

# What's Next for Iraq After al-Sadr's Withdrawal from the Political Process?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Azhar Al-Rubaie is a freelance journalist based in Iraq. His writing focuses on a variety of issues, including politics, health, society, wars, and human rights. Al-Rubaie is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



Brief Analysis

## Violent protests broke out after al-Sadr announced his withdrawal from Iraqi politics, but this is unlikely to be the end of al-Sadr's political maneuvering.

On August 29, thousands of Sadrists headed towards the Green Zone in Baghdad, where Iraq's foreign embassies and government buildings are located. These protests soon became violent and later expanded into southern Iraqi governorates, including Maysan, Dhi Qar, and Basra, all in response to a tweet from prominent Shi'ite leader Muqtada al-Sadr stating that he would withdraw from politics. In the tweet, al-Sadr indicated that he was permanently resigning from political activity and would close down all Sadrist institutions except his father's shrine, the al-Sadr family's museum, and the al-Sadr heritage authority. He also asked for his followers' prayers if he should die or be killed.

Al-Sadr's tweet and the ensuing protests are yet another episode in the saga of Iraq's political chaos following almost one year of failing to form a government after the country's early elections in October 2021. Since then, Shia rivals—namely the Sadrist Movement led by al-Sadr and the Iranian-aligned Coordination Framework which includes forces led by Nouri al-Maliki, Hadi al-Amiri, and Haider al-Abadi—have been stuck in a stalemate that has continued to escalate.

### The Immediate Consequences of al-Sadr's Withdrawal

Al-Sadr's withdrawal quickly triggered bloody clashes between his supporters and other Shi'ite factions, including the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq militia. With around 33 killed and hundreds more wounded in these clashes, security forces announced a full curfew on vehicles in Baghdad in an attempt to stem the violence.

The next day, al-Sadr gave a press conference in which he ordered his supporters to withdraw from the Green Zone and the Iraqi Council of Representatives building within the next hour. In a [televised speech, \(https://url.emailprotection.link/?bGFWIxJwEA0kagwyYhXLyPHsFOpjJc\\_dBOky2itm2KzS4nOiXcvfO3QTf2ULGQgeufblHs2NsMGgnwxPu\\_mIk\\_M2uS\\_-jSg7LsMoH-5aMwTtka9HRhEHw\\_BdnHaNPcS\)](#) he stated that he was deeply saddened by what was happening in Iraq and he emphasized that both sides of the conflict were to blame. Al-Sadr added that a revolution tainted by violence and death was no longer a revolution.

Nevertheless, several days later on September 2, protests again erupted in Nisour Square calling for an end to corruption, quotas, and Iranian interference in Iraqi affairs. Protestors chanted “the people want the fall of the regime,” “Iran won’t rule Iraq,” and “we oppose Tehran’s interference in Iraqi politics.” Although these demonstrators were independently organized by the Tishreen Movement and were thus unaffiliated with the Sadrists, they called all other protestors to join them and made many of the same demands, including the dissolution of the Parliament and anti-corruption checks on authorities.

These September protesters, like many in Iraq, blame the ruling elite for the country’s ongoing political impasse and failure to manage the country. The demonstrators also expressed strong objections to Iran’s blatant interference in Iraqi affairs, another major talking point for al-Sadr. Despite his withdrawal from the political process, al-Sadr’s demands continue to resonate, both within his loyal Sadrist base and increasingly outside of it, as well.

### **Al-Sadr’s History of Withdrawals**

Beyond just the staying power of al-Sadr’s arguments, various parties to the conflict have speculated that al-Sadr, himself, will likely stick around. Although he announced that this was a “final” withdrawal from politics, many maintain that he could return at any time. A brief glance at al-Sadr’s past maneuvers proves as much.

