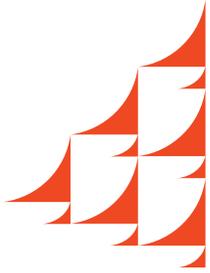


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Institute in Washington
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Common Cause To Confront the State

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Among her vast publications, including monographs and works in scholarly journals, 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.

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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.

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Executive Summary

Nearly 20 years since the U.S.-led coalition invaded Iraq, a new generation of Iraqis is fighting for a different vision and fate for their country from that of their parents. In doing so, they have formed an informal alliance with Iraqi clerics – a radical departure from the trend in most Arab states, where secular-oriented youth seek to delegitimize religious leaders and institutions. Significant Iraqi clerics have joined forces with civil society activists in a move that has the potential for a reimagining of the Iraqi state. This newfound cooperation is grounded in shared goals: profound domestic political and economic reform and a rejection of Iran’s ideological and political influence in Iraq.

This mosque-street tacit alliance seeks to forge change through several channels, including parliamentary elections scheduled for October. But what is their potential for bringing about political and economic reform? This paper seeks to analyze the informal alliance between some clerics and civil society leaders in opposition to the Shia-led state based upon dozens of interviews in Iraq from January through April, Arabic media reports, social media posts, statements and fatwas from clerics, statements from protesters, and the academic literature. The upcoming elections alone are unlikely to change the power-sharing system, which has existed since the aftermath of the 2003 invasion. However, the informal alliance between protesters and clerics will certainly impact the elections and could usher in the beginning of a more stable Iraq.

Introduction

On November 15, 2019, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani published a statement on his official website voicing support for the national protests in Iraq, which had started a month earlier. He demanded that the state security forces stop the violence against the young demonstrators. He also called for reform of the federal electoral law so that ruling Shia parties did not continue to maintain an unfair advantage, part of an effort to instill in the general public confidence in the political process.

Sistani’s intervention provided credibility and a large degree of legitimacy to the protesters’ complaints of government corruption. He called for corrupt officials

Significant Iraqi clerics have joined forces with civil society activists in a move that has the potential for a reimagining of the Iraqi state.

to be prosecuted, the money they looted to be recovered, and the system of unfair privileges granted to them abolished. In an earlier statement that month, he echoed another central demand of the protesters that Iran should get out of Iraq: “No person or group, no side with a particular view, no regional or international actor may seize the will of the Iraqi people and impose its will on them.”¹

With these two statements, Sistani, the most revered ayatollah for Shias in Iraq and for many beyond, aligned the *marjiyya*, or religious establishment, with the Shia street and presaged a serious challenge to a government that has been led by Shia politicians ever since the United States deposed Saddam Hussein in 2003. Now, nearly 20 years on, significant Iraqi clerics

¹ Bobby Ghosh, “Iraq’s Top Cleric Warns Iran To Stay Out,” *Bloomberg*, November 2, 2019.

have joined forces with civil society activists – a move that has the potential for a reimagining of the Iraqi state. The newfound cooperation between leading elements of the religious establishment and civil society is grounded in shared goals: profound domestic political and economic reform and a rejection of Iran’s theological and political influence in Iraq.

Upcoming parliamentary elections scheduled for October will test whether this informal alliance will produce the outcome both the street and the clerics are demanding. Clerics interviewed in Iraq for this paper largely believe that, by itself, the elections will not bring about rapid reform but rather will contribute to a long-term process. “I do not believe these elections will bring about much change,” said Ali Al Qazwini, a cleric in Karbala. “But they are a tool for slow change.”² Some protest leaders, however, predict there will be larger street opposition after the elections, which will likely fail to meet society’s demands, and the next government will be short-lived.

This paper analyzes the tacit alliance between some clerics and civil society in opposition to the Shia-led state based upon dozens of interviews in Iraq from January through April, Arabic media reports, social media posts, statements and fatwas from clerics, statements from protesters, and the academic literature. The protest movement, which has been concentrated in predominantly Shia areas, is a formidable challenge to a political system dominated for two decades by Shia Islamist parties and factions.

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The paper also seeks to explain the increasingly unified opposition to Iran and its meddling in Iraqi affairs by noting a distinction between Arab Shias and Iranian Shias, who in the modern world do not share the same religious values or national identities. The extensive literature on modern Shiism has largely been produced through a lens of Iranian Shiism. As a result, modern Arab Shiism, vastly different with its own unique characteristics, has been largely sidelined. This has occurred in part due to the historical claim by Persians of maintaining the *true* interpretation of Shiism, according to the scholar Meir Litvak, who has conducted extensive historical research on the topic.³ The terms Shiism and Shia underwent many interpretations over the centuries before reaching what is called semantic narrowing. Now the terms are almost universally understood to refer to “Twelver Shiism” as practiced in Iran, a doctrine that adheres to the belief of the return of the Hidden Imam, the Twelfth Imam or Mahdi, to earth to usher in an era of perfect justice and righteousness.

This paper considers the following major questions, with both domestic and regional consequences: Can Iraq’s *marjiyya*, as personified by Sistani, confer legitimacy on a state rejected by a large portion of the population as corrupt, inefficient, and incompetent by working to enforce a change in government? Can the mostly young protesters, some of whom describe themselves as secular oriented and call for a separation of state and religion, form a tacit bond with the clerical establishment that is lasting – a reversal of the trend in other Arab states where the young generation has distanced itself from religious institutions?

² Author interview in Najaf, March 2021.

³ Meir Litvak, “God’s Favored Nation: The New Religious Nationalism in Iran,” *Religions* 11, no. 10 (October 2020).

