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IRAQI SHI'A ISLAMIST PARTIES' RESPONSES TO THE PROTEST MOVEMENT

POLITICAL ISLAM MOVEMENTS

IN THE SECOND WAVE OF **ARAB UPRISINGS**

AL SHARQ
STRATEGIC
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Introduction

Since October 2019, mass demonstrations have been held in Iraq demanding better living conditions, independence from regional and global powers, an end to corruption and eventually the downfall of the entire political system in place in Iraq since the 2003 US-led invasion.

The protesters are mostly Shi'a youth, students and civil society activists from the majority-Shi'a provinces of Baghdad, Basra, Najaf, Karbala and Nasiriyah. Since the protests began, nearly 700 people have been killed, and over 30,000 injured,[1] the vast majority of whom are from the Shi'ite community.[2] In this context, Shi'a Islamist parties have viewed the protest movement as an existential threat to their power, mainly because of the protests' rejection of a system which Shi'a Islamist parties have played a significant role in both creating and maintaining. For this reason, with the exception of the Sadrist Movement (as explained below), Shi'a Islamists' interests have been in complete conflict with the demands of the protests.

Mapping the Shi'a Islamist parties and groups

In addition to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who is "revered by all parties as a higher moral guide and sometimes as the ultimate informal authority",[3] there are six groups or leaders who exert significant influence over Iraqi Shi'a politics. While overt adherence to Shi'a Islamic teachings varies between the parties, they do all nevertheless have Islamic roots. These groups are ranked as follows by their number of seats in the Iraqi Parliament:

1. **The Alliance Towards Reforms** or **Sairoon** is a political alliance formed to contest the 2018 Iraqi parliamentary election in which it won 54 seats. It is a coalition between the **Sadrist Movement** and the Iraqi Communist Party and is led by prominent Iraqi Shi'a leader Moqtada Al-Sadr.
2. **The Pro-Iranian Axis** includes a number of parties and paramilitary groups aligned with Iran. The most powerful component is the **al-Fateh** (the Conquest) **Alliance** which has 48 seats in the Iraqi parliament and is an Islamist Shi'a alliance formed to contest the 2018 elections under the leadership of prominent pro-Iran figure Hadi Al-Amiri. Amiri heads the **Badr Organization**, one of the largest pro-Iran militias in Iraq and part of the armed coalition **Hashd al-Sha'abi** (Popular Mobilization Forces). Another Shi'a Islamist and Iran-aligned force is the **al-Sadiqoun** parliamentary bloc which has 15 seats. It is the political wing of the Shi'a paramilitary force **Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq**, led by Qais al-Khazali.
3. The **Nasr** (Victory) **Coalition** is a Shi'a Islamist/nationalist political alliance established by former Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi (2014-2018), which represents the third largest bloc with 42 seats in Parliament.
4. The **State of Law Coalition** is another parliamentary alliance led by former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (2005-2014) with 25 seats. Both Nasr and State of Law originate from the **Islamic Dawa Party**, which has played a significant role in Iraq's political process post-2003 and both Maliki and Abadi, have portrayed themselves as state-builders, expanding their networks of loyalists.
5. The **al-Hikma** (National Wisdom) **Movement** is an Iraqi Islamist/nationalist Shi'a movement which split from the Islamic Supreme Council (see below), led by Ammar al-Hakim. Al-Hikma has 19 seats.

6. The **Islamic Supreme Council** is an Islamist party which was established in 1982 under the leadership of Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim.

All these groups have support among the Shi'a community of Iraq; but it would be a mistake to believe that any can speak on behalf of the Shi'a as a whole.

Shi'a Islamists' responses to the protest movement

Despite their differing attitudes towards Islam and their influence on Shi'a politics and decision-making, two main players have been dominant in their response to the protest movement. These are Moqtada al-Sadr, and the pro-Iranian al-Fateh. Sadr's support for the protests put his movement on a collision course with the leaders of al-Fateh and other Iran-aligned militias. Shi'a leaders fear Sadr's support for the protests and his perceived ambition for the overall leadership of the Shi'a community, more than the threat posed by the protests themselves, as explained below.

Other groups such as Nasr, State of Law and al-Hikma, despite perceiving the protests as a threat to their interests because of the protesters' rejection of the existing political class, they engaged in dialogue with the youth, liberal and non-Islamist voices of the protesters.

Sadr's responses

In addition to the largest bloc in parliament, Sadr leads a strong grassroots movement. When the protests began, Sadr chose to refrain from active participation, even though his supporters accounted for a decent proportion of the protest, albeit less because they are Sadrists and more because they were poor and unemployed. Later on, Sadr did participate, notably after the attacks on protesters; clearly he would have cared less if the protesters were all liberals but he knew many of them form his support base.[4] For this reason, Sadr sought to ride the protest wave, or at least portray himself as its protector. After the attacks on the headquarters of Iranian-aligned groups on October 25, there was the risk of an escalation which could have led to an intra-Shi'a civil war, primarily between Iranian-aligned armed groups and the Sadrists.[5] Sadr's founding narrative, on which his socio-political mobilization

and discourse are built, is his attempt to position himself as a system outsider, on the side of the people against the establishment. This narrative has made it easier for Sadr to pose as an ally of the protesters, if not seemingly a natural one. As conflict between the USA and Iran increased, Sadr also sought to use his leverage on the streets as a key political tool to claim his leadership of the Iraqi Shi'a community and politics.

