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Research  
Paper

Middle East  
and North Africa  
Programme

October 2022

# The Sadrist movement in Iraq

## Between protest and power politics

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## Summary

- For policymakers inside and outside Iraq, including in the West, Muqtada al-Sadr has been an enigmatic leader claiming many identities, shifting from insurgent militia leader to reformist protest leader, and from election winner and government coalition builder to revolutionary. His influence is of critical importance to Iraqi and regional politics.
- This research paper argues that Sadr has pursued a strategy of ‘controlled instability’, seeking to expedite political destabilization, not with the intention of reforming or bringing down the political system, but to bolster his own political power within the dominant Shia apportionment of the Iraqi state. A shift from a Shia-centric to Sadr-centric governance strategy accelerated after the movement’s 2021 election victory, further destabilizing Iraq’s already fragmented politics.
- Key to understanding Sadr’s influence is understanding his audience: his social base represents one of the largest Islamist movements in the Middle East. This paper presents the findings of a rare sociological survey of more than 1,000 residents of Baghdad’s Sadr City, a district with a high concentration of Sadr’s followers.
- The study indicates that while the Sadrist movement has benefited both politically and financially from its expanding influence over the state, its social base has remained impoverished. Sadr’s followers are demanding that he mount a more radical opposition to the political status quo, straining his model of controlled instability. By reverting to a protest footing, Sadr hopes both to retain legitimacy among his followers and to reach out to other protest factions, thereby rebuilding a protest-oriented political coalition.
- Despite his announcement in August 2022 that he was ‘quitting politics’, it is unlikely that Sadr himself will withdraw from Iraq’s political system or allow it to collapse, potentially into civil war. Sadrists will continue to stand for election and engage in politics. However, Sadr’s politics are being driven in a riskier direction, becoming more reactive and short-term, and increasing the likelihood of miscalculation - such as his parliamentary withdrawal, which has fuelled political instability and violent clashes across the country.
- Those who have looked to co-opt Sadr and the social power of his base to advance their own political interests have not succeeded. Most recently, Western policymakers saw him as a channel to limit Iranian influence in Iraq, support their preferred prime minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, and lead reform of the political system. Instead, Sadr, bolstered by his perception of tacit Western backing, has pursued his own political agenda, ultimately clashing with Western interests and demonstrating anew the pitfalls of backing individuals or ‘picking winners’ in Iraq’s complex networks of power.
- Western policymakers should focus on building coherent institutions across the Iraqi state that can hold the entire leadership to account.

## Introduction

Following its shock victory in Iraq's October 2021 election, winning 73 of the 329 parliamentary seats, the Shia Islamist Sadrist movement promised to push Iraq towards a new type of politics by forcing the establishment of a majority government.<sup>1</sup> But in June 2022, after eight months of deadlock with the rival Shia Coordination Framework (SCF)<sup>2</sup> over the formation of a new government, the Sadrist bloc's leader – the populist cleric Muqtada al-Sadr – withdrew from the process, ordering his parliamentarians to resign. The following month, Sadrist protesters stormed and occupied Iraq's parliament building. Then, on 29 August, protesters and members of the Sadrist armed group Saraya al-Salam (SAS)<sup>3</sup> again stormed the Green Zone (the fortified international zone of Baghdad), which led to clashes with armed groups linked to the Iran-aligned Popular Mobilization Forces (al-Hashd al-Shaabi – PMF)<sup>4</sup> and at least 22 deaths.<sup>5</sup>

A number of questions arose from these events, chief among which were: why did the Sadrists fail to form a government, and why did Sadr refuse to re-engage with the political consensus underpinning the formation of every Iraqi government since 2003? Sadr appears willing to actively oppose the system he has previously protected in order to achieve his goals. As violence erupted following the occupation of parliament, one US policymaker asked: 'Can one person hold the whole country hostage?'<sup>6</sup> Many observers were left wondering to what extent Sadr was really willing to risk the stability of Iraq's post-2003 political system, and to what ultimate end.

In the past, the Sadrist movement played a key role in stabilizing Iraq's political system as it came under pressure from the Islamic State crisis, oil shocks, civil unrest and the COVID-19 pandemic. The Sadrists lent their coercive power to the state, and twice redirected anti-establishment protests away from challenging the fundamentals of Iraq's governing consensus.<sup>7</sup>

Having observed these responses, many doubted that Sadr would use his movement's electoral victory in 2021 to radically challenge the rules of Iraqi politics and destabilize a system in which his movement had become embedded.<sup>8</sup> And yet, Sadr steadfastly pursued his vision of a 'majority' government by allying with Sunni and Kurdish factions to form the Tripartite Alliance and to force out

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<sup>1</sup> Robin-D'Cruz, B. (2022), 'The Sadrist Electoral Machine in Basra', Report, Century International, <https://tcf.org/content/report/the-sadrist-electoral-machine-in-basra>.

<sup>2</sup> The SCF is an alliance of Shia Islamist groups: the State of Law coalition led by former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, the al-Fateh Alliance including Badr Organization leader Hadi al-Ameri and Asaeb ahl al-Haq leader Qais al-Khazali, the Alliance of National State Forces led by Ammar al-Hakim, the Victory Alliance led by former prime minister Haider al-Abadi and the National Contract Coalition led by Faleh al-Fayadh, the head of the Popular Mobilization Forces.

<sup>3</sup> Known in English as the Peace Brigades.

<sup>4</sup> Mansour, R. (2021), *Networks of power: the Popular Mobilization Forces and the state in Iraq*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/02/networks-power>.

<sup>5</sup> Davison, J. (2022), 'Iraqi cleric Sadr calls off protests after worst Baghdad violence in years', Reuters, 30 August 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraq-security-forces-say-four-rockets-land-baghdads-green-zone-2022-08-30>.

<sup>6</sup> Research interview with US policymaker, Washington, DC, July 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Robin-D'Cruz, B. and Mansour, R. (2020), *Making Sense of the Sadrists: Fragmentation and Unstable Politics*, Report, Philadelphia, PA: Foreign Policy Research Institute, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/03/making-sense-sadrists-fragmentation-unstable-politics>.

<sup>8</sup> Dodge, T. and Mansour, R. (2021), *Politically sanctioned corruption and barriers to reform in Iraq*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/06/politically-sanctioned-corruption-and-barriers-reform-iraq>.

some of Iraq's most powerful Shia Islamist actors and parties.<sup>9</sup> This project not only broke the norm of political inclusivity which has stabilized Iraq's elite competition, but also appeared to transgress the Shia-centric vision of the state which has been entrenched in Iraq's political system.<sup>10</sup> Sadr's challenge to the established political system, and the pushback from the SCF, propelled Iraq into a new political crisis. His refusal to compromise and back down under pressure, as he has done so often in the past, surprised many, and suggested that Sadr's role as a guarantor of the political system – in its current form – could no longer be taken for granted.

Sadr has long pursued a strategy of 'controlled instability', which relies on limited destabilization of the system at strategic moments to gain popular support and political leverage. But this has ultimately conformed to the fundamental rules of political competition. However, after the October 2021 election, Sadr appeared to take a more radical turn as he sought to further destabilize an already fragmented Shia Islamist elite. In reality, he was pursuing a strategy to reconstruct Shia Islamist power around himself, moving it from Shia-centricity to Sadr-centricity.

This research paper addresses the dilemma which arises when a strategy of controlled instability tips into less controlled destabilization. A key consequence is miscalculation in the management of elite politics, exemplified by Sadr's decision to withdraw his MPs from parliament. He had hoped that his Sunni and Kurdish allies would follow him. They did not, and instead began negotiating with the SCF, which had gained more MPs following Sadr's withdrawal. This misstep propelled Sadr into a series of reactionary moves and an escalation of violence in the Green Zone which led to at least 22 deaths on 29 August 2022.

Underneath the surface, however, the Sadrists' antagonism towards the consensus of elite politics is also being driven by a more bottom-up dynamic which arises from the challenge of managing the movement's social base. This base – composed of millions of poorer urban Shia – is the key source of Sadr's political power. To better understand the movement's followers, and how they shape Sadrist politics, Chatham House commissioned a survey of more than 1,000 Sadrists from Sadr City. Named after Muqtada al-Sadr's father, Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr, this is a majority Shia district and Sadrist stronghold in eastern Baghdad.<sup>11</sup> The survey was conducted in mid-July 2022 (see details and findings below). Consequently, as well as addressing elite politics, this paper also presents the findings of this survey and outlines their implications for the Sadrist movement and for political stability in Iraq. It offers guidance to policymakers on the pitfalls of backing individuals in Iraq's complex networks of power, and argues that reform cannot be pursued through backing different political 'sides', but rather through

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<sup>9</sup> Former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki and elements of the Popular Mobilization Forces (al-Hashd al-Shaabi – PMF).

<sup>10</sup> In 2005, the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), which represented the Shia Islamist parties, issued an internal memo referring to Iraqi politics as now revolving around a 'Shia sun'. This also established a fundamental norm for Iraq's government formation process in which each ethno-sectarian bloc would manage its own internal affairs, with the Shia bloc taking precedence. Allawi, A. A. (2007), *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, p. 438. See also: Haddad, F. (2016), *Shia-Centric State Building and Sunni Rejection in Post-2003 Iraq*, Paper, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/01/07/shia-centric-state-building-and-sunni-rejection-in-post-2003-iraq-pub-62408>.