And, if both the clerics and protesters succeed in diminishing Iran's ideological and political influence – something many Iraqis say is already happening – could this become a model for other predominantly Arab Shia societies, where Iran intervenes? One factor fueling Iraqi popular disdain for Iran is the regular violence committed by thousands of Iranian-backed Shia militia forces. Since the big wave of demonstrations began in October 2019, protest leaders across the country have been the targets of these Shia forces that are attempting to silence them. According to the United Nations, hundreds of protesters have been killed, others have been kidnapped and disappeared.⁴ “Had it not been for the marjiyya’s stand with the demonstrators, the ruling parties could have exterminated all the demonstrators in an historic massacre,” said Aws Al-Khafaji, at one time an important militia leader in the Popular Mobilization Forces who left the forces and was arrested in 2019.⁵ Some militias in the PMF take orders from Iran. Media reports said Khafaji was arrested on the orders of Iranian-backed militias because of his criticism of Iran’s meddling in Iraq and the power of the Shia militias being centralized under the authority of an Iranian-backed commander and outside the control of the Iraqi state.⁶ When the protests first began, some experts called upon the United States to help the Iraqi prime minister rein in the militias. However, Washington is strategically and militarily unwilling to confront the militias directly due to the great risk of creating more internal strife in Iraq and more instability.⁷

This new chapter in Iraq’s history raises the question of whether years of sectarian-based violence between Shias and Sunnis could be coming to an end, only to be supplanted by an intra-Shia and intrasocietal schism. In the past, even if the Shias were not united among themselves, their differences were overshadowed by their unified efforts to fight against Sunni militants, such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. In 2014, ISIL controlled one-third of Iraqi territory. Now, with those threats largely contained, the Shias have to deal with their own fragmentation, which has been a factor in undermining state governance. This schism among competing Shia actors is proving to be nearly as destabilizing as the sectarian violence of the past.

The conflicts among Iraqi Shia political parties, clerics, and civil society also illustrate that while Iran certainly has its constituencies inside Iraq, not all Shias are adherents of the Iranian model of theocracy, where supreme clerical rule has the final say over all state affairs. Historically, this has been the great distinction between the schools of thought in Qom, Iran and Najaf, Iraq – the two holy Shia seats of learning. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, when Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini radicalized Shia tradition and instituted his own radical reading of the historical notion of *vilayet e-faqih*, the guardianship of the jurist who has absolute power, the theological divisions between Najaf and Qom have become more pronounced.

⁴ “Iraq: UN Details Ordeal of Abducted Protesters, Welcomes Government’s Promise To Investigate and Compensate,” *Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, May 26, 2020.

⁵ Author interview in Baghdad, April 2021.

⁶ Rafid Jaboori, “Prominent Iraqi Shia Militia Leader Arrested – The Rise and Fall of Aws al-Khafaji,” *The Jamestown Foundation*, April 3, 2019.

⁷ Michael Knights, “Exposing and Sanctioning Human Rights Violations by Iraqi Militias,” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, October 22, 2019.

As Western policymakers work to decrease Iran's military and political influence in the Middle East, understanding that many Arab Shia communities also long for Iran to get out of their respective countries is of utmost importance. Thus, an opening exists for engagement between Western policymakers and these Shia communities as a counterweight to Iranian influence.

Shia Demographics in the Middle East

Country	Shia Population	Total Population	Shia as Percent of Total
Iran	61.8 million	68.7 million	90%
Iraq	17.4 million	26.8 million	65%
Saudi Arabia	2.7 million	27.0 million	10%
Lebanon	1.7 million	3.9 million	45%
Kuwait	730,000	2.4 million	30%
Bahrain	520,000	700,000	75%
Syria	190,000	18.9 million	1%
UAE	160,000	2.6 million	6%
Qatar	140,000	890,000	16%

Vali Nasr, "When the Shiites Rise," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2006.

The Political and Economic Context

Where the Iraqi state begins and ends, and nonstate actors and institutions continue, is a moving target depending on the uncertain security situation, ever-changing political actors, influence of outside governments, and conflicts in the broader Middle East. This fluidity is one of the greatest challenges to political and economic reform.

Iraqi civil society has long paid the price for the resulting instability and uncertainty, but it is now beginning to come into its own as an important player in the political sphere. The protesters place blame for the country's fragility and failure squarely on the shoulders of a succession of corrupt Shia-led governments, some of which deliberately stoked sectarian tensions within Iraqi society.

Young Iraqis now in their late 20s witnessed firsthand the brutal street fighting in 2007-08 between Shias and Sunnis, known as *al-ahdath al-taejiya* (the sectarian events), and many were displaced as children by violence. Some have attempted to shun sectarian divisions altogether and work toward a national identity, shouting the familiar slogan: "We want a homeland." Although Iraqis of all backgrounds, including academics, clerics, and taxi drivers, have participated in the protests, the overwhelming majority of the protesters are Shias. "Naturally,

Shiism has played a role in the protests because of the strong current of standing against injustice that runs throughout Shia history and is embedded in the Shia consciousness," said Jawad Al-Khoei, an influential cleric in Najaf.⁸

The gap between population growth, which entails a significant increase in demand for jobs and services, and the resources available to meet this demand is one of Iraq's most pressing challenges. Although Iraq has not conducted a demographic census since 1987, the population is estimated at a bit over 41 million, according to the World Bank.⁹ It is expected to increase to 53 million by 2030, with an average annual growth of 2.75%.

One of the most critical shortcomings of the post-2003 reconstruction of Iraq was its failure to diversify the economy away from the dominant, capital-intensive oil sector and encourage employment in non-oil, labor-intensive sectors.

The fertility rates in Iraq continue to be among the highest in the world (4.27% between 2015 and 2020). Almost 40% of the population is under 14 years old, 20% is between the ages of 14 and 24, and 33.7% is between the ages of 24 and 54. Youth unemployment is estimated at 30%, and this is likely to increase in the coming years.¹⁰

Youth are identified as a key vulnerable group excluded from society, facing a disproportionate lack of access to jobs and therefore unable to contribute productively to society. According to a February Atlantic Council report, 60% of Iraq's population is under the age of 25.¹¹

Lack of employment is cited prominently as a motivating factor for joining violent groups, for economic reasons, status, and respect.¹² Unemployment was one key issue that motivated civil unrest in late 2018, when sporadic protests, primarily led by dissatisfied youth, erupted in some parts of the country, and then again in October 2019. The coronavirus pandemic and oil price decline have greatly aggravated the economic and social crises.

