

Planning Post-IS Iraq: Competing Visions Within the Shia Block?

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The Shia Block is realistically the key determinant for national reconciliation to occur in Iraq. However, its internal divisions make it a problematic and non-unitary interlocutor for national, regional, and international initiatives. So far, the Block has outlined two plans: al-Hakim's "Historical Settlement" and al-Sadr's roadmap.

On Monday 20 February, Muqtada al-Sadr [announced](#) a 29-point roadmap for governing Mosul after the eventual liberation from Islamic State (IS), which appears closer than ever considering the ongoing offensive in the western part of the city. In October last year, Ammar al-Hakim [proposed a political reconciliation plan](#), the "Historical Settlement", as a template for governing Iraq in view of the defeat of IS. Though both are drawn from the Shia leadership and represent the Shia electorate, the two leaders and their constituencies have noticeable differences. A third pole is represented by the non-reconciliatory vision of Nuri al-Maliki, who has so far obstructed any dialogue in the country.

In light of the Sunni's weak political leadership and the Kurds being distracted by internal discordance as well as talks about independence, the Shia Block is realistically the key determinant for national reconciliation to occur in Iraq. However, its internal divisions make it a problematic and non-unitary interlocutor for national, regional, and international initiatives. This policy brief analyses what the common and competing positions of the plans that have been announced so far within the Block are. The major shortcoming of both al-Sadr's and al-Hakim's initiatives is the political heritage that they attach to a national reconciliation plan. Free from such heritage, al-Abadi, the fourth pole in the Shia Block, has yet to reinvigorate his initial push for reconciliation and articulate it in a comprehensive plan, one that may find support among a broader spectrum of domestic and international actors.

Competing positions

A key difference between al-Hakim's and al-Sadr's plans is first of all their political inception. Al-Hakim is the key promoter of the "Historical Settlement", but the plan is, in theory, the expression of the National Iraqi Alliance, the large but loose Shia Block holding the majority of parliamentary seats. Elected as chairman in September, after years of tensions over the Block's leadership, al-Hakim will hold the position for a year based on the rotational presidency arrangement [struck upon his election](#). In contrast, al-Sadr's plan is an expression of his own political will. Al-Sadr's political block, al-Ahrar, has boycotted NIA since spring 2016 and [rejoined](#) in October in what was most probably a political calculation when talks about provincial elections were underway. There is so far no indication that al-Sadr is promoting the plan among Iraqi parties

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and it has received almost no traction, but the announcement itself can be seen as another sign of competing visions within the Shia Block.

A second key difference is their scope. Al-Hakim's plan (based on leaked versions of it, as no official document was released) is intentionally vague. In all, the plan sets principles, parameters and steps forward, which participating parties must adhere to before a dialogue could start under the auspices of the UN. So far, the UN [has repeated that](#) "there is no UN draft or UN initiative. It is still an Iraqi national initiative", waiting most probably for the document to gain traction among the Iraqi leadership. On the other hand, al-Sadr's plan calls for a number of initiatives, which include a national dialogue, but extend to measures targeting socio-economic issues and the security apparatus, most of them as vague as the ones in the "Historical Settlement" document.

The two plans are also different with relation to a number of specific points. Al-Sadr sets as a condition the withdrawal of all foreign forces from the country. The document is explicit in calling for ending Turkish presence in the country (by diplomatic means, or otherwise) but also for ensuring "the exit of all occupying forces and the "friendly" ones, so to speak, from Iraqi lands". This is in line with al-Sadr's past position on opposing foreign presence in Iraq, including through armed struggle. However, the leader allows for UN engagement in settling the dispute with the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and eventually supervising the political process in the liberated areas. The engagement of the UN is more pronounced in al-Hakim's plan, which gives the UN the role of submitting a detailed strategy based on consultation with key representatives, [and in collaboration with Jordan](#), a key country hosting the Sunni opposition to the current Shia-dominated government.

Another difference in the documents concerns whether any plan for the future of Iraq should occur within or outside the electoral process. Al-Sadr asserts that a dialogue for national reconciliation, as he sees it, "should not be based on political and electoral grounds but on grounds that guarantee civil and social peace". In al-Hakim's document, instead, the "binding recognition of the results of free and fair elections" indicates the opposite attitude. This point is certainly important considering next year's election and it may reflect the two parties' electoral weight in the country. Furthermore, in al-Hakim's document the call for refraining from "the practice of duplication in attitudes towards the legitimacy of the Iraqi political system (a foot in the government and a foot in the opposition), including the cessation of instigation against the legitimacy of the existing political system internally and externally" is something that al-Sadr could take quite personally, given his confrontation with the current government.

