



REPORT MIDDLE EAST

Can Militant Cleric Moqtada al-Sadr Reform Iraq?

MAY 1, 2018 — THANASSIS CAMBANIS

In the fifteen years since the American invasion toppled Saddam Hussein from power, Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr has distinguished himself from other emerging Iraqi leaders with his endurance, iconoclasm, and unpredictability. He has cut a bedeviling and at times magnetic figure in his country, and he is one of the few sectarian leaders whose popularity has crossed sectarian lines.

Through war, flips of allegiances, involvement in corruption, and military victory and defeat, Sadr has managed to preserve his maverick image as a stubbornly independent man deeply committed to his principles, even as those principles shift over time. Now, with the May 12 Iraqi elections approaching, he is trying to parlay his reputation as a nationalist free-thinker into a movement that can transform Iraq's political system.

In fact, Sadr has fashioned himself into an unlikely tribune of reform in Iraq. A persistent thorn in the side of foreign powers and Iraqi politicians alike, the graying forty-four-year-old is now trying to radically reshape his country's politics. He has freshly renounced religious sectarianism, building an alliance with Communists and secular reform activists.¹ He has attacked Iraq's corrupt spoils system, with slogans such as "corruption is terrorism" that resonate with millions of disenchanted Iraqis. His unorthodox electoral campaign joins Shia partisans, Communist ideologues and some of Baghdad's secular elite. Sadr's popularity, hard power, and unifying message make him a direct threat to Iraq's political class.

Even though his movement is unlikely to win a majority, Sadr's unique campaign and nationalist-religious-secular alliance has upended nostrums about Iraqi and Middle Eastern politics. He hopes to establish new guiding principles: Sectarian movements can change their politics and become secular and nationalist. Armed militants can take part in electoral politics and government. Sectarian constituencies can embrace nonsectarian principles and support power-sharing and coexistence.

The evolution of Sadr and his movement has unfolded along pragmatic lines, with many flaws and inconsistencies. Nonetheless, Sadr's political makeover amounts to a groundbreaking and encouraging transformation. It compels other established movements in Iraq to address the core challenges of security and governance, while building trans-sectarian or nationalist coalitions. He sets an example for other leaders and political organizations interested in exiting the confining boxes of sectarianism and patronage and mobilizing broader, more fluid and inclusive idea- or policy-based movements.

The success of Sadr's approach and platform is more important than that of his candidates. If his coalition is repudiated by voters, or abandons its plans to challenge poor governance, then we can expect more of the dispiriting business-as-usual from Baghdad. But if Sadr follows through after the election and promotes the formation of a platform-based

government with a legislative opposition, then we can expect Iraqi politics to enter a new phase, moving away from narrow sectarianism and patronage-only politics. A transition to a government with some technocrat ministers, a real opposition, and some pretense of nonsectarianism is necessary if Iraq is to begin addressing policy problems that affect the stability of the entire Middle East. The most pressing concerns include securing and developing the areas liberated from the Islamic State and reincorporating Sunni Arabs and Kurds into Baghdad's fold.

This report traces Sadr's evolution, and both the perils and promises of the road ahead. It is based on more than forty interviews conducted in Iraq in February and March 2018, with support from a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Charismatic Provocateur

Iraqis have long bemoaned a lack of leadership and vision within the ruling class. The melee of corruption and militia-formation that has plagued Iraqi public life since 2003 has featured a parade of politicians and warlords, many of whom have evolved into effective operators. Yet only two indisputably strong, charismatic leaders have distinguished themselves from the fragmentary society of party bosses, warlords, tribal leaders, and the grifters and opportunists who have made deals with the wardens of cash. Those two are both Shia clerics, and no love is lost between them.

The first, and most influential, is Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the single most authoritative leader in Iraq. A cleric of impressive intellect and conservative (rather than radical) nationalist views, Sistani is credited as a moderating force who at times kept Iraq from civil war and at others helped mitigate the scope and damage of sectarian conflict.

The other enduringly powerful figure is the far more junior Sadr, who in the wake of the U.S. invasion emerged as a strong counterpoint to Sistani's style of leadership and modest ambitions. Sadr lacks the educational pedigree of the ayatollahs who are considered "marjaiya," or sources of emulation, and whose teachings are followed by millions worldwide. Still, Sadr inherited the millions of passionate followers of his father and uncle, both revered ayatollahs; and he also continued the family feud against Sistani, whom the Sadrs regarded as too timid.

