



The Cambridge Security Initiative

## **IRAQ'S NEW PRIME MINISTER WILL NOT BE A FIX**

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On 29 November 2019, after months of protests and related violence in which over 400 Iraqis have been killed, Iraqi prime minister Adil ‘Abd al-Mahdi resigned, one year after taking office. Yet, protesters are not satisfied with Mahdi’s resignation. Rather than calling for the end of one man, or one party, they have been calling for the downfall of the post-2003 political system.

Mahdi’s resignation not only failed to stop protests, but reignited political wrangling following last year’s election that resulted in two Shi’a-led political blocs – Hadi al-Amiri’s Binaa and Muqtada al-Sadr’s Islah – agreeing to share government posts. Mahdi was a compromise candidate for the PM job because he was not aligned to a political party. However, this inherent weakness meant Mahdi was ineffective as a prime minister, allowing Binaa and Islah to wield unchecked power. Iraqi protestors blame this corruption for the fact that many in Iraq still don’t have basic services, such as clean water or electricity, despite Iraq’s oil reserves.

Rather than leading the protests as he did in 2016, Sadr remains in Iran, signalling his departure from politics. While the Sadrist movement remains, Sadr himself is taking a backseat, possibly due to threats from Iran-backed armed groups in Iraq. Under this new context, Amiri’s Binaa bloc has become the de facto largest bloc, working with Kurdish and Sunni mainstream parties to maintain the system. Although Sadr’s bloc can veto, they’re in a weaker position vis-à-vis formal politics.

Moving forward, the political parties want a replacement prime minister akin to Mahdi’s profile: a weak, non-political, compromise candidate who appears competent on the surface but allows the parties to continue exploiting the political process. The protesters in Iraq are calling for the opposite – a strong, disciplined leader who can hold the political parties to account. Their number one candidate is former deputy leader of the Counter Terrorism Service Abdul Wahab al-Saidi, who is a national hero for his leadership in the fight against ISIS and whose demotion sparked protests in early October.

### **OUTLOOK**

The fact that a new PM has yet to be named demonstrates the political parties’ lack of interest in genuine reform. On 26 December, President Barham Salih rejected Binaa’s latest candidate, governor of Basra Asad al-Aydani, because he felt that the candidate would be rejected by protesters who accuse Aydani of being supported by Iranian-backed groups. In any case, Grand

Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's top Shia cleric, has called for early elections, ensuring that the next prime minister is only interim. Although neither a confirmation nor a date is set for early elections, more Iraqi leaders are pointing to elections as the only way out of the current deadlock, to find some common ground between the elite and the street.