the legitimacy and hope of Muqtada that enables his followers to have faith in his judgements on socio-political matters perceived to be within his jurisdiction.⁴⁹ Rather, they must also believe that he is sufficiently authentic to use his legitimacy and hope for the collective's benefit. Additionally, the symbolism's 'interrelationship' also means that trust is not only built upon the religious legitimacy of his forefathers, nor the clerical establishment Sadr I and II were a part of, but also the religio-political populist vision that they adopted as their divine calling. As such, Muqtada is a *populist cleric* and what that entails in the religious *and* political spheres formulates a bedrock of his absolute trust.

Building upon the mentioned points for this paper's discussion of the epistemic modes of Muqtada's charisma production on hybrid media, the interrelationship of the affective bond perceptions must be considered when analysing the forthcoming content. Due to the perceptions' interconnected nature, all three symbolisms can be catered to, and derived from, a single piece of content from hybrid media. The videographic material can also argue for the validity of *primarily* one of the three perceptions. However, this does not mean that the content does not suggest the other perceptions' credibility. In fact, producing one perception, at times, can imply the existence of others, which is a form of suggestive messaging directed at the audience.

49 'Perceived to be within his jurisdiction' was added to the affective bond's definition to acknowledge the nuances of absolute trust. Having absolute trust in leaders does not automatically mean having absolute trust in *all* matters. For example, a leader may be deemed charismatic in electoral politics, but not necessarily in armed mobilisation. For more see: Alsayegh, A. *Emotional Entrepreneurism ...* op. cit., 345–347.

5 Epistemic Modes of Muqtada's Charisma Production on Hybrid Media

As highlighted previously, epistemic modes are contestations over what forms of knowledge are prioritised and legitimised. Hybrid media content confirming Muqtada's image are understood as epistemic modes of his charisma production because they overtly and suggestively deliver elements of Muqtada's image as objective truth. Hybrid media space, due to the plethora of conflicting depictions of al-Sadr's character, becomes an arena whereby various contestations occur over Muqtada's 'true' image. Accordingly, both oppositional hybrid media content that demonise Muqtada *and* pro-Sadr material are epistemic modalities. Although the former is not this paper's subject, it should be deemed an avenue of future research to more holistically convey the tussle over Muqtada's image in hybrid media.

The epistemic modes of al-Sadr's charisma production are plentiful. Typically, these videographic materials are multi-faceted constructions deploying *latmiyat*,⁵⁰ Sadri songs,⁵¹ and vivid symbolic imagery to deliver their messaging. Meaning that each video could cater to more than just one of the perceptions constituting Muqtada's charisma. As will be illustrated, hybrid media content also indicates the interrelationship of the three symbolisms as mutually-reinforcing perceptions, and that they imply one another's existence. Videos deploying the epistemic modes of legitimacy, hope, and authenticity production are discussed first. The section ends by exhibiting and analysing content that conveys the end-product of recognising al-Sadr's charisma – absolute trust in his leadership. This subsection demonstrates how hybrid media epistemically argues for absolute trust in Muqtada through the affective bond framework.

50 *Latmiyat* (sing. *latmiya*) are Shi'i Muslim songs that commemorate and/or mourn highly revered figures in Shi'i Islam such as Prophet Muhammad (SAWW) and his Household (AS). They usually underscore these historical figures' hardships, eulogise their steadfastness, and express Shia's affinity to them. In many Sadri videos, *latmiyat* are used as background music to images and clips of Muqtada, implying he mirrors these Shi'i figures' stories and characteristics. For more on *latmiyat* see: Ali, M. *Nationalism, Transnationalism & Political Islam: Hizbullah's Institutional Identity* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

51 Before the proliferation of hybrid media spaces, these songs were sold and played in various cities and platforms in Iraq. Cockburn notes that such songs were sold on kiosks (as cassettes) at *wadi al-salam* cemetery in Najaf. One such song Cockburn reported on, glorifies Muqtada as a brave hero that would never betray Iraq (to combat rumours that he fled to Iran in 2004). – Cockburn, *Muqtada ... op. cit.*, 238.

