



# The Fractured Shia of Iraq

Understanding the tensions within Iraq's majority

Matthew Duss and Peter Juul January 2009

Center for American Progress



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# Introduction

On January 31, 2009, Iraqis will vote in the country's first provincial elections in four years. These elections will deliver a preliminary verdict on the vigorous and often violent competition between Iraq's contending political factions, and help shape the contours of Iraq's future politics as the Obama administration begins to redeploy U.S. military forces from the country.

The elections and their aftermath promise to be contentious and potentially bloody as Iraq's three main ethnic and religious groups—the minority Kurds and Sunni Arabs and the majority Shia Arabs—vie for power. More troubling still, factions within each of these ethnic and sectarian groups will contend for power in the regions they dominate—using local patronage and control of Iraq's resources, revenues, and guns, as well as appeals based on longstanding religious traditions in Iraq. The outcome will affect the timing of U.S. troop redeployments from Iraq, as the new Obama administration seeks to reshape Middle East politics in the coming year.

U.S. policymakers and the American people today boast a more nuanced understanding of the Iraqi political landscape than they did prior to the 2003 invasion. Many are familiar with the differences among Sunni Arab factions, some of whom have aligned themselves with American forces to dramatically improve security over the last two years.<sup>1</sup> Comparatively little attention has been paid, however, to the political differences among Iraq's Shia Arabs, who are estimated to make up more than 60 percent of Iraq's population.<sup>2</sup>

As they have done since 2005, religious Shia political parties are likely to shape Iraqi politics at the national level and at the provincial and local levels in central and southern Iraq. It remains to be seen which, if any, of these factions will dominate. This report examines the ongoing competition among rival Shia factions—manifested in a series of political and military confrontations in the wake of the U.S. overthrow of Saddam Hussein five years ago. The end of Hussein's regime, followed by the 2005 election of a transitional government, opened a new political space for Iraq's Shia political parties, bringing Shia Arabs into power for the first time in the Arab world.<sup>3</sup> This power shift represented a significant change for a Middle East previously neatly divided between the mostly Persian Shia of Iran and Sunni Arab-led states, unsettling regional politics, especially among those Sunni Arab nations with significant Shia minorities, including the Gulf States, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon.

In Iraq's 2009 provincial elections, three dominant and fiercely independent Shia political organizations—the Da'wa Party, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, or ISCI, and the Sadrists, along with the smaller but still significant Fadhila (see box on page 3 for a brief description of each party)—will attempt through the ballot box and armed conflict to secure

a majority of Shia votes in Iraq in order to lead the country's Shia-majority provinces. To a significant degree, however, all three organizations derive their legitimacy from the opinions and edicts of a relatively small group of high-ranking clerical scholars in Iraq and Iran. While these clerics do not govern directly, they do offer opinions regarding what is and is not acceptable government policy. The increasing importance of Iraq's tribes—assiduously courted by Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki over the past year—adds an additional layer of complexity to these religious and political dynamics.

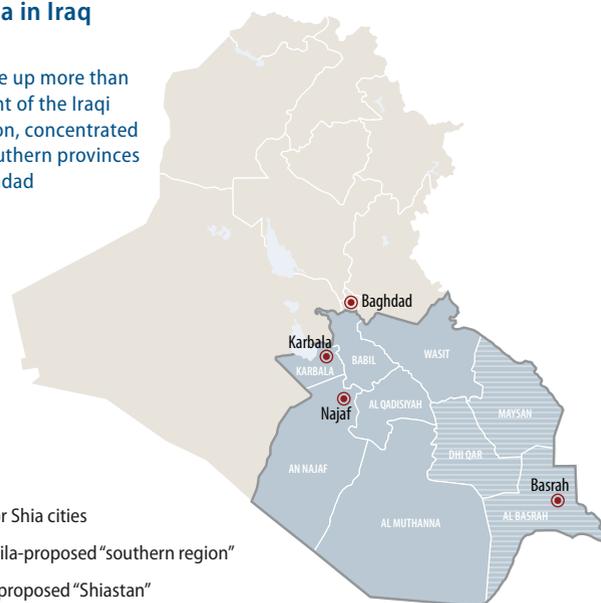
The Obama administration is inheriting the consequences of the Bush administration's policy of unconditional support for a certain set of leaders that control the levers of power and money in Iraq's central government. U.S. military, political, and economic support for the two Shia factions that currently control Iraq's central government, ISCI and Da'wa, has fortified their grip on power since the 2005 transitional elections. But the balance of this power may well change depending on the outcome of the January elections and a series of local, provincial, and national elections over the course of the coming year. These will include a July referendum on whether to accept the U.S.-Iraq security agreement Maliki's transition government signed last December.

Exploring the history of Iraqi Shia political-religious trends is necessary for understanding Iraq's possible political future. How the points of contention among Iraq's Shia parties, which mirror the divisions within Iraq's broader Shia Arab community, are resolved at the ballot box and in the streets of the country by their respective militias will significantly affect the Obama administration's Middle East policy as it seeks to shift greater attention and resources eastward to Afghanistan and Pakistan. The U.S. troop surge in Iraq in 2007 and 2008 was intended to provide the political space for reconciliation among the Kurds and Sunni and Shia Arabs, which remains elusive.<sup>4</sup> More importantly, however, it may well be the struggle for power within the Shia community that determines how and how well the United States exits Iraq.

In the pages that follow, this paper will examine the religious and political legacy of persecution of the Shia in Iraq over the past half-century and then trace the development of the dominant religious political parties and other power centers within the Shia community, most notably the powerful Shia religious clerical community known as the Hawza—led today by the influential but aged and ill Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. This will be followed by a detailed examination of complex inter-Shia contests for power after the U.S. invasion and amid the current occupation, and conclude with some policy suggestions on how to handle what promises to be an extremely fluid and probably dangerous Shia political landscape in 2009. The success of U.S. policymaking in Iraq will hinge on understanding these Shia dynamics.

## The Shia in Iraq

Shia make up more than 60 percent of the Iraqi population, concentrated in the southern provinces and Baghdad



## Major Shia political groups

### Da'wa

Da'wa is a Shia Islamist party formed in the Shia religious center of Najaf (see map of Iraq on page 2) in the late 1950s as a religious response to secular ideologies such as Arab nationalism, socialism, and communism.<sup>5</sup> Regarded as threat by the Baathist regime, Da'wa suffered from severe persecution throughout the 1970s, culminating in a widespread crackdown in the early 1980s following the Iranian revolution. During Saddam Hussein's rule, Da'wa members went into exile in Iran, Syria, Lebanon, and the United Kingdom, among other places. As a result, Da'wa effectively ceased to exist as a meaningful political force inside Iraq, though a breakaway faction of Da'wa members formed the Islamic Da'wa-Iraq Organization, now a member of the current Shia political coalition, the United Iraqi Alliance.<sup>6</sup>

Years in exile took a toll on Da'wa's political standing within Iraq. Da'wa returned to Iraq in 2003 without much of an indigenous base, and even today it does not maintain a large militia. Da'wa derives its power from its position within the Shia electoral bloc, with its control of the prime minister position in the Iraqi government. Both of Iraq's elected prime ministers in the past two governments, Ibrahim al-Jaafari and Nouri al-Maliki, were Da'wa members (though al-Jaafari has since broken from Da'wa and formed his own party).

