

*Position Paper*

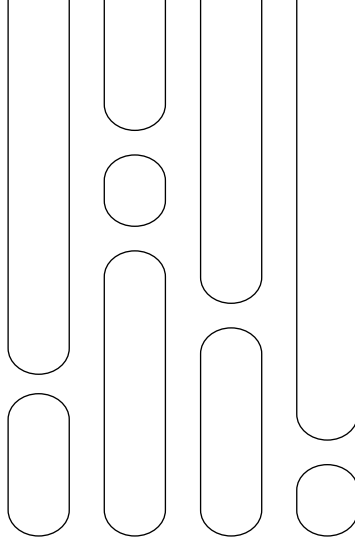
# RIFTS WITHIN IRAQI SHIITE PARTIES: WILL MALIKI'S ATTEMPTS TO SEEK OVERTURES WITH SADR BE FRUITFUL?

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In the midst of escalating crises both internally and externally, particularly with the involvement of Iran-backed militias in the conflict in Gaza, Iraq finds itself grappling with intensified challenges. Against this backdrop, Shiite circles in Iraq have disclosed efforts by former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, head of the State of Law Coalition, to initiate [reconciliation](#) with his Shiite rival Muqtada al-Sadr, leader of the Sadrist Movement. This move seeks to address one of the long-standing Shiite conflicts within the Iraqi arena. Over the years, the two major Shiite alliances have engaged in intense power struggles, competing for leadership, religious authority (marjaya), power and clout in Iraqi politics. These tensions have heightened since the onset of the November protests five years ago, occasionally escalating to armed clashes between the two influential Shiite factions.

The recent efforts by Maliki, aligned with the Coordination Framework which includes factions supported by Iran, to reconcile with Sadr, raise significant and multifaceted questions. If successful, these efforts could profoundly impact the Shiite political landscape in Iraq, restructuring power dynamics and potentially reshaping the stances of Shiite factions on key issues. Several questions emerge:

What are the underlying motives driving Maliki's attempts to reconcile with Sadr, particularly considering his alignment with the Coordination Framework? Does this signal a rift within the coalition, potentially leading to its dissolution?

Is Iran playing a role in Maliki's overtures to Sadr, aiming to resolve the intra-Shiite conflict that poses a challenge to Iranian influence in Iraq?

What are the potential opportunities and challenges associated with the rapprochement between Maliki and Sadr? How might this impact the broader political landscape in Iraq?

Given the significant differences between the two parties and the evolving internal and external dynamics in Iraq, what is the likelihood of success for Maliki's efforts to reconcile with Sadr?

## **Motives and Drivers Behind Maliki Seeking Reconciliation With Sadr**

The Coordination Framework, led prominently by the State of Law Coalition under Maliki's leadership, navigated a significant conflict with the Sadrist Movement regarding government formation. This tussle culminated in the installment of Mohammad Shia' al-Sudani as the prime minister in 2022. However, this victory, albeit substantial, was overshadowed by the circumstances surrounding it. Unlike a triumph secured through electoral dominance, this victory stemmed from a need to offset a resounding electoral defeat. Following the withdrawal of Sadrist lawmakers from the Iraqi Parliament and Sadr's own retirement from politics, the Coordination Framework found itself compelled to regain its political footing. This turn of events left an indelible mark not only on Maliki's psyche but also on the collective consciousness of the Coordination Framework's figures and leaders. It underscored the limitations of their movement's influence and the extent of its leverage within the Iraqi political landscape. The government formed by the Coordination Framework, albeit designed to strike a semblance of balance, is plagued by apprehensions. It has always harbored a concern that supporters of the Sadrist Movement may reinitiate demonstrations at any given moment.

Amidst the dominance of the Coordination Framework, Iraq's political landscape adhered to a delicate balance characterized by internal and external policy equilibrium, alongside a lingering apprehension of Sadr's potential resurgence that could upend the established equation. However, this equilibrium was disrupted with the onset of the Israeli conflict in Gaza and Iran's decision to engage its loyalist armed militias in military support of Palestinian resistance factions in October 2023.

