



The Arab Gulf States
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March 2, 2023

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About the Author

Geneive Abdo is a fellow at the Wilson Center in Washington, DC. She was most recently a visiting fellow at the Brookings Doha Center. Her current research focuses on the shifting political and religious alliances within Shia communities in the Middle East. She has worked at several Washington-based think tanks, including the Atlantic Council and the Stimson Center. She was a non-resident scholar at the Brookings Institution from 2013-17. She was also a lecturer at the Elliott School of International Affairs at the George Washington University from 2016-19.

Her vast publications include monographs, books, and works in scholarly journals. Her newest publication is a chapter in the edited volume *The Gulf Cooperation Council at Forty: Risk and Opportunity in a Changing World* (Brookings Press, 2023). Abdo is the author of four books on the Middle East, including *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide* (Oxford University Press, 2016). Her other books, also published by Oxford, include a groundbreaking study of the Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power in Egypt. Abdo has received many awards for her scholarship, including the prestigious John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship. Abdo also was the recipient of the Nieman Fellowship for study at Harvard University.

She was formerly the liaison officer for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations, an initiative established by former Secretary-General Kofi Annan, which aimed to improve relations between Islamic and Western societies. Before joining the U.N., Abdo was a foreign correspondent, where her 20-year career focused on coverage of the Middle East and the Muslim world. From 1998 to 2001, Abdo was the Iran correspondent for The Guardian and a regular contributor to The Economist and the International Herald Tribune. She was the first American journalist to be based in Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Her thousands of articles and commentaries on Islam and the Middle East have appeared in The New York Times, Newsweek, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy Magazine, The Washington Post, and other publications. She is a frequent speaker at universities, think tanks, and international institutions in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East.

Executive Summary

Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who has been a key player on the Iraqi political scene for nearly two decades, bowed out of politics in 2022. He was manipulated by his Shia rivals, who outmaneuvered – and effectively stole power from – him after the October 2021 parliamentary elections. For the first time since 2005, Sadr has no clear political role and no formal road map to get back into politics until elections are held again in 2025. So where does this leave him and the Sadrist movement, which is comprised of millions of his followers? Iraqis fear he could unleash his supporters and take to the streets, as he has done many times in the past, to regain the political leverage he has lost. This has the potential to spark widespread violence and an all-out intra-Shia conflict.

Introduction

Muqtada al-Sadr, the Iraqi cleric and politician who posed one of the greatest challenges to U.S. forces during the early years after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, has once again emerged as a wild card in Iraq's future. After the October 2021 parliamentary elections, Sadr went from being a victor to upending Shia Islamist politics as they had existed for nearly 20 years by trying to exclude his Shia rivals from a role in government. As a result, his Shia rivals managed to maneuver him out of the political system – for now.

However, his return in some form – through violence or other means – is inevitable because he commands a formidable social base in Iraqi civil society. In addition, although he has vowed to stay away from politics because he believes the new government is illegitimate, he has made similar pledges in the past only to find an advantageous way back in at a later time.¹ In this way, he has played the role of the consummate opposition figure in Iraq for many years.

His absence from the political scene, however temporary, is a setback for Western policymakers who had come to view Sadr and former Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, a Sadr ally, as useful obstacles to Iranian influence in Iraq. Now that Kadhimi is out of office and Sadr's brinkmanship has left him out as well, Iran's allies have great influence in the new government, including in the ministries. As the *Economist* magazine characterized it, the "government has been hailed as the most pro-Iranian since Shah Abbas conquered Baghdad four centuries ago."²

This paper will explore the possible scenarios that could bring Sadr back into the political system.

¹ Geneive Abdo and Yaser Mekki, "Sadr's Boycott Threat Puts Election Timeframe in Question," *Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, July 21, 2021.

² "A Gulf Apart: Iran and Its Arab Neighbours are Divided Over a Name," *The Economist*, January 19, 2023.

