

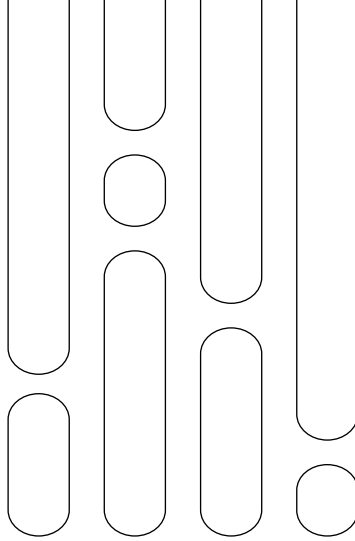
REPORT

THE BATTLE OF COMPETING NARRATIVES: A NEW INTER-CONFESSIONAL, ETHNIC STANDOFF EMERGES ON THE IRAQI ARENA

JUNE 11, 2024



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In a move that has ignited sectarian and ethnic controversy, the Iraqi Parliament voted to approve a request from Sadrist Movement leader Muqtada al-Sadr, to recognize Eid al-Ghadir, observed on the 18th of Dhu al-Hijjah, as an official holiday. This decision has led to counter-sectarian and ethnic reactions, with concerns about imposing a Shiite narrative over other Iraqi sects and ethnic groups. Sunni members have responded by calling for the anniversary of Saqifah Bani Sa'ida to be designated as an official holiday. Additionally, Kurdish and Turkmen representatives have demanded the recognition of holidays that commemorate significant events with symbolic importance to their respective communities.

The significance of these developments lies in their potential to plunge Iraq into a sectarian and ethnic quagmire, reminiscent of the strife that plagued the country in previous years, resulting in significant loss of life and injury. This situation raises several critical questions: What are the implications of the Iraqi Parliament's approval of the Eid al-Ghadir holiday? What are the ideological and political dimensions and repercussions of imposing the Shiite narrative in Iraq? How will this impact the future relationship between the Sadrist Movement and the Coordination Framework on the one hand, and the Sunni and Kurdish alliances on the other, in the upcoming parliamentary elections? Additionally, what are the repercussions for the intra-Shiite conflict and, by extension, Iranian influence in Iraq and the future of the Iraqi state?

First: Dimensions of the Iraqi Inter-confessional Conflict

As Iraq navigates a delicate phase in its contemporary history, marked by complex crises stemming from external interventions, particularly those by Iran, and the involvement of Iran-aligned armed militias in regional conflicts, the nation faces a new crisis. This crisis centers around a clash of narratives, escalating sectarian and ethnic tensions, potentially ushering Iraq into a new era of sectarian and ethnic conflicts, reminiscent of past strife that resulted in significant human and financial losses. The following outlines the most prominent features of this emerging conflict in the Iraqi arena:

1. The Imposition of the Shiite Historical Narrative on Other Iraqi Communities

A new sectarian controversy has emerged with Muqtada al-Sadr's efforts to impose the Shiite narrative across all Iraqi sects and ethnic groups. In a [televised](#) speech on May 17, 2024, Sadr called for the inclusion of Eid al-Ghadir, celebrated annually by Shiites on the 18th of Dhu al-Hijjah, as an official holiday. According to the Shiite narrative, this day commemorates when Prophet Muhammad designated Ali bin Abi Talib (may God bless him and grant him peace) as the caliph of Muslims. Sadr's demand to officially recognize this day has intensified sectarian tensions within Iraq.

Sadr, speaking as if he represented the entire Iraqi populace with all its sects and ethnic groups, contradicted reality and overlooked the diverse historical narratives in Iraq. He reiterated his request by [stat-ing](#), "By order of the people and the moderate national majority with all its sects, the House of Representatives must establish a law that makes the 18th of Dhu al-Hijjah, Eid al-Ghadir, an official public holiday for all Iraqis, regardless of their affiliation and belief."

To push for the law, Sadr mobilized his followers, using street protests to pressure the Parliament into meeting his demand. Large masses of his Shiite supporters participated in mass Friday prayers across several Shiite-majority provinces. Sadr further intensified the pressure on the Parliament, warning that if it did not agree to make Eid al-Ghadir an official holiday, it would have to "[confront Muhammad and Ali](#) as their opponents, Sunnis and Shiites."

