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## Withdrawal from Politics of Disillusioned Shia Leader Muqtada al-Sadr Will Only Add to Iraq's Political Turmoil - But He

BY PATRICK COCKBURN

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The surprise announcement by the influential Shia religious leader Muqtada al-Sadr that he is withdrawing from active politics will only add to the political turmoil in Iraq at a moment when violence is in a state of sharp escalation.

Mr Sadr's unexpected statement comes two months before national parliamentary elections and was sparked by some members of his own party, which holds 40 out of 325 seats in parliament, voting for a controversial bill giving MPs generous pensions. The \$8,000-a-month salaries and high pensions of MPs has become a symbol in Iraq of the corruption of a political elite which has visibly failed to solve Iraq's problems since the fall of Saddam Hussein.

It is unclear if Mr Sadr's withdrawal will be permanent or temporary, though a Sadrist official emphasised that it was wrong to use the word "retirement" to describe Mr Sadr's departure from politics. He added that Mr Sadr's disillusionment with Iraqi politics went beyond the issues of corruption and excessive parliamentary pay and he was disappointed that so many people "are sympathetic to sectarian policies". He has accused the prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, of playing the sectarian card in the upcoming election by presenting himself as the leader of the Shia community in the face of an attack by the Sunni minority.

Iraq is facing a deepening political crisis as the insurgency in Sunni parts of the country intensifies, with anti-Shia jihadi groups, including the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) taking over Fallujah, 40 miles west of Baghdad, five weeks ago. Last week ISIS fighters seized the town of Sulaiman Pak 100 miles north of Baghdad and government soldiers were battling to win it back at the weekend in the face of strong resistance from snipers and with many entrances to the town mined.

Mr Sadr's moderate stance today is in sharp contrast with his reputation in the US and Britain after the invasion of 2003 as a "firebrand" cleric who was leader of the paramilitary Mehdi Army. He resolutely opposed the occupation of Iraq, fighting two battles against US forces in Najaf in 2004 and taking over Basra in opposition to British troops. In 2011 Mr Sadr's anti-occupation stance was crucial in forcing Mr Maliki to seek the exit of all US forces.

His influence stems from populist and nationalist politics combined with the prestige of his family, many of whom were martyred resisting Saddam Hussein. His father, Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr, who led a religious revival movement in the 1990s, was shot dead by Saddam Hussein's gunmen in Najaf in 1999. His father-in-law, Mohammed Baqr al-Sadr was executed by Saddam in 1980.

Whatever permanency of his absence from the political process Mr Sadr will remain a powerful figure by virtue of his inheritance.

In an interview with *The Independent* in Najaf in November, Mr Sadr expressed gloom about current developments in Iraq, saying "the near future of Iraq is dark". He said it was not so much sectarianism at the top of Iraq politics that worried him in the long term as its spread at street level: "If it spreads among the people it will be difficult to fight." He rebutted criticism of the Mehdi Army for playing a central role in killing Sunni in the sectarian civil war of 2006-7 saying the militia force had been infiltrated by outsiders. Mr Sadr has distanced himself from Iraqi politics in the past and has taken up religious studies. But this time round he sounds angrier and

more determined to withdraw: “I announce that I will not interfere in politics. There is no political entity that represents me anymore nor any position in parliament or government,” he said. Six government ministers are Sadrists, as well as the governors of Baghdad and Maysan province. He further explained his move saying it was to “preserve the reputation of the al-Sadr [family]... and put an end to the wrongdoings that were conducted, or could be conducted, under their title.”

Mr Maliki is in a strong position to serve a third term as prime minister of Iraq, despite the disastrous failure of his administration to provide security, services and economic improvement. A decade after the US invasion there is a shortage of electricity and drinking water outside the area controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Mr Maliki has been able to stay in power because he presents himself as leader of the Shia majority; is acceptable to Iran and the US; and, much though he is disliked and distrusted by other parties, they have been unable to come up with an alternative leader.

But although Mr Maliki has been able to control the central government, his authority over Kurdish held areas is non-existent and his power in Sunni provinces is diminishing. His influence in Anbar and Nineveh provinces, both with Sunni majorities, is becoming more limited. In Mosul city in Nineveh ISIS is said to have an income of \$8m a month from taxes it levies and in Tikrit people no longer visit restaurants known not to pay protection money in case they should be the target of a bomb attack.

Mr Sadr has said that he wants to break the grip of sectarianism on Iraq but believes this has lost him some popular support. A Sadrist official said that he believed that his withdrawal from politics at the weekend “was aimed at shocking Iraqis and seeing if there really was a bloc of moderate non-sectarian Iraqis out there”.