



Volume 8, Number 14

July 27, 2014

## **Iraqi Shi'i Politics in the Wake of ISIS**

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More than two months after Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's bloc attained the largest number of seats in nationwide parliamentary elections, the Iraqi assembly still had not begun the process of choosing a new prime minister. On July 15, the parliament approved the nomination of Salim al-Jaburi, a Sunni, as speaker of parliament, and, on July 17, the assembly elected Fuad Ma'sum, a veteran Kurdish politician, as president.<sup>1</sup> These were two important steps in breaking the political stalemate in Iraq. Yet the country still remains without a constitutionally appointed prime minister to fend off the acute threat posed by the Islamic State of the Iraq and *al-Sham* ("Greater Syria"; ISIS). ISIS took over Mosul in June, has begun advancing into the Sunni heartland and, on June 29, proclaimed the establishment of a caliphate, stretching across Syria and Iraq. What are the prospects for Iraq's Shi'i-led government following ISIS's declaration? Will Nuri al-Maliki serve a third term as prime minister? And is his regime capable of stabilizing the country?

Following the U.S.-led occupation in 2003, Iraq was hailed as a model for democratization in the Middle East. For the first time in Iraq's history, its Shi'i majority had attained power, through a combination of American assistance and the establishment of nominally democratic institutions. In the new constitution of 2005, Iraq was defined as an Islamic, democratic, federal, and parliamentary republic. An unwritten power-sharing arrangement awarded the prime minister's position to a Shi'i, speaker of parliament to a Sunni, and the presidency to a Kurd. But this vision of a pluralist state was quickly shattered

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Chulov, "Iraqi Parliament Session Collapsed amid Political Standoff," *The Guardian*, July 1, 2014; "Iraq Parliament Chaos Deepens as MPs Fail to Agree on New Speaker," *Agence France-Press, The Guardian*, July 7, 2014; "Iraq's Parliament Breaks Deadlock to Elect New Speaker," *BBC*, July 15, 2014; "Iraq MPs Elect Fouad Massoum as President," *BBC*, July 24, 2014.

due to the problematic legacy of minority-majority relations in Iraq. The historical marginalization of the Shi'i majority under Saddam's rule contributed to Shi'i retribution against Sunnis following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. In addition, democracy did not take root during this period due to structural problems, the country's authoritarian political culture, and Iraq's geo-strategic position. In particular, the amorphous nature of the new constitution did not clearly define the relationship between the Kurdish federation and the central government, nor did it delineate the separation of powers between the three branches of government or the balance between the Islamic and democratic nature of this regime. One of the main problems with Iraq's electoral system is that it is based on voting by provinces, in which each province is a district. The electoral districts are fairly homogenous, which contributes to the creation of ethnic-sectarian blocs in parliament. Furthermore, while proclaiming a federal democracy, Iraq quickly slipped into authoritarianism, in line with the legacy of Saddam's one-man rule that operated through cronyism, political violence, and corruption. In the post-2003 period, the involvement of outside powers, and particularly Iran and Saudi Arabia, further entrenched sectarian politics.

Nevertheless, a measure of pluralism still exists within the Shi'i community, which includes multiple parties, many of whom are offshoots of the historical Da'wa party.<sup>2</sup> The State of Law Alliance, led by Maliki and his Da'wa party, is comprised of several parties which are mainly Shi'i. In the April 30 national elections, the Alliance retained its numerical edge, winning 92 seats in the 328-seat parliament compared to 89 in the previous assembly, chosen in 2010. Maliki also personally won more votes in this election than in 2010: 727,000 compared to 622,000, previously. The rest of the Shi'i votes were divided between Muqtada al-Sadr and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), each receiving about 30 seats. Ibrahim al-Ja'fari, a former prime minister, received an additional six seats. Sunni Arab votes were split between three lists, receiving 60 seats all together. The Kurds' three main parties won more than 50 seats.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike in the previous elections of 2010, the 2014 vote revealed internal fragmentation within the Sunni, Shi'i, and Kurdish camps. In 2010, Shi'is united behind the Iraqi National Alliance, while the Sunnis supported the 'Iraqiyya Alliance. 'Iraqiyya was headed by Ayad 'Allawi, a secular Shi'i, and was formed

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<sup>2</sup> See for example, Rodger Shanahan, "[The Islamic Da'wa Party: Past Development and Future Prospects](#)," *Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA)* 8:2 (June 2004); "Shiite Politics in Iraq: The Role of the Supreme Council", *Middle East Report* 70, Nov. 15, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Knights, "[Iraq's Election Results: Avoiding a Kurdish Split](#)," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Analysis, May 21, 2014.