5.1 *Epistemic Modes of Legitimacy, Hope, and Authenticity Production*

Hybrid media's epistemic illustration of Muqtada's historically-anchored legitimacy typically emphasises the closeness of Muqtada to his father. In a video,⁵² Muqtada is shown visiting a revered Shi'i figure's shrine⁵³ in Iraq and kissing its wall and floor to show respect and reverence.⁵⁴ The following clip in the video shows Muqtada seemingly walking with purpose while keeping his head down, suggesting a degree of focus and humility. More importantly to the legitimacy discussion here, a Sadri song was added to the background of this two-clip video wherein a man sings:

I am the son of Muhammad al-Sadr, the one who makes the transgressors tremble ... [I am] Iraqi and there are legends written about my name.

Indicatively, the singer begins the song with introducing Muqtada. Speaking of him as if he were in the first person, narrating a sense of one-ness with the personhood of the populist cleric, speaking for him and narrating who he is as though they shared the same being. The first words of the song highlight what the singer puts forward as the baseline of Muqtada's own image in being the offspring of Sadr II. He then underscores the implied characteristics of one that represents *al-shahid al-thani* by proclaiming that the son of Sadr II is he who challenges oppressors that violate others' rights. This corresponds with entailments of both Muqtada's inherited legitimacy from his father, and his historically-anchored legitimacy (wherein he becomes known for carrying on his late father's populist legacy).

The particular note about making transgressors 'tremble' can be understood as a recognition of Muqtada's capabilities to mount significant opposition to elites. This underscores an agreement with the interrelationship of the affective bond's perceptions, in that the singer implies that Muqtada's elite-challenging-capabilities (hope) stem from, and reflect, his legitimacy symbolism. The song then continues to convey the nationalistic element of Muqtada's religio-populist vision, in line with the scope of his father's own political goals. Forthwith, the singer claims that Muqtada has achieved historical feats, worthy of lore, for the Iraqi nation's benefit. This not only reconfirms the

52 @8li.o and @7iqva. "inahu 'ibn Muhammad Sadr". Instagram, March 24, 2024. <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C45o6HOIcOy/?igsh=NndzMnIwZ2pkMml5>.

53 Based upon the brief snippets of the walls around Muqtada, this may be the Imam Husayn shrine.

54 Kissing shrines speaks to Muqtada's authenticity, as it is a symbolic action that his followers can relate to as popular religio-cultural practice.

historically-anchored element of the populist cleric's image, but also argues that Muqtada's actions in the Iraqi political sphere were not merely policies, but also epic stories to be eulogised. Moreover, the phraseology of legends implies a significant degree of heroism, indicating his worthiness of being dubbed a symbol of hope.

In another video,⁵⁵ an image of Muqtada can be seen where he stands still, head tilted downwards, with a book by his side adorned with a picture of his father on the cover, and a *latmiya* playing in the background. Before getting to the content of the *latmiya*, it is worth recognising this video as another attempt at validating the closeness of Muqtada to Sadr II. The image displays the populist cleric in a sombre mood while having his eyes focused on the picture of his father. The message communicated here is Muqtada's seriousness in thinking and remembering not only Sadr II as his father, but also the teachings of *al-shahid al-thani* (symbolised by the book itself). Thereby, signalling to the audience Muqtada's intent to remain true to his institutionally-inherited legitimacy which, in turn, maintains his historically-anchored legitimacy. Secondly, the *latmiya* speaks more to the personalised devotion that people should have towards Muqtada. The *latmiya* being played in the background implies the intent of the content creator in making a linkage between having affinity to Muqtada and his image as the successor of his father. The Shi'i song carries forward this message as the orator says:

My heart is for you. My mind is for you. I, in short, in my totality, am all for you. He owns the properties of the king. My hopes and my aspirations that I have invested within you ... In a moment he will sacrifice everything for you.

