

A close-up portrait of Moqtada al Sadr, a prominent Iraqi politician and leader of the Sadrist movement. He is wearing a black turban and has a full, dark beard and mustache. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a serious expression. The background is blurred, showing a portion of the Iraqi flag (red, white, and black stripes with a green triangle at the top).

The Return of Moqtada al Sadr:

What Does It Mean For Iraq's Stability?

Moqtada al Sadr returned to Iraq last week from Iran, where he had resided for several years. The Iraqi Army's 2008 victory over Sadr's Mahdi army in Basra was a turning point for Iraq. It established definitely the Iraqi government's sole sovereignty and authority, but also created much enmity between Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki and Sadr, who continued to paint the Iraqi government and its representatives as pawns for US interests.

But Sadr seems to have warmed to the Iraqi government during 2010. It was Sadr's surprise endorsement in October that won Maliki a second term as prime minister and led to the resolution of the vexing political impasse that had lasted since the March elections. Still, Sadr and his newfound camaraderie with the Iraqi government are being watched closely, for his disposition toward the Iraqi government is a critical factor for its stability going forward.

THE MESSAGE

Sadr delivered a speech in Najaf on Saturday morning to throngs of followers. Mainstream western media have described this event in broad strokes, but the finer nuances of Sadr's words have gone unreported.

Sadr reaffirmed several times his staunch opposition to the US and the urgency of ending the occupation. However, he has also tempered the resistance concept, suggesting that resistance "does not mean that each one should take up arms," but that there is also "cultural resistance".

Sadr also offered crucial statements of support – not only of the Iraqi government, as has been reported in Western media, but also of the established political institutions and mechanisms for effecting change. This last part is critical, for without it, Sadr's statement of support for the government would hold little value. He says, "We are with the government of Iraq, as long as it serves the interests of the Iraqi people," a statement which, by itself, begs the question of what to do if that government doesn't serve Iraq's interests. How would Sadr react, for example, if he persists in his opposition to the recent oil contracts signed with international oil majors? The following statement clarifies: "...and if it does not serve the interests of the Iraqi people, there are political means by which we must reform it - political, and none other". Mere rhetoric? Perhaps. But this explicit endorsement of the established political mechanisms is what give Sadr's support for the Iraqi government credibility, and bodes well for Iraq's stability.

Not only the content, but also the context of the speech offers insights into Sadr and his followers (please see the link* below for the broadcast of the speech on Iraq's Fayhaa TV, in Arabic). First, the sheer number of attendees underscores Sadr's fervent following. Second, Sadr's public relations team have ensured that Iraqi flags were distributed to the crowd front and center for the cameras, but one sees few Iraqi flags waved in the back. Third, there's a very high level of organization. Even the crowd's responses to his speech are delivered in unison, without pause, as if well-rehearsed. This efficient organization is what earned the well-oiled Sadr political machine many seats in the March elections; it's also what makes skeptics of Sadr's rapprochement nervous should he decide to obstruct the Iraqi government, rather than support it.

For the time being, this does not seem likely. Overall, Ergo sees this speech as positive for Iraq's stability. But we continue to monitor developments in order to see whether Sadr's backing of the government will endure, particularly if he disagrees with how the new government handles key issues like oil or security.

-- Kyle McEaney

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*Speech of Moqtada al Sadr in Najaf, Jan 8, 2011: (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CRoyaZYGS90>)

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