

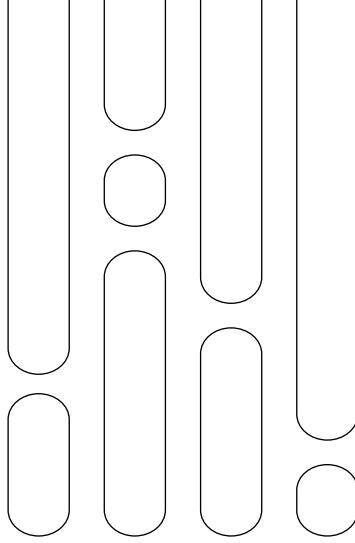
Position Papers

THE FUTURE OF IRAQ'S CRISES AFTER SADR'S WITHDRAWAL AND THE RECENT ARMED CLASHES

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In a very dangerous and complicated development, Sadrist¹ leader Muqtada al-Sadr announced on August 29, 2022, that he was withdrawing from political life and closing all of his offices, except for the shrine of his father, the family museum, and the Al-Sadr family heritage association. He also announced the closure of all social media pages related to his movement, while prohibiting the raising of flags and the chanting of slogans in the name of his movement in gatherings or protests.

Following a wave of bloody clashes in the Green Zone that claimed the lives of 23 people and injured 500 others after he announced his withdrawal from politics, Sadr returned to the political scene to call on his supporters to immediately withdraw from the Green Zone and end the sit-ins within 60 minutes. According to some observers, Sadr's speech laid the groundwork for calm. His supporters immediately left the scene. Observers were astounded by how quickly Sadr's supporters left the Green Zone, reflecting on the level of influence he wields over his supporters.

The Environment and Motives for Sadr's Decision

Sadr recently faced political and religious pressures, prompting him to withdraw from politics, and he reiterated this position when calling on his supporters to leave the Green Zone. The following factors influenced his decision:

- **The political impasse:** Political forces are divided over his demands to dissolve the Parliament and hold early elections.
- **The constitutional complication:** The constitutional requirements to address the status quo are missing. According to Article 64 of the Constitution, the Parliament can constitutionally dissolve itself but with the approval of the majority (50%+1) of Iraqi lawmakers and new elections can only be held within 60 days of the date of dissolution through two mechanisms:

The Sadrist Movement is a political religious movement founded by Muqtada al-Sadr, an Iraqi (1) Shiite cleric, after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Sadr's large grassroots following stems from the popularity of his late father, Ayatollah Mohammed Mohammed al-Sadr who was assassinated in 1999. Sadr enjoys massive popularity and aspires to bring his national project into reality in order to meet the demands of the Iraqi people. The project is based on a country that is free of uncontrolled sectarian militias, corruption and terrorism as well as ensuring that the country has an independent and balanced foreign policy. Sadr's project conflicts with Iran's clout in the country. Kazem al-Haeri is the Sadrist's *marja-i taqlid* (source of emulation) as Sadr's father recommended him to assume this position after his death. Haeri resigned, or was forced to, in August 2022. In response, the Sadrists turned toward the Najaf .Marjaya given the fact that it is the largest Shiite seminary in the country

First, one-third of Iraqi lawmakers need to call for Parliament to be dissolved, which is difficult given the Coordination Framework's (CF)¹ opposition to the dissolution. Even if the majority of the coalition agrees to dissolve the Parliament, the CF has the so-called “blocking third” power that hinders its dissolution.

Second, the prime minister submits a request to the president. However, this mechanism is unlikely because the president is elected by the current Parliament and the prime minister's term has officially expired. This necessitates the election of a president of the country and the appointment of a prime minister to dissolve the Parliament.

Some are awaiting the Supreme Federal Court's decision on whether the Parliament should be dissolved due to the expiration of the constitutional term. However, this appears to be exceedingly difficult as the court lacks the constitutional authority to dissolve the Parliament. It previously dismissed several lawsuits calling for the dissolution of the Parliament, citing a lack of jurisdiction.

■ **Attempts to delegitimize Muqtada al-Sadr:** Sadr's decision to withdraw from politics was preceded by an unexpected move by cleric Kazim al-Haeri; he is a *marja-i taqlid* (Shiite source of emulation) who the Sadrists follow. Haeri's resignation appears to be intended to put the Sadrist Movement in an awkward position and deprive it of marja legitimacy in favor of its rivals in the CF and others who are in the Iranian camp. Haeri focused on the idea that Sadr lacks the qualifications needed to perform *ijtihad*, i.e., implying he has not become a marja yet, and must emulate one of the Shiite clerics. As a result, Haeri directed his followers to emulate Khamenei, effectively putting Sadr and the Sadrists in limbo. Hence, the statement made by Haeri where he announced his resignation was essentially directed at Muqtada al-Sadr. Sadr in turn picked up the signal and announced his withdrawal from politics in Iraq entirely.