The ramifications were far-reaching, not solely confined to military maneuvers among the militias with allegiance to the Qom marjaya but extending to political realignments within the Coordination Framework itself. Consequently, the established equation govern-

ing Iraqi politics underwent a seismic shift as erstwhile allies found themselves at odds. The following highlights the several catalysts standing out in elucidating Maliki's pivot toward reconciliation with Sadr:

### **Divergent Viewpoints of the Factions Aligned With the Coordination Framework**

The Coordination Framework's stance on military involvement in Gaza revealed a stark division among Shiite groups, particularly regarding the extent to which engagement should be escalated. On one side were coalitions advocating for a conservative approach, eschewing expanded military involvement against US targets. This faction included the State of Law Coalition led by Maliki, the Fatah Alliance under the leadership of Hadi al-Amiri of the Badr Organization, the State Forces Alliance led by former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, and Ammar al-Hakim of the National Wisdom Movement. Their reluctance to broaden military action was not a gesture of support for the US presence in Iraq but rather a pragmatic response to Iraq's intricate crises. They aimed to prevent potential repercussions for Iraq and avoid embarrassing the Coordination Framework-formed Iraqi government before the US administration. Contrastingly, there were alliances and factions advocating for an aggressive stance, calling for expanded and sustained military engagement against US targets. This faction included Harakat al-Huquq (Rights Movement) led by Hussein Mu'nis, the Iraqi Kata'ib Hezbollah headed by Abu Hussein al-Hamidawi, and Harakat al-Nujaba led by Akram al-Kaabi.

Therefore, Maliki stands firm among those who oppose the notion of exceeding the rules of engagement with the United States in Iraq, citing the delicate balance that governs the Iraqi equation and its potential repercussions on the government formed by the coalitions within the Coordination Framework. This includes the State of Law Coalition led by Maliki himself. Additionally, Maliki's stance aligns with that of Iran, further cementing his position. He resists the urge to deviate from the traditional rules of engagement out of concern for

receiving stern deterrence messages from the United States, which could disrupt the functioning of the Iraqi government and potentially pave the way for Sadr's resurgence on the Iraqi street. Therefore, Iran, via the Commander of the Quds Force, Ismail Qaani, urged the leaders of Iran's aligned militias in Iraq to [curtail their attacks](#) against US targets.

It appears that Maliki has realized that the departure of his most formidable opponent and arch-nemesis from political life did not diminish his role in leading the Shiite faction or shaping the Iraqi landscape. Sadr's retirement failed to restore equilibrium for Maliki, particularly as he recognized the unreliability of certain allies who seemed more inclined toward bolstering their own influence and power within the Iraqi landscape. This concern is heightened by Maliki's apprehension regarding the burgeoning rapport between Qais al Khazali, leader of the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq militia, and Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammad Shia' al-Sudani. He fears that this growing relationship could lead to the formation of a potent Shiite alliance that might undermine his influence and potentially diminish his sway on the Iraqi stage. Thus, Maliki saw in encouraging Sadr to re-enter political life and establishing a robust bilateral relationship — a coalition between Maliki and Sadr — an effective strategy to thwart the emergence of such a formidable alliance. This approach has become a central concern for Maliki, who increasingly subscribes to the Iranian viewpoint that isolating Sadr could exacerbate divisions within the Shiite community, potentially paving the way for catastrophic intra-Shiite infighting.

### **Maliki's Assessments on Sadr's Intention to Return to Politics**

Conversely, Maliki might have interpreted several signals suggesting Sadr's inclination to gradually re-engage in political life. One such indication was [Sadr's call](#) for mass demonstrations in solidarity with the Palestinian people against the Israeli war in Gaza. This call underscored Sadr's enduring ability to mobilize public support and his continued influence over "street protests." The swift response from broad swathes of the population to Sadr's summons demonstrated

his street mobilization power and the continuance of his ground support. Moreover, Sadr's outreach extended beyond domestic borders. His [message](#) to the governments of Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, seeking permission for his Sadrist followers to peacefully approach the borders of Palestine, and his call for Arab nations to stage open sit-ins at the Palestinian borders until the Gaza siege is lifted, further indicated his reemerging political activism on a regional scale.

