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UNDERSTANDING POLITICS IN IRAQ

POST-OCTOBER 2021 ELECTIONS



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Understanding Politics in Iraq Post-October 2021 Elections

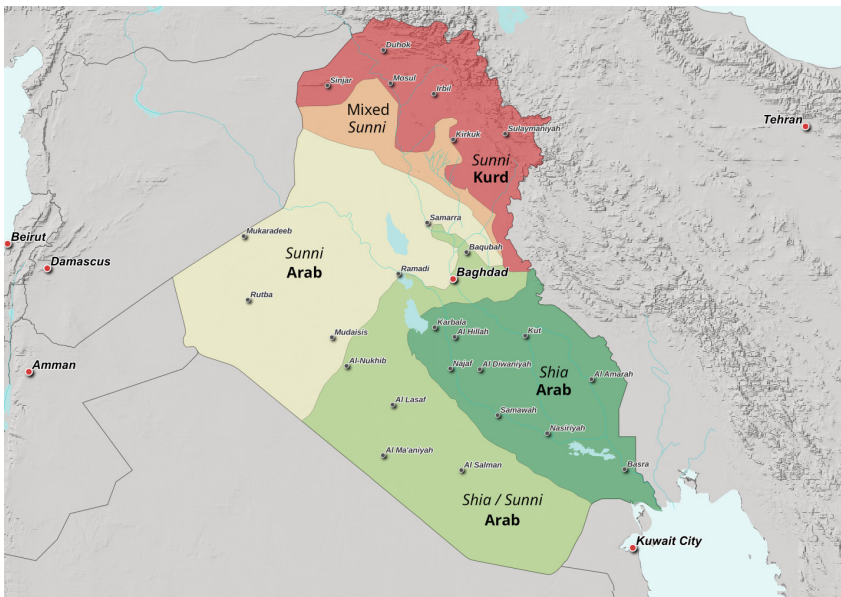
Abstract

*I*raq's post-2003 political system is facing political and economic dysfunction mired by widespread corruption, economic inequalities and lack of improvement in living standards. The unstable political situation is further accentuated by the influence and control of external actors, i.e. Iran and the US. Intense turmoil and political stalemate stemming from political competition and rivalries among the key stakeholders delayed government formation and appointment of new President, Prime Minister and cabinet for almost a year since the last election on 10 October 2021. On 13 October 2022, the parliament finally appointed Abdul Latif Rashid as President who nominated Mohammed Shia al-Sudani as the Prime Minister. The political future however continues to remain precarious.

This research article would attempt to identify the key features of post 2003 political process in Iraq; analyze the reasons for the recurrent political impasse and evaluate the role of the Sadrist Movement. It would also evaluate the role of Iran and briefly touch upon the diminishing US influence in Iraq's domestic politics. The last section would touch upon India's interests in Iraq.

Iraq's Political Background

The post-Saddam Hussein political structure, i.e. Muhasasa Ta'ifia, is based on consociationalism or ethno-sectarian apportionment to guide government formation. In Iraq's consociationalism democracy, power and budget are distributed among the people and parties of the three major communities, namely the Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds. Under this unique political process, the largest political bloc is identified after fresh elections and the process of selecting a new speaker is made. The position of the speaker is first selected among the Sunni parties and approved by the largest bloc, after which the speaker and two deputy speakers are elected by absolute majority. The position of President which is largely ceremonial is initially selected by the Kurdish parties and eventually elected by the members of parliament by a two-third majority. The President subsequently appoints the new Prime Minister, reserved for a Shiite candidate and selected by the largest bloc to appoint a council of ministers (Dodge, 2018; Alkhudary, 2020). Accordingly, the positions of President, Prime Minister and Speakers are occupied by Kurdish, Shiite and Sunni candidates respectively.



Map 1: Ethno-sectarian Map of Iraq in 2021

Adapted from Al Bayan Center for Planning and Studies 2021, <https://www.bayancenter.org/en/2021/02/2162/>

The political structure, while being demographically justifiable, has created a system of rewards in which politicians after occupying government offices award their supporters. The latter are largely on ethnic and sectarian lines as well as political groups who use the ministers to extract government resources. Political, ethnic and sectarian loyalty becomes extremely crucial for gaining employment in the bloated public sector (*Al-Amin, 2016*). The political system has therefore led to parties that exclusively represent the interests of their own sectarian and ethnic groups, thus undermining the concepts of cohesive community, citizenship and national identity in the post-war Iraq (*Alaaldin, 2018; Dodge, 2019; Mehdi, 2019*).

Table 1: Iraq’s ethnic/ religious population distribution in 2014

Ethnic/ Religious Categories	
Shiite Arabs	15 million
Sunni Arabs	9 million
Sunni Kurds	4 million
Turkmen	3 million
Black Iraqis	1 million
Christians	0.5 million
Baha’i	1000
Circassians	2000
Faili Kurds	500,000
Jews	Less than 100
Kaka’i	200,000
Sabeen-Mandaeans	3000
Roma	50,000
Shabaks	250,000
Yazidis	500,000

Source: European Parliamentary Research Service [EPRS] 2015

The Muhasasa Ta'ifia system was applied in the provisional Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) set up by the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority between 13 July 2003 and 1 June 2004, and the system continued to dictate government formation and distribution of ministries and resources after 2005, 2010, 2014, 2018 and October 2021 elections. The system of elite-power sharing led to weak and undemocratic political institutions based on patronage. Demands for reforming the political quota system emerged as a crucial topic during the May 2018 parliament election (*Dodge, 2018; Albassan, 2021; Al Khafaji, 2018*). Public anger against this elite power-sharing and concerns over the deteriorating economic situation, corruption, unemployment, poverty etc. led to numerous protests in late 2012, January-June 2013, July-August 2015, April 2016, February-March 2017, July 2018, and lately in October 2019 (*Ibrahim, 2019*).

During the October 2019 protest, the initial motivation was based on opposing widespread corruption, high unemployment rate, foreign interference etc. It however evolved into demand for complete overhaul of the existing political arrangement. The public desperation and international and domestic outcry after the death of at least 669 protesters forced the incumbent Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi to resign on 30 November 2019 and appointment of Mustafa Al-Kadhimi as Prime Minister on 7 May 2020 after months of negotiations (BTI, 2022). The economic situation and the living standards of ordinary Iraqis continued to deteriorate heightening public dissatisfaction.¹ In the subsequent election held on 10 October 2021, the Sadrist bloc led by influential Shiite cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr emerged as the largest party. It led to upsetting the balance especially within the Shiite camp indicating cracks in the ethno-sectarian political arrangement. The subsequent section would briefly evaluate the political

1 In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and associate socio-economic ramifications have pushed 4.5 million or 11.7 percent of total Iraqi population below the poverty line. In 2021, Iraq's total unemployment rate was at 16.5 percent (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2020). The male unemployment rate was at 14.7 percent and female unemployment rate at 28.2 percent. The youth unemployment rate was at 35.8 percent and adult unemployment rate was at 11.2 percent (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2022). Iraq was ranked at 157 out of 180 states in 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2022).

trajectory of the Sadrist Movement and address their role in Iraqi politics in the post 2003 period.

Sadrist Movement in Electoral Politics

Head of the Sadrist movement, Muqtada al-Sadr is the son of late Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Sadeq-al-Sadr who was killed by Saddam Hussein government on 19 February 1999. In the aftermath of the 2003 military intervention by the US, Al-Sadr criticized the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) under Paul Bremer (*AlJazeera, 2010 a; Georgy & Rasheed, 2022*). Sadr along with his followers initiated the Sadr Bureau focusing largely on social service and gaining local support. He also built Jaysh Al-Mahdi (JAM) or Mahdi Army in June 2003 with the goal of challenging Washington backed Iraqi provisional government, overthrowing the US forces and achieving political power (*BBC News, 2022*). JAM was disbanded in 2008 under Nouri al-Maliki government; it was however re-activated in 2014 under the name of Saraya al Salam or Peace Brigades. The two central goals of the Peace Brigades were, firstly, the defeat of the Islamic State (IS), and secondly, resignation of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (Roggio & Weiss, 2020; Nada & Rowan, 2021).² Sadr has regularly utilised his devoted support base to build mass protests for pushing its demands.³

Sadr's political agenda is driven by Iraqi nationalist resistance and opposition to the US and Iranian interference in Iraqi politics. The group largely derives its support from the poor section of the Shiite community that benefitted from their extensive social welfare programs at the grassroots level (*Alaaldin, 2017 a; Osman, 2020; Davison & Rasheed, 2022*). Muqtada Al Sadr's image as militia leader fighting against US and Iranian influence has been highly popular among ordinary Iraqis. He has reinvented himself

2 Nouri al-Maliki was replaced after 2014 election by Haider Al-Abadi supported by Sadrists (Center for International Security and Cooperation [CISAC], 2017).