On top of the implicit linkage to his father, the *latmiya* highlights that Muqtada owns the hearts and minds of the people because they can place hope in his leadership's capacity to manifest solutions to their conundrums. This speaks to the hope symbolism of al-Sadr. The following lyrics then underscore Muqtada's authenticity by proclaiming that he would be willing to put aside his own personal wellbeing for the collective's benefit. In effect, this video speaks to the mutually-reinforcing nature of the affective symbolisms. Not only does it convey Muqtada's legitimacy, but also (through the *latmiya*) expresses that he is worthy of being seen as the answer to the people's woes, and concurrently it expresses the purity of Muqtada's moral compass as a leader willing to use his

55 @7iqva and @8li.o. "❤️". Instagram, July 14, 2024. <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C9abnpxOqwL/?igsh=MWdodDdoN3k3emptMg%3D%3D>.

status and power to help others even if it comes at the expense of his personal interests. Indicatively, this hybrid media content epistemically argues for having an emotionalised relationship with Muqtada premised on a blend of the three affective perceptions.

In a different video⁵⁶ posted by Muqtada's official YouTube channel, the populist cleric is shown arriving at his father's shrine in a 1984 Mitsubishi Galant 1600 GL (the type of car his father was killed in) on the evening of the 25th anniversary of his assassination. Muqtada exits the car and walks towards Sadr II's shrine, kneels, and kisses the surface of his grave for 10 seconds. He subsequently moves in between the other two graves near his father's, which belong to his two older brothers who were killed in the assassination of Sadr II, and kisses the surface of their tomb for one second. Muqtada then proceeds to read a speech in honour of his father which referred to his yearning for the coming of Imam Mahdi, and his antagonism towards the enemies of the messiah such as the corrupt actors in Iraq. Effectively, Muqtada continues his practice of reconfirming his historically-anchored legitimacy by paying reverence to his father's soul on the anniversary of his martyrdom. This is also implicitly represented by the long kiss he gave his father's tomb, relative to that of his brothers'. Both kisses symbolised reverence, but the former indicated a greater sense of attachment than the other due to its duration. Muqtada then continues by reading out a speech specifically highlighting core themes of Sadri ideology such as preparing Iraq for the coming of Imam Mahdi through battling corruption. In sum, the populist leader, sought to not only aesthetically convey his unfettered attachment to his father (through the visit and the long kiss), but also discursively by vocally reconfirming his pledge to carry on his father's religio-populist legacy.

Another piece of hybrid media material more closely attempts to validate a core component of Muqtada's hope symbolism: his support for the structurally impoverished. In an Instagram post, a video⁵⁷ depicts basic goods (e.g. rice, oil, and other foods) being organised for distribution by Sadri personnel with short snippets of Muqtada walking around the area, implying his overlooking of the whole process. In the background, a Sadri singer proclaims that the Sadri line of thought equalises the love of the nation to the love of Imam

56 Al-maktab al-khas li-samahat al-sayyid al-qa'id Muqtada al-Sadr, "ziyarat samahat al-qa'id al-sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr li-marqad walidah al-shahid al-sayyid Muhammad al-Sadr wa-najlayh fi al-dhikra al-sanawiyya 25" posted on 24 May 2023, YouTube video, 4:44, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8raG6oocSF4>.

57 @8li.o and @7iqva "shamikh mithl sahan al-rida ❤️". Instagram, March 13, 2024. <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C4dkIndoCux/?igsh=MWlqMjFzZWZqYXA3dA%3D%3D>.

Husayn (AS)⁵⁸. Muqtada himself is specifically referred to as the “revolutionary leader” and the “charitable project of God”. Like previous content, there is a clearly expressed connection between what Sadr does for his constituents and the populist themes of the Sadri movement’s ideology. Thereby, demonstrating Muqtada’s intent to reconfirm his historically-anchored legitimacy. Though, this time, such themes are coupled with videographic content depicting Muqtada successfully manifesting his promise to provide for the structurally disenfranchised, which specifically caters to his hope symbolism. On top of this, he is shown patrolling the area by which the task is carried out to ensure its success, sending a message of reassurance that Muqtada intends to carry out his mission carefully for the interests of his collective constituency. This particularly attempts to validate the authenticity component of al-Sadr’s charisma, which is sacralised by the singer when he proclaims Muqtada to be the embodiment of Allah’s generosity.