Background

Iraq held its fifth parliamentary elections in October 2021, ending in victory for the Sadrist movement. Sadr's slate secured 73 seats out of 329 in Parliament – the largest share of seats among the numerous factions competing in the elections. With this victory, Sadr brought the issue of a majoritarian government to a head. He declared a “reform project,” to create a majority government – a departure after more than 20 years of a consensus system based on sectarian apportionment. He formed a coalition with the two largest Sunni blocs, the Sovereignty alliance and the Kurdistan Democratic Party's Homeland Salvation Coalition. Together, they formed a coalition with 175 seats. Sadr pitched his project for a majoritarian government as a way to upend the status quo and save the country from the profound corruption that the ruling Shia Islamist parties had engaged in for two decades.

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However, a ruling by Iraq's top court in February 2022 derailed Sadr's plan by raising the quorum requirement for Parliament to elect a president – the first step in forming a government – to a two-thirds majority.³ Iraqi experts believe the Iranian-backed Shia factions pressured the court to make this ruling to prevent Sadr from forming such a government.⁴ Thus, even with 175 seats, Sadr's coalition did not reach the two-thirds required to form a government.

This ruling, and effective maneuvering by Sadr's rivals, thwarted efforts by Sadr and his coalition to form a government for eight months after the elections. Sadr tried to make a deal with the Iranian-backed Shia parties that formed the Coordination Framework. The Coordination Framework includes the State of Law Coalition, led by former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, Fatah Alliance, led by militia leader Hadi al-Amiri, Asaib Ahl al-Haq movement, led by militia leader Qais Khazali, and National State Alliance, led by cleric Ammar al-Hakim. Many of the figures in the Coordination Framework are allies of Iran, promoting Iran's interests in Iraq. Although the parties and figures within this umbrella alliance have conflicts with one another, they were united in their opposition to Sadr.

Sadr failed to make a deal with the Coordination Framework because he imposed too many conditions. Iraqi sociologist, professor, and analyst Akeel Abbas said the conditions were “incapacitating,” and the Coordination Framework could not agree to them because they excluded the other Shia elites from all levers of power.

Unable to accept the considerable political compromises his missteps and misreading of political realities were imposing on him, in June 2022, Sadr instead forced his 73 representatives who won outright to resign from Parliament, and the future became uncertain. In late July, the Iranian-backed factions made public their pick for prime minister, a former minister and provincial governor, Mohammed al-Sudani. The news provoked Sadr and his followers.

³ Farhad Alaadin, “Tafsir al-Mahkama al-Etihadia Yafrod al-Tawafiq Badilan Likhayarat Saaba,” *Rudaw*, February 4, 2022.

⁴ Akeel Abbas, “Iraq: Sadr Is Down for Now, but Has Iran Overplayed Its Hand?,” *Middle East Eye*, September 13, 2022.

Not only did Sadr object to the proposed choice for prime minister, but it showed that the Coordination Framework was marching forward to form a government without him. Having ceded all his parliamentary leverage, his primary rivals – Maliki and the Iranian-backed militia leaders Amiri and Khazali – got the upper hand in forming a new government.

Some experts characterized Sadr's move as political suicide. Sadr's allies, the Sunnis and Kurds, left him behind and aligned with the Coordination Framework to form a government. "Sadr must adhere to the system because he is part of it. Principally, as a political Shia Muslim, he cannot be exempt from the apportionment system," said Sadiq al-Tael, an Iraqi researcher and columnist for Al-Quds Al-Arabi, in an interview.⁵

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Iraqi expert Ahmed Abdulrazzaq suggested the move showed Sadr's lack of strategy. In an interview, he said, "Sadr showed that he has no political vision and that his decisions are spontaneous."⁶ Other Iraqi experts believed Sadr's move was necessary to prove his claim that the government was illegitimate. "Al-Sadr's decision to withdraw was correct, and even excellent," said Abbas.

