

In the Power Struggle Between Sadr and Maliki, What Stream of Islamist Politics Will Prevail in Iraq?

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Brief Analysis

As the feud between Sadr and Maliki takes an unprecedented turn, its result is likely to have an impact on the role of Shia Islamist parties in Iraq.

Muqtada al-Sadr's recent tweet asserted the authenticity of leaked recordings from a secret meeting between Nouri al-Maliki and Shia political activists in Iraq. The news of these leaks have made headlines across newspapers and media in Iraq, as they contain alleged threats against Sadr in the leak and allusions to what amounts to a political coup. The leaked audio, which is now with the Iraqi judiciary to verify its authenticity, included accusations against Sadr and his group of murder and kidnapping. It also included personal accusations that Sadr is part of a British scheme, led by Masoud Barzani, to overthrow the Shia in Iraq and hand over power to the Sunnis.

Maliki is heard in the leak saying: "Iraq is on the verge of a devastating war from which no one will emerge unscathed, unless the project of Moqtada Al-Sadr, Massoud Barzani, and Muhammad Al-Halbousi is defeated...and if necessary, I will attack Najaf." He was also heard indicating that he had fighters ready to fight. The political activists, whose voices can also be heard in the leaked recording, promised him to place thousands of fighters under his command to carry out the alleged move against everyone—including some of his allies in the framework whom Maliki accused of cowardice and of having been purchased by the (Sunni) Speaker of Parliament Al-Halbousi. In the audio, Maliki also promised these young men he was talking to to arrange a meeting for them with the Iranians to support them financially and morally and make them ready for battle.

Sadr's response to these leaks represents the latest chapter in an ongoing political saga in Iraq between these two powerful politicians, and his response also suggests that the escalating power struggle in the country between these two forces is now entering a new stage.

In his tweet, Sadr demanded that Maliki's political allies and tribe abandon Maliki and that the latter should leave

politics entirely. The tweet set a new precedent in the Iraqi political conflict since the current political system was established following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. In addition to setting this precedent, the public assertion that this leaked audio is accurate also has important ramifications that extend beyond the political isolation of Maliki, who has been one of most important actors in Iraq during the past two decades.

This situation is causing a major upheaval within Maliki's party, the Islamic Dawa Party, which is itself an institution as Iraq's largest and oldest Shia party. This conflict is also likely to pave the way for a nationally-oriented political Shia Islamism to replace the old guard that has dominated the political scene for the past nineteen years, as I projected in a previous Washington Institute article [two years ago \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/mabd-antfadt-alraq-waq-jdyd-wlabyn-jdd\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/ar/policy-analysis/mabd-antfadt-alraq-waq-jdyd-wlabyn-jdd).

Sadr's tweet comes just three days after the Sadrists' "million-man march" during Friday prayers on July 15, which included speeches delivered on behalf of Sadr that contained ten key points for the Iraqi political class. However, there was also an implicit eleventh point that was nevertheless clearly conveyed to the audience, i.e., that the Sadrists had voluntarily ceded the parliamentary majority they won in the last elections and could still use that popular power, now gathered in the streets, to turn the tables if they had to. It seems that the Coordination Framework, or at least some of its forces, had ignored this crucial message.

The recent leaks—the authenticity of which Maliki has denied—contained threats from Maliki against both the Sadrist current as well as Sunnis and Kurds involved in the political process. They also called into question the credibility of Maliki's allies in the Coordination Framework and their ability to make key decisions without the backing of Iran and the Revolutionary Guard. This has given Sadr the opportunity to strengthen his current's influence and tighten their grip on the Iraqi political process.

Sadr seems to have decided that the leaked recording is genuine, although others have expressed doubts about its authenticity. The most concerning aspect of the leak is that the conversation indicates Maliki was trying to tap new forces from among armed factions that wanted to seize control not only from the Sadrists but also from the other Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish political actors. The implication—if the leak is indeed authentic—is that Maliki was planning a political coup with the help of new armed factions, which would install him as the sole leader of Iraq. If such a coup had succeeded, it would have first targeted the Sadrists and then set upon the entire Iraqi political process.

Now that the leak is out, and Sadr has decided to tackle the issue head on, these two forces are pitted against each other. If Sadr succeeds in quashing any would-be coup, this turn of events will have ramifications for the perennial struggle between different currents of Shia political Islam that have played out in Iraq over the past several decades since 2003, as the most prominent Shia forces in Iraq at the moment are Maliki's Islamic Dawa Party and the Sadrist current.