prior to the 2010 elections as a list that combined three parties: two of them were headed by Sunnis and the third by Allawi himself. Although he had little support from Shi'i voters, the 'Iraqiyya Alliance posed a formidable challenge to Maliki, winning a wafer-thin majority but ultimately failing in its efforts to establish a governing coalition. The Kurds formed the Kurdistan Alliance. In the 2014 elections, due to political divisions among the Shi'is, including a lack of unity among Shi'i religious forces, Maliki did not face any real challenge to his leadership. Nonetheless, although Maliki's party received the most votes, his bloc controlled less than a third of the 328-seat parliament and needed to create a coalition government with other Shi'i parties and perhaps also with Sunnis and Kurds.<sup>4</sup>

Sunni resentment has been stoked by the empowerment of the Shi'is in the post-2003 period, the marginalization of the Sunni population, and Maliki's authoritarian style of leadership. Their anger has also been fuelled by a heavy-handed security presence in Sunni-populated areas as well as by a feeling that the government targets Sunni politicians.<sup>5</sup> On the Kurdish front, there has been rising tension between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Baghdad over the export of oil extracted from the Kurdistan region, which is part of a broader dispute about the relationship between the KRG and the central government.<sup>6</sup>

Maliki has even faced growing criticism from his fellow Shi'is, and particularly from the Sadrist movement and Ammar al-Hakim's ISCI. Following a massive jailbreak of 500 *al-Qa'ida*-affiliated prisoners in May 2013, Muqtada al-Sadr demanded that the security apparatus, ministries and the commander of the armed forces resign. Hakim raised questions about the fate of billions of dollars spent on national security and called for the resignation of Iraq's security leadership.<sup>7</sup> In March 2014, Sadr called upon his followers to demonstrate against Maliki and blamed him for the continuation of corruption, injustice, and dictatorship. The Sadrists announced that they were nominating an independent

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<sup>4</sup> See "Iraq's Election: The Incumbent Digs In", *The Economist*, May 22, 2014; Ahmed Ali, "[Iraq's 2014 National Elections](#)," *Institute for the Study of War*, April 2014.

<sup>5</sup> "Make or Break: Iraq's Sunnis and the State," *Middle East Report* 144, August 14, 2013; Reidar Visser, "[De-Baathification and Criminal Charges: Patterns of Candidate Exclusion in Iraq's Parliamentary Elections, 2014](#)."

<sup>6</sup> Knights, "Iraq's Election Results,"; Juan Cole, "[Sunnis Big Losers in Iraq Elections, PM al-Maliki has Largest Party](#)," *Informed Comment*, May 20, 2014; Barah Mikail, "[Avoiding Iraq's Fragmentation](#)," *Policy Brief* 178, FRIDE and Hivos, April 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Hamza Mustafa, "[Iraq: Sadr and Hakim Demand Maliki Resignation](#)," *Asharq al-Awsat*, July 31, 2013. See also, "[New Initiative to Resolve Political Crisis](#)," *The Majalla*, May 24, 2013.

candidate for the position of prime minister.<sup>8</sup> Even Iraq's top Shi'i cleric, Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani, implicitly criticized Maliki. Sistani who enjoys immense support among millions throughout the Shi'i world, urged Iraqis to fight against the Sunni insurgency. He also set a clear timetable for choosing a new prime minister, as he called for a more inclusive government.<sup>9</sup> The dire situation in Iraq pushed Sistani to express a more forthright position, a shift from his tendency to remain aloof from politics. Concurrently, Grand Ayatollah Bashir al-Najafi explicitly called for Maliki's removal.<sup>10</sup>

Given the growing criticism of Maliki, are there any Shi'i rivals to his leadership? The national elections in April demonstrated that Maliki and his State of Law Alliance still predominate. Nevertheless, the security threat posed by ISIS may weaken Maliki's popularity and his Shi'i political rivals may unite behind an alternative leader. Muqtada al-Sadr, who enjoys widespread support among the Shi'i rank and file, does not pose a real threat to Maliki as he is not respected by the clerical leadership or by the more established or affluent Shi'is.<sup>11</sup> Ayad 'Allawi's 'Iraqiyya, which offered the promise of a non-sectarian alternative to Iraqi politics, received only 21 seats in the 2014 elections.<sup>12</sup>

A true rival to Maliki's leadership may come from within Maliki's own Da'wa Party which is part of the State of Law Alliance. Maliki's party may seek to replace him, given his divisive image and his poor record in confronting the Sunni jihadist threat. Another figure worth watching is ISCI's 'Ammar al-Hakim. Hakim comes from a well-known Shi'i family and is considered a charismatic and respected politician who has expressed support for national unity. The ISCI, which was originally established in Iran in 1982, has been gaining ground since