"The importance of this decision lies in the fact that the Sadristes suffer from accusations that they are part of the government. With this withdrawal, the popular objection against them is negated. Also, I think that being out of power will strengthen the idea of the opposition in general in Iraq. Similar to *Tishreen*," he said, referencing the 2019-20 protest movement, "their continued opposition will contribute to the organization of the street and opposition."⁷

Sadr then called for dissolving Parliament and holding new elections – the only constitutional path for the Sadristes to return to the political process. In July, he urged his followers to storm the Parliament, Supreme Court, and Green Zone in Baghdad, a fortified area that is home to high-ranking Iraqi officials and foreign diplomats. His supporters demanded the dissolving of the Parliament and government. The violence launched a new phase of chaos and fear between the Iranian-backed Coordination Framework's militias and the armed Sadristes, the Saraya al-Salam militia. It was the most serious violence to threaten Iraq since the 2006-08 civil war between Shias and Sunnis.

Into August 2022, Sadr continued to show his street credibility. Thousands of Iraqis gathered to hear Sadr deliver a Friday prayer sermon in the Green Zone and pledged their support for him.⁸ In the end, he ordered a cease-fire and called on his supporters to refrain from further violence, but that was after at least 23 of his supporters had been shot dead by the end of the month.⁹

⁵ Author interview with Sadiq al-Tael, January 2023.

⁶ Author interview with Ahmed Abdulrazzaq, January 2023.

⁷ Author interview with Akeel Abbas, January 2023.

⁸ Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "Hundreds of Thousands Gather for Mass Prayer in Baghdad," *PBS*, August 5, 2022.

⁹ "Iraq: Clashes in Baghdad's Green Zone Leave 23 Protesters Dead," *AFP*, August 30, 2022.

Now that the new government has been in operation since October 2022, early elections seem unlikely. Sadr's failure to form a government, the collapse of his alliance with the Sunnis and Kurds, and his withdrawal from Parliament have put him in the backseat of Iraqi politics. A few days after Sudani was appointed prime minister, Sadr disavowed the new government through a close associate, Mohammad Saleh al-Iraqi.¹⁰

For the first time since 2005, Sadr has no clear political role and no formal road map to get back in until elections are held again in 2025. So where does this leave Sadr and his movement? Sadr has millions of followers and a powerful military faction. According to an Iraqi security official, "The budget of the Sadrist movement or the funds owned by the Sadrists are equivalent to the budget of a small country."¹¹

It is likely Sadr's withdrawal from politics is temporary, according to leaders of his movement. One of these leaders, Mujahed Al-Taee, wrote on Twitter: "The Sadrists know that their limited representation in the executive body is temporary. The movement and the rest of the political forces know that the next playing field will be in the provinces,"¹² meaning they will use their power to influence politics on a local level. The Sadrists do not control any major ministries, aside from Hamid Al-Ghazi, who has held the post of secretary general of the Council of Ministers since Kadhimi was prime minister from 2019-21.

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Possible Scenarios

Throughout his political career, Sadr has worked both against the Iraqi state and within the state, often at the same time. His actions from October 2021 to October 2022 prove this general strategy, and it is likely to continue in the coming months. Despite his attempts to form a majoritarian government with Kurds and Sunnis, Shia Islamists are likely to dominate Iraqi politics, with the *marjiyya*, or clerical class, playing a role behind the scenes. The question is: What will Sadr do? Will he try to work within the system to discredit the government or will he work against the state and urge his supporters to go to the streets? Some political commentators predicted Sadr would act after the government had been in power for 100 days, but that time is nearly up.

"Shia Islamist parties and movements, by virtue of their central role in governing Iraq, have borne the brunt of widespread public blame and anger about the chaotic state of the country," wrote Ali Ali-Mawlawi, an Iraqi analyst. "In recent years, discursive politics in Iraq have turned

¹⁰ "The Sadrist Movement Refuses to Participate in the Next Government in Iraq," *Le Monde with AFP*, October 15, 2022.

¹¹ "Baada Ensahab Muqtada al-Sadr min al-Amaliya al-Siyasiya fi al-Iraq. Hazihi Hiya al-Sinaryouhat al-Matrouha Lilkhouruj min al-Mazeq," *Arabic Post*, June 18, 2022.

