

IS MUQTADA AL-SADR GOOD FOR IRAQ?

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The latest storming of the Iraqi parliament is one of the most significant political events in Iraq since Saddam Hussein's regime was overthrown in 2003. This process, which culminated in the weekend's dramatic events, began in March of this year when the Shea cleric Muqtada al-Sadr turned a flagging protest movement into a major national force, by virtue of his personal intervention. By the end of March, at the head of this movement, Sadr himself successfully walked into the Green Zone, where security forces welcomed him with open arms. Rather than reprimanding him for what would otherwise be considered trespassing, the Iraqi general in charge of security kissed his hand — a symbolic gesture of submission. Sitting in the Green Zone, he pushed Abaci to pursue a cabinet reshuffle and set a 10-day ultimatum.

In April, the prime minister failed three times to pass a technocratic cabinet in parliament. With each failure, the protest movement grew increasingly impatient. Following Abadi's second failed attempt, which was heavily influenced by former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, Sadr ordered his MPs, who make up the Ahrar bloc, to stage a sit-in inside parliament. This sit-in, which Shea, Sunni, and Kurdish MPs later joined, administered an extra-ordinary parliamentary session and obtained enough votes to sack speaker Salim al-Jabouri. However, Jabouri returned to his seat to administer a third attempt for cabinet reshuffle on April 30. Still, the parliament again failed to pass Abadi's list of names for a technocratic cabinet and instead adjourned for a 10-day recess. At this point, an impatient Sadr determined it was time for a drastic show of force, resulting in the weekend's storming of the parliament, where protestors, carrying Iraqi flags rather than guns, were welcomed and kissed by Green Zone security.

Sadr champions the protest movement's demands, namely to move beyond the system of ethno-sectarian communal quotas (*Muhasasa Ta'ifiya*). His message to the political establishment demands immediate change. His power comes not from institutional privileges but from his popularity among millions of Iraqis, who are willing to mobilize on his call and who are increasingly impatient.

A Firebrand Paramilitary-Leader

How did we get here and what does this mean for the future of Iraq? Can it be that Sadr, once the *bête noire* of American interests in Iraq, may actually be a force for good? This is a question that few, if any, would have countenanced until recently, and for a number of reasons. Among these are Sadr's short-lived attempt to take over Iraq by force and impose an Islamic theocracy shortly following the invasion in 2003. During this period, he established the Mehdi Army (*jaysh al-mehdi*),

which became the largest Shea militia and fought to disrupt the post-2003 U.S.-led state-building project. His militiamen seized control of public buildings and police stations, administered death squads that murdered Sunnis through torture, notably with electric drills, and kidnapped local residents and foreigners. Individuals affiliated with his movement assassinated senior leaders like Shea cleric Abdul Majid al-Khoei in April 2003. Sadr's willingness to travel the path of political violence led many commentators to conclude that Sadr is a "thug" or firebrand cleric and as such is *not good* for Iraq. His militias were involved in some of the worst sectarian excesses of the bloody civil war between 2006 and 2008. Today, many Iraqi commentators remain wary of Sadr's political ideology, which is fiery, anti-Western, anti-secular, and rooted in political Islam.

Sadr's relations with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and the clerical leadership (*marja'yya*) in Najaf are also problematic. He broadly criticizes Sistani's strict adherence to the quietist school (*Al-hawza al-samita*), which calls for non-interference by clerics in politics. In contrast, Sadr, similar to his father, believes a cleric can be politically involved and outspoken (*al-hawza al-natiqa*). Beyond ideological differences, Sadr has also at times politically challenged Sistani. In the early days following the 2003 invasion, he tried to usurp Sistani directly as a theocratic ruler. In 2004, Sistani had to negotiate a truce between the Mehdi Army and the United States, and in return, called for Sadr to disband his courts in Najaf. Although Sadr must follow the *marja'yya*, he has been vocal in sharing his thoughts and has at times attempted to contest the order.

