

Eid al-Ghadir: A Renewed Debate for Iraq's Shia Politicians

by [Waqas al-Kadi \(/experts/waqas-al-kadi\)](#)

Jun 12, 2024

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/ya-alghdyr-nqash-mjdwad-llyasyn-alshyt-alraqyyn\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Waqas al-Kadi \(/experts/waqas-al-kadi\)](#)

Waqas al-Qadi is an independent journalist and writer interested in political and humanitarian affairs.



Brief Analysis

Muqtada al-Sadr's recent attempt to designate Eid al-Ghadir a national holiday has sparked fierce debates and threatens to further destabilize the Iraqi political system in the coming months.

For centuries, Shia and Sunni scholars across the Muslim world have failed to reach a consensus on Eid al-Ghadir and its religious significance to Islam. This is true in Iraq as well, but due to the precarious and often tense relationship between the Shia and Sunni communities in the country, the Iraqi religious discourse has largely refrained from debating the issue publicly in order to avoid enflaming sectarian divisions. Scholars Shia and Sunni alike understand that this contentious issue carries inherent risks, and while they may discuss the topic of Eid al-Ghadir extensively in private, moderate Sunnis and Shias dismiss it in pursuit of peaceful coexistence rooted in the innate nature of civil society. However, political dynamics in Iraq are shifting rapidly, and Eid al-Ghadir has now become a matter of open debate among the country's main political factions. The prominent Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's recent attempt to designate Eid al-Ghadir a national holiday has sparked fierce debates and threatens to further destabilize the Iraqi political system in the coming months.

Shias celebrate Eid al-Ghadir on the 18th of Dhu al-Hijjah every Islamic year, marking the anniversary of the Prophet Muhammad's sermon at a place called Ghadir Khumm, located between Mecca and Medina. During the return of Muslims from the Farewell Pilgrimage in 10 AH, the Prophet said, "Of whomsoever I am the *mawla* (master), Ali is his *mawla*." Shias interpret this as the Prophet's designation of Ali ibn Abi Talib as his successor. Sunnis respond by acknowledging Ali's virtue and status but argue that the Prophet's statement was a response to complaints from some soldiers in Yemen about Ali's perceived aloofness.

In mid-April 2024, Muqtada al-Sadr called for Eid al-Ghadir to be declared a national holiday. While this proposal has drawn much attention from politicians, the media, and the general public, it is not the first of its kind. Ammar al-Hakim, another Shia cleric and politician, made a similar call in 2016, in a motion that secured 170 signatures in Parliament.

Nothing happens in Iraq by chance. Political actors move subtly, forming alliance and moving against their rivals in calculated moves. Sadr's timing for the Eid al-Ghadir holiday proposal comes months before the end of Muhammad Shia' al-Sudani's term as Prime Minister. Sadr's recent activities, including renaming his movement the "Shia National Movement," suggest he is preparing for a significant return through the upcoming parliamentary elections, according to a [Reuters report \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/powerful-iraqi-shiite-cleric-sadr-girds-political-comeback-2024-05-12/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/powerful-iraqi-shiite-cleric-sadr-girds-political-comeback-2024-05-12/). Sadr likely aims to create a parliamentary bloc capable of forming the next government, after failing to do so two years ago without his competitors in the Coordination Framework.

Although religious figures and politicians have long feared that discussing Eid al-Ghadir would fuel Shia-Sunni conflict, Sadr's call to make Eid al-Ghadir a holiday is not directed against the Sunnis in Iraq. Instead, his current political machinations reflect a Shia-on-Shia power struggle and Sadr's attempt to embarrass the State Administration Coalition, which has pledged to Washington to adhere to relatively non-sectarian standards in exchange for agreed political gains. Sadr urged his supporters last May to chant "No, no America" to convey a message to those negotiating with the Americans, implicitly accusing Sudani's government of betraying the Shia cause by describing MPs opposing the holiday as "enemies of Muhammad and Ali."

Sadr used the same tactics against his opponents in the Coordination Framework that they used to thwart his attempts to form a government after the 2021 elections, despite his movement securing the most parliamentary seats. The Framework waged an organized smear campaign against Sadr, sometimes taking on ideological dimensions, accusing him of weakening the Shia component and handing power back to the Sunnis due to his alliances with Sunni and Kurdish parties, even though he severed ties with them abruptly.

