

Al-Sadr supporters storm parliament to prevent formation of Iraqi government

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Supporters of the nationalist Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr stormed Baghdad's Green Zone, the heavily fortified area that houses the US Embassy, military forces and contractors, and occupied the federal parliament Saturday. Al-Sadr's spokesperson said, "The demonstrators announce a sit-in until further notice."

About 125 people were injured in the protests, 100 protesters and 25 members of security forces, as demonstrators called for an end to corruption and the political system put in place after the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq to unseat the regime of Saddam Hussein in 2003. It follows a similar storming of parliament Wednesday.

The sit-in, a direct threat to al-Sadr's rivals, is aimed at preventing legislators convening to form a government. Parliament Speaker Mohammed Halbousi has suspended future sessions.

The turmoil underscores the worsening political crisis in Washington's puppet state that has become a proxy battle ground for regional and international political conflicts. Some 1.2 million people are still internally displaced due the many conflicts that have beset the country, which also hosts at least 250,000 Syrian refugees. Food insecurity is rife.

Iraq has seen numerous protests over endemic corruption, the terrible social and economic conditions reflected in unemployment and poverty rates of 40 percent and 32 percent, and water and power outages. This has been exacerbated by the pandemic, which has taken a terrible toll on people's lives—around 25,000 deaths have been officially recorded—health and livelihoods.

Adding to the deep sense of crisis have been the sandstorms that have hit a country already suffering from soil degradation, intense droughts and low rainfall linked to climate change. At least 5,000 people have been hospitalised with breathing problems, while airports, schools and public offices across the country had to close.

Last October's elections saw al-Sadr's Sairoon movement win the most votes on a voter turnout of just 41 percent, even lower than in the 2018 elections, as hostility towards

the sectarian-ethnic political regime and its rival backers in Washington and Tehran soared. Ten months later, Iraq's venal political factions have still not agreed on a new government.

Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, a former intelligence officer seen as Washington's man in Baghdad, has continued in a caretaker role, unable to set a budget for 2022, despite the increase in oil prices that could help alleviate the acute social crisis.

He came to power in May 2020 after months of mass protests, the largest since the 2003 US invasion, brought down the government of Adil Abdul-Mahdi. Mahdi's government had sought to suppress the protests with lethal force, deploying the security forces and paramilitary groups to shoot down more than 600 protestors, further inflaming tensions until the pandemic and the accompanying restrictions emptied the streets.

Al-Kadhimi not only continued the economic and social policies of his predecessor, but also implemented new measures aimed at securing loans from the International Monetary Fund that have devastated workers' incomes. He continued the intimidation and repression of oppositionists as militias affiliated to the various political parties assassinated political activists, local leaders and outspoken journalists and critics. He reneged on his pledges to investigate the killings by the security forces and to introduce legislation that would overturn Iraq's sectarian political system, key demands of the protest movement, because the established parties refused any changes that would encroach on their privileges, patronage and wealth.

While al-Sadr and his Sairoon bloc won the most seats (73) in the 329-seat parliament, up from 54 in 2018, at the expense of his Iran-allied Shia opponents in the Coordination Framework, it was far short of a clear majority.

The former militia leader from a leading Shia clerical family, who led the main Shia resistance to the US occupation, has no progressive answers to the immense suffering of the Iraqi people. Posing as a nationalist opposed

to foreign interference in Iraq, he has in the past been close to Iran and acted as kingmaker in forging ruling coalitions. He has put his men in most arms of the state, including in the cabinet, the state-owned oil company, powerful ministries and local authorities, where they take a cut on government contracts to pass on to his organisation that provides jobs and social welfare for its impoverished supporters in Baghdad's slums and runs a militia.

Al-Sadr announced his intention of forming a government with the largest Sunni and Kurdish blocs, leaving the Iran-aligned Shia parties in opposition, an arrangement that breaks with the custom followed since 2003 whereby all parties are represented in government. Not wanting to be excluded from the patronage system, his Shia opponents maneuvered to block his coalition-building process via a series of procedural and legal interventions, including using the Federal Supreme Court to block the nomination of a president and launching missile attacks on his Kurdish allies.

In June, al-Sadr announced that his entire bloc would renounce their seats in parliament in a move aimed at forcing his rivals to agree to a new government and opening the door to street protests, counter-demonstrations and instability to force the dissolution of parliament and new elections.

In the event, new lawmakers were sworn in accordance with the constitution, making the pro-Iran bloc, the Coordination Framework, under former premier Nuri al-Maliki's party, the State of Law Coalition, and the pro-Iran Fatah Alliance, the political arm of the Shia-led former paramilitary group Hashid al-Shaabi, the largest in parliament. There is little agreement between them on any of the major political issues confronting the country.

When the Coordination Framework nominated Mohammed al-Sudani for the premiership, al-Sadr objected and mobilized his supporters to storm the parliament, which was not in session, with the security forces standing by. Before al-Sudani can officially be nominated as premier-designate, parliament must first select a president from the Kurdish parties, a process that has been no less contentious.

The semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional government (KRG) had originally backed al-Sadr's bloc, but tensions between Erbil and Baghdad escalated after the Iraqi Federal Supreme Court ruled in February that the KRG's oil and gas law was "unconstitutional," meaning that the KRG's oil and gas sector had no legal basis for keeping its revenues, largely derived from sales to Turkey. The KRG rejected the ruling, calling it "unjust" and "unconstitutional." KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani began to push for a new constitutional arrangement that would cede more power to the Kurds and other ethnic constituencies.

US President Joe Biden has sought to distance Baghdad

from Tehran, urging Washington's regional allies, including Saudi Arabia, to restore diplomatic relations with Iraq as a means of containing Iranian influence and bolstering al-Kadhimi's political legitimacy. He invited al-Kadhimi to talks with the Gulf States, Egypt and Jordan in Saudi Arabia's port city of Jeddah in an effort to broker an anti-Iran alliance as part of Washington's broader preparations for war with Russia and China—with whom Tehran has forged increasingly close relations.

Iraq has, however, passed a law in May making it a crime to normalise relations with Israel, visit the country, or promote normalisation, with violations of the law punishable with life in prison or the death penalty.

Further roiling the Iraqi state has been the bombing on July 20 of Barakh in the KRG's Duhok province that killed nine Iraqi tourists. Iraqi and Kurdish officials blamed the attack on Turkey.

According to a Defense Ministry report, Turkey, a NATO member, has set up more than 100 military bases and outposts on Iraqi territory and has stationed more than 4,000 troops inside Iraq, along with tanks, armored vehicles, helicopters and heavy weapons as part of Ankara's decades-long war with the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Turkey's troops far outnumber even those of the US (2,500) and France (800).

Ahmed al-Sahaf, Iraq's foreign ministry's spokesperson, said Iraq had recorded 22,740 violations of Iraqi sovereignty by Turkish forces since 2018, with 296 official complaints submitted to Ankara. Al-Sahaf denied there was any "security or military" agreement with Turkey and accused Ankara of having "expansionist goals behind the attacks it is carrying out." *Al-Monitor* cited Turkey's Presidential adviser Ayhan Ogan warning on July 21 that "if Turkey's security concerns are ignored and, moreover, provoked, Turkey would create a new security belt all the way from Aleppo to Mosul." This would mirror Ankara's plan for a 30-kilometer-deep safe zone in northern Syria.



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