



# Iraq's Next War: Implications for the Region

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

### Iraq Pushed to the Brink of War

The August 2022 clashes between Muqtada al-Sadr's supporters and the Popular Mobilization Force (PMF) pushed Iraq to the brink of civil war. While lasting only two days, intra-Shiite political and violent contestations continue, setting the stage for an expanded conflict.

### Fragmentation May Mitigate Further Escalation

The election results portray the extent to which the rivalries between, and amongst, Iraq's most prominent movements and blocs has intensified. This could stave off a major conflagration amid differences over how to manage the recent escalation.

### The PMF is in Decline But Not Out of the Picture

The influence of the Iran-aligned PMF is waning in Iraq, making them more determined to pushback against any efforts to exploit their decline and Sadr's assertion of authority over the political landscape.

### Iraq Can Help Defuse Regional Tensions

Iraq has the potential to forge closer ties with the Arab world and bridge relations between the Gulf and Iran, defusing regional tensions; it should sustain the mediation process initiated by former Prime Minister Kadhim by including other key factions in the mediation process.

## KEYWORDS

Iraq

Elections

Muqtada Al Sadr

Civil War

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COVER IMAGE: Supporters of the Coordination Framework, a group of Shi'ite parties, gather during a protest, amid a political crisis, near Green Zone, in Baghdad, Iraq August 12, 2022. REUTERS/Thaier Al-Sudani

## INTRODUCTION

Iraq was pushed to the brink of civil war in August following a series of tit-for-tat exchanges between Muqtada al-Sadr—head of Iraq’s most powerful socio-political movement (the Sadrist movement) and one of the country’s most powerful militia groups (Saraya Salam)—and a coalition of Iran-aligned parties and militias known as the Shiite Coordination Framework.<sup>1</sup> The clashes unfolded after Muqtada al-Sadr’s supporters stormed the Iraqi parliament for the second time within a week. Protesters breached and occupied the Green Zone, including the Republican Palace. The clashes that unfolded resulted in at least 24 deaths, with many more injured.<sup>2</sup> The violent showdown was a long-time in the making.<sup>3</sup> Sadr has long-standing, at times violent, tensions with the bloc’s most prominent actors, including Asaib Ahl al-Haq—a notorious militia organization whose head, Qais al-Khazali, is one of Sadr’s closest competitors vying for influence amongst the most destitute and impoverished of Iraq’s Shiites, particularly in the Sadr City district of Baghdad.

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Sadr also has stark differences with former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who instigated the 2008 Charge of the Knights operation that ousted Sadrists from Basra and forced the cleric himself to go into self-imposed exile in Iran.<sup>4</sup> Although the conflict in August lasted two-days, it took place against the backdrop of tensions over the government-formation process, and ongoing violent contestations in Baghdad and the Shiite south. The conflict also marked political differences between Sadr and his Iran-aligned rivals (the former wants fresh elections, which the latter opposes). In October 2022, a year since the elections were held, a new Prime Minister-designate, Mohammed Shia al-Sudani,<sup>5</sup> was appointed. However, this may fail to calm tensions since

Sadr views Sudani as a Maliki proxy, has vehemently rejected his appointment, and has refused to join the new government.<sup>6</sup> A ruling by the parliament’s legal advisor, which stipulates the resignation of 73 Sadrist MPs in June were illegal, could de-escalate tensions and provide Sadr with a face-saving pathway through which to engage the new government,<sup>7</sup> but Sadr has rejected the proposition.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, deep-rooted animosities will shape the nexus between Sadr and his rivals moving forward. Collectively, these dynamics have set the stage for an expanded conflict that could engulf Iraq in another civil war. This paper examines Iraq’s prospects of averting a catastrophic war, the role outside actors can play to de-escalate tensions, and what the current crisis could mean for the Arab world. It provides recommendations for regional and Western powers centered on how to help Iraq avoid a conflict on its territory and more effectively balance its ties to Iran and the Gulf Arab states, amid rising geopolitical tensions.