Additionally, Maliki might have interpreted Sadr's private and enigmatic visit to the residence of the highest Shiite authority, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, alongside discussions among Shiite figures regarding the amendment of the election law in preparation for early parliamentary elections, as pivotal to Iraq's political future. This visit hinted at the strong rapport between Sadr and Sistani, a relationship that remains closed off to many politicians, including to leaders within the Coordination Framework. Furthermore, Sadr's [directive](#) to movement leaders to reconnect with the grassroots on multiple occasions was perceived as a precursor to his potential return to the political arena.

### **Speculation Suggests That Iran Is Behind Maliki's Attempts to Seek Overtures With Sadr**

Some observers speculate that Iran may have played a role in influencing Maliki's shift toward Sadr, potentially aiming to mend the Shiite-Shiite divide that significantly impeded Iranian efforts to extend their influence in Iraq. Iran perceived the rift between key Shiite figures as a hindrance to its expansionist agenda in Iraq, particularly considering the Shiite community's pivotal role in advancing its interests. The division between Maliki and Sadr posed a significant challenge to Iran's ability to safeguard its gains and advance its broader plans in Iraq.

There is also growing Iranian concern regarding the expanding individual interests of certain armed militias within the current Iraqi landscape. This development poses a risk of provoking a retaliatory

response from the United States, potentially upsetting the delicate balance engineered by the Iranian-backed Coordination Framework in Iraq. Such a scenario could even escalate into open conflict between Iran and the United States, with far-reaching implications for Iran and its regional influence. In light of these concerns, media reports surfaced regarding a visit by the Iranian Quds Force Commander Ismail Qaani to Iraq on January 29, 2024. During this visit, Qaani reportedly met with leaders of various armed groups at Baghdad International Airport. Notably, this visit occurred just one day after Washington accused Iran and its militias of responsibility for the killing of US soldiers at the Tower 22 base. The purpose of Qaani's visit was purportedly to exert pressure on militia leaders to either [curtail or mitigate](#) attacks against US targets.

### **Major Chances For Rapprochement Between Maliki And Sadr**

Both Maliki and Sadr have ample opportunities for reconciliation, making it the most straightforward path to circumvent various potential challenges and risks that could impact both of them. Some of the most notable opportunities include:

#### **The Possibility of the Sadr-Maliki Dispute Reaching the Maturation Phase**

As any internal or external conflict evolves, it often reaches a stage of maturity where the involved parties find common ground and are more inclined to consider a settlement. This occurs when one or more parties to the conflict perceive that they have exhausted their options for maximizing gains through continued conflict. This dynamic might partially apply to the positions of the major Shiite alliances, as they have all come to realize that none possess all the decisive cards to claim sole leadership of the Shiite camp. In the case of Maliki and Sadr, their positions reflect this evolving understanding:

- Maliki rationally reading Sadr's sway over the Iraqi landscape: As mentioned earlier, despite the Coordination Framework's success in forming the government, it recognizes the pillars of Sadr's pow-



er and his formidable leverage within the Iraqi equation. These include a broad popular base, significant political influence, a potent armed faction, the enduring legacy of the Sadr household, a spiritual following and charismatic traits that enable him to potentially form a government. Maliki and Iran have likely come to the realization that Sadr has the ability to complicate the situation for any government aligned with Iran. This is especially true after witnessing Sadr's strength in previous conflicts with the Coordination Framework over the past two years. They understand that Sadr is not merely a factor to be overlooked in the Iraqi equation, but rather, he might possess the strongest hand in the Iraqi political landscape..

■ Sadr objectively reading the power of the pro-Iran proxy actors on the Iraqi arena: From the confrontations with Maliki in recent years, Sadr may have formed a crucial realization about the strength and influence of Shiite alliances in Iraq. These conflicts served as a litmus test, revealing the formidable challenge of overcoming the alliances and armed factions aligned with Iran. Despite his considerable mobilization power, Sadr has encountered significant obstacles in achieving his objectives. His efforts to assert sole leadership of the Shiite faction and form a government on national foundations have thus far been thwarted. Even in the recent Shiite conflict with Maliki, the outcome favored a consensus-based government rather than a truly national one. This series of setbacks may have led Sadr to reassess his prospects for success in future confrontations. While he remains convinced of the necessity of challenging Iran's influence, he may also recognize the difficulty of achieving significant gains without exerting strong pressure. It is likely that Sadr understands the reluctance of Iran to make concessions that could undermine its regional expansion, particularly considering Iraq's pivotal role in Iran's broader strategic objectives.