<sup>11</sup> For background on Sadr City, see discussion on the historical development of the district in Krohely, N. (2015), *The Death of the Mehdi Army: The Rise, Fall, and Revival of Iraq's Most Powerful Militia*, London: Hurst, pp.13–34.

building coherent institutions that can hold the network to account. Box 1 presents the key findings of Chatham House's 2022 survey of Sadr City residents.

### **Box 1. Key findings from Sadr City**

- Much of Sadr's base has not benefited from his increased control over the state and remains either unemployed or in the most insecure forms of employment. To them, the corrupt political system including institutions like the parliament and Council of Ministers is untrustworthy. This pushes Sadr to distance himself from the political system, an elite pact which harms Iraqis every day through corruption and structural violence.
- Instead of the political elite, Sadrists retain faith in religious leadership to manage their community's religious and political affairs. However, they tend not to support religious actors taking public roles in formal politics. Neither Sadr nor Sadrist clerics take official government positions.
- The survey showed little consistent evidence that Sadrist youths are moving away from religious commitments or an Islamic framework for politics. However, Sadr's dominance over the political decisions (i.e. voting) of the younger generation is weaker than is the case for older generations.
- Boosted by their experience of winning the past two elections, Sadrists retain a high level of enthusiasm for elections, despite the broader context of rising voter apathy. This means that Sadr enjoys a comparative advantage over his Shia Islamist rivals, who lack such a base.
- Unlike other protest groups, the Sadrists tend to regard protests and elections as complementary strategies. Sadrists are looking for leadership that combines both elements, i.e. they look for leaders who are effective protest leaders and who also win elections.
- The Sadrists have mixed views on the Tishreen (October Protest) movement, with younger Sadrists showing a higher proclivity to experiment with voting for Tishreen-linked political parties in the future. This is a risk to the Sadrists' electoral base which the movement is seeking to address through protest politics and outreach to Tishreen leaders.

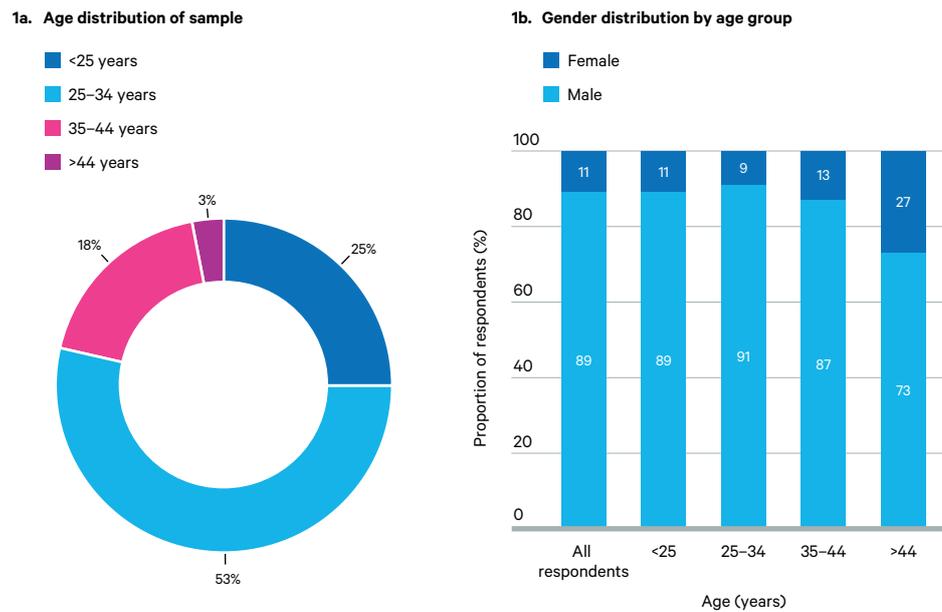
## **Survey methodology**

The survey was carried out on behalf of Chatham House by a team of local researchers between 16 July and 20 July 2022, and engaged 1,099 participants in face-to-face interviews. The Sadrist movement was informed that the survey was taking place, but did not pre-approve the survey questions or influence who the researchers interacted with. An effort was made to target different social settings to obtain a representative sample. However, due to cultural norms and constraints on access, the survey sample overrepresented young males over women and older age groups.

To some extent, the age profile of the sample reflected the actual demographic structure of Sadr City. The latter was chosen as the field site, as it represents the largest Sadrist stronghold in Iraq. To avoid designing a survey that openly targeted Sadrists, it was decided to target geographic locations instead. Consequently, the population of Sadr City is used as a proxy for the Sadrist movement. However, this raises two important caveats when interacting with the data. First, although the population of Sadr City is overwhelmingly Sadrist, not all respondents were necessarily affiliated to the movement. Second, as the survey only targeted one locale, it is likely to underrepresent the diversity of views within the Sadrist movement. These will be shaped by other factors, such as the urban–rural divide. In other words, it should not be assumed that Sadrists in Sadr City will hold the same views as those in Basra City, or the rural province of Maysan, for example. Further and more expansive surveys would be needed to generate a more complete picture of the Sadrist base.

Table 1, in the Annex which follows at the end of the paper, provides a breakdown of the sample by individuals’ districts of residence within Sadr City.

**Figure 1. Sadr City survey sample: demographic overview**



Source: Chatham House research.  
Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

## Deciphering contradictions: Sadr's strategy of controlled instability

### Navigating multiple identities

For almost two decades, policymakers inside and outside Iraq have been puzzled by Sadr's consequential but highly sporadic decision-making. Many who have engaged with him during this time have expressed frustration at their own inability to predict his next move – or his next tweet. Those who have taken Sadrist rhetoric at face value have often been left feeling surprised, or even betrayed.

Most recently, after the 2021 election, Western and Iraqi policymakers and analysts were again confronted with Sadr's rhetoric on anti-corruption and reform. Some US and Iraqi policymakers saw Sadr as an important channel for furthering their interests – a tool to combat Iran, support their preferred prime minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, and reform the struggling Iraqi political system.<sup>12</sup> One former adviser to Kadhimi wrote in May 2022 that Sadr had 'become the sole possible reformer who can overhaul a hopelessly failed political system'.<sup>13</sup> This support persisted even after the Sadrists had violently suppressed mass protests which had begun in October 2019 (known locally as *Thawrat Tishreen* – the October Revolution) and called for an end to the corrupt ethno-sectarian basis for the political system (*muhasasa*).

However, relying on Sadr as an ally for policy or reform is at best a short-term strategy. In the longer term, this approach not only misreads the intentions of the Sadrist movement, but it also risks stifling more genuine reformist currents in political and civil society. Meanwhile, the anticipated gains *vis-à-vis* Iran will be superficial and are likely to be traded away by Sadr if he consolidates a more dominant leadership position within the Shia Islamist bloc.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, this approach has emboldened the Sadrists to adopt more risky positions, while intensifying intra-elite competition over the state.

Simple binaries – such as pro-/anti-Iran or pro-/anti-reform – are inadequate in helping to form an understanding of Sadrist politics, which balance multiple identities. These identities have included militant and religious insurgent and system guarantor; the movement has been both a governing party and an opposition protest movement. Particularly since joining the formal political process in 2005, the Sadrists have balanced these different roles within an overall strategy of controlled instability. This meant pursuing limited destabilization of the system at strategic moments to gain popular support and political leverage, but ultimately conforming to the fundamental rules of political competition.

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<sup>12</sup> *The Economist* (2021), 'Firebrand cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and America move closer in Iraq', 29 April 2021, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2021/04/29/firebrand-cleric-muqtada-al-sadr-and-america-move-closer-in-iraq>.

<sup>13</sup> Abbas, A. (2022), 'From Spent Force to Tactician: The Evolution of Muqtada al-Sadr', Emirates Policy Center, 12 May 2022, <https://epc.ae/en/details/brief/from-spent-force-to-tactician-the-evolution-of-muqtada-al-sadr>.

<sup>14</sup> Following the US's simultaneous assassination of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani and Iraqi militia commander Abu Mehdi al-Muhandis in January 2020, Sadr travelled to Iran to make the case that he could best represent its interests in Iraq.

The underlying logic of controlled instability can help make some sense of Sadr's actions within a long-term perspective. Politically, the Sadrists have tended to work alongside other Shia Islamist parties, anchoring a Shia-centric vision of politics in the Iraqi state. Even when the movement has campaigned electorally against this system – as happened in 2018, when the Sadrists denounced the *muhāsasa* – Sadr still acted to stabilize the system in the post-election phase.<sup>15</sup> Sadrist violence and power of mobilization also proved indispensable to the crushing of the Tishreen uprising of October 2019 and the restabilization of a political system in the face of massive social unrest and demands for radical political change.<sup>16</sup>

Militarily, the Sadrists are no longer the militia that fought Western forces and engaged in sectarian violence, intra-Shia militia warfare, and chaotic criminality between 2003 and 2009.<sup>17</sup> Rather, the movement's coercive power was regulated within the political economy of violence that maintained the Iraqi state.<sup>18</sup> The Sadrists' paramilitary wing, Saraya al-Salam (SAS), turned away from the self-mobilizing religious zeal of its original incarnation, Jaysh al-Mahdi (Mahdi Army). Today, like other militias, SAS is integrated into the political economy of the Iraqi state, and is less likely to challenge the system either through insurgency or civil war.

