

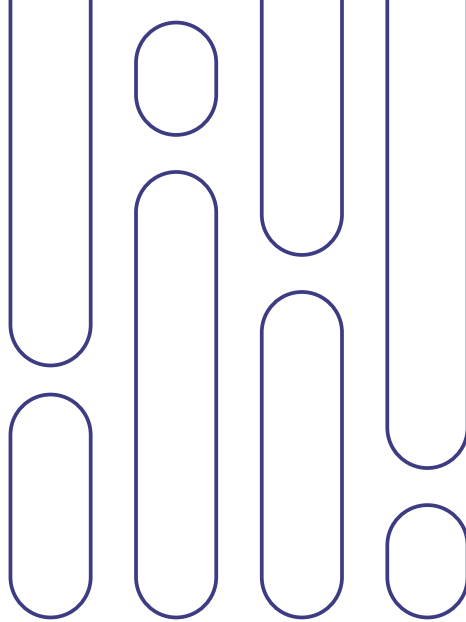
REPORT

The Latest Episode in Iraq's Protracted Intra-Shiite Conflict and the Impact on Iran's Influence

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During July 2023, the Iraqi arena witnessed a new episode in the bloody Shiite struggle between the two largest Shiite forces: the Dawlat al-Qanon Coalition led by the head of the Shiite Dawa Party Nouri al-Maliki and the Sadrist Movement led by Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. This new episode arose in the aftermath of a series of bombings targeting a number of Dawa Party offices. Sadr supporters closed down a number of the Dawa Party's offices after they accused Dawa Party affiliates of tarnishing the legacy of their late marja (spiritual leader) Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr (father of Muqtada al-Sadr) on social media. In these defamatory social media posts, it was claimed that Muqtada al-Sadr's father enjoyed good ties with the former Ba'ath Party of Saddam Hussein. The circumstances and timing of the latest intra-Shiite escalation raise significant questions regarding the nature and expected future trajectory of this episode in comparison with previous rounds of conflict — taking into consideration that the bouts of conflict have recurred with the same political and religious dimensions within the Shiite sect, which has been taking the lead in Iraq for nearly two decades. The intra-Shiite conflict generates several implications for the future of Iran's influence in Iraq and the future of Iraqi statehood. The questions raised here are as follows: what is the future trajectory of the current escalation? Which party has the greatest influence in the Shiite and Iraqi political equations? What is the future role of Iran regarding the recurring conflict between the two strongest Shiite blocs in the country?

Interpretations of the Renewed Conflict Between Sadr and Maliki

Iraq has been witnessing a furious conflict for nearly two decades between Muqtada al-Sadr and Nouri al-Maliki; the latter adopted a policy of exclusion and marginalization against the prominent figure of the Sadrist Movement during his prime ministerial (2006-2014) and vice-presidential tenures (2014-2015, 2016-2018). Their clash, which has witnessed several rounds of violent confrontation, is based on crucial issues which are essential to the security and future of the Iraqi state and Iran's clout in the country. Broadly speaking, this intra-Shiite

conflict is driven by political and ideological considerations.

• **Political factors:** The latest round of conflict was sparked by the defamation campaign launched by Maliki's followers against Sadr's father and stems from ideological and political dimensions that are related to the larger rivalry between the Qom and Najaf seminaries. However, such skirmishes will continue indefinitely as these are linked to the ongoing clash over major issues between Sadr and Maliki. The differences between these two prominent figures center on the nature of the Iraqi government (national majority/consensual), its form and external orientations. Both parties advance conflicting projects. Sadr's political vision emphasizes the importance of a national majority government under the umbrella of an independent and sovereign Iraqi state that has a balanced approach in its foreign relations. In contrast, Maliki fights for a consensual government that is subject to the influence and decision-making powers of Iran-backed militias.

