



MAPPING THE MAJOR POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS AND ACTORS IN IRAQ SINCE 2003

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The Nature of Iraq's Post-2003 Political Process

Iraq's political process has transformed tremendously since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. The political environment changed abruptly, thrusting the country into a political reality characterized by fierce competition over power and resources. The country's political structure shifted from a one-party system into a multiparty system with intense politicking. Iraq's current political environment is dynamic and ever-changing; political negotiations are tense, they come down to the wire, deals are usually struck at the 11th hour. Political parties have devoted a great deal of energy to secure their interests and, in numerous cases, have overlooked common ethno-sectarian backgrounds in return for political gains. To be sure, political parties have acted in a purely sectarian fashion in pivotal moments, including the formation of governments and electoral alliances. Yet, attributing all post-2003 political behavior to sectarian tendencies oversimplifies the complex web of players, historical rivalries, regional interference, mass violence, and intra-partisan personal animosities.¹

Iraq's political landscape is crowded given the openness of the post-2003 political space, with hundreds of political actors in the form of parties and personalities. The majority of the political parties are ethno-sectarian in nature, if not in behavior. The parties include Iraqi Shi'a, Iraqi Sunni, Iraqi Kurdish, Iraqi Turkmen, and Iraqi Christian groupings. These political parties have been able to capture the majority of the seats in the Iraqi Council of Representatives (CoR) and, consequently, in major government posts. Out of these hundreds of political parties, about 80 parties have proven viable over time. These are parties that have participated in Iraq's multiple elections since 2003, enjoy stable leadership, have sustainable resources to compete and field long lists of candidates.²

Iraq's Political Institutions

Iraq's post-2003 political institutions have undergone both positive and negative developments. This mixed picture is the result of the intense political dynamics and evolving maturity of Iraq's system, which has been tested greatly by the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). The fall of Mosul in June 2014 was partly the result of a lack of faith Iraqis had in the political system. ISIS capitalized on the Iraqi Sunni feeling of political disenfranchisement and convinced them that violence was the most effective means to achieving change. But despite the fact that ISIS took control of almost one third of Iraq in June 2014, Iraq's political institutions on the local and national level proved resilient to the challenges and did not collapse. As Iraq was fighting ISIS on multiple fronts and fending attacks on other fronts, the political class agreed to form a new government in August 2014, ending Nouri al-Maliki's time as Prime Minister by denying him a third term. Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's subsequent rise to power not only signified a transfer of power during wartime, but also highlighted the flexibility of Iraq's political system.

In the aftermath of Saddam's removal in 2003, Iraq developed three primary national governance institutions in addition to provincial councils throughout the country that include executive and legislative bodies. Nationally, the executive branch is represented by the Council of Ministers (CoM), the legislative branch by the Council of Representatives (CoR), and the judicial branch primarily by the Federal Supreme Court. The CoM has seen changes in its cabinet numbers due to political circumstances and the necessity of creating governing coalitions. Former PM Nouri Al-Maliki, for example, created a cabinet that had almost 30 ministers in 2010. From Maliki's perspective, this permutation was necessary to form a government because different political groups were demanding positions and he needed the political support of these groups. After the government formation, Maliki criticized this arrangement, which he called "consensus democracy." By 2012, Maliki supported the creation of a different cabinet system that included fewer players and started advocating for a "majoritarian system." Maliki's opponents saw this advocacy for change as a concerted effort to consolidate his rule and position as the undisputed principle actor in setting the political agenda. The bloated cabinet set-up came under pressure and underwent changes again in 2015. During that transformation, Maliki's successor

Prime Minister Abadi decided to downsize the cabinet after increasing pressure from Iraq's population. The population saw the cabinet's size as a system based on rewarding political parties in return for their political support to the sitting Prime Minister. The August 2015 changes were consequential for Iraq's political environment, being the result of nationwide protests criticizing the political system and its configuration. The list of critiques was long and included demands to end ethno-sectarian based politics and replace it with a merit-based system. Moreover, the protests were notable because of the participation of Iraq's Shi'a majority in Baghdad and southern Iraq. This participation alarmed the Iraqi Shi'a political class that had thus far enjoyed the support of their political base in southern Iraq. This demonstration of discontent was partly the reason behind PM Abadi's decision to reform the government. Another major reason was his recognition that the majority of the population sought a different political system, in which positions are not given according to sectarian background and partisan affiliation. He acknowledged the lack of support by Iraq's Shi'a majority for the acting political class and regarded it as a call for change towards a more merit-based system. Thus, in response, he appointed new ministers with a more technocratic background.