Their appointments, however, are regarded as a result of compromise between Da'wa's two main rivals, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, or ISCI, and the Sadrist movement now led by the radical Islamist cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, rather than a reflection of Da'wa's own electoral strength. As Iraq expert Phebe Marr points out, "it is not clear how many votes Da'wa would gain" absent its political alliances. Until recently, Da'wa did not have the ability to mobilize popular support like the Sadrists or the political organization of ISCI.<sup>7</sup>

But Da'wa's fortunes may be on the rise. Maliki has used his authority as prime minister to bolster Da'wa's electoral prospects, both by establishing his nationalist credentials through his hard-nosed negotiation of the U.S. withdrawal agreement last year and by using the Iraqi security forces to degrade the organizational infrastructure of political competitors, especially the Sadrists. Maliki has also created a series of independent tribe-based paramilitary units known as "support councils" in Basra, May-san, Babil, Wasit, Karbala, Dhi Qar, and Baghdad provinces, which answer directly to him and the Da'wa party inner circle.

### The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq

ISCI was founded in Iran in 1982 as the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, or SCIRI, until its name change in 2007. ISCI's control over state institutions such as the Finance Ministry, as well as continued

funding from Iran, is the party's main sources of power. ISCI was allotted 36 seats of the 130 seats won by the United Iraqi Alliance in the December 2005 legislative elections. Large numbers of SCIRI's Badr militia infiltrated the new Iraqi government's security services during the party's hold on the Interior Ministry in 2005. In 2007, in an attempt to buttress its Iraqi nationalist credentials and distance itself from its Iranian patrons, SCIRI changed its name to the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, though many believe ISCI still retains close relations with Iran. ISCI currently retains the loyalty of wide swathes of the security forces. Indeed, the Badr militia is now the security force of the Interior Ministry.

As a result of its predominant role in state institutions, ISCI wields far more power than its limited popular base would suggest. It also controls the governments of the Shia holy cities of Najaf and Karbala, and has profited from the lucrative pilgrimage industry in those cities.<sup>8</sup> This control led to clashes with Sadrist Mahdi Army militia, including the August 2007 fight in Karbala that led to the Mahdi Army ceasefire. ISCI's political constituency is mostly comprised of the Shia business class and religious elite located in Najaf and Karbala. The Shia clerical establishment gives tacit support to ISCI in its battle with the more radical Sadrists. Yet ISCI's largely middle-class base has been shrinking as more and more moderate to wealthy Iraqis flee the country.

ISCI champions the creation of a nine-province "Shiastan" consisting of the main Shia-majority provinces. The party also depends on the United States to shore up its domestic position. It has seen its relationship with the United States, which began before the U.S. invasion, as a check against the power of the more popular Sadrists, and has largely opposed the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq. As a consequence, despite ISCI's close ties to Iran, the United States has seen ISCI as its primary Shia ally in Iraq and has worked to forge a strong relationship with the party's leadership.<sup>9</sup>

### The Sadrists

The Sadrists are an indigenous social movement with roots in Baghdad's dispossessed urban Shia underclass. Traditionally repressed by Sunni-led governments in the past and often ignored by Shia religious elites, these dispossessed Shia see the Sadrists and their current leader, Muqtada al-Sadr—the son of the movement's revered founder, Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr—as a defender and promoter of their interests.<sup>10</sup> Sadr has used his control over public and private goods and services in and around Baghdad to consolidate his power by benefiting this base. This network of redistribution gives the movement a central role in many neighborhoods, further cementing its importance.<sup>11</sup> In the December 2005 elections, the Sadrists received 29 seats of the United Iraqi Alliance's 130 seats in the Council of Representatives.

## Major Shia political groups (continued)

Today, the Sadrists have a foothold in Iraq anywhere there are “recently urbanized, economically disadvantaged, socially marginalized, and politically disenfranchised Shiites.”<sup>12</sup> As a movement of the dispossessed, Sadrists represent a natural challenge to the middle-class politics of ISCI. The Sadrists also represent a challenge to the Shia religious establishment, which abhors Sadr’s lack of formal religious training and his “rabble” following.<sup>13</sup>

The Sadrist’s militia, the Mahdi Army, is thought to have nearly 60,000 members.<sup>14</sup> Many Mahdi Army members also have infiltrated Iraq’s security forces, particularly the local police and military rank-and-file.<sup>15</sup> Despite this successful penetration, the Mahdi Army does not have “control” over official Iraqi security forces to the same degree that ISCI’s Badr Organization militia might.

In the wake of government offensives in Basra, Sadr City, and Amarah in March and April 2008, the Mahdi Army has been substantially degraded. It will remain, however, a serious potential threat to Iraq’s long-term stability if the movement is not sufficiently integrated into Iraq’s governing structure. Furthermore, the Sadrist movement continues to maintain a fairly visible presence in key parts of Iraq through the Organization of the Martyr Sadr, a social services network that provides for the basic needs of thousands of ordinary Iraqis.

### Fadhila

Fadhila is a Basra-based regional Islamist party that follows the ideology of Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, father of Muqtada al-Sadr. Like the Sadrists, Fadhila generally follows an anti-Iranian Arab nationalist line; Fadhila, however, does not recognize Muqtada’s claim of leadership, following instead Ayatollah Muhammad Yaqubi, a student of Sadeq al-Sadr, who is based in Karbala.<sup>16</sup> Fadhila largely controls the levers of local government in Basra, controlling 21 provincial council seats of 41 total. Fadhila’s leader, Muhammad al-Waeli, holds the governorship. Like the Sadrists and ISCI, Fadhila controls a militia; like the party itself, the militia is limited in geographic reach. It was initially part of the United Iraqi Alliance, but left the Shia bloc in 2007 after a dispute over the Oil Ministry.<sup>17</sup>

Fadhila’s major political objective is the creation of a three-province “southern region” incorporating Basra, Maysan, and Dhi Qar provinces. The idea of a “southern region” has percolated for decades and receives considerable support in Basra, but the idea places the party at odds with ISCI’s desire for a nine-province “Shiastan” region. Furthermore, Fadhila feels ISCI’s super-region project threatens to dilute its own Basra-centered power base. As a result, Fadhila has faced a concerted ISCI-Sadrist effort to remove, al-Waeli, its leader, from his governor-

ship.<sup>18</sup> Recently, Fadhila supported an effort by independent parliamentarian Wail Abd al-Latif to hold a referendum on establishing Basra as a separate federal region, but Latif’s petition failed to reach the required 140,000 signatures.<sup>19</sup>

Fadhila’s second main power base is its control of Basra’s oil sector. Some 80 percent of Iraq’s oil flows through the province, and as much as 20 percent of the total reserves in the Middle East are thought to be located under Basra.<sup>20</sup> Fadhila’s departure from the United Iraqi Alliance is perceived to be a result of losing the national Oil Ministry portfolio to its rivals in ISCI. In Basra, the party controls the 15,000-strong local Oil Protection Force, which is responsible for safeguarding the oil infrastructure, and Fadhila stands accused of attempting to take control of the state-owned Southern Oil Company. Along with almost every other major party in Basra, Fadhila is believed to profit from oil and fuel smuggling.<sup>21</sup>

### The Najaf Hawza

The Hawza is a collective term for the Shia scholarly-religious establishment, based in Najaf, in southern Iraq. Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani is currently the leading authority, expressing what he determines, through consultation with various other clerical scholars, to be the consensus opinion on issues relating to correct Islamic practice. Throughout the history of modern Iraq, the Hawza has played a role in shaping and mediating the relationship between Iraq’s often disenfranchised Shia majority to the various Sunni-dominated regimes that have ruled the country.