Sadr's own insurgency, in military, political and religious terms, proved a brief dalliance that quickly gave way to a more system-conforming role. For instance, in the religious sphere, Sadr gradually abandoned his challenge to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani after 2004.<sup>19</sup> Since then, he has sought to bolster his authority by aligning his religious and political positions with those of Sistani. (For example, Sadr frequently weaponizes Sistani's statements against the political class for his own purposes.) Sadr's actions have therefore tended to stabilize the religious hierarchy centred on the holy city of Najaf and to bolster its role as a quasi-constitutional force in Iraqi politics.<sup>20</sup>

## Balancing controlled instability

Unlike many rival groupings, the Sadrist movement is not merely a construct for managing the distribution of resources within elite networks. It has also remained a mass social movement, constraining the Sadrist leadership to balance elite politics against management of its base. The Sadrists found a critical

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<sup>15</sup> Sadr also performed a stabilizing role after he helped force Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki from power in 2014; after the 2018 election; and following the suppression of the Tishreen (October) uprising in early 2020, when he bolstered the administration of Mustafa al-Kadhimi.

<sup>16</sup> Other militant groups had previously deployed extreme violence in their attempts to end the Tishreen protests. For instance, although dozens of activists were killed in the Khilani Square massacre of 6 December 2021, which was alleged to have been carried out by Kataib Hezbollah (Hezbollah Battalions), an affiliate of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Tishreen protests were maintained. By contrast, it was the Sadrists' unique combination of violence (e.g. the massacre in the city of Najaf in February 2020) and the movement's mobilizing power – its ability to seize the physical space of protest (as happened at Nasiriyah's Habobi Square in August of the same year), which proved crucial for crushing the Tishreen protests.

<sup>17</sup> Robin-D'Cruz (2022), 'The Sadrist Electoral Machine in Basra'.

<sup>18</sup> Mansour (2021), *Networks of power*; Robin-D'Cruz (2022), 'The Sadrist Electoral Machine in Basra'.

<sup>19</sup> Sadr's early religious insurgency culminated in the Battle of Najaf in 2004, when Jaysh al-Mahdi attempted to seize control of Najaf.

<sup>20</sup> Robin-D'Cruz, B. (2022), 'Muqtada al-Sadr and the Struggle for Religious Authority', Carnegie Middle East Center, 14 September 2022, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2022/09/14/muqtada-al-sadr-and-struggle-for-religious-authority-pub-87910>.

equilibrium between 2015 and 2018, when Sadr instigated successive mass protests against the government calling for political reform (including, notably, a sit-in protest in Baghdad's fortified Green Zone in 2016) even though hundreds of senior officials and decision-makers in many parts of the state had generated revenue for his movement.

Sadr's dovetailing of this protest movement within an electoral platform was sufficiently credible to energize his own base and to draw Shia youth from Sadrist backgrounds into electoral politics for the first time. At the same time, Sadr also built ties to other established political parties and representatives of the so-called 'civil trend', which was attracted to the large-scale mobilizing power of the Sadrist base.<sup>21</sup> Some staunch secularists, liberals and leftist thinkers were willing to work with the Islamist leader because they believed it to be the only way to overcome the post-2003 political order to exploit divisions within the Shia Islamist elite.<sup>22</sup>

From the Sadrist perspective, the strategy was a stunning electoral success. Sadr convinced many that he was a protest leader, despite keeping his key levers of power within the state. Support for the Sadrist-led coalition in Iraq's parliamentary elections almost doubled in terms of vote share, from 917,589 in 2014 (a 7 per cent share of the total) to 1,493,542 (14 per cent) in 2018. Of this increase, about one-third was attributable to gains by the Sadrists' leftist and liberal allies, and two-thirds to the increase in the Sadrists' own electoral base.<sup>23</sup> To put this success in perspective, the non-Sadrist Shia Islamist vote declined from 4.5 million to 3.7 million votes over the same period.

The 2018 election serves as Sadr's blueprint for political success because it drew from both the Sadrist base and the growing disillusionment embodied in protest-based movements. Moving forward, he is looking to repeat this success by building relations with protest movements linked to Tishreen.

## **Tilting too closely to the government?**

The balance of controlled instability can easily be lost. Following the 2018 election, Sadr remained wary of being too closely linked to the government. One month after the election, he refused to acknowledge publicly his reported government formation deal with Hadi al-Ameri, head of the rival Shia Fateh Alliance, insisting on referring to their agreement as an 'understanding'. Nevertheless, the details of the deal were at variance with the reformist demands of protests led by Sadr himself. As the Sadrists entered more areas of the government, Sadr conformed more closely with the status quo of consensus politics. This prompted expressions of profound disillusionment among his own supporters.

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<sup>21</sup> Robin-D'Cruz, B. (2019), 'Social Brokers and Leftist-Sadrist Cooperation in Iraq's Reform Protest Movement: Beyond Instrumental Action', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 51(2), pp. 257–58, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743819000047>; Jabar, F. A. (2018), *The Iraq Protest Movement: From Identity Politics to Issue Politics*, Research Paper, London: London School of Economics, [https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/88294/1/Faleh\\_Iraqi%20Protest%20Movement\\_Published\\_English.pdf](https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/88294/1/Faleh_Iraqi%20Protest%20Movement_Published_English.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Faleh Abdul Jabar, Faris Kamal Nadhimi and others were major proponents of this idea. See Nadhimi, F. K. (2017), سيكولوجيا الاحتجاج في العراق [The Psychology of Protests in Iraq], Baghdad: Dar Sutour.

<sup>23</sup> Based on analysis of figures provided by Kirk H. Sowell and published in his newsletter, *Inside Iraqi Politics*, 65, 2018.

Sensitivity around being seen to openly promote the status quo drove Sadr's policy of appointing independent or technocratic ministers to the government in 2018. These officials (which included Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi, an economist) could present a 'clean' and impartial image in the upper ranks of the Iraqi government, while, critically, still falling within Sadr's control, being empowered by their association with him to assume responsibility for important decisions.

The Sadrists' 2018 electoral victory prompted a gradual expansion of Sadrist networks across the Iraqi state, so that by October 2021, when the next election was held, the bloc represented the leading political entity in the state.<sup>24</sup> Yet, the Sadrists' political success and increased control over the state did not benefit the movement's popular base in a material sense. Having de facto control over ministries such as health and electricity allowed the Sadrists to generate financial resources through awarding favourable contracts, but the gains were not distributed evenly through the movement. Chatham House's survey data reveals the extent to which in 2022 the core of the Sadrist base remains overwhelmingly mired either in unemployment or in the most insecure forms of work.

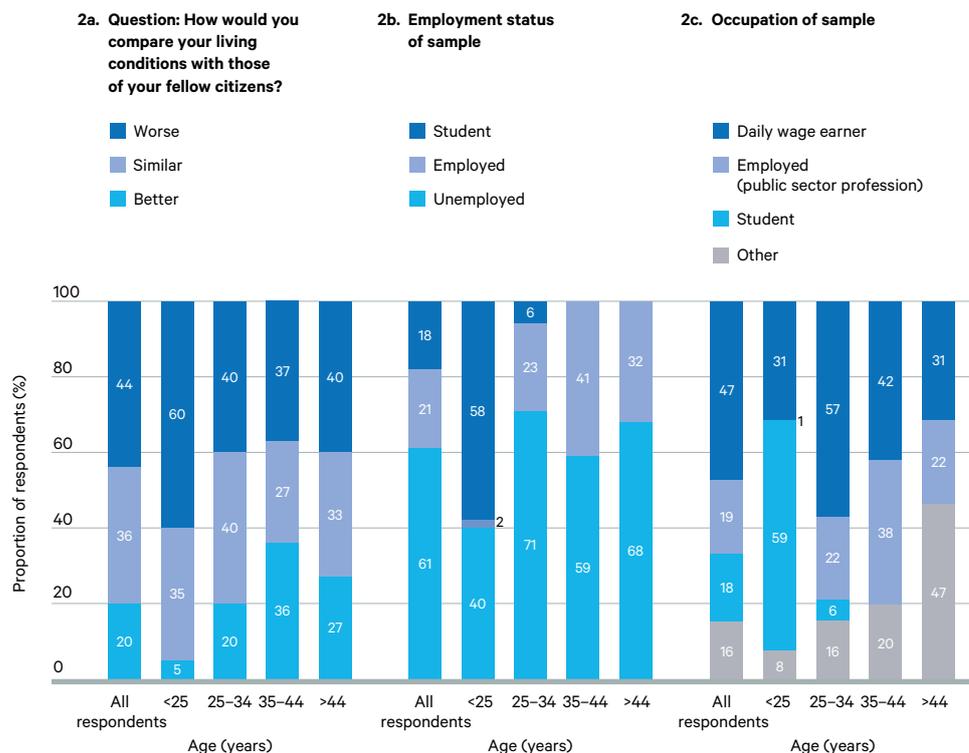
### **Having de facto control over ministries such as health and electricity allowed the Sadrists to generate financial resources through awarding favourable contracts, but the gains were not distributed evenly through the movement.**

According to the top-line survey data (see Figure 2b, below), 61 per cent of the total sample identified as unemployed. However, when those self-identifying as students are excluded, this figure rose to 74 per cent overall, and to 79 per cent of under-35s. Meanwhile, of those respondents in some form of employment and not self-identifying as students, 75 per cent reported being daily-wage workers or in other forms of insecure employment (such as autorickshaw driving). This meant only 25 per cent identified as being in secure employment (overwhelmingly in the public sector). Overall (see Figure 2c) only 19 per cent of the sample was in secure employment. In the 18–24 age group (of which a majority were students), 60 per cent of respondents considered that their economic outlook (in terms of their living conditions) was either much worse or worse than their fellow citizens, with only 5 per cent considering it to be better. (See Figure 2a.) Across all age groups surveyed, these beliefs were held by 44 per cent and 20 per cent of respondents respectively. Thus, increasing electoral power has not allowed the majority of the Sadrist social base to penetrate the coveted mainstream of public sector employment (*malak al-daim*) and therefore the socioeconomic status of those Sadr supporters remains unchanged.