¹² Mujahed Al-Taee, *Twitter post*, January 3, 2023, 5:27 p.m.

to the 'state versus anti-state' construct as a way to frame criticism of Iraq's ruling elite. This construct has focused almost exclusively on Shia Islamist parties and movements that enjoy political ties to Iran, branding them as inherently antithetical to the state."¹³

Like the Iranian-backed Shia Islamists and militias, Sadr has often been labeled as a rogue actor working to advance his own interests. After the turmoil following the latest parliamentary elections, which installed Iranian-backed allies who did not win outright, in fact, having suffered some of the greatest losses in terms of the number of votes, many Iraqis believe the electoral system is flawed and should change, particularly regarding the involvement of religious-based parties in politics. In a July 2022 opinion survey conducted in Iraq by the Enabling Peace in Iraq Center, 40.5% of Iraqis polled said, if

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free and fair elections were held, they would vote for a political party that shares their interests and concerns but only if it explicitly believes in the separation of religion from politics.¹⁴ Thus, Sadr's move to create a majoritarian government with the Sunnis and Kurds – a significant departure from Shia-based religious party dominance of the government – appears to be in keeping with a sizable part of public opinion, whether they are his supporters or not. However, the respondents in this poll appear not to be Sadr supporters. Most were employed and held at least a bachelor's degree, whereas many of Sadr's supporters are unemployed, according to many studies conducted by London-based think tank Chatham House.

Holding Early Elections

Sadr called for early parliamentary elections in August 2022, and he refused to engage in a national dialogue to try to end the political crisis, as Kadhim had proposed. Sadr said, "We have already tried and experienced dialogue with them," referring to the Coordination Framework. He continued, "It has brought nothing to us and to the nation – only ruin and corruption."¹⁵

The U.S. ambassador in Baghdad has also indicated that early elections could address Iraq's political crisis. However, there appears to be resistance within the Coordination Framework. Aref Al-Hamami, a representative of the Coordination Framework, said, "The proposal to continue the parliamentary session until the end of its actual term is due to the sensitivity of the stage the country is going through."¹⁶

On November 1, 2022, Iraqi President Abdul Latif Rashid dismissed the possibility of early elections in Iraq. "There is no decision to hold new early elections in Iraq and the political crisis is over," he said.¹⁷

¹³ Ali Al-Mawlawi, "Iraqi Shia Factions Are Supposedly 'Anti-State.' But State Power Is What They Want," *The Century Foundation*, December 6, 2022.

¹⁴ Geneive Abdo, "Charting a Nationalist and Secular Iraqi State: The Road Ahead?," *Enabling Peace in Iraq Center*, October 2022.

¹⁵ "Muqtada al-Sadr Youtaleb Bihal al-Barlaman al-Iraqi wa l-jra Entikhabat Moubkira wa Yastabaed al-Hiwar maa Khousoumihi," *France 24*, August 3, 2022.

¹⁶ "Iraq's Coordination Framework Seen Backing Down on Early Election Pledge," *The Arab Weekly*, February 12, 2022.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Even if early elections were held, the outcome could be the same for Sadr. He is likely, once again, to be out maneuvered no matter how many seats his coalition may win in new elections if he continues to insist on a majoritarian government, as he did in 2021-22. With the sectarian power-sharing system still intact, he will open the door to his rivals if he insists on demands the system in place allows them to reject. Academics call this existing system, “consociationalism.” In Arabic, the Iraqi system is often referred to as *Muhasasa Taifiya*, or apportionment of political positions among sectarian parties. This has served to ensure political power primarily for Kurdish parties and Islamist Shia parties, which often comprise the largest relatively cohesive blocs in elections.

Although this power-sharing system is not formally enshrined in the Iraqi Constitution, during the government formation processes after the parliamentary elections from 2005 to 2021, the role of speaker of parliament went to a Sunni, prime minister to a Shia, and president to a Kurd. The appointments of these positions, which occur long after votes are cast in the elections, have allowed the dominant political parties in each group, such as Shia Islamist factions, to use their political weight to demand the selection of their preferred candidates. The backroom negotiations in the end determine the new government’s configuration, irrespective of who voters cast their ballots for in the elections. This system – together with Sadr’s decision to withdraw his supporters from Parliament – was responsible for allowing Sadr’s rivals to squeeze him out of forming the new government after the 2021 elections. And, the Sunnis and Kurds are generally reluctant to abandon the current power-sharing system because they would risk losing the presidency and speaker of parliament position if Sadr’s “reform” project was ever implemented.

