



Haider Abadi

Has Soleimani stolen the keys to the Iraqi state?



BARIA ALAMUDDIN

How did it all go so wrong? Just a couple of weeks ago, Muqtada Al-Sadr and Prime Minister Haider Abadi were reportedly making progress toward agreeing on a broad-based Iraqi governing coalition. However, seductive, treacherous voices were whispering in the ears of both these men. Abadi became convinced that, despite losing badly in the elections, his bloc had enough votes for him to retain his prime ministerial seat and so he complacently awaited whichever of the leading two blocs (the Sadrist or Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi) would offer him a sufficiently attractive deal.

Al-Sadr, however, became so frustrated with Abadi's maximalist demands that he was willing to listen to voices tempting him to forge an alliance with the coalition of pro-Iranian Al-Hashd militants and cut the prime minister out altogether. Why was this unexpected? After all, Al-Sadr in 2003 emerged as a leader of his own Shiite paramilitary movement and many top Al-Hashd generals are Al-Sadr's former proteges.

In recent years, Al-Sadr has rebranded himself as a moderate reformist. He outspokenly denounced former Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki's sectarian style of governance, condemned Al-Hashd war crimes and called on these militants to disarm. He reached out to Saudi Arabia and Arab states and contested the 2018 elections on a joint list with communists and secularists. Unsurprisingly, these communist stablemates are today accusing Al-Sadr of betrayal for reneging on his stated reformist principals and aligning with paramilitary theocrats.

Iran's Qassem Soleimani was in Baghdad last week playing marriage guidance counsellor between Al-Sadr and the Al-Hashd leadership, heralding the possible birth of a new governing alliance centred on Shiite Islamists with a long record of horrific war crimes; leaving Sunnis and liberals out in the cold.

Al-Sadr's principal condition was that Al-Hashd forces must come under the state's umbrella.

However, if Al-Hashd is simultaneously a principal force in government, retaining control over the Interior Ministry, with Al-Hashd leader Hadi Al-Amiri becoming prime minister, then Al-Hashd's incorporation into the state becomes the nightmare scenario. Instead of demobilization, sectarian Al-Hashd forces would obtain permanence, legitimacy and institutionalization. Instead of the state neutralizing or normalizing Al-Hashd, it would swallow the Iraqi state — its political and military arms. This is the scenario that the Lebanese Hezbollah could only dream of: Why settle for being a state within a state when you can become the state?

Not having participated in the elections himself, Al-Sadr presumably envisages himself sitting above the political process in a guardianship (or supreme leader) role. Some observers find this reassuring. However, between 2005 and 2008, Al-Sadr sat back impotently while his Mahdi Army thugs murdered tens of thousands of Sunnis as sickening levels of sectarian bloodletting engulfed Baghdad. Under Sadrist control, the Ministry of Health effectively became the "Ministry of Murder," with ambulances used by death squads for systematic abductions, and citizens terrified of visiting hospitals lest they are murdered in their beds. Even Al-Sadr's apologists question his ability to rein in his headstrong, bloodthirsty underlings, and acknowledge his Donald Trump-like tendency for sudden reversals of political views.

Massive campaigns of demographic engineering across central Iraq were insufficient to provide Al-Hashd with sufficient votes to achieve the commanding position they would have liked in these elections. A high proportion of Shiite voters are repulsed by Al-Hashd's nakedly pro-Iranian agenda. Given this shaky popularity, Al-Hashd has the motive, the means, the opportunity and sufficient ruthlessness to exploit any government role to permanently entrench itself in power.

Al-Hashd leaders explicitly wedded to the Khomeinist doctrine of Wilayat al-Faqih (governance by clerics) are happy to exploit the ballot box, while being ideologically hostile to the values of democracy. It is thus not alarmist to warn that, if Al-Hashd is allowed to consolidate power, 2018 may be the last time Iraqis have a free and fair opportunity to elect candidates of their choice.

Civil tensions are already boiling over, with

Sunnis and minorities deeply alienated by the Iraqi state. If sectarian forces yet again hijack the government — despite strong performances by parties which branded themselves as moderates — this may be the moment where Sunnis finally give up on the Iraqi state and start considering other formulas.