## POLITICAL VOLATILITY

Iraq’s October 2021 elections had long-term reverberations for the future of the country. While past elections were characterized by ethno-sectarian blocs that mobilized and amalgamated to contest the elections, the recent election illuminated the fragmented political climate and, with that, the fragmentation of a political order that has traditionally been underscored by ethno-sectarian power-sharing and political contestations. Each of the predominant Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish parties have seen their votes split, and their share of the post-election landscape divided, producing increased volatility. This resulted in violent clashes in August as rival actors within the ruling Shiite political class came to blows after months of tit-for-tat heated exchanges, targeted assassinations, and the instrumentalization of Iraq’s institutions.<sup>9</sup>

The political landscape has become highly fragmented, increasing the prospects of a new civil war.<sup>10</sup> The winner of the elections, the radical anti-Western

cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, secured 73 seats out of 329 (gaining 19 more seats since his last win in 2018); while his closest rival, the Popular Mobilization Force (PMF), won just 17 seats, a decline from the 48 seats the umbrella militia organisation dominated by Iran-aligned groups won in 2018.<sup>11</sup> On its electoral debut, the bloc that was formed out of the protest movement, *Imtidad*, secured nine seats, a remarkable feat for a movement subjected to systemic assassinations;<sup>12</sup> while Nouri al-Maliki, Iraq's former prime minister and leader of the Islamic Dawa Party, won 35 seats.<sup>13</sup> The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the Kurdistan region's most dominant party, secured 32 seats, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) won 16 seats.<sup>14</sup> The *Taqaddum* party, led by prominent Arab Sunni official and Speaker of Parliament, Mohammed al-Halbousi, won 37 seats.<sup>15</sup>

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These results exemplify intra-community fractures and portray the extent to which the rivalries between, and amongst, Iraq's most prominent movements and blocs have intensified. While other communities have seen their votes split (as in the case of the Kurds),<sup>16</sup> it is Iraq's Shiite factions and their deep-seated animosities that have raised the specter of a war. The Shiite vote have been divided, not just amongst civilian-led parties and movements, but amongst several different paramilitary groups and their respective battle-hardened leaders, including Muqtada al-Sadr, Hadi al-Amiri (head of the *Badr* Brigade), Qais al-Khazali (head of *Asaib Ahl al-Haq*), and former Premier Nouri al-Maliki, who commands his own tribal militia.<sup>17</sup>

It is Sadr's checkered history with the Iran-aligned PMF and Maliki's Islamic Dawa Party that will shape the contours of the political and conflict landscape in the coming period. Specifically, while Iraq's rival

factions have maintained relative stability and their hold on power off the back of a post-2003 elite bargain, that equilibrium of power has been disrupted by the October elections, after which Sadr attempted to form a majority government that excluded the PMF and Maliki, with backing from the KDP and Mohammed al-Halbousi.<sup>18</sup> Tensions reached their apex before the August clashes after leaked audio recordings appeared to indicate that Maliki had instructed his tribal militias to prepare for battle against Sadr.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the Sadrist and *Asaib Ahl al-Haq* have been engaged in a spate of tit-for-tat assassinations over the past year, which has seen both sides lose their most senior militia commanders. This prompted Sadr to send a delegation to the southern city of Maysan in February to calm tensions amid fears of a major conflict breaking out.<sup>20</sup>