Though the dominant trend among leading clerics had been away from overt involvement in politics, Sistani took a more active role in guiding the post-invasion political process within the political and security void that opened up after Saddam Hussein’s regime fell. In summer 2003, against the plans of U.S. administrator L. Paul Bremer, Sistani insisted that only an elected body could write the new Iraqi constitution. In November 2003, Bremer tried to create an interim government through appointments and indirect voting, but “Sistani ruled that only direct elections would do.” The United States eventually acquiesced.<sup>22</sup>

Amid the massive upsurge in violence in the wake of the February 2006 bombing of the Samarra mosque, Sistani again withdrew from any public role. His imprimatur continues to be a source of legitimacy for the Iraqi government, however, as evidenced by the regular visits he receives from high-ranking government officials seeking advice.<sup>23</sup> Recently, Sistani issued a series of statements relating to the U.S.-Iraq security agreement that were intended to ensure that the agreement restored full Iraqi sovereignty.<sup>24</sup>

# The legacy of persecution

From their moment of origin down through the centuries, Shias have often had to contend with oppressive Sunni rulers (see page 6 for a brief religious history of the Shia). The towns of Najaf and Karbala—the scenes of fierce fighting between U.S. forces and the Mahdi Army in 2004, and later between the Mahdi Army and the Badr Organization—developed as centers for Shia learning between the mid-18th and mid-19th centuries.<sup>25</sup> After the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of the British mandate of Iraq after World War I, Shia leaders based in Najaf were among the leaders of the 1920 revolt against British control. After defeating this rebellion, the British installed a Sunni monarchy and formalized Sunni minority rule over the Shia of Iraq. From its earliest days, the Sunni Iraqi government attempted to marginalize Shia political opposition by challenging their status both as Arabs and as Muslims, a strategy the Baathists repeated later in the century.

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## The Islamic Da'wa

To understand the complicated politics among today's Shia religious parties in Iraq, it is important to highlight the common roots. The Islamic Da'wa ("Islamic call") is the oldest of Iraq's Shiite religious parties, and it has influenced most of the Shia religious parties in existence in Iraq today. The Da'wa grew out of the intellectual ferment of the seminary city of Najaf in the 1950s and 1960s, during which time a new wave of religious activists competed with secular ideologies like communism and socialism to define the politics of Iraq's Shia community. The most significant intellectual figure in Najaf's scholarly renaissance was Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr (also known as Sadr I), a distant cousin and father-in-law of current Iraqi political figure Muqtada al-Sadr. Sadr I's theories about the place of religion in society—he advocated a more activist role for clerics as well as for the formal institutionalization of Shia religious leadership—today underpin all of the leading Shia religious parties.

As Sadr I rose in the clerical ranks, he came under criticism from more traditional members of the Hawza (a title used for the collective Shia clerical establishment based in Najaf)<sup>26</sup> who felt that his activism was inappropriate.<sup>27</sup> Baqr al-Sadr and other leading clerics were advised by the Najaf leadership to withdraw from overt political activities. This opened the way for non-clerics to begin to take positions of leadership in the party.<sup>28</sup>



**Grand Ayatollah  
Ali al-Sistani (1930– )**

Based in Najaf, but originally from Mashadd, Iran, Sistani has been the leading Shia cleric in Iraq since 1992. While he rarely leaves his home in Najaf, his edicts are a source of guidance for many of Iraq's Shia faithful, and his imprimatur a significant source of legitimacy for Iraq's Shia leaders.

## Shia Islam in brief

Of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims, around 170 million are Shia.<sup>29</sup> The largest populations of Shia Muslims are found in India, Iran, and Iraq. Shiism developed out of a dispute between the Prophet Muhammad's followers over who would succeed him as the leader of the Muslim community. After the Prophet's death in 632 C.E., some believed that the new leader should come from the Prophet's family. This faction supported Ali Ibn Abu Talib, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law. Ali's faction was overruled, and the majority chose Abu Bakr, Muhammad's uncle, to succeed Muhammad and become caliph.<sup>30</sup> Ali's partisans continued to support Ali's leadership claim, however, as he was passed over two more times—first in 634 C.E., in favor of Umar, and again in 644, in favor of Uthman. Ali was finally named the fourth caliph in 656 after Muslim soldiers murdered Uthman.<sup>31</sup> Ali's supporters later became known as *Shiite Ali*, the “partisans” of Ali.

Ali's leadership of the Muslim community was beset with difficulty from its first days. One of Uthman's relatives, Mu'awiya, demanded retribution for his murdered kinsman. The murder of Uthman thus provided a pretext for Mu'awiya to attempt to retake the caliphate for the Umayyad clan, to which Uthman and Mu'awiya both belonged.<sup>32</sup> After a period of conflict between Ali and Mu'awiya, a portion of Muslims blamed both leaders for the continued unrest, and attempted to assassinate both of them. They failed to murder Mu'awiyah, but their attack on Ali was successful, and he died of his wounds in 661 C.E. After Ali's death, his eldest son, Hassan, became caliph. In the interest of avoiding further bloodshed between Muslims, Hassan agreed to abdicate in favor of Mu'awiya.

In 680, Mu'awiya arranged for his son Yazid to succeed him as caliph. In response, Ali's second son, Hussein, raised an army and led a rebellion against Yazid to reclaim the caliphate for the Prophet's family. Though vastly outnumbered, Hussein refused to surrender. He was killed in battle with Yazid's forces near Karbala.

The martyrdoms of Ali and Hussein permeate Shia religious practice and political consciousness, contributing to the Shia sense of themselves throughout history as righteous followers of the Prophet's true path, persecuted by usurpers. This model of persecution, resistance, and mar-

tyrdom is replayed throughout Iraqi Shia history. The persecutors have come in various guises: Sunni Ottomans, British occupiers, the British-installed Sunni monarchy, the Baath Party, Al Qaeda, and the U.S. military. The experiences of Iraqi Shia at the hands of these oppressors fit neatly within, and greatly strengthen, this conceptual framework.