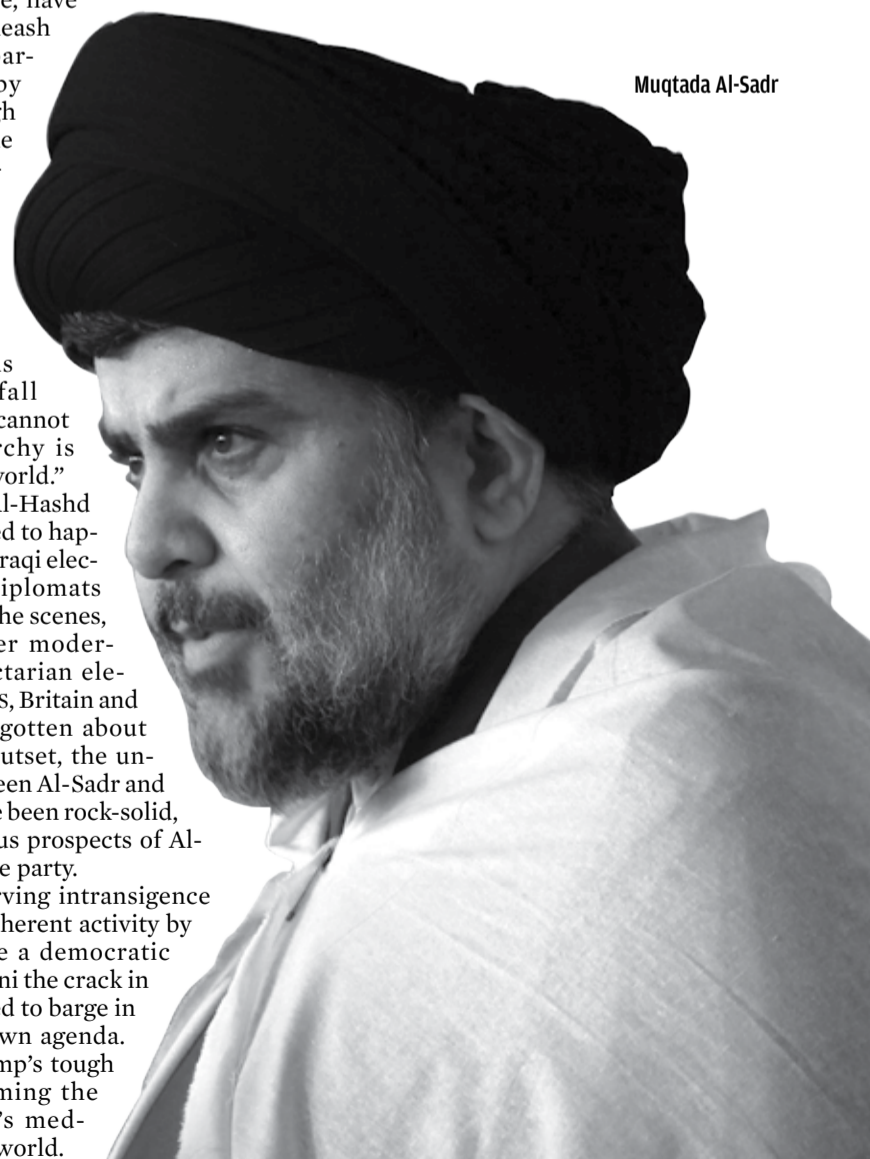
How would an Al-Hashd-Sadrist regime govern? Given the host of medium-sized factions and poisonous history between figures like Al-Sadr and Al-Maliki, Iraq's dysfunctional record of log-jammed legislation looks set to continue. Entrenched in key security ministries, Al-Hashd would, meanwhile, have a free hand to unleash its vision for a paramilitary state by governing through intimidation. "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity," as the poet W.B. Yeats wrote, culminating in the famous lines: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world."

How was this Al-Hashd coup d'état allowed to happen? In previous Iraqi elections, Western diplomats laboured behind the scenes, bringing together moderates and anti-sectarian elements. Have the US, Britain and France today forgotten about Iraq? From the outset, the understanding between Al-Sadr and Abadi should have been rock-solid, blocking all serious prospects of Al-Hashd spoiling the party.

Abadi's self-serving intransigence and the lack of coherent activity by those who desire a democratic Iraq gave Soleimani the crack in the door he needed to barge in and impose his own agenda. So much for Trump's tough talk about slamming the door on Tehran's meddling in the Arab world.

Maybe there is time to salvage an Al-Sadr-Abadi alliance. Maybe there is time to defeat Al-Hashd's efforts and prevent a scenario that appeared almost inconceivable just a few days ago. The clock is ticking down on the narrowing opportunity to rescue Iraq from sectarian, paramilitary, pro-Iranian hegemony. Are those who enjoy the capacity to act even aware of this existential threat facing Iraq?

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Muqtada Al-Sadr

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