One of the most critical shortcomings of the post-2003 reconstruction of Iraq was its failure to diversify the economy away from the dominant, capital-intensive oil sector and encourage employment in non-oil, labor-intensive sectors. A significant percentage of the labor force remains employed by the public sector. Against this backdrop, Iraq continues to be a rentier economy with the state playing the dominant role in the economic process and distribution of wealth. This distribution, however, is plagued with corruption. Iraq is among the countries with the highest corruption rates in the world, according to Transparency International, which ranked Iraq as 169 out of 175 countries in its 2017 Corruption Perceptions Index.¹³

⁸ Author interview in Najaf, April 2021.

⁹ "Macro Poverty Outlook for the Republic of Iraq," *World Bank*, April 2021.

¹⁰ Harith Hasan, "Beyond Security: Stabilization, Governance, and Socioeconomic Challenges in Iraq," *Atlantic Council*, July 2018.

¹¹ C. Anthony Pfaff, "Iraq: A Road Map for Recovery," *Atlantic Council*, February 2021.

¹² World Bank, *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2011).

¹³ "Corruption Perceptions Index," Transparency International, 2017.

Corruption is one of the primary grievances Iraqis have against their government and one of the leading drivers of political mobilization in the protest movement. According to polling conducted by Al-Mustakella for Research Group's Independent Institute of Administration and Civil Society Studies, or IIACSS, government corruption was the main concern for 39% of Iraqis in 2019, which was a sharp increase from 2004 when only 13% said corruption was a main concern.¹⁴ The corruption and syphoning off of government funds is directly felt by ordinary Iraqis: The electricity supply is often interrupted; medical care is scarce, particularly since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic; and educational standards are subpar.

The View From the Hawza

With the state in tatters and national civil unrest at unprecedented levels, at least some of the marjiyya believe it is their religious duty to engage in the political sphere. Iraqi clerics piously tell visiting foreigners that they intervene in politics only out of necessity, *maslaha*, a concept in Islamic jurisprudence, which is invoked – traditionally at times of extreme peril – to protect the public welfare. However, in reality, the role many Iraqi clerics play is intertwined with religion and politics, blurring their influence across these two spheres. Although their public and political roles have been particularly evident since the formation of a new Iraqi Shia-led state in 2003, Iraq's clerics also seek to maintain their independence from the state. According to the scholar Marsin Alshamary, who has conducted extensive research on Iraq's clerical establishment, "fears of state control stem from the tremendous persecution that Shia clerics suffered under Saddam Hussein."¹⁵ In this way, clerical authority has emerged as an extraconstitutional actor, even though the clerics show no interest in following Iran's theocratic model and institutionalizing their authority.

Although their public and political roles have been particularly evident since the formation of a new Iraqi Shia-led state in 2003, Iraq's clerics also seek to maintain their independence from the state.

When the protest movement exploded in October 2019, the civil unrest presented a dilemma for the clerics: How could they support the protesters without creating more political instability and provoking reprisals either from Iranian-backed nonstate actors or elements within the state itself against the hawza, the term for the collective institutions that train seminarians in religious schools? Initially, Sistani expressed a more neutral position, which changed by early November 2019 to become consistently in favor of the protests and critical of the government.

However, some young civil society activists had the answer. Meetings with some clerics were arranged in October 2019, after a young activist in Najaf, Yasser Mekki, appealed to Khoei, the influential cleric in Najaf, to schedule discussions between clerics in Najaf and young demonstrators from Baghdad, Najaf, and Nasiriyah. "We held meetings with the highest-ranking clerics,"¹⁶ Mekki explained. "I said, 'We need these meetings because we are in a critical

¹⁴ Sam Gollob and Michael O'Hanlon, "Iraq Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post-Saddam Hussein Iraq," *Foreign Policy at Brookings*, August 2020.

¹⁵ Marsin Alshamary, "The Role of Iraq's Influential Shiite Clerics is Changing. Here's How," *The Washington Post*, February 4, 2019.

¹⁶ Author interview, April 2021.

point in the demonstrations.” Mekki said the meetings continued for three to four months, generating increasing clerical support for the demonstrations. The clerics who attended the meetings wish to remain anonymous; many of them are close to Sistani.

Clerics who either participated in the meetings or later became aligned with the demonstrators said that they believed it was logical for the hawza to support the protest movement. First, Sistani by that time had made his support for the movement extremely clear. Second, the Najaf-based clergy sees itself as a force promoting goodwill for ordinary Iraqis. Regarding the demonstrators, Sayed Mahdi al-Hakim, a scholar in the Najaf hawza and the imam of Al Jawad mosque, said, “It was natural for the marjiyya to reinforce their positions because, first, they are its sons, and second, because their demands are legitimate, regardless of the identity of the protesters or their orientations.”¹⁷ Hakim is a descendant of one of the most revered clerical families in Iraq.

Sayyid Ammar al-Hakim, a powerful Iraqi cleric who led the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq from 2009-17, said the clerics want to work with the demonstrators to find solutions. “We have opened channels of communication with the demonstrators and their leaders at all levels and classes since the first days of the protests ... Most of the demands they put forward in the demonstrations are in great harmony with the vision we have been presenting for 10 years.”¹⁸

He continued, “In the recent protests, the marjiyya also stood by the true popular demands of the people and called for fair and free elections to restore people’s confidence in their democratic system and in state institutions.”¹⁹

Others said there are more cynical reasons for clerical involvement. They noted that Sistani and other high-ranking clerics helped the Shia parties (that are now running the state as part of the political class and which Iraqis accuse of profound corruption) rise to power in the first place. Thus, their support for change now and their endorsement of the protest movement are simply to clean up the record. “The marjiyya in Najaf were the ones who supported Shia parties that caused corruption, theft, and the destruction of the country,” said Asaad Al-Nasiri, a Friday prayer preacher at the Kufa mosque in Najaf. “They were also the main influencers in choosing prime ministers for several electoral rounds” over the years, said Nasiri, who split from the ranks of Muqtada al-Sadr’s movement in 2020, once Sadr turned against the protesters. Nasiri supports the protesters.²⁰

Nasiri believes the unspoken alliance between the clerics and demonstrators is strictly a marriage of convenience. “Many protesters do not care about the marjiyya. However, they know they are influential. Their knowledge of this makes them demand that the marjiyya intervene ... this demand is a legitimate right of the protesters, despite all their ideological orientations,” he said.²¹

¹⁷ Author interview in Najaf, April 2021.

