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UNPREDICTABLE ACTOR IN IRAQI POLITICS: THE SADRIST MOVEMENT

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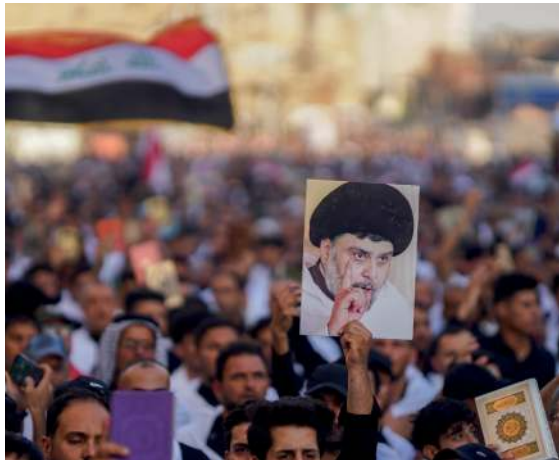
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INTRODUCTION

As the new political system established in Iraq after 2003 emerged amid various crises, foreign interventions and social polarizations, some actors periodically came to the forefront, while others became completely ineffective. However, Muqtada al-Sadr has been one of the rare figures in Iraqi politics who has maintained his presence despite the ever-changing balance of power, repeatedly influencing the political landscape in decisive ways. Endowed with political, religious, and social resonance within the Iraqi society—as well as multilayered legitimacy—Sadr stands out as an actor in Iraqi politics who is different to interpret and often impossible to predict with conventional analytical frameworks. Therefore, evaluating the position of the Sadrist Movement in Iraqi politics and Sadr's strategic preferences for the upcoming parliamentary elections of November 11 is of critical importance both in terms of Iraq's internal political dynamics and the positions of regional actors.

The unpredictability of the Sadrist Movement cannot be explained solely by its sudden shifts in decision-making or its extra-systemic behaviors. The deeper underlying factors are directly related to the structural problems of the Iraqi political system, the internal power struggles within Shiite politics, the influence of external actors, and the crisis of political representation in the public's perception. Sadr's periodic movement toward the center of the political system—followed by his subsequent withdrawal—should be evaluated together with his personal political style and broader structural dynamics. In particular, his withdrawal from parliament after failing to form a majority government, despite securing 73 seats in the 2021 elections, and his subsequent mobilization of street-level opposition, which put pressure on the system, positioned him as a figure who “broke the traditional rules” of Iraqi politics.

The main objective of this study is to analyze how, and in what way, the Sadrist Move-

ment may return to the political arena in the lead-up to the 2025 elections. However, this assessment should not focus solely on current developments; it must also consider the political evolution of the Sadrist Movement since 2005, its relationship with the changes in the Iraqi electoral system, and its positioning within Shiite politics. This broader perspective is essential because Sadr's activity on the political stage is often both a reaction to unfolding events and part of a pre-planned strategy grounded in popular support.

Since the 2005 elections, the Sadrist Movement had engaged in politics under the umbrella of the Iraqi National Alliance; however, it later evolved into an independent political force, transcending the boundaries of this alliance. Sadr's tensions with Nouri al-Maliki, the influence of the Mahdi Army on the streets, and intra-sectarian divisions have been both causes and consequences of this transformation. The most prominent milestones in this evolution include the participation of the Ah-rar Bloc in the 2014 elections, the first-place victory of the Sairoon Coalition in 2018, and the 73 seats won in the 2021 elections by leveraging the narrowed constituencies system. However, the most striking development occurred in 2022, when, despite these political gains, the Sadrist Movement withdrew from parliament and suspended its political activities.

Sadr decision to withdraw from the political channel was not only a sign of failure but also an attempt at repositioning. This decision was driven not only by the failure to form a government but also by the power struggle with the Shiite Coordination Framework, Ayatollah Kadhim al-Haeri's withdrawal from the *mar-jah*, and shifts in the foundation of religious legitimacy. These developments forced Sadr to opt for street politics. Over time, however, it has become evident that the limitations of this approach have also been reached. The boycott of the Iraqi Provincial Council Elections of 2024 and the movement's signals of restructuring under the name "National Shiite Movement" ahead of the 2025 elections indicate a cautious yet determined intention to return to the political arena.

In this context, whether the Sadrist Movement will participate in the 2025 elections is not merely a strategic decision specific to the movement itself. It will also be a decisive factor in shaping the future of Iraq's political system, influencing the balance between within Shiite politics, and the positions of external actors. Sadr's decision to participate in the elections will have a direct impact on the legitimacy of the current government, post-election coalition scenarios, and the public confidence in the ballot box. Moreover, this decision could lead regional powers such as the U.S. and Iran to reconsider their Iraq policy.