However, the assassination by US drones in early January of the commander of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Qassem Soleimani, and deputy chief of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Units Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, forced al-Sadr to distance himself from the protesters. Instead, he called for a "million-man march" on January 24 to protest the presence of US troops in the country, which attracted large crowds of his supporters.[6] Immediately after, Sadr ordered his supporters to take down their tents and withdraw from the sites of the previous and ongoing protests, including Tahrir square. As Sadr's supporters had been a significant part of the protests since October 2019, the protesters suddenly saw their numbers dwindle significantly.[7] Later, he instructed his followers to throw their support behind Mohammed Allawi, the prime minister-designate who failed to receive a parliamentary vote of confidence. Consequently, Sadr's reputation as the protector of the protests was negatively affected and this may be seen as the most significant move in widening the gap between Sadr and the other protesters who rejected Allawi's nomination.

Responses of the pro-Iranian groups

The pro-Iranian groups, such as al-Fateh, al-Sadiqoun and armed organizations such as Kata'ib Hezbollah, have adopted a security approach to the protests, and have played a significant role in attempts to crack down on protesters. The violent response to the protests has only served to further anger those on Iraqi streets and deepened the general public's sense that the Iraqi authorities are illegitimate. These groups have used labels including "coup", "Zionist-American conspiracy" and "Saudi-Gulf projects", to describe the protests. The main fears of these groups can be explained by the following points:

1. They are at the core of the political establishment which the protests want to change.
2. They distrust the liberal or secular voices of the protests, which essentially challenge the political and religious discourse of these groups. Some of the demands of the young protesters have been articulated in terms of a civil state (al-dawla al-madaniya) and a new Iraq's national identity.
3. Sadr's support for and connection with the protesters and youthful elements of society (even if it has dwindled), are perceived as positing a major threat. Such divisions should be viewed as part of a larger intra-Shi'a struggle for power that has dominated post-Islamic State Iraqi politics.

This last point is significant because there are many reasons as to why al-Fateh fears Sadr. Firstly, Sadr is al-Fateh's most immediate political competitor, with millions of followers. Major Shi'a groups such as al-Fateh do not like the fact that Sadr commands millions of die-hard followers who cast their votes for him, and as a consequence dominates the political scene in the country. Secondly, by extension of political influence, Sadr is also al-Fateh's most immediate paramilitary competitor, controlling one of the main militia groups in Iraq, Saraya al-Salam, which has a presence in many strategic regions in Iraq. Thirdly, as a result of both political and parliamentary competition, Sadr is also a key economic competitor, with his people planted in key economic institutions in Iraq (most notably the Ministry of Oil). Fourthly, Sadr is feared, or at least disliked, because he is not as ideologically committed to al-Fateh's program of an Islamic state as an extension of the Iranian system of Wilayat al-Faqih. Sadr is pragmatic, flexible and unpredictable, meaning he is a source of uncertainty for the other Shi'a parties.

Implications for Iraq's political system and stability

The Shi'a Islamists' response to the protesters, and their inability to address their demands for reform of the governing system, has major implications for the entire political system in the country. Since 2003, the Shi'a Islamist parties which adopted religious and sectarian discourses have dominated political mobilization in Shi'a-majority areas of Iraq. For the purpose of staying in

power, fostering religious or, more accurately, sectarian identity, has been an effective strategy. This has been fundamentally challenged by the protests. The Shi'a Islamist parties have much to lose if the status quo, already shaken and fragile, collapses. It is key to understand that the status quo cannot be reformed in the short term, as the protesters and youth demand; therefore, protests will continue.

Legitimacy crisis

Since 2003, Iraq has faced many formidable security threats, from sectarian civil war (2006-2008) to the threat of Islamic State (2014-2017), yet the confessional nature of its political system has never been acutely threatened. The current protests have thus shaken the country to its foundations. Post-2003, there have never been such widespread and large protests, nor have the protesters been as forceful in their demands for political change. Importantly, the protest movement has brought a new player into Shi'a politics, the Iraqi street. Pressuring the caretaker prime minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi to resign has been seen as a major victory by the youthful protesters.[8] Since the Iraqi Parliament approved Mahdi's resignation on December 1, 2019, Iraq has had three prime minister-designates (Mohammed Tawfiq Allawi, Adnan al-Zurfi, and Mustafa al-Kadhimi), all of whom have pandered to the demands of the protesters in an attempt to win legitimacy.[9] Shi'a Islamist politicians must now tailor their language and policies in a way which avoids contradicting the language of the protesters.[10]

The protests have deeply challenged the very meaning of the political legitimacy that Shi'a Islamist parties have claimed since 2003. The post-2003 discussions over legitimacy were dominated by Shi'a victimisation and past struggles against the Ba'ath regime. The problem is that the only Iraq the post-2003 Iraqi generation has known, is the Iraq of the current ruling class, which is characterized by deep corruption and mismanagement. This system and its sources of legitimacy are broken and the Shi'a Islamists are unable (or unwilling) to find stronger forms of legitimacy in the short term. A rejection of the Shi'a Islamists' political power and a move away from participation in

elections by many youthful elements of society is a likely scenario for the near future. A generational gap, which has been highlighted by the protests, will have longer implications.

