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Renewed Unrest in Iraq: Religious and Tribal Factors

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This month marks a decade since the American-led war to oust Saddam Hussein and the commencement of the American democratization project in Iraq. It finds the country mired in three months of consecutive mass protests and an upswing in violence. The latest unrest was ignited when Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki orchestrated a raid against the offices of Finance Minister Rafi al-Issawi, a prominent moderate Sunni politician. The Shi'i Prime Minister's affront to Issawi occurred just after President Jalal al-Talabani, an important mediating force in Iraqi politics, left the country for medical treatment in December 2012. Maliki's latest political ambush of a Sunni opponent is reminiscent of his maneuver against Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi, which took place amidst last year's US withdrawal. The episode involving Hashemi, who subsequently fled to Turkey and was tried in absentia, drew attention to Maliki's increasing authoritarian ways and the politicization of the judiciary. Domestic tensions, which have been on a steady rise ever since, seem to have reached a breaking point.

As protests in the predominantly Sunni provinces of Anbar, Ninewa, and Salahaldin continue, tribal and religious leaders, who are often depicted as inherent obstacles to the

building of modern, cohesive democratic states, are proving to be the most constructive forces in Iraq's rocky democratization process. Sunni and Shi'i tribal and religious leaders are working to salvage what's left of Iraq's fraying national unity and rescue the political process from dangerous brinkmanship. Their collaborative efforts have precedents that date back to their role in unifying and mobilizing disparate tribes and believers in the 1920 revolt against British colonial authorities. In the post-Saddam era, Sunni tribal leaders of the *Sahwa* (Reawakening) security committees have confronted the al-Qa'ida threat, while religious leaders have done their best to rein in their followers during periods of acute sectarian conflict.

Since December 2012, tens of thousands of demonstrators have staged protests and sit-ins that have blocked Iraq's trade routes with Syria and Jordan, resulting in hefty economic losses. The demonstrators are demanding the release of hundreds of thousands of detainees languishing in prisons without trials, the annulment of Article 4 of the Anti-Terrorism Law, which the judiciary frequently invokes to prosecute individuals accused of abetting terrorism, and the cancellation of measures undertaken by the Justice and Accountability Committee, the body that has barred individuals who had been affiliated with the Ba`th regime from public sector employment. Demonstrators have appropriated the language of the Arab Spring to call for Maliki's resignation and protest against laws that they claim target the Sunni Arab minority.

The continued demonstrations represent the culmination of widespread discontent among Iraq's Sunnis. Self-perceptions of victimization and marginalization stem from their abrupt loss of power in 2003 and are reinforced by the large-scale de-ba`thification measures that were undertaken, the failure to integrate the Sahwa fighters into the state security apparatus, the view of Maliki's rule as authoritarian and sectarian, the politicization of Iraqi institutions and ministries, and the lack of services in many provinces. Although sectarianism is not the exclusive cause of all of these problems, it is the most salient method of expressing grievances and mobilizing opposition. Mosque imams regularly lead their worshippers from Friday prayers to local squares, and in mid-February, Sunni clerics called for a mass march from the provinces to Baghdad's Abu Hanifa Mosque. The parallel

between the planned march, which was cancelled due to security concerns, and the annual Shi'i 'Ashura processions that infused political protest with religious identity during years of Ba'thist repression was striking.

Sheikh `Abdul Malek al-Sa'adi, one of Iraq's foremost Sunni clerics, is the most prominent protest leader. A moderate anti-Saddam figure, Sa'adi quickly assumed a central leadership role, monitoring and controlling the demonstrations' slogans lest the protesters be portrayed as extremists who were facilitating foreign agendas, an accusation frequently leveled by their detractors. Sa'adi has unified the protesters, encouraging them to form popular representative committees, and insisting that demonstrations remain peaceful. To this end, in late January he declared that peacefully informing the government of their demands through sit-ins constituted *jihad*. Sa'adi's efforts to protect the legitimacy of the protesters' demands and employ peaceful, non-sectarian slogans have been endorsed and emulated by other Sunni religious leaders and organizations, such as the Union of Muslim Scholars. Sa'adi has prevented politicians from exploiting the protests for political gains and has been working closely with tribal leaders to coordinate non-violent opposition.

From the outset of the crisis, Sunni tribal leaders have been playing a dual role: mediating between the government and protesters and serving as a bridge between Sunni and Shi'i populations. Tribal leaders stand at the helm of negotiations with the Baghdad authorities, receiving government officials and sending their own delegations to deal with aspects of the crisis. Thus far, the Maliki government has preferred dealing with them, and not directly with the protesters, due to their political and social capital in Iraqi society. Sheikh Ahmad Abu Risha, who until early March served as the Secretary-General of the Council of Iraqi Reawakening, is another pivotal figure. He has also contributed to the maintenance of a peaceful, non-sectarian tone and has fought allegations that al-Qa'ida and foreign actors have taken over the Sunni provinces and infiltrated the demonstrations.