¹⁸ Author interview, May 2021.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Author interview in Najaf, April 2021.

²¹ Ibid.

Polling data supports this cynical view that the protesters are using the marjiyya to achieve their objectives and vice versa. While Sistani remains revered among Iraqis, the clerical establishment as a whole is increasingly unpopular.²² According to polling conducted by Munqith Dagher, the former director of IACSS who is now with Gallup, only 38% of Iraqis in 2021 said they trust the religious establishment.

One of the most politically active clerics in the protest movement is Muhammad al-Yaqoubi, who is based in Najaf but whose largest following lives in the southern city of Basra, one of the most active centers for the protest movement. Although Yaqoubi has a wide following in Basra, he is not so popular in other parts of the country, according to Iraqi activists. Yet, he has a long history of significant political activity. For example, he has been instrumental in important political discussions, including the drafting of the Iraqi Constitution, when he argued that sharia, or Islamic law, should take precedence over civil law.²³

While Sistani remains revered among Iraqis, the clerical establishment as a whole is increasingly unpopular.

Yaqoubi issued a statement on October 30, 2019, nearly a month after the massive protests began, praising what he called “the uprising for Iraqi freedom.” He said in the statement, “One of the valuable fruits achieved by the renaissance of the youth in the liberation is the restoration of national identity that was robbed by sectarian, corrupt people ... until they made Iraqis lose hope in reviving the national identity and forced many children of the nation to emigrate from Iraq. However, the brave youth ... united all groups of people under the slogan, which is a free and independent homeland.”²⁴

Even before the protests began, Yaqoubi called for political reform in 2018. That same year he told the head of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq that the international community and neighboring countries were to blame for contributing to Iraq’s problems, such as a lack of water.²⁵

In a statement in October 2018, after Adel Abdul Mahdi was designated prime minister and formed a new government, Yaqoubi said: “The people had a glimmer of hope in the new government that it would be a national government and would provide it with security, services, and a thriving economy. But today, after announcing the identities of its members, the people lost hope in the government, as some have been accused of terrorism, corruption,

²² Munqith Dagher, “Uprising or Election: What Kind of Change Do Iraqis Want?,” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, March 12, 2021.

²³ Edward Wong, “Clerics Want Islamic Law Written Into Iraq Constitution,” *The Seattle Times*, February 6, 2005.

²⁴ “Al-marja al-yaqoubi: ma tahaqqaq min injaz fi entifadat huriyyat al-iraq” [The Reference Al-Yaqoubi: What has been achieved in the uprising for Iraqi freedom], *The Religious Marja Sheikh Muhammad Al-Yaqoubi*, October 30, 2019.

²⁵ “Al-marja al-yaqoubi yadu ila wujud qiyada wataniyya waiyya muwahida lilmuzaharat” [The Al-Yaqoubi reference calls for a unified, conscious national leadership for the demonstrations], *The Religious Marja Sheikh Muhammad Al-Yaqoubi*, July 25, 2018.

and belonging to a foreign nationality,"²⁶ a clear reference to Iran. During the large wave of protests a year later, the demonstrators demanded Abdul Mahdi's resignation. In November 2019, he stepped down from office.²⁷

Amid clerical support for the demonstrations is one notable outlier: the populist cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, once an instigator and champion of Iraq's protest movement and now a culprit in instigating violence against it. He announced in January 2020 that he had withdrawn his support for the popular movement.

The Sadrist movement has been a formidable force in Iraqi politics since 2003, filled with anti-imperialist rhetoric and calls for social justice. In 2015, Sadr presided over an opposition movement largely comprised of the underclass and called for a nationalist agenda, one that would leave sectarianism behind. However, since 2020, Sadr has become a staunch opponent of the demonstrations. His armed forces, called Blue Helmets, have attacked, injured, and killed protesters in Baghdad and Najaf.²⁸ One of the bloodiest attacks was in Najaf on February 4, 2020. That attack prompted Sistani to condemn the violence the following Friday during his mosque sermon. The violence could spark a change in political fortunes for Sadr, at least among some educated Shia elites, although he still maintains support in Sadr city and other parts of Iraq. Sadr, who was never considered a credible theologian – even though he comes from a renowned clerical family – is believed to be out of favor with the marjiyya in Najaf. Still, respected Iraq experts predict that Sadr could get the largest bloc of votes in the October elections.

The Sadrist movement has been a formidable force in Iraqi politics since 2003, filled with anti-imperialist rhetoric and calls for social justice.

Nasiri, a former Sadrist leader, is one example of someone who turned against Sadr due to the latter's opposition to the protest movement. Right after Sadr withdrew his support, Nasiri took off his turban to show he was no longer a leader in the Sadrist movement, then he denounced Sadr personally and joined the protests.²⁹ Since then, he has been active on Twitter, calling for corrupt leaders in Iraq to be prosecuted and condemning Iran's intervention in Iraq. He has almost 300,000 Twitter followers.

As a result, he said he was punished by the Iranian-backed militias and Sadr's forces. "Standing up to the corrupt parties and militias takes courage because whoever takes this position will be subjected to bullying, threats, and systematic campaigns. I was subjected to various types of threats and denunciations, even by clerics who want to suppress the protests."³⁰

²⁶ "Bayan hauwwi tashkil al-hukuma al-jadida" [Statement on the formation of the new government], *The Religious Marja Sheikh Muhammad Al-Yaqoubi*, October 30, 2018.

²⁷ Jenny Gathright, "Iraqi Parliament Accepts PM Adel Abdul-Mahdi Resignation, But Protesters Demand More," *NPR*, December 1, 2019.

²⁸ Fatma Ben Hamad, "How Iraq's 'Blue Hat' Militiamen Went From Protecting to Killing Protesters," *France 24*, February 10, 2020.

²⁹ "Iraq's Sadr Movement Begins To Split," *Middle East Monitor*, January 27, 2020.

³⁰ Author interview in Najaf, April 2021.