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<sup>24</sup> Dodge and Mansour (2021), *Politically sanctioned corruption and barriers to reform in Iraq*.

**Figure 2. Economic outlook and employment status**



Source: Chatham House research.  
Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

How does this finding make sense in the context of extensive Sadrist use of the Iraqi state for employment-based patronage? First, it reflects the extent to which the expansion of public sector employment in Iraq has failed to keep pace with population growth. Public sector employment increased rapidly in absolute terms in the period to 2014 but hit a plateau in that year;<sup>25</sup> as a percentage of the workforce, the number of public sector employees declined steadily between 2011 and 2018.<sup>26</sup> This trend was reversed from 2019 as the government used offers of public sector employment to dampen protests. Under these conditions, employment patronage was no longer focused (as it had been during the early 2010s) on bringing those outside the system into expanding patronage networks. Rather, political factions competed merely in order to ‘cannibalize’ existing networks by shifting their affiliations.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, despite their growing power within the state, the Sadrists have been unable to take the core of the movement’s base from the economic margins to a position where they can fully participate

<sup>25</sup> A sharp fall in oil prices coupled with the Islamic State crisis led to the enforcement of austerity measures in 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Tabaqchali, A. (2020), ‘How Demographics Erode the Patronage Buying Power of Iraq’s Muhasasa Ta’ifia,’ *Arab Reform Initiative*, 30 July 2020, p. 4, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/how-demographics-erode-the-patronage-buying-power-of-iraqs-muhasasa-taifia>; Al-Mawlawi, A. (2018), ‘Analysing Growth Trends in Public Sector Employment in Iraq’, LSE Middle East Centre blog series, 31 July 2018, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/07/31/analysing-growth-trends-in-public-sector-employment-in-iraq>.

<sup>27</sup> This also helps to explain the intensification of rivalry between Sadr and Nouri al-Maliki during this period, since a considerable Maliki legacy survives in the existing state networks owing to a period of expansion in public sector patronage under his premiership.

in the state's political economy of employment. Reacting to this reality, and despite being a key player in Iraqi politics, Sadr will continue to protest against the established system as long as it does not provide benefits to his followers.

Second, the new patronage networks which affiliated to the Sadrists from within the professional middle classes did so on an extremely fluid and instrumental basis. The networks align according to the shifting balance of power within each ministry or directorate. As such, these networks often represent a 'soft' base, distinct from the core base which is tied to the Sadrist movement via deeper processes of socialization.

Following the Sadrist victory in the 2018 election, the movement became increasingly more influential within the government, accumulating even more power under the Kadhimi administration. However, these gains took place against the backdrop of a political system that was heading into crisis. This gave rise to an apparent paradox, whereby the Sadrists' political success as an electoral force, coupled with their greater influence within the state, produced diminishing electoral returns. By the time of the 2021 election, the Sadrist vote fell to below the total gained by the movement in 2014, from nearly 1.5 million to only 885,310 (which was especially surprising given high population growth and the Sadrists' traditionally youthful demographic profile).

According to a number of senior leaders, there was an initial hesitancy within the movement to even compete in the 2021 election, following internal polls which had suggested votes would be lost.<sup>28</sup> Ultimately, however, the Sadrists were able to compensate for a declining vote base through a sophisticated election strategy and the strategic and tactical failures of their rivals.<sup>29</sup>

## **Government formation and breaking the 'Shia House'**

The 2021 election result left senior Sadrists in a buoyant mood. Sensing their rivals in the SCF had been weakened, and Iraq's political system was teetering on a precipice, they pushed for a national majority government. The goal was to take advantage of a narrow window of opportunity to permanently restructure the balance of power within the dominant Shia Islamist bloc. The project was inherently risky, and its failure propelled Sadr into a series of increasingly short-term and risky reactions.

Senior Sadrist leaders claimed in interviews with this paper's authors that the movement's shift away from consensus politics sought to 'correct the political process and enforce certain principles'<sup>30</sup> and did not merely represent a personal vendetta against Maliki and the PMF. They referred to the now famous statement, made in 2018 by the *marja'iyya* (the Shia leadership in Najaf), that 'those who have tried, should not try again'.<sup>31</sup> However, this principle was

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<sup>28</sup> Confidential research interviews with Sadrists, conducted by the authors in Baghdad between October 2021 and August 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Robin-D'Cruz (2022), 'The Sadrist Electoral Machine in Basra'.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> According to the Sadrists, this means that Nouri al-Maliki should not be a candidate. See 'Ayatollah Sistani: Those in power should not try for prime minister,' *Rudaw*, 9 October 2018, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/100920181>.

applied inconsistently. Notably, while trying to exclude Maliki entirely from the government formation process, the Sadrists accepted the inclusion in the SCF of other existing leaders such as Hadi al-Ameri.

Similar contradictions were also present with respect to the Sadrists' own coalition partners. No attempt was made to break the political consensus which apportions the principal offices of state (the roles of prime minister, president and speaker of parliament, and their deputies) according to the *muhasasa* ethno-sectarian system. Nor was there any suggestion that Sunnis, Kurds and Shia would be called upon to surrender their sect-based spheres of influence over certain ministries.

## **Sadrists argued that the movement could better position itself by refusing to participate in another 'status quo government', instead advancing its reform agenda through reviving protests.**

Rather than leading a reformist bloc with a programme for government, Sadr seemed to be seeking to precipitate a crisis within the 'Shia House'. The primary objective was maintaining pressure on the SCF by forcing it into a situation where it could neither form a government with him nor exclude him entirely from the process. In this scenario, the Sadrists hoped the only way forward would be for the SCF to split, with some of its elements joining Sadr and others being excluded from doing so.

This contradiction between reformist discourse and reality reflects a more general trend in the movement. Rhetoric on anti-corruption has been widely viewed as a cover for targeting specific actors and networks. For instance, Sadrist rivals in the SCF have been targeted by the Anti-Corruption and Major Crimes Committee (XO-29)<sup>32</sup> which has been lauded by many Western policymakers and analysts for its work in contributing to accountability in the political system. Despite its intended purpose, Sadrist leaders have used this committee to go after opponents, in a bid to acquire further power.

The withdrawal of Sadrist MPs from parliament in mid-2022 was a key turning point. Sadrists argued that the movement could better position itself in readiness for the future by refusing to participate in another 'status quo government', instead advancing its reform agenda through reviving protests. The aim, in the words of one influential Sadrist, was 'to take a short-term risk to achieve the larger goal'.<sup>33</sup> Another Sadrist leader explained that 'elections are not the sole procedure to achieve this objective [the national majority government]. Sadr can capitalize on people, protesters, not just Sadrists but also non-Sadrist groups'.<sup>34</sup> But this was not because a new and transformative type of politics was being driven forward against an anti-reformist establishment: rather, it was because the Sadrists were

<sup>32</sup> The XO-29 committee (formally the Permanent Committee to Investigate Corruption Cases and Major Crimes, or PCICCMC) was created via Executive Order No. 29 issued by the Prime Minister's Office on 27 August 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Research interviews with Sadrists, conducted in Baghdad between October 2021 and August 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

taking increasingly desperate risks in a bid to break the unity of the so-called ‘Shia House’, so that it could be rebuilt around Sadristism. In other words, the aim of the Sadrists was to displace Shia-centricity with Sadrist-centricity.

## **The politics of the Sadrist voter base**

Often overlooked – and under-studied – in favour of a focus on elite competition, the Sadrist base has an impact on Sadrist politics, by way of a ‘bottom-up’ dynamic. Thus, to build an understanding of Sadr it is necessary not only to analyse his political motivations, statements, and tactical moves *vis-à-vis* other elite actors, but also to study his primary audience – the millions of poor urban Iraqis who comprise his core support. The survey commissioned by Chatham House generates new insights into the movement’s social base.

As the Sadrist base has grown in strength, it has become one of the largest Islamist movements in the Middle East. Its considerable mobilization potential, together with the apparent flexibility of its leaders, has proven attractive to actors of many different types, each of which has sought unsuccessfully to co-opt the movement’s social power for its own purposes. However, such attempts have backfired on every occasion, and the Sadrist movement has been able to maintain its own agenda at the expense of that of its allies.

In part, the reason lies in misreadings of the Sadrist base. For example, between 2015 and 2018 sections of Iraq’s leftist and liberal elites sought to join forces with the Sadrists. These groups hoped to use the Sadrists’ electoral base to break into the political system and advance their own reform agenda. They also believed that they could influence the Sadrist base and shift its ideological orientation towards their own. More recently, US policymakers believed that the base’s ‘Iraq-first’, nationalist tendencies could be weaponized against Iran. Meanwhile, the Iranian government itself has deployed military and financial muscle to try and co-opt Sadrist networks to serve its own ends.

