

# Forming a New Government in Iraq: Possible Scenarios

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Brief Analysis

## Although Iraq's new government has ended the year-long deadlock, the path forward is still rife with obstacles.

On October 13, Iraqis woke to the sound of nine Katyusha rockets falling on the Green Zone before the special session of parliament that was to be held to select the new Iraqi president. But these rockets were no celebratory shots marking a breakthrough one year after the last Iraqi elections. Although security forces blocked all the roads leading to the Green Zone in order to prevent any demonstrators, they still failed to stop armed factions from expressing their unhappiness about the election of Abdul Latif Rashid to the office of Iraq's fourth president since the fall of the regime in 2003.

Iraq has suffered from complete political paralysis since its Federal Supreme Court issued a [decision \(https://shafaq.com/en/Iraq-News/Supreme-Court-specifies-the-quorum-of-the-parliament-session-dedicated-to-elect-a-president\)](https://shafaq.com/en/Iraq-News/Supreme-Court-specifies-the-quorum-of-the-parliament-session-dedicated-to-elect-a-president) in February that the Council of Representatives must have a two-thirds quorum to elect a president. This decision enabled the Coordination Framework forces and their allies to form an opposition bloc that prevented the Sadrists Movement and its allies—including the Sunnis and Kurds—from forming a government after they won a majority in the 2021 elections. The Sadrists had wanted to form a majority government instead of a consensus-based government between political parties, as had been the case during the previous five parliamentary sessions. After winning the most seats—73 total—the Sadrists ultimately refused to form a coalition with the Coordination Framework forces, whom the Sadrists accused of corruption and blamed for Iraq's ongoing challenges.

The Sadrists pulled out of the Council of Representatives, which paved the way for other political forces, most of which were aligned with the Coordination Framework, to come to the forefront and proceed with forming a government. These groups were able to form accords with former Sadrists allies, including Kurds and Sunnis, to elect

Rashid as president. In turn, Rashid selected Mohammed Shia al-Sudani as the new prime minister. Sudani has close ties to Nouri al-Maliki, although he resigned from Maliki's party some time ago. The political process in Iraq is back to business as usual despite the Sadrists' attempts to reject a system of political consensus.

The Sadrists' efforts, which were undermined by the Coordination Framework forces, would have limited the authority to form a new government to the groups that had received the most votes, which is how things usually run in democratic societies. However, in Iraq, this would have resulted in two main outcomes. First, most political parties and figures would have lost their influence in government, which would have undermined their political, financial, and military clout. Secondly, it would have robbed Iran of much of its political influence over Iraq by keeping its allies out of the government. This is especially true since the Sadrists have made it clear since the beginning that they oppose foreign meddling in Iraq, whether from Iran, the United States, or any other power. Furthermore, forming a majority government would have created a precedent for future governments to require a majority in order to assume power. The forces with limited popular backing are aware they would not be able to win in future elections if this were the case.

With the Sadrists out but the Coordination Framework still unable to reach a two-thirds quorum, new political affiliations and agreements were established. Former Sadrist allies, particularly the Sunnis and Kurds, took advantage of the Framework's need for support and made increased demands in exchange for joining the coalition and forming a government. One of these demands was Masoud Barzani's insistence that Barham Salih—the candidate for the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—be kept away from the presidency, replaced either with a candidate from the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) or a different candidate from the PUK.

The Coalition Framework forces likewise acceded to various Kurdish and Sunni demands which they had previously been unwilling to negotiate on, especially with regard to oil and gas in the Kurdistan Region, Article 140 in the constitution—which established the the Kirkuk status referendum, and removing de-Baathification mechanisms that had been used against Sunnis.

Although the president has now been elected and the nominee for prime minister chosen, it remains to be seen how the two other main actors in the Iraqi political scene will respond, since both the Sadrists and the October/Tishreen Movement have previously opposed the nomination of Sudani as prime minister.

The October Movement, which forced former Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi to resign and pressured the previous Council of Representatives to change the electoral law, has now lost much of its momentum as a result of being a main target for disinformation and physical attacks from militias and pro-Iranian forces in Iraq. Ideological conflicts and leadership disputes within the Movement as well as clashes with the Sadrists also led to the splintering of these forces and further loss of momentum. Despite promises to the October Movement from Mustafa al-Kadhimi's government, Khadimi failed to deliver and has even tried to appease armed parties opposed to the October Movement in hopes that they would back him in the next elections. Kadhimi did not want the October Movement to create issues for his government by protesting against corruption, injustice, lack of social services, and loss of sovereignty.