Renad Mansour, a scholar at Chatham House who has written extensively on the Sadr phenomenon, explained in a co-authored study that notions Sadr had undergone an ideological transformation in 2015, as Sadr implied with his nationalistic rhetoric, are misleading. In fact, media and Western think tank reports (which painted Sadr as abandoning his Shia Islamist ideology for a political agenda based on concrete, more secular issues) are misinformed, wrote Mansour.³¹

Instead, Sadr's inconsistencies make him an erratic and unpredictable political actor who seems to change his opinions depending upon the political context. This includes his relationship with Iran. Sadr is known for demanding all foreign troops leave Iraq, namely U.S. and Iranian forces. However, he is believed to adhere to the Iranian model of vilayat e-faqih, whereby a cleric rules the state, and he has made recent trips to Iran and met with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.³² After years of theological disputes with the marjiyya in Najaf, Sadr seems to have resigned himself to a backseat role. Mansour has written that Sadr seeks a new accommodation with Iran – one reason for his opposition to Iraq's protest movement, which is clearly anti-Iranian.

The View From the Street: A Competition of Shia Identities

The young protest movement, comprised mostly of Iraqi Shias, reflects a certain irony: A power-sharing system put in place after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, whereby government positions are reserved for different sects and ethnicities, was intended to address Shia marginalization during more than two decades under Saddam Hussein's predominantly Sunni rule. Despite pronouncements of fundamental freedoms for all, Iraq's new constitution, which was drafted after the fall of Saddam Hussein, was seen as advancing those groups that drafted it, namely Shias and Kurds. "Because the constitution was not the fruit of a social and political consensus, and was devoid of implementation mechanisms, it became another divisive factor in Iraq's already fractured governance system," wrote Maha Yahya, a scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Beirut.³³

Even so, the system has not necessarily benefited all Shias, particularly the young generation. Nearly 20 years on, it is clear that reducing politics to religion and identity has produced an Iraqi state of patronage politics and cronyism toward the very sect the system was designed to help. For example, despite the dominance of Shia elites in government, the highest poverty headcounts in Iraq have been recorded in mainly Shia areas. In 2007, despite the high number of Shias in government, the highest poverty rates were mainly in Muthanna and Babylon governorates, according to the World Bank. High poverty rates in Shia areas have persisted.³⁴

³¹ Renad Masour and Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, "Making Sense of the Sadrists: Fragmentation and Unstable Politics," *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, March 30, 2020.

³² Ali Mamouri, "What is Muqtada al-Sadr Doing in Iran?," *Al-Monitor*, September 11, 2019.

³³ Maha Yahya, "The Summer of Our Discontent: Sects and Citizens in Lebanon and Iraq," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, June 30, 2017.

³⁴ Brian Blankespoor, Nandini Krishnan, and Tara Vishwanath, *Where are Iraq's Poor: Mapping Poverty in Iraq* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2015).

In firsthand accounts from young Shia demonstrators about their reasons for being on the street, there is a deep sense of anger at the Shia-led state they expected would provide a better life than that of their parents. They are striving for an end to the sectarian and ethnic-based power-sharing system and its replacement with a civic state. Prioritizing sectarian interests, in the eyes of the protesters, has only led to ineffective governance. They vow to continue the protests until their demands are met, although some are more optimistic than others as to whether change will occur in the near future. Hussain Al Ghurabi, a well-known protest leader in Nasiriyah, referencing the October protest movement said, “Tishreen has major strategic goals. The most important are ending the despicable quota system that destroyed the country, amending the constitution, and going for a new social contract.”³⁵

Part of the reason for nationwide support is the protesters’ strategic appeal to all Iraqis, even though most on the streets have been Shias.

According to IIACSS opinion polling, from 2005-06, 62% of Iraqis believed their country was moving in the right direction. But by the end of 2019, only 19% agreed the country was moving in the right direction. And only 15% of Shias agreed – lower than the national average.³⁶

A lot has been written on the events of the protests since 2019: the violence against protesters; the estimated crowd sizes; and the government’s response. It is not the purpose of this paper to rehash those events. Rather, it is important to understand the protesters’ grievances, whether they have national support, and whether they will be able to enact change in the future with the backing from elements of the clergy.

According to opinion polls, there continues to be national support for the protesters and their goals. In a National Democratic Institute public opinion survey, conducted between December 2019 and February 2020 in Baghdad, Basra, Diyala, Erbil, and Nasiriyah, 68% of Iraqis said they supported the nationwide protests and 29% opposed them.³⁷ The National Democratic Institute report noted that the movement was leaderless, but protest leaders believed this was a strength rather than a weakness. Otherwise, if there were clear leaders, they might be kidnapped or killed, and the movement effectively decapitated.³⁸

Part of the reason for nationwide support is the protesters’ strategic appeal to all Iraqis, even though most on the streets have been Shias. The slogans and placards have been overwhelmingly nationalistic, coupled with the battle cry, “We want a homeland.” This nationalist flavor distinguishes not only this wave of protests from others in the past in Iraq, but the younger generation’s vision for Iraq from that of the previous generation, which became the political class after 2003. “The protest movement cannot be classified with a particular school of thought because the protesters come from many stripes and because injustice has affected all classes of Iraqis,” said Laith Al Najim, a demonstration leader in Najaf.³⁹

³⁵ Author interview in Nasiriyah, April 2021.

³⁶ Munqith Dagher and Karl Kaltenthaler, “Iraq is the Prize: A Warning About Iraq’s Future Stability, Iran, and the Role of the United States,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, March 20, 2020.

³⁷ “Iraq: We Want a Homeland,” *National Democratic Institute*, 2020.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Author interview in Najaf, April 2021.