(1) **The Coordination Framework (CF)** is a coordination umbrella of Shiite parties formed in March 2021. Most of its parties have armed branches and work to implement a pro-Iranian project to ensure Iran's influence in Iraq. The pro-Iran project opposes the Sadrist popular project that is based on establishing a sovereign independent Iraqi state that curbs the influence of Iran's proxies in the country's decision making and ensures a balanced foreign policy. The CF includes a host of Shiite politicians and military figures such as Nouri al-Maliki, Hadi al-Ameri, Ammar al-Hakim, Haider al-Abadi, and Qais al-Khazali. Some follow Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei as the marja while others follow Kazem al-Haeri. Others do not believe in the necessity to follow a marja in the political realm. Recently, the intra-Shiite dispute impacted the Sadrist Movement, the Najaf seminary, and the whole political landscape in Iraq.

However, there are additional implications related to Haeri's resignation that go beyond causing a crisis for the Sadrist Movement and include arrangements for the marja succession in Najaf. In case of Sistani's demise, Haeri was one of the pro-Iran nominees for becoming Najaf's supreme marja. But, the Iranians possibly decided that putting pressure on Sadr and extinguishing his clout is more of a priority than making arrangements to fill the post-Sistani void, especially since Haeri's chances of becoming Sistani's successor have diminished over time because of his old age and Najaf's clerical community despising him.

Haeri's resignation is expected to be finalized, unlike Sadr's. The latter appears to have absorbed the shock and is now reshuffling his cards, reconsidering his calculations and seeking new religious legitimacy on which to base his political project. Perhaps Najaf will be the marjaya that he aligns with, represented by Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani or Ayatollah al-Fayyad, especially since Sadr stated that Najaf is the mother and largest marjaya in the Shiite world. As a result, if this scenario plays out, there will be a Sadr-Najaf alliance versus an Iran-militia alliance, with Sadr ending his emulation of a pro-Iran marja or a marja with political goals different from his own. But the most pressing question is whether Najaf will bear the consequences of the Sadrist Movement's acceptance of its religious authority?

Significations of Sadr's Move

Through closely watching Muqtada al-Sadr's politicking, the following observations can be made:

- **Withdrawal is a repeated scenario by Sadr:** This is not the first time that Muqtada al-Sadr has announced his withdrawal from politics. This is the third occasion over the past two years. He announced his withdrawal from the 2021 elections, but he returned and participated. He also announced his withdrawal from politics after the government formation talks reached an impasse due to the CF's blocking attempts. He then returned and engaged in politics, calling on his supporters to gather for a sit-in in front of the Parliament to prevent the formation of a government led by the CF.

- **Significance of the current decision:** Sadr's decision to withdraw from politics this time is possibly more dangerous than the previous occasions, given the following:

- The decision comes at a critical juncture as all factions are seeking a solution to the crisis that has exhausted Iraqis in the 10 months since the October 2021 election. It is difficult to find solutions without the Sadrist Movement, which wields the biggest clout on Iraq's political landscape.

- It sends a message to all parties that the Sadrist Movement is not responsible for what happens in Iraq after his withdrawal decision, given the complicated crisis, which has reached its apex, and the frustration and

boiling anger among Sadrist protesters over not having their demands met 30 days after they began their protests.

- Escalating the dispute to the level of an armed conflict to send a message to all parties that chaos can erupt before calling on his supporters to immediately withdraw within an hour. This is due to the fact that both parties to the conflict have paramilitaries, and their supporters share a mutual desire to exact revenge on each other as a result of the long-running dispute.

- **Sending messages that these demands are those of the people, not only Sadr's:** By taking this step — through which Sadr has thrown the calculations of all parties, including allied factions who partook in the dialogue with the CF, into disarray — he proves to those inside and outside the country that the demands for change spring from the angry masses, not just the Sadrists. Hence, he reveals how far the Iraqi street, not only the Sadrist Movement, has become dissatisfied with the situation in Iraq, prompting them to consider if he is really the root cause or not of complicating the crisis and not reaching a solution in Iraq. By withdrawing from politics, Sadr is sending the message that others should bear the consequences of the public's anger.

- **Reiterating that he is the security valve of the popular protests:** Through his withdrawal, it is believed that Sadr aimed to give the protesters a chance to decide what they wanted and where they wanted to go for a limited time. He wanted to leave the political forces pitted against the angry protesters, thus sending a message to everyone that he was the security valve that prevented the angry Iraqi street from exploding, and that the peaceful protesters would no longer have a security guarantor in his absence. This is exactly what occurred. As soon as he announced his withdrawal, street fighting erupted in the Green Zone, a new escalation in the face of his rivals. His supporters heeded his call and left the scene immediately after he called for their withdrawal.