The Sadrist Movement Since 2003



2003

- After the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Sadrist Movement emerged on the political scene.
- It formed a militia force called the Mahdi Army and began armed resistance against U.S. forces.

2004

- The Mahdi Army clashed with U.S. and Iraqi forces in Najaf and Basra.
- Its role in Shia-Sunni conflicts sparked debate.

2005

- The Sadrist Movement participated in the elections under the United Iraqi Alliance; it won 28 seats.

2007

- Muqtada al-Sadr continued his religious education in the Iranian city of Qom and temporarily suspended his political activities.

2010

- Played an influential role in the elections; supported Nouri al-Maliki's continuation as prime minister, considering the political balance of the time.

2016

- Organized anti-corruption protests; his supporters entered Baghdad's Green Zone and occupied the parliament building.

2018

- Participated in the elections with the Sairoon Coalition; became the largest bloc by winning 54 parliamentary seats.
- Stood out with its rhetoric of reform and fighting corruption.

2021

- Won 73 seats in the October elections, becoming the largest bloc in parliament.
- Attempts to form a majority government failed due to not securing enough parliamentary support.

2022

- On Aug. 29, Sadr announced his withdrawal from politics, and following this decision, the Sadrist Movement's members of parliament also resigned from their positions.
- Sadr supporters staged demonstrations by entering official buildings such as the parliament in Baghdad's Green Zone.
- In the clashes between Sadr supporters and security forces during the protests in and around the Green Zone, nearly 20 people were killed and over 150 were injured.

2023-2024

- Sadr suspended the political activities of the movement. However, he continued to exert influence through social and religious activities.
- The Sadrist Movement boycotted the 2023 Provincial Council Elections and did not participate in them.
- On April 10, 2024, Sadr announced—via a handwritten letter—that he had renamed the Sadrist Movement to the "Shia National Movement."
- Supporters of the Sadrist Movement organized large-scale protests in Baghdad in response to events such as Israel's attacks on Palestine and the visit of former U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Iraq.

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POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF THE SADRIST MOVEMENT



The Sadrist Movement supporters gathered in the southern Iraqi city of Basra demonstrate against the normalization of Iraq-Israel relations, April 3, 2023.

The Sadrist Movement took part in the Iraqi National Alliance (al-Itlaf al-Watani al-Iraqi/ United Iraqi Alliance) in the January 2005, December 2005 and March 2010 parliamentary elections in Iraq. The State of Law Coalition led by al-Maliki, split from the Iraqi National Alliance prior to the December 2005 elections. Following these elections, the operations launched by then-Prime Minister al-Maliki against the Sadr-backed Mahdi Army in Basra brought escalated the rivalry between the State of Law Coalition and the Sadrist Movement to the point of armed conflict. Nevertheless, in subsequent elections where political coalitions were formed, both groups were part of the same alliance.

Table 1. Results of the December 2005 Iraqi Parliamentary Elections.

	Electoral Alliance	Number of Votes	Vote Share (%)	Number of Seats Earned
1	United Iraqi Alliance	5,021,137	41.19	128
2	Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdistan	2,642,172	21.67	53
3	Iraqi Accord Front	1,840,216	15.09	44
4	Iraqi National List	977,325	8.02	25
5	Iraqi National Dialogue Front	499,963	4.10	11
6	Kurdistan Islamic Union	157,688	1.29	5
7	The Upholders of the Message	145,028	1.19	2
8	Reconciliation and Liberation Bloc	129,847	1.07	3
9	Iraqi Turkmen Front	87,993	0.72	1
10	Rafidain List	47,263	0.39	1
11	Mithal al-Alusi List	32,245	0.26	1
12	Yazidi Movement for Reform and Progress	21,908	0.18	1
Others		588,348	4.83	0
Total Valid Votes		12,191,133	100	275
Total Invalid Votes		205,498	1.66	
Total Votes Cast		12,396,631	100	

The December 2005 Iraqi parliamentary elections marked a period in which Iraqi politics began to realign along ethno-sectarian lines. The election results were among the firsts to clearly reflect the balance of representation among Shia, Kurdish and Sunni political groups. The United Iraqi Alliance, representing the Shiite majority, secured a decisive position in the Parliament by winning 128 out of 275 seats. The Kurdistan Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdish parties showed its strength in regional representation with 53 seats. Sunni Arabs, by contrast, were dispersed across multiple lists, particularly the Iraqi Accord Front. Nevertheless, the Iraqi Accord Front, which emerged as the largest Sunni alliance, won 44 seats. This outcome illustrates that Sunni political representation was fragmented and had limited potential to serve as an effective actor in the central government. Internal rivalry within the Shiite bloc was one of the most significant underlying dynamics of the election results. The Sadrist Movement joined the United Iraqi Alliance in these elections but had not yet reached a decisive position within the alliance's internal balance. During this period, the Sadrist Movement, which maintained a strong street presence through the Mahdi Army, started to form its own independent structure within institutional politics. Following the elections, then-Prime Minister al-Maliki's stance toward Sadrist-backed militia groups showed that internal Shiite rivalry had turned into a conflict. This period marked the early indications that the Sadrist Movement would, in the coming years, distance itself from alliance politics and pursue an independent and unpredictable political trajectory.