The majority of Shia belongs to a sect known as “Twelvers,” so called because of their belief in the 12 Imams, leaders descending from the Prophet Muhammad. They believe that the 12th Imam—Muhammad al-Mahdi, known as “the Hidden Imam”—was hidden by God in a spiritual realm, and that his return will herald an era of peace and justice.<sup>33</sup> In the absence of an earthly ruler, Shia developed a system of religious accreditation and leadership in which individuals choose a *marja al-taqlid*, or object of emulation, from among recognized clerics to act as their spiritual guide. Devout Shia address questions regarding faith practices and proper conduct to their chosen *marja*, and they are required to follow his decisions, known as *fatwas*.<sup>34</sup>

Education in the Shia seminaries is a rigorous process. Students generally begin their studies between the ages of 14 and 20. There are three levels, or study cycles, each taking between three and six years, and students advance through acclaim for his understanding of the Quran and hadith (sayings of Muhammad), and of the Arabic language, by consensus of his teachers and, later, his students. Unlike the Imams, who were believed to have possessed a supernatural ability to understand the Quran and thus did not need to rely upon human reason, Shia scholars have developed a process of independent interpretation of religious matters, known as *ijtihad*.<sup>35</sup> Once a scholar achieves the rank of *mujtahid*, he is granted a diploma and permitted to rule on religious questions in edicts known as *fatwas*.

The two leading centers of Shia learning in the modern world are Najaf, in southern Iraq, and Qom, in northern Iran. As the site of the tomb of Imam Ali, Najaf was for centuries the center of Shia learning in the Middle East. After the Iranian Revolution in 1978, Qom began to replace Najaf as the chief seminary of the Shia world, both because of the substantial government resources provided for this purpose and because of the increasingly oppressive atmosphere for Shias in Saddam Hussein's Iraq.<sup>36</sup>

This tension between scholarship and activism continues to represent a point of contention in the contemporary Hawza, today led by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.<sup>37</sup> The conflict is often characterized as between “activist” and “quietist” clerics, though this is not entirely accurate. Even *marjas* classified as “quietist,” such as Sistani himself, offer opinions that clearly have bearing on political matters, and become more politically engaged when situations warrant—for example, Sistani made an early push for direct elections following the fall of Saddam in 2003.

Following the Baath Party coup in July 1968, a period of intense repression of Iraq’s Shia majority began. The Baathist security services regularly harassed, detained, and tortured religious activists and leaders. Abandoning his silence, Baqr al-Sadr began speaking out against the regime and was arrested and detained numerous times throughout the 1970s. Religious Iraqi Shiites were further emboldened by the Iranian revolution in 1979. Sadr I exhorted Iraqis “to keep the jihad and struggle to remove this nightmare from the land of beloved Iraq, to liberate themselves from this inhuman gang,” the Baathists, “and to establish a righteous, unique, and honorable rule based on Islam.”<sup>38</sup> Baqr al-Sadr’s status as a *marja* protected him for some time, but after a series of assassination attempts against Ba’ath Party officials, Saddam Hussein was no longer willing to take a risk that the popular Sadr I—whose followers had begun referring to him as “Iraq’s Khomeini”—might lead a similar revolution in Iraq. Saddam had Sadr arrested and executed in April 1980.<sup>39</sup>

This was the first execution of a grand ayatollah in modern Middle Eastern history,<sup>40</sup> an indicator of how far Saddam Hussein was willing to go to prevent the emergence of a unifying figure from among Iraq’s Shia majority. Soon after, thousands of Shia clerics and activists fled to surrounding countries. The death of Baqr al-Sadr is a seminal event in the political culture of Iraq’s religious Shia, echoing the martyrdom of Hussein in the 7th century, which provides the basis for much of Shiite religious ritual. Baqr al-Sadr, now often referred to as “the First Martyr,” continues to be regarded as a saint by many of Iraq’s Shia.

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## The diversification of Shia religious politics

In the wake of the mass persecution of the Shia following Baqr al-Sadr’s death in early 1980s, thousands of Shia clerics sought refuge in neighboring Iran. Among these were Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim, one of the co-founders of Da’wa, and his brother Abdul Aziz al-Hakim. While in Iran, the Hakims helped found the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, or SCIRI, with the blessing of Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini.

The purpose of SCIRI was to help overcome divisions within Iraq’s Shia political movement and provide a unifying framework for Islamist activism in Iraq.<sup>41</sup> In exchange for Khomeini’s sponsorship, SCIRI explicitly advocated the establishment of an Islamic state in Iraq, adopting Khomeini’s radical (and, from a Shia theological standpoint, marginal and fringe) ideology of direct rule by clerics. Notably, Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim formed a close relationship with Khomeini’s representative on the Higher Defense Council, Ali



**Grand Ayatollah  
Muhammad Baqr  
al-Sadr (1935–1980)**

Prominent clerical scholar, central figure in the Najaf renaissance of 1950’s, and co-founder of the Islamic Da’wa Party in 1957. Sadr served as a religious authority to many of Iraq’s Shia activists. Executed by Saddam Hussein in 1980. Often referred to as Sadr I, or the First Martyr.



**Grand Ayatollah  
Muhammad Sadeq  
al-Sadr (1943–1999)**

An Iraqi cleric who built a powerful movement appealing to Iraq’s poor Shia during the 1990s, Islamic conservatism, Iraqi nationalism and populism. Assassinated by Saddam Hussein’s agents in 1999, along with his two eldest sons. Often referred to as Sadr II, or the Second Martyr.



**Muqtada al-Sadr  
(1973–)**

Son of Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr. Despite a lack of religious credentials, after the 2003 U.S. invasion, he took leadership of his father’s movement. Sadr’s Mahdi Army militia was one of the main drivers of violence during Iraq’s 2006–7 sectarian civil war, but they have been increasingly fractured and weakened since 2007, when Muqtada fled to Iran, where he remains today.

Khamenei, Iran's current Supreme Leader. Khamenei served as the chief Iranian liaison with Iraqi groups,<sup>42</sup> and his support helped SCIRI develop simultaneously into both an Iranian instrument and a political fiefdom of the Hakims.

Following the First Gulf War in 1991, SCIRI attempted to turn the anti-Saddam army mutiny in southern Iraq into an Iranian-style Islamic revolution. The failure of the revolt revealed a lack of popular support.<sup>43</sup> Afterwards, the party maintained its deep links to Tehran, but proved ideologically flexible in the 12 years between the First Gulf War and the overthrow of Saddam in 2003. In 1992 SCIRI joined the Iraqi National Congress—a U.S.-favored collection of exile opposition groups—and participated in pre-invasion exile opposition gatherings in 2002 and 2003.<sup>44</sup>

This flexibility served the Hakims and their organization well after the invasion, when it began cooperating with the United States and moving into official political institutions despite popular skepticism of its Iranian ties.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, upon returning to Iraq, the Hakim brothers' relationship with Iran would repeatedly be used against SCIRI by Muqtada al-Sadr—the leader of the Sadrist today and a scion of another clerical family who did not choose exile—though ironically it did not seem to bother U.S. policymakers, who handily facilitated SCIRI's establishment in post-invasion Iraqi politics.