However, in most cases, those who have tried to make use of the Sadrist base have ended up becoming instruments of Sadrist power. Iranian actors (notably the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – IRGC) have had more success than most, but even the IRGC failed to make inroads into the core Sadrist supporter base, succeeding only in co-opting networks within the movement’s clerical and paramilitary strata.

## **Religion and politics: trust and agents of change**

The survey conducted by Chatham House among inhabitants of Sadr City in June 2022 revealed that Sadrists hold diverse views on the relationship between religion and politics. This complexity cannot be easily captured in terms of simple binaries such as Islamist/secular or support for an Islamic vs a *madani* (civic) state. Moreover, this diversity has a generational aspect. Perhaps surprisingly, Sadrists aged under 45 years demonstrated relatively more faith than older generations in religious leaders’ ability to achieve political change

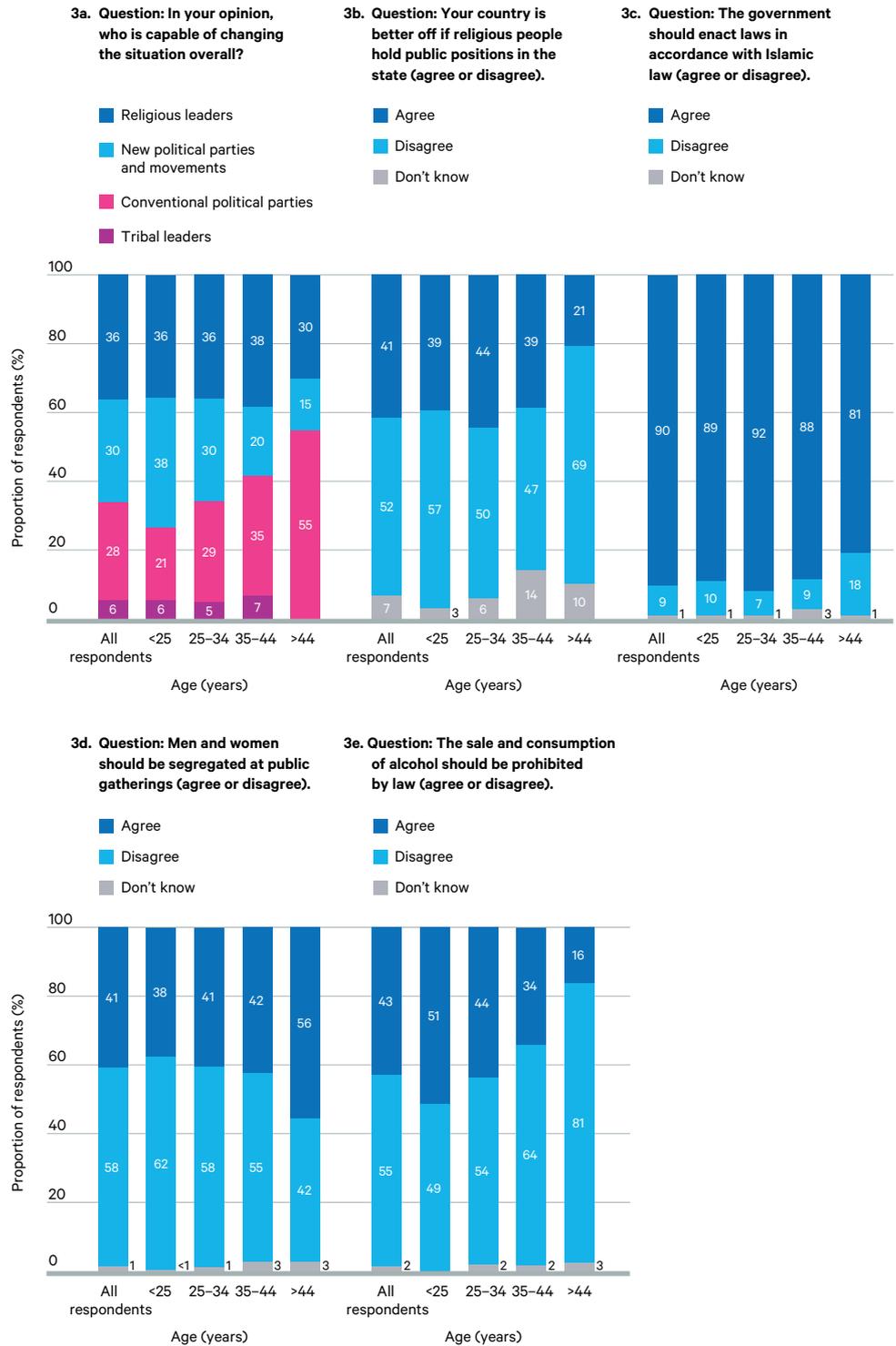
(see Figure 3a, below). Similarly, younger respondents showed greater inclination towards some positions associated with stronger religious and Islamist tendencies (see Figures 3c to 3e). This has important implications, not only for the nature of Sadrist politics in general and the ways in which Sadrist leaders will seek to appeal to the movement's base, but also for those in the *madani* and Tishreeni camps who seek to compete for leadership within the Sadrist base, or at its fringes.

Religious leaders were identified as the most trusted agents of political change by 36 per cent of all respondents, compared with 30 per cent and 28 per cent for new political parties and conventional political parties respectively (see Figure 3a). This figure may seem low, but it is significant given that Sadrist clerics play no role in formal politics (i.e. they are not party leaders, politicians, ministers or prime ministers). It is this absence from the formal political sphere that lends Sadrist clerics an edge in credibility with the base when it comes to political leadership. Ordinary Sadrists typically interact with the movement's clerics within everyday non-political contexts. Consequently, they are not as tainted by political governance failures notwithstanding the Sadrists' deep systemic involvement as a governing party.

By contrast, as shown in Figure 4, trust in political institutions (the Council of Ministers – as the Iraqi cabinet is known – or the parliament – the Council of Representatives) is extremely low, with 49 per cent and 54 per cent of all respondents claiming to have 'absolutely no trust' in these respective institutions. When those reporting 'limited trust' are added in, this means that the Council of Ministers and Council of Representatives were distrusted by 72 per cent and 75 per cent of all respondents respectively. This leaves religious leadership, civil society institutions (mainly mediated through the Sadrists' religious networks), and the Iraqi security forces (excluding the PMF) as the main repositories of trust, among those institutions upon which respondents were asked to give their views.

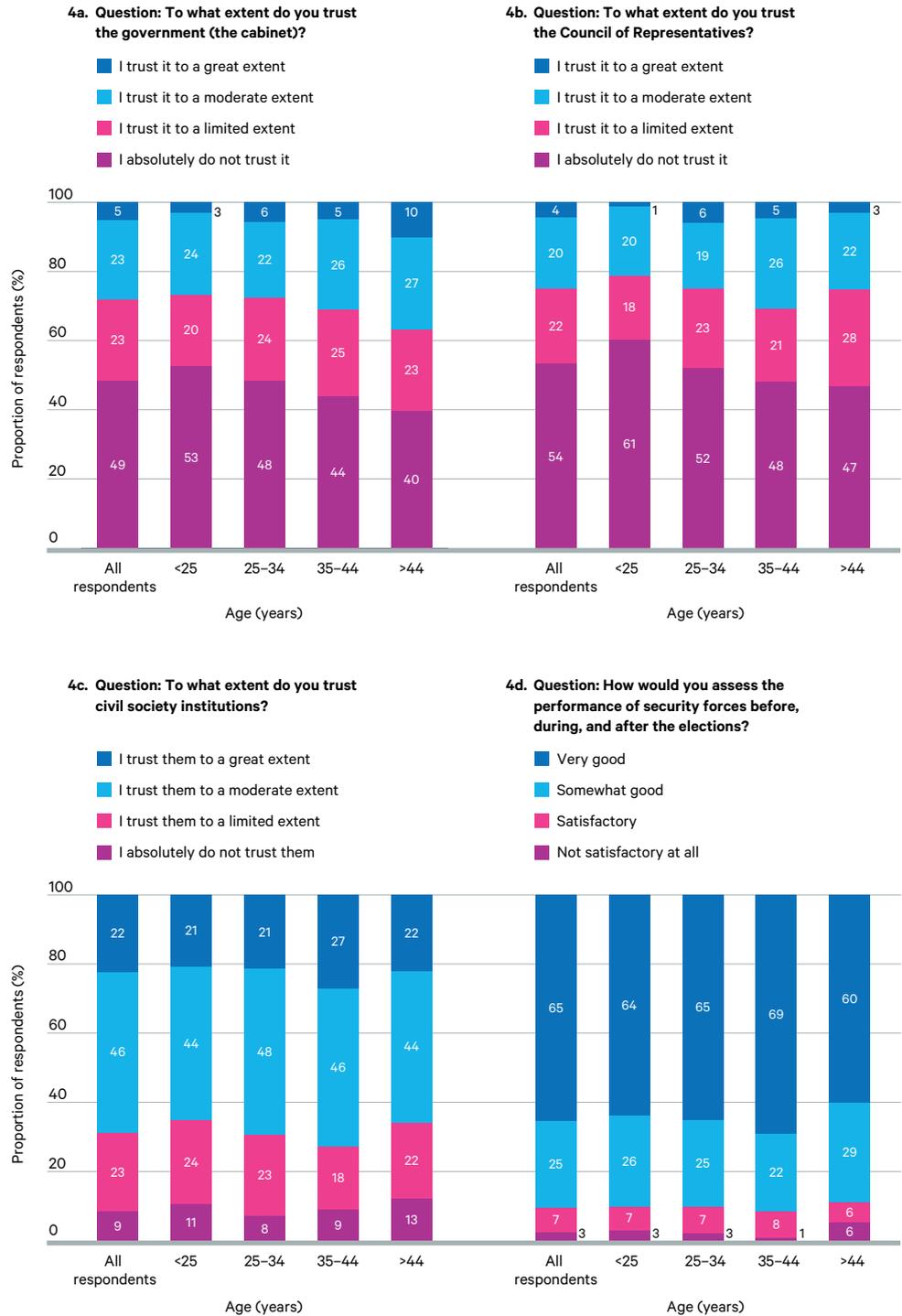
A different pattern was observed, however, in the case of respondents aged 45 years and over, who favoured conventional political parties as most capable of realizing political change, over religious leaders and new political parties. (Figure 3a gives the respective preferences as 55 per cent, 30 per cent and 15 per cent of responses in this age group.) Variation in views across the age groups was highly apparent in responses to the survey questions on levels of trust in political institutions (Figure 4), where levels of distrust were highest among the youngest respondents, aged under 25 years. Lower levels of trust in the political institutions seem broadly to correlate with higher levels of trust in religious leadership.

