



Concern Regarding Exacerbating Tensions in Iraq Emerges in the Aftermath of Populist Leader Muqtada al-Sadr's Latest Announced Withdrawal from Politics

Since October of last year, Iraq has found itself mired by uncertainty and political paralysis as rival opponents vie for power. The two sides have similar religious character, but different political viewpoints, the largest and most significant difference being the place that Iraq's Shiite neighbor, Iran, has in Iraq's future. On one side lies a pro-Iranian coalition of militias and interest groups, the most prominent of which is the Coordination Framework, led by Nouri al-Maliki, former prime minister. On the other lies a group known as the Sadrists, led by Muqtada al-Sadr. A month ago, al-Sadr supporters formed a tent village around the government palace to prevent a governmental meeting spearheaded by the Coordination Framework that would have concerned the dissolution of the current parliament and how to institute early elections, two issues on which the Sadrists and the Coordination Framework vehemently disagree. The blockade was successful, and since then, all had been quiet, albeit tense. However, the tentative calm was shattered earlier this week on Monday when al-Sadr announced his decision to step away from politics. The statement threw staunch supporters into a frenzy, prompting hundreds to storm the palace, drawing fire from security forces. That night, a Sadrist militia went toe-to-toe with an Iranian-backed one in another part of the Green Zone, and in several southern provinces, pro-al-Sadr protests erupted. Fighting continued until Tuesday, when al-Sadr asked his followers to put down their arms and leave the tent blockade. At least 30 were killed and 400 were injured in total.

That a similar or worse conflict will take place in the near future is not only likely, but almost certain. The event once again showcased the immense sway that al-Sadr holds over his followers, as well as the danger they possess in his absence. Whether or not al-Sadr is truly walking away remains uncertain, as this is far from the first time that al-Sadr has withdrawn from politics only to return shortly thereafter. In fact, some believe that al-Sadr periodically announces such "retirements" only to demonstrate what may happen if he is not put in power. But it may be that there is more legitimacy – or at least reason – behind his most recent step back from politics. Popular Shiite religious leader Ayatollah Kadhim al-Haeri retired on Sunday, who shares many of the same followers as al-Sadr. Rather than urge Iraqi Shiites to search for religious guidance from another source within Iraq, al-Haeri told his followers to give their support to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei of Iran. Being that al-Sadr is adamantly anti-Iran, it could weaken his following.

Aside from Iran, other international actors have done little. Among the minority groups in the country, namely the Sunnis and the Kurds, there appears to be little to no hope that Iraq can evade civil war. "Unfortunately, I do not see a secure and prosperous future for my country," said political scientist Moayed Jubeir Al-Mahmoud to the New York Times.

Additionally, there is no indication that Iraq's political paralysis will come to an end any time soon, unless of course it is ended by war. For 10 months, the two sides have essentially done nothing but prevent each other from making any form of progress. Al-Sadr's initial bid at taking power legitimately was blocked when he won the most seats in October, but failed to obtain a majority. Upon his failure to seize power, al-Sadr's followers in the legislature left in solidarity. Most recently, of course, was the attempt by the Coordination Framework to convene a governmental session, which was halted by the Sadrist blockade. Since fighting ceased on Tuesday, it has again appeared that peace is restored, but no one can say for how long.