

In an Interview with Al-Monitor Website, Sayyid Ammar Al Hakim: The Citizen Bloc Possesses the Credibility and is a Bridge that Connects Everyone



Sayyid Ammar al-Hakim, head of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, put forth his vision for the political situation in Iraq and the accumulated crises. In an interview with Al-Monitor, he said that some crises such as the Anbar crisis cannot be solved by security means. He warned against the politicization of the army, and stressed that his electoral bloc possessed the most important card, namely the "credibility" card.

The interview:

Al-Monitor: What is your assessment of the root of the crisis in Iraq today? Is it a flaw in the constitution or in its implementation? Or rather a flaw in the political circles and parties?

Al Hakim: The root of the crisis in Iraq is represented by the absence of a unified understanding for building the new Iraqi state. Some seek to build the state on a centralized basis, while others seek to build it on the basis of a confederation and go beyond the framework of a federation. And some seek to make it a state of sects and nationalities. This is the main cause of the crisis. Each party's understanding of the state is reflected in its actions and behavior. In addition, the deficiency or vagueness in some of the constitutional mechanisms has opened the door wide for circumventing the constitution through individual efforts. Finally, many parties and political currents lack maturity when it comes to political experience. All of these factors put Iraq on course for a continuing crisis, but in our assessment, the basis of the crisis is the lack of a unified understanding regarding the new Iraqi state.

Al-Monitor: You brought about a major change in the structure, mechanisms, and work of the Islamic Supreme Council, and you made a major transition during the provincial elections in April of last year. What was the defect in the Supreme Council and how did you treat it?

Al Hakim: The defect was in form, not in substance. We moved from an environment of opposition to an environment of a state, and that transition requires a change of mechanisms and a renewal of concepts, and this was done in stages. First, we changed the name; from the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution to the Islamic Supreme Council. Then we changed mechanisms and put in place a new system, and focused our project on the state and our perception of democracy. We believe that change is a necessity of life, and that successful political work is work that aspires to the future, benefits from the experiences of the past, and interacts with the present. We are still looking forward to the completion of the renovation process, opening our doors to young blood and integrating more and more with our people in different social classes. We fought against dictatorship fiercely, and now we are working strongly in order to build a modern, just and powerful state. And this requires that we constantly develop our performance,

renew our mechanisms and change for the better.

Al-Monitor: You describe yourselves by saying that you take centrist positions in relation to Iraqi parties and you maintain good relations with everyone. But don't you think that you are in this position because you have failed to engage seriously with the crises? In other words, if the Islamic Supreme Council were to head the government, could it be centrist?

Al Hakim: Moderation is not a position, but rather a policy and an approach. This approach is not a spur of the moment [decision] or the product of the current circumstances. Rather, it is the approach of our political current, of the Supreme Council, and of all our leaders who have moved forward with this approach, beginning with leader of the Ummah Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim, and then Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim and the late Abdul Aziz al-Hakim. Today, we are committed to this approach, and experience has proven that it is the correct approach. I am confident that if we adopted this approach in rule now, we would be able to solve a lot of problems and overcome many crises. This is because crises are born out of stubbornness in positions and intransigence in opinion. When you are ready to meet the other in the middle of the road, this means that you have completed half the path to solving the problem and avoiding crisis.

Al-Monitor: How do you see the outcome of the crisis in Anbar? What is the fate of your initiative regarding the province? In your opinion, why was this initiative not adopted? Was it really an electoral initiative?

Al Hakim: The crisis in Anbar will end when what we stressed in our initiative "Our Resisting Anbar" is adopted. We believe that "fabricated" crises cannot be solved with security solutions. The problem in Anbar is "fabricated", and its solution must comprise security, political, social and service-based solutions. Terrorism grows when the political atmosphere is paralyzed, and we have to differentiate between confronting terrorism in Anbar and solving the political problems in Anbar.

As for those who claim that our initiative was electoral, I think that they do not understand the sectarian interactions in the Iraqi street and are ignorant of how elections work in Iraq. If we were thinking about the elections, we would have taken emotional stances, because elections need to excite people's emotions. But we are committed to the state building project and our positions are principled, logical and rational. And these positions cause us embarrassment sometimes, when the conditions in which we operate are neither logical nor rational.

As for the solution in Anbar, it simply involves precise separation between terrorism, which must be confronted with force and determination, and political problems, which must be solved, quickly, seriously and radically. When separation is achieved in this way, Anbar will stabilize and we will eliminate terrorism.

Al-Monitor: We have heard warnings from you about the politicization of the army and the

weakening of the military institution. Where lays the security problem? And how can it be resolved and how can terrorism be dealt with in a different way from what's happening today?

Al Hakim: We will continue to strongly warn about the issue of the politicization of the army, because we believe in building a state based on institutions. And the military institution, in democratic systems, must be neutral and independent. Therefore we will not allow for the politicization of the army, destroying its creed or weakening it.

As for the security problem, it is part of the problem related to the mentality with which the security file is managed. The government does not deal with security as a single and comprehensive file, or on the basis that security stability stems from political stability or that the fight against terrorism will be effective when the political environment is stable. Iraq needs a comprehensive strategy to address the security situation, practical and effective plans, and to re-evaluate the tools used in dealing with the security file. This includes the efficiency of management of this sensitive file that is fateful for Iraq.

