



Moqtada al-Sadr and the International Coalition: Common Ground and Fault Lines

by [Michael Knights](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Knights](#)

Michael Knights is the Boston-based Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states.



Brief Analysis

On January 24, 2020, Moqtada al-Sadr seized the reins of Iraqi politics. By taking charge of the Friday marches, he overshadowed the Iran-backed militias and showed up their comparative lack of numbers. Al-Sadr directed the protests away from the U.S. embassy, subsequently stating that embassies should be protected and all resistance attacks against foreign forces should immediately stop. He also called for a timetable for the departure of all foreign forces while signaling that such a withdrawal might be “adjusted” according to circumstances. And in the coming days, Moqtada’s support will likely make possible the nomination of a new [Iraqi prime minister](#) to replace the resigned premier Adel Abd’al-Mahdia as soon as Thursday, January 30, further asserting Moqtada’s power as a kingmaker in Iraq.

Though not in control of all developments—as shown by the January 26 rocket attack on the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad and the popular re-manning of the protest sites without his say-so—Moqtada is nevertheless the first among equals in Shia politics, and he aims to prove himself indispensable to onlookers in Iran, the West, and the Gulf States.

Some will greet these developments with relief, viewing Moqtada al-Sadr as the least bad option among Iraq’s militia chieftains and as someone who can serve as a potential bulwark against Revolutionary Guard designs on Iraq’s sovereignty. Yet others will immediately see problems on the horizon, viewing Moqtada as a potential threat to all future elected leaders and civil society in Iraq, and a leader just one shade removed from Iran’s militiamen. Both of these views may prove to be true.

Vital to understanding Moqtada’s power is an understanding of how his role at the head of the Sadrists has evolved over the years. At the time of the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Sadrists were essentially defined as the followers of

Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr, father of Moqtada and a populist cleric who was assassinated along with Moqtada's two older brothers by the Saddam regime in 1999. Almost two decades later, it can be said that those Sadrists who are still with Moqtada are as much his followers as supporters of his father. Those who wanted to break away from Moqtada have done so by joining Iran-backed splinter groups, the most prominent of which is Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq.

Whereas Moqtada was 30 in 2003, he is now 46; he continues to not firmly police his movement, but he is a more seasoned politician with a good ability to read young Iraqis and the Iraqi street. Though still unwilling to meet with U.S. officials, he has travelled to both Iran and to Saudi Arabia and other Sunni states, demonstrating a willingness to dabble on the international stage. Moqtada's advisors have also improved in quality, most recently with the rising profile of Walid al-Kremawi, Moqtada's main electoral and political advisor.

THE SADRIST AGENDA: IN THEIR OWN WORDS

In 2018, I began a series of interviews with Sadrists during my visits to Iraq and in other venues. My intention was to better understand their objectives and to sense how their future attitudes to the United States and Iran would develop. This article draws together my interview material in a brief treatment of Sadrist objectives as they themselves have defined them, highlighting both areas where there is likely dissonance with the 81-member international coalition present in Iraq and also issues on which there may be surprising synergies. The latter category includes—counterintuitively—the issue of foreign military presence in Iraq. However, these interviews also contain a strong warning that Moqtada is by no means a reliable or positive actor overall.

In conversations with one key Sadrist, a number of themes emerged as the claimed objectives of the movement in today's Iraqi political scene. They were, as he described them:

1. "Abolish the quota system" of Iraq, in which political parties impose political appointees or otherwise "own" ministers and senior officials according to the party's parliamentary share.
2. "Bring arms under the control of the state," which refers to the integration of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) into the regular state army or their normalization as a more obedient, regulated security force.
3. "Establish balance with neighboring states."
4. "Fight corruption [and] make all accountable, including former officials."
5. "Remove any foreign troops in Iraq, taking into account the rights of the government and the parliament."

These claimed goals are notable, as they all fit with the 81-member international coalition's overall objective of assuring the permanent defeat of the Islamic State by rebuilding a sovereign, stable, and democratic Iraq. But how real is the Sadrist commitment to these nominal objectives, and how much is window dressing or the aspirations of senior leaders disconnected from their base?

Regarding the first point, it is clear from the first fifteen months of the current government that the Sadrist movement does not yet practice what it preaches on the issue of political quotas for ministerial and senior official appointments based on the parliamentary share of factions or on anti-corruption. While this does not necessarily indicate a duplicity on Moqtada's part, it does at the very least demonstrate the challenge he would face in altering the culture of patronage networks within his own movement were he to seriously make an effort to disrupt it.