A more anti-elitism themed video⁵⁹ on Instagram depicts Muqtada as a heroic figure against scores of national and international elites. A *latmiya* plays in the background venerating a historical Shi’i figure while expressing disdain towards the actors that he fought against. Whenever the *latmiya* would use derogatory terms such as, “Pharaoh”,⁶⁰ “sellout”, “stupid”, or “men-lookalikes”, the video would switch to clips of corrupt Iraqi state elites such as Nouri al-Maliki or Ammar al-Hakim, or even international ones (Benjamin Netanyahu, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden). Concurrently, when the *latmiya* expresses the strength of the Shi’i figure such as his capability to paralyse the Pharaoh, destroy the corrupt, and rise above the occupier and bring back the glory days, Muqtada is placed at the forefront of the video. Effectively, the video romanticises al-Sadr’s capacity to challenge elites to promote his hope symbolism. This romanticisation is augmented by the video’s attempted connection between the Shi’i figure being referred to in the *latmiya* and Muqtada himself. In a sense, the editor hammers home the notion that Sadr’s path mirrors the path of the revered historic Shi’i leaders that came before him.

58 3rd Imam of Shia Islam who is revered and heavily commemorated all year round (in the Islamic month of Muharram in particular) for his stand against the tyranny of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid during the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD. His refusal to pledge allegiance to Yazid ultimately led to the brutal murder of himself, his 72 companions, and multiple family members after ten days of being surrounded by Yazid’s army and cut off from water supplies.

59 @8li.o and @7iqva “sha’bk hadir □❤”. Instagram, March 7, 2024. <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C4NWUFl0HHc/?igsh=MXJ5M3UzdW4zemVqYg%3D%3D>.

60 ‘Pharaoh’ was used in the *latmiya* as a simile derivative of the Islamic political rhetoric lexicon to describe a tyrannical and morally vile antagonist.

A video⁶¹ more oriented towards validating Muqtada's authenticity shows the Sadri leader going into a local fruits and vegetables store to pick out, by hand, the food items he wishes to purchase. The caption itself reads *qimat al-tawadu'* meaning, "the pinnacle of humility". This attempts to highlight that despite al-Sadr's status as the leader of one of the most powerful movements in Iraq, he still maintains his modesty and shops himself rather than sends an employee on his behalf. Such an action resonated with people in the comment section who highlighted this as evidence that Muqtada is no different than the ordinary Iraqi. This perception mirrors a core component of authenticity symbolism which is not only the moralistic character of a leader, but also the degree to which people can relate to him in their day-to-day circumstances and lifestyles. The action Muqtada is undertaking is then augmented in awe as the audience realise the discrepancy between how al-Sadr is shopping and how he could have simply sent someone in his stead due to his high status. Additionally, this video holds unique resonance as it seemingly emulates his father's own famous story of knowing the price of tomatoes when a layperson came and quizzed him about them. Muqtada, intendedly or unintendedly, mimics his own father by recognising and acting upon the meaning, constructed by the Sadri constituency, of the symbolic relationship between leaders, fruits, and vegetables.

In the same video, al-Sadr can be seen browsing while wearing a worn-out black robe with a hole in it, catching the attention of the viewers in the comment section. Typically, this could be seen as an authenticity performance demonstrating Muqtada's disinterestedness with materialism (which was recognised by the commentators). However, when a user asks why Muqtada is wearing such a robe, a response was given from another user who argued that this was his father's robe, and the hole in the robe is damage sustained from one of the bullets responsible for his assassination in 1999. In putting on this robe, Muqtada reinforces what pre-existing literature reports on his consistent policy of dressing in a manner that reminds people of his father. This is in line with his intent to demonstrate his closeness to his father, a crucial element of his historically-anchored legitimacy. Questions may arise of whether al-Sadr was truly wearing his father's damaged robe. The truth of this is redundant. The takeaway here is that his clothing can hold epistemic significance as a validator of both his historically-anchored legitimacy and authenticity.

61 @_dijlah. "❤️ qimat al-tawadu'". Instagram, March 15, 2024. <https://www.instagram.com/p/C4iPtUWNMvw/>.