Sadr was not yet thirty years old when the United States invaded Iraq. His family organization already included a nationwide network of staff and offices, and Sadr quickly leveraged these to assemble a committed militia, the Mahdi Army. He emerged as a powerful and unpredictable force—violently opposed to the American occupation as well as to homegrown Sunni extremists.

Although he is a Shia cleric, Sadr made it clear with his rhetoric and style that he was first and foremost an Iraqi nationalist, not beholden to foreign powers, whether Iran, the United States, or another country. From 2004–08, the Mahdi Army forged a fearsome record of violence, fighting at different times against U.S. forces, Sunni sectarians, and fellow Shia movements. His fighters rallied, at least initially, under the banner of resisting the American occupation. In the first years after Saddam’s fall, the Mahdi Army and the Sadrist political organization made symbolic overtures to non-Shia resistance groups and expressed a willingness to ally with Iraqis of any sect or ethnicity (a commitment evident more in rhetoric than in practice). As a result, and especially in the early years following the invasion, Sadr was one of the few militia commanders who enjoyed at least some grudging respect across sectarian lines. The ensuing decade dulled his sheen somewhat, as his soldiers were implicated in some of the same abuses and sectarian violence as other factions, and his political partisans, the Sadr Movement, proved every bit as susceptible as other parties to the temptations of corruption. In 2008, Sadr officially disbanded his Mahdi Army militia, although much of its structure and membership survived in other guises within the Sadr organization. In 2014, in response to Sistani’s call for fighters to resist the Islamic State, Sadr launched Saraya al-Salam, (“Peace Companies” or “Peace Brigades”), a successor militia to the Mahdi Army which included most of its veteran officers who hadn’t moved on to other, more militant organizations.



BILLBOARDS COMMEMORATE MILITIA FIGHTERS WHO DIED FIGHTING AGAINST THE ISLAMIC STATE, AND PAY TRIBUTE TO THE SPIRITUAL FOREBEARS OF SADR’S MILITIA AT A CHECKPOINT NORTH, OF KARBALA. SOURCE: THANASSIS CAMBANIS.

Sadr’s trajectory has not been a simple one-way ascent from militia strongman to political player. His story abounds with course-changes and seeming contradictions. For example, he has witheringly attacked the Iraqi political system, even as he has deeply embedded his politicians within it. And though in 2018 he has mounted a new campaign against

corruption, throughout the post-invasion years, Sadrists won a hard-earned reputation for epic corruption in their government fiefs, including the lucrative and critical health ministry which they controlled from 2006–07.

Unlikely Partners for Reform

In 2015, the rise of the Islamic State shattered the business-as-usual trajectory of Iraqi politics. Sectarianism had flourished, along with the corrupt spoils system. But foreign influence on Iraqi politics, along with security services crippled by corruption and no-show ghost soldiers, was no match for the Islamic State. Many Iraqis already had reached a breaking point because of raging unemployment and the government's failure to provide basic services like electricity. Basic services had never been fully restored since the American invasion of 2003, despite years of banner oil profits, mostly lost to corruption. Protest camps sprung up around the country. In Baghdad's Tahrir Square, followers of Sadr got to know followers of the secular reform parties, including the Communists. Over time, trust grew. Leaders of the secular parties were invited to meet with Sadr.

By the time the Islamic State shattered Iraq's sense of security, Sadr was already changing course. With the protest movement, he adopted a newly moderate and inclusive rhetoric. Sadr threw his weight behind the protesters. He encouraged his political movement and followers to make common cause with secular reformers and independent technocrats. His followers ceased their very public attacks on homosexuals. "He has undergone a change, an evolution," said Raid Jahid Fahmi, the secretary general of the Iraqi Communist Party, who has led the secular embrace of the cleric Sadr. "You will find a change in his vocabulary and thinking."²

"Sadr is ready to cooperate with anyone with Iraqi interests," said Fahmi. "This was a very important cultural shift."³

After joining forces with protesters from other factions in 2015, Sadr and his top lieutenants repeatedly met with potential partners. Over time, leaders in the Iraqi Communist Party and the Iraqi Republican Party, led by a secular Sunni pro-American businessman named Saad Janabi, grew convinced they could trust Sadr—and that they would be given an equal role in designing the alliance, even though their parties were much smaller than Sadr's following.⁴

