

Implications of the Sadrist Withdrawal for the Shia Coordination Framework and Iran

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Brief Analysis

The conflict between the Sadrists and the Shia Coordination Framework signals the potential for a new political order in Iraq and a shift in Iran's influence in the country.

In mid-June, Sadrist candidates in the Iraqi Council of Representatives withdrew from the political process despite winning a majority of seats in the early elections held on October 10, 2021. In the interim period, the Sadrists' leader, Muqtada Sadr, had failed to form a majority coalition and move forward with government formation. Now, their decision to withdraw from the process entirely can help shed light on the nature of the political crisis that Iraq is experiencing. Not only has the country been unable to form a government but it also faces other challenges, such as deteriorating security.

Given the Sadrists' economic, political, and social influence, Sadr may also use his political clout to confront the Shia Coordination Framework if it tried to provoke him and contain his influence. Thus, the Sadrists have withdrawn in order to send a clear message to the Shia Coordination Framework – led by former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki – that they are now the dominant Shia political force in Iraq and that the Coordination Framework must accept this new reality.

At this point, it remains unclear how the winds will blow. The Sadrists' decision to withdraw makes clear that Iraq is on the verge of new political order centered around the conflict between ascendant Shia forces (the Sadrists) and traditional Shia forces (the Coordination Framework). The early elections of October 2021 could be the last elections held under the current political system, especially given that the system is no longer able to internally resolve its political crises. Furthermore, the political forces that created this system are no longer able to function within it, all of which indicate a significant degree of uncertainty for the current political system during the coming period.

The Shia Coordination Framework: Where next?

It seems that Sadr's withdrawal from the Iraqi political process was aimed at embarrassing the Shia Coordination

Framework and embroil them in a decisive confrontation on the street. Despite Sadr's ambiguous move, the Coordination Framework seems vigilant in dealing with it. Recently, there are two options governing the actions of the Framework, which have already engaged in dialogues with the Kurdish, Sunni, and independent blocs to form a national consensus government and put an end to the current political impasse.

The first option is espoused by Maliki; he calls for the formation of a strong Framework government that can benefit from the great financial abundance resulting from the enormous rise in oil prices and allocate to design new government programs that serve the Iraqi citizens. This could provide the Framework the public support it needs to confront Sadr's threats of mobilizing the street.

The second option is advocated by other leaders in the Shia Coordination Framework – most notably Hadi Al-Amiri, Ammar Al-Hakim, Haider Al-Abadi, and Qais Al-Khazali. They believe that there is a need to start a transitional phase based on the extension of Mustafa Al-Kadhimi's cabinet. During this period, the Framework can work to amend the electoral law and the Electoral Commission in a way that serves its interests. Then, it could dissolve the Parliament and put a schedule for early elections. In this way, the Framework could deprive Sadr from the element of surprise and weaken him in a way that impedes him from threatening the Framework's options. Despite the political caveats that characterize each option, Sadr's actions alone will ultimately determine which direction the Shia Coordination Framework may pursue.

The Shia Coordination Framework forces are dealing with numerous challenges, not only regarding how to work with the Sadrist but also how to convince the Sunni and Kurdish blocs to leave behind previous agreements with what was the largest bloc and move to coordinate with the Framework. The Kurdistan Region in particular will have a significant problem working with the Shia Coordination Framework forces given issues of disputes between Bagdad and Erbil and the continuous bombing of Erbil and gas fields in Sulaymaniyah by some armed factions associated with the Framework. There will be similar problems with the Sunni bloc, which holds some of the Coordination Framework forces responsible for the tragedies that have befallen Sunni cities liberated from ISIS control and their deliberate delay of the reconstruction efforts and the return of the displaced people to those cities. Meanwhile, many Shia Coordination Framework leaders have accused the Sunni and Kurdish blocs of trying to normalize Iraq's relations with Israel, though they recently toned down this discourse.

Where does Iran fit in this Shia equation?

When it comes to Iraqi politics, Iran has pursued a diplomatic strategy that has sometimes been restrained but also often appeared erratic. After the results of the early elections were announced, Iran accepted the results and their implications, even though its allies had lost. The weakness of the current Iranian position in Iraq indicates that Iran no longer has the clout to manipulate Iraqi politics, after each election, as was previously the case during the era of Qasem Soleimani, who held a great deal of influence and served as a unifier for Iraq's numerous pro-Iranian militia groups.

The current Iranian predicament in Iraq is the product of several key factors. The most important of these are current Quds force commander Esmail Qaani's failure to fill the strategic gap created by Soleimani's absence, as well as the political conflict that has arisen between leaders of Iranian-aligned factions trying to fill the shoes of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, former commander of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Iran is also facing significant regional and international pressures after the faltering of the Vienna nuclear agreement and its preoccupation with the intelligence and security breaches that it has been suffering from recently. These strategic difficulties have had negative repercussions for Iran's capabilities in Iraq and have caused the former to shift from a position of giving orders to being forced to come to terms with a new reality. Despite Iran's attempt to correct the imbalance it faces in Iraq through appointing a new ambassador, it is still unable to change the rules of the game in a comprehensive way.

Regardless of the nature of the Shia party that will form the next government, Iran is mainly concerned ensuring its political interests in Iraq. It does not view Iraq as a sovereign state, but rather as part of its regional influence which extends from Afghanistan to the Mediterranean. Iran also seeks to obtain some assurances from any upcoming government to ensure the future of the PMF. More precisely, Iran intendeds to integrate all factions loyal to it into the PMF, structure the PMF in a way similar to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and grant it guardianship and constitutional legitimacy to guarantee the continuation of its influence in Iraq.

U.S. Policy Implications

Iraq's current political difficulties are taking place against the backdrop of U.S. President Joe Biden's upcoming trip to the Middle East scheduled in mid-July, and in the midst of U.S. efforts to exert more pressure on Iran to reach an agreement on the new nuclear deal. For its part, Iran is still digging in its heels to stall progress on any deal that does not serve its political ambitions. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei announced that Iran would not give ground on its ballistic missile and drone programs or regarding its regional involvement, which have come under just as much U.S. scrutiny as its nuclear program.

If the Shia Coordination Framework forces were to succeed in forming a new government in Iraq, this would pose a significant obstacle for U.S. efforts to contain Iranian activity in the region, especially regarding the Gulf and Israel. Although the Biden administration has indicated that it plans to form a new security umbrella in the region to bring together Israel and the Gulf against Iran, this vision is on the verge of a very difficult test. If the Coordination Framework succeeds in installing a new Iraqi prime minister sympathetic to the Iranian project and opposed to the U.S. presence in Iraq or U.S. policy in the region in general, Iraq will become a security problem that the United States will have to deal with according to this new status quo.

It is true that there are recent regional efforts from Kadhimi to bring Iran and the Gulf—and specifically Saudi Arabia—closer together. But the continuing drone and missile attacks on U.S. bases conducted by Iranian-aligned militias—some of which are connected to the Shia Coordination Framework—make clear that the United States could soon find itself in a difficult situation in Iraq given this most recent turn of regional and international events. Depending on how the Shia Coalition Framework proceeds on government formation moving forward, the United States may need to rethink its approach in Iraq.



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