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# Iraq: Hurling from Political Deadlock towards Civil War

Unit for Political Studies

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### Unit for Political Studies

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Since the early parliamentary elections in October 2021, a political crisis has engulfed Iraq, peaking on 29 August 2022, when it turned into an armed confrontation between the Sadrist Movement and some factions within the “Coordination Framework” — an umbrella organisation of forces and organizations close to Iran — leaving more than 30 people killed and hundreds wounded.<sup>1</sup> This escalation came about a month after an open sit-in led by supporters of the Sadrist movement inside the Iraqi Parliament and its surroundings, protesting the Framework’s nomination of Mohammed Shia al-Sudani for prime minister. Meanwhile, supporters of the Framework staged a counter sit-in in front of the suspension bridge outside the Green Zone, demanding the formation of a new government and an end to the suspension of the Council of Representatives. Despite the containment of these armed confrontations the political crisis does not appear close to a solution.

## From Elections to Protests

Early elections for the Council of Representatives were held in Iraq in October 2021, as a result of the protest movement that began in autumn 2019, which led to the replacement of Adil Abdul-Mahdi’s cabinet (November 2019), with that of Mustafa Al-Kadhimi (May 2020), whose main goal was holding early elections. The Sadrists won the largest number of seats in these elections (73 out of 329) and sought to form a parliamentary alliance called “Save the Homeland” with Taqaddum (representing the Sunni provinces) that won 37 seats, and the Kurdistan Democratic Party, which secured 31. On the other hand, the Coordination Framework, a parliamentary grouping formed in March 2021 to synchronise the positions of the Shi’i forces loyal to Iran, the most important of which are the State of Law coalition and the Fatah Alliance, with a combined parliamentary force of 58 representatives.<sup>2</sup> This indicates a decline in support for Iran and armed militias in the Shi’i provinces in favour of forces based on the unified Iraqi state and patriotism.

Following the Sadrist movement’s victory, leader Muqtada al-Sadr called for the formation of a political majority government — a departure from the quota system established in 2003. The quota system in Iraq is based on two levels. The first level is the distribution of the main political positions among the ethnic, religious and sectarian components, according to an almost fixed equation for the main or major components (roughly: Shi’i Arabs “50% +1”, Sunni Arabs “20%”, and Kurds “20%”), with some room for other minorities. At the second level, the system is based on a distribution of executive positions within the political groupings representing each component, according to their electoral success.

Al-Sadr sought to form a majority government, with Kurdish and Sunni forces, without prior Shi’i consensus, exacerbating ongoing tensions. These Shi’i forces and other groups that did not join al-Sadr’s coalition joined forces to frustrate al-Sadr’s attempts to form a government by preventing a

<sup>1</sup> “Iraq: Death Toll in Clashes between Sadrists, Pro-Iranian Factions and Security Forces Rises to 30,” France 24, 29/8/2022, accessed on 31/8/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3TtP2me>.

<sup>2</sup> “Iraqi Parliament Elections 2021 - Final Results”, the Independent High Electoral Commission, accessed on 6/8/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3zEQ6dY>.



quorum.<sup>3</sup> The Iraqi constitution (Article 70) stipulates that “the Council of Representatives shall elect a President of the Republic from among the candidates by a two-thirds majority of the number of its members.”<sup>4</sup> The Shi’i forces opposed to al-Sadr have consequently been dubbed “the blocking third,”<sup>5</sup> with the failure to elect a new president successfully precluding the establishment of an elected majority government.

The Coordination Framework justified its position by claiming that the current proposal to form a majority government threatens the consensual system of power-sharing that has existed in Iraq since 2003.<sup>6</sup> These forces fear losing out on the process of sharing state resources, which is widely viewed by political forces as a “bounty.” Shi’i divisions in Iraq cut much deeper than the formation of the government, extending to the running of the state, the presence of militias, and the nature of the relationship with Iran.<sup>7</sup> It is important to remember that the ongoing revolutionary movement in Iraq since 2019 has slammed the link between administrative and financial corruption with sectarian partisan quotas. This quota system extended beyond parliament to the entire civil service at the expense of efficiency, professionalism and productivity.