"Moqtada al-Sadr is the only person who can summon one million people with a single call," Janabi said. Secular Iraqis and even some sectarian Sunnis have come to believe Sadr's nationalist rhetoric, he added.⁵

In coalition with his new partners, Sadr said he would support an entirely new group of technocratic candidates under a new name. He disbanded his existing "Ahrar" parliamentary bloc, with thirty-four members. He ordered them all not to run for reelection, clearing the way for a new slate of technocrats—the vague term of choice for Sadr and his movement



A SUPPORTER OF MOQTADA AL-SADR FLASHES THE VICTORY SIGN AS THE IRAQI NATIONAL ANTHEM OPENS AN ANTI-CORRUPTION PROTEST IN BAGHDAD'S TAHRIR SQUARE ON FRIDAY, FEB. 9. SOURCE: THANASSIS CAMBANIS.

government's performance, unfettered by sectarian or political allegiances. Sadr's new party is called "Istiqama," which means "integrity," and the overall coalition with the Communists and other smaller members is called "Sa'iroun," which means "On the move," or "Marching," with the intention of evoking a march toward reform. The alliance's goals are clear: a civil, secular state, run by technocratic experts who can fight corruption and improve governance.

Sadr's New Platform in Context

Sadr's record makes his positioning today all the more interesting. In the pivotal 2018 parliamentary elections, he has declared himself the leading opposition reform candidate. Some of his new claims strain credulity because of his checkered record, but his sheer power and loyal following mean he always has potential as a kingmaker. Electoral math makes unlikely his ambitions of winning the prime minister's job for his political movement, but he is establishing an entirely new style of politics and rhetoric, which holds critical promise for Iraq and possibly for the entire region.⁶ First, he has fashioned a potentially inclusive national narrative from the grisly history of sectarian violence that has buffeted

Iraq since 2003. Second, he has deftly eclipsed paralyzing political binaries, by forming an alliance with the Iraqi Communist Party and a small array of independent, secular reformists. Third, he has spurred an open discussion of the central problem of Iraqi politics: the “muhasasa” system, most accurately rendered as the “allotment” or “spoils” system.

“This alliance is something new,” said Fahmi, the Communist leader, who has led the secular embrace of Sadr.⁷ “The political process must shift to a citizenship state from a constituency state. The sectarian quota system is incapable of giving solutions to the problems of the country.”

Since the fall of Saddam’s dictatorships, elections have done nothing to dent the sectarian-based patronage structure in which there is no opposition to the government, but only a shifting free-for-all to feed at the public trough. Elections



A NEIGHBORHOOD SECURITY OFFICIAL LOOKS ON DURING FRIDAY PRAYERS IN SADR CITY, BAGHDAD ON FRIDAY, MARCH 16. SOURCE: THANASSIS CAMBANIS.

merely determine what share of power each party gets—the more votes a party secures, the more profitable the ministries to which it lays claim. No successful party has ever refused to take part in the government, joining in the broken-piñata frenzy of corruption that has characterized Iraqi governance at least since Saddam’s era.

The 2018 elections come at a moment when much has changed in Iraqi politics, and Sadr has carefully shaped his movement to make the most of it. The upcoming vote arrives on the heels of a successful military campaign against the Islamic State (in which Sadr’s fighters played an important role), and the coming of age of Iraq’s Shia sectarian militias and Islamist parties. The Shia Islamist militant parties have dominated Iraq since 2003. They have defeated their main external rivals and corralled Kurdish separatism. They have fought each other, sometimes in bitter political contests and

at times in outright war, as in 2008 when Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki drove Sadr's Mahdi Army out of Basra. Today, being a Shia Islamist militia no longer serves as a politically distinguishing identity. All the major electoral coalitions are led by Shia politicians, and most include some Sunni and Kurdish partners and candidates. Fissures within the Shia political space have strengthened other layers of political identity. Politicians now distinguish themselves by their approach to securing Iraq in the future from a resurgence of the Islamic State; balancing the influence of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United States; and solving the nagging problems of poverty, development and corruption. While other Shia political parties are experimenting with nationalist identity in the wake of the campaign against the Islamic State, Sadr has been identifying as a nationalist for years. He stands out further still by his vigorous support for the idea of a civil, even secular, state.

