
Sadr's Ashura in Tehran

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The recent trip of Iraqi Shia cleric and politician Muqtada al-Sadr to Iran and his presence between Supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran leader ayatollah Khamenei and head of al-Quds forces Qasem Soleimani during Ashura commemoration in Tehran was an important event which could have impact on the Iraqi internal politics.

Sadr's appearance in Tehran was at time that internal Shia disputes in Iraq and talks over Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi are continuing. As well as bringing Iraq into the regional and international conflict has become undeniable.

How we can understand Sadr's presence there? And more importantly what kind of impact can leave on the Iraqi internal politics?

Why Sadr was in Tehran?

Sadr's followers prefer to interpret his trip to Tehran as more religious and personal trip rather than political one. Even some of them consider the photo of Sadr between Khamenei and Soleimani as internal Iranian political issue. But those follows Iraqi and regional politics cannot be convinced with that interpretation because in the previous Ashura's Sadr did not have such appearance and been for a while that he has cold relations with Iran.

Some others view his trip as might be want to make a deal with the Iranians to remove PM Adil Abdul- Madhi. But this is also not convincing, because despite the pressures and critics we have not seen serious efforts by the Saerun-Sadr to remove PM.

And others believes that he might be is negotiating between Iran and Saudi Arabia, but in fact Iran and Saudi Arabia have stronger channels than Iraq and Sadr to communicate as they can talk via some of the gulf countries or can send out direct messages to each other if they are willing to meet, not through Sadr as it has been for while he was in bad shape with the Iranians.

In general we can look at some of the factors on why Sadr was in Tehran?

First: Role of Ayatullah Kazemi al-Haeri and internal Shia problem in Iraq

After drone strikes over bases and depots of Shia Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in some parts of Iraq ,Sadr has declared that he does not think this was carried out by Israel. And recently he disagreed with some of the PMF leaders over obeying to the Iraqi government orders and form air force for PMF. In the meantime Ayatollah Saeed Kazemi al-Haeri al-Hussein (who is originally from Karbala and is teaching at the Hawzah Ilmiyya (Seminary) in Qom- Iran) has issued a fatwa to forbid the presence of US troops in Iraq. And in his fatwa described PMF as "holy" force^[1]. Al-Haeri's words are important for Sadr and he cannot ignore them because Sadr's father suggested that Shia's should follow this ayatollah! If Sadr does not listen to this he might lose some of his followers that are following ayatollah al-Haeri. And Sadr cannot give up about his previous speeches regarding to the neutrality of Iraqi politics. However ignore Kazem al-Haeri and more tension with some of the PMF groups has got potential for another division within the Sadrist which is hard at this moment Sadr to not consider such risk.

And Sadr several times has warned government and was willing to be seen as neutral and not taking side with either party in government. This could be an indication of his concerns over giving important positions to some of the Badr officials and government's actions in favor of his opponents. His talks and meeting with Iranian officials can have impact on the problem between Sadr and other parties in government.

Second: Sadr's volatile relations with Iran

Sadr is from well-known Shia family that through his family bloodline connects politics and sect in Iraq, Lebanon and Iran. Such family connection between Sadrist in Iraq and Lebanon and links with Khomeini and Khatami families of Iran through marriage is one of the bridges of political and sectarian connection. Even Hassan Nasrallah had close relations and links with the Sadrists and could he have role in relations between Iran and Sadr. The private office of Muqtada al-Sadr still uses the description as he is eminence of Islam and Muslims (Hujatual-Islam Wa al-Muslimin) which among five Shia spiritual grades he holds the third one of Shia school. But close people to him revealed that he want to reach ayatollah grade which sort of his relationships with hawzah Ilmyia (Seminary of Qom) hawzah Najaf (ayatollah al-Sistani) was reason that so far he did not reach that grade. Sadr had studied at Qom which is one of the conditions to become ayatollah but so far he did not get it. Despite that he has lived in Iran for years and studied there but politically after second half of 2000s had cold relations with Iran, even this has reached a level where his supporters had clashes with the groups close to Iran and raised slogan against Qasim Soleimani such saying (hey Qasim Suleimani this is Sadr Rabbani) . Sadr instead of sectarian policy adopted religious-nationalist rhetoric and as the result of that he has developed relations with Saudi Arabia and Sunni countries. Earlier he said that is against interference in Iraqi internal affairs but also he does not want Iraq become a hostile place against its neighbors which is referring to issues between Iran with the US and others. But he never cut off his relations with Iran and at the Iraqi internal level two times he agreed to become pillar to form government with those parties known to be close with Iran.

Third: Sadr's Surprises

Sadr is known for that from time to time he makes sudden decisions, and recently he tweets more and some of his messages sent out there and this make him more look like Trump in US! And many times when he decided then later was regretted such he had dissolved the Mahdi army and later he formed another force under different name, even he decided to quit politics but then he picked again. So his trip to Tehran also could be another sudden decision to improve his relations with Iran.

Conclusion:

Sadr's trip to Iran after long cold relations cannot be seen as non-political. His political and religious position linked to the Shia world and through family and religious he is linked to Iran. And politically his position in current Iraqi politics and with government situation to a large extent linked to how Sadr is dealing with those groups is close to Iran. And on the contrary what we hear at this stage changing PM might be is not in the interest of Sadr and this is related to normalize internal tensions which he cannot deny role of Iran in this as well.

Most likely appearing Sadr between Khamenei and Soleimani in Tehran at least will reduce the internal Shia short tensions especially Sadr's tension with some of the PMF groups.

[1] <http://www.alhaeri.org/main.php?id=68#statements>