Influential Sunni sheikhs have hosted delegations from the Shi'i south to discuss ways to defuse the situation. In early February, representatives from six provinces met in Samarra, a mainly Sunni province known for its major Shi'i holy sites, and signed an agreement

intended to rescue Iraq through a national, sectarian-free charter. Additionally, over two hundred Sunni and Shi'i tribal representatives met in Diyala to sign a Charter of Honor, which disavows violence and commits its signatories to hindering al-Qa'ida's ascent. Since December, a number of Sunni and Shi'i tribal leaders have withdrawn their allegiance from Maliki, who had previously courted and mobilized tribal support in his conflicts with Kurds and other political opponents. Continued cooperation between Sunni tribal sheikhs is essential if the demonstrators are to achieve success; Maliki, for his part, is waiting for existing cleavages to become manifest and divide the protests' leadership.

Many Shi'i leaders have cautioned Maliki not to misconstrue the unrest as Sunni rage, because Shi'i discontent is rampant as well. Center-periphery relations are strained. Provincial leaders and their constituents are dissatisfied with their share of the national budget and frustrated by flagrant corruption. But it is the leading religious clerics from the *hawza* (religious community of learning) of Najaf that have issued the sharpest warning that Maliki needs to take the demonstrators seriously.

Since the eruption of the protests, Ayatollah Sistani, the most influential cleric in the Shi'i world, has consistently called upon Maliki to exercise restraint. According to some reports, he even threatened to encourage the National Shi'i Alliance, to which Maliki and his supporters belong, to unseat the prime minister should he use force to suppress demonstrations. Sistani, who has confined his intervention in politics to critical junctures in Iraq's political transition, has acknowledged the politicization of judicial files and the flaws in the implementation of the Justice and Accountability law. He repeatedly has urged Maliki to address the demonstrators' legitimate demands in accordance with the 2005 constitution and build a civil state anchored in constitutionally sanctioned institutions. Sistani has criticized all of Iraq's political blocs for being responsible for the latest impasse and warned them not to delay the endorsement of the national budget, an issue that had become entangled in the unrest. Many Shi'i clerics' Friday sermons have emphasized the urgency of promoting concepts of citizenship and repairing relations between the authorities and the public. The *marja'iyya* - the religious establishment and leadership of Najaf's leading grand ayatollahs - publicly declared its support for the law passed by the

Iraqi parliament in January that limits the holder of the premiership to two terms in office. As such, Najaf's religious establishment has joined the anti-government chorus and put Maliki on notice.

The Shi'i cleric and powerful politician, Muqtada al-Sadr, also has intensified pressure to find an equitable solution to the demonstrators' grievances. Unlike Shi'i politicians such as Ayatollah 'Ammar al-Hakim, who have recognized the protesters' needs but maintained ties with Maliki, Sadr is actively collaborating with the Prime Minister's political opponents, Sa'adi and Sunni tribal leaders. Sadr's involvement in coordinating the opposition smacks of political opportunism and is ostensibly part of his effort to recast himself as a popular national leader. But it is important nonetheless, inasmuch as it strengthens the forces seeking to rein in Maliki's authoritarianism.

Although they are not yet satisfied, the protesters have registered discernible achievements. Thousands of prisoners have been released, former army personnel have been returned to service, and Maliki has announced some concessions regarding the Justice and Accountability Law. However, political rifts and instability in Iraqi institutions are increasing. The Justice and Accountability Committee recently used the De-ba'thification Law to remove the Chief Justice, Medhat al-Mahmoud, (a Sunni) from his position. Despite Mahmoud's Ba'thist record, he is a reputed Maliki supporter who has exploited his power to neutralize the Prime Minister's opponents. In response, Maliki dismissed Faleh Shanshal, a leading Shi'i Sadrist MP, who headed the Justice and Accountability Committee. Now Sunni politicians are trying to have Shanshal reinstated. The committee's move against an ally of the prime minister and a notorious Ba'thist seems to be motivated by the Sadrist bloc's effort to prove its commitment to curbing Maliki's authoritarian rule and implementing de-ba'thification more fairly. This is merely the latest episode that problematizes the narrative of Iraq's Sunni-Shi'i conflict, which is overused to explain all things Iraqi. Even when identity politics are genuinely at play, raw politics and competition for resources are also to be found at the core of many problems.

As identity politics are manipulated by various political forces, it is the religious and tribal leaders who are working to mitigate sectarian tensions and salvage Iraq's democratic transition. They are trying to counter foreign interference from nearly all of Iraq's neighbors and combat al-Qa'ida's renewed efforts to destabilize the country. Another ominous development is the reemergence of militias and the formation of new ones like the Mukhtar Army, which is led by Wathiq al-Batat and associated with Hezbollah and Iran's Revolutionary Guards. Against these odds, it is no surprise that members of parliament, junior clerics, and ordinary Iraqis have implored Sa'adi and Sistani to hold joint emergency meetings and intervene more assertively to extricate the country from the deepening crisis. Should the array of deleterious domestic and foreign factors push Iraq over the precipice to civil war, it will not be for tribal and religious leaders' inaction. These forces, usually deemed incompatible with democratic politics, are working assiduously to combat the undemocratic politics being peddled by politicians in Baghdad. Their constructive role in stabilizing Iraq's political process and preserving national unity provides a ray of hope for the country's future.

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