After failing to form a political majority government and parliamentary political action, al-Sadr called on his representatives to resign, on 12 June 2022, justifying his withdrawal as a refusal to collaborate with “corrupt politicians” in managing the country’s affairs, with pressure to form a quota-based government increasing.<sup>8</sup> This step seemed to be a prelude to the conflict spilling out of the institutional framework into the street. On 27 July 2022, tens of thousands of al-Sadr’s followers stormed the Iraqi parliament to stage a sit-in that spilled into the surrounding. They also stormed the headquarters of the Supreme Judicial Council in Baghdad on 23 August 2022, to stage another sit-in. Supporters of the Sadrist movement also worked to block the nomination of Mohammed Shia al-Sudani for prime minister by the Coordination Framework, which has become the largest bloc in the Council of Representatives.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Iraq’s Constitution of 2005, Constitute Project, accessed on 4/9/2022 at: <https://bit.ly/3Rm6wzB>.

<sup>5</sup> “The Federal Court Issues a Clarification regarding the Constitutional Article on the Election of the President of the Republic,” *Iraqi News Agency*, 2/3/2022, accessed on 6/8/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3bzt4F7>.

<sup>6</sup> “A New Position for Maliki’s Coalition: Let the largest bloc go to form the government,” *Nas News*, 6/1/2022, viewed on 6/8/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3Qqilno>.

<sup>7</sup> “Iraq’s Early Parliamentary Elections: Is the Country Heading towards a Majority Government?” Situation Assessment, ACRPS, 25/10/2021, accessed on 6/8/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3qh0dBj>.

<sup>8</sup> “Al-Sadr: I Will Not Participate in the Upcoming Elections in the Presence of Corrupt Forces,” *Iraqi News Agency*, 15/6/2022, accessed on 6/8/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3Q6K6BU>.

<sup>9</sup> “Sadrists Hold Sit-In in front of the Supreme Judicial Council in Baghdad and Demand the Resignation of its President and the Coordinating Framework Condemns Serious Abuses,” *Al Jazeera Net*, 23/8/2022, accessed on 31/8/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3CJ72TI>.



## Sadrist Calculations

Taking advantage of his status as a descendant of an influential political and religious family, Sadr withdrew his bloc's representatives from the parliament and resorted to street politics.. He is able to mobilize the Shi'i street's resentment towards the failure of successive Iraqi governments to deal with the worsening political and economic crises – the same strategy he used in the October 2019 protests that swept the country. He asked his supporters at that time to back the protests and their demands to change the “corrupt political class” and work to form a new government, before backtracking to dissuade them from the demonstrations in favour of supporting his proposal to “renew the peaceful reform revolution.”<sup>10</sup>

By taking his battle to the street, Al-Sadr sought to force the Coordination Framework to accept his candidate for prime minister on the one hand, and prevent it from forming the government on the other hand, to form a dynamic in which early elections are held, as a result of the continuing state of political impasse. Al-Sadr expects new elections to only strengthen his position as the country's largest political force. It is thought that al-Sadr may even go further, perhaps seeking to overthrow the political system that was established in 2003, In any case, it does not seem that al-Sadr is in the process of leaving the vacuum to be filled by his opponents. Although he announced his withdrawal from the political process in June 2022, he had hoped, through the latest round of protests, to return to the political process — but this time on the street.

He also appeared to have been reluctant to withdraw from the Council of Representatives right up until it was announced, with the move coming days after the passage of the Emergency Support for Food Security and Development law, which he backed as another step towards reform.<sup>11</sup> However, several reasons prompted al-Sadr to leave Parliament and head to the street. In addition to strengthening his legitimacy, he seeks to demonstrate his status within the political system and show that he has a coherent mass base that he is able to mobilize at will, along with his ability to thwart the efforts of his political opponents to form a new government without him.

## Response of the Coordination Framework

The Framework's forces relied on a street-for-street policy, matching al-Sadr on the other side of the road and launching a sit-in within the borders of the Green Zone in central Baghdad. On 12 August 2022, the Framework's forces started an open sit-in at the gates of the Green Zone in Baghdad, in response to the Sadrist protests, but their capacity to mobilize was limited compared to al-Sadr's. In parallel, the Coordination Framework attempted to contain al-Sadr by calling for dialogue instead of popular mobilization. This approach was supported by most of its leaders, including Nouri al-Maliki,

<sup>10</sup> “al-Sadr Announces the Renewal of the Reformist Revolution and Preparations for Peaceful Sit-Ins,” *Iraqi News Agency*, 31/1/2020, accessed on 8/8/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3Q2mdvb>.

