

# Possibilities and Challenges in Iraq's Government Formation after the Sadr-Maliki Call

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Ali Al-Mikdam is an Iraqi writer, journalist and human rights activist interested in Iraqi affairs, gender equality, Iraqi-Iranian politics relations, and pro-Iranian militias in Iraq. He is concerned with victims of forced disappearance and their rights. Due to his opinions he was arrested twice and abducted by unknown militia.



Brief Analysis

**After months of deadlock over who will hold the position of Iraq's president and prime minister in a laborious process towards government formation, an agreement finally seems possible, and perhaps even likely.**

**T**his shift is due to a recent phone call between Muqtada al-Sadr—head of the current majority bloc in government consisting of his party along with Sunni and Kurdish allies—and Maliki, the divisive former prime minister representing the Shia Coordination Framework, which includes those Shia political parties whose influence weakened during Iraq's early October 2021 elections.

Those familiar with the conversation between the two men said that it was KDP leader Massoud Barzani who initiated the meeting. Barzani has faced unprecedented pressure in the past few months from multiple fronts, including the ongoing rift between the KDP and the PUK and the unexpected ruling of the Iraqi Federal Court on the longstanding issue of oil revenues in the KRI in favor of Baghdad over Erbil.

For these combined reasons, it has been in Barzani's interest to reduce the intensity of the conflict between the two Shia political blocs over nominations for prime minister, a conflict playing out in tandem to KDP-PUK tensions over who will fill the seat of the presidency. Iran is monitoring every step, and it is not impossible that it also had a hand in the Sadr-Maliki call. In any case, it has contributed to pressure on Barzani internally and judicially to reach this result.

According to informed sources, the conversation lasted just a few minutes, and the two sides mainly appeared to reaffirm their positions and principles. Sadr confirmed his insistence on a government of a national majority, effectively telling Maliki that 'if you want to form the government we are prepared to be the opposition

ourselves, otherwise let us form it.’

Yet despite the conflicts that remain, any contact regarding this issue is a sign of movement on the question of government formation, which in the past weeks had seemed completely on hold given each side’s convictions against the other party. Now, with an avenue of dialogue open between the two rivals, Sadr’s public refusal to work with Maliki appears to have reached an end, and there are reports that the two men are now meeting in person to discuss the issue further.

This shift sparked optimism tinged with caution after news emerged of Muqtada Al-Sadr’s intention to nominate his cousin Jaafar al-Sadr for prime minister—a choice that the Shia Coordination Framework has announced it will support. Jaafar is the son of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, the spiritual father of all of Iraq’s Shia Islamists who was executed by Saddam Hussein in the early eighties due to his political activities. In response, those armed militias that see themselves as politically oriented with the Coordination Framework started a campaign against the candidacy of Jaafar al-Sadr, describing his candidacy on social media platforms as the “British option.”

However, it is not just the militias who have concerns over Jaafar’s nominations. Others within the Shia Islamist movement fear the repercussions of using the name Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr as their trump card in response to the overall decline in their popularity, especially among the youth. The weight of the martyred symbol of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr may actually backfire if Jaafar al-Sadr fails in his risky mission as prime minister of a state that is facing so many challenges. Such a failure would break the prestige of the symbol of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and further contribute to the weakening of the Shia Islamic body.

Saleh Al-Hamdani—an Iraqi journalist and blogger—believes that Muqtada Al-Sadr may at present be forced to agree with the Coordination Framework, but that their consensus will not last long. He notes that Sadr and the Coordination Framework will remain rivals for power, that Sadr cannot be controlled, and that his large and powerful group of supporters provide means of disrupting the country’s political sphere. With the first disagreement between the two sides, all bets will be off.

On the other hand, writer and researcher in Iraqi affairs Dr. Al-Fadl Ahmed believes that such a consensus will trigger a second protest movement in Iraq. He notes that the previous large protests in early October 2019 were spurred by high unemployment, poverty, and the elites’ apparent contempt for the Iraqi people. With these factors remaining today and without any solution to these issues in sight, it is natural to expect for the protests to return in the future and increase in their intensity. The more the Iraqi people are ignored, the more compelling the message of the October 2019 protests becomes. While it is true the initial movement started with small protests and was largely made up of those who held graduate degrees, broad swathes of the Iraqi population were subsequently motivated to come out in larger numbers and adopt political demands in addition to those regarding basic services. It is likely that the current small wave of protests currently cropping up in areas that played key roles in the original protest movement will be a catalyst for larger protests in the future unless their demands are resolved.

Dr. Al-Fadl expects that if a new consensus government is formed in Iraq, it will be weak and unable to face the protests—potentially marking it as the last government of the Iraqi governmental system established after 2003.

In contrast, a majority government in which one major party is understood as responsible for the state’s failures and successes will have a greater ability to contain the crisis of protests if it occurs.

Iraq’s current political scene fluctuates between two scenarios: either there will be a consensus government that means a return to the option that Iraqi politicians know well, or an attempt to try another political option—the majority option with a true opposition block—that the Iraqi state has not yet dealt with. The first option would inflame the street, which is barely calmed down after the October uprising. As for the second option, its mechanisms and consequences are unknown. ❖

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## RECOMMENDED

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### BRIEF ANALYSIS

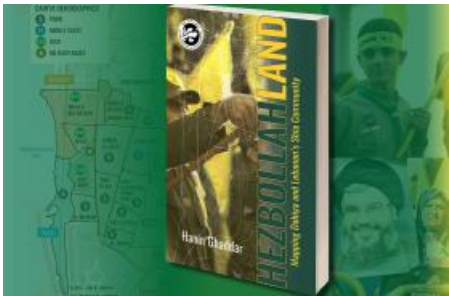
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