## THE REGION

Regional actors and the wider international community may have received the Sadrist movement's storming of the Iraqi parliament with intrigue and unease: intrigue because Sadr's mobilization against the PMF may undermine the Iran-aligned umbrella organization's hold on power, and unease because of the unintended consequences that a conflict could have for the country.<sup>21</sup> While there is generally limited appetite for an intra-Shiite civil war, the Gulf Arab states, in addition to the United States, may see Sadr's pushback against the PMF and Nouri al-Maliki as an opportunity to contain the influence of Iran and its allies. Sadr has traditionally enjoyed backing from Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf states as the least worst option amongst the Shiite ruling class, with others like Ammar al-Hakim of the *Hikma* Movement also well received.<sup>22</sup> Sadr has also helped his prospects of winning political backing, even if tacit, from the Gulf by forming an alliance with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)-aligned actors, including Khamis al-Khanjar, head of the *Azm* alliance who joins Halbousi as the prominent Arab Sunni officials within the now non-existent Sadr-led Tripartite Alliance. Halbousi and Khanjar both have strong ties with the UAE, Turkey, and Qatar, while the KDP enjoys strong ties to all three.<sup>23</sup>



For policymakers, on the surface, the implosion that could emerge from an intra-Shiite civil war signifies an opportune moment to achieve a number of outcomes in the region and elsewhere. However, each of these is fraught with challenges and uncertainties. Firstly, an internal war between rival Shiite factions could weaken the Shiite political class's ability to consolidate power, and subsequently, weaken Iran's grip on the political landscape. With that, and secondly, this presumes an opportunity to bridge the gap between Iraq and the Arab world. Finally, the internal fractures within the ruling Shiite elite could present an occasion to restore the authority of the Iraqi state over the militias that comprise the PMF.

However, these inter-locked dynamics may be deceptive, in that one has to dig deeper to grasp the full extent of their implications. For starters, the Sadrist movement is a rival the PMF has engaged with and contained for years. Many former Sadrist leaders command or are leading members of the rival militia groups that comprise the PMF.<sup>24</sup> Sadr will reign politically supreme, since he commands Iraq's most powerful socio-political movement, but he has rivals within the political class that the PMF and its allies, with the support of Iran, can exploit to manage the fallout from their loss. The PMF has a known capacity to leverage its combat capabilities and brazenness to address its precarious political position.<sup>25</sup> In addition to being a politically effective and formidable force, one that is operationally dynamic, that can capitalize on its combat capabilities, and one that, almost inevitably, will learn from its electoral decline, the PMF is able to draw on the patronage that the Iranian government continues to provide. This includes political and strategic guidance, and Iran's own willingness to use coercive tactics to increase pressure on the PMF's rivals.<sup>26</sup> The PMF can also rely on fractures within the Sadrist movement, which has suffered dissenting voices<sup>27</sup> following Sadr's decision to storm parliament. Some Iraqi officials have suggested that Sadrists could struggle if their foremost rivals mature politically and become better organized.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, the PMF has wide-ranging options and advantages. This has evidently been the case in

the twelve months since the October parliamentary elections. The Shiite Coordination Framework, an alliance of mostly Iran-aligned political actors and militias that was established to suppress Sadr's electoral victory,<sup>29</sup> has used its undue influence over the federal supreme court to pressure the KDP into succumbing to the Framework's demands for an inclusive coalition government, namely by forcing the court to render Kurdish oil exports illegal.<sup>30</sup> This move was designed to raise the pressure on the Kurds and, therefore, on the Alliance led by Sadr. Despite constituting a dubious ruling, given its timing and the court's unconstitutional standing (the court was not established by the Council of Representatives, as required by the constitution),<sup>31</sup> it highlights how the Framework can leverage its influence over the Iraqi state and its institutions to achieve its political objectives. While the KDP and the Alliance can potentially stave off their rivals' legal and constitutional rulings, Iran and the leadership of the PMF did their utmost to derail the Alliance by launching missile and drone attacks on Erbil,<sup>32</sup> including an unprecedented direct ballistic missile attack in March,<sup>33</sup> allegedly assassinating rivals within the Sadrist movement,<sup>34</sup> and exploiting divisions amongst the Kurds to force through a government in which they can retain their outsized influence.

