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A Day in Baghdad's Green Zone: Popular Anger and Political Deadlock in Iraq

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Photos and videos of Iraqi protesters pulling down the concrete walls of the fortified Green Zone before storming the Parliament's building, and those of Iraqi lawmakers and politicians, scared of the crowds, fleeing in luxury cars or crossing the Tigris River by boat to find refuge, made the headlines on Saturday, 30 April 2016. The crowds left the Green Zone on Sunday following a statement issued by the protests' organising committee and distributed by the office of Muqtada al-Sadr – leader of the Sadrist Movement – whose followers massively participated in the Green Zone breach. While damage to public property was negligible and few lawmakers were attacked or intimidated by the protesters, the 30 April events will certainly have a huge impact on the already shaky political process in Iraq.

The penetration of the so-called Green Zone is highly symbolic for ordinary Iraqis. This term was used by the American military in 2003 to designate a fortified safe zone at the heart of Baghdad – in opposition to a highly dangerous “Red Zone” where most Iraqis lived – which housed the headquarters of the U.S. occupation and, previously, one of Saddam Hussein's palaces. Today the Green Zone serves as seat of the Iraqi Parliament and government, of the American as well as other foreign embassies, and houses many Iraqi high officials and their families. This off-limits zone where many protesters have never been symbolises for many Iraqis tyranny, occupation, corruption and the great gap separating the population from its political leaders. The Green Zone breach was mostly peaceful. The Iraqi security forces and Saraya al-Salam (Peace Brigades), al-Sadr's paramilitary group, formed a joint force to control crowds and avoid any excesses. After chanting slogans, waving Iraqi flags and taking photos in the

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Parliament, the protesters moved by night time to Celebration Square, another section of the Green Zone which used to be a parade ground for Saddam Hussein. They then withdrew the following day out of respect for an annual Shiite pilgrimage commemorating the death of Imam Musa Kadhim.

While the Iraqi protest movement started as early as July 2015 (essentially to improve services, to combat corruption, and to call for the reform of the political system), al-Sadr resurfaced and stole the spotlight in February 2016. The leader of the Sadrist Movement has proclaimed himself “godfather of the reform.” Since then, he has led a protest movement to back Prime Minister Haider al-‘Abadi’s endeavour to nominate a “technocratic” government in which, it is claimed, qualified and politically independent personalities would replace officials recruited according to a flawed ethno-sectarian quota system, in effect since 2003. Political forces have generally resisted al-‘Abadi’s efforts to reshuffle his cabinet and thus to threaten their patronage networks granted by ministerial positions. The Prime Minister’s first list of candidates to fill cabinet positions failed to acquire parliamentary approval. After weeks of political blockade by dissenting lawmakers, the Parliament approved a handful of ministers on Tuesday, 26 April. However, it failed to reach quorum on Saturday, 30 April, the day when the Parliament was supposed to complete voting on the cabinet reshuffle originally urged by al-‘Abadi in February.

Just before the protesters’ entry to the Green Zone, al-Sadr gave a televised speech from his stronghold of Najaf. He denounced the political blocs’ unwillingness to combat graft and to end the “odious” quota system by obstructing the formation of a “technocratic” cabinet and getting round popular demands for reforms. He added that “only Iraqis could choose their destiny: either maintaining corrupt officials along with the quota system or bringing down the entire government (without any exception).” Al-Sadr also announced a two-month withdrawal from public life as a sign of rejection of political inertia and of the return of any form of quota system. He added that he was waiting for “the great popular uprising and the major revolution to stop the march of the corrupt.” These words spearheaded and launched the protesters’ penetration of the Green Zone, considered either as a culmination of weeks of political turmoil and inaction by the Iraqi Parliament, or as a tactical movement (by the protests’ secular leaders and by Muqtada al-Sadr) to put pressure on Iraqi lawmakers to approve al-‘Abadi’s allegedly technocratic government – a first step in a set of reforms.

The protests' organising committee announced its roadmap (on 1 May) which took the form of a multileveled ultimatum. The first step is to call for an overall cabinet reshuffle. If this is not fulfilled, the protesters will call for the resignation of the so-called three presidencies (of the Republic, of the cabinet, and of the Parliament), then for early elections, and finally threaten to start civil disobedience and a general strike that would paralyse all public institutions.

Both the American and Iranian administrations – in an unlikely tacit alliance – have so far supported Haidar al-'Abadi and have put pressure on their respective local allies in Iraq to keep al-'Abadi in power. For both administrations, Iraq's political stability is primordial to focus on the military campaign against the Islamic State, still in control of swathes of territories in Northern and Western Iraq. Whether or not they consider finding an alternative to al-'Abadi, it has become clear that Muqtada al-Sadr has imposed himself as a key actor to be reckoned with for any future political arrangement.

About the author

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