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<sup>8</sup> "[Iraqi PM's Opponents Seek to Deny him a Third Term](#)," *Asharq al-Awsat*, April 8, 2014; "Reprieve for Maliki as Jihadi Threat Mutes Shia Opposition," *The Financial Times*, July 6, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> See Alexander Dziadosz and Raheem Salman, "A Look at Sistani's Role," *Reuters*, July 8, 2014; Isaac Hasson, "Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani: Ideology, Activities, Proselytizing, Polemics, in Amnon Cohen and Noga Efrat, eds., *Post-Saddam Iraq New Realities, Old Identities, Changing Patterns* (Sussex Academic Press, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> "[Senior Iraqi Shiite Cleric Backs PM Maliki's Ouster](#)," *Jordan Times (via AFP)*, July 16, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> "[The Return of Muqtada al-Sadr?](#)," *Aljazeera*, June 22, 2014; Harith al-Qurawee, "[Is Muqtada al-Sadr Retiring or Repositioning?](#)," *Al-Monitor: Iraq Pulse*, Feb. 21, 2014; "Profile: Moqtada Sadr," *BBC*, Jan, 19, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> See "[Iyad Allawi: The View from Baghdad](#)," *Asharq al-Awsat*, June 18, 2013; Ahmed Ali, "[Iraqiyya's Path to Power](#)," *Foreign Policy*, April 8, 2010; Iraq's Election: The Incumbent Digs in"; Stephen Wicken, "[Iraq's Sunnis in Crisis](#)," *ISW*, May 2013.

the 2013 provincial elections and maintains connections with both Iran and the U.S. It won 30 seats in the 2014 national elections.<sup>13</sup>

Ahmad Chalabi's name has resurfaced again lately, as well. He has been mentioned in the Western media as a potential candidate for prime minister. Chalabi is a secular Shi'i, and was linked to the dubious intelligence on weapons of mass destruction that was provided to the U.S. prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Following the U.S.-led occupation, Chalabi headed the controversial Deba'thification Commission responsible for banning former Ba'th members from the new Iraqi administration. There are reports that Chalabi currently enjoys the support of several Shi'i parties.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, it is hard to believe that a secular Shi'i, particularly one who is such a divisive figure, will find enough support within Iraq to be able to replace Maliki.

It is quite possible that Shi'is may nonetheless unite behind Maliki and award him a third term, because of the ISIS threat and pressure from Iran to keep him in office. Maliki can still muster more support than any other politician in Iraq. He also knows how to skillfully play the Iraqi political game, after eight years as prime minister. If the Shi'i parties support Maliki, this may compel some of the Kurdish factions to join him. Another option is that the Da'wa party itself will recognize the need to replace Maliki and will choose a new leader. In any case, whatever ensues, stabilizing the country will require the introduction of a more inclusive government, one which responds to the grievances of both Sunnis and Kurds.

In order to undermine ISIS and obtain stability, the Shi'i authorities will have to attain some level of accommodation with the more moderate or pragmatic Sunni forces, such as tribal elements or Sunni politicians. Reviving the alliance with the Sunni *Sahwa* ("Awakening") movement will require the government to convince these tribal forces that it is keen on supporting a new, non-sectarian policy.<sup>15</sup> The U.S. had also been pressuring Maliki to be more inclusive. Another option is to strengthen regional autonomy for all three communities and even to establish three independent political entities.<sup>16</sup> However, the disintegration of Iraq would

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<sup>13</sup> See: Ahmed Ali, "[The Revival of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq: 2013 Iraq Update](#)," *ISW*, July 16, 2013; Frances Romero, "Ammar al-Hakim, Iraq's Newest Shi'ite Leader," *Time*, Sep., 4, 2009; "[Profile: Ammar al-Hakim](#)," *Aljazeera*, March 7, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> See Martin Chulov and Spencer Acherman, "Ahmad Chalabi: from Pariah to Iraq's Next Prime Minister?", *The Guardian*, July 6, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> On this movement see, "[Political Tribes and the Politics of Tribes](#)," *FOAB Weekly Newsletter* 1:19, Jan., 17, 2014; "As Violence Worsens, Iraq Again Turns to Sunni Tribes," *Agence France-Presse*, Aug., 24, 2013.

likely have serious consequences for the region's sectarian and ethnic composition. Iran itself has supported the empowerment of Shi'is in Iraq, yet also opposes the fragmentation of the country. It will also be very complicated to divide Iraq because many regions have a heterogeneous population, including mixed tribes and even mixed families.<sup>17</sup> The potential disintegration of Iraq and the looming threat of ISIS may foster more chaos. Nevertheless, it is also likely that Iraq will continue to exist in a dysfunctional state which, for the time being, will continue to be under the authoritarian rule of Nuri al-Maliki.

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**The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on approximately the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.**

**TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation.**

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<sup>16</sup> Martin Chulov and Fazel Hawramy, "Kurds Push for Independence Vote amid Iraq Chaos," *The Guardian*, July 3, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> See Borzou Daragahi, "A Divided Future," *The Financial Times*, July 8, 2014. See also, Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, "[The New Iraq Crisis: Iran's](#) Options," *Iran Review*, June 20, 2014.