Many protest leaders emphasized in interviews what they call the secular nature of the protest movement. “Most of the leaders of the protests are secular figures, and this is reflected in the secular demands, such as the development of state institutions and the rule of law, and these demands have a secular essence,” said Ali Al Moulalim, a political activist in Basra.⁴⁰

Although this sentiment has been generally shared by many protesters, at different points since 2019, Shia religious symbolism has come to define some of the demonstrations. Arabic media reports of the protests in Baghdad, for example, showed clerics in Tahrir Square and demonstrators comparing the injustices Iraqis are suffering to the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, who is a hero for Shias around the world and whose death in the seventh century has served as the narrative perpetuating Shia redemption and suffering. Hussein was killed in a battle against the Sunni Umayyads in Karbala in 680. The assassination eventually led to the formation of the Shia sect within Islam. The protesters have held images of Imam Hussein, which became, at least for a time, a symbol of the protest movement close to the beginning days of Ashura, the mourning period when Shias across the world commemorate Hussein’s death.⁴¹

However, there is a major difference between how Shiism and Shia identity are instrumentalized between the older and young generations. The younger generation is using religious references in the demonstrations as a way of uniting the country, as opposed to the Shia political elites who took power after Saddam Hussein’s fall, who young Iraqis blame for all their woes. For example, symbols of Hussein have been used in the protests along with the Iraqi national flag. “There is a competition between two narratives of the Hussein event in Karbala in the year 61 Hijri: The first is a traditional one that reinforces the sense of sectarian identity and the supposed Shia injustice associated with it that was employed by the Shia political elites after 2003. And the other narrative, a nationalist, modern one, relates to the collective experience of an Iraqi society developed by ordinary Shia, most prominently through the Tishreen protests,” wrote Akeel Abbas, a professor at the American University of Iraq in Sulaymaniyah, in an edited volume about the protests since 2019.⁴²

As the demonstrations were well underway by November 2019, the protesters began to view the security forces waging violence against them as the enemies of Imam Hussein. When masked gunmen torched protesters’ tents during sit-ins in Karbala, the protesters compared this attack to the burning of the tents of Imam Hussein’s family in Karbala more than 1,400 years ago. Eighteen demonstrators were killed. It was unclear if the attackers were state riot

⁴⁰ Author interview in Basra, April 2021.

⁴¹ Mustafa Saadoun, “*Al-hussain thawra wa layis bukaan faqat ... ‘ashura’ tuhafiz al-ihitijajat fi al-iraq*” [Al-Hussein is a revolution, not just crying” ... Ashura spurs protests in Iraq], *Raseef* 22, August 29, 2020.

⁴² Akeel Abbas, “*Al-Rumuz al-Husainiyya wa Wazaifuha Al-Wataniyya fi Al-ihitijajat Al-Iraqiyya*” [Hussaini Shia symbols and their national functions in the Iraqi protests], in “*Al-Ihtijajat Al-Tishriiniyya fi Al-Iraq – Istihdar al-qadim wa istisaa al-jadid*” [*The October Protests in Iraq – the dying of the old and the intractability of the new*], ed. Faris Kamal Nadhmi and Harith Hasan (Baghdad: Al-Mada Foundation for Media, Culture and Arts, 2020): 47-61.

police or Iranian-backed Shia militias.⁴³ No matter, the symbolism of this violence in Karbala was overpowering: “The Shia in power became the enemy that identifies intrinsically with the historical enemy of Hussein in Karbala,” Abbas wrote.⁴⁴

In another powerful and symbolic moment in the protests showing competing Shia narratives, a young boy carrying a green Hussein flag (collectively called the “flags of Abbas,” a reference to Abbas ibn Ali, Hussein’s brother who is revered among Shias for his attempt to save Hussein) was shot in Baghdad, his green flag and small body suddenly hitting the ground. The shooting went viral on YouTube.⁴⁵

From these pivotal moments and others, it is clear some of the young protesters have adopted the narrative of Shia martyrdom and oppression. Today, however, the perceived oppressors are not Sunni; they are Iraq’s Shia political elites, some of whom are loyal to Iran. Although this association of Hussein’s assassins with other Shia leaders is unusual, it is not unprecedented. Before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the supporters of Khomeini referred to the shah, who was eventually overthrown, as an enemy of Hussein. And, in recent years, when millions of Iranians were on the streets of Tehran in 2009 and 2010 in protest of the government, Khamenei, himself was referred to as the enemy of Imam Hussein – a radical claim in the context of Shia politics.

... whether or not the demonstrators are religious, they are fighting for a civil, not a religious, state, according to numerous interviews conducted in Iraq with protest leaders as well as their public statements.

Does this religious symbolism make Iraqi demonstrators religious, or are they secular oriented, as they often describe themselves? This question is irrelevant for two reasons: Whether or not the protesters are religious, they have appreciated the support from the clerics. There is one caveat: Many of the protest leaders who were interviewed for this paper drew a distinction between the corrupt political clerics, as they call them, and the clerics who are guardians of the faith, who they believe work in the interest of Iraqi society.

And two, whether or not the demonstrators are religious, they are fighting for a civil, not a religious, state, according to numerous interviews conducted in Iraq with protest leaders as well as their public statements. “Even the governments of the Prophet Muhammad and Imam Ali were civil governments that did not impose religion on people and followed the Quranic laws,” said Khafaji, the former militia leader in the PMF.

⁴³ “Masked Men Attack Protesters in Iraq’s Karbala, Killing 18,” *Arab News*, October 29, 2019.

⁴⁴ Akeel Abbas, “Al-Rumuz al-Husainiyya wa Wazaifuha Al-Wataniyya fi Al-Ihtijajat Al-Iraqiyya” [Hussaini Shia symbols and their national functions in the Iraqi protests], in “Al-Ihtijajat Al-Tishriniyya fi Al-Iraq – Istihdar al-qadim wa istisa al-jadid” [*The October Protests in Iraq – the dying of the old and the intractability of the new*], ed. Faris Kamal Nadhmi and Harith Hasan (Baghdad: Al-Mada Foundation for Media, Culture and Arts, 2020): 47-61.

⁴⁵ قناة النظار Tv, “Istishhad tifi yahmil rayat al-abas bi niran qanas” [The martyrdom of a child carrying the Abbas flag by a sniper’s fire], YouTube video, October 16, 2019.

