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# The Crisis in Iraq: Should Gulf Be Worried?

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### *Introduction*

[On October 15](#), the influential Shia leader Muqtada al-Sadr's camp refused to join the new government headed by Prime-Minister Mohammad Shia al-Sudani and President Abdul Latif Rashid. While, it initially seemed like certain promises made to Sadr regarding an early election and election law revision, had led to a stage of reconciliation, the refusal by Sadrist paints a different picture. In early [September](#), Iraq's federal court had dismissed a lawsuit filed by the followers of Muqtada al-Sadr calling for the dissolution of the country's legislature citing the inability of government formation 10 months after the elections. The court clarified that the courts cannot interfere in the executive or legislative processes due to the lack of a constitutional basis for such a decision, and urged parliamentarians to either form the government or dissolve parliament.

Moving from this immediate context, this article places the unfolding Iraqi political crisis in the larger regional context. By doing so, we attempt to understand the various factors – of domestic, regional, and international nature – that are at play.

### *Iraqi domestic politics: The worsening crisis*

Iraq has been a country facing uncertainty and instability since 2003.

Although the political process in Iraq is undoubtedly futile, the parliamentary election to the Council of Representatives that took place in October 2021 was crucial. al-Sadr impressed his entire political weight on the election. Consequently, Al-Sadr succeeded in winning a majority with 73 seats, and became eligible to lead the formation of a coalition government.

Al-Sadr's rivals, who are primarily Iran-backed Shiite parties commonly addressed to as the Coordination Framework, rejected the election process alleging fraudulent elections. The Framework approached the Supreme Court for the annulment of the election results. In December 2021, although the court ratified the electoral results, the crisis continued. Later in January 2022, the Framework disrupted the new parliament's first session. The Al-Halbousi's bloc and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) boycotted the polls. Al-Sadr's call for boycotting led to a [failure in electing](#) a new president. In June, several of al-Sadr's alliance members [resigned from parliament en masse](#), in a supposed attempt to break the eight-month-long political deadlock. This was a political gamble that essentially strengthened al-Sadr's rivals. During this period, Sadr also demanded the dissolution of parliament and early elections. Meanwhile, they used constitutional technicalities to create hindrances and stall the formation of a coalition

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government led by Al-Sadr within the allowed period.

On failing to form a coalition government, Sadr announced [his decision to exit](#) from Iraqi politics to resolve the political deadlock. The political crisis took a violent turn on August 29 when the supporters of the leading cleric Sadr, who had been at the parliament in the heavily fortified Green Zone staging a weeks-long sit-in, breached the Republican Palace's entrance and clashed with the Iraqi security forces, [causing the death of at least 25 individuals and leaving over 350 injured](#). The hostilities abruptly ended when Sadr ordered his loyalists to end the violence.

Unexpectedly, on August 28, the Shia spiritual leader Ayatollah Kadhim al-Haeri stepped down from the position of a religious leader and urged his supporters to back Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. This move undercut al-Sadr's legitimacy amongst al-Haeri's followers. The September 7 federal court's dismissal of the lawsuit filed by the pro-Sadr bloc was yet another blow.

There is a larger context for the current crisis. The latest political crisis in Iraq is the result of the bitter power struggle between Iraq's dominant Shia parties which has plunged the nation into a vicious cycle. The tussle between Sadr's supporters and Iranian-backed parties have gnawed for the past ten months. The Iranian backed parties started by criticizing Al-Sadr and his party's policies. As the crisis worsened and unraveled, the positions of the prime minister and president became unconstitutional. Consequently, Iraq entered into a phase of governmental paralysis.

### *American withdrawal and the Assassination of Qassim Soleimani*

In order to understand what is happening in Iraq, one must consider three aspects: the political system in Iraq, the intra-Shia divisions, the American withdrawal, and the absence of Qassim Soleimani.

The ongoing predicament will not be the end of Iraq's crisis. One can argue that, as the entire political system of the state of Iraq is loose and fragile, similar complications and tribulations may reappear at any point in the future. The crisis in Iraq commenced with the American intervention in 2003. The temporary settling of issues does not rule out the probability of them resurfacing in the future. The situation will persist as a matter of concern in the contexts of economic differences, political differences, and social divisions between intra-Iraqi sects along the ethno-religious lines. The absence of a well-defined national identity and strong state apparatuses will make Iraq persist as a security challenge to the neighboring states.