To support the Sadrist demand, Hazem al-Araji, the Friday prayer leader in Baghdad, delivered a sermon in which he clarified, "This holiday is a divine command to His Prophet to convey the mandate to the Commander of the Faithful, and this is God's command to His Prophet, and His Prophet conveyed it." His sermon aimed to mobilize and rally the Shiite community to put pressure on the Parliament to approve the Eid al-Ghadir holiday.

The pressure exerted by Sadr and his followers yielded results. It did not take long for the [Parliament](#), with a majority of Shiite members

from the Coordination Framework — an alliance of Shiite factions supported by Iran — to respond to Sadr's demand. On May 22, 2024, the Parliament agreed to include Eid al-Ghadir in the law regarding official holidays.

It is a strange irony that [the new holiday law](#) recognizes Eid al-Ghadir and three holidays specific to the Jewish Mosaic sect — Yom Kippur, the two days of Passover, and the two days of Sukkot — despite the dwindling presence of the Jewish community in Iraq. Meanwhile, the law makes no mention of the anniversary of the founding of the Iraqi Republic, which falls on July 14 each year.

2. Sunni Backlash Against the Imposition of the Shiite Narrative

The conflict of narratives was exacerbated by two factors. First, many Iraqi Sunni forces rejected and criticized the recognition of Eid al-Ghadir as an official holiday. These included the Sunni religious authority represented by the Iraqi Fiqh Council, the Iraqi Islamic Party led by Rashid al-Azzawi, the Sovereignty Alliance led by Khamis al-Khanjar, the Muttahidoon Alliance led by former Parliament Speaker Osama al-Nujaifi, and the Azm Alliance headed by Muthanna al-Samarrai.

The second factor is that Sunni representatives took a similar step as their Shiite counterparts by requesting that the anniversary of Saqifah Bani Sa'ida be included as an official holiday in the country. This event, during which allegiance was pledged to Abu Bakr al-Siddiq as the caliph of the Muslims following the death of Prophet Muhammad in the 11th Hijri year, is significant in Sunni tradition.

In contrast to the Shiite discourse aimed at imposing the Shiite narrative, Sunni leaders utilized Friday sermons in Sunni provinces to highlight the perceived dangers of the Shiite initiative. Abdul Wahab al-Samarrai, the preacher at the Abu Hanifa Mosque in Baghdad, cautioned against the potential outbreak of disastrous sectarian strife stemming from the recognition of Eid al-Ghadir as a holiday. He argued that such recognition would solidify the Shiite narrative and sub-identity while erasing other unifying national identities. Samarrai emphasized, "We will not accept and will not be satisfied. Either the identity of all Iraqis will be a citizenship identity, or all identities

will be respected, so there would be a holiday for Ghadir Day, a holiday for Saqifah Day, and a holiday for the inauguration of the Commander of the Faithful, Omar bin al-Khattab.”

The Sunni Muttahidoon Alliance also criticized the Parliament’s approval of the Eid al-Ghadir holiday, especially given the critical challenges Iraqis are facing due to the failure of the political system to address the country’s complex crises. This alliance argued that the current situation necessitates Iraqis to seek common ground rather than impose sectarian narratives that have historically led to polarization. Eid al-Ghadir, representing the “[caliphal designation](#)” in the Shiite narrative, was highlighted by the Muttahidoon Alliance as problematic, as it “excommunicates” those who do not adhere to this belief. According to the alliance, this implies the excommunication of nearly half of the Iraqi population.

In general, Sunnis expressed their fear that the Eid al-Ghadir holiday would reinforce sectarian tendencies and open the door wide for the confessionalization and ethnicization of national holidays. This could lead to dozens of holidays due to the presence of numerous sects and ethnicities in Iraq. Currently, Iraqi law allows provincial councils to grant holidays specific to their province for various reasons, such as Eid al-Ghadir, Saqifah, Turkmen Martyr Day, and others. This provision aims to accommodate the diverse cultural and religious practices across different regions.