3 On 26 February 2016, a large number of Sadr's supporters stormed parliament and on 18 March 2016, they staged sit-in outside the Green Zone to criticize the failure to reform the political system and curb corruption during Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi's tenure (Al-Monitor, 2016).

as an anti-corruption figure and anti-establishment political reformer capable of challenging the existing political order (*Osman, 2020; Mansour & Robin-D’Cruz, 2022*).⁴

For Sadrists, the transition from insurgency to electoral politics has been relatively successful and the group has gradually increased their seat share in parliament. In March 2010 parliamentary election, Sadrists were part of Iraqi National Alliance (INA).⁵ The alliance secured 70 seats in 325 member parliament (Inter-Parliamentary Union [IPU], 2022 a). In April 2014 election, Sadrist Movement secured 34 seats (IPU, 2022 b). During 12 May 2018 election, Muqtada Al Sadr’s Integrity Party collaborated with secular parties to form Sairoon lil-Islah or Marching for Reform.⁶

The 2018 alliance between Sadrists with Shiite Islamist tenets and secular and socialist parties indicated their willingness to break from political sectarianism and dilute the role of ethno-sectarian and ideological divisions (*Khafaji, 2018; Robin, 2018*). The bloc comprising of Islamists and secular socialists was seen as an interesting experiment aimed at achieving political, economic, social and cultural reform and rebuilding state institutions devoid of sectarian and national quota approach (*Robin, 2018; Al-Marashi, 2018; Saadoun, 2018*). The Sairoon Alliance emerged as the largest bloc winning 54 seats in the 329-member parliament (BBC News, 2018). The predominant Shia blocs such as pro Iran Fatah Alliance, Haider Al-Abadi’s Victory/ Fatah Alliance and Nouri Al-Maliki’s State of Law coalition secured 48, 42 and 25 seats respectively (*IPU, 2022 c; Aldroubi, 2018*).

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- 4 Muqtada Al Sadr’s statement on 17 July 2016 urging Iraqis to stop violence against LGBTQ community was appreciated by Human Rights Watch. Sadr at the same time suggested his followers to distance themselves from LGBTQ people. According to rights groups, Sadr’s Mahdi Army had been involved in abuses against homosexual and gender non-confirming people (Middle East Eye, 2016).
 - 5 The political parties in Iraqi National Alliance (INA) were Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, the Iraqi National Congress, the Badr Organization, the Sadrists, the Fadhila or Islamic Virtue Party, faction from Dawa Party and the Shiite Turkmen Movement (Al Jazeera 2010, b).
 - 6 The 2018 Sairoon Alliance included parties such as Iraqi Communist Party, National Integrity Party, Iraqi Republican Gathering Party, Progress and Reform Party, Just State Party, Youth and Change Party and Sadrist Movement (Robin, 2018; Ibrahim, 2018).

Electoral gains by Sadrists in 2018 was seen as setback for Iran and Iran-backed parties that played a key role in thwarting the Islamic State (IS). The Sadrists managed to capitalize the public resentment especially among the poor Shiite community that did not benefit from Iraqi government's close ties with either Iran or the US (*Ibrahim, 2018; Kathem, 2018*).⁷ Sadr's bloc was however incapable of bringing any real change in the ethno-sectarian political arrangement due to failure to form majority and after reaching consensus with other Shiite blocs, President Barham Salih appointed independent Shiite candidate Adel Abdul Mahdi as the Prime Minister on 2 October 2018 (*Mamouri, 2018; Al Jazeera, 2018*). The Sadrists increased its influence within the political apparatus and maintained close engagement with the cabinet under Mahdi. The appointment of a trained economist as technocrat Prime Minister was aimed at pacifying public anger towards government apathy (*Middle East Monitor, 2022*). Following the post October 2019 protest, Mahdi was replaced after eventual consensus on 7 May 2020 among the Shiite parties to appoint the former director of Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INI), Mustafa Al-Kadhimi as non-partisan Prime Minister (*Abdul-Zakra & Kullab, 2020; Al-Oraibi, 2021*). Al-Kadhimi promised a solution based government and assured that Iraq would not be used as proxy battleground for foreign actors. Al-Kadhimi also promised early election and an accountable government to pacify the growing public frustration leading to the October 2021 election (*Tarzi, 2021; Al-Shakeri, 2020; Al-Oraibi, 2021*).

7 Muqtada Sadr announced its plan to form the cabinet represented by independent technocrats to end corruption; rebuild infrastructure; providing health care and education after 2018 election (*Ibrahim, 2018; Kathem, 2018*).

Table 2: List of Prime Ministers in Iraq since 2004

Election Dates	Prime Minister	Duration of Tenure	Political affiliation
	Ayad Allawi	Interim capacity: 1 June 2004- 3 May 2005	Iraqi National Accord
Transitional National Assembly election: 30 January 2005	Ibrahim Al-Jaafari	3 May 2005-20 May 2006	Islamic Dawaa Party
First term: 15 December 2005 Second term: 7 March 2010	Nouri Al-Maliki	20 May 2006- 8 September 2014	Islamic Dawaa Party
30 April 2014	Haider Al-Abadi	8 September 2014- 25 October 2018	Islamic Dawaa Party
12 May 2018	Adil Abdul Mahdi	25 October 2018- 6 May 2020	Independent
Nominated by parliamentary majority post October 2019 protest	Mustafa Al-Kadhimi	6 May 2020- 13 October 2022	Independent
10 October 2021	Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani	13 October 2022 -	Islamic Dawaa Party

Source: Maps of World, 2021

Table 2 indicates dates of election after 2003-2004 Coalition Provisional Authority government held in 2005, 2010, 2014, 2018 and 2021. The trend also indicates that due to Iraq's electoral system based on ethno-sectarian apportionment, the consensus based government has dominated the political landscape. The difficulty in forming consensus has led to wide gaps between the dates of election and eventual appointment of the Prime Minister. During Nouri-Al-Maliki's first tenure, he was appointed after five months in May 2006 since December 2005 election. Haider Al-Abadi and Adel Abdul Mahdi were appointed after around five months since elections in April 2014 and May 2018 respectively. In case of the appointment of the current Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani, it was eventually finalized after one year of political stalemate, protests and clashes. The subsequent section would delve into the political dynamics

post October 2021 and identify the key trends.

2021 Election

Parliamentary election held on 10 October 2021 witnessed the lowest ever voter turnout at 43 percent since 2003 indicating public disenchantment with the political process (*Reuters, 2021*). The majority of Iraqis were not convinced if the election could carry out any meaningful change without appropriate restructuring of the ethno-sectarian political structure. In the aftermath of the recent election, the problem associated with the complicated political dynamics resulted in a stalemate and the key political stakeholders were unable to resolve their differences causing delay in government formation.

Table 3: October 2021 Parliamentary Election Result

Political group	Number of Seats
Sadrist Bloc	73
Taqadum/ National Progress Alliance	37
State of Law Coalition	33
Kurdistan Democratic Party	31
Fatah Alliance	17
Kurdistan Alliance	17
Azm Al Iraq Alliance	14
New Generation Movement	14
Ishraqat Alliance	6
Tasmim Alliance	5
Babylon Alliance	4
Imtidad Movement	4
National Contract Alliance	4
National State Forces Alliance	4
Hasm Movement for Reform	3
Jamahiruna Hawuyatuna Alliance	3
Ahali Wasit Independent Group	1
Al Foratyen Party	1
Al Jamahir Al Wattaniya	1
Al Wafaa & Al Taghit Bloc	1

Political group	Number of Seats
Al Watan Party	1
Arab Alliance of Kirkuk	1
Biladi Movement	1
Iqtadar Watan Group	1
Iraqi National Project	1
Kurdistan Justice Party-Iraq	1
National Approach Alliance	1
National Hope Alliance	1
National Product	1
National Sanad Group	1
Rights Movement	1
United Iraqi Turkmen Front	1
Yazidi Progress Party	1
Independents	43
Total	329

Source: IPU, 2022

Table 3 indicates that the Sadrist bloc emerged as the largest party winning 73 seats in the 329-member parliament. The Fatah Alliance comprising of Iran backed groups such as Badr Organization, Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Hashd al-Shaabi or Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) managed merely 17 seats as compared to 48 seats in 2018. Besides Fatah Alliance, former Prime Minister Nouri Al Maliki's State of Law Coalition secured 33 seats (IPU, 2022).

The verdict indicated that the mandate by Iraqi Shiites was in favour of Sadr's nationalist agenda focused on curbing corruption and overcoming the external influence of both the US and Iran. The Sadrists also capitalized on the 2019 electoral system that divided the state's 18 governorates into 83 multi-member electoral districts allocating 329 seats (Mansour & Stewart-Jolley, 2021; Al Jaffar, 2021; Higel, 2021).⁸ Sadrists therefore benefited from the low turnout, thorough study of the new electoral districts and

8 The electoral districts depending on their size are divided between 3 to 6 seats. In the previous elections, seat allocation was determined according to the total number of votes secured by parties under proportional representation system. Under the new system, candidates belonging from different parties compete as individuals and unlike earlier, candidates cannot transfer excess votes to other candidates in their party (Mansour & Stewart-Jolley, 2021).

impressive organizational strength (*Al Jaffar, 2021; Higel, 2021*). The Sadrist bloc despite winning the largest number of seats however did not have sufficient numbers to establish a clear majority and the efforts by Sadrists were further impeded by the divergent interests of other parties.

Post-2021 Election Politics

In Iraq, the appointment of the Prime Minister is traditionally based on consensus among the Shiite parties. The Sadrist bloc, in the aftermath of the latest election repeated the approach used in 2018 to collaborate with non-Shiite parties and forming a national majority cabinet. It reached out to collective of Sunni parties under Sunni Coalition of Sovereignty with 62 seats and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) with 31 seats to form cross-sectarian bloc. The critics of the ethno-sectarian consociational democratic system appreciated the initiative by ‘Save the Homeland Alliance’ to build majority alliance comprising of Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds raising hope that it could help in overcoming the sectarian basis of power sharing (*Alaaldin, 2022; Chalak, 2022; Jiyad, 2022; Alkinani, 2022*).

