

Sadr’s Rebranded Political Movement: The Old, the New, and a Reality Check

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Given the complicated baggage that Sadr brings into Iraq’s political game, his re-entry into formal politics after a years-long hiatus will likely destabilize the internal Shia political landscape.

Prominent Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr stole the spotlight on April 11 when the account Wazir al-Iraqi, his mouthpiece on X, [revealed \(https://x.com/salih_m_iraqi/status/1778112884611940747\)](https://x.com/salih_m_iraqi/status/1778112884611940747) the formation of “*al-Tayyar al-Waṭani al-Shi’i*,” sparking extensive commentary about his plans to re-enter Iraq’s formal political process. While Sadr, an ambitious political and religious leader, seeks a significant position for himself and his group in Iraqi politics, his efforts will be constrained by diminishing trust among his former Kurdish and Sunni allies and the ongoing dilemma of dealing with Iran, Iraq’s influential eastern neighbor and ultimate power broker.

Al-Tayyar al-Waṭani al-Shi’i: What’s in A Name?

The new appellation that Sadr has chosen for his political group is significant in multiple ways. First, there is a question of translation when it comes to rendering the name of this new group in English. While it is typically translated as the [National Shia Movement \(https://amwaj.media/media-monitor/amid-new-intra-shiite-dynamics-sadr-signals-return-to-iraqi-politics\)](https://amwaj.media/media-monitor/amid-new-intra-shiite-dynamics-sadr-signals-return-to-iraqi-politics) or [Shia National Movement \(https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/34555-Sadr-renames-movement-to-%2527Shiite-National-Movement%2527-in-political-resurgence\)](https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/34555-Sadr-renames-movement-to-%2527Shiite-National-Movement%2527-in-political-resurgence), I suggest a more pointed rendition: the Patriotic Shia Current. There is a subtle, often neglected difference in the meanings of the words “*waṭani*” and “*qawmi*” in Arabic, often interchangeably used to denote “national(ism)” in English. However, “*waṭani(yya)*” pertains to state-centered nationalism and, hence, is a better equivalent to the English term patriotic (patriotism), while “*qawmi(yya)*” corresponds more strongly with ethnicity-based nationalism, which can be pursued within or across several existing states. The choice of the word *waṭani* demonstrates Sadr’s hopes to be recognized as someone with a patriotic, cross-sectarian (i.e., willing to engage beyond the Shia realm) and cross-ethnic agenda (i.e., not a solely Arab group). But

the word patriotic is realistic *only* to the extent that Sadr will be able/willing to engage with other parties from other ethnicities and sects. It should not be taken to mean that he can gain votes from among other communities and claim to represent (portions of) them.

The use of the term "Shia" in the new group's name is notable for more than one reason. First, it is the first time that Sadr has used the term in any of the groups he has set up. None of his previous or current groups—from Jaysh al-Mahdi (Mahdi Army) to the Sadrist Movement/Current to Ahrar, Sa'irun, and Saraya al-Salam (Peace Brigades)—carries this explicitly sect-centered signifier (Mahdi is a revered figure in both Shia and Sunni belief, though admittedly more central among the Shia). The use of the qualifier "Shia" in the group's new name reveals an acknowledgment that the Shia political landscape is Sadr's *immediate* arena of political activity and exhibits a determination to challenge his pro-Iran Shia rivals gathered within the Coordination Framework on this shared turf.

Sadr has already sought to reaffirm his leadership position within the Shia political arena by publicly pushing for the **ratification** (<https://en.964media.com/19881/>) of a controversial piece of legislation that recognized Al-Ghadeer Day as a national holiday. According to Shia tradition, Al-Ghadeer is the day on which the Prophet Mohammed appointed his cousin Ali as his successor. Sunnis reject this narrative. The designation of Al-Ghadeer as a holiday faced resistance among Sunni groups in the Iraqi Parliament and beyond. Furthermore, as the scion of a prominent Shia religious family, Sadr enjoys extensive symbolic capital and charisma among Shia constituents, particularly those of lower socio-economic status and rural backgrounds. His **reception** (<https://esta.krd/en/181287/>) last year by Shia Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani also boosted his credentials within the Shia landscape as the only major Shia leader/politician received by Sistani in recent years.