Indeed, this is not the first time that al-Sadr has withdrawn from the political process. At various intervals in recent years, the Shi’ite leader has suddenly announced to his followers that he would withdraw or resign from political activity only to later renege on his decision. In 2007, for example, al-Sadr **announced**

**([https://www.democracynow.org/2007/4/16/headlines/sadr\\_movement\\_quits\\_iraq\\_government\\_over\\_us\\_withdrawal](https://www.democracynow.org/2007/4/16/headlines/sadr_movement_quits_iraq_government_over_us_withdrawal))**

his resignation from politics and subsequently left for Iran, both in protest of the presence of U.S. forces in Iraq and in order to focus more comprehensively on his religious studies. At the time, al-Sadr promised he would not reconsider his decision until the last U.S. soldier withdrew from Iraq. However, in 2010, before U.S. forces withdrew from Iraq, al-Sadr came back onto the political scene after his bloc won 39 seats in the election as members of the National Iraqi Alliance.

Three years later, following clashes between the Sadrists and other armed factions, al-Sadr again announced that he would leave political life, only to return shortly thereafter. He withdrew yet again in 2014 and 2016, and otherwise made frequent threats to withdraw at **various points (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/timeline-shia-cleric-al-sadr-s-withdrawals-from-iraqi-politics/2672895>)** over the last decade. Al-Sadr’s most recent announcement is one in a long line of withdrawals and resignations.

Considering this history, some political forces remain concerned about al-Sadr’s lasting impact given the scope of his political clout. More specifically, many are concerned that al-Sadr’s million-man grassroots following has the potential to upend the Iraqi political process at his bidding, whether or not he personally returns to politics. Even outside of the political framework, al-Sadr is capable of stirring up the Iraqi public with a single tweet to mobilize supporters around the country.

Moreover, al-Sadr’s resignation from the political process does not necessarily mean that he will turn over power to other political parties and factions, nor that he will make room for them in the political process. Those close to al-Sadr have indicated that the remaining players will not be able to form a government or name a prime minister, either according to their own objectives or the conditions that al-Sadr had previously set. Ultimately, this could result in the dissolution of the Iraqi Council of Representatives, and early elections could be held to resolve the crisis and break the political stalemate that has lasted for about a year.

If the Coordination Framework does, indeed, make concessions or agree to al-Sadr’s conditions to dissolve parliament in favor of early elections, al-Sadr’s withdrawal is unlikely to last much longer. Following a September 5 meeting of political forces that did not include Sadrist representatives, this scenario seems likely to happen in the near future. In the meeting, political figures discussed the need to reconcile divergent points of view and they endorsed establishing a tactical team from among various political entities to prepare for early elections. Such preparation would include revising the election law and rethinking the role of the elections commissions, as al-Sadr had wanted.

### **Withdrawing Without Leaving**

Political analyst Raad Hashim, like others, has **argued (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oz4IK6n9TaE>)** that al-Sadr’s

withdrawal is only temporary—an attempt to win sympathy and drum up support for his campaign against rival militias. But even if al-Sadr’s resignation is, indeed, final, it’s clear that he would remain very much present in the political workings of Iraq. Al-Sadr has left his mark on the Sadrist movement and in the Iraqi public, and it is unlikely that he will remain on the sidelines for long, especially if there are more escalations—or concessions—in the future.

Although the political scene in Iraq has sometimes been chaotic and unclear, the likelihood of early elections before the end of next year is an important break in the political stalemate. If amendments are made to the constitution and election laws, and changes are implemented in the elections commission, it’s possible that an Iraqi government could be successfully formed. Of course, there’s no guarantee that these changes will actually resolve the deep-seated issues between the major political blocs. Nevertheless, the changes will likely result in a return to politics for al-Sadr, who will be eager to again participate in the electoral process along with his supporters, especially if amendments are made to allow political blocs to form alliances after the elections. If this is the case, analysts predict the amendments will largely work in al-Sadr’s favor during the formation of the next government, granting him an upper hand in the political sphere. ❖

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