Security officials still worry about continuing threats from the Islamic State, but according to some Iraqi analysts voters have already moved on. Polling, they say, shows that Iraqis are more concerned about livelihoods than anything else. "Security is no longer a priority," said Sajad Jiyad, head of the Bayan Center, a think tank in Baghdad.⁸ "They're asking for jobs, not for security."

Yet even as Iraqi politicians pivot to face these new voter priorities, the electorate is meeting them with increasing suspicion and cynicism. Sadr has presented himself as something of a political outsider—and certainly not one of the Baghdad elite. His reinvention as a coalition builder enhances his appeal, suggesting he means it when he says he is ready to do business in a new way.

"The state is failing," said Dhiaa al-Asadi, leader of the current Sadrist bloc in parliament and a political operative very close to Sadr.⁹ "The existing political elite are part of the problem. They can't be part of the solution."

Sadr wants to see the militias formed to fight the Islamic State fully reintegrated into Iraqi government control. He wants sectarian quotas abolished for public sector jobs and government positions. He wants a carefully balanced foreign policy that keeps Iraq equidistant from Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United States. He has also been one of the only important Iraqi Shia leaders to oppose the involvement of Iraqi Shia militias in the Syrian civil war.¹⁰ He wants to come to terms with separatist Kurds. Above all, he wants to jumpstart the moribund economy to provide jobs and salaries to Iraqis—the poorest of whom are disproportionately part of Sadr's following.

In this context, Sadr's frontal challenge to the central narratives of Iraqi governance since 2003 has the potential to force the ruling parties to shift their rhetoric and approach. Indeed, the process can already be seen in action.

Bridging Old Rifts

Take, for example, Sadr's changing relationship with Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who, despite reservations about Sadr that have at times erupted into violent confrontation, has continued to court and collaborate with the cleric. Abadi has gone so far as to adopt some of Sadr's rhetoric. One billboard at the entrance to Baghdad shows Abadi's face and reads, "corruption and terrorism have one face," echoing the Sadrist protest slogan, "corruption is terrorism."

Abadi's wary embrace of Sadr is especially significant given that the many of the latter's supporters view Abadi as a villain. One recent demonstration, in February, marked the one-year anniversary of the death of fourteen demonstrators—killed at the hands of Abadi's security forces while marching toward the Green Zone. Marchers carried flag-draped coffins commemorating the "martyrs for reform" in the same manner that they would honor martyrs who died fighting the Islamic State.

Abadi and his allies have opted to accept Sadr as a potential partner, although Sadr's critical rhetoric has made them wary. "I think we should distinguish between the election campaign and the reality," said Sadiq al-Rikabi, a member of parliament and a close ally of the prime minister.¹¹ "It is very easy to stand against corruption," he added, but much harder to articulate tangible policy proposals.

Perhaps even more significant than Sadr's partial rapprochement with Abadi is that with Sistani. Despite Sadr's persistent popularity, Sistani's influence remains more important—but also more diffuse. Sistani's clout with Iraqi Shia is not absolute nor instrumental; he doesn't directly control any political parties or militias, and despite his extensive efforts, he has been unable to persuade Shia politicians to avoid corruption, violence and sectarianism. Still, his edicts hold force. It was a fatwa from Sistani in 2014 that created the popular mobilization units ("al-hashd al-sha'abi," or PMUs). Almost all Shia in Iraq heed Sistani's edicts, and he has been credited on multiple occasions with limiting the deleterious impact of Iraq's worst crises. Sistani has telegraphed his disappointment with the record of the Shia Islamist parties that have dominated Iraq's government since the 2005 elections. The Shia parties almost uniformly try to claim the approval of Sistani and the other senior Shia clerics, even when Sistani has made clear that he supports none of them. Sistani warned leaders of the Shia militias not to parlay their battlefield success into political campaigns, but most of them ignored the order, to Sistani's chagrin.

In an interview, a representative of Sistani criticized militia leaders for seeking "political advantage" from the "blood sacrifice" that Iraqis of all sects made in the resistance against the Islamic State.¹² As the parliamentary campaign has heated up, Sistani has made his displeasure even more clear. One cleric close to Sistani went on Furat Television to warn voters not to make their choice based on sect.¹³ "The corrupt people we have voted for have robbed the nation. We ought to not vote for them again, even if they are members of our clan or sect," said the cleric, Rashid al-Husseini.¹⁴ "I would rather trust a faithful Christian than a corrupt Shia."