During the Iran-Iraq War, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps had managed and controlled much of SCIRI's military and intelligence activities, creating SCIRI's militia wing, the Badr Brigade, to serve essentially as a unit of the Revolutionary Guard in Iraq. Though SCIRI did have an official "military unit," its activities were relegated to administering salaries, budgeting, and recruitment. Actual command was in the hands of Iranians, who envisioned the Badr as a tool of guerilla war inside Iraq. During the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, the Iranians drafted hundreds of Iraqi POWs into the Badr Brigade. SCIRI's running of POW camps in Iran, and rumors of the torture of Iraqi prisoners at the hands of Iranian-directed Badr troops, has proven a difficult hurdle for the organization to overcome in establishing genuine legitimacy as an Iraqi party.<sup>46</sup>

Iran also sparked criticism among a significant number of Iraqi Da'wa members, who opposed Iran's new influence over Iraqi activism and refused to adopt Khomeini's theory of "rule of the jurispudent." Many of these members, including future Iraqi prime ministers Ibrahim al-Jaafari and Nouri al-Maliki, chose to seek refuge from Saddam outside of Iran, in Damascus, Beirut, London, and elsewhere. This dispersal of Da'wa activists made it difficult to develop a unifying vision for Iraq. After the failed 1991 Shia uprising, however, several Da'wa members published *Barnamajunah* (Our Program) while in London. The manifesto "represented a significant break from their previous stance of calling for an Islamic state in Iraq and focused on the need for a democratic framework reflecting the will of the people."<sup>47</sup>

After the uprising by Iraq's Shia population in 1991 following the First Gulf War nearly toppled his regime, Saddam Hussein developed a two-pronged strategy for precluding any such revolts in the future. He sought to rehabilitate his own religious credentials through



**Grand Ayatollah  
Muhammad Baqir  
al-Hakim (1939–2003)**

One of the founders of the Da'wa Party, Hakim fled to Iran in the early 1980s during the wave of Ba'athist repression which culminated in the execution of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr. While in Iran, with the support of Ayatollah Khomeini, Hakim helped found the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq. In August 2003, several months after he returned to Iraq in the wake of the U.S. invasion, Hakim was killed by a massive car bomb in Najaf.



**Abdel Aziz al-Hakim  
(1953–)**

Younger brother of Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, Abdel Aziz al-Hakim fled to Iran with his elder brother in the early 1980s. He served as the commander of SCIRI's militia arm, the Badr Brigade. After his brother's murder, he took up leadership of SCIRI, which was later renamed ISCI. Hakim is currently very ill with lung cancer.



**Ammar al-Hakim**

Son of Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, Ammar has taken over many of the leadership duties of ISCI as his father has been treated for cancer.

increased demonstrations of public piety, and to marginalize the Hawza leadership in Najaf, many of whom were of Persian descent. Iraqi Shia were branded “Iranian lackeys” by Hussein’s Baathist propaganda—a common pejorative Iraqi Sunnis still use today<sup>48</sup>—and the dictator enabled the rise of an Arab marja, Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr (also known as Sadr II), a younger cousin and protégé of Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr.<sup>49</sup>

After an initial period of passivity toward the regime,<sup>50</sup> during which time Sadr II—Muqtada’s father—took advantage of Saddam’s tolerance in order to create a network of loyal clerics and activists throughout poor Shiite communities, Sadr II began a campaign of indirect confrontation.<sup>51</sup> While Sadr II did highlight his own Iraqi Arab background as a means to increasing his legitimacy in the eyes of Iraq’s Shia, he combined this with denunciations of unjust, un-Islamic government—veiled but unmistakable references to the Saddam regime. Advocating a more active role for marjas, Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr refined his cousin Baqr al-Sadr’s notions of clerical activism into a theory of the “speaking Hawza” versus “the silent Hawza,”<sup>52</sup> and criticized the Sistani-led Najaf establishment for what he considered their passivity in the face of oppression.

Sadr II also rebuked religious leaders like the Hakims who had fled Iraq to save their own lives rather than staying to guide and comfort the people, even if it meant risking death. In a defiant show of readiness for his expected martyrdom, Sadr II began appearing in public wearing a funeral shroud, a symbolic gesture that his son Muqtada also later employed.<sup>53</sup> The elder Sadr proclaimed his support for Ayatollah Khomeini’s concept of the “guardianship of the jurisprudent,” calling for the establishment of an Islamic state in Iraq, ruled by clerics.<sup>54</sup> Like Khomeini, Sadr II’s fiery speeches condemned America together with Saddam and Israel as enemies of Islam.<sup>55</sup>

Sadr II cultivated a strong base of support among the poor of Baghdad’s slums, many of whom were tribal migrants who had migrated to the city in search of work. Just as Shia *mujtahids* had found adherents among the newly settled tribal communities in the 18th and 19th centuries,<sup>56</sup> so Sadr II found followers from among the city-dwelling Shia tribal migrants who saw his movement as a substitute for the family support networks they had left behind.<sup>57</sup> To further gain adherents to his brand of religious activism, Sadr II organized a system of religious courts, medical services, and food delivery, laying the groundwork for the parallel organizations that his son Muqtada later continued to develop.

In February 1999, Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr was assassinated along with his two oldest sons as they drove toward his offices in Najaf. Most believe that Saddam ordered the killing.<sup>58</sup> As with the killing of Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr nearly 20 years earlier, the murder of Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr was a devastating blow to Iraq’s religious Shia community.<sup>59</sup> The news of Sadr’s death was greeted with massive demonstrations that developed into an uprising<sup>60</sup> in which Iraqi police killed more than 200 people.<sup>61</sup> Soon after his father’s death, Muqtada, only 25 years old at the time, went into seclusion and was not seen again in public until after the fall of Saddam.



**Nouri al-Maliki**  
(1950–)

Born in Hilla, Iraq, Maliki fled the country along with many other Da’wa activists during the 1980s, taking refuge in Syria. After returning to Iraq in 2003, Maliki was chosen as a successor to Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari in 2006.



**Ibrahim al-Jaafari**  
(1947–)

A former spokesman for the Da’wa Party while in exile in London in the 1990s, Jaafari was one of two vice-presidents in the Iraqi Interim Government from 2004 to 2005. He served as Prime Minister of Iraq from April 2005 to May 2006, when he was forced out in favor of Nouri al-Maliki.

# The U.S. invasion and occupation

In the period leading up to the U.S. invasion and its immediate aftermath, the United States favored exile Shia political groups over other indigenous Shia political groups. U.S. policy in this respect has primarily benefited the Da'wa Party and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, both of which obtained seats on the Iraqi Governing Council,<sup>62</sup> the provisional government from July 2003 to June 2004 under U.S. administrator L. Paul Bremer.