The response of major Shi'a Islamist parties to the protesters' demands for radical change shows the fragmentation of the Shi'a house. Given the nature of these parties, which rely heavily on sectarian patronage networks for survival, real and radical reform not only seems 'unrealistic' but poses an existential threat. For them, the cost of embracing radical reform seems to be greater than reforming the system. With a dysfunctional government, deteriorating state-society trust, and the people's anger growing by the day, Iraq faces the possibility of descent to a failed state.

It is clear now that support for the political authorities can no longer be managed by adjustments in public policy or a change in leadership, as all of the political elite are seen by many as "the other". There is a danger that this crisis of trust and legitimacy might further violent confrontation between the people and Shi'a dominant parties. Since 2003, the Iraqi Shi'a Islamist movements have evolved in a way which makes them impervious to major change and their own armed groups, unwilling to integrate in the state forces.[11] This might help them to survive, even without significant popular support, but coercion and violence cannot consolidate their grip on power. The question remains: in the absence of popular support, what means of legitimacy are available to these actors?

Authority without popular support

Within a system of ethno-sectarian power-sharing, dysfunctional economy and fragmented security forces, the people's distrust of the authorities has increased.[12] The sustainability of the protests depends on people's dissatisfaction and mistrust, which grows by the day. The most likely scenario in the short term is therefore the continuation of protests and Shi'a dissatisfaction with the Islamist parties behavior. Shi'a Islamist politicians wish to show that they are on the side of people and not part of the political establishment, yet what is

contested is not just a specific politician or policy, but the very meaning of the "authority" these parties have wielded. This will have significant ramifications not only for Shi'a politics, but also for the future of the country.

While it is clear that popular support for the political parties is waning, political actors and armed groups such as the Sairoon Alliance the Fateh Alliance, the Nasr Coalition, and the State of Law, as well as armed organizations such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq-maintain their hard power through systems of political and sectarian patronage. It is this political class which has ultimately formed every government, and which is now perpetuating distrust between the people and political elites, and the absence of a social contract. Simply put, in the short term the result is that Shi'a Islamists will maintain their grip on power, but without popular support.

In the long term, internal legitimacy is critical for survival for all actors, no matter how hard the leaders try to hold onto power with an iron grip regardless of (the lack of) popular support. The old sources and discourses of legitimacy in Iraq – self-victimisation sectarian or ethnic solidarity – are no longer enough to ensure popular support. Other sources of legitimacy will be needed, or popular dissatisfaction will prove a threat to the stability and existence of the country. Functioning, inclusive and legitimate governance must replace the discourses such as fear and external threat previously adopted by political actors. However, as the analysis above shows, Shi'a Islamist parties do not have short-term answers to their legitimation crisis. Instead, they continue to believe this is a temporary crisis and that the people's grievances can be addressed within the context of the status quo.

Regarding popular legitimacy and support, the ability of Iraq's political actors to win popular support varies significantly, as the country is deeply divided. For example, for the main components of Hashd al-Shaabi such as the Badr Organization and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, which have been confronting the protesters, the protests threatened the popularity they won during the fight against the Islamic State. Their popularity and victory in the 2018 elections stemmed from their central role in this struggle, yet this has been significantly undermined by

their confrontations with the protesters. For these armed/political organizations, gaining legitimacy without constructing an "external threat" is impossible. The dynamics of internal legitimacy and popular support for coalitions such as Nasr and State of Law, which have been deeply imbedded in the system since 2003, are different. For them, performance legitimisation seems to be the only answer for their survival.

Conclusion

This brief has explored how the protests have fundamentally challenged the legitimacy of the major Shi'a parties. It has also shown that the protests' impact is not only relevant for the affairs of Shi'a Islamists, but also for the core of the political system that has been in place since 2003. The Shi'a youth's protests have forced a change in the public discourse on legitimacy. However, a scenario in which the Shi'a protesters demands for radical change are fulfilled, unfortunately, seems unlikely. Fragmentation within the Shi'a house and the vested interests of key actors constitute a large enough force to counter the protesters' demands for "a better Iraq".

The outcomes of Shi'a actors' attempts to (re)gain popular legitimacy may all come at the expense of the country's cohesion. To address the demands and placate the anger of the population, radical political reforms may be seen as a solution, but this is not possible in the short term. Immediate radical reform may be an existential threat to the sources of power of these parties, as their hold on power has been largely based on patronage and the use of state resources for their political interests. Gradual reform is possible but will not appease the protesters. As long as there is a gap between the people and authorities, political, economic and security reforms will be constrained in a vicious circle.

Endnotes

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ABOUT AL SHARQ STRATEGIC RESEARCH

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