In the 2010 elections, Ayad Allawi's Iraqiya Coalition, which opposed identity-based politics, emerged as the leading political group, bringing Shiites together despite their internal divisions. However, the unified Shiite factions ultimately formed the government instead of the Iraqiya Coalition. Al-Maliki's second government, established through this coalition, remained in power until 2014.

Table 2. Results of 2010 Iraqi Parliamentary Elections

	Electoral Alliance	Number of Votes	Vote Share (%)	Number of Seats Earned
1	Iraqi National Movement (Iraqiya)	2,849,612	24.72	91
2	State of Law Coalition	2,792,083	24.22	89
3	Iraqi National Alliance	2,092,066	18.20	70
4	Patriotic Democratic Union of Kurdistan	1,681,714	14.59	42
5	Goran Movement	476,478	4.13	8
6	United Iraqi Alliance	306,647	2.66	4
7	Iraqi Accord Front	298,226	2.59	6
8	Kurdistan Islamic Union	243,720	2.11	4
9	Kurdistan Islamic Group	152,530	1.32	2
10	Quota Total	61,153	0.39	8
Others		572,183	8.41	0
Total Valid Votes		11,526,412	100	275
Total Invalid Votes		-	-	
Total Votes Cast		11,526,412	100	
Number of Registered Voters/Turnout Rate		18,892,000	61.00	

The 2010 Iraqi Parliamentary Elections stood out as one of the rare elections in which the Iraqi identity was as influential as identity-based politics in Iraq. In the election results, the Iraqi National Movement, led by Allawi, which set out with a supra-sectarian discourse against identity politics, managed to come first with 91 seats. This outcome was largely due to the consolidation of the Sunni electorate around the Iraqi National Movement to a large extent, as well as the support it received from segments of the Shiite voters. On the other hand, the participation of Shiite parties in three separate blocs, rather than as a unified list, led to a division of the Shiite vote. Fragmentation among groups such as the State of Law Coalition (89 seats), the Iraqi National Alliance (70 seats) and the United Iraqi Alliance (4 seats) weakened the internal unity of the Shiite bloc. Kurdish parties, meanwhile, maintained their regional balance with 42 seats.

In this election, the Sadrist Movement sought to redefine its position in institutional politics by participating in the Iraqi National Alliance. Although the alliance's total number of seats fell behind those of Iraqiya and the State of Law Coalition, this period marked the beginning of the Sadrist Movement's transformation into a strategic political actor. Following the elections, the government formation process was delayed, and Shiite parties united to exclude the Iraqi National Movement from the government due to sectarian concerns. At this point, the Sadrist Movement played a decisive role by accepting al-Maliki's second term as prime minister. However, this support also set the stage for future political rivalry. During this period, Sadr saw that he could influence the functioning of the political system and started to clarify his own political line by distancing himself from al-Maliki's authoritarian tendencies.

Although Sadr was a member of the Iraqi National Alliance, he formed the Ahrar Bloc in the 2014 parliamentary elections in an effort to limit the conditions that had previously enabled al-Maliki to form a second government. In these elections, the Sadrist Movement emerges as the second-largest political group with nearly one million votes. However, the disintegration of the Iraqi National Coalition prevented the Shiites from forming a large political structure like the State of Law Coalition. As a result, groups such as al-Muwatin, the Islamic Virtue Party, the National Reform Movement, the Sadiqun Bloc and part of the Dawa Party participated in the elections independently. From an electoral standpoint, this was seen as a green light for al-Maliki's third term. Nevertheless, a combination of factors—including the advance of the terrorist organization DAESH, Sadrist opposition to al-Maliki, and the continued marginalization of Sunni Arabs—ultimately prevented the formation of such a government. Instead, Haider al-Abadi, representing the faction of the State of Law Coalition within the Dawa Party that distanced itself from al-Maliki, formed the new government. Thus, while the State of Law Coalition and the Dawa Party retained control of the government, al-Maliki was prevented from serving a third term as prime minister.