The Iran Factor

The extent of Iranian meddling in Iraq cannot be overstated. Since 2003, Iran has skillfully penetrated Iraq's Shia population, taking advantage of its long, shared border and political, religious, and economic ties. Iran has also penetrated nearly all of Iraq's communities, even Sunni ones, with influence even among the two dominant Kurdish parties as well as the Shia Islamist parties. Iran's influence is diverse and includes political actors who were in exile in Tehran during Saddam Hussein's years in power and remain loyal today. Iraq is a top priority in Iran's foreign-policy agenda. For Iranian policymakers, Iraq is a more critical theater of operation than other countries where Iran supports local militant groups, such as Yemen. Iran's main sources of power in Iraq are the Shia militias in the PMF, some of which are under the control of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps'

Quds Force, not the Iraqi state, and Shia parties with varying degrees of loyalty to Tehran, including the Islamic Dawa Party, headed by former Iraqi Prime Minister

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Nuri al-Maliki; the Fatah Alliance, headed by the military commander Hadi al-Amiri, and Sadr's Sairoon coalition, which holds a majority of seats in the Iraqi Parliament. Maliki, who has been closely aligned with Iran at least since 2010, has expressed his wish to be a candidate again for prime minister, even though his popularity has plummeted.⁴⁶

Iraqi society has become increasingly opposed to Iran's interventions, including Tehran's support for the Iranian-backed Iraqi militias, which have attacked the demonstrators. Over time, Iraqi Shias have come to view Iran as interfering destructively in Iraqi politics. In 2014, 86% of Shias had a favorable view of Iran, while in 2019 that dropped to 41%. "In general, Iraqis neither favor Iran nor the United States, but for the first time in a long time we see favorability of the United States among Iraqis double the favorability of Iran," Dagher, president of the IIACSS polling agency, said. "This is a new phenomenon in the Iraqi political theater."⁴⁷ Polling in late 2019 among pro-reform protesters in Baghdad and the southern provinces indicated that only 1% trusted Iran (compared with 7% who trusted the United States, and 30% who trusted the U.N.).⁴⁸

Even from afar, Khamenei has contributed to Iraqi unfavorable attitudes toward Iran. Just a few days after the protests began in October 2019, Iran's supreme leader denounced the demonstrators, blaming foreign conspirators for the unrest. Such accusations are common for Khamenei; he has often blamed what he calls foreign enemies, the United States at the top of the list, for protests inside his own country. A tweet on October 7, 2019 on Khamenei's account stated: "Enemies tried to create division, but they failed, and their conspiracy will

⁴⁶ "Maliki Eyes Iraq's Premiership Again Despite Declining Fortunes," *The Arab Weekly*, February 23, 2021.

⁴⁷ Namo Abdulla and Mehdi Jedinia, "New Poll: Iran Losing Support of Majority in Iraq," *VOA News*, June 16, 2020.

⁴⁸ Munqith Dagher, "Iraq's Protests Haven't Yet Changed the System – But They're Transforming Iraqis' Belief in Themselves," *The Washington Post*, December 10, 2019.

have no impact.”⁴⁹ Such rhetoric from Khamenei is in keeping with the ideals of the Islamic Revolution: The creation of the Islamic Republic was designed to export the theological and ideological principles of the revolution to regional countries.

Iraqi resistance to Iran’s agenda has increased with the younger generation, and the protests are stark evidence of this rejection. For example, on November 4, 2019, protesters attacked the Iranian Consulate in Karbala, shouting, “Karbala is free, Iran out, out!”⁵⁰ As stated, Karbala holds immense religious importance for Shias around the world, which makes such blatant signs of popular opposition to Iran, the only Shia theocracy, even more poignant. “Iran’s popularity has dropped dramatically because of the oppression Iran carried out against its own people as well as the devastation it inflicted on many people in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, openly and clearly. This made people in these countries, including Iraq, fully aware of the danger of the Iranian regime to the region as a whole,” said Nasiri, the former leader in the Sadrist movement.

Similar demonstrations against Iran erupted May 8 in Karbala, after a protest leader was killed, presumably by Iranian-backed assassins. Protesters staged a daylong protest in Karbala and set fire to trailers belonging to Iran’s consulate there.

Much like Iraqi elements within civil society, clerics also oppose Iran’s political and religious influence in Iraq, with Sistani leading the way. In the short term, it appears more realistic for Iraqis to be able to minimize Iran’s religious influence, but not its military might. Sistani has at times intervened as a mediator or problem solver between the state and society to deprive Iranian-backed groups from performing that role. For example, when the large protests began in 2019, calling for the prime minister to resign, Sistani pressed for a new prime minister, and demanded one be chosen without outside influence, a reference to Iran. “We hope that the new prime minister and government members will be chosen within the constitutional period and according to what citizens look for, far from any outside interference,” Sistani said in a Friday sermon read by his official representative.⁵¹

Sistani has encouraged the PMF militias to integrate into the Iraqi military – something successive prime ministers have called for with no success. He also encouraged those militias within the PMF who follow him to split from the main PMF umbrella group in 2020. In December 2020, four brigades close to him split from the PMF and came under full control of the state.⁵² In addition, during the 2018 elections Sistani issued a statement in opposition to the PMF’s participation in the elections. Some Shia party factions, such as Fatah, are tied to militias within the PMF. He said: “No one is allowed to exploit the religious reference’s title or any other title dear to the hearts of Iraqis for electoral gain.”⁵³

⁴⁹ “Khamenei Says Iraq Protests Conspiracy By ‘The Enemy,’” *Radio Farda*, October 7, 2019.

⁵⁰ “Iraq Unrest: Protesters Attack Iranian Consulate in Karbala,” *BBC*, November 4, 2019.

⁵¹ “Al-Iraq: Al-Sistani yadu ila ikhtiyar rais hukuma min dun ‘tadakhul khariji” [Iraq: Al-Sistani calls for choosing a prime minister without “outside interference”], *Al Jazeera Mubasher*, December 6, 2019.

⁵² Mustafa Saadoun, “Shiite Factions Close to Sistani Move To Separate From Iran-Backed Militias,” *Al-Monitor*, December 4, 2020.

⁵³ “Bayan maktab samahat al-sayyid (dam dhilu) hauwwl al-intikhabat al-niyabiyya fi al-Iraq am 2018” [A statement from the office of His Eminence (may God bless him) on the parliamentary elections in Iraq in 2018], *Official Website of the Office of His Eminence Al-Sayyid Ali Al-Husseini Al-Sistani*, May 3, 2018.