Figure 3. Views on religion and Islamism



Source: Chatham House research.  
Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

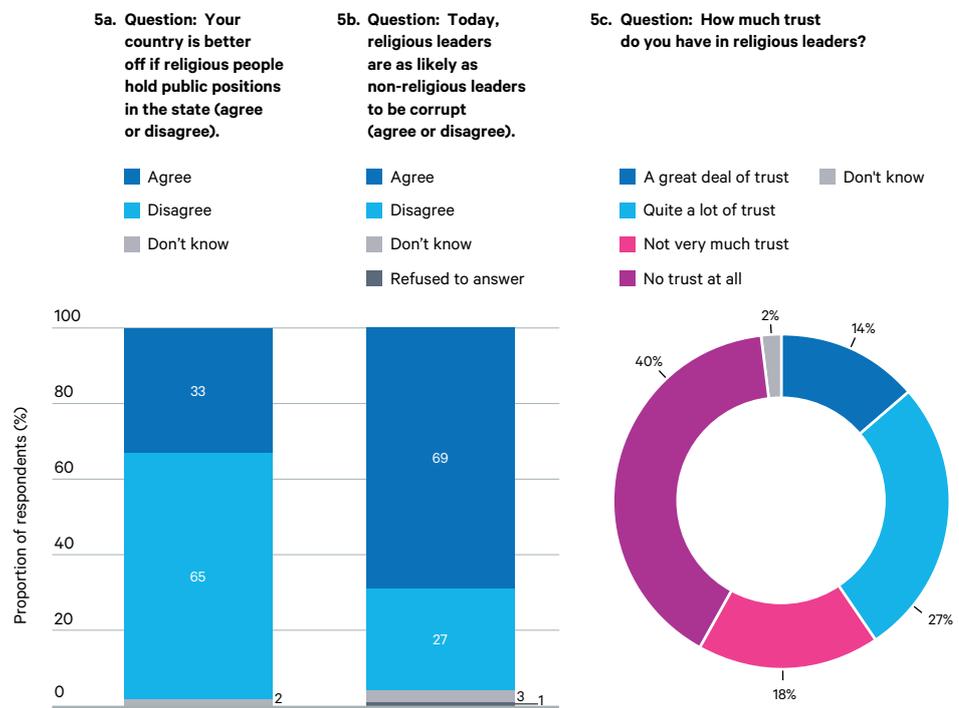
Figure 4. Levels of trust in institutions



Source: Chatham House research.  
Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Further complicating the picture, a majority (52 per cent) of respondents of all ages disagreed with the proposition that Iraq would be better off if religious people held public positions in the state, with 41 per cent being in agreement that it would (Figure 3b). In part, this disparity reflects the Sadr-centric nature of the movement. Sadrists do not tend to subscribe to the notion that clerics should hold political office, but do believe in Sadr’s unique authority to oversee political as well as religious affairs. It should also be noted that other survey data for Iraq as a whole indicates that the Sadrists remain comparatively better disposed towards religious actors holding public positions (see Figure 5: 33 per cent of the Iraq-wide sample agreeing with the proposition, and 65 per cent opposing).

**Figure 5. Arab Barometer 2018: political Islam (data for Iraq only)**



Source: Arab Barometer – Wave V, 2018–2019.

### Support for Islamism

Overall, the Sadrist base remains deeply committed to a religious vision of politics but does not have a clear or unified ideological position on how this should be achieved, or what the details would look like. For instance, overwhelming majorities of more than 80 per cent across all age groups believe that parliament should enact laws (including penal codes and personal status laws) in accordance with Islamic law (see Figure 3c). However, when asked whether they agreed with gender segregation at public events (Figure 3d), respondents were more evenly divided. The same applies to the prohibition of alcohol.

Here, too, the generational divide adds complexity, with Sadrists in the youngest age bracket surveyed (under 25 years) being decidedly more likely (62 per cent) to state their opposition to gender segregation, but also somewhat more likely (51 per cent) to support the prohibition of alcohol compared to older age groups. While 90 per cent of the sample (including 89 per cent of the 18–24 age bracket) supported the general statement that the government should enact laws in accordance with Islamic law, this figure fell to 81 per cent for those respondents over 45 years old.

Public opinion polling shows that two decades of governance failure has discredited both Islamism as a governing ideology and the elites who have espoused this form of governance.<sup>35</sup> However, the results from Chatham House’s survey of the Sadrist base indicate that governance failure may have increased attachment to religious leadership as an alternative, particularly among the younger generation. This means that the Sadrist movement will continue to push its religious credentials *vis-à-vis* its merely political Islamist rivals, such as Nouri al-Maliki, who have become more disconnected from clerical and religious leadership.

The movement also remains overwhelmingly committed to an Islamic vision of politics, even if this vision has not been crystallized in a specific model of state or programmatic politics. Consequently, the Sadrist leadership has greater flexibility in its political positions: however, the latter are also constrained to remain within a broader religious-Islamic frame.

Perhaps the most surprising revelation of the Chatham House survey is the diversity of religio-political views among the Sadrist base. Responses to a number of the questions posed on the topic of these views (see Figures 3, 6 and 7) showed a fairly even spread across various positions, with contradictory stances sometimes being apparent within a single age bracket. The Sadrists have avoided formulating and imposing a clearly defined and rigid programmatic political ideology (Islamist or otherwise), preferring instead to manage this internal diversity through more ambiguous and flexible political forms. This was perhaps captured more clearly in the shift between the Sadrists’ 2018 and 2021 election campaigns, with the former tilting into *madani* politics while the latter refocused Sadrist politics on core religious themes.

## **Attitudes towards other protest movements**

When the Sadrist movement pivoted back to protest politics in 2022, its rhetoric towards the Tishreen movement shifted markedly in order to facilitate a reconciliation.<sup>36</sup> The Sadrist leadership was clearly aware that, following its exit from parliament, the movement’s protest strategy needed to broaden

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<sup>35</sup> Data from Arab Barometer – Wave V, 2018–2019 (not reproduced in this paper), shows that only 20 per cent of respondents trusted the country’s Islamist movements, while 71 per cent did not.

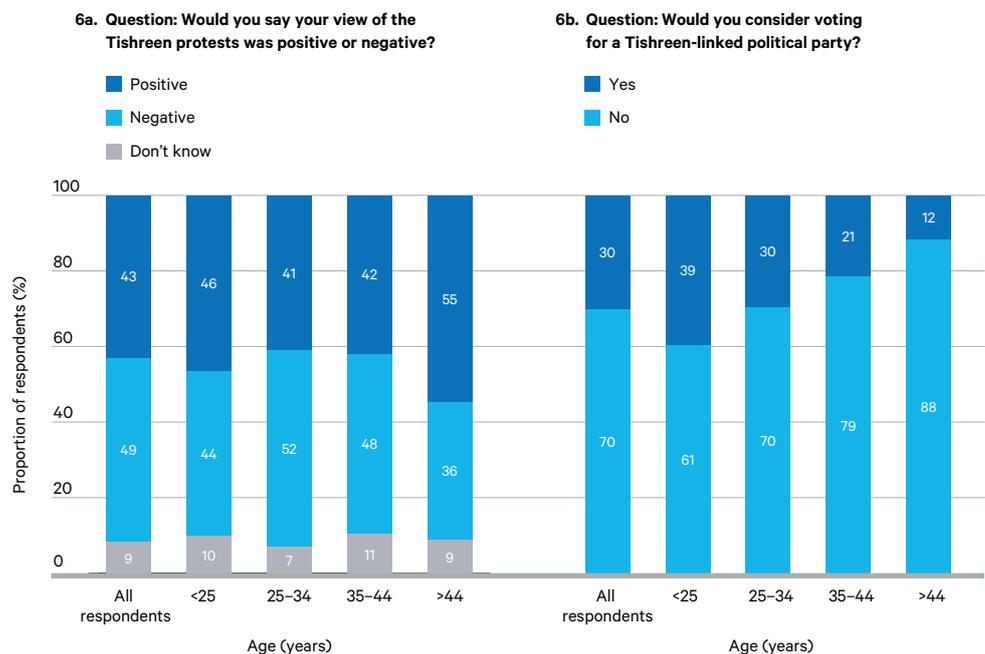
<sup>36</sup> Not only did statements from Sadr and his proxies Salih Muhammad al-Iraqi and Muslih Mohammad al-Iraqi take the form of a direct appeal for Tishreen to join the protest movement, but iconography of Tishreen martyrdom was deployed during the Sadrist protest at the Council of Representatives in July/August 2022. Tishreen tents were also set up, and Sayyid Ibbrahim al-Jabiri, the head of the Sadrist protest committee, was filmed holding consultation sessions with Tishreen activists.

beyond the core Sadrist base. Leaders told the authors they hoped to recreate the strategy that produced the remarkable electoral success in 2018.