• **Ideological factors:** The two camps differ over religious points of emulation and the leadership of the Shiite community. Maliki strongly supports the Qom marjaya in the context of the historical and ongoing struggle against the Najaf marjaya to ensure that the dominance of Wilayat al-Faqih is established across the Shiite world. Sadr disagrees with Maliki on the dominance of the Qom marjaya and attaches more importance to the local or Arab marjaya — in spite of the past differences between Najaf and the Sadrists over political positions regarding the Najaf marjaya since the assassination of Muqtada al-Sadr's father at the end of the 1990s. The disagreements between the two widened during the US invasion of Iraq. The Sadrists characterize the Najaf marjaya as passive. Despite these disagreements, this does not mean that Sadr has a poor relationship with Najaf, but he has a relatively good bond as he is aware of its independent nature. Najaf works to contain Sadr by allowing him, unlike the rest of the politicians, to communicate with the Supreme Marja's Office. Sadr believes that he has the right to lead the Shiite community due to his growing popularity. Sadr and Maliki are two parallel lines that never intersect; each represents a completely different project. Maliki represents Wilayat al-Faqih, a cross-border political system. Their conflict is quite complicated because it is part of a larger

conflict between Qom and Najaf, the two largest Shiite seminaries in the world. Their ideological approaches toward the country's internal and external affairs are hugely divergent.

Dimensions of the Renewed Conflict Between Sadr and Maliki

• **Resorting to force and violence:** Like the previous rounds of conflict between the supporters of Sadr and Maliki, the Sadrists' criticism of the Dawa Party because of its alleged tarnishing of the image and reputation of Shiite marja Mohammad Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr was accompanied by simultaneous attacks, which were apparently coordinated. Dozens of the offices of the Shiite Dawa Party were bombed, vandalized or completely closed down on the orders of the Sadrist Movement. Unknown gunmen also targeted the headquarters of the Badr Organization which is led by Hadi al-Amiri, the headquarters of Ansar al-Wafia and the headquarters of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq led by Qais al-Khazali in Najaf. Videos on social media showed the Sadrists storming the Dawa Party's offices and tearing and burning Maliki's photos. They also launched

pro-Sadr campaigns under the slogan "we are ready to sacrifice ourselves for Sadr and his son" and "except Sadr," i.e., respect Sadr. Such statements reflect the level of popular discontent. Maliki refuted any kind of defamation against the marja, affirming that the aim of the accusations was to trigger sedition in Iraq. However, concerns remain that tensions will rise again as happened following the crises of the audio leaks and the formation of the previous government.

• **The attempts of Sadr's adversaries to undermine his great popularity:** The latest clashes are just a new cycle in the longstanding conflict between the two parties. Pro-Iranian political arms such as Dawlat



The headquarters of the Dawlat al-Qanoon Coalition is closed by the Sadrists in Basra.

Photo: Shafaq News.

al-Qanoon, the Dawa Party and others have attempted to undermine in different ways the wide popular support base of Muqtada al-Sadr that has contributed to him becoming the dominant figure in the Iraqi equation since the October Protest Movement, known in Iraq as the Tishreen Movement. This is done to serve the interests of pro-Iranian forces. These pro-Iranian political arms were successful in their efforts as Sadr lost his religious authority that was granted to him by Haeri — who stepped down as a marja (religious authority) after announcing his retirement from political life. Haeri also confirmed that Sadr had not attained the qualifications necessary to perform ijtehad and called on his followers to follow the religious leadership of Qom. In response, Sadr withdrew from Iraqi political life. In the latest round of the conflict, Sadr's opponents defamed his father's legacy; videos and posts on social media platforms went viral, denigrating the legacy of Mohammad Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr and accusing him of having good relations with the Ba'ath Party led by former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein — though many reports indicate that the Ba'ath Party had Sadr's father assassinated in 1999.

• **The level of the current conflict in comparison to previous rounds:**

The latest round of conflict is lesser in its degree, scope and ramifications; particularly in comparison to the conflict in 2022 over Maliki's leaks against Sadr, in which he threatened to storm Najaf and topple Sadr due to their differences over the formation of the government. When Sadr withdrew from political life, bloody clashes erupted between the followers of the two parties in the Green Zone in late August, in which 28 people were killed and nearly 500 were injured. It was a furious conflict as it was over the government's formation and led to a deadlock and a failure to form a new government for a long while. The current conflict, however, is not linked to government formation, so it can be contained. However, it is worth noting that Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani's tenure is expected to end in November 2023.

• **The reduced time between the rounds of conflict:** It has been noted that over the past five years, the rounds of conflict between Sadr and Maliki are occurring with increasing proximity. As the intervals between the rounds of conflict (2008, 2014, 2019) were four to five years, this decreased significantly during the last four rounds (2019, 2021, 2022), and

then the last round in 2023 continued for almost one year (see Table 1). This is an indication that the conflict between Sadr and Maliki has exacerbated, and that it is centered on fundamental rather than marginal issues such as: the battle for supremacy between the Najaf and Qom marjayas, the formation/nature of previous Iraqi governments, Maliki's determination to lead the government again as prime minister and Iraq's domestic and foreign policies. Sadr continues on his path to transform Iraq into a strong, national, independent state that enjoys balanced foreign policies. On the other hand, Maliki implements Iran's agenda by consigning Iraq to Iran's spheres of influence and obstructing its return to the Arab world. However, Sadr lacks a clear vision for the Iraqi state leading to confusion and strategic errors in his political conflict with his opponents.