In theological terms, Iraqi clerics oppose Iran's model of vilayet e-faqih, whereby a cleric has absolute power over state affairs. In interviews in Najaf in 2016 with two of Iraq's grand ayatollahs and other clerics, there was consensus that the marjiyya in Iraq do not subscribe to this approach and favor democratic governance.⁵⁴ In this way, the clerics are also in step with civil society activists, who clearly articulate a desire for a separation between state and religion.

The Prospects for Change

Parliamentary elections scheduled for October are unlikely on their own to spark fundamental change in the political system or meet the shared calls of the protesters and clerics for deep-set reform, an end to widespread corruption, and the reduction, or even cessation, of Iranian meddling in Iraqi affairs. According to polling conducted in 2021, 70% of Iraqis do not believe the elections will change how the government functions.⁵⁵

However, the elections will offer a series of indicators about the sustainability of this new, tacit alliance between the clerics and civic activists – between mosque and street. These include the way voting is conducted, the size and scope of voter turnout, the level of violence and intimidation by the Shia militias, and whether establishment Shia populist movements led by figures the protesters oppose (such as Sadr and Amiri of the Fatah Alliance) prevail and, once again, come to dominate the state.

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Many protest leaders have said that if the elections seem rigged, like many in the past, they will call for an uprising in greater numbers than in 2019. This will place the clerics, Sistani in particular, in a difficult position. As in the beginning of the protests, the clerics will face a dilemma: If they condemn the elections and their results, are they implicitly condoning the street unrest and instability? In other words, how far is the marjiyya prepared to go in pursuit of reform? And will it risk its traditional role and influence in the name of civil society?

For its part, the protest movement also faces uncertainty and risk: Chiefly, how far can the protesters push the clerics without risking a backlash? It cannot be lost on many that a successful alliance of secularist reformists, religious intellectuals, students, and clerical activists came together to overthrow the U.S.-backed Shah of Iran in 1979, only to collapse under the weight of demands for political supremacy on the part of the “political mullahs” led by Khomeini.

For now, at least, many protesters believe the demonstrations have already achieved a modicum of success. After all, a sitting prime minister was ousted from power shortly after the protests began with pressure from the street and the marjiyya. “Abdul Mahdi’s exit would not have happened without the Marja’s speech,” referencing Sistani, “and this is what makes

⁵⁴ Author interviews in Najaf, November 2016.

⁵⁵ Munqith Dagher, “Uprising or Election: What Kind of Change Do Iraqis Want?,” *Fikra Forum*, March 12, 2021.

the youth continue to demand that the marjiyya intervene to resolve debates, particularly those over the elections,” said Ahmed Al Suhail, a journalist and blogger who is influential with the protesters.

Second, the protesters demanded electoral reform, which also was supported by some of the clerics, in order to ultimately abolish the system of sectarian apportionment that was created in the aftermath of the 2003 regime change. In December 2019, the Iraqi Parliament approved a new electoral law, which took President Barham Salih 11 months to ratify due to disputes over how to define Iraq’s electoral districts. The new law is a departure from the past, which designated each of Iraq’s governorates as a single district. The new law divides Iraq into 83 districts.

As a result of the new election law, some protest leaders have shifted their focus from the street to the ballot box. They have formed new political parties and plan to run their own candidates in the October elections.

Dividing Iraq into more electoral districts, in principle, should open up the electoral system by creating more competition and allowing for the adoption of individual nominations for candidates. The new system is designed to forge a link between each member of parliament and his or her particular constituency with the aim of making the member of parliament directly accountable to voters in the district. The new law also prevents popular politicians from using their vote share to award seats to other candidates on their list who did not win seats.⁵⁶ The law also allows for small political parties, not just large factions led by established political elites, to compete in the elections. But it will not lead to changing the power-sharing system.

In order to avoid violence and vote rigging, which have been common in past elections, the Iraqi government has asked the U.N. to monitor the elections. The government is attempting to gain societal support for the elections to avoid a low voter turnout, which would cast doubt on the legitimacy of the elections. In 2018 elections, the official voter turnout was reported as a bit more than 44%, but the actual turnout, according to many Iraqi experts, was about 20%.

As a result of the new election law, some protest leaders have shifted their focus from the street to the ballot box. They have formed new political parties and plan to run their own candidates in the October elections. Many groups ran out of time to register with Iraq’s Independent High Electoral Commission, which gave political parties only one week to submit applications. Four political parties, established by protesters, did meet the deadline: Emtidad; al-Bayat al-Watani; OTM, or October 25 Movement Party; and a fourth party comprised of activists aligned with Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi.

However, these new parties enter the political fray with many disadvantages. The electoral commission charges 30 million Iraqi dinars (approximately \$20,500) to register a new party.⁵⁷ They lack the enormous funding of the older generation of Shia parties. They also lack the organizational skills to encourage voters to go to the polls; and they even lack physical space to organize. Media reports indicate that, while the established parties use mosques for campaign

⁵⁶ Sajad Jiyad, “Protest Vote, Why Iraq’s Next Elections are Unlikely to Be Game-Changers,” (working paper, London School of Economics, April 2021).

⁵⁷ Ibid.

organizing, the new parties do not have access to such facilities. And if those obstacles were not enough, the existing Shia elite will undoubtedly do all they can to preserve the status quo through intimidation and other means, according to several Iraqi experts. Such disadvantages may become a source of great frustration if the new parties established by the protesters do poorly in the elections.

Even if protest leaders adopt a cynical view toward the *marjiyya* after the elections – that they are part of the problem and not the solution – Iraqi civil society still will have expanded the political sphere in significant ways. “Even if new parties do not pick up many seats, they may be able to lay the groundwork for a shift in campaigning, alliances, voting, and politics in general,” wrote Sajad Jiyad.⁵⁸ It is likely that Najaf will continue to express opposition to Iranian meddling. The proverbial street is now a formidable force with the ability to apply pressure for change.

⁵⁸ Sajad Jiyad, “Protest Vote, Why Iraq’s Next Elections are Unlikely to Be Game-Changers,” (working paper, London School of Economics, April 2021).

