



The Fractured Shia of Iraq

Understanding the tensions within Iraq's majority

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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.¹ 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.²

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.³ 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.

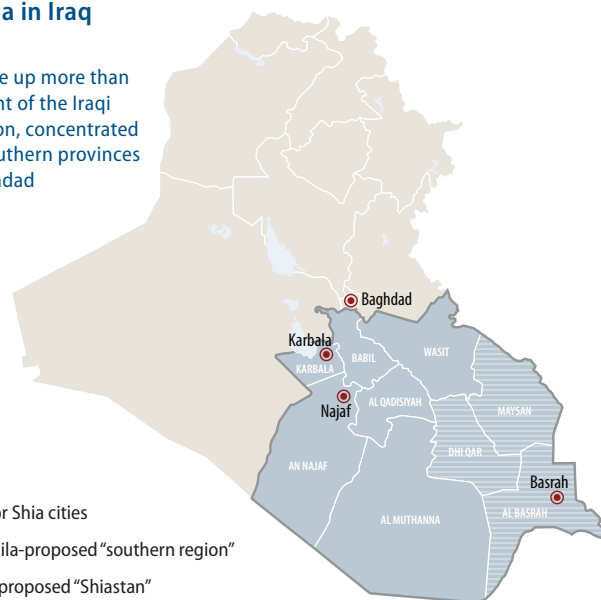
The Obama administration is inheriting the consequences of the Bush administration's policy of unconditional support for a certain set of leaders that control the levers of power and money in Iraq's central government. U.S. military, political, and economic support for the two Shia factions that currently 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.⁴ 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



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