Sadr’s traditional rivalry with former Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki and his political group, ‘State of Law’ impeded inclusive consensus government within the Shiite parties.⁹ From Sadr’s perspective, the differences with Al-Maliki are too wide to compromise. The rivalry between Sadr and Al-Maliki has emerged as crucial component in Iraq’s fragile political landscape (*Barakat, 2022; Hamasaeed, 2022; Al Jazeera, 2022*). The non-Sadrist Shiite groups including those close to Iran organized under the umbrella of the Coordination Framework (CF). CF is a multipolar bloc comprising of powerful figures, it is diverse in terms of ideology, but share common goal i.e., to stall consolidation by Sadrists. The CF includes Nouri al-Maliki’s State of Law Coalition; Fatah Alliance; Nasr Alliance; Hikma

9 Nouri Al-Maliki during his tenure as Prime Minister initiated a US backed military operation to neutralize the control of Mahdi Army in Basra and other southern provinces in 2008 forcing Sadr to disband the group (*Barakat, 2022*). Sadr despite criticizing Al-Maliki prior and post US withdrawal backed Al-Maliki for Prime Minister in 2006 and 2010 election (*Garrels & Inskeep, 2006; Ghosh, 2010*). The differences gradually increased with Sadr calling Al-Maliki as ‘dictator’ in 2014 and criticizing him for delaying or cancelling elections (*Youssef 2014*).

Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) (*Saadoun, 2022 a; Bobseine, 2022*). The CF preferred a consensual government representing all political forces present in the parliament similar to previous sessions. The alliance was fiercely opposed to excluding non-Sadrists Shiite parties in government formation process. Sadr according to the group was seeking to monopolize the Shiites' share in the government and increase its support base (*Saadoun, 2022 a; Middle East Monitor, 2022 b; Hasan, 2022*).

Muqtada Al-Sadr during the government formation process also reached out to factions within the CF and tried to alienate Al-Maliki's State of Law coalition. Sadr's plans however failed to deter the unity within the Coordination Framework (*Shafaq News, 2022 a; Saadoun, 2022 a; Hasan, 2022*). The decision by CF members was based on political calculation rather than ideological reasons that feared that alliance with Sadr would weaken the political control and erode their support base. The key source of conflict in forming a new government lied in the split within the Shiite groups between Sadrists with 73 members and other Shiite groups within the CF with over 60 members (*Saadoun, 2022*).

Sadrists and coalition partners, after October 2021 elections, attempted to prove its majority to form government on at least three occasions i.e. 7 February 2022,¹⁰ 26 March¹¹ and 30 March 2022¹² under Save the

10 On 7 February 2022, the parliamentary session to elect a new President was cancelled because of lack of quorum since majority of the political parties boycotted due to lack of political agreement over the new appointment (*Al-Arabiya News, 2022*). Only 58 MPs out of 329 members attended the February 2022 session that is sufficiently less than the required two-third quorum. As mentioned earlier, the president's position is earmarked for the member of Kurdish community. The Sadrists boycotted the said session because the candidacy of Hoshiyar Zebari belonging from Kurdish Democratic Party was suspended by the Supreme Court due to corruption charges during his stint as Finance Minister in 2016. Sadr prior to the session also backed out from supporting Zebari since his party contested the 2021 election on anti-corruption agenda (*Al Arabiya News, 2022*).

11 On 26 March 2022, Sadr's Save the Homeland coalition nominated Iraqi Kurdistan Interior Minister, Riber Ahmad for presidency and Jafar Al-Sadr, brother of Al Sadr as the Prime Minister. The appointment for the President's post again failed due to lack of quorum (*Aldroubi, 2022 c; Shafaq News, 2022 c; Global Times, 2022*). During the 26 March parliamentary session, only 202 members attended the session and a two-third majority or 220 votes were required to proceed with parliamentary approval (*The Indian Express, 2022*).

12 On 30 March 2022, the CF with around 130 MPs again sabotaged appointments proposed by "Save the Homeland" coalition and resorted to boycotting the parliament sessions and preventing the assembly from reaching the required two-third quorum to elect new President.

Homeland or Enqadh Watan Alliance. It was repeatedly thwarted by non-Sadrists and Iran-backed Shiite parties and their allies and neither Save the Homeland coalition nor CF were unable to gather two-third majority support in the 329-seat parliament necessary for appointing a new president (*Al-Saeed, 2022; Shafaq News, 2022 b; Shafaq News, 2022*). It therefore became unlikely for Muqtada Al Sadr to exclude the CF in the government formation process (*Kurd Press, 2022; The Arab Weekly, 2022*).¹³

The political deadlock continued eventually forcing Sadr to call for resignation of his party's 73 MPs on 12 June 2022. Sadr specified that move was taken to create space for the establishment of a new government. Sadr by ordering resignation attempted to project himself as incorruptible mentioning that corruption exists on all levels of government and only method to curb the problem is by having another round of elections and replacing with new and motivated individuals (*Peoples Dispatch, 2022; Al Jazeera, 2022*). The resignation was seen as acceptance by Sadr that it was impossible to form a government without the Iran-backed groups. In accordance with Iraqi law, in case of vacancy in parliament, the candidate with second highest number of votes in the electoral district occupies the seat (*Al-Salby, 2022; Yuan, 2022*). The resignation therefore directly benefitted Sadr's opponents belonging to the CF.

The CF utilized this opportunity to appoint Mohammad Shia Al-Sudani as the Prime Minister.¹⁴ Sadrists however saw it as political defeat; opposed

It also divided the votes of the independent candidates (France 24, 2022 b). Muqtada Al-Sadr after the failure of vote attempt in March last week repeated his rejection of the idea of a consensus government calling it to be 'Death of Iraq' (*Kurd Press, 2022; The Arab Weekly, 2022 a*).

- 13 Muqtada Al-Sadr on 31 March decided to stop negotiations and offered 40 days' time to the CF to negotiate with other blocs to form government (*Kurd Press, 2022; The Arab Weekly, 2022 a*). The CF reasserted its position on 3 May urging Sadrists and their allies to deliberate and chose one candidate based on the ethno-sectarian principle. The group also demanded changing the new electoral law that benefitted Sadr to increase its vote share in the last election (*Al-Nashmi, 2022*).
- 14 Mohammed Al-Sudani, during Saddam Hussein's rule stayed in the state. He participated in 1991 Shia uprisings. In the post 2003 period, Al-Sudani occupied positions in local and central governments including mayor of Amarah city in 2004 and subsequently, governor of Maysan province. He served as Minister of Human Rights between 2010 and 2014 during Nouri Al-Maliki government and Minister of Labour and Social Affairs between 2014 and

the appointment and called for new election (*Iraqi News Agency, 2022; Asharq Al-Awsat, 2022; Al-Monitor, 2022*). Al-Sudani according to Sadrists is too close to Nouri Al-Maliki and Iran. On 27 July and again on 30 July, the supporters and sympathizers of the Sadrist bloc entered the Green Zone and stormed the parliament to stall the selection of Mohammad Shia al-Sudani nominated by CF (*Al-Rubaie, 2022; FitzGerald, 2022; Aydi, 2022*). Sadr repeated his strategy of using sit-ins and protests to consolidate his voter base and gain further ground in case of fresh election. Sadr following the protest maintained stubborn attitude about holding new election. For Sadr, new election was essential for removing corruption in all levels of government (*Hamasaeed, 2022*). The Sadrists continued their sit-ins at the parliament throughout the month of August 2022.¹⁵ Sadr despite month long protests and appeal to judiciary failed to fulfill its objectives.¹⁶ Sadr's actions were also dismissed by the top Shiite clergy.¹⁷

2018 during Haider Al-Abadi government. He separated from Islamic Dawa Party in 2020 and projected himself as an independent politician. Al-Sudani withdrew his bid for Prime Minister after Adil Abdul Mahdi's resignation post October 2019 protest, due to public demand for a genuinely independent Prime Minister leading to Mustafa Al-Kadhimi's appointment (Yuan, 2022; The Guardian, 2022). He established the Al Foratyen Party in 2021 while maintaining close ties with Nouri Al-Maliki's State of Law party (Mahmoud & Naar, 2022).

- 15 Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi in response to protest by Sadrists urged for national dialogue. On the question of continuing demonstrations, the Prime Minister assured that security forces will not be used in political conflicts. The security forces were prohibited from issuing any political statements (The Arab Weekly, 2022 c).
- 16 Muqtada Al Sadr's supporters conducted demonstrations outside the Supreme Judicial Council headquarters and Federal Supreme Court demanding dissolution of parliament and conducting new elections (The Arab Weekly 2022 d). The Supreme Judicial Council on 14 August 2022 dismissed Sadr's call arguing that it does not have jurisdiction to dissolve parliament citing the principle of separation of powers (Sherko, 2022). According to the Iraqi constitution, parliament can only be dissolved by an absolute majority vote following a request by one-third or by the Prime Minister with the approval of the president (Mahmoud, 2022).
- 17 The Shiite spiritual leader Ayatollah Kadhim al-Haeri, a close associate of Muqtada Al Sadr's father, Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr enjoyed wide following among Sadrists. In mid-August, al-Haeri announced his retirement from religious authority. He also asked his followers to emulate Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei indicating his political inclination in the background of contest between Sadrists and Tehran backed parties. For Sadr, it was seen as setback. Al-Haeri also questioned Sadr's Sharia qualifications to pose himself as mujtahid or religious authority and assume political leadership (Bobseine, 2022 b; The Economic Times, 2022). Najaf based Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani also refused to back Sadr's actions and warned him to curb 29-30 August 2022 violence (Ali, 2022). Al-Sistani's intervention was instrumental in prohibiting wide scale violence. Reportedly, Al-Sistani

Sadr, on 29 August expressing frustration with the political stalemate and lack of support from the clergy, announced his resignation from politics and asked all parties including his own to give up government positions and organize fresh election. He criticised the failure of fellow Shiite leaders to adopt reform in political arrangement by forming national majority government (*Kadhim, Pfaff, Slavin, Peek and Mostajabi, 2022*). Sadr's supporters in a desperate act barged into the government palace in the Green Zone and clashed with rival Shiite groups leading to death of around 30 people (*Motamedi, 2022*). Sadr in response emphasized that the demonstrations by his supporters was not a 'revolution' anymore because it lost its peaceful character. He chided his followers announcing that "the spilling of Iraqi blood is forbidden." He apologized to the Iraqi people; appealed to the security forces to retake control of the Green Zone and urged his followers to withdraw from the protest site (*Daily Sabab, 2022*).