Al-Monitor: What is your position on Muqtada al-Sadr's decision to retire from political work?

Al Hakim: We have directly declared our position and we addressed Mr. Sadr, calling on him to reconsider his decision, if possible. This is because we believe that Mr. Sadr has widespread support and many followers, and the Sadr family is highly respected in Iraqi society. While we respect his personal decision, we hope that his eminence will reconsider this decision.

Al-Monitor: Some Iraqis considered Sadr's decision to be a step toward separating the religious course from the political one. How do you assess the relationship between religion and politics in Iraq, given that you are a cleric and the leader of a political bloc?

Al Hakim: Religion is a supreme spiritual and moral value in all societies, and in Iraqi society in particular. In Iraq, religion is part of the general culture of society. We have our own opinion about the relationship between religion and politics, but I do not have sufficient space here to clarify this important and sensitive relationship. In short, our vision for building a state focuses on the project to build a modern and just state. Justice is a supreme religious value, not a political value. Politics gives us the means, and religious gives us the values. The more correct question relates to the difference between a religious state and a civil state, yet we removed ourselves from this framework of civil versus religious state by proposing the concept a modern and just state, in accordance with the principles of the constitution.

As for Mr. Sadr's decision, it does not fall within the framework of an opinion on the subject of religions and politics. It is a political decision and has its own circumstances.

Al-Monitor: Is it true that all positions, steps and perhaps crises that Iraq has been witnessing recently are linked to the issue of elections and the renewal of a term for Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki? How do you see the issue of a third term?

Al Hakim: The crises of a big country like Iraq cannot be reduced to one single issue or one

case. Likewise, one cannot neglect the possibility that crises overlap with one another as a result of a specific approach. I believe that Iraq's greatest challenge is the lack of a common understanding of the concept of a new Iraqi state. And one of the most important pillars of this state is the principle of peaceful transfer of power. At the constitutional level, there is no objection to Mr. Maliki assuming a third term. The important thing is for there to be a single vision, a clear project, and a unified group working in harmony for the future of Iraq. This is the basis, and if this basis is not available there will not be an agreement on a third term for Mr. Maliki.

Al-Monitor: The Iraqi situation is sometimes described as a conflict between the theory of centralized governance, represented today by Maliki, and the theory of decentralization, which is represented by his opponents. Is such a description valid? Is Iraq a centralized or decentralized state today?

Al Hakim: It is certain that the lack of commitment to a common understanding of the concept of a new Iraqi state means that trends are different and sometimes intersecting. We cannot limit the problem to merely two parties: those with and those against Maliki, or a centralized state and a decentralized state. The problem is multifaceted and has multiple parties. There are those who call for centralization, those who call for federalism, and those who call for a confederation. And some may be working on achieving division, even if not openly. The constitution specifies the federal identity of the state, but the procedures are not clear and the political parties do not agree on specific action.

The new Iraq is still in the stage of conception, and the features of this new state are still forming. It will certainly be a difficult birth, but its not impossible. If we find a harmonious team that works with a unified vision and believes in partnership and in a single unified Iraq, then we will be able to get through this stage quickly and safely and ensure the future of Iraq and the generations to come.

Al-Monitor: How do you see the political map after the parliamentary elections, and what is the position of the Citizen's Bloc in this map?

Al Hakim: The political map is drawn by the elections, and the Citizen Bloc has great ambitions to take its natural position and its popular entitlements. We have the most important cards on the national scene, namely the card of "credibility". Our honest relations with everyone have given us a lot of credibility. Our policies are established, not volatile, and this is an important factor in determining the extent of influence in the next stage. Iraq is a pluralistic democracy, and whoever has their doors open to all has a role in bringing together a unified team at a single table. And we hope that we can be a bridge that connects everyone. Our confidence in ourselves, and in our people, is high.

Al-Monitor: You have good relations with Iran. In your opinion, what kind of settlement can be completed to end the conflict between Iran and the international community regarding the

nuclear issue?

Al Hakim: I think that both sides are working hard to find common ground for understanding, despite the difficult circumstances. There is a strong will to reach a settlement, and today they are closer than ever to reaching a comprehensive and final solution. Iran is an important and influential state in the region and the world, and putting an end to this issue will make Iran a state that has a positive impact in the international arena. The issue is difficult, but we have crossed the impossible zone and I think that things are now moving in the realm of possibility. The fair equation in this issue involves the international community recognizing Iran's right to peaceful nuclear energy and lifting the embargo, in exchange for Iran reassuring the international community that it will not turn towards developing nuclear weapons.

Al-Monitor: How did you view Geneva II? And how do you assess the Syrian crisis and mechanisms to solve it?

Al Hakim: Our vision is always based on the ability of dialogue to reach a solution. A military solution will only bring destruction to Syria and the region. Regardless of the immediate results of the dialogue at the Geneva II Conference, it was very useful. The mere fact that both parties sat down at the same table means that they have arrived at the conviction that a military resolution is impossible. We have to expect that the dialogue will be difficult and arduous, and could stop from time to time, but this is the only way to get Syria to safety and to preserve its unity and protect the rights of its people. Violence has created a lot of hatred and a lot of victims. We can't expect to have a quick dialogue and a quick solution. But it is important that we do not give up and encourage everyone to continue the dialogue and meet in the middle.