Historically, Sadr has been at odds with Sistani and the other senior clerics in the marjaiya. In the current campaign, however, he has closely shadowed Sistani's pronouncements about corruption and the need to elect new leaders. In recent statements, Sadr has addressed skeptical voters who have lost faith in the political process because of the corruption and failures of previous Iraqi governments, including those with the participation of Sadrists. "We will not be deceived by the lies again," Sadr wrote in an April 14, 2018 statement¹⁵ His own movement's previous failures, he said, "give the motivation and determination to succeed in this election."

On April 4, 2018, Sadr released a series of arguments against boycotting the elections. "Some ask, and say: the corrupt and the old faces will stay in power whether we vote or not," Sadr wrote. He offered thirteen rebuttals, evoking religious loyalty, patriotism, optimism, and the responsibility of citizenship.¹⁶

In today's Iraq, Sadr boasts a unique status.¹⁷ He can count on nearly absolute devotion from his rank-and-file followers, his organization, his political party and his militia. Even Sadr's opponents recognize his political heft. In this, he is different from other Iraqi religious leaders only in degree: Mowaffak al-Rubaie, a former national security adviser who is close to several senior Iraqi politicians, said that millions of Iraqis venerate clerics and will do whatever those clerics instruct.¹⁸ During a visit by Sadr to the Kadhamiya shrine in Baghdad, Rubaie recalled, Sadr's followers crowded the cleric's jeep to touch the dirt on its wheels, which they smeared on their heads as a blessing. "If he orders these people to set themselves on fire, they will do it," he said.

Sadr's positions have appealed to Iraqis who are weary of conflict but seek to maintain dignity and integrity in their foreign relations. For example, Sadr has softened his rhetoric about secularists, and has been willing to mend fences with Saudi Arabia and criticize Iran. But at the same time, he has maintained a hard line against the United States, whose influence in Iraq he considers wholly malign.

The fact that those positions are accommodating while remaining tough and without being overly compromising—much like his evolving relationships with Abadi and Sistani—make his calls for unity that more meaningful.

"Healing is gradual," he said in the April 14 statement. Iraq has never before experimented with professional technocratic politicians, "without any partisan or religious or ideological or ethnical indications, to choose the most effective and the best [leaders] for the love of Iraq, and the love of Iraq is of faith."

Managing Expectations

If this account of Sadr's well-timed transformation into a champion of nonsectarian political reform sounds a little too gung ho, there are plenty of structural and historical reasons to readjust expectations to a more realistic level.

The results of the May 12 election are likely to set in motion a long negotiation process; many seasoned Iraqi politicians and analysts believe the outcome will be another unity government like all those that have ruled Iraq since the U.S. occupation, with goodies and power divided among sectarian parties. Sadr has pulled many about-faces before; he may tire of the alliance with secular parties, or he might decide he can better serve his constituents by joining yet another weak coalition government. "Moqtada al-Sadr has been on television and in politics for fifteen years and he has accomplished none of his goals," said one political insider close to the government. "He has been revealed to be someone who cannot be trusted."¹⁹

Fighting Sectarianism

Specific aspects of Sadr's past raise questions about his sincerity. For example, despite his maverick image, he has played his part in the problem of sectarianism. The Mahdi Army orchestrated some of the worst ethnic cleansing and sectarian killings of 2006, although Sadr subsequently pulled his loyalists back. Many of his extremist supporters defected to other organizations or founded their own, like Qais al-Khazali, who is now the leader of Asaib al-Haq, a Shia militia close to Iran.

Some secular leaders never overcame their mistrust of Sadr, with his religious background and history of secrecy and political about-faces. One of the secular reform leaders who rejected the coalition is Shirouk al-Abayachi, leader of the National Civil Movement and a member of parliament.²⁰ Sadr's organization is "foggy" and evasive, she said. "One year ago they would call us infidels," she said. "We don't know what they want from us." If the Sadrist alliance does well in elections, she said, history suggests that Sadr and his lieutenants will make the important decisions, rather than deferring to the independent secularists from tiny parties. "We don't just want seats in parliament," Abayachi said. "We want to build a clean alternative."

Despite his conciliatory reform rhetoric, Sadr has been willing to turn to outright confrontation with the state. Despite his status as a junior partner in the Iraqi government, Sadr personally broke through the security cordon surrounding Baghdad's Green Zone in March 2016.²¹ His followers set up a protest camp in the heart of the government, even briefly occupying parliament and the prime minister's office.