It is in response to these measures that Sadr, provoked and at risk of having his back to the wall, moved to mobilize his supporters and fighters in the summer. However, Sadr's decision to withdraw his fighters and supporters just 24-hours after the clashes unfolded indicates that there is still some reticence towards launching a full-scale war on his rivals, while also indicating that he is susceptible to other external actors who may have pressured him into withdrawing his forces, such as Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and Hassan Nasrallah.<sup>35</sup> The limits of Sadr's influence were also evidenced by the appointment of a president and prime minister-designate who was backed by the Coordination Framework and is tasked with forming a new government that Sadr has refused to join.<sup>36</sup> While Sadr can still torpedo this process by mobilising his supporters, it indicates his rivals have a notable ability to navigate and shape the political landscape to their advantage.

Ironically, it may also be the fragmentation of the Shiite political class that could stave off a major conflict and conflagration; there are differences amongst the Shiite Coordination Framework over how to engage and manage the threat from Sadr. While Maliki and Khazali are not averse to the notion of a civil war and a potential military battle against Sadr, others such as Hadi al-Amiri prefer mediation and reconciliation, on the basis that neither side will be capable of securing an outright victory.<sup>37</sup> Amiri has emerged as a voice of moderation amongst hardline extremist members of the Coordination Framework, such as Maliki and Khazali, and has set out to calm tensions alongside the leadership of the Kurdistan region. According to interviews conducted in Baghdad, Iran has tasked Amiri with preventing an intra-Shiite civil war, which Tehran believes could further fracture the Shiite bloc, diminish its influence, and tilt the balance of power in favor of the Arab world and the United States.<sup>38</sup>

## THE ARAB WORLD'S MOMENT?

That said, Sadr's victory and own ability to engage his rivals should not be underestimated. Aside from controlling his own powerful militia, which gave birth to many of the leading Iran-aligned groups within the PMF, the cleric has also emerged as the voice of Iraq's largest demographic—its Shiite underclass. His victory in Iraq's elections was impressive and, at the time, a seismic political development, coming as it did in the midst of widespread protests and voter apathy, economic crisis, and geopolitical tensions,<sup>39</sup> in addition to the dramatic electoral decline of the PMF and Sadr's aggressive push to assert authority over his rivals.<sup>40</sup> Sadr has proven that he can and is willing to challenge his rivals at the polls, as well as violently upend the political order that has shaped the country since 2003.

Sadr retains several advantages, not least the mobilizing capacity of the Sadrist movement.<sup>41</sup> While his Iran-aligned rivals are renowned for their battlefield success against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the PMF is organizationally vulnerable, and has been particularly vulnerable since the emergence of a protest movement determined to shift public

opinion against Iran and its proxies.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the PMF is engulfed in a battle with Sistani-aligned militia factions that were previously part of the PMF, but then withdrew in response to Iran's monopolization of power within the organization.<sup>43</sup> The withdrawal of the Sistani-aligned factions from the PMF has left Iran's proxies with limited religious cover, and it may have diminished their political reach. This reality has not been helped by the electoral defeat and some observers on the ground are noting that PMF cadres and low-ranking fighters are already beginning to look elsewhere in an effort to secure their livelihoods.<sup>44</sup> If this increases and becomes more widespread, it could have existential implications for the PMF's ability to mobilize fighters and, in turn, its access to a national budget worth \$2.6 billion.<sup>45</sup>

The PMF is fighting a battle on four fronts: against the Sadrists, the Sistani-aligned militias, the protest movement, and a geopolitical landscape overwhelmingly focused on containing the PMF and Iran. However, it should be noted that these dynamics will only make the PMF and its allies all the more determined to ferociously push back against attempts to suppress their waning influence. According to interviews, some within the PMF have already accepted the inevitability of war, and, accordingly, are preparing to mobilize resources and fighters.<sup>46</sup> With this in mind, there are two ways of looking at how the Arab world could engage Iraq moving forward.