Nevertheless, although the movement has lost much of its energy, their ideas remain firmly planted in the minds of most Iraqis, especially the youth. The memory of what was achieved in 2019-2020 remains present for everyday Iraqis and continues to frighten political parties in power. Although the number who went out into the streets on the third anniversary of the October uprising was smaller than expected, there were calls for broader action and it is still possible that a larger demonstration could be organized for October 25. The choice of Sudani as prime minister—a politician who had previously been nominated by pro-Iranian forces during the October uprising and whom the October Movement had previously opposed due to his close ties to Maliki—will pose a new challenge to the will of the October Movement. It remains to be seen whether these events will prompt youth in Baghdad and southern Iraq to

protest further against the regime.

Sudani's nomination also poses a personal challenge to al-Sadr and his broad popular base. Like the October Movement, Sadr had previously opposed Sudani's nomination. Several months earlier, a spokesman for Sadr on social media even shared a [tweet \(https://twitter.com/salih\\_m\\_iraqi/status/1551994815650340864?s=20&t=ZbH1MWZiOrY9IonP6k9n9w\)](https://twitter.com/salih_m_iraqi/status/1551994815650340864?s=20&t=ZbH1MWZiOrY9IonP6k9n9w) poking fun at Sudani's nomination because of his ties to Maliki, a key political opponent for Sadr. Now, the question in everyone's mind is: How will Sadr respond to this nomination? There are three potential scenarios that seem most likely at this juncture. First, Sadr could remain quiet about the nomination so that Sudani can form his government, and then later mobilize supporters after giving Sudani several months to show what he can do. If Sudani fails according to the Sadrists' evaluation, they could organize a popular uprising to remove him.

Sadr's silence thus far about Sudani's nomination is not what most analysts expected to see. Nevertheless, there are likely to be problems during the process of choosing a cabinet, with provocations from the Coordination Framework that will inevitably displease the Sadrists. This will make it difficult for the Sadrists to keep quiet for long. Furthermore, the Sadrists might see this transition period as an opportunity to become involved before Framework forces take control of state institutions, especially security forces, which would oppose any peaceful protest movement. This scenario, of course, could also lead to internal political dissidence in the Sadrist camp.

In a second scenario, the Framework forces could successfully appease the Sadrists by giving them some cabinet posts, providing assurances regarding early elections in the future, or even granting the right to veto Coordination Framework cabinet members. This does not appear to be a very likely scenario based on what Sadr has previously said. He indicated to those close to him that he does not want to negotiate behind the scenes with Coordination Framework forces. Case in point, the same social media [spokesperson \(https://twitter.com/salih\\_m\\_iraqi\)](https://twitter.com/salih_m_iraqi) for Sadr tweeted days ago that Sadr won't allow any of his supporters to join the new cabinet.

The third scenario is the one that seems most likely. In this scenario, the Sadrists would wait for the right moment—for example, the third anniversary of the October uprising on October 25, 2022 or a similar occasion—to organize popular demonstrations and undermine the formation of the new government. There are reports circulating that talks have occurred to form agreements between the October Movement leaders and Sadrists to unify their efforts and mobilize forces for a major popular uprising to topple the regime.

If a popular alliance between the Sadrists and the October Movement is successful, there is no doubt that divisions within the Coordination Framework forces, which became apparent during the selection of the new president, will become further entrenched. The Coordination Framework will split between “doves”—such as Haider al-Abadi, who will insist on appeasing Sadr and not moving ahead with the new government—and “hawks”—who will resort again to using militias against a popular uprising. Armed conflict remains likely unless religious and political forces such as Ayatollah al-Sistani are able to keep weapons from falling into the hands of non-state actors. The new government, even if it is able to proceed, will certainly face challenges on many fronts, which will render Sudani's task practically insurmountable. Will Sudani be the Tom Cruise of Iraq and pull this ‘mission impossible’ off? We don't have to wait long to find out the answer ❖

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