

SADR'S BALANCING ACT ON MALIKI

Opponents of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki have been pushing for his removal from power for much of his second term in office. In recent months, Kurdistan Regional Government President Massoud Barzani and leaders from the Iraqiyya list have turned to an effort to withdraw confidence in Maliki as prime minister. Iraq's Shi'ite parties, though concerned about Maliki's accumulation of power, have largely abstained from the no-confidence push. Yet the anti-Maliki effort gained new life in mid-April when the powerful Shi'ite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr intensified his opposition to Maliki and voiced his intention to remove the premier. Sadr's push for a no-confidence vote is an important inflection not only in his own posture towards Maliki, but also in the ongoing political crisis in Iraq. It has prompted a backlash from Iran, which has supported Maliki by seeking to restrain Sadr and to prevent a vote of no confidence. This backgrounder explores the possible calculus and responses of Sadr, Iran, and Maliki as Iraq's governmental stalemate continues to drag on.

For much of the duration of the crisis, Sadr has pursued a two-track policy of criticizing Maliki while at the same time denying any intention of working against the prime minister directly. From February through mid-April, Sadr and his supporters called Maliki a dictator and an autocrat and denounced his failures to tackle unemployment, corruption, and the poor provision of services in Iraq.¹ At the same time, the Sadrists voiced support for Maliki's premiership and openly derided the possibility of removing him, pointing out that Maliki's critics were also members of his government.² Following the arrest of Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) chief Faraj al-Haidari on April 12, however, Sadr began to make more specific accusations against Maliki, charging the prime minister with aiming to establish a dictatorship and attempting to derail planning for future elections.³ Emboldened, Sadr began meeting with Iraqiyya and Kurdish leaders in late April, first in Arbil and then at his own residence in Najaf. Following those meetings, he promised to deliver the votes of all of his movement's members of Parliament for a vote of no confidence in Maliki if Barzani and the Iraqiyya leaders could provide enough votes to reach a majority. Since then, Sadr has acted as one of Maliki's most vocal opponents.

Sadr's heightened opposition to Maliki's premiership is noteworthy because Sadr served as "kingmaker" in the aftermath of both the 2005 and 2010 elections, bringing

his movement's MPs behind Maliki at Iran's behest. Once an emblem of resistance to the American occupation of Iraq, Sadr inherited a strong constituency among disenfranchised working-class Shi'as in Baghdad and the south of Iraq from his father, one of the most powerful Shi'ite clerics in Iraq during the 1990s.

Iran naturally supports a Shi'a-led Iraqi government that is weak enough to remain pliable but strong enough to provide effective support for Iranian interests in Iraq and in the region. While analysts such as Reidar Visser have suggested that Iran might have preferred an Iraqi leader less powerful than Maliki, such as former Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari, Iran is clearly invested in keeping Maliki in power.⁴ In 2010, Iranian influence was integral to ensuring a second term for Maliki, and Iran has been central to keeping other Shi'a political groups in Iraq in line. With American influence in Iraq in decline, Iran has emerged as the most powerful external influence in Iraq. Maliki is not a pawn of Iran, but Iranian interests are fixed firmly in his political calculus.⁵ Moreover, Maliki's ties to Tehran and his Shi'a Islamist background have engendered hostile relations between Maliki and Iran's regional competitors, particularly Turkey and Saudi Arabia, providing Iran with an important buffer against those states.⁶

Iran, therefore, has worked aggressively to bring Sadr back in line. Days after Sadr publicly promised that his

party would vote unanimously to replace Maliki if other political blocs could secure the remaining votes needed, Iran-based Iraqi cleric Ayatollah Kadhim al-Haeri urged the man once seen as his protégé to refrain from splitting Iraq's Shi'a community over political disputes.⁷ When this approach did not yield results, Haeri issued a fatwa on June 3 forbidding his Sadrists followers to vote for secularists, particularly "in any of the Iraqi government institutions."⁸ Haeri's opening is rumored to have been followed by negotiations with Quds Force Commander Soleimani and even envoys from Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who reportedly spirited Sadr to Tehran on June 4 after talks with Soleimani broke down.⁹

If Iran's methods of persuasion are reminiscent of 2010, however, Sadr's responses thus far are less so. Sadr responded defiantly to Haeri's fatwa: a Sadrists source told Al-Hayat that "Muqtada al-Sadr will not adhere to any fatwa issued by Haeri, and he will not back down from his decision to withdraw confidence from Maliki unless Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani or Sheikh Ishaq Al-Fayad [issue] a fatwa," adding that "Sadr believes that these two authorities issue fatwas for the benefit of Iraq, not other countries." More diplomatically, senior Sadrists Amir al-Kanani maintained Sadr's "great respect for [the fatwa] and its source" but insisted that it was impossible for Sadrists politicians to adhere to the fatwa because a number of political blocs included both Islamist and secular figures.¹⁰ Sadr's own response, however, was to call for Maliki's resignation.¹¹ He was also rumored subsequently to have told Soleimani to leave his home in Qom in an argument over Maliki, prompting reports that Iran has cut its funding to Sadr's organization and forced him to close his office in Tehran.¹²