- **Calculated escalation as a means to end the political deadlock:** Sadr appears to have realized that pushing things to breaking point is necessary to end the political deadlock. He wanted to send a message to everyone that he has levers for both resolving and causing crises. If this is not true, why did Sadr not call on his supporters to leave the street while he read out his withdrawal statement? His call for his supporters to leave the Green Zone, as well as their quick response, presented Sadr as an opponent of violence and exposed the CF inside and outside Iraq, revealing their violent tendencies, with its supporters using heavy weapons, rockets and mortars shortly after the chaos erupted.

Some observers believe that Sadr's call for his supporters to leave the Green Zone only 24 hours after bloody clashes erupted shows that by allowing violence to erupt for a brief period, Sadr sent a message to those inside and outside Iraq that he holds exclusive power to calm or escalate the situation. Others believe Sadr realized that continuing infighting is not in his favor because the militias would kill a large number of his supporters. Others also believe that Sadr feared the scenario that sees the continuation of open conflict with the militia fighters. The militias were quick to use heavy weapons in a way that reminded Sadr of Operation Knight's Charge in which armed militias massacred his supporters in 2008. Iran did the same thing in Lebanon when it allowed its ally Hezbollah to use excessive force against the Amal Movement in the 1980s.

■ **The possibility of Sadr returning to the political landscape:** Past experience suggests that Sadr's return to politics is likely since he likes to confuse and outwit his rivals. Every time he withdraws from the political landscape, he returns in a stronger position than before. Despite his decision to withdraw from politics, he continues to monitor the developments. This is proven by his call to his Sadrist supporters to withdraw from the Green Zone and the continuation of Saleh Mohammad al-Iraqi, a spokesman for Sadr, to deliver remarks indicating that the movement has not given up the country to the CF. Sadr has full control over his supporters. He can order them to stop or act — not through a television show but a short post on Twitter. His withdrawal does not mean the influence of his movement is over. Previous occasions have proven that the exact opposite is true, with Sadr returning and strongly influencing events in the country. Sadr has withdrawn from politics, but the influence of the Sadrist Movement is not dependent on the presence or absence of its leader. The movement has a massive base of supporters, with it described as a million-man movement, with significant influence across Iraq.

The Repercussions of the Shiite Escalation on Iran's Clout in Iraq

The outcomes of the recent successive events in Iraq indicate significant results that are not in favor of Iran such as the following:

■ **The rising priority of limiting arms to the state:** One of the most significant results of recent Iraqi events is the increasing demand for weapons to be limited to the state despite the fact that disarming militias is difficult and complicated. In his speech that called on his supporters to withdraw from the Green Zone, Sadr stated that illegal arms were the prime reason behind the events unfolding in Iraq. Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi also stressed that illegal weapons were the cause of the crisis, and that the events in Baghdad had compelled the authorities to limit arms to the state. He threatened to step down if the crisis continued. The

prime minister may resign if the CF continues to refuse to dissolve the Parliament. This refusal is likely to lead to more armed chaos that will harm Iran's interests, with Tehran calling for calm in Iraq, in the current period particularly.

■ **The control of Iraq's political affairs is not in the hands of Iran's arms:** The pro-Iranian political alliances in Iraq have been unable to control the Iraqi arena, even though they have depended on the use of illegal arms to support their positions such as not dissolving the Parliament. On the other hand, Sadr has taken the lead in Iraq, and he is the wild card that cannot be bypassed. Even if he withdraws or retires, Sadr is still a force to be reckoned with. In addition, his political project aligns with the aspirations of the people, which is based on establishing strong state institutions, ensuring the independence of Iraq's decisions, confining arms to the state and establishing balanced external relations. His project opposes Iran's project, which is based on ensuring Iraq's subordination to Tehran, and keeping Iraq within its sphere of influence as Baghdad is an integral part of its expansionist project in the region. The latest events have confirmed that Sadr has the power to provoke escalation, halt hostilities and establish peace. He is also able to destabilize the fragile formation of the CF and the pro-Iranian armed factions.

■ **The divergent positions of the CF toward Sadr:** Recent events reflect the divergent viewpoints within the CF toward addressing Sadr's demands. Nouri al-Maliki and Qais al-Khazali adopt a stricter position on Sadr's demands, especially in regard to dissolving the Parliament and holding early elections. On the other hand, Hadi al-Amiri, Haider al-Abadi, and Ammar al-Hakim are less strict regarding Sadr's demands. This will negatively impact the future of the CF and its cohesion. This intra-Shiite dispute is not in the interest of Iran and its political influence in Iraq.