Table 3. 2014 Iraqi Parliamentary Elections Results

	Electoral Alliance	Number of Votes	Vote Share (%)	Number of Seats Earned
1	State of Law Coalition	3,141,835	27.25	92
2	AL-Muwatin Coalition	982,003	8.52	29
3	AL-Ahrar Coalition	971,589	8.42	28
4	Kurdistan Democratic Party	852,198	7.39	19
5	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan	789,519	6.84	19
6	AL-Wataniyyah	686,017	5.95	21
7	Muttahidoon	680,690	5.90	23
8	Gorran Movement	451,858	3.92	9
9	AL-Arabiyya Coalition	315,858	2.74	10
10	Islamic Virtue Party	211,257	1.83	8
11	National Reform Trend	192,763	1.67	6
12	Nineveh Kurdistan Alliance	185,804	1.61	6
Others		1,823,892	15.80	60
Total Valid Votes		11,526,412	100	328
Total Invalid Votes		1,487,353	1.29	
Total Votes Cast		13,013,765	100	
Number of Registered Voters/Turnout Rate		21,503,875	60.5	

The 2014 Iraqi parliamentary elections took place at a time when identities and political fragmentation became more pronounced. The election results did not reflect a clear balance between the Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish blocs; rather, the overall political landscape became significantly more fragmented. The State of Law Coalition came in first with 92 seats, showing that al-Maliki retained his personal power in the Shiite political arena. However, the fact that the remaining Shiite formations participated in the elections with separate lists, such as al-Muwatin (29), al-Ahrar (28), the National Reform Alliance (6) and the Virtue Party, highlighted the dominance of competition and disorganization over intra-sectarian unity. For the Kurds, the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan maintained their regional representation with a total of 38 seats. The disorganized and ineffective appearance of Sunni political structures such as al-Wataniya, Muttahidoon and the Arab Coalition has been the main dynamic weakening their institutional relations with the central government in the post-2014 security crises.

In this election, the Sadrist Movement competed under the umbrella of the al-Ahrar Coalition, securing nearly 1 million votes and 28 seats, thereby gaining visibility with its own political identity. This suggests that the movement had begun to pursue an independent political course, breaking away from the larger Shiite alliances it had been part of in previous elections. Al-Ahrar's performance demonstrated its status as a significant actor within the fragmented Shiite political landscape; however, it prevented the Sadrist Movement from being decisive in the government formation process on its own. Nevertheless, post-election developments have opened a strategic room for maneuver for the Sadrist Movement. The DAESH takeover of Mosul and the deepening security crisis in the country were among the factors that prevented

al-Maliki's third term, while Sadr's anti-Maliki stance was effective in shaping this process. As a result, the replacement of al-Maliki by Haider al-Abadi as prime minister can be considered as an indicator of the Sadrist Movement's indirect influence on the system.

The military success achieved against the terrorist organization DAESH during the al-Abadi era (2014-2018) was translated into political gains, especially by the Fatah Coalition, which became the political representative of the Hashd al-Shaabi groups involved in this struggle. For this reason, the disintegration of the groups that had previously been part of the State of Law Coalition weakened al-Maliki. In fact, the State of Law Coalition's 92 seats in the 2014 elections were reduced to 25. The newly formed Fatah Coalition won 48 seats. The Sadrist Movement, which benefited from this split, won 54 seats with the Sairoon (March) Coalition, becoming the largest political formation.

Table 4. 2018 Iraqi Parliamentary Elections Results

	Electoral Alliance	Number of Votes	Vote Share (%)	Number of Seats Earned
1	Sairoon	1,493,542	14.40	54
2	Fatah	1,366,789	13.10	48
3	Victory Alliance	1,133,912	10.90	42
4	Kurdistan Democratic Party	873,645	8.40	25
5	State of Law Coalition	725,108	7.00	25
6	Al-Wataniyyah Coalition	623,594	6.00	21
7	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan	616,232	5.90	18
8	National Wisdom Movement	547,223	5.20	19
9	Muttahidoon	368,633	3.50	14
Others		5,265,087	25.40	63
Total Valid Votes		13,013,765		
Total Invalid Votes		456,467		

Following the 2018 elections, a national unity government was formed under the leadership of Adil Abdul-Mahdi, a consensus candidate, as the two blocs supported by Sadr and Fatah Coalition in the Iraqi Parliament failed to dominate each other. The October 2019 demonstrations that broke out during Abdul Mahdi's tenure as prime minister led to his resignation before his term ended. Sadr, who supported these demonstrations, took the wind of the demonstrations behind him and accelerated the fall of the government. In response, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, the head of the Iraqi Intelligence Service, again as a consensus candidate, formed the government with the mission of leading the country to early elections.

Before fulfilling his promise of early elections, Kadhimi supported a law that changed the electoral system from the Sainte-Lague method of proportional representation to one using narrowed constituencies. The political group that benefited the most from this change was the Sadrist Movement. In the 2021 Iraqi parliamentary elections, the Sadrist Movement won 73 seats in the 329-seat parliament, almost twice the representation of its closest rival, the Taqaddum Coalition. In addition to Sadr, the biggest winners of the elections were the independent candidates, who secured 43 seats, largely due to the new electoral system.