Shia Islamist parties do not differ significantly from Sunni political Islamist parties in their general approach, although there are some differences. In both Sunni and Shia political contexts in various countries, Islamist thought is split between transnational and national approaches. Within these two general camps there are also various other subgroups.

The Iranian Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist (Velayat-e Faqih) and the Iraqi Islamic Dawa Party, like the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood, belong to the transnational camp. They believe that it is not necessary to wait for the reappearance of the Hidden Imam to establish an Islamic state, and that it is permissible under Islamic shari'a to establish that state during the Imam's occultation. A temporary form of deliverance is therefore achieved through the establishment of a transnational Shia Islamic state.

The Iranian and Iraqi approaches developed divergent understandings due to the different circumstances in which they developed. In Iran, the Vali-e Faqih serves as the Supreme Leader while the Islamic Dawa Party has elected political leaders. The second main camp within Shia political Islam focuses on spreading Islamic principles in the state and working within the national political process without an end goal of establishing a greater Islamic state. In this regard,

this camp follows Najaf's understanding of Islamic jurisprudence in rejecting the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist and significant involvement in politics. The Sadrist current, the National Wisdom Movement, and the Islamic Virtue Party in Iraq, as well as other religious factions in other countries, exemplify this trend in domestic Shia political Islamist parties.

In light of these various currents within Shia political Islam, it would be wrong to say that the conflict that has emerged between Sadr and Maliki is only a personal dispute, without further implications for Iraqi politics. The conflict certainly does have a major personal dimension, stemming from the Battle of Basra when Maliki's US-backed forces attacked Muqtada al-Sadr's forces in 2008.

Yet the struggle currently playing out between these two parties for political power is also by nature ultimately tied to broader political questions in Iraq as well. The conflict between the major representatives of these two streams also raises the question of whether a globally-oriented Shia Islamist doctrine—including both the Islamic Dawa Party and the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist—or a nationally-focused Iraqi Shia political Islamist doctrine will become the dominant political trend in Iraq.

As an expert on Iraqi public opinion, I would argue that there is growing support among the Iraqi public for nationally-based Iraqi Shia movements over the transnational approach. For example, the October 2021 elections shed light on the degree of popular support in Shia communities for each of these approaches, with much greater electoral support for the national approach as compared with the transnational model primarily represented by the Coordination Framework.

Calculations based on the Iraqi electoral commission [data](#)

[\(https://ihec.iq/%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2586%25D8%25AA%25D8%25A7%25D8%25A6%25D8%25AC/\)](https://ihec.iq/%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2586%25D8%25AA%25D8%25A7%25D8%25A6%25D8%25AC/)

help reveal these dynamics. A majority—70 to 75 percent—of eligible Shia voters did not participate in the elections. But of those Shia who did participate, only 30 percent voted for the Coordination Framework forces, the amalgamation of parties including Rule of Law Coalition, Fatah Alliance, Huqooq Movement, Ataa Movement, and the al-Aqd al-Watani Coalition that represented the transnational approach in the elections. The national Iraqi Shia current received another 30 percent of those who voted (themselves just 25-30% of the potential Shia electorate), while independent candidates won about 40 percent of the Shia vote.

As is clear through this breakdown, a majority of Iraqi Shia voters chose either independent candidates or proponents of nationally-focused political Islamism. According to a recent [World Values Survey](#) [\(https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp\)](https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp), approximately just 35 percent of Shia in Iraq want some form of an Islamic state, whether from the national or transnational model.

As the confrontation between Sadr and Maliki unfolds, it is likely to further weaken popular support for the transnational current of Islamist thought in Iraq, which already only a minority view overall. With regard to political leadership, the current power struggle will clearly impact which camp will hold sway over Iraqi decision-making. If Sadr is successful, transnational Shia Islamism will have been dealt a major blow, and the proponents of the Vilayet-e-Faqih model will have lost one of its main footholds in Iraq. Even if the Islamic Dawa Party remains a key player in Iraq, its impact will suffer a setback that is likely to result in a complete rethinking of its approach, especially since it is dealing with an internal rift since former Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi's resignation from the party several years ago. ❖

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