Pervasive Corruption

When it comes to fighting corruption, there are similar reasons to moderate enthusiasm for Sadr.

Existing anti-corruption efforts suggest it will be difficult to make meaningful inroads against the spoils system. “The system needs to be reformed but there is no incentive to reform,” said Ali al-Mawlawi, director of research at the



RIOT POLICE BLOCK THE ROAD LEADING TOWARD THE GREEN ZONE FROM BAGHDAD'S TAHRIR SQUARE DURING AN ANTI-CORRUPTION PROTEST ON FEB. 9. SOURCE: THANASSIS CAMBANIS.

Baghdad think tank the Bayan Center.²² “The government has hard evidence, but the corrupt judiciary won’t prosecute.”

Even Sadr’s own politicians have struggled to have an impact, and critics of Sadr’s reform program point out that it is short on specifics. Jumaa Diwan al-Badali is a Sadrist member of parliament who represents the poor Baghdad district of Sadr City (which takes its name from Moqtada al-Sadr’s father, Mohammad al-Sadr); Badali is also the rapporteur of parliament’s integrity committee, in charge of investigating corruption. His experience shows the limits of any serious effort at reform. His committee has publicized some problematic contracts, often resorting to media leaks to force the government to pay attention. Parliamentarians have uncovered kickbacks and fishy contracts in the department of defense, including one case, Badali said, where the department attempted to buy subpar and nonexistent equipment for the fight against the Islamic State.²³

The biggest contract they stopped was a \$2.5 billion weapons deal with China, which was part of the 2017 budget. Badali believes the U.S. encourages corruption in Iraq as a way of keeping the country and its security forces weak. “I don’t accept the prime minister’s depiction of Iraq as a pool of corruption,” he said. “We are a country with some corruption. We are not the most corrupt country in the world.”

Aside from the general difficulty of rooting out corruption, Sadr and his allies are hardly innocent of graft themselves. Sadr's militia, the Saraya Salam ("Peace Brigades"), a PMU created in 2014 from the remnants of the Mahdi Army, has benefited from government funding. Corruption clearly played a role in eroding the combat readiness of Iraq's security forces prior to the rise of the Islamic State, but the rise of new security institutions, including the PMUs, has only fueled the type of corrupt militia patronage that has hobbled the central government.



SHIA PILGRIMS PREPARE TO ENTER THE IMAM AL-ASKARI SHRINE IN SAMARRA ON FEB. 13. SADR'S MILITIA, THE "SARAYA SALAM," OR PEACE BRIGADES, IS RESPONSIBLE FOR SECURITY. SOURCE: THANASSIS CAMBANIS.

Over the years since 2003, Sadrist ministers and members of parliament joined the corruption frenzy as well, taking kickbacks and doling out patronage jobs through ministries under their control. Sadr's principal secular ally, the Iraqi Communist Party, also enjoyed influence through the spoils system, winning positions in the cabinet despite very winning very few votes. Fahmi, the current Communist leader, served as minister of science and technology from 2006 to 2010. Fahmi preserved his reputation for probity through his time in government, although—critics of the Sadrist reform project are quick to point out—he wasn't able to roll back corruption by other parties in government.

"Who can fight corruption?" said Ahmed al-Krayem, a tribal leader and provincial politician who alleges that Sadr's followers and fighters participate in the same kickbacks and extortion schemes as every other Iraqi political party and militia group.²⁴ "The Sadrists won't fight corruption." Even the prime minister, Krayem pointed out, has been dogged by

allegations of corruption from his earlier stints in government before taking over as premier.

Interestingly, Sadr doesn't refute charges that his own movement is implicated in the failures of past attempts to root out corruption, but rather insists that change depends on continuing engagement and changing tactics. "We didn't hope to be corrupted," he wrote in answer to one supplicant who asked how Sadr justifies his political campaign given that his movement has participated in every single one of the corrupt governments since 2003. "We are rising up against the political process from the inside, rather than from the outside."

Profound Political Problems

Some of the differences within the Sa'iroun coalition seem unbridgeable. Sadr's Shia followers fought the United States and died in droves. Janabi's secular followers include many elite Sunnis who are openly fond of the Americans. The Communists, meanwhile, have a long history of tensions with the clergy. Still, supporters of the alliance say these differences won't lead to political fissures. "Sadr can control his people if there are problems. We will control our followers," Janabi said. "We agree about fighting sectarianism."

