

"AS FAILED GOVERNMENT FORMATION ESCALATES INTO VIOLENCE, WHAT'S NEXT FOR IRAQ?"



SUMMARY OF A 'AGSIW' WEBINAR



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OVERVIEW

After sparking a sit-in that prevented the Iraqi Parliament from meeting and protests calling for new elections, Iraqi Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr announced his “resignation” from politics on August 29 prompting armed clashes and fears that violence could spiral and get out of hand.

Subsequently, Iraq’s military announced a countrywide curfew, and the caretaker prime minister suspended Cabinet sessions in response to the violence that on August 30 resulted in the death of dozens of people with hundreds injured in clashes that ultimately led Sadr to call for his followers to leave the Green Zone.

In a webinar chaired by AGSIW (Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington) President, former US Ambassador to Iraq, Douglas A. Silliman, a panel of informed speakers discussed the underlying reason behind Sadr’s motivation for wanting to dissolve Parliament and holding new elections following by his latest resignation from Iraqi politics. The panel further explored ongoing efforts for forming a new government, 10 months after the October 2021 parliamentary elections as well as other critical issues facing the country at this time (e.g., constitutional reform and the extent of Iranian influence in the country).

KEY COMMENTS MADE BY SPEAKERS

1. LAHIB HIGEL (*Senior Analyst, Iraq, International Crisis Group*)

- The crisis started in the aftermath of October 2021 election in which Moqtada Sadr’s coalition obtained the largest portion of seats (73) in the Iraqi parliament, though it fell short of being able to ride out the ‘blocking or preventive one-third’ which prevented it from getting its way for the

formation of a new government – i.e., Sadr could not muster the support of two-thirds of MPs in order to promote his agenda.

- In the final analysis, Moqtada Sadr was short by some 15 votes (202 out of 339) for a two-thirds majority.
- Once unable to secure his aims, Sadr then ordered his 73 MPs to resign their seats which was then immediately filled by supporters of his opponents such as former PM Nouri al-Maliki and other Iranian backed forces in Iraqi politics.
- Another significant factor triggering Moqtada Sadr was the resignation of the Ayatollah Kazem al-Haeri, the spiritual Shia leader of many Iraqis including Sadrists and his call that all his followers should now ‘emulate’ the teachings of the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.
- Moqtada Sadr interpreted this action as a hostile move against himself and this subsequently led to violent clashes between his supporters and pro-Iranian forces.
- The surge in violence then paved the way for the most respected and followed Shia leader in Iraq – Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani – to enter the fray in order to de-escalate matters.
- Sadr then made a conciliatory speech calling for non-violence and the return of his followers from the streets – something that was welcomed by both the Iraqi President and Prime Minister, though not with Nouri al-Maliki and his cohorts. Nonetheless, for the time being, the tensions have subsided considerably mainly because the wider Shia community does not want wider conflict, though it remains to be seen how matters move forward in the coming period.
- It seems that all competing parties are generally tone deaf to the desires of the general population at large who are distant and weary about the ongoing extent of intra-elite disputes. This is compounded by the fact that it is also unclear what Sadr truly stands for or what it is that he truly wants given that there are many who believe that he is not the reformer he claims to be (especially given his comments about women protesters and their ‘non-conservative clothing’ during the Tishreen Movement).
- Hence, a debate regarding constitutional change is much needed given that the current constitution is clearly not fit for purpose.
- Apart from the loss of Soleimani, the loss of Abu Mehdi al-Mohandhas has been critical for the kind of mediation that had kept the ‘Shia House’ (including the PMI) together.

- With Iran-US tensions currently on the low, the various Shia groups are now grappling with their own Raison d'être by attacking Kurds and Sunnis.
- For his part Moqtada Sadr has tried to build up his political power since 2005. His one prime advantage all along has been that he has an organized and loyal crowd behind himself with the intention of replacing those who have ruled the Shia constituency such as the likes of Maliki.
- **Conclusion:** Holding a new round of elections is important for initiating a political reset. However, to resolve outstanding issues, this needs to happen in tandem with constitutional reform.