In contrast, the Sadrists have been quite consistent, internally and externally, on the subject of the Hashd al-Sha'abi (PMF), weapons, and the state. As a senior Sadrist emphasized: "We completely reject arms outside the control of the state," adding that Iraq should "arrest any individual seeking to impose their authority in the streets, or fighting the government." According to this Sadrist, they instead "Want the fighters to submit their arms to the government, go home, and enter into the military if they are needed, or get priority for other employment."

These statements echo Moqtada's most recent communique on January 24, in which he explicitly envisaged either the dissolution of the PMF into the Ministry of Defense or its stricter regulation, with "severe punishment" reserved

for those operating outside the framework of prime ministerial control.

These communiqués suggest that under a new prime minister backed by Sadrists and Grand Ayatollah Sistani, and with potential spoilers such as [Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis](#) now removed from the scene, the Sadrists could be a powerful driver of placing the PMF structure under real controls. What now remains to be seen is whether Moqtada's own Saraya Salam militia will place itself under the same controls, or choose to continue operating in a separate chain of command.

SADRIST VIEWS OF A FOREIGN MILITARY PRESENCE

Some of the most interesting conversations I have held about today's Moqtada and his movement have revolved around the issue of foreign military forces in Iraq. A surprising factor has been the reduced level of emotion in the Sadrist discourse about American forces since the United States returned to Iraq in 2014 as an invited partner rather than an invader. In one interview, a Sadrist noted: "There is no sense of enmity towards American troops; most Iraqis highly appreciate their help."

Nevertheless, there is a deeply held conviction throughout the Sadrist movement, from the most Westernized spokesman to Moqtada himself to the militant cadres, that the presence of foreign military forces—American or otherwise—should not become a proforma reality of Iraqi life.

One interesting factor is that unless explicitly asked about U.S. forces, Sadrists tend to use the more general term "foreign forces" to describe the coalition. This generalization underlines the differences between the current situation and pre-2011 U.S.-led presence.

Also notable is one view expressed on why U.S. forces should be removed: when asked about Americans specifically, there emerged the claim that the U.S. military presence undermines Iraq's ability to push back on Iranian paramilitary presence in Iraq. As one interviewee noted: "Our feeling is that the existence of American troops causes so many problems in Iraq. Iran feels threatened and gives its groups support to resist the occupier, religious people oppose the presence, and young people are agitated by it. We want to remove this pretext."

During these conversations, I asked Sadrists what exactly they meant by "occupation" or "occupiers," the phrases most commonly used to describe any foreign forces in Iraq. In particular, I asked (candidly) whether they really thought of, say, Canadian trainers as "occupying forces." When asked to actually dig down into the issue, the answers became more complicated and one could readily sense the potential for compromise solutions over international cooperation with Iraq.

First, aside from its public rhetoric, the Sadr movement wants any foreign presence to be highly regulated and invited explicitly to undertake a set mission with set parameters. I was told that "Any troops, any boots on the ground, will not be allowed unless asked by the Iraqi government or parliament." The presence of foreign forces "should be regulated by law," a Sadrist leader ventured, but there were many modalities this might take. "Very sensitive issues of war and peace should go to the parliament for periodic review, even if decided by the prime minister. [Or] at least the security committee of the parliament." The inclusion of a number of potential approval pathways suggests a high degree of flexibility along with a low level of starting knowledge, as coalition forces are already highly regulated.

Second, the continuation of trainers and advisors (as opposed to combat forces) was not out of the question. "There may be no sensitivity to trainers, although maybe some to American trainers... Canadian, Australian, European trainers are highly welcomed by the Iraqi people. They are our friends, they train our troops... It all depends on the numbers, where they are, what their tasks are. These should be made clear." Again, this attitude opens a lot of room for discussion, especially as the coalition would be delighted to shift to a non-combat, training-only role.

OVERLAP WITH COALITION PLANS TO ADAPT THE MISSION

What most Iraqis do not appreciate is that the military contributors in the 81-member coalition also want to rationalize and better regulate the operations and force posture of Combined Joint Task Force—Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR). No coalition partner—including the U.S. government—wants to commit their own combat forces to a costly, risky, open-ended presence in Iraq.