Constitutionally, the various branches of governance are designed to operate in a system of checks and balances. For example, the Federal Supreme Court has the authority to adjudicate cases raised against the other branches. Theoretically, the legislative branch has the authority to supervise and oversee the responsibilities of the executive branch, while the CoM is responsible for drawing and implementing the country's overall and foreign policy. In reality, however, these branches have come under a great deal of critique and obstruction for their performance and independence. For example, the CoR was effectively neutralized by PM Maliki during his second term and the Supreme Court issued a decision which forbade the CoR from proposing laws independently. Instead, the authority to propose legislation was given to the CoM. This development was seen as former PM Al-Maliki consolidating his authority to propose laws and, as a result, controlling the political process. For the CoR, this meant a less decisive role that lacked the power or authority to supervise the executive's performance. Today, the court is seen as a body in need of reform due to its performance under the Maliki period and the perception that it is not working as an independent body. Rather, it is seen as a political instrument bending to accommodate power brokers. Reforming the judiciary branch is now a major demand by all political groups and there is a popular demand to make changes to the judicial institution. Nonetheless, reforming the judiciary branch has proven difficult in the post-Maliki period.

Iraq's Consecutive Elections

One important positive development is the peaceful transfer of power through the election process. Since the establishment of modern Iraq in 1921, four democratic national elections have taken place as well as two provincial elections – all of them since 2005. Each set of elections brought a different dynamic and outcome that came to define its aftermath. National and provincial elections took place in January 2005 and made Ibrahim al-Jaa'fari Prime Minister in the Iraqi Transitional Government. In December 2005, the general elections to the first permanent government took place, making Nouri al-Maliki Prime Minister from May 2006 onwards. In 2009, the second set of provincial elections reintroduced the Iraqi Sunnis to the political process and made changes on the local level in crucial provinces like Ninewa with Mosul as its capital. In the 2010 national elections, Maliki was re-elected after ten months of political wrangling. In 2013, the provincial elections proved worrisome as provinces with Iraqi Sunni majorities saw a decreasing turnout compared to the 2009 elections.³ Ultimately, the 2014 elections saw the removal of Maliki from his role as Prime Minister and the rejuvenation of the political system through his successor, Haider al-Abadi.

The Busy Year of 2005

The 2005 calendar year was an eventful one for Iraq's political scene. It witnessed three electoral processes that have since set the course for the country. The first elections of January 2005 were a shock to the system, as they allowed many of the exiled political parties to campaign openly and shift from underground organizations to mainstream political groups – a transition that did not proceed smoothly. The national and

provincial elections set the trend of political groups coming together and coalescing based on ethno-sectarian grounds. For example, the Iraqi Shi'a political groups formed the Unified Iraq Alliance (UIA), which included the most prominent groups and figures. The UIA was also perceived to have the support of Iraq's preeminent Shi'a religious authority, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. In contrast, the Iraqi Sunni political groups did not participate as fully in the elections, which signified a division within their ranks and leadership. There were also calls for boycott that resulted in a lower turnout in predominantly Sunni areas. The Iraqi Kurdish groups, on the other hand, formed the Kurdistan Alliance. All of these groups secured the majority of votes and set out to form the first post-2003 government.⁴ The result was the first coalition government that was headed by Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari, an Iraqi Shi'a. Jalal Talabani, an Iraqi Kurd, was elected President and Hajim al-Hassani, an Iraqi Sunni, became the Speaker of the Iraqi National Assembly, Iraq's first parliament.⁵

After the January elections began the difficult task of drafting a constitution – an essential step on Iraq's path to democratic self-determination. Debates and discussions continued throughout the year until the constitutional referendum took place on October 15th, 2005. Despite disagreements on the constitutional provisions and numerous withdrawals from different groups during moments of tense negotiations, the document was drafted by a committee that included representatives of the three major ethnic and sectarian groups.⁶ These tactics would come to define subsequent political affairs. The constitution passed the referendum with a 79 per cent approval rating but was rejected by the predominantly Iraqi Sunni provinces of Salah ad-Din and Anbar, and only passed by a slim margin in Ninewa.⁷ These results meant that Iraq's Sunnis, by and large, did not see the constitution as representative of their aspirations. In contrast, the Iraqi Shi'a majority and Iraqi Kurdish provinces voted largely for the new constitution, seeing it as a necessary document and measure for the future of Iraq. Because of these differences and due to the presence of controversial articles such as the division of local and federal authorities particularly over energy resources, there have been repeated and almost universal calls to either amend the constitution or draft a new document.