Table 1: Rounds of Conflict Between Sadr and Maliki (2008-2023)

First Round 2008	Second Round 2014	Third Round 2019	Fourth Round 2021	Fifth Round 2022
This dates back to the tenure of the Maliki government when he adopted an exclusionist policy against the Sadrist and launched a fierce military operation against them in 2008 dubbed as the "Battle of Basra" in which a considerable number Sadrist were killed and detained. Therefore, Sadr adopted a tough stance against Maliki's second tenure in 2012. Relations were tense during Maliki's second tenure.	Tensions simmered when Sadr held Maliki accountable for the ISIS (Daesh) takeover across a vast swathe of Iraqi territories and for the deteriorating security and economic conditions. Consequently, the Sadrist fiercely opposed Maliki's third tenure and supported Haider al-Abadi	Tensions renewed against the backdrop of Sadr's support for the protests against Iran's influence, which called for establishing a strong Iraqi state independent of any foreign agendas. Such protests opposed Maliki's pro-Iran policies.	Tensions escalated when the Sadrist won the most seats in the 2021 parliamentary elections while the pro-Iran blocs suffered a stunning defeat. Sadr, back then, refused to form a consensus government that included Maliki.	Two crises: First, Maliki's leaked audio recordings in which he threatened to storm Najaf and topple Sadr. Second, the nature/formation of the government. Tensions pushed the two parties into a complete deadlock. When Sadr announced his withdrawal from the political life, bloody clashes erupted between the supporters of Maliki and Sadr's followers in the Green Zone, in which 23 people were killed and 500 were injured. The pro-Sadr protesters were asked to leave the Green Zone and end their protest.

Source: Unit of Regional and International Studies, Rasanah IIIS (July 2023).

Undermining the Legacy of Sadr's Father to Thwart His Son's Popularity

The early Iraqi parliamentary elections are just around the corner; the tenure of the Sudani government is set to expire in November 2023 as previously agreed. The pro-Iran political alliances are fully aware of Sadr's growing tools of influence in Iraq and Haeri's ineffectual call to the Sadrists to adopt Qom as their marjaya instead of Najaf. Therefore, these alliances continuously attempt to undermine Sadr's growing political and religious power within the Iraqi Shiite community by defaming the legacy of his family and its most prominent marja. Since his emergence on the political stage following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Sadr has amassed powerful tools of influence in the Iraqi political arena to the extent that he has become the most complex figure in the Iraqi political game. He enjoys overwhelming Shiite support and he can easily mobilize the public against his opponents. This is in addition to his support for the rising popular discontent against Iran's influence since Iraq's Tishreen Uprising (the October protests). Sadr's popularity is due to the following reasons:

- **The longstanding hawza legacy in Sadr's family:** Sadr's legitimacy depends on the legacy of two martyrs: first, Sadr Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr who was executed by Saddam's regime in 1980 and second, Mohammad Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr. The latter was one of the most prominent marjas, known for his pro-Arab approach whether for Shiites or the hawza. He also played a significant role in countering the attempts of Iranian clerics to transfer the Shiite central hawza from Najaf to Qom. He took a stance against the marja al-taqlid (sources of emulation; the most knowledgeable Shiite clerics) who adopted Wilāyat al-Faqīh, absolute guardianship.

- **The significant popular legacy of the Sadr family:** This legacy has benefited Muqtada al-Sadr who has identified himself in one of his statements as a scholar in the hawza but he does not hold the necessary scholarly qualifications to warrant him to issue legal rulings. He is classified as hojatoleslam (a title of respect given to a mid-ranking Shiite cleric) and still far from being a reference of emulation. However, he has continued his father's legacy in the hawza, therefore, he enjoys a

prominent position and receives considerable respect from the Shiite community and the hawza members. He seeks to succeed his father in becoming Najaf's marja. He is deeply committed to his father's scholarly line within the framework of the Twelver Shiite approach, and he depends on his father's legacy and popularity. His father was a significant source of spiritual inspiration for the majority of Shiites, especially the youth because of his reformist positions and his prominent role in preserving the hawza in Najaf as well as for helping the poor and needy. According to Shiite sources, he adopted anti-Ba'athist policies and decided to be the Friday prayer imam for Sunnis in Kufah's mosque. He authorized his representative in Iraq's cities to perform the Friday prayer. He increased his opposition to Ba'athist rule at the end of the 1990s by refusing to supplicate for Saddam Hussein during Friday prayers.