Additionally, Sunni influence was unable to prevent the approval of the law because the Sunni bloc is politically marginalized and ineffective at the parliamentary level. The Sunni bloc lacks the tools to compel the dominant Shiite bloc to consider or enforce Sunni demands. Sunnis also remember the major battles following the fall of Saddam Hussein, during which several sectarian militias targeted the Sunni population. Notably, the Mahdi Army militia, associated with Sadr, participated in these battles. Consequently, the options available to Sunnis are limited, compounded by the disappearance of influential Sunni leaders who had a significant impact on the Sunni community and the Iraqi state as a whole. Furthermore, communication between

Sunnis and Shiites is often weak or non-existent, leading to increased sensitivity and distrust between the two groups.

3. The Rejection of the Imposition of the Shiite Narrative by Kurdish and Turkmen Factions

Despite their awareness of their weak position in the Parliament, the Kurdish and Turkmen factions adopted the same tactic used by the Shiites. They demanded the official recognition of Kurdish and Turkmen events with significant symbolic meaning. The steps taken were as follows:

A. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan submitted a request to the Parliament to include March 16 — the day of the Halabja chemical weapons bombing — and April 14 — the anniversary of the launch of the Anfal operations and subsequent genocide — as an official holiday throughout Iraq.

B. The Turkmen bloc in Parliament [proposed](#) including Turkmen Martyr Day as an official holiday. This day, observed on January 16, commemorates the execution of many Turkmen leaders by Saddam Hussein's regime in 1980.

Second: The Historical and Ideological Impact of Imposing the Shiite Narrative

Eid al-Ghadir (Ghadir Khumm) is a significant day celebrated annually by Shiites on the 18th of Dhu al-Hijjah. It commemorates the event when Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), after completing the Hajj rituals, addressed his companions in a place called Ghadir Khumm and declared, "Anyone whose guardian I am, then Ali is his guardian." The Shiites interpret this hadith as the Prophet's explicit appointment of his cousin Ali as his successor in the caliphate. They argue that the hadith is both definitive in transmission (Qati' al-Thubut) and definitive in meaning (Qati' al-Dalala). Conversely, Sunni scholars reject this interpretation, offering several counterarguments against the Shiite understanding of the hadith.

1. The hadith is a single-transmitter report (Hadith Ahad) that cannot be employed in an issue of definitive significance. Moreover, the

imamate, according to the majority of Shiite scholars, is definitive in nature (transmission and meaning).

2. Although the hadith is authentic, its meaning is considered conjectural rather than definitive. There is no explicit, unequivocal statement within the hadith indicating that Ali would be the Prophet's successor. The primary purpose of the hadith is to praise and commend Ali ibn Abi Talib, similar to other instances where the Prophet praised his companions in various hadiths. Numerous Twelver Shiite scholars have argued that the hadith's meaning is conjectural rather than definitive, thereby undermining its probative value in establishing Ali as the designated successor to the Prophet. According to Sharif al-Murtaza, there is no evidence that the Prophet's companions understood the hadith's intended meaning as a matter of necessity; rather, their understanding was derived through interpretation. Therefore, legal knowledge in this context is not derived from necessity but is instead acquired through theoretical reasoning.

3. This hadith serves as evidence against the Shiite community. It does not clearly and explicitly state that the caliphate would belong to the progeny of Fatimah, contrary to the arguments put forth by Twelver Shiites thereafter. The majority of Sunni scholars have rejected the Shiite community's interpretation of this narration. Razi maintained that the hadith is speculative both in its transmission and meaning. Linguistically, Razi argued that the hadith implies the obligation to love Ali (may God be pleased with him), and to affirm his inner integrity, but it does not confirm his imamate or infallibility. Ghazali commented on the wording of the hadith, stating that "they are words open to interpretation and were transmitted by single narrators."

The dispute is not solely political but also involves a scholarly debate concerning the verification of narratives and methods of interpretation. Additionally, it is influenced by historical and sectarian differences, which have widened the gap between the two parties. In this context, both sides tend to appeal to general principles and the laws of the modern state.