The obvious question, however, is whether Sadr will wait until new elections in 2025. “Sadrist have two options to return to politics. The first is to wait until 2025, and this is hard to imagine. They will not wait until 2025. They may resort to the streets and demonstrations to force the Coordination Framework to hold an early election,” said Abbas.¹⁸

Back to the Streets

Over the years, Sadr has used street protests and violence carried out by his millions of supporters as political leverage. Although the violence his followers committed in July and August 2022 did not advance Sadr’s political goals to pressure the Coordination Framework and Sudani and allow him to reenter the political system, he will likely turn to violence once again. Now that the new government appears to be reneging on its pledge to hold new elections, Sadr and his followers have the perfect rationale to take to the streets as they did in the past.

In fact, Sadr called for a united prayer gathering January 13, when he announced “a year of change.” Sadr made this call for a united prayer nearly a hundred days after the Sudani government was formed – the amount of time many Iraqi experts believed Sadr would give the new government before making moves to reenter the political system and perform once again as the active opposition to the government. Sadr appears to be capitalizing on splits

¹⁸ Author interview with Akeel Abbas, January 2023.

within the Coordination Framework and among its allies. There have been reports suggesting Maliki's State of Law Coalition, a key component of the Coordination Framework, has fractured with some of his members forming their own political group.¹⁹

Sadr's "year of change" language suggests he has a plan over the next year to perhaps pressure the new government and rally his base before his supporters become frustrated he is not taking action. Sadr also may have taken the opportunity to rally his base because of the economic crisis in Iraq. Significant withdrawals of money from Iraqi banks by Iranian politicians or their proxies in Iraq have occurred, according to some Iraq experts.

However, some Iraqi commentators believe Sadr will wait to call his supporters to the streets again. "He will wait until the next hot summer when people will likely begin to complain or demonstrate because of a lack of electricity and other

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life necessities. So, he will be waiting for the street to start demonstrating so he can take part with them," said Tael, the Iraqi researcher and columnist, in an interview.²⁰

Sadr's January call to prayer and his decision to rally his supporters signaled to his opponents in the government that he is prepared to use the street once again for leverage. This strategy, however, poses risks for Sadr as well as for all Iraqis who fear violence will break out in 2023. Renad Mansour, a leading expert on Sadr, and Benedict Robin-D'Cruz wrote about the summer 2022 protests in an October 2022 report for Chatham House: "This marked a shift away from the cleric's previous strategy of building a power base within Iraq's prevailing political consensus, the *muhāsasa* ethno-sectarian system, towards a much riskier and more destabilizing form of protest-based politics. These events demonstrated the social power held by the Sadrist movement and by its voter base, which is largely made up of poor urban Iraqis."²¹

The Chatham House report featured a survey of 1,000 Sadr supporters living in Sadr City, an impoverished area of Baghdad. One of the many important findings of the study was that Sadr supporters view street protests and elections as going hand in hand in a comprehensive political strategy. This is one reason they support Sadr: He can win votes in elections, and he also has the power to unleash thousands of supporters on a moment's notice for street protests.²²

Sadr's power over his base stems in part from the importance his followers place on religion. The Sadrist movement is arguably the largest and most influential Islamist movement in the Middle East, since the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt lost most of its power after the 2013 military coup that ousted the Muslim Brotherhood from government.²³

¹⁹ "Iraq's Sadr Indicates Return to Politics in Public Prayer Session," *Al-Monitor*, January 13, 2023.

²⁰ Author interview with Sadiq al-Tael, January 2023.

²¹ Renad Mansour and Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, "The Sadrist Movement in Iraq," *Chatham House*, October 28, 2022.

²² Ibid.