A final video that is prudent to address in this subsection is one that comes directly from Muqtada's official YouTube channel. This content⁶² depicts al-Sadr participating in a collective effort with other ordinary Iraqis to clean a government school prior to the start of the new academic year, with background music in the form of the Iraqi national anthem *mawtini* (meaning my nation). Similar to the previous video, the emphasis is on depicting the humble character of Muqtada as a powerful leader willing to partake in an activity that is more common among the lower economic echelons of society. He is even seen discarding his usual clerical clothing to wear a more practical robe for the occasion. Such symbolic messaging highlights the malleability of Muqtada's character in shifting from authoritative hero to ordinary Iraqi, which, as mentioned in the earlier discussions, is a crucial balance to strike for a leader to be deemed convincingly charismatic.⁶³ This image of ordinariness is critical as it stimulates a sense of relatability among his constituents. Achieving this balance confirms, to Muqtada's audience, that he is a genuine upholder of the values he claims to represent. A value of leading righteously, while simultaneously abstaining from arrogance.⁶⁴

5.2 *Charismatic Authority Confirmed*

Having discussed the epistemic modalities of Muqtada's charisma production on hybrid media through the affective bond framework, it is now worth accounting for the content that depicts followers' expressed recognition of his charismatic image. In accordance with the affective bond definition, this means locating content that conveys the absolute trust people have within

62 Al-maktab al-khas li-samahat al-sayyid al-qa'id Muqtada al-Sadr, "musharakat samahat al-qa'id al-sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr ('a'azahu 'Allah) fi hamlat tandhif al-madaris al-hukumiya" posted on October 20 2021, YouTube video, 5:09 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JgKVTEwPinA>.

63 The balance between being special and ordinary is crucial for charismatic leaders globally. Ayatollah Sistani (not a populist leader) is seen as having a special relationship with God, but portrays his lifestyle as no better than the ordinary Iraqi (e.g. he pays rent and eats basic food such as biscuits and tea for breakfast). Donald Trump is seen as the saviour of the American dream, but eats McDonalds and speaks simply like many average Americans. The coexistence of ordinariness and extraordinariness is a fundamental component of charisma as it encourages followers to relate and feel close to a leader (ordinary), but also invest hope in that leader's capacity to create meaningful change or beneficial outcomes for the collective (extraordinary).

64 The words 'righteous' and 'arrogance' are terminologies embedded within the rhetorical toolkit of Shi'i political Islam and are intentionally used here to more accurately represent how Muqtada may be seen by his Shi'i Sadri audience.

al-Sadr. Reflecting this, an Instagram video⁶⁵ shows clips of Muqtada's followers engaging in mass protests, while holding Iraqi flags, posters of Muqtada, persevering in their collective action regardless of the state repressive apparatus using water cannons against them, storming the Iraqi parliament in 2022,⁶⁶ and wearing the symbolic white shroud to indicate their readiness to be martyred during their demonstration. The clips show people emboldened and acting with purpose. However, it is the speech (it is unclear who this person is) playing in the video's background that narrates the ontology of Sadris' motivation to act. In this speech, the narrator defiantly says:

This is what Muhammad al-Sadr taught us, and this is how he reared us. For no one can prevent us if we wanted to reach something. We will reach it no matter what the cost, and whatever the situation asks of us. Our blood is nothing, and we will sacrifice our blood for Iraq, and the son of Iraq, al-Sayyid al-Mujahid Muqtada al-Sadr!

There are numerous themes worth unpacking here. Firstly, the narrator expresses a feeling of readiness to sacrifice for Iraq at the call of Muqtada, corresponding with the ideology of the leader's own institutionally-inherited legitimacy, his father's teachings. Muqtada is phrased as a *mujahid* which means the one enacting *jihad*. Jihad is a term that has multi-faceted meaning, but generally refers to striving in the cause of Allah.⁶⁷ Within the context of this video and Muqtada's activism, jihad specifically refers to resisting oppression. The reference of Muqtada in such a manner reflects how Sadris understand themselves as agents of their leader's jihad, making them *mujahidin* (plural of mujahid). Within the jihadi cultural universe this firmly situates oneself into the framework of *'ihda al-husnayayn* (the two best outcomes) – a Qur'anic concept claiming that those who engage in jihad are promised either victory (*nasr*) or martyrdom⁶⁸ (*shahada*). The understanding of this, among Muqtada's followers, is demonstrated by their decision to wear the

65 @8li.o and @7iqva. "hakadha 'alamana Muhammad al-Sadr". Instagram, March 3, 2024. <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C4EEfTRL6Ov/?igsh=ZTFpb2FidzQ3czB5>.