However, historical rites that have sparked significant clashes between the two sides have been revived and exploited once again. This occurs within a volatile and contested political climate, and these rites deepen the fundamental historical differences between Sunnis and Shiites regarding who has the rightful claim to the caliphate. The events of Ghadir Khumm and Saqifah Day are particularly significant, as each symbolizes the exclusive right to the caliphate for each respective group. According to the Shiite narrative, Ghadir Khumm marks the Prophet's designation of Ali as his successor, while the Sunni narrative holds that Saqifah Day is when the Prophet's companions agreed to declare Abu Bakr al-Siddiq as the caliph of Muslims. This historical contention is central to the Sunni-Shiite divide. Thus, legislating the celebration of Ghadir Day signals the Iraqi state's official endorsement of the Shiite narrative at the expense of not only the Sunni community, but also the vast array of ethnic and religious communities that represent the country's rich historical and cultural legacy.

Third: The Political Consequences of Imposing the Shiite Narrative

1. A Step Toward Consolidating the Shiite Identity

Several observers believe that the decision to make Ghadir Khumm an official holiday is a move toward consolidating an exclusively Shiite identity for Iraq, which has historically been both Arab and Islamic. This step would enable Shiites to dominate and impose their narratives, rites and customs over those of other sects and ethnic groups in Iraq. Consequently, this would compel society to accept a Shiite identity, facilitating the implementation of Shiite agendas both internally and externally. This strategy is reminiscent of the role played by clerics in Iran after the revolution in solidifying Iran's Shiite identity.

2. Providing an Explanation Regarding the Iraqi Government's Failure to Perform Its Duties

The ongoing crises in Iraq have highlighted a significant issue within the Iraqi political system, which has been predominantly controlled by the Shiite faction since 2003. Specialists offer various explanations for the government's failure to address these crises and main-

tain security and stability. These interpretations encompass institutional, internal, and external factors. However, the developments surrounding the Ghadir Khumm holiday have unveiled further interpretations of this failure. The system, dominated by Shiites, lacks national programs aimed at fostering a cohesive state and national identity. Instead, it implements sectarian programs that serve the interests of the Shiite sub-identity and align with Iran's expansionist strategy. Consequently, the government has strayed from its primary function of serving all citizens, focusing instead on Shiite political goals linked to the Iranian agenda. This supports the establishment of a Shiite identity that facilitates Iran's expansion plans and ensures Iraq remains within its sphere of influence.

3. Increasing the Risk of Sectarian Strife in Iraq

The actions of Muqtada al-Sadr, drawing from traditional Shiite literature and heritage, hold significant risks in the context of a modern state that values constitutions, rights, and freedoms. Historically, tensions between Shiites and Sunnis in Baghdad over events like Ashura and Ghadir have escalated to near civil war, resulting in the deaths of dozens on both sides. Contemporary politicians, however, seem not to have learned from these past conflicts. Imposing a Shiite narrative on a multi-sectarian and multi-ethnic society like Iraq could heighten the chances of sectarian conflicts. Such conflicts have historically led only to the destruction of resources and wealth, the squandering of human potential, the exacerbation of political, economic, security and social crises, and the collapse of state institutions. The risk of sectarian strife is particularly high during Iraq's current period of instability, marked by severe crises and the country's transformation into a battleground for US-Iran confrontations. This is further complicated by the involvement of pro-Iran militias in regional conflicts and attacks on US targets within Iraq.

4. Presaging Sadr's Return to the Political Fold

Observers interpret the declaration of the Ghadir Khumm holiday by Muqtada al-Sadr as a sign of his intention to re-enter political life and participate in the upcoming parliamentary elections — an early electoral move. He has mobilized his supporters to rally in the streets

to pressure the Parliament, preparing them for the next phase. This coincides with his announcement to rename his movement from the Sadrist Movement to the Shiite National Movement, aiming to broaden the movement's framework to include other Shiite alliances, thereby enhancing its political influence in the future.