He strongly supported the 1991 Iraqi uprisings against the Ba'athist regime, and Saddam was concerned about his regime's survival, particularly because of Sadr's prominent and growing role. Therefore, he was arrested several times. He and his two sons, Mustafa and Moamal, were assassinated by live bullets fired by unidentified persons in Najaf's al-Hannah suburb in 1999. The southern Iraqi governorates, back then, witnessed a massive popular uprising known as the Sadr uprising of 1999 to protest against his assassination. Iraqis accused Saddam's regime of involvement in his assassination. After being arrested in the wake of the US-led invasion, Saddam's denial of being involved in the killing of Sadr during the trial did not gain much traction. One day after Sadr's assassination, Iraqi forces carried out large-scale arrests and killed dozens of Sadr's followers over the demonstrations that they held in Sadr City in protest against his assassination. Therefore, the prominent officials of the former Ba'athist regime, following the US-led invasion, were sentenced to death because of their involvement in the mass killings following Sadr's assassination. However, there are many narratives regarding his assassination, some argue that he was targeted due to the dispute between himself and Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim, while others attribute it to his disagreement with the Qom marjaya or his continuous attacks on Israel.

• **Possession of a strong militia:** The anti-Sadr alliances, which are pro Iran-alliances, believe that the Mahdi Army (Saraya al-Salam), Sadr's military arm, will enable him to influence the Iraqi equation and to stand against the influence of pro-Iran militias in Iraqi decision-making. This was evident in all the rounds of conflict between Maliki and Sadr. During the last round, in spite of Sadr's decision to freeze the activities of his military arm after the bloody clashes that broke out in the Green Zone in August 2022, Saraya al-Salam carried out huge parades in the streets of Najaf, displaying light and medium weapons. This was a sign of its high military and combat readiness against the backdrop of the attempts to strip Sadr of legitimacy.

Ramifications on Iraq's Statehood and Iran's Influence

The Shiite conflict has become one of the most serious threats to Iraq's statehood which could throw Iraq into a vortex of sedition and chaos. It is an intense struggle between the most powerful Shiite political alliances in the Iraqi arena; they possess immense political, military and street power. This conflict is over who will control Iraq's religious and political authorities. This pattern of conflict is reflective of parties seeking their own personal interests rather than prioritizing the country's national interests. Therefore, the Iraqi state with all its institutions, apparatuses and capabilities is a victim of this conflict, making it much more fragile in the face of powerful conflicting Shiite alliances. This is what is apparent in Iraq today. The protracted intra-Shiite conflict has exposed Iraqi citizens to grave dangers.

The Shiite conflict is also one of the most serious threats to Iran's clout in Iraq because Tehran's political influence is at risk due to the internal divisions in the Shiite house. Those parties or alliances that Iran was counting on to extend and preserve its sphere of influence are involved in this intra-Shiite conflict. Iran has failed to foster unity among the competing Shiite blocs in the Iraqi arena. It has neither healed the rifts in the Coordination Framework or between this bloc and the Sadr Movement. The disputes have escalated since the assassination of Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani who was killed in an air-strike near Baghdad International Airport in 2020.

Conclusion

The conflict is between Maliki, who wants Iraq to remain within Iran's spheres of influence, and Sadr. The latter's intention is not clear to either Iraqis or Arabs as he does not have a coherent vision for the future of Iraq. This country, which could easily become strong and prosperous in light of its capabilities and resources, stands on the threshold of an extended crisis. Iran can no longer play an influential role in resolving or managing the intra-Shiite conflict. Iraq has become an integral and continuous part and a reflection of Iran's crises since the 1970s. This Iraqi Shiite conflict casts a shadow on Iran's home front and its interventions in Yemen, Lebanon and Syria. This conflict poses a further challenge to Iranian influence in Iraq because it is a conflict between those that Iran depends on to preserve its influence and implement its regional project in Iraq.