66 France24. "Iraqi Cleric Sadr Calls for Wider Protest as Supporters Occupy Parliament." *France24*, August 1, 2022. <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20220731-iraqi-cleric-sadr-calls-for-wider-protest-as-supporters-occupy-parliament>.

67 For more on jihad definitions see: Mostfa. A. "Violence and Jihad in Islam: From the War of Words to the Clashes of Definitions." *Religions* 12 (966) (2021), 1–17.

68 Which entails eternal paradise or, in a more communitarian sense, is a necessary component of the collective's victory over tyranny – Alsayegh, A. *Emotional Entrepreneurism ...* op. cit., 268–274.

white shroud during their mobilisation. Crucially, this reflects their belief in their leader's delineation of the 'righteous' political activism that enables the attainment of martyrdom or victory.

In other words, the expressed readiness for sacrifice underscores the absolute trust placed within Muqtada's judgement on the possible outcomes of complying with his collective action calls. As mentioned in the speech, this trust stems from understanding Muqtada's calls as being a manifestation of his late father's will (symbol of legitimacy) and is continuously validated by al-Sadr's authenticity symbolism as a leader with Iraq's best interest in mind. The emboldening feeling, reported by the narrator, can also be understood as stemming out of the hope symbolism placed in the leadership of Muqtada as a powerful protagonist against elite antagonists.

In another video,⁶⁹ previously analysed for romanticising Muqtada's capabilities to challenge national and international elites, this sense of radical readiness to comply with al-Sadr's mobilisation calls can be seen again. The *latmiya* in the background of the video conveys this as it narrates:

Your people are ready, starting from tomorrow O' one who gives the unquestionable command ... [The] Shia are by your side, waiting for you to make your command, just signal it [to us]!

At the core of this part of the *latmiya* is a proclamation of unquestionable obedience to Muqtada as the Shi'i Muslim faith's figurehead. There is also a claim that the Sadri movement represents the totality of the Shia, akin to how Laclau theorises the people of populism claim they are the only legitimate populus.⁷⁰ The linkage between the *latmiya's* lyrics and Muqtada is seen when the video puts forward clips of al-Sadr giving authoritative and stern-looking speeches, sometimes in military clothing and others in clerical garments. Whenever there is a mention of the "Shia" or "your people" the video switches to birds-eye clips of masses of Sadri supporters wearing the famous white shroud. The video then carries on to implicitly claim (as noted in the previous section) that Muqtada will resurrect the "glory days". The clip that is presented for this specific lyric is one of Muqtada speaking through a radio with a white bandage on his arm (perceivably due to a sustained injury).

In sum, the mentioned aspects of the video, along with their *latmiya* accompaniment, puts forward a message of indubitable faith in the Sadri leader's

69 @8li.o and @7iqva "sha'bk hadir □❤️". Instagram, March 7, 2024. <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C4NWUFloHHc/?igsh=MXJ5M3UzdW4zemVqYg%3D%3D>.

70 Laclau, *On Populist ...* op. cit., 81.

decision-making within the context of initiating collective action. Like the previously analysed video, this reflects the end-product of recognising charisma, whilst justifying that recognition based on Muqtada as a figure that can bring about desired change against corrupt elites. The clip of him carrying on his duties despite his injury further augments the belief in him as a figure with great resolve in times of tribulation, and courageously will not be intimidated into silence. Subliminal references to his legitimacy can be seen through the anti-elitism component of the video, while authenticity can be interpreted as deriving from Muqtada's demonstration of putting his own pain aside for duty's sake in the injured-hand clip. Effectively, while this content places greater emphasis on Muqtada's hope symbolism, it nevertheless covertly caters to his legitimacy and authenticity as an implicit epistemic argument for placing absolute trust in his calls to action.