²³ David D. Kirkpatrick, "Army Ousts Egypt's President; Morsi Is Taken Into Military Custody," *The New York Times*, July 3, 2013.

According to the Chatham House survey, Sadr supporters under 45 years old showed greater attachment to their faith than those from older generations. And religious leaders were identified as trusted agents of political change by 36% of respondents, while 30% and 28%, respectively, believed new or conventional political parties were agents of change. According to the results of the survey, a majority of Sadr's supporters living in Sadr City have lost faith in the Iraqi government: 55% have no trust in Parliament, and 45% have no trust in the Cabinet. The vast majority, 90%, said they believed the government should enact laws in accordance with Islamic law.²⁴

The religious dimension of Sadr's street credibility is not backed up by his actual religious credentials. Sadr never achieved the status of *marja*: He ended his religious education after he submitted his dissertation on an aspect of Islamic jurisprudence. He did not continue his religious studies, making his rank below that of an ayatollah. Nonetheless, Sadr has used official religious practices, mostly emulated from his father, Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Mohammed Sadeq al-Sadr, who was a towering religious figure for the Iraqi Shias. Sadr's father was assassinated in 1999 by Saddam Hussein's forces. Sadr also employs unofficial religious practices to claim religious authority. For example, as Robin-D'Cruz wrote, Sadr has made the unorthodox claim that he has a personal connection to the Hidden Imam – a central belief in Twelver Shiism is that the imam remains in hiding and will return to earth to save the world at the end of time.²⁵

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Sadr's lack of the highest religious credentials appears not to have affected his influence among his followers. Robin-D'Cruz noted that Sadr's personal charisma overcomes his lack of religious credentials, which is fairly commonly seen as a source of legitimacy for the *marjiyya*, or clerical class, in Iraq.²⁶

However, the Iranian-backed parties now controlling the government, and the Iranian regime itself, are working to chip away at Sadr's religious authority. Ayatollah Kadhim al-Haeri, a cleric in Iran who was appointed as a spiritual advisor, or guardian, to the Sadrist movement by Sadr's father, in August 2022, said Sadr was splitting the Shia community. (In reality, the Shia community, not only in Iraq but across the Middle East, has been divided for many years, with most now following Iraq's Ayatollah Ali Sistani as their *marja*.) He then told Sadr's followers to seek religious guidance from Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, whom Sadr opposes. Officially, Islamist Shia movements require authorization by a grand ayatollah to engage in politics. Thus, without Haeri's endorsement, Sadr technically is not allowed to be the religious head of his movement. Although this development seems not to have affected his followers, it is a claim Iran and its proxies in Iraq can use against him when he decides to reenter politics. Haeri was likely pressured by the Iranian regime to take such action.²⁷ However, the uprising in Iran since September 2022 – the greatest challenge to the regime

²⁴ Renad Mansour and Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, "The Sadrist Movement in Iraq," *Chatham House*, October 28, 2022.

²⁵ Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, "Muqtada al-Sadr and the Struggle for Religious Authority," *Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center*, September 14, 2022.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Akeel Abbas, "Iraq: Sadr Is Down for Now, but Has Iran Overplayed Its Hand?," *Middle East Eye*, September 13, 2022.

since the 1979 Islamic Revolution – has deeply damaged the credibility of the Iranian clerical class, particularly Khamenei. Thus, criticism against Sadr from Iran's clerics is unlikely to have much of an impact upon Iraqis, many of whom want an end to Iranian influence inside their country.

Conclusion

Sadr's failure to form a government after the 2021 elections and the events that followed leave him little choice but to take a more radical approach to attempt to reenter the political system. He refuses to work with the current government, led by his Iranian-backed rivals and influenced by his long-standing nemesis, Maliki. In addition, some of Sadr's supporters, reflecting the views of the younger Iraqi population, oppose the current electoral system and chide successive Iraqi governments for corruption. Some of Sadr's supporters want more radical action and were against his decision to end the street protests and violence in August. For all these reasons, Sadr is likely to thrust Iraq into a cycle of instability, if not violence, unless he discovers another way back into the political system.