Table 5. 2021 Iraqi Parliamentary Elections Results

	Anbar	Babylon	Baghdad	Basra	Dhi Qar	Diyala	Duhok	Erbil	Qadisiyah	Karbala	Kirkuk	Mai than	Muthanna	Najaf	Nineveh	Salahaddin	Suleymaniyah	Wast	Quota	Total
Sadrist Movement	0	2	27	9	9	0	0	0	3	4	0	7	2	5	0	0	0	5	0	73
Taqaddum Coalition	10	1	11	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	8	2	0	0	0	37
Kurdistan Democratic Party	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	10	0	0	2	0	0	0	9	0	2	0	0	31
State of Law Coalition	0	3	13	1	4	0	0	0	2	2	0	2	3	2	0	0	0	1	0	33
Fatah Coalition	0	2	3	3	0	3	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0	17
Kurdistan Coalition	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	2	1	8	0	0	17
Azem Coalition	1	0	7	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	14
New Generation Movement	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	0	9
Imtidad Movement	0	2	0	0	5	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	9
Ishraqat Kanoon	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	6
Tasmim Coalition	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5
National Contract	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	4
Alliance of National State Forces	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	4
Babylon	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	4
Our People Our Identity	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	3
Hasim Movement for Reform	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	3
Jamahir al-Wataniyya	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Kirkuk Arab Coalition	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Biladi National Movement	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Unified Iraqi Turkmen Front	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Wafa and Tahrir	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Firateyn Movement	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Vasit Ahalisi	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Iqtidar Watan	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Rights Movement	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Iraq National Project	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Kurdistan Justice Party - Iraq	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
National Production Party	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
National Naheej Coalition	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
National Amal Coalition	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Homeland Party	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Yazidi Progress Party	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
National Sanad Party	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Independents	4	4	5	2	1	2	2	-	1	-	2	1	1	4	3	3	2	2	4	43
Total	15	17	69	25	19	14	11	15	11	11	12	1-	7	12	31	12	18	11	9	329

The 2021 elections, not only demonstrated that the Sadrist Movement had become the most powerful political actor in arithmetic terms, but also highlighted the potential of the electoral system to shape politics. With 73 seats, the Sadrist Movement, in addition to its numerical superiority, claimed authority to set the political direction. However, the fact that these gains did not immediately lead to the formation of a government revealed the continuing influence of identity-based groups that emerged in Iraqi politics after 2003. Thus, it became evident that even the most powerful political actor, despite winning the elections, could be sidelined in the political process.

WHY DID THE SADRIST MOVEMENT WITHDRAW FROM POLITICS?



Supporters of the Sadrist Movement leader Muqtada al-Sadr try to enter the parliament building during a protest, Baghdad, Iraq, Oct. 28, 2022.

The Sadrist Movement supported the formation of a majority government instead of a government of national unity, which it opposed, consistent with the framework of the power it gained in the Parliament. Sadr formed a tripartite alliance (Alliance for the Salvation of the Homeland) with the Taqaddum Coalition and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and aimed to form a majority government with the support of independent candidates. However, after failing to form the government, Sadr declared his decision to remain in opposition and invited the Shiite Coordination Framework—comprising other Shiite groups—to form the government. However, a government could not be formed due to the continuation of the tripartite alliance. Therefore, on June 9, 2022, Sadr made a live statement and demanded the resignation of the MPs affiliated with his movement. With the replacement of the resigned MPs, the arithmetic in the Iraqi Parliament changed in favor of the Shiite Coordination Framework, leading to the formation of a government led by Muhammad Shia al-Sudani.

Table 6. The Distribution of Iraqi Parliamentary Seats Following the Resignation of the Sadrist Movement.

Political Group	Number of Seats
State of Law Coalition	40
Taqaddum Coalition	39
Kurdistan Democratic Party	31
Fatah Coalition	28
Kurdistan Coalition	17
Imtidad Movement	16
Azeem Movement	14
Nation State Forces Coalition	13
New Generation Movement	9
Tasmeem Coalition	8
Ishraq Qanoon	7
Aqdi Watani	7
Rights Movement	6
Other 26 groups	40
Independent	54
Total	329