## **Internal and External Parties Aiming to Maintain a Balanced Equilibrium**

The State of Law Coalition and the Sadrist Movement, as major Shiite rivals, recognize that maintaining a balance domestically between supporters of state and non-state paths, as well as externally in Iraq's relations with regional and international actors, is essential. This equilibrium is also favored by the international community, which prioritizes internal security and stability by avoiding entanglement in conflicts between regional and international parties. Moreover, regional and international partners contribute to resolving crises and supporting Iraqi efforts for reconstruction and development in provinces liberated from ISIS. Ultimately, this approach aims to build a stable and influential new Iraq conducive to reconciliation.

## **Major Challenges Facing the Maliki-Sadr Rapprochement**

In light of the evolving dynamics surrounding Maliki's approach to reconciliation with Sadr, numerous challenges arise that could impede the achievement of reconciliation between the two parties. These challenges include:

### **The Centrality of the Contentious Issues Between Maliki and Sadr**

The ongoing conflict between Sadr and Maliki is a central issue characterized by several key aspects :

- Both Maliki and Sadr vie for dominance over the Shiite community, seeking to assert their leadership and influence. This also relates to whether authority —marjaya — should be centered in Najaf or Qom, reflecting differing views on religious leadership and influence. Sadr advocates for an independent state with national majority governments, emphasizing sovereignty and balance in internal and external affairs. Meanwhile, Maliki's approach emphasizes the continuity of consensus in government formation, often aligned with decisions from Iran-backed militias. Yet, disagreements exist over the process of selecting and appointing government leaders, reflecting broader power struggles and differing visions of governance. Sadr seeks to

promote the construction of a sovereign Iraqi state that maintains a balance between state institutions and non-state actors, while Maliki's approach may involve closer alignment with Iran-backed militias. To date, neither Maliki nor Sadr has displayed flexibility in addressing these bones of contention.

■ Maliki and Sadr represent two distinct intellectual paradigms that may never converge as long as neither acknowledges the legitimacy of the other's ideology. They each embody a vision diametrically opposed to that of their adversary. In particular, Maliki aligns with the transnational Shiite project under Wilayat al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist), adding an additional layer of complexity to the conflict. This dispute can be viewed as an extension of the broader ideological rivalry between Najaf and Qom, further complicating the situation. Given the substantial disparity in their ideological lines, bridging the intellectual chasm between them appears unlikely.

Finding satisfactory concessions to resolve the outstanding issues, particularly the conflict over Shiite community leadership, between the two sides may prove challenging. Both Sadr and Maliki wield significant power and influence in the Iraqi political landscape, making it difficult to make concessions for the sake of reaching a settlement, especially given the absence of indications of weakening resolve on either side. Sadr remains committed to advancing the path of the state (restoring state authority and control), aiming for the establishment of a new, independent and sovereign Iraq that maintains balanced external relations. In contrast, Maliki pursues a path of reconciliation backed by Iran, potentially tethering Iraq to Iranian influence and subjecting it to the control of armed militias aligned with Tehran, thus bolstering Iranian hegemony. These entrenched positions on outstanding issues further complicate efforts to find common ground and achieve reconciliation between the two parties.

## A Prolonged, Unsettled Dispute

The unresolved conflict between Maliki and Sadr has persisted for over a decade and a half without a resolution. For Sadr, it is challenging to overlook the policy of exclusion and marginalization directed toward symbols of the Sadrist Movement during Maliki's two terms as prime minister (from 2006 to 2011). Additionally, the offensive leaks attributed to Maliki in July 2022 further exacerbated tensions between the two parties. The relationship between Maliki and Sadr deteriorated to a critical level, culminating in violent confrontations between their supporters encamped in the Green Zone at the end of August 2022. These clashes resulted in not just dozens, but hundreds of deaths and injuries.