Converging positions

The reaffirmation of Iraq's unity is shared by both plans. According to al-Hakim's, "the aim of the initiative is "to maintain and strengthen Iraq as an independent state that enjoys sovereignty, unity, federalism and democracy and that brings all of its people and components together." The same necessity is recognised in al-Sadr's roadmap as preserving "the unity, security, and sovereignty of Iraq". Al-Hakim's Historical Settlement goes perhaps even further, by affirming as one of the parameters: "faith and commitment in words and deed to the unity of Iraq ... and reject its division under any circumstances". This is a point that is certainly problematic for the KRG's aspiration for independence.

Al-Hakim and al-Sadr therefore present a similar vision on a number of other issues. First, they both envision the involvement of tribal leaders, social elites, religions, sects, minorities, and ethnic groups in the process of settling the ethno-sectarian tensions that have brought the country to the verge of collapse. They both exclude from the process Baathists and terrorists, al-Hakim extending this exclusion to Takfiri groups, defined as groups who label others as apostates. A key difference on this point could, however, emerge in the final draft of the document. Indeed, al-Hakim excludes the "Baath Party", potentially [leaving the door open](#) to

some Baathists to be involved in their personal capacity. Al-Sadr, instead, has referred so far to the Baathists as a whole, most probably excluding any form of consultation with them.

With regard to the security situation, al-Sadr's plan expresses the need not to interfere in neighbouring countries, alluding to the involvement of Iraqi elements within the Hashd al-Shaabi in the fight against IS in Syria (such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Saraya al-Khorasani), something al-Sadr [is opposed to](#). The need for non-interference is also explicitly mentioned in al-Hakim's document. Their position on the domestic role of the Hashd al-Shaabi is, however, less clear, with al-Sadr, for instance, calling for integrating the "disciplined elements with the Hashd in the security forces". The law regulating the Hashd al-Shaabi (November 2016) has already caused a harsh reaction from Sunni elements strengthening [the rejection](#) of al-Hakim's plan by the National Forces Alliance, the biggest Sunni block in the parliament.

Identifying shortcomings and conditions for national reconciliation

There are many things lacking in both documents. One of these missing elements is the result of the avoidance of concretely addressing the governing mechanisms in Nineveh in the future, a point which will be key in settling reconciliation within the governorate but also countrywide. Secondly, despite calls for an inclusive process, the "Historical Settlement" as well as al-Sadr's roadmap appear to be too focused on party politics, and so far there appears to be little engagement with bottom-up initiatives, another fundamental condition for national reconciliation to succeed. Furthermore, in the absence of a clear time framework, any reconciliation initiative runs the risk of becoming trapped in the electoral game in the midst of the next parliamentary and provincial elections which are likely to be scheduled for April 2018. Not only will this not serve the purpose of reconciliation, it will further discredit similar mechanisms in the eyes of the population, making reconciliation even more difficult.

Most importantly, al-Hakim and al-Sadr only represent part of the Shia Block, whose cohesion has been undermined over the last years by personal projects; polarisation within the electorate; and more recently the presence of armed groups—the Hashd al-Shaabi—partly a product of existing and perhaps newly forming political parties. The brokers of the two plans [are far from being perceived](#) as *super partes* actors, as both al-Hakim and al-Sadr were active (and problematic) parts in the political makeshift of Iraq after 2003. Beside these two brokers, the third pole, the Dawa Party, is still commanding political power within the Block and in the country. Al-Maliki is certainly not a realistic candidate under whom any reconciliation plan will succeed. He has [already labelled](#) the "Historical Settlement" as "treason against the Iraqi people". Despite the Dawa Party's nationalistic credentials still being strong, at least among a segment of society, al-Maliki is associated with the dark days of the advancement of IS, something that inevitably weakened his position.

Despite coming from the same party, al-Abadi has the credentials of having faced, so far successfully, IS and retaken important swathes of Iraqi territories. Al-Abadi had already come to office with a commitment to pursue a national reconciliation project. The passing of the [General Amnesty Law in August 2016](#) is an indication of this commitment together with the work of the National Reconciliation Committee in the Prime Minister's Office (NRC). By revitalising his initial push for reconciliation, al-Abadi has the opportunity to build upon common positions in existing plans and reconcile them with other demands coming from the Iraqi society. A comprehensive plan coming from al-Abadi would certainly have a more likely chance of finding support among a broader spectrum of domestic and international actors.

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