While the inclusion of "Shia" and "patriotic" in the group's name might be seen as a perplexing oxymoron, it is reflective of the reality of Iraqi politics and its hardened political-communal boundaries—a reality that is to continue for the foreseeable future due to the state's demographic composition and history. The first part, i.e. "Shia", is fact, and the second part, i.e. "patriotic", is a wish. A multi-communal federation, Iraq lacks a federation-wide political party that can perform reasonably across all ethnic and religious/sectarian communities. Sadr might aspire to play that role, but he will not be able to as his rhetoric and past baggage will not allow him to cross the existing boundaries (especially the memories of Jaysh al-Mahdi and its participation in the sectarian conflict post-2003).

Other Ideological Underpinnings

Sadr has ensured that anti-American (albeit of a non-violent variety) and anti-Israeli orientations remain staples of this new stage in his political venture. While the governing Shia Coordination Framework in Iraq includes more liberal and/or pragmatic elements such as Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani, Haider al-Abadi, Ammar al-Hakim, and, to a lesser extent, Nouri al-Maliki, it also encompasses staunchly pro-Iranian figures who openly take pride in violent confrontations, past and present, against the United States and, since October 7, Israel.

Against this backdrop, Sadr has emphasized his anti-American and anti-Israeli credentials. Sadrists have **reminded** (<https://www.understandingwar.org/jaysh-al-mahdi>) their rivals that they led the original anti-American "resistance" in Iraq, fighting U.S. forces as early as 2004 under the banner of Jaysh al-Mahdi. Since October 7, he has publicly **demanded** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/shiite-cleric-muqtada-al-sadr-calls-closure-us-embassy-iraq-2023-10-27/>) the **closure** (<https://www.barrons.com/news/iraq-s-sadr-demands-closure-of-us-embassy-after-rafah-strike-973fa30e>) of the U.S. embassy in Baghdad and called for the expulsion of the ambassador on at least two occasions, though he has urged non-violent means to achieve these objectives. Additionally, Sadr has made several anti-Israeli remarks, often drawing on provocative religious texts, and has organized humanitarian aid campaigns for the population in the Gaza Strip.

Sadr's Prospects in Next Elections and Arm Wrestling with Iran

The launch of the Patriotic Shia Current comes amid preparations for the next parliamentary election, expected by November 2025. Although the Sadrism Current was the top vote-recipient in the 2021 elections, winning 73 out of 325 seats, Sadr ultimately failed to secure a coalition of two-thirds of the parliamentary seats needed to form the government and subsequently withdrew from the entire political process in an astonishing move.

Undoubtedly, Sadr is maneuvering to emerge as the dominant Shia force in the next election. He is well aware of the unpopularity of the current ruling class (with the relative exception of Sudani), as **demonstrated** (<https://agsiwi.org/iraqi-provincial-elections-could-come-with-major-political-and-security-ramifications/>) by the all-time low voter turnout in last year's provincial council elections (26 percent of all potentially eligible voters). He will be strategically positioning himself to capitalize on this massive popular disgruntlement with the rival Coordination Framework by presenting himself as an anti-corruption and patriotic force that is not beholden to either Iranian or U.S. interests.