Da'wa and SCIRI—renamed ISCI in 2007—also received two seats apiece in the first post-Saddam cabinet, formed in September 2003.<sup>63</sup> Parties were accorded representation on a sectarian basis, which consequentially encouraged stronger sectarian identification among Iraqis. For Da'wa and, especially, ISCI—who were treated by the U.S. occupation government as representatives of Iraq's Shia despite their lack of a popular political base—this recognition began a steady entrenchment in the institutions of the new Iraq.<sup>64</sup>

In contrast, Muqtada al-Sadr consolidated his movement's political position outside of the occupation authorities and provisional government. Appealing primarily to the dispossessed urban Shia of Baghdad, Sadr's movement mobilized support among the poor Shia masses, which his revered father had built into a following.<sup>65</sup> Sadr's associates attacked—both rhetorically and physically—returning exile politicians such as the Hakims, who were perceived to have abandoned the country, as well as “quietist” religious figures such as Sistani, who Sadr charged with tacitly cooperating with the Baathist regime. A mob of Sadr's followers also are believed to have murdered Abdul Majid Al-Khoei,<sup>66</sup> the scion of another clerical dynasty to which Sadr was deeply hostile, when he returned to Najaf from exile in London after the U.S. invasion.<sup>67</sup>

Then, in late August 2003, SCIRI's leader, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr Al-Hakim, was assassinated by a massive car bomb—believed to have been the work of Al Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi<sup>68</sup>—in Najaf, along with as many as 95 others.<sup>69</sup> The death of the elder Hakim brother dealt a serious blow to SCIRI, as he had developed the organization as a personal instrument largely dependent upon his own leadership and he had possessed substantial religious authority as an acclaimed ayatollah. Leadership of SCIRI passed to his younger brother, Abdel Aziz Hakim, who possessed neither his elder brother's charisma nor his scholarly credentials.

In August 2004, the issuing of an arrest warrant for Muqtada for the murder of Abdul Majid Al-Khoei and the shuttering of a Sadrist newspaper's offices resulted in intense fighting between Sadr's Mahdi Army and U.S. forces. As combat extended into Najaf and Karbala, Sadr was forced to accept a cease-fire negotiated by Ayatollah Sistani and the clerical establishment. While his militia was badly damaged, the fighting of 2004 enhanced Sadr's stature and gave him an opening to the emerging political process.<sup>70</sup>

In the period after the invasion, in contrast to the "quietism" that traditionally characterized the Shia religious establishment, Ayatollah Sistani played a more active role in guiding the political process. Against the wishes of U.S. proconsul L. Paul Bremer, Sistani pushed for holding elections earlier rather than later and maintained that no Iraqi constitution could be considered legitimate if an unelected body created it.<sup>71</sup>

Leading up to the January 2005 elections for a transitional government, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani helped bring Sadr, SCIRI, Da'wa, and other Shiite religious parties together under the so-called United Iraqi Alliance list. In keeping with his overriding priority of protecting the religious Shia community, Sistani's goal in bringing the UIA together was to prevent the Shia vote from being split by parties running separately, and ensure Shia dominance of the new government. Along with other Shia leaders, Sistani did not want the Shia to repeat the mistake they had made under the British occupation in 1920, when their refusal to cooperate with the British mandate authorities had resulted in their being largely shut out of government institutions.

SCIRI used its political organization and armed militia—trained and funded by Iran—to dominate the UIA. It also used images of Sistani in its campaign advertising to persuade Shia that it was the grand ayatollah's preferred party, something that has been legally prohibited for the January 2009 elections.<sup>72</sup> In the national elections on January 30, 2005, the UIA received 4.08 million of 8.46 million votes cast, a near-majority of 48 percent.<sup>73</sup>

Moreover, SCIRI took power in the 2005 provincial elections due in no small part to the local (though not national) boycotts of its primary Shia rivals, the Sadrists, as well as the Sunnis. ISCI gained control of many provincial and local governments in mixed areas and the Shia-majority south.<sup>74</sup> Only in Basra was SCIRI outmaneuvered by Fadhila. As a result, SCIRI was also able to penetrate the local security forces throughout much of the south.

In February 2005, SCIRI and Da'wa put forward Da'wa's Ibrahim Jaafari as the UIA candidate for prime minister. As negotiations to form a government dragged on into the spring, Sadr's 23-strong parliamentary bloc grew displeased with the choice of Jaafari.<sup>75</sup> Despite these grumblings, Jaafari was sworn in as prime minister on April 7.<sup>76</sup>

Once in power, SCIRI began to entrench itself in state institutions, particularly the security forces. Bayan Jabr of SCIRI took over the Interior Ministry and allowed the Badr Organization militia to deeply infiltrate its ranks. There it began to push out former

Baathists of every sectarian background and replaced them with Badr members and approved new recruits.<sup>77</sup> In effect, SCIRI's control of state security institutions turned Interior Ministry forces into its own legitimate militia.

The December 2005 national elections for a permanent government produced a smaller UIA plurality compared to the January 2005 transitional elections, largely due to increased Sunni Arab participation. Sadr increased his seats to 32, making his bloc the largest in the UIA.<sup>78</sup> Both SCIRI (29 seats) and Da'wa (25 seats) retained similar-sized parliamentary delegations.<sup>79</sup> At this point, the UIA began to fracture. With American support, SCIRI put forward its own candidate for prime minister, Adel Abdul Mahdi; Sadr and Da'wa closed ranks behind Jaafari, defeating SCIRI's move by one vote.<sup>80</sup>

Jaafari, however, remained under pressure from Sunni Arab and Kurdish parties as well as the United States to step down due to what they saw as his inability (or unwillingness) to stem the sectarian violence then raging. (Jaafari had also angered Kurdish leaders by making a state visit to neighboring Turkey, which is hostile to independent Kurdish aspirations, without consulting them.<sup>81</sup>) The UIA assured Da'wa that if Jaafari stepped down the party would retain control of the prime minister's office, icing SCIRI's attempted takeover.<sup>82</sup> SCIRI would have to settle for Mahdi being named one of Iraq's two vice presidents. A two-month deadlock—ended by Ayatollah Sistani's intervention<sup>83</sup>—Jaafari stepped down and Da'wa nominated Nouri al-Maliki to the premiership. Maliki was quickly approved by the Iraqi parliament in April 2006; only Fadhila opposed his appointment within the UIA.<sup>84</sup>

# The Shia and the 2007–2008 surge

For most of the first two years of his tenure, Prime Minister Maliki, like his predecessor, was regarded as weak and ineffective. Because the Sadrists had sponsored his bid, he was seen as unwilling to confront the Mahdi Army or to welcome greater Sunni inclusion in his government. In November 2006, a leaked U.S. National Security Council memo “expressed serious doubts about whether Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki had the capacity to control the sectarian violence in Iraq and recommended that the United States take new steps to strengthen the Iraqi leader’s position.”<sup>85</sup>

Maliki’s reputation underwent a transformation, however, in March 2008 when he ordered the Iraqi army to retake the southern port city of Basra, which had been under the domination of the Mahdi Army and other criminal gangs. At first the “Charge of the Knights” operation, as it was known, faltered after meeting heavy militia resistance and suffering desertions by troops supportive of Sadr. U.S. support eventually enabled the Iraqi army to move deeper into Basra, and the fighting eventually ended with an Iran-brokered cease-fire.

