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### STRATEGIC TRENDS

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#### **GULF**

##### **Iraq: towards an intra-Shia armed confrontation?**

The so-called “Islamic State” is not the only threat that Iraq’s central institutions have been facing: the Shia faction has never been so fragmented and conflicting as today, putting under pressure the post-2003 system of power based on fragile sectarian balances and quotas.

On April 30 and then on May 20, protesters led by the Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr penetrated into the Baghdad’s Green Zone, storming highly-protected institutions, as the parliament and the prime minister’s office; they also stormed the headquarters of the rival Dawa party in Karbala and al-Nasiriyah.

Previously, Al-Ahrar (al-Sadr’s movement) had rejected the cabinet reshuffle suggested by the prime minister Haider al-Abadi, asking for the replacement of all ministries with independent technocrats and symbolically calling for the substitution of the three presidents (among them, the Kurdish president and the Sunni speaker of the Parliament), betting on populism to gain leverage on Baghdad.

This unprecedented mobilisation has introduced a new, hazardous dynamic in the Iraqi scenario: the “top-down driven” street protest: in fact, al-Sadr was able to capitalise on popular resentment against

corruption and political ineffectiveness. At the same time, the Islamic State has intensified its suicide attacks in the capital taking advantage of the institutional impasse, with the purpose to target predominantly Shia-populated districts.

It would be too much simplistic to describe the Sadrist mobilisation as a political confrontation between the street and élites. This is the way Al-Ahrar wants to describe the dispute in order to rally popular support: although an outsider of the current establishment, al-Sadr embodies a traditional, vertical kind of leadership (with his familiar and religious legacy) rooted in Basra, the Southern and Shiite most oil-rich Iraqi region.

The rising question regards the increased political rivalry within the Shia camp: Al-Ahrar, the Dawa Islamic Party and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) represent interests more and more difficult to reconcile. The same ruling Dawa party experiences a competition for power between al-Abadi and former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki's cronies.

After Saddam Hussein, the Sunni camp's alienation from state institutions fragmented the tribal landscape, so that jihadi cells skilfully managed to build alliances in order to establish the "Caliphate". Now, the intra-Shia rift risks to empower militias and paramilitary groups tied to government's forces (as in the case of the Popular Mobilisation Forces, Hashid al-Shaabi), further undermining the role of regular forces. In this chaotic framework, the battle for Falluja, still a DAESH stronghold, is going to start.

United States and Iran's negotiation would be critical to de-escalate tension and overcome the institutional impasse, but there is little room for bargaining. Both Washington and Teheran aim to downplay Sadr's role, since Americans want to preserve the stability of Iraqi institutions (notwithstanding the dysfunctional sectarian-based system they contributed to create) in order to fight ISIS, while Iranians support the rivals Dawa and ISCI. However, Al-Ahrar rejects foreign mediations: during the assault at the Green Zone, Sadrists chanted slogans against the USA and Iran, directly calling for the end of the "quotas" system.

Bottom line: the disquieting perspective of an armed conflict within the Iraqi Shia faction is not an off-chance hypothesis.

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