It is true that the United States and the broader coalition have bridled at the abrupt effort to evict all foreign forces using a non-quorum session of parliament and threats of violence against MPs in order to coerce votes. The United States has signaled that a complete cessation of all U.S.-Iraqi security cooperation would trigger a broader reduction in U.S. non-military contributions to Iraq's economic well-being.

However, in the context of a constructive discussion between security partners, the prospects for a rationalization and regulation of the CJTF-OIR mission, the NATO Training Mission, and EU security cooperation missions are good. Representing such a restructuring of the foreign military mission as a win for Moqtada would be a smart move.

And one reason why Sadrists have privately hedged on the need for a full parliamentary approval of the international mission is that it makes sense for the defense and security committee, in partnership with Iraqi generals, to assess what military support is still needed. If the committee were to render such a decision, it is very likely to conclude that much of the institutional capacity building and training supplied by the coalition is still required to create sustainable improvements in the security forces.

Were a dialogue on the future of the coalition to begin in earnest, the coalition will have some key points to emphasize. First, Iraq needs to actively commit to protecting foreign forces. Moqtada's January 24 statement against attacks on foreign forces is a reassuring starting point for such a dialogue.

Second, the coalition may surprise Iraq by expressing a willingness to hand off many combat operations to Iraq. For instance, the Iraqi military is still relying upon coalition airstrikes and artillery to safely demolish Islamic State underground arms caches and provide emergency fire support for endangered Iraqi forces. To the coalition partners, Iraq appears to be putting little effort into improving its counter-insurgency capabilities because it knows it can rely on open-ended CJTF-OIR firepower. As one U.S. official told me, "we are not going to mow the grass for them, kill Sunnis for them, forever."

Thus, there is likely to be quite a lot of interest on the coalition side for Iraq to either commit to real improvement in its military capabilities or to quit wasting the coalition's time and resources. A new coalition training plan should involve an Iraqi commitment to take over all combat missions within a defined period of time, certainly not more than a year or eighteen months. At present, the Islamic State is not a big enough threat to keep coalition forces in Iraq indefinitely if Iraq doesn't do more to help itself.

MOQTADA AND THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

As Moqtada al-Sadr moves to center stage—as a political kingmaker and Iraq's strongest militia leader—it is also worth asking in broader strokes not just how Sadrists are expected to view certain concrete issues, but how the United States should view the man himself as a political leader of Iraq. The answer is that the United States should view Moqtada with the same caution and coolness that he views us, because he is not a friend of America, likely never will be, and could easily be a very dangerous influence over Iraq's future.

In conversation with a senior Sadrist, I asked what it would hypothetically take for Moqtada to openly meet with American officials or to authorize his deputies to do so. It was immediately apparent in the response that ill-feeling towards the United States runs very deep. He answered that the United States would first need to publically apologize for a number of things: for backing Saddam in the Iran-Iraq War, for failing to help Iraqis during the

bloodily suppressed intifada in 1991, for U.S. support to undemocratic governments seen as suppressing Shia (i.e., Saudi Arabia and Bahrain), and for U.S. foreign policy in the region in general—especially on the Israel-Palestine issue. The conditions as presented were something of a non-starter. Yet, as with other issues, the Sadrists may prove to be more flexible than they at first appear.

In terms of domestic politics, the United States should also watch Moqtada very closely and resist being lulled into underestimating the danger he could pose to Iraq’s democracy. Moqtada’s abrupt removal of protection from protest camps on January 25, opening the protesters up to deadly attacks and the burning of their camps, is a reminder that there are no permanent alliances in Iraqi politics. After months of uneasy coexistence, some protest leaders criticized Moqtada, and his response was to punish them without hesitation or mercy.

It is also important to clarify what Moqtada’s vision of leadership entails. Moqtada’s officials underline his keenness on “a civic state” and one told me outright he is “not intending to make a religious state. Religious goals can be achieved through the civic state. He is in harmony with Sistani.” This may well be true, but Moqtada also believes he has a role to play as a “guide” focused on “social justice” (in the words of one Sadrist advisor) who, while not directly ruling, “wants to set the principles, be the overseer.” While unlikely to be a ruler in the mold of Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Moqtada is also unlikely to be a “quietist” cleric in the style of Sistani. Something in-between is more likely, raising parallels with Hezbollah’s Hassan Nasrallah. This is not a comparison that should reassure. ❖



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