Many U.S. government officials and journalists alike simplistically characterized the March battle in Basra as a fight between the legitimate Iraqi government and unlawful militias.<sup>86</sup> A more textured analysis, however, reveals the complex political dynamics at play. While extending the government’s writ into areas hitherto controlled by militias was one goal of the operation, Maliki and his main governing partner, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, were locked in an intense political struggle with the Sadrists for political support of Iraq’s Shia majority. Examined through this lens, the battle in Basra was about internal power politics—a politically motivated effort against one Shia political group by another that happened to hold the reins of power in Baghdad and sought to weaken the power of a rival group.

The March fighting in Basra brought the intra-Shia conflict between ISCI and Sadr to the forefront of the Iraq war. Many U.S. policymakers and pundits, however, ignored the complexity of the situation and to this day still reduce the intra-Shia conflict to the “Iraqi security forces” versus “militia fighters and criminals.”<sup>87</sup> Characterizing the conflict in this fashion obfuscates the fact that the United States took sides in an intra-Shia civil war. Unconditional support for the Iraqi government creates a moral hazard that dissuades ISCI and its Da’wa allies from arriving at an accommodation with the 2 million-strong Sadr movement.

Iran's role in the Basra fighting has also been a source of some confusion. While elements of the Mahdi Army did receive support from Iran, Iran's main instrument of influence in Iraq has been its close relationship with ISCI, as well as looser but still substantial ties to members of the Da'wa Party. An October report from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point's Combating Terrorism Center stated that Iran "projects political influence by leveraging close historical relationships with several Shia organizations in Iraq"—Da'wa and ISCI—and noted that Iran's "political allies have secured high-ranking positions in the Iraqi government."<sup>88</sup> Iran's relationship with Sadr has been primarily aimed at managing the threat he posed to the influence of Iran's primary allies.

In retrospect, the Basra offensive represented the first of several steps Maliki took in 2008 to extend his government's authority. Follow-on operations in Sadr City, Amara, and elsewhere by the Iraqi security forces drove Sadr's militia further underground. Through these anti-Sadr operations, Maliki established himself, in the words of one Basra supporter, as "a strong man protecting the country."<sup>89</sup>

After Basra, Maliki continued consolidating his growing power through the formation of tribal militias known as "support councils," which his office also funded and directed. First formed during the Basra fighting (where 10,000 Shia tribesmen were recruited<sup>90</sup>), these government-sponsored militias give Maliki an armed force loyal to him in areas dominated by ISCI, Sadr, and the Kurds. While the Kurds have been the most vocal in opposition to the support councils,<sup>91</sup> they have also unnerved Maliki's nominal coalition partner, ISCI. ISCI politicians in southern Iraq have called the support councils "illegal and unconstitutional," while support council members claim ISCI-dominated security forces have arrested them for their involvement.<sup>92</sup>

In addition to the extra-government support councils, Maliki has established separate chains of command for certain Iraqi security force units. Case in point: an "elite counterterrorism force" reports directly to Maliki's office. These special forces have been used to raid provincial government buildings in Diyala and carry out arrests in the Interior Ministry.<sup>93</sup> Interior Minister Jawad Bolani, whose own Iraqi Constitutional Party is competing in January's provincial elections, denounced the raid as happening "for political reasons... You know the country is approaching provincial elections, so there is a relation to the political process."<sup>94</sup>

Moreover, Maliki has used the recently completed Status of Forces Agreement with the United States to burnish his credentials as a nationalist. Able to obtain a firm date of December 31, 2011 for the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq, Maliki framed the SOFA as a "withdrawal accord."<sup>95</sup> Such a stance allowed Maliki to position himself as the leader who secured the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq, taking much of the steam out of Sadr's political appeal.

# The Shia and the Iraqi elections of 2009

Over the past year, the political dynamics among Iraq's Shia religious parties have changed substantially. Erstwhile partners on a national level, ISCI and Da'wa are geared up for fierce electoral competition on the provincial level. Despite laws banning the use of religious symbols in campaigns, ISCI continues to run on an explicitly sectarian Shia platform, invoking Shia ritual chants in its campaign posters and printing the names of the Prophet Muhammad on campaign literature so that pious voters will not throw it away.<sup>96</sup> Sadrists have chosen to contest provincial elections as a party, preferring to endorse two lists of independents and technocrats.<sup>97</sup>

The most prominent change, however, has been Da'wa's embrace of a nationalist platform for its provincial campaigns. Maliki's decision to name the Da'wa's coalition "State of Law" reflects a shift in emphasis from religious identification and Islamist social politics to bread-and-butter issues such as basic public services and security. This also reflects a sense of the growing disenchantment voters have with the religious party-controlled government's inability to provide basic services. As the coalition's campaign manager put it, "Right now we have priorities. People have no houses, no food, no security. There are essential needs for people before you do things like ban alcohol or force women to cover their heads with scarves."<sup>98</sup>

To this end, Maliki has cultivated a base of support among Iraq's tribes to offset the militia-based power of ISCI and the Sadrists. The prime minister's tribal support councils enjoy stipends of \$10,000 a month, buying the support of these important social networks while alienating Maliki's competitors. Moreover, these tribes tend to be more nationalist and secular in outlook, suspicious of both overtly religious parties with ties to Iran and the Shia clerical establishment.<sup>99</sup>

The outcome of Iraq's provincial elections will yield strong clues as to the future direction of Iraqi politics. With nearly 13 million potential voters, 400 political groups, and 14,431 candidates competing for 440 seats in 14 provinces (the provinces comprising the Kurdish region and the contested province of Tamim will not have elections on January 31), the stakes are high. Importantly, unlike previous Iraqi elections—in which people voted for closed lists of candidates usually based on ethnic and sectarian affiliations—the January 2009 elections will be under an open-list proportional representation system, meaning people will be able to vote for individual candidates or for their lists.<sup>100</sup> This could further

decrease the power of the current dominant parties and party bosses, enabling the rise of leaders who are more sensitive to local issues and less sectarian in outlook.

In Iraq's Shia-majority south, the outcomes will have heavy implications for the next round of national elections in the late 2009-early 2010 timeframe. If ISCI manages to win a substantial majority of seats, the sectarian identity politics that have dominated Iraq since the 2005 elections will likely persist for the foreseeable future. But if Maliki's coalition achieves a substantial victory, then Iraqi politics may shift ever so slightly away from the sectarian politics promoted in the past and toward a new, more nationalist discourse.

To be sure, a victory for Maliki's party will not augur a new age of secular technocratic nationalism. Da'wa remains a party based in religion, albeit one that finds more and more political profit in Iraqi nationalism and the provision of basic services. Moreover, the still-unresolved sectarian tensions between Arabs and Kurds and Sunnis and Shias will remain Iraq's most dangerous and persistent political problems. Nevertheless, a victory for the "State of Law" coalition will change the terms of debate and push all parties seeking national power to cast their platforms in more nationalist terms.

Iraq's two major upcoming elections—the referendum on the U.S.-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement scheduled for July and the next national elections later this year or early next year—will test the depth of Iraq's emerging nationalist sentiment.