A Reformist

Nonetheless, there are grounds for optimism when it comes to Sadr's place in the Iraqi political sphere. He has matured as a leader; and controversial figures have been removed from his ranks, including Qays al-Khazali, Akram al-Kabi, Abd al-Hadi al-Darraji and Mahmud al-Hasani al-Sarkhi. The first three are now senior leaders in Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (the League of the Righteousness), which has engaged in violence that "may amount to war crimes."

Following his defeat to Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Operation Knight's Charge in 2008, Sadr left for Iran. His self-imposed exile had considerable impact on Sadr's political thinking. According to personal conversations with Sadr sources, when Sadr arrived in Iran he was expecting a hero's welcome as the military leader who fought against American occupation. On the contrary, senior Iranian clergy and political elites viewed and treated him as a lower cleric. Sadr had difficulties meeting with senior officials, including Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Little else is known about his time in Qom and he returned to Iraq in 2011 with a reinvigorated drive to reshape his movement and, by extension, Iraq. His message emphasized an almost xenophobic Iraqi nationalism, beyond the anti-Americanism and anti-foreigner tropes seen after 2003. It even included anti-Iranian sentiments. At the same time, this was combined with a concerted effort to establish links with surrounding states and foreign movements as well as European capitals and businesses.

Sadr has since undergone a rebranding process. He disbanded the notorious Mehdi Army and later established Saraya al-Salam (the Peace Brigades), which semantically has a less aggressive and non-sectarian tone. Last year, in a battle against the Islamic State, Sadr withdrew his paramilitary fighters as soon as allegations emerged of crimes committed by his men. Moving away from strictly a sectarian militia, his fighters are also fighting alongside Sunni tribes, such as the Albu Nimr in Anbar, against the Islamic State. Moreover, members of his paramilitary have welcomed the idea of integration into the Iraqi state, but only when the government's security apparatus is perceived as effective and legitimate.

Many analysts criticize Sadr for hypocrisy, claiming to fight corruption while sending individuals from his own ranks to become government officials. His officials have been part of the very problem of corruption that Sadr claims to oppose. However, Sadr is increasingly cautious about who he sends to represent his voice in government. Under accusations of corruption, he has on occasion removed the bad apples and blessed the courts' legal proceedings. For instance, when Abadi issued legal proceedings against Sadr's Deputy Prime Minister Baha Araji, Sadr issued a statement ordering Araji to resign and forbade him from leaving the country prior to completion of the judicial procedures.

An Iraqi Statesman? Sadr's Role in Baghdad's Politics Today

As we argued two years ago, Sadr's involvement in domestic politics may be a precondition for Iraq's return to stability. In an environment already marred by a security (the Islamic State) and economic (drop in oil price) crisis, some commentators are criticizing Sadr for what they see as holding Abadi and democratic Iraq for ransom. Others have argued that Sadr is trying to carry out a coup.

From a different vantage point, Sadr's influence could be positive. Street politics are an oft-integral part of any functioning democracy, as long as they remain largely peaceful. In this case, both the protesters and the government (the Green Zone's security detail) refrained from violence — a remarkable feat given the wider regional context. More importantly, although Sadr has alluded to violence in “storming and breaching the perimeter of the Green Zone,” Sadr's protesters entered to a large extent peacefully. The typical behavior of disturbing authority, people, and property associated with mob violence, which includes disorganized groups, occurred but was minimal. The security guards, who very clearly supported the movement, kissed the protesters, as we noted. Both sides even shared a bite of watermelon. Throughout the storming of the parliament, Sadrist leaders kept calling for the protesters to not harm others and to not damage government property.

