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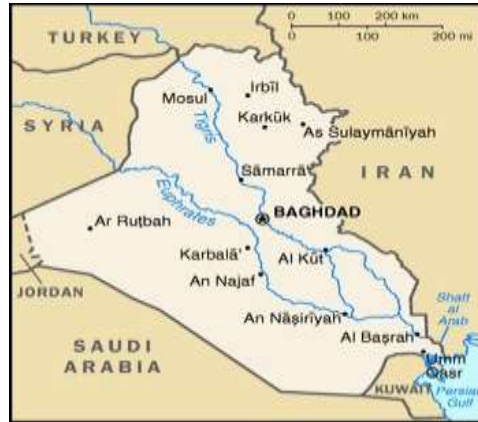
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Weekend Protests Signal New Shi'ite Power Struggle in Iraq

By Jason Ditz
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Since the 2003 US invasion, Shi'ite-dominated governments have been a fixture in Iraq, and while that much can be counted on to continue in the near-term, there is increasing internal turmoil about exactly who is going to end up in the top spot, with major public protests like the one this weekend in Baghdad showing deep dissatisfaction with the status quo.

This has been a coming issue for Prime Minister Hayder Abadi, who was never a particularly prominent political figure, and ended up in power after the ouster of Nouri al-Maliki nor or less by default, as the “compromise” State of Law candidate that both US and Iranian officials could accept.

Abadi’s inability to tackle corruption in the country has been fueling unrest, particularly among the Sadrist Trend. His own State of Law Party doesn’t necessarily have his back, either, with Maliki continuing to dominate the party, and positioning himself for a return.

The wild card, however, is Sadr’s supporters and their long-time allies in the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council, who would be needed to keep either Maliki or Abadi in power, and whose anti-corruption stance is difficult to reconcile with the widespread corruption born in Maliki’s time in power, and which Abadi proved to have neither the ability or inclination to really tackle.

This could easily force early elections, and it’s not clear where the Shi’ite majority will fall. The size of some of the Baghdad protests, however, suggests the Sadrist Trend is looking likely to make big gains the next time the vote comes along, a fact which is driving a lot of the trend’s interest in electoral reform.