Sadr has announced resignation in the past as part of political strategy and the latest development has also to be seen in such light.¹⁸ Therefore, he utilized the withdrawal announcement to embolden his position during negotiations and gather support for early elections. On 28 September 2021, parliament currently dominated by members from parties affiliated with the CF reconvened (*Menmy, 2022*). The inaugural session attended

warned Sadr that he would be forced to release statement denouncing violence that could have direct ramification on Sadr's popularity (Davison, Hafezi & Bassam, 2022).

- 18 Muqtada Al-Sadr had announced resignation from politics on previous occasions. In March 2013, Sadr threatened to quit politics and announced his withdrawal in August of same year. Eventually, he retraced his announcement due to call from his supporter. On 15 February 2014, Sadr two months before parliamentary election announced his retirement from politics. Sadr, similar to the 29 August 2022 announcement dissolved the political movement in 2014 but assured continued functioning of charitable and educational organisations. The bloc eventually contested election and secured 34 seats. In April 2016, Sadr suspended the activities of the Al-Ahrar parliamentary bloc with 34 members creating difficulty to reach a quorum. He appealed to his supporters to stage protest demanding accountability; curbing corruption and forming a technocratic government. In July 2016, Sadr formed a committee to vacate offices throughout the state. In October 2016, Sadr ended the boycott of parliament sessions. On 4 October 2018, Sadr talked about political retirement and prohibited the parliamentary bloc to nominate any candidate for the Iraqi government. In December 2019, Sadr shut down his Facebook account and ordered closure of the political offices to protest against the candidacy of Mohamed Shia al-Sudani. On 15 July 2021, Sadr repeated his intention to withdraw from politics due to prevailing corruption. Sadrist eventually managed to secure the highest number of seats in October 2021 election (Anadolu Agency, 2022; Moubayed, 2021).

by 222 members voted against resignation of Sadr's ally and parliamentary speaker, Mohammed Al-Halbousi (*France 24, 2022 a; The Siasat Daily, 2022; Menmy, 2022*).

The Sadrists in response clashed with security forces leading to 133 injuries (*Siasat Daily, 2022; Business Standard, 2022*).¹⁹ Muqtada Al Sadr announced that his supporters would continue to resort to mass protest to demand for early election. On 11 October 2022, the speaker's office in a surprise move called for parliamentary session to elect a new president that could pave the way to end the political deadlock (*Al Jazeera, 2022*). On 13 October, the parliament currently dominated by Iran backed CF eventually elected Kurdish politician, Abdul Latif Rashid, nominated by Sadr's ally, Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) as the new President.²⁰ He immediately appointed Mohammed Shia-al-Sudani, nominated by CF as the Prime Minister-designate allowing him 30 days to form cabinet (*Yuan, 2022; The Guardian, 2022*). On 27 October, a cabinet was approved by the parliament. Al-Sudani mentioned his government will focus on solving public service problems including employment opportunities, housing provisions etc.; curbing corruption,²¹ honoring the concerns of minority groups, initiating economic reforms to revitalize industry, agriculture and private sector (*Nalia Radio and Television [NRT] 2022, a; Al Jazeera, 2022*).

For Iraqi citizens eager for economic improvement and political reforms, the ongoing phase of political stalemate has been especially different. Therefore, early government formation committed to transparency and accountability is vital to ensure better governance and concrete

19 During the 28 September 2022 clash, 122 security officials and 11 protesters were injured (*Business Standard, 2022; The Siasat Daily, 2022*).

20 Abdul Latif Rashid secured 160 votes and former President; Barham Salih won 99 votes (*Al Jazeera, 2022 d; Tasnim News Agency 2022 b*). President Rashid was the Vice President of the Iraqi National Congress in 1992. He served as Minister of Water Resources between September 2003 and December 2010 and worked as Senior Advisor to Iraqi President Jalal Talabani between 2010 and 2014 (*Chandok, 2022; Mahmoud & Naar, 2022*).

21 In order to display his commitment to curbing corruption, the new Prime Minister ordered an investigation over the missing US\$ 2.5 billion or 3.7 trillion Iraqi dinar from the National Tax Authority Fund in Rafidain Bank. The Prime Minister designate assured that legal measures were be resorted to curb corruption in all government institutions (*NRT, 2022 b*).

improvements in the standards of living. However, in the background of Iraq's dependence on oil economy and a political system unwilling to overcome the ethno-sectarian power sharing arrangement, the hope for genuine improvements in economic standards remains bleak. Al-Sudani, as part of the pro-Iran ruling elite is not likely to provide an alternative economic and political policy (Yuan, 2022; Aldroubi, 2022 a; Aldroubi, 2022). Both President Rashid and Prime Minister Al-Sudani have benefitted from the ethno-sectarian arrangement and owe their allegiance to political blocs that appointed them.

In the current context, how Sadrists handle the parliamentary proceedings; cabinet appointments and its performance could determine the course of Iraqi politics. Muqtada Al Sadr has refused to participate in the Al-Sudani government calling it 'subordinate to militias' and therefore it is not likely to meet the aspirations of the Iraqi people (*Al Jazeera*, 2022). As mentioned earlier, Sadrists view Al-Sudani as a close ally of Nouri-Al-Maliki that could carry forward CF's agenda and marginalize Sadrists in political and economic sphere and state institutions. The Sadrists will likely continue to capitalize on the public restlessness to provide quick solutions and attempt to destabilize the government. Prime Minister Al-Sudani is currently facing the difficult task of navigating the economy and nurturing mutually beneficial engagement with Sadrists. Al-Sudani therefore needs to manage all the parties and cater their interests within the government. In terms of political and economic reforms, he does not have significant political capital to provide a positive momentum. Moreover, Al-Sudani will also face challenges with regard to dealing with terrorist threats and well as energy dispute between Baghdad and Iraqi Kurdistan (*Aldroubi*, 2022). Therefore, the political future of Al-Sudani government is highly delicate and depends of variety of factors such as political actions by Sadrists, trends in militancy, meeting public demands for providing swift solution to socio-economic conditions, continued political consensus and geopolitical competition between Iran and the US.

The next section would evaluate Iran's calculations especially focusing on its strategic pursuits in the Iraqi domestic context marked by decreasing

faith and support for Tehran's influence.

Iran's Calculations in Iraq

The Islamic Republic of Iran's relations with Iraq under Saddam Hussein were highly turbulent and both states fought war between 1980 and 1988. The two decades long rivalry had shaped Iran's strategic perception towards Iraq. The 2003 US invasion in Iraq posed a major strategic dilemma for Iran. While the US military intervention led to the fall of Saddam Hussein regime, it also raised fear within Iran about facing a similar fate. In the post-Saddam Hussein political landscape, Iran supported the Shiite militias including Sadr's Jaish Al-Mahdi (JAM) Army for fighting against the US. The two powerful Iran backed militias i.e., Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq, grew in prominence since 2003 (*Azizi, 2021: 1-2; International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS], 2022; Alaaldin, 2017 b: 1-2*). Iran gradually increased its influence after US officially announced military withdrawal in 2011. The inroads made by the IS in Iraq offered a new opportunity for Iran to expand its influence. Iran-backed armed groups were organized within the framework of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF); the Iraqi government also invited the Quds Force to fight against IS.²² By late 2017, Iraqi government reclaimed most of the IS controlled territories. The influence of pro-Iran militias however continued to grow (*Azizi, 2021: 1-2; Mansour & Jabar, 2017; Majidyar, 2017*).

Iran, learning from past experience, did not want a strong Iraqi state dominated by nationalist or pan-Arab forces. Tehran resorted to supporting allied Shiite groups and presenting them as alternative in post-Saddam Hussein political setting. Although due to Iraq's unique political structure, total domination by one sectarian group is not possible, the firm presence of pro-Iran Shiite parties was seen as essential to preserve the balance of power (*Azizi, 2021: 2-3; Alaaldin, 2017 b: 1-2; Majidyar, 2017*). The Iran backed groups organized themselves politically under the banner of the 'Fatah Alliance'. It emerged as the second largest bloc in 2018 election

²² The key components of PMF including Badr Organisation, Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al Haq predated the new umbrella group (*Azizi, 2021: 1-2*).

after the Sadrist bloc. Besides Fatah Alliance, Iran developed tactical understanding with all the major Iraqi political parties including Nouri-Al-Maliki's State of Law coalition; Haider Al-Abadi's bloc, Sadrist bloc as well as few Sunni and Kurdish parties.²³ Iran's endorsement was a critical factor for appointment of Nouri-Al Maliki in 2006 and 2010; Haider Al Abadi in 2014; Adil Abdul Mahdi in 2018 and Mustafa Al Kadhimi in 2020 as Prime Minister (*Al-Salby, 2010; Siddique, 2010; Gorzewski, 2014; International Institute for Iranian Studies [IIIS], 2019; Hearst, 2018*).