Another sticking point for Sadr's agenda may be that the idea of apolitical "technocrats" who just get the job done may be something of a fantasy—at least for Iraq.

Even Sadr's supporters point out that technocrats can only have impact if they are effective politicians. "I don't believe in technocrats," said Hakim al-Zamili, an influential Sadr lieutenant who runs the parliament's security committee.²⁵ "Only a strong politician with a base in a political party can succeed. The country is full of militias, people with weapons in the streets. An independent technocrat without a political party can't do anything."

Independents have served as ministers in Iraq since 2003, and none has managed to change the system. The types of figures who can change the system, Zamili said, are tough political veterans with the backing of formidable parties. "Maybe a political technocrat like me can do something," he said. "No one can threaten me, no militia. I can speak, I can interrupt someone, no one can stop me."

Iraq's system is broken; it might benefit from repairs, but Iraqi voters should not expect a wholesale revolution. "Let's be honest—we can't accomplish everything we are planning," Zamili acknowledged.

Murder in Samarra

Power politics in Iraq can play out at a visceral level, and one recent incident has underlined both the frailty of Sadr's new vision, and its promise.

Sadr has repeatedly taken the position that there should be only one central authority in Iraq—the state—and that all militias must be integrated into government control. At the same time, he commands thousands of militia fighters in the Saraya Salam, most of them stationed in the flashpoint shrine city of Samarra, north of Baghdad. Samarra is a mostly Sunni city that is home to one of the most holy spots for Shia Muslims, the site where it is believed that the twelfth imam went into occultation in the ninth century. Sunni extremists blew up the Shia shrine in Samarra in February 2006, setting off one of the deadliest periods of sectarian fighting in Iraq. Islamic State fighters held sway in Samarra until Shia militias drove them out in 2014.



HAKIM AL-ZAMILI, A TOP AIDE TO MOQTADA AL-SADR AND HEAD OF THE IRAQI PARLIAMENT'S SECURITY COMMITTEE, ARRIVES AT FRIDAY PRAYERS IN BAGHDAD'S SADR CITY ON FRIDAY, MARCH 16. SOURCE: THANASSIS CAMBANIS.

fighters, their tenure in the city has been a model of success. They have formed partnerships with local business owners and tribal leaders, most of them Sunni, and have restored security and the business that comes with pilgrimage traffic. Critics accuse the Sadrist militia of ruling the city with an iron fist, detaining political critics, and extorting money from local traders and business owners. The accusations were repeated in multiple interviews with the author, and aren't out of the ordinary in Iraq; in fact, the accusations levied against the Sadrist militia are much milder than those heard in zones ruled by other Shia militias, where displaced Sunnis live in fear of disappearance and, in some places, of summary execution.

The fact remains that the Sadrists are running a fiefdom, a state-within-a-state in Samarra; while such behavior is the norm in today's fragmented Iraq, it contradicts the Sadrist platform of reforming the state under a unified nationalist banner. In March, the dangerous equilibrium resulting from so many overlapping security forces collapsed with a shootout between allies in Samarra. On Tuesday, March 13, the prime minister's personal security detail was driving north in a convoy, preparing for Abadi's planned visit later in the week to Mosul. The road took them through Samarra. At the town's main checkpoint, according to two members of a committee that investigated the incident, the convoy refused to stop at the Saraya Salam checkpoint, as they are required to by law.²⁶ Commandos from Battalion 57 of the Iraqi Army, the prime minister's special unit, went so far as to confiscate weapons from some of the Saraya Salam fighters at the checkpoint. "It was humiliating," said one of the members of the investigative committee that visited Samarra days later.²⁷ The angry fighters radioed ahead to the next checkpoint, a kilometer away, where Saraya Salam militiamen blocked the road with Humvees and confronted the convoy. Dozens of gleaming black sports utility vehicles swarmed the checkpoint. The army unit then fired toward the checkpoint. The Sadrists returned fire, killing Brigadier Sherif Ismail, the battalion commander and a trusted supporter of the prime minister.