With the resignations, the Sadrist Movement moved beyond the parliament as a political channel and took politics to the streets. Mass demonstrations such as sit-ins were organized during this period. However, al-Haeri stepped down from the "*marjah*" on August 29, 2022 due to ill health, which led Sadr to end all his activities. That is because al-Haeri, who had been appointed by Sadr's father, Muhammad Sadiq Sadr, for religious leadership, also provided religious legitimacy to the Sadrist Movement. Therefore, after al-Haeri's withdrawal, the Sadrist Movement announced the suspension of its activities. As a result, the Sadrist Movement, which had transitioned from parliamentary politics to "politics on the street," officially ended its activities. However, throughout this process, Sadr continued to influence politics through his public statements. Initially, the resignation of the Sadrist Movement MPs was viewed as a step back by a movement that had failed to form the government. However, the use of resignation as a tool was a product of Sadr's strategic calculation. Indeed, the failure to form a government despite having the largest

representation in the Parliament highlighted the legitimacy problems within the system itself. Therefore, this maneuver not only represented a rejection of Parliament, the arena where representative politics is conducted, but also sought to restructure the post-2003 Iraqi political framework.

Sadr's move to withdraw from Parliament and politics also represents a continuation of his political style. As a Shiite leader who gained popularity on the streets during the 2003–2005 period, Sadr's withdrawal took on a populist character. In his call for MPs to resign, Sadr emphasized that "a national majority government is the only way to reform Iraq."¹ The statement is in line with Sadr's statement that he "sacrificed for the future of Iraq despite not giving up on the truth." Therefore, it can be said that a government that does not have the participation of the movement would be fragile. The Sadrist Movement's position is an attempt to create a new political balance by exerting pressure from outside the system rather than being pushed out of the system.

1 "Sadr asks his bloc to resign from Iraqi parliament", *Anadolu Agency*, 9 June 2022.

BOYCOTT DESPITE SIGNS OF A TURNAROUND?



People flock to Sadr City region in Baghdad to perform Friday prayer upon leader of the Sadrist Movement Muqtada al-Sadr's call, in Baghdad, Iraq, July 15, 2022.

Following the resignation of Sadrist Movement members from the Iraqi Parliament, the Sadrist Movement also boycotted the 2024 Iraqi Provincial Council Elections. In April 2024, in the run-up to the Iraqi parliamentary elections expected to be held in 2025, the movement changed the name it used in the 2021 Iraqi parliamentary elections and established the Shiite National Movement.² After the 2024 Provincial Assembly Elections, this change in structure could be the first step towards ending the boycott of the political channel.

In a letter dated February 11, 2025, Sadr, leader of the Sadrist Movement, called for an internal assessment regarding whether to participate in or boycott the upcoming elections. The letter was made public on February 19, 2025, through social media accounts affiliated with Sadr. This move allowed Sadr to gauge reactions to his potential return

to politics—both from within the movement and from other political actors. His absence from the political scene has contributed to increased fragmentation among Shiite groups, even as it has created a more favorable environment for parties such as the Shiite Coordination Framework to advance their agendas.

Following Sadr's publicized correspondence, on February 20, 2025, a delegation led by Sadr's office director, Ibrahim al-Jabiri, visited the Baghdad Rusafa Office of the Iraqi Independent High Electoral Commission. Thus, the movement took its first concrete step regarding the electoral process. On the other hand, this publicization may have been expected in order to avoid a reaction to political activity within the movement. However, beyond the timing, the visit in question shows that the Sadrist Movement is following the process in a bureaucratic sense.

2 "Sadr renames movement to 'Shiite National Movement' in political resurgence", *Kurdistan24*, 11 April 2024.

The Sadrist Movement's decision to announce a boycott despite showing signs of returning to the political process may be due to its approach to participate in an election in which it will achieve success.

On February 19, 2025, the Sadrist Movement issued a statement urging its supporters to renew their voter registration.³ This development was interpreted as the Sadrist Movement beginning preparations for participation in the upcoming elections. With the movement's apparent decision to re-enter the electoral arena and the announcement of the election calendar, further efforts to increase social mobilization can be anticipated. In this context, Sadr may be expected to support or initiate street protests, particularly if he becomes dissatisfied with Prime Minister al-Sudani's government. However, should Sadr reach an understanding with al-Sudani, he may instead opt for less confrontational methods of mobilization, such as organizing mass Friday prayers and encouraging his supporters to participate.

Sadr's meeting on March 7, 2025 with more than 200 politicians from the Ahrar Bloc, the Sairoon Coalition and the Sadrist Movement was one of the most concrete examples of his potential return. The meeting signaled a renewed emphasis on the movement's political wing. However, Sadr announced on March 27, 2025 that he would not participate in the elections.⁴ He declared, "Let everyone know that as long as corruption exists, I will

not participate in a sham electoral process that only benefits sectarian, ethnic and partisan interests." Therefore, despite showing signs of returning to parliamentary politics, Sadr has stated that the boycott will continue at the level of discourse.