Fourth: The Imposition of a Sectarian Narrative and the Potential Outcomes of the Intra-Shiite Dispute

Over the past two years, Iraq has experienced a highly complex political deadlock,¹ primarily due to an intense conflict between the two largest Shiite alliances. The first alliance is the Sadrist Movement led by Muqtada al-Sadr, and the second is the Coordination Framework, which includes several pro-Iran alliances such as the State of Law Coalition led by Nouri al-Maliki and the Fatah Alliance led by Hadi al-Amiri. This conflict revolves around leadership, religious authority, power and influence within both the Shiite community and the broader Iraqi political landscape. The rivalry escalated to armed clashes in the Green Zone in central Baghdad. These clashes concluded when Sadr called on his supporters to immediately withdraw to prevent further bloodshed. Subsequently, in August 2022, he announced his retirement from political life.

The swift response of the Coordination Framework to Sadr's demand and the statement by the leader of the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq militia after the vote on the Ghadir Khumm holiday — "[The majority of the people have received their long-denied rights](#)" — signal a new Shiite dynamic in Iraq. Sadr expressed his gratitude to the Shiite political figures who voted in favor of his request, indicating the potential formation of an understanding between Iraq's Shiite factions. This development suggests the possibility of rapprochement between Maliki and Sadr, potentially leading to a historic reconciliation or, at the very least, a

(1) The new law stipulates that official holidays are Friday and Saturday of every week, the Gregorian New Year, the Hijri New Year, the Prophet's Birthday, the Tenth of Muharram, Eid al-Ghadir, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, Nowruz, Army Day, Labor Day. The law permits the holy cities to stipulate day-offs for a 3 maximum days as necessary, and granting all Iraqi religions and sects, such as Christianity, Sabians, and Yazidis, specific holidays. Three special holidays were also approved for the Jewish Mosaic sect, whose followers no longer have a strong presence as before, which is the Day of Atonement, Easter, and Sukkot." Source: <https://2u.pw/EXumXrTX>

long-term truce, as both sides recognize the impracticality of a zero-sum game.

Some observers believe that Sadr used the Ghadir Khumm holiday request to test the credibility of the Coordination Framework, particularly the State of Law Coalition, in their willingness to cooperate. The rapid response from the members of the Coordination Framework, who announced their bloc's support for their Sadrist colleagues in Parliament, validated this approach. Consequently, parliamentary approval came swiftly, just days after Sadr's request.

In an indicator that strengthens the scenario of rapprochement, Iraqi Shiite circles have revealed Maliki's [efforts](#) to approach Sadr. This move may stem from Maliki's concerns about potential divisions within the Coordination Framework regarding the extent and nature of targeting US interests in Iraq. He is also aware of the risks posed by the growing relationship between Qais Khazali and the prime minister, which could lead to the formation of a new Shiite alliance beyond his control. Therefore, Maliki sees establishing a strong bilateral association with Sadr as the ideal strategy to prevent such an alliance from emerging. Additionally, Maliki might align with the Iranian perspective that isolating Sadr could deepen divisions and potentially lead to intra-Shiite conflict.

Many observers believe that Iran stands to benefit the most from a resolution of the conflict between Sadr and Maliki. It is speculated that Iran is actively involved in fostering understanding between the two to mend the Shiite divide, which has significantly impacted Iranian efforts to expand further across the Iraqi political landscape. The division between Maliki and Sadr poses a major dilemma for Iran, as it considers the Shiite community as the backbone of its ongoing expansionist project in Iraq. The weakening of this Shiite support base due to internal divisions threatens Iran's ability to safeguard its gains and pursue its remaining plans in the region.

Fifth: The Main Consequences of the Potential Outbreak of Renewed Sectarian Strife in Iraq

1. Shiite Control Over the Parliament and the Passage of Sectarian Laws:

Repeatedly, concerns have been raised about the lack of competition against the Shiite bloc during successive electoral battles in Iraq, which ultimately results in Shiite domination in the Parliament. This scenario is viewed as one of the most perilous avenues for advancing external agendas, particularly those of Iran. If the Parliament is predominantly Shiite, it may facilitate the passage of legislation aligned with Iran's interests. The reluctance to actively promote the participation of other ethnic and sectarian components, besides the Shiite community, in Iraq's political landscape can gradually serve to advance Iran's expansionist agenda. This strategy involves promoting Shiite identity at the expense of the collective Iraqi identity, thereby aligning with Iran's agenda. Consequently, there is a pressing need to scrutinize all laws passed by the Iraqi Parliament, especially since representatives of the Coordination Framework have gained significant control over the Parliament.