Iraq may be presented with an opportune moment to forge closer ties with the Arab world and counterbalance Iran's far-reaching influence as the PMF's influence wanes. However, Iraq-GCC relations have been unstable and strained since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, after which the country became a staging ground for proxy conflicts and political warfare between Iran and the Arab world. Relations reached their lowest ebb during Nouri al-Maliki's rule. Maliki was widely perceived as being sectarian, authoritarian, and responsible for marginalizing and repressing Arab Sunnis, which ultimately enabled the emergence of ISIS in 2014.<sup>47</sup> His abrasive approach and failure to strike a conciliatory tone shape much of how the Gulf Arab states engage Iraq today.

However, Iraq's more moderate Shiite political actors have long wanted improved relations with the Gulf, including the likes of Ammar al-Hakim, while Sadr has been warmly received in various Arab capitals. No such forging of closer ties will take place if a civil war unfolds, but the scope of the war itself and the involvement of outside actors like Arab countries and Iran will be better managed and constrained if there is ongoing dialogue aimed at ensuring Iraq's current crisis does not become a geopolitical one. Ammar al-Hakim's visit to Saudi Arabia just days after the August clashes, for example, helped temper tensions; and it is precisely visits like this, in the midst of violent volatility, that can reduce the prospects of an intra-state conflict morphing into a proxy war on Iraqi territory.<sup>48</sup>

“The August 2021 Baghdad Summit further enhanced Iraq's reputational standing as a potential bridge-builder in the region...”

Moreover, there has been a flurry of activity since former Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi came to office three years ago. Kadhimi has been warmly received in the Gulf Arab states, as well as Jordan.<sup>49</sup> Under Kadhimi, Iraq has achieved some successes as part of its efforts to mediate tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. It was significant that on April 9, 2021, Saudi intelligence chief Khalid al-Humaidan met Saeed Iravani, deputy secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council,<sup>50</sup> after which Saudi Arabia and Iran took part in the Baghdad Summit.<sup>51</sup> In November of 2020, the Arar border crossing was opened for the first time in 30 years<sup>52</sup> and has culminated in agreements focused on improving economic ties and trade between the two countries. Most recently, Saudi Arabia and the UAE committed to a substantial increase in investment in Iraq in the form of a \$3 billion fund for private sector initiatives, although details remain limited.<sup>53</sup> The August 2021 Baghdad Summit further enhanced Iraq's reputational standing as a potential bridge-builder in the region by convening the foreign ministers of Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as Egyptian President Abdel

Fattah el-Sissi, King Abdullah II of Jordan, and Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani.<sup>54</sup>

## IRAQ AS A BRIDGE-BUILDER?

However, Iraq has a new Prime Minister-designate, Mohammed Shia al-Sudani. It is still unclear how much faith the Saudis will have in the appointment of Sudani and in Baghdad's wider political environment, given the dominance of Iran and its allies, and since Sudani is a Dawa Party stalwart who has close ties to Nouri al-Maliki.<sup>55</sup> History may consequently repeat itself: in the past, the Saudis were never convinced that Kadhimi's predecessors, such as Adil Abdul-Mahdi and Haider al-Abadi, were not made from the same fabric as Maliki. Abdul-Mahdi later became complicit in enabling the violent crackdown against protestors by Iran's proxies in 2019,<sup>56</sup> while Abadi integrated the PMF into the Iraqi state and sought to form an alliance with the PMF during the 2018 elections.<sup>57</sup> It is highly conceivable that much of the Arab world may harbor similar reservations over Sudani, particularly if he is unwilling or unable to constrain the influence of the Coordination Framework (the PMF and Maliki in particular) or if he reverts to the same sectarian posturing that was adopted by his Dawa Party colleagues and predecessors.