Both Sadr and Prime Minister Abadi avoided public recriminations, and ultimately the killing was settled through a tribal agreement. The military unit, according to the investigative committee, was at fault for ignoring proper checkpoint procedures. "We need to develop a culture of respect," said Zamili, the Sadr lieutenant, who was one of four members of the investigative committee. Another member of the investigative committee, who is not from either the prime minister's or from Sadr's bloc, blamed a lack of professionalism. "They were arrogant. They wanted to show off, they didn't want to follow the rules," the member said. "It was 100 percent an accident." Political, military and economic power are inextricably intertwined, and state authority is severely compromised. This particular killing strained but did not break the alliance between Abadi and Sadr, but it revealed yet another potential point of rupture. Tellingly, it was resolved not by the judicial system or by a formal political process, but by a combination of ad hoc investigation and informal tribal justice.

Turning Point Election

The 2018 elections will set the course for Iraq's government for at least another four years. If the current spoils system continues, with every major party joining into yet another ineffective unity government, Iraq can expect to repeat similar crises. It will be nearly impossible to maintain the effective national security approach that defeated the Islamic State—an approach that required unified command, mass mobilization, and help from all of Iraq's competing allies, including Iran and the United States. Economic development will require warm relations with Iran, the United States and Saudi

Arabia, and, at the very least, a curtailment of rampant corruption. None of these improvements will come to pass without a powerful prime minister, a meaningful opposition, and competent ministers. Sadr's trailblazing coalition marks a crucial possibility for Iraq: the mainstreaming of civic-secular nationalism, and the passing of national politics from sectarianism into a new phase. More emphatically than any other leader, Sadr has abandoned religious and sectarian discourse, showing that a Shia cleric with a sectarian base can embrace civic, secular politics. There is, of course, ample precedent for such politics in the last century of Arab political history, but sadly, very little among contemporary Iraqi political leaders.

An informal quota system reserves the most important job, prime minister, for a Shia, and the presidency and speaker of parliament for a Kurd and Sunni Arab respectively. If this new tradition survives another electoral cycle, it will fast become the kind of pernicious unwritten tradition that cannot be changed—like Lebanon's sectarian quotas, which have become unassailable even though they are not in the constitution.

In his alliance with Communists and secularists, Sadr has mainstreamed civic politics. If he sticks with his current course, he can also set an example for other leaders who are willing to move past their origins as sectarians, clerics, or militia leaders. Despite his pointed anti-Americanism and history of armed resistance, the United States should welcome Sadr's new role. So should Iran, which hoped to make Sadr into one of its proteges before the cleric broke with Tehran as well. Sadr's broadsides against the United States (his lieutenants regularly brand the Baghdad embassy as a "devil" spreading sedition and strife in Iraq) shouldn't obscure the common interests he shares with the United States and its Iraqi partners: building a strong, effective government and encouraging a nonsectarian, inclusive national identity that can help end the cycle of sectarian violence.

Sadr's new rhetoric, and his secular political alliance, mark one of the most promising developments in contemporary Iraqi politics. There are plenty of reasons to question his sincerity, or the durability of the partnerships he has forged since 2015, but those partnerships hold the potential to change the tenor of the entire political playing field. Sadr's reinvention of himself from militant cleric to nationalist anti-sectarian statesman comes at a time when other sectarian movements have begun to realize that they will need support from multiple constituencies in order to survive politically. In the likely event that the alliance doesn't win enough seats to form a government, it can contribute still more profoundly to Iraq's political development by opting to stay out of power and serve as a parliamentary opposition. Iraq stands at a turning point, where its largely sectarian political movements are experimenting with nonsectarian politics, and where its ruling class is confronting the dead-end to which the spoils system has brought the country. Sadr's gambit stands a chance, albeit a slim one, of catalyzing the political transformation that Iraq so sorely needs.

To be sure, Iraq will still play host to endemic corruption and patronage, but a sharp change in politics can expand the government's agenda to include long-term governance along with the usual business of padding state contracts and doling out ghost jobs. Without the sort of transformative nationalist, professional, and anti-corruption politics advocated by Sadr, Iraq is sure to face an ongoing cycle of crises that will destabilize not only Iraq, but also its neighbors and U.S. interests in the Middle East.

Notes

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26. Author interview with two members of the investigative committee on March 15, 2018, and with Major General Saad Maan, Ministry of the Interior, Baghdad, Iraq, March 14. Hakim al-Zamili was one of four members of the investigative committee that visited Samarra on March 13 and 14. The second member interviewed asked to remain anonymous. The author also watched the checkpoint video of the incident.

27. Zamili, *ibid*.



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