Control over Iraq is a critical component of Iran's regional strategy. Iraqi territory provides land connection from Iran to Syria and Lebanon. The land bridge has been crucial to reinforce military personnel and aid President Bashar Al Assad's forces to defeat the IS and rebel fighters (*Azizi, 2021: 2-3; Al-Smadi, 2014*). It also provides a critical edge over other regional powers such as Saudi Arabia; UAE; Turkey; Israel etc. The presence of Iranian forces and Hezbollah in Syria has heightened the strategic contest with Israel. Tel Aviv and Tehran have engaged in proxy war in the Syrian battleground since 2013. Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) has conducted series of air strikes on Iranian, Hezbollah and Syrian government bases. The land corridor through Iraq is essential for Iran to preserve its bases and continue uninterrupted supply of weapons, fighters and resources.

Iraq is also a major export destination for Iranian goods, natural gas and electricity. Iran's total export to Iraq was around US\$ 7.4 billion in 2021 (*Azizi, 2021*). Iran has benefitted from Iraq's location serving as transit route to Mediterranean Sea and European market. Iraq's electricity infrastructure has been inadequate to cater to the demands of the people. Iraq's domestic production in 2022 is around 22,000 megawatts; however, it requires around 35,000 megawatts to fulfill the national demand. Subsequent governments have failed to rehabilitate the electricity sector forcing it to rely on neighbouring states to maintain stable supply (*Bechocha, 2022; Qatar News Agency, 2022*). Iran in order to fill the gap has provided

23 Iran after 2014 election joined Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish parties to endorse Haider Al-Abadi's nomination for Prime Minister isolating Nour-Al-Maliki and weakening his bid to stay in power (Morris & Sly, 2014).

around 1200 megawatts directly into the electric grid and supplied 40 million cubic meters (MCM) of gas for generators (*Gulf International Forum, 2022*). It is estimated that Iraq is reliant on Iran for around 45 percent of natural gas required to generate electricity (*Tasnim News Agency, 2022*). Iraq is therefore heavily dependent on Iranian electricity network. Tehran at the same time has utilized electricity supply to Iraq as a geopolitical tool to preserve its predominance. Moreover, Iran by controlling electricity supply is capable of stirring domestic developments within Iraq (*Mamouri, 2018; Reuters, 2020*).²⁴ Both states in July 2022 signed a long-term strategic electricity contract that would help Tehran to nurture energy diplomacy based on electricity with neighbouring states by supplying surplus production, help in usage of maximum capacity of the electricity network and enable a steady flow of income (*Mehr News Agency, 2022*).

Iran is also a major supplier of natural gas. Tasnim News Agency reported that the current volume of gas imports was at 43 million cubic meters (MCM) in 2021-2022. Iraqi Ministry of Electricity held discussions with Iranian counterparts in August 2022 to increase the volume of gas. Iraq currently requires around 55-60 MCM of gas (*Tasnim News Agency, 2022*). Tehran, similar to electricity supply, has occasionally withheld the flow of gas citing payment delays. In December 2020, Iran reduced gas exports from 50 MCM to 5 MCM leading to power shortages (*Reuters, 2020*).²⁵ Iran's actions placed direct pressure on Mustafa Al-Kadhimi government reflecting Tehran's influence in Iraqi domestic situation.

On the political level, Tehran has hindered successive Iraqi governments from nurturing closer ties with the west. It is particularly sensitive to the presence of western and regional powers in the Arab state and has utilized its allied militias to prevent the territory from becoming a permanent

24 In July 2018, Iran stalled electricity supply to Iraq due to delayed payments. It led to protest between demonstrators and the security forces resulting in handful of deaths (*Mamouri, 2018*).

25 According to Iraqi Electricity Ministry, the state lost around 6,550 megawatts of electricity (*Reuters, 2020*).

zone of the US and its allies (*Azizi, 2021: 3*). The Islamic Republic's two-fold policy in Iraq are firstly, to ensure Iraqi government would not work against Tehran's interests and secondly, mediation between the Shiite factions and curbing divisions (*Azizi, 2021: 3-4; Al-Smadi, 2014; Malik 2021*). Iran through its intervention has contributed in slowing the Iraqi state to evolve itself into a genuinely independent democracy.

Iran's stronghold in Iraq eventually transformed the Arab state into a battleground between Tehran and Washington DC. The US carried out several air strikes on positions of PMF forces and Iran backed militias conducted number of attacks on US military bases and convoys between 2018 and 2021 (*CFR, 2022; Stewart & Ali, 2021; Falk, 2021*). The ordinary Iraqis aspiring to improve their standard of living after years of conflict and devastation saw Iran's 'over-involvement' as a roadblock. Moreover, the extra-judicial and illegal activities by Iran backed militias further increased sensitivity about Iran's influence.²⁶ Notably, the key demand of the October 2018 included both political overhaul of the ethno-sectarian political apportionment as well as reducing Iran's involvement in Iraqi politics. In fact, during the 2019 protest, Iranian consulates were attacked in Karbala on 3 November and Najaf on 28 November reflecting public antagonism towards Tehran's influence (*Ibrahim, 2019 b; The Arab Weekly, 2021*). According to Baghdad based Independent Institute of Administration & Civil Society Studies (IIACSS), the positive perception by Iraqis towards Iran has declined from 70 percent in 2017 to 15 percent in 2020 (*Abdulla & Jedinia, 2020; Fenton-Harvey, 2022*). In this context, Sadrist bloc has managed to appropriate the negative public sentiment about Iran's over-involvement and has placed itself as a pragmatist and nationalist alternative to the Tehran backed parties.

26 The Iran linked militias have reportedly collected taxes at checkpoints, interference in functioning of seaports, construction firms etc. The groups have also been accused of cracking down on demonstrators during 2019 October protest as well as killing political opponents. While PMF has denied these allegations, it has affected the public perception towards these groups and Iran (*Azizi, 2021: 7*).

Iran's Difficult Ties with Sadrist Bloc

Muqtada Al-Sadr, while maintaining tactical ties with Iran, is critical of Tehran's overarching influence on Iraqi political institutions, government, political process and of course, the political parties. Sadr's public speeches reflected his regional and domestic overview that contradicted Iran's strategic policy. During the course of the Syrian civil war, Sadr on 9 April 2017 urged Iran's regional ally, Bashar Al Assad to step down and stop the bloodshed inviting ire from Tehran (*Reuters, 2017*). Sadr unlike other Shiite leaders close to Tehran has refrained from speaking hostile rhetoric against Saudi Arabia and other Sunni states.

Sadr also visited Riyadh on 30 July 2017 and met Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman indicating shared interest in countering Iran's influence. Sadr through his visit delivered message to regional and influential Sunni states that not all Shiite groups are aligned with Iran (*Al-Rasheed, 2017*). It therefore served as a tactical and strategic move for Sadr to gain financial and political support from Riyadh; dilute the sectarian rhetoric and contribute in confidence building between both states.²⁷ Sadr speaking to Saudi journalists emphasized on securing peace, rejecting sectarianism and returning Iraq to the Arab fold (*Al-Rasheed, 2017; Riedel, 2017*). Sadr also visited the UAE on 13 August 2017 and met with the Emirati leadership.²⁸ Sadr's visits were part of efforts to balance Iraq's engagement with Iran and the Gulf states and serve as a bridge between GCC and Baghdad. Saudi Arabia and the UAE also saw Sadr as an effective medium to expand its influence in Iraq. Iranian media outlets, analysts and politicians saw Sadr's visit as larger plan to invite Saudi and

27 Saudi Arabia reopened its embassy on 1 January 2016. Riyadh cut off diplomatic ties and shut down its embassy in Iraq in 1990 after Saddam Hussein regime invaded Kuwait (VOA News, 2016).

28 Muqtada Al Sadr during his visit to the UAE met with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed; Foreign Affairs Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed; Deputy Secretary General of the Supreme National Security Council, Ali Mohamed Hammad Al Shamsi; Undersecretary of the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed Al Mazrouei and founder of the Ulama Organisation in Iraq, Sheikh Ahmed al-Kubaisi (The National, 2017).

Emirati inroads in Iraq (*The National*, 2017; *Middle East Eye*, 2017).²⁹

Sadr is seen as populist and his political agenda is based on reducing external influence from Iran besides the US. However, it is simplistic to assume that Sadr's relation with Iran is antagonistic. In fact, Iran has served as asylum for Sadr for many years and he has met with the Supreme Leader on multiple occasions (*NBC News*, 2011). Sadr enjoyed firm tactical relations with Qasem Soleimani. The level of engagement however subsided after Soleimani's death. The new head of the Quds force, Esmail Qaani does not enjoy the same level of relations as Soleimani. Toby Dodge, Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics noted Qaani does not have either the influence or strategy parallel to Qasem Soleimani. The role of Qaani is weak as compared to Soleimani who enjoyed broader ties with Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish parties. Qaani has been unable to impose Iran's objectives on the political parties. Iran's strategy therefore is based on preserving the gains it achieved over the past years, i.e. continued political representation of the allied Shiite parties. Iran while seeking political stability, it did not have the necessary tools to force Sadr to make concessions and end the political crisis (*Saadoun*, 2022 b; *Dodge*, 2022).