In his continued defiance, Sadr likely is motivated in part by an uneasy relationship with Maliki. Upon entering the Iraqi political scene in 2003 and 2004, Sadr defined himself as an alternative to the exiled Shi'a parties, including the Da'wa Party, of which Maliki was then deputy leader and which he leads today, and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI). Sadr positioned himself as a symbol of resistance to foreign occupation. As prime minister, Maliki subsequently allied with American forces to push Sadr and his Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) militia out of Basra and Sadr City in 2008, ultimately forcing Sadr

publicly to disband JAM and re-structure his movement. Sadr is likely unhappy about Maliki's consolidation of power, too. Maliki has brought key elements of Iraq's security forces under his personal control, undermined the independence of institutions such as the IHEC and the Central Bank of Iraq, and targeted political rivals such as Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi. Sadr is not the only Iraqi political figurehead to have called Maliki a dictator – Maliki attempted to dismiss Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al-Mutlaq for doing so – but he has done so with increasing frequency and volume in recent weeks.¹³

Sadr is also likely concerned about the upcoming provincial elections and the electoral threat Maliki may pose, particularly in the Shi'a-dominated south of Iraq. With the decline of ISCI since 2007 and Maliki's increasing popularity among Shi'as, the main competition in the next election will be between Da'wa and the Sadrists. Any gains that Maliki makes at the provincial level will come at Sadr's expense. Moreover, Maliki has demonstrated considerable success in probing the latent divisions between members of the ad hoc alliance ranged against him. His high-profile visits to disputed territories of Kirkuk and Mosul highlighted longstanding animosities between Sunni Arabs and Kurds in the north, making clear that any alliance between the two is unlikely to outlast the Maliki premiership.¹⁴

Sadr's opposition to Maliki can be seen as an attempt to win political concessions. His reluctance to fall in line suggests that he is raising the stakes or intends to develop a higher and more independent political profile in Iraq in keeping with his nationalist claims. For their alignment with Maliki in 2010, the Sadrists were rewarded with control of a number of ministries and one of the deputy parliamentary speakerships. These positions were supplemented with the governorship of Maysan province and the release of Sadrists prisoners.¹⁵ It is possible, therefore, that Sadr is intensifying his opposition to Maliki in order to force higher-profile concessions ahead of the next elections. These might take the form of provincial-level appointments in the south or even of greater Sadrists influence in the security forces, which Maliki has sought to keep under his own control.

In continuing to ally himself openly with Sunni Arabs and Kurds against the Shi'a mainstream, however, Sadr

runs the risk of alienating some of his core constituency. Should this alienation result in fewer Sadrists seats in future elections, Sadr might lose his appeal as an ally and his ability to drive bargains with Maliki. Moreover, in pushing back so hard against Iranian attempts to bring him into the Maliki fold, Sadr may be in danger of losing support to rival Iran-sponsored Shi'ite militant group Assaib Ahl al-Haq, a Sadrist splinter group that has been willing to support Maliki while criticizing Sadr's alliance with Sunni and Kurdish political groups. This may ultimately be enough to convince Sadr to back down from his previous calls for Maliki's removal and adopt a less strident posture.

Beyond Sadr, Iran has maintained a broad range of channels through which it can ensure the survival of a pliable Shi'a-led government in Iraq. As Maliki's opponents turned their attention to the mechanisms through which confidence might be withdrawn from the Maliki government, eyes fell on Iraqi President Jalal Talabani. Talabani has been linked to Iran since Tehran armed and supported his Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) party in the 1990s. With Talabani constitutionally empowered to call for a vote on Parliament's confidence in Maliki, Iran seemed to be discouraging Talabani from following such a course.¹⁶ One member of Maliki's State of Law Coalition admitted that Iran was exerting pressure on Talabani "not to send the letter to parliament [requesting the no-confidence vote] and to support [Maliki]."¹⁷ Talabani's chosen course—to solicit signatures calling for Maliki's dismissal in order to verify the extent of anti-Maliki sentiment in parliament, an act he need not have taken had he wished to unseat Maliki—suggests that Iran's envoys succeeded in persuading him. Meanwhile, Maliki's own influence with Iraq's judiciary has produced a Supreme Court ruling narrowing the parameters within which parliament can question—and then move to withdraw confidence from—a government minister.¹⁸

A combination of Iranian pressure, political risk, or the promise of concessions from Maliki may ultimately convince Sadr to return to the fold of Shi'ite unity. Prior to leaving for Tehran, he is rumored to have asked senior political and paramilitary supporters to sign a blood oath of loyalty to him, suggesting he believed there was internal opposition to his collision course with Maliki or his split

with Iran. In the meantime, Iran is reported to have requested that Sadr give Maliki two months to form a more acceptable coalition government.¹⁹ Sadr reportedly spoke to Maliki on June 14 and seemed to have reasserted his opposition to a third Maliki term, perhaps opening the way to a deal in which Maliki is allowed to finish his current term. At the same time, however, Sadr has continued to refer to plans for a no-confidence vote as a "divine Iraqi project," which may foreshadow a return to Sadr's double-game strategy of the early months of 2012.