Over the past two decades, the political system in Iraq has failed to achieve stability. Most of those who attained power had a tendency of being friends of the neighbor Iran. Al-Sadr's bloc was the first one not to be aligned with Iran, despite being Shia. Sadr's actions have been reactions to the Coordinated Framework driving him to a corner. [Additionally](#), the other major political groups, namely the Sunni Arab Muttahidoon under Osama al-Nujaifi (affiliated with the Construction and Reform Bloc) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) under Barham Salih and Kosrat Rasul, further complicate matters. Sadr remains the best option

for the Kurds in the current scenario, considering the [anti-Kurd measures](#) taken by the Iran-backed Popular Mobilization Units and the Coordination Framework. Essentially, it is an intra-Shii'a crisis, and the Sunnis and Kurds are bystanders of this unravelling war.

In a way the political system of Iraq has allowed, facilitated and propelled the current crisis, as it has in the past. Iraq's confessionalist power-sharing government, which is an amalgam of religion and politics, distributes institutional and political power among the confessional communities – namely, between the three major ethno-religious groups in Iraq: Shia Arabs, Sunni Arabs and the Kurds. As per [political tradition](#), a Shi'ite Muslim Arab is chosen as the Prime Minister, a Kurd as the President, and a Sunni Muslim Arab as the Speaker of Parliament.

The confessional political process is the deeper context of the Iraqi crisis. The covert conflict brewing between the various marji and religious authorities could have also contributed to the deepening of the conflict. Whether earlier elections can potentially and definitively end the quandary of the crisis in Iraq is a question that looms large. The apprehensions, hence, linger.

Having established the immediate and larger context, one can argue that the current crisis is not much different from similar episodes of failing to form a government in the past. It is simply another chapter or milestone. While there have been similar political crises before, it never worsened to the current degrees. Why? A factor that has been overlooked in this crisis is the killing of Qassim Soleimani. His killing has significantly impacted the dynamics

of inter-Shia relations in Iraq. Qassim Soleimani was an important character who was able to play his charm offensive on both sides of the Shia spectrum in Iraq. This made him an adhesive in keeping the Shia factions together. None could fill Qassim Soleimani's shoes. He was successful in maintaining peace and cordial relations between the different sides and forming coalition governments. One could assume that despite the recent differences and confrontations in the elections, the country would not have entered into this state of governmental paralysis if Qassim Soleimani was still around.

### *Regional Implications*

A country as vast as Iraq is facing a massive political crisis. Naturally, Iraq has once again become a security threat for the Middle East. Nevertheless, within the Gulf region, it is hard to say that there is a united unanimous voice with respect to Iraq. It is hard to define the Gulf's stance on Iraq in a single manner. In fact, there are three distinct voices. The first position – one of acceptance of the current Iraqi scenario – has been taken by the states of Oman and Qatar. Doha and Muscat seem to acknowledge the present scenario of Iraq and have adopted a pragmatic approach of carrying out unprejudiced diplomatic relations with the government in power. The second position, obtained by the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, is one of quiet concern. The last position can be observed through the actions of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Manama and Riyadh have been worried and vociferous about the crisis unfolding in Iraq. They have both

actively accused Iran of meddling in Iraqi politics and causing regional instability. These positions are also subject to change depending upon the dynamic nature of relations between the Gulf states.

Two factors take centerstage in Gulf's concerns about Iraq. Primarily, the growing political and security concerns in Iraq simply provides greater room for Iranian influence. This swelling presence of Iran, in turn, raises questions of independence and sovereignty of Iraq. Greater Iranian influence directly transcends into the presence of a more powerful Shia clout in the Gulf scene; a derivative that would prove distasteful to Riyadh. Another concern is about having a fragile Iraq. The latter has faced instability since the late 1990s. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait put an end to the widespread support that Baghdad enjoyed in the Gulf region. Iraq became a political threat. The 2003 invasion made matters worse, transforming Iraq to a weak and fragile state that became a security threat and challenge. The weakening of Iraq in turn increased Iran's influence. The current political crisis has heightened the Gulf concern regarding the stability of Iraq and the larger region, considering how similar natured intra-state conflicts tend to spillover to neighboring states.

Iraq's self-assumed role of mediating between Saudi Arabia and Iran for normalizing relations becomes relevant. The fact that Iraq's [caretaker](#) Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi visited [Jeddah and Tehran](#) to revive Saudi-Iran mediation shows the importance Iraq assigns to its mediatory role. Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi, in late August, remarked that Iraqi intervention in restoring

Saudi-Iran ties has been [useful](#). However, Riyadh might not share Raisi's opinion if Iranian influence in Iraq were to grow.

The Iraqi political crisis that started in early 2022, is a byproduct of the intra-Shia conflicts and power strife between Iraq's dominant Shia parties. As long as the political system propels such crises, the country will remain weak and a growing security concern for the Gulf region. The Gulf states cannot ignore the unraveling crisis in the fragile state of Iraq with a ongoing Iranian influence.

### **About the authors**

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