The Sadrist Movement's decision to announce a boycott despite showing signs of returning to the political process may be due to its approach to participate in an election in which it will achieve success. In this context, there are multiple dynamics that will determine the electoral performance of the Sadrist Movement. Foremost among these is the electoral law, which is the dynamic beyond the relationship between the political entity and the electorate. For the 2025 elections, the return to the Sainte-Lague electoral system reduces the likelihood of Sadr replicating the 73 parliamentary seats won by the Sadrist Movement in the 2021 elections. Indeed, the table below illustrates that under the revised electoral formula—replacing the 2021 system—the Sadrist Movement would have lost five seats in the Dhi Qar governorate alone. Similar projected losses across other provinces suggest that the movement is unlikely to achieve the same level of arithmetic success it attained in the 2021 elections.

3 "Sadr calls on supporters to update voter records, hinting possible election return", *The New Region*, 19 February 2025.

4 "Sadr: I will not participate in the electoral process, Iraqi", *News Agency*, 27 March 2025.

Table 7. 2021 The Effect of the Electoral System Change on the Distribution of The Sadrist Movement's Seats in Dhi Qar Province

Political Groups	2021 Elections: Number of Seats Won	Applying 2021 Election Results to Electoral Law	Difference in the Number of Chairs
Imtidad Coalition	5	9	4
Sadrist Movement	9	4	-5
State of Law Coalition	4	3	-1
Fatah Coalition	0	2	2
National State Forces Coalition	0	1	1
Independents	1	0	-1
Total	19	19	0

Changes in electoral systems stand out as one of the main factors directly affecting the positions of political actors in Iraq. However, one of the actors that has so far been able to take advantage of these systems by reading them correctly has been the Sadrist Movement. As a result, the Sadrist Movement was able to increase its parliamentary seats from a maximum of 54 before the 2021 elections to 73 in 2021. If the 2025 elections return to the Sainte-Lague system, the Sadrist Movement is likely to win fewer parliamentary seats than in previous elections. The scheduling of the election for November 11, 2025, effectively eliminates the possibility of reverting to the 2021 electoral system.

With the possibility of changing the electoral law now eliminated, the Sadrist Movement must base its decision to return to politics on calculations within the framework of the current electoral system. In this context, the primary determining factor for the movement—which maintains an organic and close relationship with its support base—will be the electoral strategies of the political actors it will face. The decision of Shiite parties within the Shiite Coordination Framework to participate in the elections with separate lists, rather than as a unified bloc, could serve as an advantage for the Sadrist Movement. However, in constituencies where the Sadrist Movement holds significant strength, the presence of multiple medium-sized rival lists—as opposed to a single large competitor—may limit the number of seats it can secure. Therefore, within the constraints of the current electoral system, the Sadrist Movement's strategic assessment of competing lists will likely play a decisive role in determining its electoral performance.

The structure of the electoral system, combined with the current configuration of rival electoral lists, does not appear to offer a clear path to victory for the Sadrist Movement. This may reinforce Sadr's reluctance to enter an electoral race that could result in perceived failure. As such, Sadr's decision to participate in the 2025 elections is likely to be driven more by strategic calculations than by political aspirations alone. A key determinant will be whether the projected number of seats would be sufficient to realize his broader political objectives, particularly the formation of a majority government. If this threshold cannot be met, the dynamics of Sadr's relationship with Iranian-backed Shiite groups may become increasingly significant. Therefore, it can be argued that the Sadrist Movement will closely monitor these evolving factors before finalizing its decision on electoral participation.

POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS OF SADR'S ELECTION DECISION



A man holds a poster of the Sadrist Movement leader Muqtada al-Sadr as people gather with the call of Sadr to protest against Quran burning in Sweden and Denmark, Karbala, Iraq, July 28, 2023.

Sadr's potential participation in the 2025 Iraqi parliamentary elections represents a significant development in Iraqi politics, with implications for both domestic and regional dynamics. In particular, for Shiite political groups aligned with Iran, this could signal the beginning of a new phase of intensified political competition. In the 2018 and 2021 elections, the Sadrist Movement emerged as the leading political force in Parliament, securing the highest number of seats and asserting considerable influence over the political landscape. As a result, the movement's re-entry into the political arena stands out as a critical development—one that may compel Iran-aligned actors to reassess their electoral strategies and recalibrate their plans for government formation.