According to Sadrist interlocutors in Chatham House research interviews held in July 2022, ‘some protest leaders visited Sadr in Najaf over [the] last two or three months, exchanging ideas, but they have not reached the status of alliance’.<sup>37</sup> Given the Sadrists’ prior role in suppressing the Tishreen uprising in 2019, it was clear that they would face an uphill struggle in rebuilding relations with the protest movement. Many Tishreen activists, viewing the Sadrists and the SCF as two sides of the same coin, appeared to prefer to sit back and let the two groups fight it out.<sup>38</sup>

According to Chatham House’s survey, Sadrists hold complex views about Tishreen. Across all age groups, Sadrists showed a high degree of affinity with the Tishreen movement. 43 per cent of respondents claimed to hold positive views about the Tishreen protests, against 49 per cent who reported negative views (see Figure 6). This is despite strident anti-Tishreen rhetoric from Sadrist leaders, and Sadrist violence against Tishreen activists in the intervening years.<sup>39</sup> These results indicate that for the Sadrist leadership, protest activism is not merely a matter of elite bargaining but is also driven from the bottom up by these powerful tendencies within the movement’s social base.

**Figure 6. Views on Tishreen**



Source: Chatham House research.  
Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

<sup>37</sup> Research interview with Sadrist, Baghdad, May 2022.  
<sup>38</sup> As one interviewee told the authors: ‘They both deserve death. We won’t be part of that.’ (Research interview with anonymous activist, Basra, 2 August 2022.)  
<sup>39</sup> Robin-D’Cruz, B. (2021), ‘The Social Logics of Protest Violence in Iraq: Explaining Divergent Dynamics in the Southeast’, Working Paper, LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series, 53, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/111784>.

The Sadrists are so dependent on reproducing a core vote that they cannot afford to allow ‘drift’ – either at the margins, or for Shia youth growing up in Sadrist milieux like Sadr City. For that reason, they engage with Tishreen parties. This risk was demonstrated in the Chatham House survey data, particularly with respect to younger Sadrists. Overall, 32 per cent of respondents aged between 18 and 34 years reported that they would consider voting for a Tishreen-linked political party (see Figure 6b: 39 per cent of under-25s and 30 per cent of 25–34-year-olds). This compares with 12 per cent for the over-44 age group – a very low proportion, since 55 per cent of the latter group claimed to hold a positive view of Tishreen. The disparity indicates that Sadr’s political hegemony over parts of his base, particularly its younger demographic, may be weakening.

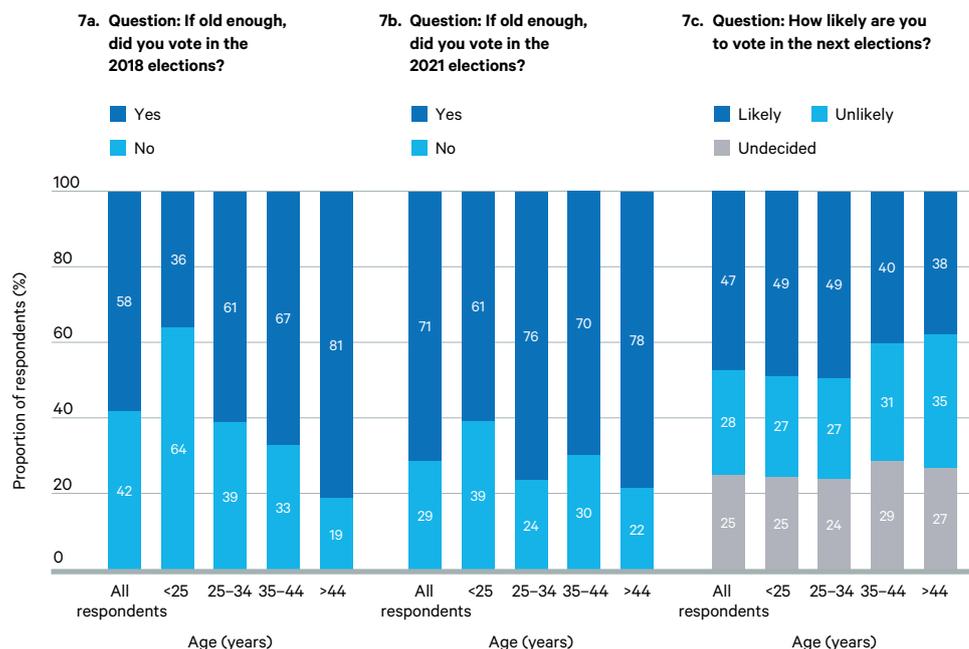
The Sadrist leadership are seeking to accommodate these Tishreeni currents within their own movement, while also co-opting elements of Tishreen’s disorganized leadership in piecemeal fashion. If successful, this would reduce the likelihood that Tishreen, and the social currents feeding into it, can become an autonomous political force for reform. At the same time, management of the base is reinforcing the Sadrist leadership’s greater proclivity for risk-taking and their willingness to destabilize elite politics. The Sadrists’ strategy of controlled – or contained – instability, which has previously succeeded in pacifying the more radical impulses of the base, is now being pushed to its limit.

## **Attitudes to elections**

It is notable that, compared to Tishreenis and non-Sadrist youth in general, the Sadrist base appears to have more faith in the potential for electoral politics to deliver change. In Chatham House’s survey, around 49 per cent of Sadrist youths aged between 18 and 34 years stated that they were likely to vote in the next election (Figure 7c), against 27 per cent who said they were unlikely to. In terms of the whole sample, 47 per cent of respondents indicated that they were likely to vote. Such figures are above the turnout, which is usually estimated at closer to 30 per cent. 71 per cent of Sadr City residents interviewed for the Chatham House survey (Figure 7b) indicated that they voted in the 2021 election, far above the officially reported turnout. Surprisingly little variation by age group was reported across these figures.

Supplementary questions in the Chatham House survey revealed that 49 per cent of all respondents regarded elections as decidedly more effective in generating political reform than protests, with 22 per cent selecting protests as the most effective method. Meanwhile, 21 per cent of those surveyed rated elections and protests as equally effective in achieving reform. In sum, it can be assumed that the majority of Sadrists tend to regard protest activism and electoral politics as complementary strategies, while Tishreenis and non-Sadrist youth are far more sceptical of the effectiveness of elections – notwithstanding efforts made by international actors to increase voter turnout.

**Figure 7. Elections and voting behaviour**



Source: Chatham House research.  
Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

If such is the case, these attitudes have been further amplified by the October 2021 election and its aftermath. The Sadrist success, in terms of seats, further energized both the movement’s social base and its enthusiasm for electoral politics. Meanwhile, the rapid disintegration of Imtidad – which was the largest political grouping to emerge from the Tishreen movement – has had a dampening effect on the non-Sadrist protest movement, deepening its adherents’ disillusionment with politics.<sup>40</sup>

Profound implications emerge for future leadership structures within Iraq’s protest currents and civil society. The Sadrist base is looking for strong leadership that is able to contest electoral power. As such, the base is unlikely to be co-opted by a protest movement without a credible electoral dimension. At the same time, while Tishreen and other civil society groups continue to boycott elections, or are unable to offer a credible and unified electoral option, the Sadrists are best placed to capitalize politically on growing protest sentiment.

More broadly, Chatham House’s survey data suggests that Sadrist enthusiasm for elections is likely to maintain the group’s dominant electoral position in a context of broader trends towards voter apathy. Our survey was conducted after the Sadrist withdrawal from parliament, and, while this is likely to have injected some confusion into the base regarding the movement’s electoral stance, the data also suggests that Sadrists do not regard this as a definitive break with electoral politics. This would suggest that Sadr’s base expects the movement to remain engaged in future elections, despite Sadr’s current ambiguity on this question.

<sup>40</sup> Bobseine, H. (2022), ‘Under Pressure, Iraqi Activists Plot “Third Way”’, Century International, 28 September 2022, <https://tcf.org/content/report/under-pressure-iraqi-activists-plot-third-way>.

## Conclusions

From the perspective of policymakers both inside and outside Iraq, Sadr has been an enigmatic leader. He has claimed multiple identities, from insurgent militia leader to reformist protest leader – and from election winner to revolutionary – complicating simplistic labels such as ‘reformer’ or ‘anti-Iranian’ which continue to be assigned to him. This research paper has sought to present an interpretation of Sadr’s words and actions in the context of the dilemmas he faces in the management of both elite politics and his own support base. In the past, Sadr has balanced these competing demands through a strategy of controlled instability, not to reform or revolutionize Iraq’s political system, but to gain ground for his movement within the Shia apportionment of the Iraqi state.