2. Sadr Confining His Agenda to the Shiite Community Versus the "Nation-state Trajectory:"

There is a widespread consensus that Muqtada al-Sadr's recent sectarian demand, reflecting a retreat behind religious doctrine and identity politics, raises questions about the credibility of his commitment to a national rather than sectarian path for the state. By mobilizing his supporters in favor of a sectarian demand, Sadr risks undermining the broader national concept of the state, which emphasizes citizenship over sectarianism. This sectarian mobilization imposes a Shiite narrative on Iraq's diverse components, fueling sectarian and ethnic tensions. Such an approach contradicts the inclusive vision of citizenship and threatens to distort and erase Iraq's unique multicultural identity.

3. Sadr's Sectarian Demand and the Future of Relations With the Sunni Community

During the previous two rounds of parliamentary elections, Muqtada al-Sadr raised national collective slogans without resorting to sectarianism. He advocated for building a new Iraq that embraces all its identities and citizens, regardless of their backgrounds or beliefs. This inclusive approach generated significant popular and political appeal, leading to Sadr attracting a large segment of Sunni voters to his alliance. Additionally, Sadr formed alliances with Sunni political groups such as the Sovereignty Alliance, Azm Alliance, and the Mut-tahidoon Alliance. However, there is speculation that Sadr's recent sectarian demand may impact the positions of Sunni popular movements and alliances toward him in the upcoming elections. This shift in stance could potentially alter the dynamics of electoral alliances and voter support in Iraq.

Conclusion

The foregoing facts reveal a nearly axiomatic fact in the strategic mindset of Iraqi Shiite politicians, represented by the centrality and priority of the sectarian parameter over all other parameters in their principles, tools and orientations toward internal and external Iraqi issues. The Sadrist Movement, which over the past years vociferously advocated for the adoption of a project for the state in its national sense that brings together all sub-identities and ethnicities, standing in contrast to sectarian and ethnic alignments as well as sectarian quotas in Iraq, has failed the test of the sectarian parameter. It has retreated and fortified itself behind the Shiite identity, paying no heed to the collective identity of Iraqis. Moreover, the Sadrist Movement has called for imposing the Shiite narrative on all the Iraqis when it called for making Ghadir Khumm an official holiday. Sadr is fully aware of the impact of such a move on the country's Sunni and Kurdish factions. This puts the trajectory of the "national state" at stake, enhancing the trajectory of a deeply divided state. This comes as Shiite politicians have revealed their intentions toward prioritizing the national state and collective values instead of Shiite and sectarian narratives and parameters.

The ongoing and multifaceted crises — political, security and social — that plague the Iraqi state highlight a fundamental dilemma within the political system, particularly in light of Shiite dominance. The lack of a cohesive national strategy, driven by the dominant Shiite component, exacerbates this dilemma and contributes to sectarian conflicts, resulting in significant human and material losses. These conflicts loom ominously on the horizon once again. Militias have been established and alliances have been formed to advance the agendas of Shiite sect supporters, seeking to utilize state and societal resources to further their ideological aims. This echoes the model seen during the establishment of Iran's religious government post-revolution, where state resources were harnessed to serve the prevailing ideology. As a consequence, the Shiite-dominated regime in Iraq neglects social issues, leading to complex crises, sectarian tensions, ethnic divisions, and continued security chaos. These issues are sidelined as the regime prioritizes the imposition and dominance of the Shiite doctrine over other Iraqi beliefs and priorities.

In conclusion, countries and their people often suffer under regimes driven by sectarian agendas rather than serving the interests of the nation and its citizens. This reality is vividly illustrated by the complex crises facing the Iraqi state and the difficult conditions endured by its citizens. Despite Iraq's rich civilization and abundant economic resources, sectarian divisions in Iraqi governance remain a persistent dilemma. Furthermore, the passive approach to electoral engagement among non-Shiite components and the Shiite success in marginalizing most Sunni leaders, provide fertile ground for the further expansion of Shiite influence in shaping Iraq's identity. This trend increases the challenges of countering external transboundary projects.



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