6 Conclusion

This paper sought to provide an account of the epistemic modes of Muqtada al-Sadr's charisma production on hybrid media. It did so while engaging in a virtual ethnography of videographic content on Instagram and YouTube from Muqtada and his ostensible fan pages. The affective bond conceptual framework, derivative of the newly developed emotional entrepreneurism theory, was deployed to understand how his charisma is promoted and interpreted on hybrid media. Utilising the affective bond enabled a condensed and accessible understanding of Muqtada's charisma that resonated with pre-existing accounts of his image. It did this by presenting al-Sadr as a symbol of legitimacy, hope, and authenticity to his followers.

In accordance with the findings of this paper, Muqtada's legitimacy symbolism was seen as both institutionally-inherited and historically-anchored. The former refers to his followers' recognition of the legitimacy embedded within the Sadri movement's religio-populist ideology, and its founding fathers (Sadr I and II). The latter connotes Muqtada's capability to validate his inheritance of such legitimacy as a credible extension of the Sadri legacy. This was regularly demonstrated in hybrid media through the Sadri leader's acts of reverence towards his father and his teachings, enacting anti-elitist, anti-imperial, and nationalistic policies, and acting, dressing, and speaking similarly to his father. Muqtada's hope symbolism was understood as a recognition of his capacity to create solutions for the Sadri populus's problem-sets. Videographic material on hybrid media reflected this through its romanticisation of his ability to challenge corrupt elites and provide structural support for his constituency.

Al-Sadr's authenticity symbolism was underscored as the fatherly, caring, humble, virtuous, modest, pious, and selfless component of his charismatic image. Typically, Muqtada's authenticity was expressed on hybrid media through engaging in activities perceived to be reserved for ordinary Iraqis (cleaning schools and grocery shopping). Other acts such as kissing shrines, persevering in his duties despite injury, and ensuring services were properly executed, resonated with the authenticity symbolism category.

The structure of the charisma-promoting hybrid media contents corresponded with the interrelationship of the affective symbolisms. Through the intricate editing and overlapping of images, clips, *latmiyat*, Sadri songs, and speeches, the videos regularly overtly and implicitly demonstrated how the symbolisms implied one another's existence (i.e. each perception Muqtada was deemed as embodying, suggested that he also embodied the others). Additionally, the analysed content almost always catered to a blend of the affective bond's perceptions to illustrate its message of al-Sadr's image. Finally, to confirm Muqtada's charisma over his followers, hybrid media content from his fan pages would convey 'absolute trust' in his calls to action through a stated readiness to obey his command. This willingness to obey was regularly premised upon empirical narratives of his legitimacy, hope, and authenticity symbolisms.

By engaging with the scope of this paper, I aim to have provided a new conceptual framework through which to investigate religio-populist leaders' image-building enterprises on hybrid media. This is both in terms of how that image is epistemically communicated by content creators and interpreted by the audience. I aspire that further research into this field, using the affective bond heuristic on different case studies, can bring forth new theoretical and empirical findings on the relationship between hybrid media and the charisma-constructing component of religious populism.

As previously mentioned, the affective bond was originally developed through ethnographic fieldwork on a very different leader to Muqtada, Ayatollah Sistani. The deployment of the affective bond as a conceptual framework on al-Sadr was to continue validating the affective bond as a serious heuristic to explore other leaders' charisma, and through varying means (ethnographic fieldwork vs. virtual ethnography). Though, future research using the affective bond should move onto other charisma cases such as Donald Trump (as was briefly noted in footnote 63), Javier Milei, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and others in more secular and/or non-Shi'i religiously-oriented settings. Doing so would help discover the extents and limitations of the affective bond's transferability to dissimilar contexts and potentially create meaningful strides in investigating the dynamic and affective relationship between these

leaders and their followers. Thus, contributing to the de-mystification of their charismatic allure, and the breadth and depth of the emotive hold they have over their constituents.

Acknowledgements

I would like to take the time to thank Feeza Vasudeva and Dayei Oh from the University of Helsinki for reaching out and giving me the opportunity to write an article on this pertinent topic. To Rand, thank you for your undying support and encouragement.