Iraqi cleric's aide warns of chaos if vote postponed

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BAGHDAD – A delay in the formation of a new government in Iraq could lead to a civil war, a top aide to the country’s most prominent cleric warned Friday, as Iraq’s political elite struggles to win over legislation that would regularize political movements and allow them to compete in the upcoming election.

Abdul Malik Murtada, an aide to Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, said in an interview that the death of Ayatollah Ali Sistani's father, Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Sadeq Sadr, has resulted in the disbandment of the Mahdi Army and a corresponding rise in political movements.

"We should not underestimate the potential for the Mahdi Army to be reconstituted and form a new army," Murtada said. "This could lead to a new round of violence in Iraq, with the Mahdi Army playing a central role in any new conflict."

Murtada said that the Mahdi Army, which was formed in 2004 under the leadership of Ayatollah Ali Sistani, had shown a remarkable ability to adapt and change in response to changing circumstances. "This is a sign of its ability to survive," Murtada said. "But it also means it is a threat to the political stability of Iraq."

Murtada said that the Mahdi Army had played a key role in the conflict with the US military, and had been involved in a number of violent incidents in Iraq.

"We must not allow this group to expand and become a threat to the political stability of Iraq," Murtada said. "We must work to prevent this from happening."