Iran's Moves post-2021 Elections

The Iranian leadership has been cautiously observing the developments in Iraq after October 2021 election. Iran was at a critical juncture in the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) talks and it did not want to disrupt the progress by direct involvement or supporting combat actions by allied militias in Iraq. At the same time, Tehran was worried that the inter-Shiite political division could undermine its influence in the Arab state. Iran was also fearful about the possibility of civil strife among Shiites, Sunni and Kurdish forces. Iraq's political stability and smooth government

29 Iranian daily, Kayhan claimed that Muqtada Al-Sadr is 'selling' himself to Riyadh for political and financial support and identified Sadr's isolation within Iraq as the cause for siding with Saudi Arabia. Iran calculated that closer ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE will diminish his support base among Iraqi Shiites. Iran also feared that Sadr was paving the way for turning Iraq as a strategic battleground between Tehran and Riyadh (Majidiyar, 2017 b).

formation therefore directly benefits Iran's interests. It maintained multiple channels of communication with government officials, political leaders to press direct and indirect pressure to ensure that allied Shiite political parties are incorporated in the new government (*Motamedi, 2022; Al Jazeera, 2022*).

Iranian government reached out to Muqtada Al-Sadr on numerous occasions. On 8 February 2022, Esmail Qaani met with Sadr carrying the message from the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Al Khamenei urging about the necessity of curbing the division, preserving the 'Shiite house' and overcoming the gap between the Sadrists and the CF (*Saadoun, 2022 b; Ahmed, 2022*).³⁰ Tehran was cautious about Sadr's intention to create fissures within the CF and weakening Iranian influence. Besides Sadr, the Iranian Commander visited Iraq on at least four occasions since January 2022 and met with Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish leaders to shape the government formation process (*The Arab Weekly, 2022 b; Shafaq News, 2022*).

Iran, in order to thwart Sadr's plan to form national majority government, placed direct pressure on Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leader Massoud Barzani and speaker Mohammed al-Halbousi. For Iran, the tactical retreat by Sadr in June 2022 by ordering Sadrist MPs to resign provided a unique opportunity to dismantle the Save the Homeland alliance. Iran and its Iraqi allies attempted to isolate Sadr and pressurize him to incorporate his Shiite rivals in the new government (*Al Jazeera, 2022 f; Reuters, 2022*). From Iran's perspective, indirect coercion towards KDP and Sunni parties was more effective than pressurizing Sadr. Iran tried to capitalize its influence and hoped that some if not all of its allies are represented in the government (*Ali, 2022; Hamasaeed, 2022; Baram, 2022*).

30 Muqtada Al-Sadr during the meeting with Esmail Qaani expressed his intention to form a majority government with participation of some parties but not all from the Coordination Framework hinting his difference with Nouri Al Maliki's bloc (*Saadoun, 2022 b; Ahmed, 2022*).

The *Middle East Eye*, after interviews with the US and Iraqi officials, reported that Iran has been using the policy of ‘Carrot and Stick’ to fulfill its objectives (*Al-Salby, 2022*). In case of Iraqi Kurdistan, the area is within the range of Iranian missiles which could be used to sabotage the KDP government under Massoud Barzani (The White House, 2022; Zaman, 2022).³¹ Iran could also block trade channels connecting Iraqi Kurdistan and stall its economy based on oil resources. At the same time, Iran could earn KDP’s loyalty by aiding the party obtain high number of cabinet positions; back Kurdistan’s position in case of differences with the Iraqi government over oil revenue and allow trade and energy channel from Kurdistan to pass through Iranian territory (*Al-Salby, 2022*). Iran in case of the Sunni parties intended to weaken parliamentary speaker Mohammed Al-Halbousi’s control and support rival figures and tribal leaders.³² After re-election as parliamentary speaker on 9 January 2022, his residence in Gurma district in Anbar province was attacked on 25 January 2022 using Katyusha rockets which were reportedly fired from areas controlled by pro-Iran Kataib Hezbollah militia (*Kittleson, 2022; Al-Salby, 2022*).

Iran’s opponents hinted about Tehran’s complicity to push Sadr’s allies to backtrack and create condition for incorporating the Fatah Alliance and State of Law coalition. Tehran at the same time hosted Al-Halbousi on 27 April 2022 and emphasized the need for political stability indicating the need for consensus government rather than national majority government espoused by Sadrist bloc, KDP and Sunni groups (*Rudaw, 2022; Iran*

31 IRGC on 13 March 2022 carried out multiple ballistic missile attacks in Erbil to allegedly dismantle a ‘Mossad cell’ (*The Times of Israel, 2022*). Iraq’s Federal Court on 15 February in its judgment ruled that the oil and gas law regulating the oil industry in Iraqi Kurdistan as unconstitutional and order Kurdish authorities to hand over the crude supplies to the federal government under the Oil Ministry. Iraqi Kurdistan Prime Minister Masoud Barzani called the Federal Court’s decision as political and contrary to the federal spirit of the constitution (*Edwards & Mohamed, 2022*).

32 In late April 2022, Ali Hatem al-Suleiman, prominent leader from Al-Dulaim tribe returned from exile (*Shafaq News, 2022 e*). On 1 July 2020, former Finance Minister Rafi al-Issawi was acquitted by Supreme Judicial Council from terrorism related charges (*Asharq Al-Awsat, 2020*). The court decisions quashing cases against Issawi and Suleiman and re-emergence of Mohammad al-Halbousi’s opponents was seen as a tactic by the Coordination Framework (CF) and Iran to reduce the Speaker’s control over the Sunni groups and disrupt the alliance with Sadrist bloc (*Shafaq News, 2022 e*).

International, 2022).³³ In the aftermath of storming of parliament by Sadrists, Iran urged all stakeholders to respect the democratic process. In light of failure by Sadrists and its allies to form government, Iran insisted that the CF that includes Tehran backed parties should be given fair opportunity to try and form government (*Al Jazeera, 2022 f; Sirwan, 2022; Reuters, 2022*). CF's nomination process was however disrupted by Sadrist supporters that stormed the parliament in last week of July 2022.

According to Prof. Hamid Musavi from Tehran University, the core areas of conflict are based on divergent interests of political blocs within Iraq. The differences over Iran's influence in Iraq have played a minor role especially in the current situation. Iran while enjoying considerable influence in Iraq, in the present crisis, it was not willing to interfere in its political affairs. Iran essentially saw it as rivalry between the domestic political groups. Iran offered to facilitate negotiation between the two sides (*Al Jazeera, 2022*). Sadr's relations with Tehran have however deteriorated. In light of the 13 October 2022 appointment of new President, and importantly, the Prime Minister, Iran backed parties have consolidated their position. Therefore, despite facing challenges in terms of low support for Iran backed parties in October 2021 election and political hurdles by Sadrists, Tehran has managed to maneuver the current trajectory of Iraqi politics in its favour. In the coming days, it needs to be seen how Tehran engages with Sadrists and attempts to preserve its political predominance in Iraq (*The Guardian, 2022*).

Bilateral Relations

At the government-to-government level, Iran has maintained high level engagement throughout the current period. Besides, regular discussions over the flow of natural gas and electricity supply, both sides talked about

33 Mohammed al Halbousi during his visit to Iran on 27 April met with Iranian leaders including President Ebrahim Raisi; Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and Iranian parliamentary speaker, Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf; Iran's Secretary of Supreme National Security Council Ali Shamkhani. Both sides agreed that Iran's stability reflects positively on Iraq and vice versa (Rudaw, 2022).

expanding trade, economic and judicial cooperation.³⁴ Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi speaking to Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi on 22 August 2022 emphasized on the necessity of protecting national unity. He also urged all political groups in Iraq to find out solutions to overcome the existing political problems through dialogue and interaction. Al-Kadhimi stressed on Iran's role in the region and internationally and highlighted Iraq's efforts to improve relations and cooperation with Tehran (*Press TV, 2022; Mehr News Agency, 2022*).

Tehran hosted Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein on 15 April and again on 29 August 2022 (*Aldroubi, 2022*).³⁵ The Iraqi Foreign Minister during 29 August 2022 meeting asserted that the security context of Tehran and Baghdad were intertwined, and assured that it will not allow its territory to pose threat against Iran and appreciated the 'constructive views of Iranian leaders and officials about domestic developments in Iraq (*Motamedi, 2022; Mehr News Agency, 2022*). President Raisi noted the importance of maintaining security and stability in Iraq that would only be possible through dialogue among all political groups on the basis of the constitution. Raisi also mentioned the necessity to form new government at the earliest (*Iran Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022; Motamedi, 2022; Mehr News Agency, 2022*).³⁶

The Iranian Foreign Ministry, after the two days long violence between Sadrists and its Shiite rivals subsided, on 31 August, offered a statement expressing Tehran's interest in stable, secure and powerful Iraq willing to play a constructive role in regional developments. The Foreign Ministry

34 Iran's Judiciary Chief Ebrahim Raeisi and the president of Iraq's Supreme Judicial Council, Fayeq Zeidan on 9 February 2022 signed three MOUS on judicial and legal cooperation between both states (*Press TV, 2021*).

35 The discussion in April 2022 largely covered security concerns especially in Iraqi Kurdistan, regional situation; progress in peace talks with Saudi Arabia and most importantly, political stability in Iraq (*Aldroubi, 2022 b*).