However, there is a possibility that the ongoing violence might prompt the pro-Iran armed militias that dispute over resources, leadership and influence to unite and harmonize against the Sadrist Movement to preserve their achievements and influence in Iraq.

Future Scenarios

Against the backdrop of the recent political conflict and violence, the Iraqi scene awaits the following scenarios:

■ **The possibility of dissolving the Parliament:** Sadr calling on his supporters to withdraw and the CF following suit contributed to calm and a ceasefire; this may now force all parties to resort to dissolving the Parliament. This is in addition to the fact that the three presidencies called on all parties to accept the option of dissolving the current Parliament and holding parliamentary elections within 60 days of the body's termination.

This call should be considered within the framework of an Iraqi national understanding to preempt the Federal Court's decision, or in response to the court's recommendation to resolve the political crisis. By changing the election law and calling for early elections, these moves could converge with Sadr's demands. He believes that he has made many concessions to reach a political solution such as giving up his lawmakers' seats in Parliament that amount to 71 and calling on his supporters to withdraw quickly from the Green Zone to stop the bloodshed. The majority of the deaths and injuries were inflicted on Sadr's supporters, as per Iraqi media.

■ **Formulation of a new phase for the dissolution of the Parliament:** Influential political figures in Iraq such as Barzani, Amiri, Kadhimi, Halbousi and others may initiate negotiations with Sadr to reach a settlement if the court does not recommend the dissolution of the Parliament. This may pave the way for the dissolution of the Parliament and setting a specific period of not more than one year during which either a new government will be formed with a new figure other than Sudani, or the Kadhimi government will continue in a caretaker role. In addition, new elections will be held, and the election law will be amended. Further, the issue of identifying the largest bloc should be resolved, and there should be guarantees for accepting the election results as Massoud Barzani's initiative stated. However, the Sadrists will find this scenario very hard to accept because they insist on dissolving the Parliament, holding early elections and excluding old parties in the elections. In addition, after Sadr called on his supporters to withdraw from the Green Zone within 60 minutes, his spokesperson told the protesters, "We will not allow new corruption led by corrupt people."

■ **The return of protests and further chaos:** The scenario of the return of protests, sit-ins and chaos is very likely, particularly if the CF continues to disrupt the dissolution of the Parliament and holding early elections. In this regard, Sadrist spokesman Saleh Mohammed al-Iraqi stated that the movement will not allow new corruption led by corrupt people, in reference to the pro-Iranian alliances of the CF. He also sent a message to his supporters to be ready to return to protests and sit-ins if their demands receive no response.

The other sign of a possible return of protests is that the CF is indifferent to the current demands and calls for the swift return of the Parliament and the rest of the constitutional institutions to perform their constitutional duties and work to form a new government while ignoring the demands of the Sadrist Movement and its concessions to restore calm to the Iraqi street. Another sign of the return of protests is the call of Saleh Mohammed al-Iraqi for Sadr's supporters to be ready if the return to protests is deemed necessary.

This is part of an exchange of veiled threats. Maliki expressed indignation at Sadr by saying that force cannot be used to impose a political reality on others. In response, Saleh Mohammed al-Iraqi issued a strongly-worded statement against the CF for its indifference to the demands of the Sadrist Movement and its attempts to proceed with the formation of the government. He called on Iran to collect its “camel,” according to his statement.

In addition, the motives for renewed protests are still standing, including the failure of the CF to respond to the demands of the Sadrist Movement, and the ongoing anger and popular frustration over the dire economic conditions. Sadr’s call for his supporters to withdraw from the Green Zone does not mean leaving matters in the hands of the CF, but rather it is a step as described by some members affiliated with the CF to stop the spilling of Iraqi blood and it also sends a message that Sadr is in control of matters in Iraq.

Conclusion

The Iraqi crisis has been seriously complicated as the CF continues with its plan to form the next Iraqi government while the Sadrists seek to dissolve the Parliament, hence threatening a new round of protests and chaos. Hope lies in the Federal Court’s prominent role to resolve the current political crisis. It can restore stability if it recommends to dissolve the Parliament or ignite a new round of protests and chaos if it adheres to its position that it lacks jurisdiction, especially as the prime minister has threatened to resign. If the court recommends to dissolve the Parliament, it will be a historic judicial decision which will be recognized for preventing the spilling of Iraqi blood. The dissolution of the Parliament and holding early elections represent a ray of hope for Iraq to exit the current complex crisis.

Iraq’s neighbors that aspire for establishing stability in Iraq can sponsor an initiative to settle the Iraqi crisis starting with resolving the electricity crisis through establishing electrical grid networks and supporting Iraqi political elites who aim to halt the cycle of violence and chaos in the country.



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