While Kadhimi is no longer in office—which could derail the peace talks in their entirety—it is still possible that his efforts become the foundational pillar of a Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, in Iraq and the wider region. At the very least, in light of the continued interest in Riyadh and Tehran for these talks to succeed, there may be reluctance on the part of the two capitals to exploit the current intra-Shiite crisis that may push the country towards a regionalized war. At worst, the talks will not yield any major outcomes, since Saudi-Iran tensions are underscored by a series of complicated and overlapping disputes that span different conflict theatres; at best, such talks could become a confidence building exercise that helps manage conflicts like the intra-Shiite conflict currently unfolding. These dynamics were non-existent in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, where the Arab world put its

full support behind the Arab Sunni insurgency and Iran behind various Shiite militia groups.

The notion of Iraq playing the role of regional bridge-builder is premised on, firstly, its geostrategic importance and the fact that it has constituted both a battle-ground for proxy conflicts as well as the arena where the international community gathered to combat ISIS; and, secondly, the resulting wide-ranging relations with regional and international actors that Iraq, in theory, could harness to alleviate conflicts in the Middle East. While Iraq has the potential to play the role of bridge-builder and, in the process, improve its ties to the Arab world, the fragility of the state and the fragmented political environment has resulted in competing foreign policy agendas that have prevented the emergence of a coherent foreign policy. This has enabled spoilers and provides mediation efforts with a weak foundation that makes it susceptible to the domestic political environment. It is not an exaggeration, therefore, to say that some regional capitals turn to the man, and not the state in Iraq, as a result of the legacies of opposition politics and foreign relations under the Baath regime. Some of these were critical to establishing havens abroad for opposition groups and civilians, and to secure international support for the fall of the former regime; some of which were central to evading the authoritarian rule and sectarian governance of Maliki's rule.

In other words, a combined effort between like-minded actors within and outside of formal state institutions such as the Prime Minister's office, could enable a diversified mediation process that draws on these personalized ties and adds an element of longevity to peace talks. The relationship that Iraq's Shiite Islamist parties—and others, like the Kurds—developed with Tehran was critical to their ability to secure the resources and political backing that was central to their campaign to overthrow Saddam Hussein. Some, like the Islamic Dawa Party, even went as far as conducting terrorist attacks against the West and its Arab Gulf allies at Tehran's bidding, particularly during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s.<sup>58</sup> Conversely, the Arab Gulf

states hosted and developed ties with members of the Iraqi opposition that disdained Iran's attempts to impose its theocratic ideology onto Iraq.<sup>59</sup> The Kurdistan region focused its foreign policy on Turkey, the U.S., and Europe, and on Iran to a lesser extent. Erbil's ability to balance these relations was central to the survival of the Kurdistan region after it gained de-facto independence in 1991. After the fall of the Baath regime in 2003, Iraq's Arab Sunnis went on to establish greater dependency on the Arab Gulf after Maliki persecuted high-ranking Arab Sunni political actors who went on to seek refuge in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE.<sup>60</sup>

Diversifying the mediation process in this way so that it includes like-minded, even if unconventional, bedfellows from across the ethno-sectarian spectrum may also address the elephant in the room: Iraq is not a neutral third-party to the conflicts in the region. With Baghdad's formal approval, under previous administrations, Iranian-backed Shiite militias mobilized in the thousands in neighboring Syria to prop up the Assad regime.<sup>61</sup> Groups like Asaib Ahl al-Haq, who hold seats in parliament, are direct enablers of, if not directly responsible for, rocket attacks on Saudi Arabia and the UAE.<sup>62</sup> Bringing the likes of the head of the Hikma movement, Ammar al-Hakim, closer into the fold also presents a more robust and credible set of Shiite political actors, who are more warmly received in the Gulf. Al-Hakim constitutes a more credible alternative than other Shiite political actors, such as the Islamic Dawa Party (which has a tainted relationship with the Arab Gulf)<sup>63</sup> and al-Sadr (who may be seen as too militant and unpredictable). The Kurdistan Regional Government (both the PUK and KDP) have strong ties to Iran and the Arab Gulf, (the UAE, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia in particular), and can utilize their relations and geostrategic acumen to reinforce mediation efforts.



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