36 The Iranian President appreciated the role played by Iraq in facilitating negotiation between Tehran and Riyadh. Iran's Foreign minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian has emphasized the need for preserving the national unity of Iraq, saying the country's problems must be solved through legal channels. He also called for further expansion of trade and economic cooperation between the two states by taking advantage of their existing potentialities (*Iran Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022; Motamedi, 2022; Mehr News Agency, 2022 c*).

statement also warned about exploitation of the political situation by 'Iraq's ill-wishers'. Iran also shut down its air and land borders with Iraq which temporarily obstructed the flow of Iranian pilgrims visiting Shiite shrines in the Arab state (*Tasnim News Agency, 2022 c; Iran Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022*).

Iran's conduct in Iraq's post-election political environment was deeply influenced by national security interests. The political situation and the public perceptions in Iraqi society are rapidly transforming. The poor public opinion about Iran's 'over-involvement' in Iraq indicates that electorally, the support base of Tehran backed parties such as Fatah Alliance is eroding. In case of new election, it is likely that the vote share of Iran backed parties could further decline. The Iranian government is conscious about declining public opinion and therefore opted for a more restraint approach to intervene in the current round of political drama in Iraq. The political fortune of Iran-backed parties and militias could however revive in case of reappearance and regathering of extremist threats such as the Islamic State (IS); Al-Qaeda etc threatening Iraq's national security in particular and regional security in general.

Iran is deeply invested in preserving the political constituency of its allies. It is however worried about the possibility of inter-Shiite civil conflict leading to an uncertain political future. Therefore, in the current situation, Iran favours political stability while preserving its political and strategic gains in Iraq. Moreover, in light of the domestic protests within Iran after Mahsa Amini's custodial death on 16 September, the ruling regime is facing intense pressure over its strict religious and brutal anti-women moral code. Tehran does not want civil conflict to flare up in Iraq that remains its most crucial ally. On bilateral front, Iran, as mentioned, has maintained cordial ties with the caretaker government increasing engagement in energy, electricity, trade and investment sectors between October 2021 and August 2022. The eventual appointment of Al-Sudani government backed by CF has preserved Iran's political and strategic primacy in Iraq. Iraqi Prime Minister Al-Sudani met with Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on 29 November. Ayatollah Khamenei talked about the

insecurity emerging from Iraqi territory and urged the central government to extend its authority over those regions hinting towards Iraqi Kurdistan. The Iranian leader assured that Iran will continue to defend Iraq from those who intend to create insecurity. Security issues in Iraq and Iran are intertwined according to Al-Sudani and called for joint efforts to combat terrorism, extremism and drugs. In terms of economic cooperation, both leaders focused on sectors such as economic cooperation, exchange of goods and rail connectivity (*Shamsuddin 2022; Tehran Times 2022*).

Several regional actors are closely monitoring Iraq's political developments. In case of Gulf States, they favoured Sadr's attempts to form government with Sunni and Kurdish parties that in effect will exclude the Iran backed parties. Tehran was worried about the Gulf States exploiting the political tiff and gradually increases its inroads within Iraq. Lastly, the US remains the most credible extra-regional threat for Iran and it is likely that Iran's actions will be aimed at thwarting Washington DC's plans to capitalize the growing unpopularity of Iran's over-involvement and subsume the key parties under its sphere of influence.

US Response

US' stated objectives in Iraq are strengthening of democratic institutions; empowering civil society; economic reforms and preserving the strategic, political, and economic importance of the U.S.-Iraq partnership. Since 2014, Washington DC has provided around US\$ 3 billion in humanitarian assistance (*US Department of State, 2021*). Between 2015 and 2020, the US Congress has authorized and appropriated around US\$ 6.5 billion in Defence Department funding for training and equipments. In July 2021, US offered an additional US\$ 155 million to Iraq for providing critical shelter, healthcare, water, sanitation, hygiene services, emergency food assistance, protection services in case of gender based violence response, rehabilitation of Iraqis displaced by IS, aiding people suffering from economic consequences of COVID-19 etc. The US continues to remain the largest single donor of humanitarian assistance in Iraq. It is one of the largest trade partners for Iraq and the bilateral trade was at US\$ 4.6 billion

in 2021 (*US Department of State, 2021*).³⁷ Several US companies have engaged in Iraq in sectors such as energy, defense, information technology, automotive, and transportation sectors

With regard to the current political crisis in Iraq, the US' role has been largely passive. From the US perspective, Muqtada Al-Sadr is seen as a volatile figure who came into prominence due to his rhetoric against the US and attacks on NATO coalition targets. It is estimated that Shiite militias linked to Sadrist Movement have killed around 600 US personnel (*Alaaldin, 2022*). Sadr also capitalized on the domestic antagonism of positing Iraq as a battleground between the US and Iran especially after the fall of IS in 2017. Sadr's long-term strategy is to remove all US military bases within Iraq and curb Washington DC's direct and indirect intervention. At the same time, the poor performance by Iran backed parties and victory of Sadrists in the October 2021 election, without being ideal, yet offered an opportunity for Washington DC to challenge Tehran's influence. The US while being encouraged by the October 2021 election result and quietly welcoming the electoral victory of the Sadrists, opted for wait and watch approach. The Joe Biden administration was cautious to avoid being seen as meddling in the government formation process and relied on domestic actors to resolve the political crisis. The current situation has displayed that the US influence has significantly diminished and it is no longer capable of micromanaging and horse trading to suit their interests (*Alaaldin, 2022; Wahab, 2022*).

Several US policy experts have criticized Washington DC's weak role in facilitating a cross-sectarian, multi-ethnic government in Iraq capable of safeguarding its sovereignty. Bilal Wahab writing in the Washington Institute noted that the Biden administration has underestimated its leverage within Iraq allowing Iran backed parties to prolong the political

37 Iraq's export to the US was at US\$ 3.8 billion and US export to Iraq was at US\$ 0.8 billion (US Department of State 2022 a). Iraq's trade with the US is largely dominated by crude oil. Trade and Investment Framework Agreement between both states have been operational since 2013 and US-Iraq Trade and Investment Council meeting were held in 2014 and 2019. Both states during the Strategic Dialogue signed MOUs amounting to US\$ 8 billion in potential deals with the US firms (US Department of State, 2022 b).

limbo. The US has also failed to subdue Tehran's deep engagement with Baghdad as well as curb its influence in Iraqi domestic politics (*Wahab, 2022*). The US enjoyed close ties with former intelligence Chief and former Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi and Washington DC's approval was crucial for Al-Kadhimi's appointment in 2020 (*Middle East Monitor, 2020; Hearst, 2020*).³⁸ The US has however failed to place pressure on Kadhimi government to resolve the pressing issues facing Iraqi society including corruption, economic reforms and reducing the dependence on Iran for consumer goods, natural gas, electricity supply etc. Moreover, US, despite its superior military strength, has been unable to neutralize hostile militia groups (*Cordesman, 2020; Alaaldin, 2022; Higel & Mardini, 2020*). The Joe Biden administration following the election largely disengaged from political deliberations and failed to reach out to diverse set of actors to facilitate government formation. US' efforts should focus on pressurizing the new Al-Sudani government to take action against corruption, improving the living standards of Iraqis, expediting natural gas supply, banking facilities, electricity grid connectivity etc. with the Gulf States as well as help in building infrastructure to lower Baghdad's dependence on Tehran (*Wahab, 2022*).

As mentioned earlier, the instances of confrontation between the US and Iran backed groups have increased especially since 2017. In this context, the US' interest coincides with Sadr's plan to delegitimize and weaken Iran backed groups. In the long term, Sadr's militias could also pose threat, however in the current context, Iran backed groups are more immediate threats to the US interests. US was closely watching Sadr's alliance with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) (*Alaaldin, 2022; Wahab, 2022; Hamasaheed, 2022*). In case of Kurds that enjoys tactical cooperation with the US, Joe Biden administration could help the Kurdistan Regional Government to expand its regional outreach towards Turkey, Qatar and

38 Mustafa Al-Kadhimi's appointment as Prime Minister in 2020 occurred due to secret deal between the US and Iran. Tehran backed the US in nominating Al-Kadhimi. In exchange, the US withdrew freeze of some assets; agreed to de-escalate militarily in the Persian Gulf region and allowed any third party state in Europe to release some of money that were frozen by sanctions (*Hearst, 2020*).

the UAE to nurture energy network bypassing Baghdad. The US could also minimize the differences among the Kurdish parties to appoint a new President. Sadr's plans for cross sectarian alliance especially with the Kurds has offered an opportunity for the US to capitalize. The US could aid the Kurdish groups close to Sadr to avoid getting arm twisted by Tehran; carry out proportionate retaliatory responses to Iran's attacks in Kurdish areas and provide comprehensive air defence systems (*Alaaldin, 2022; Wahab, 2022*).

For the US, the strategic significance of Iraq would continue to persist especially in light of China's growing inroads in the oil-rich Arab state. In fact, Iraq was the largest recipient of China's construction related investment in 2021 at US\$ 10.5 billion for financing assorted projects ranging from energy and aviation infrastructure, green energy capabilities to building roads and schools. Iraq is also the third-largest partner under Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for energy engagement after Pakistan and Russia (*Wang 2021; Silk Road Briefing 2022*). Iraq formally joined China's BRI project in October 2019 to fulfill immediate goals such as upgrading its aging infrastructure, expanding cooperation on oil and diversification of economy into non-oil sectors (*Silk Road Briefing 2019*). The BRI initiative disproportionately benefits China which can be optimized to expand political control and perpetuate economic and resource exploitation of states including debt traps (*Papadimitriou 2019*). Domestically within Iraq, Chinese involvement has been a controversial subject creating division within politicians and business community regarding US' development aid model and the Chinese model. Reportedly, a number of public demonstrations have been taking place in Baghdad by both pro-BRI and anti-BRI factions (*Silk Road Briefing 2022*). In December 2021 and January 2022, there have been two attacks on Chinese facilities (*Middle East Eye 2022; Arab News 2021*). The security risks could hamper China's interests in Iraq.