Sadr also remains mindful of Maliki and his allies' attempts, particularly those within pro-Iran alliances, to undermine his broad popular support in various ways. One such tactic involved delegitimizing his *marjaya* status. For instance, Marja Haeri, whom the Sadrists emulated, asserted that Sadr had not attained the level of *ijtihad* (the jurist's ability to exert independent legal reasoning) and encouraged his followers to instead follow the *marjaya* of Qom. Furthermore, efforts were made to discredit the *marja* status of Sadr's father, Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, in August 2023. Clips and posts circulated on social media platforms, with [Sadrist supporters](#) accusing accounts linked to the Dawa Party, to which Maliki belongs, of disparaging the reputation and legacy of the late Shiite *marja*. These accusations included claims of close links between Sadr's father and Saddam Hussein's regime.

On the other hand, Sadr has repeatedly opposed Maliki's attempts to secure a new mandate for governing, including instances where Maliki failed to form a government. The most recent example was when Sadr prevented Maliki from forming a government before Prime Minister Mohammad Shia' al-Sudani assumed office. Additionally, the Sadrist Movement has consistently resisted the State of Law Coalition's aspirations to lead the Shiite political landscape. Moreover, it has ac-

tively worked to diminish Maliki's influence within Iraq's governance framework.

### **Sadr's Blurred Vision of the Iraqi State's Political Future**

Sadr is criticized for lacking a clear vision for the future of the Iraqi state, leading to occasional confusion in his political endeavors and strategic missteps in his struggles against opponents aligned with Iran and those advocating for the trajectory of restoring the Iraqi state's authority and control. As a result, he has struggled to establish effective mechanisms for implementing and realizing the Iraqi state's objectives, hindering efforts to build a new Iraq. Many observers argue that Sadr lacks the political finesse needed to navigate complex situations, opting for sudden shifts in alliances and positions rather than employing strategic flexibility and cautious diplomacy to gain incremental advantages over opponents. For instance, his decision to push representatives of his parliamentary bloc to resign in June 2022 left the field open for adversaries, rather than tactfully leveraging positions to enhance his own standing and undermine opponents. Ultimately, the absence of a clear vision for the state's trajectory is seen as a barrier to achieving reconciliation with Maliki.

### **Maliki's Future Moves and the Implications For the Shiite Landscape in Iraq**

In light of Maliki's efforts to mend ties with Sadr, several potential scenarios may unfold on the Iraqi political landscape:

#### **Sadr Accepting Rapprochement**

The successful realization of this scenario would involve Maliki's efforts to reconcile with Sadr bearing fruit, resulting in the resolution of internal conflict and Sadr's return to political life. The likelihood of this scenario materializing is supported by several factors. Firstly, both parties may recognize the longstanding nature of the conflict, acknowledging their mutual inability to monopolize leadership within the Shiite camp. They may also come to realize the challenges associated with sidelining each other, given the multitude of pres-

sure points and power bases at their disposal. Additionally, reports circulating in media circles suggest a convergence of views between Sadr and Maliki regarding proposed amendments to the parliamentary elections law, which could facilitate Sadr's strong return to the political arena. Furthermore, there appears to be a general consensus among Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish alliances, as well as the Iraqi government, on the importance of maintaining internal and external balance to ensure security and stability. Given these considerations, other alliances may hesitate to align themselves exclusively with either Maliki or Sadr, recognizing the need for balance in the Iraqi political landscape. Regional actors also seem to understand the importance of achieving equilibrium in Iraq, considering the challenges associated with one faction monopolizing power within the Shiite camp.