# Conclusion: What should U.S. policymakers know?

All of the leading Shia parties in Iraq have their roots in the Najaf renaissance of 1950s, but diverged through the 1980s and 1990s. U.S. patronage helped establish two formerly exiled Shiite parties, ISCI and Da'wa, in positions of power in the central government. Out of a combination of choice and necessity, the United States worked with exile groups (SCIRI, Da'wa) in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion, resulting in those parties getting power out of proportion to their relatively small political bases—and to the disadvantage of a larger, more popular movement, the Sadrists. These groups have continued to jockey for position, often violently, over the past five years, and the January 31, 2009 elections—assuming they are fair, and just as importantly are seen as fair—will determine the extent to which they have been able to translate U.S. patronage into political support. The elections thus could significantly redraw the boundaries of competition.

As with Iraq as a whole, persistent divisions still exist between Iraq's Shiite parties. As a result of differing political bases, the Sadrists and ISCI have divergent political goals. One of ISCI's political goals is the formation of a nine-province "Shiastan" super-region in the south. There is little to indicate that this proposal has much Shiite popular support, as evidenced by the failure of the Basra federal region petition to garner sufficient signatures even to be put to a referendum. The Sadrists support a strong central government, while many Shia in Basra, Iraq's second-largest city, want to see a three-province "southern region." Despite this lack of support and internal debates within ISCI as to the wisdom of the proposal, ISCI leader Abdul Aziz al-Hakim and his son and designated successor, Ammar, have consistently and strongly backed the super-region proposal, though they seem to have downplayed this cause for the moment.<sup>101</sup>

While Fadhila is the smallest of the main Shia religious parties, with its influence concentrated in and around Basra, its control of the governorship of the oil-rich province has made it a significant player in southern Iraq. More than 70 percent of Iraq's oil is produced in this region, while its ports contribute to the majority of the country's gross domestic product.<sup>102</sup> This makes control of Basra a major prize and heightens the possibility for violence depending on the outcome of the January 31 elections.

Unlike ISCI and Da'wa, the Sadrists have strongly and consistently opposed the presence of foreign forces in Iraq and object strenuously to federalism-cum-partition. (Their base in Baghdad is resource-poor compared to ISCI's supposed base in the oil-rich south.) They strike far more Arab nationalist tones in rhetoric than ISCI, but have no strong ideology

beyond vehement anti-occupation, anti-partition Islamism.<sup>103</sup> The Mahdi Army portrayed itself as a defender of the Shiite Arab community against Sunni extremists. However, its violence increasingly terrorized the population and led to a drop in support. This decreasing legitimacy played a part in Sadr's calculation to "freeze" his Mahdi Army militia in August 2007,<sup>104</sup> which contributed significantly to the security gains in Iraq throughout 2008.

Though Ayatollah Sistani has taken a less active role as the U.S. occupation has receded, he is still a source of religious guidance for a majority of Iraq's Shia, and Maliki's government still derives significant legitimacy from his imprimatur. We should not expect this to change very much, but should recognize the deeply religious nature of the new Iraq for what it is. It is also important to consider what might occur after the passing of Ayatollah Sistani, who is very elderly. There is currently no heir apparent among Najaf's other leading clerics. In the absence of such an heir, leadership of the Hawza could pass to a committee of clerics, from among whom a *primus inter pares* might eventually arise. The competition among rival clerics and their followers during this period could be very destabilizing.

Maliki's cultivation of tribal militias answerable directly to his office is a notable development, with possible troubling implications. Leaders such as Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, have accused Maliki of using the militias (called "support councils") to enhance Da'wa's political prospects in contested areas. The Iraqi presidential council—which includes Talabani, Shia Vice President Adel Abdel Mahdi of ISCI, and Sunni Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi—called on Maliki in November 2008 to suspend the groups so that their legality could be reviewed. Maliki has refused, insisting that the councils are a natural outgrowth of the 'Awakening' movement launched in 2006, when Sunni tribes in Anbar province allied with U.S. forces against Al-Qaeda in Iraq.<sup>105</sup>

One policy primer: Maliki and his inner circle must not be able to exploit his office in order to entrench themselves in power. Eventually there should be some kind of civilian review of the use of the military to ensure that Iraq's security forces are not being used to establish yet another Middle East strongman.

Despite the tendency to describe Sadr as an agent of Iran, Da'wa and ISCI both enjoy stronger and deeper ties to Iran, which cultivated a relationship with Sadr in order both to use him against the Americans and to strengthen their main allies in Iraq, ISCI. Though the Sadrists have been significantly politically marginalized since March 2008, they still retain strong popular appeal and the support of as many as 2 million Iraqis. While the defeat of Sadrist militias is a positive step, attempting to suppress the deeply rooted Sadrist current from participation in Iraqi politics is not a sustainable political strategy.

Despite a significant decline in violence, the central political questions dividing Iraq's Shia remain. At the core of the competition between Da'wa, ISCI, and the Sadrists—as with conflict between Iraq's factions in general—is the nature of the Iraqi state. Will it be more or less centralized? How will its resources be distributed? What will be its relation-

ship with the United States, Iran, and its other regional neighbors? The elections in Iraq throughout 2009 will serve to clarify these divisions, just as the redeployment of U.S. forces pursuant to the terms of the security agreement will reveal the extent to which Iraq's civil war has ended, or only paused.

With all this information in hand, we argue that U.S. policymakers should take the following steps—ever mindful that events on the ground after the elections will also determine policy decisions.

#### [Proceed with plans for a redeployment of U.S. armed forces](#)

The presence of U.S. troops in the Shia-majority areas of Iraq is already minimal and has been for quite some time. Iraqi leaders and the Iraqi people will have to sort out their politics on their own terms; the elections may not be completely free from fraud, and violence may even result in some cases. The Obama administration would, however, be well advised to stick to its plans for redeployment. The removal of U.S. troops will facilitate the consolidation of power in Iraq, and our troop presence continues to artificially shape Iraq's power balances. For broader national security reasons, including the international economic crisis, the United States needs to recalibrate its resources to other areas of the world.

#### [Recognize the complex realities of Iraqi politics on the region](#)

The Obama administration should not make the mistake made by the Bush administration in confusing and conflating the relations between Iran and the different competing Shia factions in Iraq. Iran has a policy of hedging and supporting all of the different Shia (as well as Kurdish) factions to some extent, but it is not likely to be able to dominate Iraq when the United States leaves because of the strongly nationalist trend among many Iraqi Shia groups.

#### [Work with the United Nations and others to build more sustainable governing structures](#)

Even if the January elections are relatively peaceful, much work will remain undone to help Iraqis settle their power sharing disputes and make some tough decisions on the right balance of power between the central, regional, provincial, and local levels of government. Much of that work will require investments in the technical capacities of the various levels of government to deliver basic services along with security.

#### [Beware the possible disconnect between security and sustainable governance](#)

The United States has dedicated tens of billions of dollars to build up Iraq's security forces, and the central government has been on a massive defense-sector buying spree.<sup>106</sup> This has occurred at a time when Iraq's politics remain fractured and the governance structures remain weak. This disconnect could have far-reaching implications for civil-military tensions inside of Iraq in the future.

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