However, changing demographics have been seen as a medium-term challenge to the post-2003 Iraqi political order, which is widely regarded as becoming ideologically and economically bankrupt. Many young Iraqis struggle to find jobs. They no longer believe their leaders’ nationalist, sectarianist or reformist rhetoric. In this light, Sadr’s protest agenda represents an attempt to distance himself and his movement from a toxic political order which harms Iraqis on a daily basis. It also represents a tool to gain leverage over political rivals.

Sadr’s goal is to match the controlled instability that came between 2015 and 2018, when he convinced many that he was a protest-minded leader while still maintaining leverage inside the government. This allowed him to install more loyalists across state institutions, with the ultimate intention of removing from power his primary political adversary, Nouri al-Maliki.

### **Sadr’s protest agenda represents an attempt to distance himself and his movement from a toxic political order which harms Iraqis on a daily basis.**

However, Sadr’s rise within Iraqi politics backfired with his base. Failing to sufficiently include his followers within the gains of increased power fed disillusionment with the political system and reinforced tendencies within the base against the traditional political consensus. Chatham House survey data indicates that the base will push the Sadrist movement in more radical directions. However, it is not going to abandon its religious leaders, protests or electoral politics, all of which tend to be seen by Sadrists as complementary strategies.

Sadr was also unable to navigate the incoherent and fractured structure of the state to maximize the opportunities afforded by his 2021 election victory. Instead, the prevailing system was deployed to stop his bid for power. His opponents’ control of the judiciary and over security institutions provided judicial and security mechanisms to halt Sadr’s rise.

Despite ‘quitting’ at the end of August 2022, Sadr is by no means ‘done’ with politics. His move back to an agenda of street protests is part of a strategy to garner more votes, further empowering him in a future election and government formation process. However, the attempted shift from Shia-centric to Sadr-centric

state-building, and growing dissatisfaction with status quo politics within his base, are now pushing Sadr's model of controlled (or contained) instability to breaking point. The result is a more unstable and reactionary Sadrist politics and a great Sadrist proclivity for risk-taking – and, consequently, a proliferation of miscalculations and missteps by Sadr (such as withdrawing his MPs, or criticizing his own followers for the escalation of violence in Baghdad's Green Zone in late August 2022). Ultimately, a less stable Sadrist movement means a tilt towards greater instability for Iraq's political system.

Many Western policymakers were surprised and upset with Sadr's increased appetite for risk. The rhetoric quickly changed from 'reformist' to 'hostage-taker', with many asking the authors of this paper how Sadr could hold the country hostage. Sadr was an unreliable ally to pursue certain Western interests and reform Iraq's political system. Despite notions held in foreign capitals that Sadr was 'anti-Iran' or 'pro-reform', the reality of Iraq's elite networks is more complicated. Sadr, like any other political leader, navigates across the political spectrum and cannot be boxed into any single category. This reality means that policymakers cannot depend on Sadr or any other individual within Iraq's political system to channel reform. At times, their support – even if tacit – fuels power plays in the local context. Instead of picking favourites or 'winners', policymakers should focus on building coherent institutions that hold to account the entire network of elites.

## Annex

**Table 1.** Al Sadr City survey: population sampled by age group and district of residence

	<25 years	25–34 years	35–44 years	>44 years	Total
Al Chawadir	16	28	17	1	62
Al Sadr City (unspecified)	8	45	5	1	59
Sector 5	8	32	9	2	51
Sector 11	12	34	4		50
Sector 37	23	13	6	6	48
Sector 29	8	21	8	4	41
Sector 25	11	29	5		45
Fellah Street	12	17	10	2	41
Sector 1	10	23	6		39
Sector 55	9	18	8	1	36
Al Orfali	2	15	13	2	32
Al Gayara	2	16	13	1	32
Al Dakhil Street	11	10	8	3	32
Sector 40	6	18	6	1	31
Sector 12	6	17	8		31
Sector 48	9	24	1		34
Sector 46	6	20	5		31
Sector 63 – Al Gayara	9	14	5	2	30
Sector 4	10	8	4		22
Sector 35	8	8	5		21
Sector 36	8	8	4	1	21
Sector Zero	7	5	6	1	19
Sector 7	7	13	1		21
Maridi Market	4	14	2		20
Sector 68 – Al Gayara	7	10	3		20
Sector 6	4	16			20
Al Oula	2	10	3	1	16

**The Sadrist movement in Iraq**  
Between protest and power politics

	<25 years	25-34 years	35-44 years	>44 years	Total
Sector 69 – Al Gayara	5	11	1		17
Sector 67 – Al Gayara	1	8	2		11
Sector 61 – Al Gayara	4	4	3		11
Sector 16 – Al Gayara	3	5	3		11
Sector 8	3	8			11
Sector 44	3	2	2	2	9
Sector 30 – Al Gayara	3	6	1		10
Sector 20	4	5	1		10
Sector 21	3	2	3		8
Sector 76 – Sharka		4	2		6
Sector 62 – Al Gayara	3	3	1		7
Sector 39 – Al Falah Street	2		1	2	5
Sector 3	1	5			6
Sector 39	1	2	2		5
Sector 43	4	2			6
Sector 38	3	3			6
Sector 9	1	3			4
Mudhafar Street	2	2			4
Sector 2	1	2			3
Sector 10	2		1		3
Hay Al Amanah		1	1		2
Jameela		1	1		2
Sector 25		1	1		2
Sector 37 – Al Chawadir		1	1		2
Sector 41		2			2
Sector 44 – Fellah Street				1	1
Sector 37 – Al Chwadir Street				1	1
Sector 33		2			2
Sector 56				1	1
Sector 47	1	1			2

**The Sadrist movement in Iraq**  
Between protest and power politics

	<25 years	25-34 years	35-44 years	>44 years	Total
Al Habibiya				1	1
Sector 37 – Al Dakhil Street			1		1
Sector 48			1		1
Sector 64 – Al Gayara			1		1
Sector 27			1		1
Sector 36			1		1
Sector 83		1			1
Sector 38 – Al Chwadir Street		1			1
Sector 57		1			1
Sector 30		1			1
Sector 17		1			1
Sector Zero		1			1
Sector 44 – Al Falah Street		1			1
Sector 25 – Fella Street		1			1
Sector 45		1			1
Sector 50		1			1
Sector 43 – Al Falah Street		1			1
Sector 36 – Al Chwadir Street		1			1
Sector 79		1			1
Al Hay Market		1			1
Sector 39 – Al Chawadir	1				1
Hay Tariq	1				1
Sector 32	1				1
Sector 9 – Al Falah Street	1				1
<b>Total</b>	<b>279</b>	<b>586</b>	<b>197</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>1,099</b>

## About the authors

**Dr Renad Mansour** is a senior research fellow and project director of the Iraq Initiative at Chatham House. His research explores state–society relations and the political economy of Iraq and the Middle East. He is also a senior research fellow at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani. Renad was previously a lecturer at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), where he taught the international relations of the Middle East. He has also worked at the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, the Iraq Institute for Strategic Studies in Beirut, and the University of Cambridge, where he has taught since 2015 and from which he received his PhD. He is a co-author of *Once Upon a Time in Iraq*, published by BBC Books/Penguin to accompany the critically acclaimed BBC series.

**Dr Benedict Robin-D’Cruz** is a postdoctoral fellow at Aarhus University’s Political Science Department, where he works on the TOI project (TOI: Bringing in the Other Islamists – comparing Arab Shia and Sunni Islamism(s) in a sectarianized Middle East). He is a specialist in Iraq’s Shia Islamist politics and protest movements, with a particular focus on the Sadrist movement. He has published widely on these topics for field-leading academic journals, such as the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, as well as for LSE’s Conflict Research Programme, and a number of international media outlets and think-tanks.

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank all those who were interviewed for this paper and those who conducted the survey in Sadr City. We also thank the peer reviewers who gave their comments on earlier drafts, and Hayder al-Shakeri for his support. We would like to thank Georgia Cooke and Nicole El Khawaja of Chatham House’s Middle East and North Africa Programme for managing this paper, and Vera Chapman Browne of the Chatham House publications team for editing the text.

### Iraq Initiative at Chatham House

The project tackles the root causes of state fragmentation in Iraq, and challenges assumptions in Western capitals about stabilization and peacebuilding. The aim is to reach a more nuanced approach to navigating Iraq’s complex and interlinked political, security and economic environments.

The initiative is based on original analysis and close engagement with a network of researchers and institutions inside Iraq. At the local level, it maps key political, business, military and societal figures across Iraq. At the national level, it explores the struggle over the state.

The project uses these field-based insights to inform international policy towards Iraq. Chatham House convenes Iraq Initiative activities in various cities in the Middle East, the UK, the US and Europe.

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Cover image: Supporters of Iraqi Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr gather in the capital Baghdad on 29 August 2022.

Dozens of Sadr's supporters stormed the Republican Palace after he said he was quitting politics.

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ISBN 978 1 78413 545 4

DOI 10.55317/9781784135454

Cite this paper: Mansour, R. and Robin-D'Cruz, B. (2022), *The Sadrist movement in Iraq: Between protest and power politics*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784135454>.

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Charity Registration Number: 208223