Should Sadr return to active politics, Iraqi Shiite political actors aligned with Iran, such as

al-Maliki, leader of the State of Law Coalition, and Hadi al-Amiri, leader of the Badr Organization, are likely to seek new strategies to balance his influence. Their efforts are expected to manifest not only through political competition but also through media campaigns, election strategies, and coalition-building. Similarly, the Sadiqun Bloc, the political wing of Asaib Ahl al-Haq led by Qais al-Khazali, which is also known for its proximity to Iran, will need to determine its position vis-à-vis Sadr. Having split from the Sadrist Movement, Asaib Ahl al-Haq has been one of Sadr's most vocal critics. Therefore, the strategic positioning of these groups will likely not be limited to conflict or exclusion. For factions like Asaib Ahl al-Haq, the Sadrist Movement's reemergence may necessitate a tense but pragmatic relationship. It is possible that these pro-Iran factions may explore cooperation or alliance

options with Sadr under certain conditions. In particular, Sadr's broad popular support and nationalist rhetoric could present both a challenge and a balancing force for Iran. As such, Iranian-backed groups may lean toward a balancing strategy, integrating Sadr within the political system rather than completely sidelining him. This approach would align with Iran's broader goals of maintaining its influence in Iraq while preventing destabilization.

Another key actor that could influence the political landscape if Sadr participates in the elections is the U.S. In an effort to limit Iran's influence in Iraq, the U.S. may adopt a strategy of bolstering alternative political actors. If Sadr emerges strong from the elections and shifts his efforts toward forming a majority government, the U.S. could potentially support this process. Specifically, a coalition that excludes Iran-backed groups from the government could align with U.S. regional in-

terests. However, it is important to note that Sadr's relationship with the U.S. has been inconsistent. Despite his stance distancing himself from Iran, his anti-U.S. rhetoric requires caution in Washington. As a result, the U.S.'s stance toward Sadr will not be based solely on his opposition to Iran; it will also depend on his domestic political strategies, government formation efforts, and foreign policy direction. Therefore, if Sadr participates in the 2025 elections, the balance of power within Iraq and the broader Iran-U.S. rivalry could shift in new ways. The extent of Sadr's influence will hinge on various factors, such as his political positioning and his relationships with other key actors. In this context, it is crucial to monitor the possibility that both pro-Iran factions and the U.S. might adopt balanced approaches toward including Sadr rather than excluding him entirely.

Sadr stands out as one of the most decisive

CONCLUSION



Leader of the Sadrist movement Muqtada al-Sadr speaks to the press over the burning of the Muslim holy book, the Quran, by an extremist in Stockholm, in Najaf, Iraq, July 20, 2023.

and, at the same time, one of the most unpredictable actors in post-2003 Iraqi politics. His movement, inspired by his leadership, has had a significant influence on a broad range of issues, from his decisions on electoral participation to his alliances and social mobilization strategies. This influence is closely tied to his unique position as not just a politician, but also a religious and social symbol. This complex identity has allowed Sadr to oscillate between being at the center of the political system at times and, at other moments, stepping completely outside it.

As the 2025 elections approach, discussions surrounding Sadr's potential return to politics are intensifying. The reorganization of the Sadrist Movement into the Shiite National Movement, efforts to engage with the electoral commission, and calls to update voter registrations signal a possible return. However, Sadr's reentry into politics is not a simple

reversal. This shift is shaped by a range of factors, including structural imbalances in the political system, internal Shiite rivalries, and changes in the electoral system.

For Sadr, the decision to participate in the elections is not just a matter of political will; it is a strategic calculation. Changes in the electoral system could hinder his ability to replicate past successes. Specifically, a return to the Sainte-Lague system could erase the seat advantage he gained in 2021 through the use of shrunken districts. As a result, Sadr may choose to stay out of the elections if his potential representation in Parliament and the likelihood of that representation translating into a viable path to form a government remain uncertain.

Sadr's cautious approach makes it difficult for him to be completely pushed out of the system. Any scenario in which Iranian-backed Shiite groups can increase their political in-

fluence is interpreted as a threat to the Sadr front. Therefore, the movement's motivation to balance these actors by returning to politics is increasing. In this context, the 2025 elections will not only be a political race. These elections may also be a critical threshold for the future of Shiite politics, the inclusiveness of the system and the legitimacy of political representation in Iraq.

Should the Sadrist Movement re-engage in politics, it may revive its attempts to form a majority government in the coming period. This could open the door to building new coalitions that exclude Iranian-backed groups while garnering broader popular support. On the other hand, if Sadr chooses once again to remain outside the system, the question of how this political vacuum will be filled will become crucial. This decision will have a direct

impact on the stability and legitimacy of Iraqi politics.

If the boycott persists despite signs of a reversal, the Sadrist Movement may adopt a different strategy. This could involve supporting candidates from various lists or independent candidates who are not directly nominated by the movement. Given its past experience with alternative political methods, the Sadrist Movement may continue to influence politics through unexpected outcomes. Therefore, for the Sadrist Movement, shaping politics is not limited to either participating in or boycotting elections. Throughout the election period, the movement will remain an unpredictable actor externally, even as it internally adopts a strategic approach to its actions.



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