Others went further, suggesting Sadr would not oppose normalization with Israel to secure his rule. Their media circulated clips of the kidnapped Israeli researcher Elizabeth Tsurkov discussing [her visit](#)

<https://www.independentarabia.com/node/474491/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A/%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AA%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D8> to Sadr City and Muqtada al-Sadr's character.

After Sadr's stunning defeat in 2022 at the hand of the Coordination Framework, he suggested that he would be withdrawing from politics. It appears however that he has merely been waiting for the opportunity to retaliate. Although Sadr is driven by certain ideological convictions, he is also opportunistic and politically pragmatic. Aware that Iran is the main player in today's Iraq, he is hoping to woo Iran by positioning himself as a defender of Iraq's Shia. During a recent meeting between Iranian Revolutionary Guard and the "Axis of Resistance" in the wake of President Ebrahim Raisi's funeral, Iranian leaders expressed dissatisfaction with the armed factions tied to the Coordination Framework. Through Sadr's current posturing as the "true" advocate for the Shia population, he is presenting himself as a reliable alternative to Tehran's current partners in Iraq. However, this move has serious repercussions, as Sadr undermines his movement's Arab identity and its previous opposition to Iranian interference in Iraqi politics.

Sadr's recent power plays seem to be miscalculated in other ways as well. The Coordination Framework forces are fully aware of Sadr's ambitions, so they have agreed to engage with him in a game of cat and mouse, raising sectarian demands to empower the "Shia" component. MP Ali Turki al-Jamali from the Sadikoun parliamentary bloc, affiliated with the [Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-asaib-ahl-al-haq-0\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-asaib-ahl-al-haq-0) militia, called for renaming Iraq "the Alawi State" and demanded changes to the curriculum to remove praise for certain Islamic figures, referring to the Rashidun Caliphs, whom he

[%D9%88%D9%82%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%87%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D8%AA%D9%87%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%B1%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B2-%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%A9](#)) on a TV channel affiliated with the militia.

Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq has put the ball in Sadr's court, knowing the danger of imposing a religious regime in Iraq similar to Iran's Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist, as Iraqi society, though conservative, is not inherently religious and historically resists any measures that restrict its freedoms.

Perhaps Sadr believes he has mastered the art of politics enough to maneuver his way to the top, but this is contrary to reality. He fell into a trap by escalating his rhetoric and belittling his opponents, including Shia scholars, as happened with the Saudi cleric Munir al-Khabbaz. Sadr [attacked \(https://www.newarab.com/news/saudi-shia-cleric-faces-threats-leave-iraq-over-old-video\)](https://www.newarab.com/news/saudi-shia-cleric-faces-threats-leave-iraq-over-old-video) Khabbaz over a decade-old video criticizing Iraqi scholars' silence during the previous regime, calling for Khabbaz to leave Iraq and return to Taif. The Coordination Framework media seized on Sadr's bombastic language, labelling it as a radical attempt to expel Shia scholars from Najaf. Such an accusation could spur retribution against Sadr's followers and potentially even Sadr's assassination. Should violence break out between the various Shia political blocs, the effects would be catastrophic for Iraq. As a Shia-majority country with a tenuous security situation, inter-Shia political feuding could quickly spiral out of control, threatening to involve Iraq's other religious and ethnic groups and potentially leading to an uncontrollable escalation. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[With Gantz Out, Can Netanyahu Resist the Far Right's Pull?](#)

Jun 11, 2024

David Makovsky

[\(/policy-analysis/gantz-out-can-netanyahu-resist-far-rights-pull\)](/policy-analysis/gantz-out-can-netanyahu-resist-far-rights-pull)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[IAEA Censure Risks Iranian Escalation](#)

Jun 10, 2024

Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/iaea-censure-risks-iranian-escalation\)](/policy-analysis/iaea-censure-risks-iranian-escalation)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[A Kuwaiti Reset?](#)

Jun 7, 2024

Simon Henderson,
David Schenker

[\(/policy-analysis/kuwaiti-reset\)](/policy-analysis/kuwaiti-reset)

TOPICS

[Shia Politics \(/policy-analysis/shia-politics\)](/policy-analysis/shia-politics)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iraq \(/policy-analysis/iraq\)](/policy-analysis/iraq)