There have been reports of a possible alliance between Sadr and Sudani to form the next major parliamentary coalition within the Shia scene. Sudani has presented himself as a technocrat, interested in providing good governance and focusing on public services, avoiding being seen as wedded to deeper ideological camps within the Shia or Iraqi political landscape. He has tried to keep doors open to working with all sides, and has strategically avoided sacking Sadrism officials from the managerial government posts they have held since previous cabinets. Realizing the possibility of a Sadr-Sudani alliance, former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (an arch-nemesis of Sadr) has reportedly begun making overtures to Sadr in the hope of undermining Sudani and his chances of winning a significant parliamentary bloc. Maliki recently controversially **proposed** (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=75CAkEuUIV8&ab_channel=AlsharqiyaTube) for early elections to be held by the end of 2024. Sadr might also see some value in partnering with Sudani after the next elections, given the prime minister's favorable rating among Iraqis (though it remains to be seen if Sudani can translate this general favorable rating to votes in the coming elections). But Sadr faces a dilemma here. While he would like to undermine his rivals in the governing Shia Coordination Framework by peeling Sudani away from them, he would certainly not be pleased with the prospect of another popular Shia figure emerging in the form of Sudani, who might have more appeal to average Shia voters than either him or his Framework rivals.

In addition to that, no government can be formed without partnering with some Kurdish and Sunni Arab groups. This is where Sadr might run into some serious hurdles. Sadr's last-minute abandonment of his Kurdish and Sunni Arab allies—namely the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Masoud Barzani and the Taqadum Party of Mohammed al-Halbousi—following the 2021 elections left those groups hanging by a thread. This will make those elements highly cautious, if not unwilling, to seek a renewed political alliance with Sadr alone. The KDP and Taqadum have paid heavily for their now-defunct alliance with Sadr, as Iran and its allies within Iraq have employed multiple methods to undermine the autonomous Kurdistan Region, whose main governing party is the KDP, and successfully got Halbousi sacked from his coveted parliamentary speaker position through a ruling by the Federal Supreme Court. In short, Sunnis and Kurds will not antagonize Iran again by partnering with Sadr against pro-Iran factions in Iraq.

Finally, there is the question of just how far Sadr is willing to go to materialize his vision of a **majority government** led by his group. When push came to shove in the aftermath of the 2021 elections, Sadr avoided a decisive showdown with pro-Iran groups who appeared willing to resort to violence if necessary. The experience of the past two decades in Iraq has demonstrated that no matter the size of a party or a coalition's votes, a government cannot be formed without Iran's approval. Sadr has reportedly begun to mend fences with Iran in recent months, but the road to an eventual full rapprochement will be long and arduous. Although Iran will not entirely alienate Sadr, it will likely manipulate him against other Shia rivals to maintain its influence over the broader Shia political landscape. However, Tehran is unlikely to entrust Sadr with the reign of state power in Iraq due to Sadr's perceived

unpredictability and unreliability, and Iraq's tremendous strategic importance in Iranian regional designs.

This means Sadr, at best, would have a shot at being in the government *alongside* other more loyal groups to Iran but would not be allowed to establish a majority government that would sideline pro-Iran groups. A repeat of the post-2021 election scenario would likely not get Sadrists anywhere better than in the 2021-2022 period, as power in Iraq is ultimately not defined through electoral performance.

Given the complicated baggage that Sadr brings into Iraq's political game, his re-entry into formal politics after a years-long hiatus will likely destabilize the internal Shia political landscape. However, he has shown a pragmatic willingness to avoid violence (despite small-scale clashes here and there) to counter pro-Iran groups, as this would be a lose-lose scenario for Shia, who have finally brought the Iraqi state under their control after two decades of intense and bloody conflict. Hence, Sadr will have to navigate a difficult terrain and likely make bitter compromises with Iran and its allies in Iraq.

In short, Sadr's ambitions are not matched by his means of realizing them. The rebranded movement signifies more of a fresh stage in his political work rather than a new political project altogether or a new political reality in Iraq. In other words, there will be more continuity than change in the Sadrist Current's behavior and Iraqi politics at large—though with more emphasis placed on its immediate Shia arena of support and rivalry. While maneuvering for a spectacular electoral gain through a rejuvenated and rebranded movement is understandable, and Sadr could possibly increase his share of votes given widespread dissatisfaction with other political groups, translating electoral gains into his long-held desire for a majoritarian government is unlikely. Iran and its Iraqi allies will continue to be the insurmountable barrier to Sadr's ambitions of leading a majoritarian government. ❖

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