<sup>11</sup> “al-Sadr Proposes Forming a Committee to Prevent Tampering with the Implementation of the Food Security Law,” *Iraqi News Agency*, 8/8/2022, accessed on 7/8/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3Adxkw1>.



who charged leader of al-Fatah bloc, Hadi al-Amiri, with leading the dialogue with al-Sadr at their meeting, on 3 August 2022.<sup>12</sup> The purpose was to persuade al-Sadr to engage in dialogue with parties more acceptable to him within the Coordination Framework, given the intense personal antagonism that characterizes al-Sadr's relationship with al-Maliki. The Framework forces did however set conditions for dialogue with Muqtada al-Sadr and acceptance of his initiative; the most prominent being the dissolution of the Council of Representatives in favour of early elections, the dismissal of Al-Kadhimi as Prime Minister, and the formation of an interim government whose head will be appointed by consensus between the two sides and whose mission is to hold early elections no later than September 2023, provided that all of this takes place within Parliament.<sup>13</sup>

Despite this, the Coordination Framework failed to agree among themselves on a specific policy to confront al-Sadr's rise to prominence after his supporters' demonstrations — evident in divisions regarding the call to counter-protest. However, this does not take away from al-Maliki's position as the main force within the Coordination Framework, seeking to influence his partners' dealings with al-Sadr.<sup>14</sup>

## Prospects for the Political Deadlock

The hardline positions taken by both the Sadrist Movement and the Coordination Framework have transformed the crisis into an armed confrontation. Regardless of how the confrontation began, it has become an expression of the impasse between both sides. al-Sadr has proven unable to mobilize the forces that form the backbone of the protests, especially civil and secular forces, at their core the forces of the revolutionary movement of 2019. Hence, he was unable to turn what he dubbed the "Ashura revolution" into a countrywide revolution, something that would have given his movement greater national legitimacy.

The 2019 protestors and activists have been reluctant to join al-Sadr, having previously allied with him in the 2015 / 2016 protests and the 2019 revolutionary movement — ultimately clashing. The Framework seems to be taking advantage of the Sadrist movement's calls to abandon protests in favour of a return to Parliament to form and lead a new government. This indicates that al-Sadr may have jumped the gun by resigning from the Council of Representatives, given that his bloc would have formed a barrier against the election of a new quota-based government, forcing new elections. However, any Coordination Framework formed once Parliament resumes is unlikely to enjoy popular legitimacy.

<sup>12</sup> "The Sadrist Movement Requires a 'Real Guarantor' to Accept Negotiations with al-Amiri, and the Latter 'Knocks on the Door of Al-Hannanah Mosque' within Two Days", *Shafaq News*, 3/8/2022, accessed on 8/8/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3P8UZIt>.

<sup>13</sup> Adel Al-Nawab, "Initiatives without a Horizon in Iraq: Al-Sadr Rejects the Conditions of the 'Framework'", *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 8/8/2022, accessed on 8/8/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3vJsHqE>.

<sup>14</sup> The conflict between al-Maliki and al-Sadr dates back to 2008, when al-Maliki, as prime minister, dealt a heavy blow to the Mahdi Army, the militia affiliated with al-Sadr, who, in 2012, submitted a draft vote of no-confidence against al-Maliki. These factors link to the leaks made by an Iraqi journalist to a private session held by Al-Maliki recently, in which he attacks Muqtada Al-Sadr. See: "Leaks Attributed to Nouri Al-Maliki Ignite a Crisis in Iraq," *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 13/7/2022, accessed on 31/08/2022. at: <https://bit.ly/3Q413fi>.



## Conclusion

The August armed confrontations represent a taste of what an intra-Shia clash could lead to, in a country where militias have become more powerful than the state, and boast huge arsenals. These concerns have prompted the various parties to call for a return to the negotiating table, to agree on the conditions for holding early elections.<sup>15</sup> This dynamic may see the formation of an interim government leading to the holding of elections. However, this type of quick fix will not solve the endemic crisis rooted in the sectarian party order that exploits a democratic constitution to create a sectarian quota system.

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<sup>15</sup> "Iraqi President Calls for a National Dialogue and Early Elections and Praises al-Sadr's Position", *Al Jazeera Net*, 30/8/2022, accessed on 31/8/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3q3WruY>.