If this scenario comes to fruition, it would likely result in the formation of a robust political alliance aimed at reshaping the power dynamics in Iraq. It is anticipated that certain Shiite, Kurdish and Sunni alliances supportive of the statehood path would join this coalition. Examples include the Progress Party led by Muhammad al-Halbousi, the Victory Alliance led by Abadi, the National Wisdom Movement led by Ammar al-Hakim, and the Kurdistan Democratic Party headed by Masoud Barzani. Consequently, the Coordination Framework could effectively disintegrate, with its pro-Iran alliances potentially transitioning into opposition to the new bloc expected to emerge from the successful reconciliation between Sadr and Maliki. This shift is driven by fundamental differences among the Coordination Framework's alliances, with each prioritizing its own interests over those of the framework. These differences encompass various issues, including attitudes toward Sadr, approaches to targeting US interests in Iraq, and adherence to the principle of maintaining balance in the Iraqi equation.

## **Continuation of the Conflict**

If this scenario unfolds, it would signify the failure of Maliki's attempts to reconcile with Sadr, resulting in the continuation of the conflict without a resolution. The realization of this scenario would underscore the significant challenges facing any potential reconciliation between the two parties, particularly concerning the core issues of contention between Maliki and Sadr.

These issues include the struggle for leadership and marjaya within the Shiite camp, differences in approaches and trajectories regarding state authority, and disagreements over the mechanism for forming governments. Additionally, the absence of any official announcement from Sadr regarding his intention to return to political life, his failure to respond to Maliki's overtures, and the lack of flexibility exhibited by both parties on these matters further complicates the prospect of reconciliation. Moreover, uncertainties surrounding Sadr's vision for the future of the Iraqi state and the potential for political forces in Iraq to vie for power in the event of a US withdrawal exacerbate the complexities of the situation. If this scenario materializes, the Coordination Framework may persist, albeit with divergent positions among its constituent parties. This continuity could be perceived as a pragmatic means of countering the resurgence of the Sadrist Movement, should it re-enter the political arena.

## **Resuming their Previous Relationship: Swaying Between Rupture and Agreement**

In this scenario, the most probable outcome is a potential return of the relationship between Maliki and Sadr to a pre-crisis stage, predating the offensive leaks attributed to Maliki against Sadr in July 2022. This stage is characterized neither by complete rupture nor complete reconciliation between the two parties, but rather by a competitive dynamic in resolving issues where each seeks to advance their interests and assume the position of the most influential figure within the Shiite scene and the broader Iraqi political landscape. The likelihood of this scenario materializing is bolstered by the challenges inherent



in achieving satisfactory concessions made by Maliki to Sadr. Maliki's actions are closely tethered to the boundaries of influence permitted by Iran, which perceives that it has secured significant gains in Iraq and is intent on realizing the remainder of its plans. These plans often run counter to the state-building path advocated by Sadr. Conversely, it may also be difficult for Sadr to make concessions for Maliki that would allow him to maintain his influence within the current power dynamics. As such, this scenario suggests a continuation of the competitive and contentious relationship between Maliki and Sadr, with each party maneuvering to assert its dominance within the Iraqi political sphere.

In previous instances, Sadr had consistently rebuffed participation in a political process that would entrench the influence of established figures, particularly led by Maliki, thereby thwarting his potential appointment as prime minister before Mohammad Shia' al-Sudani assumed the role. Should this scenario materialize, it would likely see the two parties reverting to competing in the political arena. However, it is anticipated that the Coordination Framework would face a crisis, potentially leading to its dismantling in a manner that diminishes Maliki's prospects and influence within the Iraqi political landscape.

In conclusion, Maliki's attempts to reconcile with Sadr underscore a critical issue concerning the future trajectory of the Iran-supported Coordination Framework. His endeavors highlight a significant dilemma within the framework, reflecting fundamental differences that could precipitate its dissolution in the upcoming parliamentary elections. This dissolution might pave the way for the emergence of new Shiite alliances. Moreover, Maliki's efforts raise questions about Iran's potential role in them. They also shed light on the growing prominence of personal calculations and interests among leaders of certain pro-Iran alliances and militias in Iraq. This trend heightens the risk of further division and rivalry, potentially leading to the deviation of some factions from Iran's prescribed course in pursuit of individual gains. Such developments could spark fresh divisions and



conflicts among alliances and militias loyal to Iran. However, they might also bolster support for the state-building path, ultimately reshaping the Iraqi political landscape.



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