Sadr may prefer, however, to chart an independent course, refashioning himself as the Iraqi nationalist he has long claimed to be. As long as he retains a strong hold over his core constituency, Sadr can manufacture significant demonstrations in Sadr City and some of the southern cities and may return to his criticism of Maliki's record on delivering services and tackling unemployment. However, with the rest of the Shi'a National Alliance behind Maliki and with continued Iranian pressure, Sadr's only possible non-Shi'a allies are the Kurds and what remains of the Iraqiyya bloc, which has seen a series of defections in recent months. Formal electoral alliances with these groups would likely alienate Sadr's Shi'a base. An independent profile might force Sadr into a vocal but isolated form of principled opposition. It is not clear that a place exists in Iraqi politics for a Shi'a cleric independent from Iran and hostile to the prime minister it supports. While Sadr's endgame remains opaque, it is obvious that he continues to play a dangerous game.

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NOTES

¹ "Iraq's Sadr attacks PM Maliki as a 'dictator'", Agence France-Presse, February 25, 2012.

² "Sadr favours status quo in Baghdad", The Gulf Today, April 28, 2012.

³ "Top Iraq politicians demand greater democracy," Agence France-Presse, April 28, 2012.

⁴ Robert Tollast and Reidar Visser, "Iraq in the Middle, Part II: Reidar Visser on Iraq's Relations with Iran," Small Wars Journal, June 11, 2012.

⁵ Josh Rogin, "U.S. struggles with Iran for influence in Iraq," The Cable, Foreign Policy, March 23, 2012.

⁶ Although Iraq did make attempts to achieve a certain rapprochement with the Saudis, particularly in the run-up to the Baghdad Arab League summit in March. However, the limited gains won in these attempts—low-level Saudi representation at the summit and the appointment of a non-resident Saudi envoy to Iraq based in Jordan—have been overshadowed by ongoing disagreement over the possibility of intervention in Syria and tension over OPEC policy. Meanwhile, Maliki engaged in a war of words with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, with Erdogan accusing Maliki of causing sectarian strife in Iraq and Maliki rejecting Turkish "interference" in Iraqi affairs. Peg Mackey, "Iraq and Iran cuddle up in OPEC, but for how long?", Reuters, June 12, 2012; Barry Malone, "Iraq calls Turkey 'hostile state' as relations dim," Reuters, April 20, 2012.

⁷ Qassim Abdul-Zahra and Brian Murphy, "Iran Rallies To Salvage Iraq's Al-Maliki Government," Associated Press, June 4, 2012.

⁸ Oudai Hatem, "Haeri Issues Fatwa Forbidding Vote for Secularists, Sadrist Movement Rules Out Adherence to Fatwa," *Al-Hayat*, June 4, 2012.

⁹ "Lebanese newspaper: Khamenei intervened to dissuade Sadr from withdrawing confidence from Maliki," (translated from Arabic), IPA Iraq, June 13, 2012.

¹⁰ Oudai Hatem, "Haeri Issues Fatwa Forbidding Vote for Secularists, Sadrist Movement Rules Out Adherence to Fatwa," *Al-Hayat*, June 4, 2012.

¹¹ Michael Knights, "The Effort to Unseat Maliki: Lessons for U.S. Policy," The Washington Institute PolicyWatch 1947, June 5, 2012.

¹² Ramzy Mardini, "Iraq's Post-Withdrawal Crisis, Update #25," Institute for the Study of War, June 8, 2012.

¹³ Mustafa Habib, "Getting rid of Nouri: PM's critics consider options to remove 'dictator'," *Niqash*, May 3, 2012; "Sadr clarifies his stance towards Maliki," All Iraq News Agency, May 12, 2012.

¹⁴ Reidar Visser, "Endgame for the Prime Minister?," Sada, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 29, 2012.

¹⁵ Kenneth Katzman, "Iraq: Politics, Elections, and Benchmarks," Congressional Research Service, March 1, 2011, p.15; Joel Wing, "Sadrist Gain Control of Maysan Governorship," Musings on Iraq, December 30, 2010.

¹⁶ Reidar Visser, "Just Exactly How Many Iraqi MPs Are Ready to Vote Out Maliki?," Iraq and Gulf Analysis, June 10, 2012.

¹⁷ Brian Murphy and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "Iran rallies to aid of Iraq's embattled leader," Associated Press, June 4, 2012.

¹⁸ Reidar Visser, "Iraq Gets a New De-Baathification Board but the Supreme Court Becomes a Parody," Iraq and Gulf Analysis, May 7, 2012.

¹⁹ "Embattled Iraqi PM holding on to power for now," Associated Press, June 12, 2012.