In another positive development, Sadr says he is willing to compromise. During the lead-up to Abadi's cabinet re-shuffle, he led one of only three committees that sent a list of names to the prime minister (the other two being led by Abadi himself and al-Maliki). Although Sadr sent some 90 names to Abadi, an al-Ahrar source told the author that Abadi only took three of these when he named 14 new ministers. Having not been awarded enough seats in Abadi's new proposed cabinet, Sadr still supported the outcome and in fact called for quick parliamentary ratification. According to a personal conversation with a senior Sadrist official, ensuring that the reforms are implemented is more important than having his choice of technocrats.

Sadr's approach to politics has taken an Iraq-first turn, which is yet another encouraging trend. In recent Sadr-led protests, the slogan has been "na'am na'am l-al-Iraq" (Yes, Yes, to Iraq), which is an interesting twist on the far more negative "No, no, to America, no, no, to Israel, no, no, to Satan." The only flags visible are Iraqi flags — a far cry from other Iraqi political gatherings that include the flags of political parties, paramilitaries, or regional actors. Sadr increasingly transcends sectarian calculations. Today, his fiercely independent Iraqi nationalism, based in popular values, is critical of foreign intervention, be it Iranian, American, or any international actor. He remains outspoken against leaders such as Maliki, Hadi al-Ameri, and his former colleague Khazali, precisely because he believes they are too close to Tehran. Following the storming of the parliament, protestors throughout the south of Iraq chanted "Iran, Barra Barra" ("Iran, out out"). This is a remarkable turn for a man once depicted as a tool of the Iranians.

Implications for Iraq's Future

Given that the Iraqi government is currently engulfed in a battle to liberate its cities from the self-proclaimed Islamic State, some commentators question whether this is the right time to incite chaos and turn Iraqi governance upside down. The battle against the Islamic State, however, requires not only military action, be it air strikes or ground forces, but also political efforts. To defeat the jihadist group, the people of Mosul and elsewhere that currently support or express indifference to the Islamic State need to be convinced to trust and re-engage with the central government. Without ending the crisis of representation, the sect-based quotas, and corrupt practices that hamper the voice of many citizens, it is difficult to envisage the total defeat of the group. As such, Sadr's move to shake up Iraqi governance, whilst Abadi keeps the security ministries (defense and interior) for the ongoing

war, can be viewed as a positive development in reshaping the system of representation in Iraq and winning back different disenfranchised populations. In short, Sadr is opening the political front in the war against the Islamic State rather than hindering it.

One of us had a conversation about Sadr with Prime Minister Abadi, who agreed that deep down Sadr is a nationalist wanting the best for Iraq. The problem is how he goes about it and the unintended consequences of acts that may be poorly thought out. Some Iraqi writers have questioned Sadr's seeming ability to operate "above the law." Indeed, this remains problematic for any state-building project. During this era of transition, however, Sadr occupies a necessary and unique role that no other can play. As a semi-peripheral figure who circumvents the elitist political process that serves the strong to the detriment of the weak, Sadr appeals to the common man.

Sadr clearly has his own agenda: advancing a populist, nationalist cause that benefits his movement and his status in the domestic political and social sphere. But for the moment, this entails bringing about positive outcomes for Iraq on the whole. Sadr knows only too well from his personal experience that his best option is to be part of a system in which he himself represents the change.

However, it is misleading to depict the Sadrist storming of parliament as a revolutionary call to dissolve the institution. On the contrary, Sadr wants parliament to remain and to function effectively without delays – unlike leaders such as Maliki, who want parliament to delay reforms and to dissolve if necessary because of the power vacuum that it could produce.

Despite uncertainties, the latest developments in Iraq demonstrate that Sadr can be a positive force in the Iraqi political scene. Rather than taking advantage of a weak Abadi-cabinet, he in fact worked with Abadi, who was also keen on moving forward with a cabinet reshuffle. For the prime minister, this is an opportunity to minimize the influence of his largest opponents, namely al-Maliki, Ameri, and Khasali – the very same officials who Sadr is working against today. In Iraq, Sadr has become a counter-balancing force to provide checks and balances against powerful elites, such as Maliki, who have been ruling undemocratically and unconstitutionally for many years.

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