2. REND AL-RAHIM *(Co-Founder and President, Iraq Foundation)*

- Moqtada Sadr who has a good ear for sentiments of the Arab streets is adopting the language of the 'Tishreen Movement'¹. However, it is important remembering that street protests in Iraq began as far back as 2011 with the Arab Spring with protesters asking for serious reforms and especially serious actions aimed at curbing corruption.
- Therefore, 'Eslah' (meaning reform) became a key word used by Moqtada Sadr especially in the course of the 2016 Sadrism protests that were held under the banner of Eslah, although it was not clear to all parties as to what exactly was being demanded.
- However, by 2019, the Tishreen Movement was quite clear in demanding radical reforms along with an end to sectarianism as well as the adoption of a 'Neither East nor West' (i.e., neither Iran or the US) policy.
- Though this position was originally advocated by progressive and liberal elements in Iraq, the Sadrists for their part tried to co-opt this agenda and ultimately move against the Tishreenis.
- As for the Tishreenis, they have always doubted the sincerity of the Sadrists, believing them to be an integral part of the order that should be dismantled.
- Ultimately the protesters wanted to end the regime in which the Sadrists, though employing the language of outsiders, were part and parcel of the ruling establishment holding key positions and other benefits.

¹ *The October Protest Movement, known in Iraq as the Tishreen Movement, is the largest social movement in Iraq. The movement came into being during the 2019-2021 Iraqi Protests in tandem with similar protests in Lebanon and Sudan. The main centre of protests organized by the movement was Baghdad's Tahrir Square, with other protests taking place in Basra and Najaf. Following months of protest, the movement succeeded in forcing the resignation of the government of former Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi.*

- Hence, there is a huge question mark as to whether Sadr seriously believes in the kind of reforms being advocated or if he is being politically expedient.
- The current constitution not only does not serve but in actual fact over the course of the past 17 years, has impeded the proper functioning of the state.
- Therefore, some kind of a review that can serve the interests of the state is much needed.
- As for the extent of Iranian influence in Iraq, it is a fact that the assassination of Soleimani has led to a serious fall in the level of Iranian influence in the country given that his successor (Esmail Qaani) is simply incapable of filling the vacuum left by him.
- Also, the post-Soleimani period has seen a resurgence of 'Etelaat' (Iran's intel organization) as a counter-weight to the IRGC in Iraq.
- As a result, there is now a different scene for Iran in Iraq compounded by a breakup in the 'Shia House' because Soleimani is no longer there to hold it together.
- In this regard, Sadr having walked away was perhaps the opening factor or shots that started this process.
- As a result, the Iranian position is undoubtedly weaker than before. Its proof of decline has been the recent bloodshed and the greater resonance of the 'neither East nor West' slogan..
- Prior to the recent violence, the Tishreen Movement had also been quite vocal in its rhetoric and actions against the Islamic Republic (e.g., burning the Iranian consulate in Karbala etc.).
- **Conclusion:** One thing that can defuse the current crisis is to set a date for new elections. But other things also need to happen – i.e., keeping the current President and Prime Minister and allowing them to carry out their duties. While constitutional change is needed but it has to be borne in mind that any change can only come through dialogue (in which the Tishreenis are also included), Thus, any new agreement cannot be simply imposed.

3. **ABBAS KADHIM** (*Director, Iraq Initiative, Senior Fellow, Middle East Programs, Atlantic Council*)

- Divisions amongst Iraqi political leaders (highlighted by recent intra-Shia disputes) is not limited to just the Shias and is a vibrant reality amongst both the Sunnis and the Kurds.
- The failure of the two main Kurdish parties to agree on the appointment of a new president – an issue that was to go to the Iraqi Supreme Court – as well

as disagreements among the Sunnis for the appointment of a new Speaker of Parliament, vividly highlights this reality.

- With the exception of forces gathered around Moqtada Sadr, the rest of the Shia house has always been cursed by disunity and fragmentation. These differences that are sparked by competition between various forces has been a negative factor going back to 1991.
- Indeed, the modus-vivendi since 1991 has not changed, though Sadr has been more adamant that Iranian backed mobilization forces should be dismantled or integrated into the mainstream Iraqi military.
- These differences were exacerbated by the competition that had existed amongst the Shia during the recent elections as they each sought to have the Prime Minister of their choice installed in office (for purposes of setting their own agendas into motion and forcing the compliance of all the others).
- On the other hand, the 'Tripartite' coalition of Sadr, Bazzani (KDP) and Mohammed al-Haboussi also failed to work due mainly to a lack of vision for the future of the country apart from merely allocating key positions by all the parties involved.
- **Conclusion:** One thing that must be avoided and ruled out at all cost is recourse to any kind of a military solution.
- While the current Khadimi government should be allowed to continue, Iraq nonetheless needs new elections to form a fully authorized government that is away from any kind of ethno-religious sectarianism.