India's Interests in Iraq

Iraq is one of the top exporters of oil among the Organization of the

Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) member states. In 2021, the state exported 3.437 million barrels per day (bpd) of crude oil (*Iraq Oil Report 2022*) and the value of petroleum exports was US\$ 79.7 billion (OPEC 2022; *Xinhua 2022*). According to OPEC, Iraq's proven crude oil reserves is around US\$ 145 billion barrels and natural gas reserves is around 3,714 billion cubic meters in 2021. In the same year, Iraq's crude oil production was 3,971 barrels per day; marketed production of natural gas was 9,586 million cubic meters and crude oil exports were 3,440 barrel per day (OPEC 2022). In midst of the political turmoil, Baghdad exported US\$ 100.5 million barrels earning revenue worth US\$ 11.07 billion in March 2022 (*Al Jazeera 2022*). The export revenue witnessed a slight dip in August earning around US\$ 9.78 billion (*MEES 2022*).

For India, Iraq counts among the top suppliers of crude oil besides Russia and Saudi Arabia. In August 2022, Iraq emerged as the top supplier providing around 895,000 barrels per day (bpd) compared to Saudi Arabia and Russia supplying 768,000 bpd and 748,000 bpd respectively (*Dinakar 2022*). In October 2022, Russia has surpassed Iraq accounting 22 percent of India's total crude oil imports as compared to Iraq at 20.5 percent and Saudi Arabia at 16 percent (*The Times of India 2022; Tribune India 2022*). India's total trade with Iraq in 2021-2022 was at US\$ 34.3 billion with imports at US\$ 31.9 billion and exports at US\$ 2.4 billion (*Ministry of Commerce and Industry 2022*). India-Iraq bilateral trade is largely dominated by crude oil. Besides oil, India imports raw wool and sulphur from Iraq. India's exports to Iraq include transport equipment, electronic goods, electrical machinery and instruments, iron and steel, textiles, food items etc. Iraq contributes around 3.32 percent in India's total trade and currently, the Arab state has emerged as New Delhi's seventh largest trade partner. Indian government after the formation of Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani government on 13 October 2022 sent congratulatory messages. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas, Hardeep Singh Puri invited their Iraqi counterparts to visit India to further deepen bilateral and energy ties (*Embassy of India, Iraq 2022; Ministry of External Affairs 2022*).

In terms of bilateral relations, India and Iraq have maintained close ties. In the recent past, India hosted Dr. Haval Abubaker, Governor of Sulaymaniyah Province, Iraqi Kurdistan Region between 11 and 21 April 2022 under Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR)'s Distinguished Visitors Programme 2022-2023. Jaishankar met with his Iraqi counterpart, Fuad Hussein during UN General Assembly session in New York in September 2021 and again at the sidelines of Bani Yas Forum in Abu Dhabi in October 2021. Indian External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar met with Nechirvan Barzani, President of Kurdistan Regional Government during Munich Security Conference on 19 February 2022. In terms of high level visits, Minister of State for External Affairs, V Muraleedharan visited Iraq on 16-17 September 2019. India's previous Minister of State for External Affairs, V K Singh visited Iraq on three occasions in July and September 2017 and January 2018 (*Embassy of India, Iraq 2022*). From Iraq's side, Foreign Minister, Ibrahim Al Jaafari; Minister of Health, Adeelah Hamoud Hussein Saleem and Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Abdul Razzaq Al-Issa visited India in July 2017; October 2017 and October 2018 respectively (*Embassy of India, Iraq 2022; Ministry of External Affairs 2022*). Indian companies are involved in developing Iraq's critical infrastructure including sewerage system in Basra; compressor package in Baiji refinery; turnkey order for building gas turbine based Sulaymaniyah power project. India is also involved in capacity building initiatives including training programmes under the ambit of the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) especially in the areas of COVID-19 pandemic management, cyber technologies, AI and emergent technologies etc. Currently, there are around 15,000 to 17,000 Indians working in Iraq and additionally around 30,000 to 40,000 Indians annually visit holy cities in Iraq (*Embassy of India, Iraq 2022; Ministry of External Affairs 2022*).

Conclusion

Iraq's post 2003 political set up has prioritized ethno-sectarian identities in power allocation that has diluted the ideals of cohesive community, citizenship and national identity. Iraqi political parties have benefitted

from the current political structure serving its interests. The National Unity Governments under Prime Ministers Nouri Al-Maliki, Haider Al Abadi, Adil Abdul Mahdi and Mustafa Al-Kadhimi were formed after consensus among key political blocs. The Iraqi Prime Ministers have failed to improve the standard of living, curb unemployment, poverty, rampant corruption etc., thus igniting series of protests. The call for reforming the political structure has emerged as a core demand among general Iraqis. The Sadrist Movement that won the highest number of seats in October 2021 election has utilised the public antagonism against government inaction to push for majority cabinet by allying with Kurdish and Sunni parties. The Iran backed parties under the umbrella of CF has hindered Muqtada Al Sadr's plan to exclude them from the government formation process and after months of political stalemate, protests and clashes managed to appoint a new President and Prime Minister with backing from Iran. Al-Sudani government is facing huge challenges in terms of economic downturn, decline in living standards, political actions by Sadrists, trends in militancy, strategic competition between Iran and the US.

Lack of public support for Iran's involvement in Iraq has translated to poor performance by Iran backed parties especially under Fatah Alliance. The parties under CF will remain anxious about their political fate in case of fresh election. At the same time, it needs to be seen how Iraqis view Sadr's stubborn attitude that prolonged the political stalemate for a year until October 2022. Moreover, unpredictable actions such as the resignation of Sadrist MPs in June, storming the Green Zone and sit ins at government buildings in July-August and Sadr's so-called withdrawal from politics in August have been questioned by common Iraqis eager for a transparent government. The lack of support by leading Iraqi Shiite clergy such as Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and Ayatollah Kadhim al-Haeri could also affect Sadr's popularity in the current context. Sadrists were also involved in the two day long violence targeting political opponents that led to 30 deaths. Moreover, there is protest fatigue after gaining only limited success in October 2019 protests. Iraqis are in dire need of a new government to improve their poor living conditions following years of crisis caused

by IS. These factors could play a key role in determining Sadr's political legitimacy in the coming months.

A large section of Iraqis back Sadr's efforts to overcome the ethno-sectarian political arrangement. However, fresh election as demanded by Sadr is not very popular. Sadr's political strategy is aimed at political consolidation especially among Iraqi Shiites. Moreover, despite Sadr's political rhetoric to change the current political system, it has profited from the said arrangement and Sadrist politicians have occupied cabinet positions in governments under Nouri-Al Maliki, Haider Al-Abadi, Adil Abdul Mahdi and Mustafa Al-Kadhimi. The lengthy and inconclusive government formation process has posed question about the viability of Iraq's unique ethno-sectarian political model. It has been questioned by Iraqis agitated by the failure of the political class to provide social goods, education, health services, employment, facilitating investment etc.

In terms of Iran's calculations, Baghdad remains its most crucial ally and top destination of goods, electricity and natural gas. Iraqi territory also provides transit route for Iranian goods to reach Mediterranean Sea and serves as land corridor for Iranian troops and allied militias to access Syria and Lebanon. In the background of the current regional confrontation between Iran and Israel, strategic control over Iraq is pertinent to furnish weapons, technical support to its fighters in the Syrian battleground. Iraq is currently hosting mediation talks between Tehran and Riyadh. Tehran therefore does not want political instability in its neighborhood that could impact its national security. On bilateral level, Tehran had heightened its engagement with the caretaker government under Mustafa Al-Kadhimi. It appealed to all sides to respect the democratic process and uphold national unity.

Iran is keen to preserve its gains and the political constituency of its allied parties in Iraq. Iran is aware of the declining public opinion within Iraq; it however will continue to remain as the most important external player in the Arab state. In case of revival of radical groups, the political fortune of Iran-backed parties and militias could be restored. The US as well as

the Gulf states are quietly backing bid by Sadrists to form government that could alienate the parties backed by Iran. Sadr is therefore seen as an effective figure that could limited Iran's influence, Washington DC is aware of its limitations in directly interfering in Iraqi politics and has adopted a wait and watch approach.

Iraq has faced political limbo for a year since October 2021 which eventually culminated after appointment of Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani and his cabinet. It was feared that case of political stalemate continues, the armed groups of the political parties could increase violence that could transform into inter-Shiite strife widening the scope of sectarian conflict. It must however be noted that Iraqi political institutions are evolving and maturing and there are more platforms for dialogue as compared to succeeding years after 2003 US invasion. It is reflected in the eventual appointment of the new leadership that has succeeded in preserving the status quo i.e. consolidation of Iran backed parties under the ethno-sectarian system. The current government since taking office is facing myriad of challenges and political future of Iraq will depend on balancing peoples demand for economic upliftment and political reforms including re-adjustment in ethno-sectarian system that could ensure smooth government functioning capable of removing the existing inequalities in Iraq.

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