In December 2005, Iraq witnessed the third electoral process: national elections. These elections saw a rise in the participation of Iraqi Sunnis who were now more organized under a coalition known as the Iraqi Consensus Front. The Iraqi Shi'a and Iraqi Kurds remained in the same groups as the January elections. Again, the result was the dominance of the Iraqi Shi'a and Iraqi Kurds. However, there was disagreement in regards to the position of prime minister as the Iraqi Kurds objected to the reappointment of incumbent Prime Minister Jaafari due to his perceived anti-Kurdish policies.⁸ This objection translated into the election of Maliki as the new Prime Minister with Jalal Talabani keeping his position as President of Iraq. In addition, the Speaker of Parliament remained an Iraqi Sunni, Mahmoud al-Mashhadani.⁹

The 2009 and 2010 Elections

The 2009 provincial elections were significantly different from those in 2005: The Iraqi Sunnis participated in the elections in larger numbers, which signified their acceptance of the political process. For the first time since 2005, provinces like Ninewa and Anbar saw a high voter turnout. In the aftermath of the elections, new faces emerged including the Nujaifi family in Ninewa represented by brothers Atheel and Osama, with Atheel becoming the governor of Ninewa. The 2009 elections also resulted in the emergence of Maliki as the new force of the Iraqi Shi'a political sphere. Maliki capitalized on his four years in office to build an image of a "law and order" prime minister, and he and his coalition, the State of Law Alliance (SLA), gained a political majority in southern Iraq and Baghdad. In contrast, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and the Sadrists did not perform as well.¹⁰

In the 2010 national elections, Maliki again ran with his SLA list. However, the results were surprising with Ayad Allawi, the former President of the interim Governing Council of Iraq in 2003, winning 91 seats and Maliki only 89. This result meant that neither group could form a government by its own. As a result, negotiations ensued between the different groups, with Maliki insisting that he and the SLA had the right to have the first opportunity to form the government. The Supreme Court then issued a decision stipulating that the bloc

forming the government could either be the one that won the highest number of seats in the elections, or the bloc that can form the biggest coalition in the parliament after the elections. As a result, Maliki's SLA outmaneuvered Ayad Allawi to coalesce with other Iraqi Shi'a and Kurdish groups and to achieve a majority based on the new decision from the Supreme Court. Consequently, Maliki became again Prime Minister and Talabani kept his position as President, while Osama al-Nujaifi, who was with Allawi's Iraqiyah-Alliance, became the new Speaker of Parliament.¹¹

The Changing Elections

In 2013, Iraq was faced with a new political landscape. Anti-Maliki protests were taking place in multiple provinces, including in the majority Iraqi Sunni provinces of Anbar, Ninewa, and Salah ad-Din. Protesters in these provinces published long lists of demands that portrayed their areas as impoverished and marginalized. Maliki was also facing pressure from Iraqi Shi'a rivals who believed he was consolidating his rule at their expense. This meant that the 2013 elections were more crucial, since Maliki now had to contend with a population that was angry on both, the Iraqi Shi'a side and Iraqi Sunni side. Furthermore, Maliki also had to contend with the Iraqi Kurds, who were concerned about his policies towards Iraqi Kurdistan. The provincial elections of April 2013 saw Maliki's fortunes dwindle as the SLA lost seats in Baghdad and the south. The SLA lost governorship in the two crucial cities of Baghdad and Basra. At the same time, Atheel al-Nujaifi gained a majority and began working with the Iraqi Kurds to form a governing coalition in Ninewa after elections took place there in July 2013 due to a deferral by Maliki.¹² In the meantime, resentment was growing among the Iraqi Sunnis, as ISIS pulled them away from the political process and urged them to resort to violence as a means of achieving their objectives. This was an alarming development given the deteriorating security situation in the country and ISIS' concerted campaign to take control of Mosul.¹³

In April 2014, Iraq went to the ballot box for its third national elections. Maliki's SLA won the majority of seats, his Shi'a rivals however worked to replace him. With the fall of Mosul in June 2014, Maliki's position was weakened even further. Additional pressure to replace Maliki came from the U.S. government that made his removal a condition for the US military support in the fight against ISIS. With mounting internal and external pressure, Maliki was replaced by Haider al-Abadi.¹⁴

The Shi'a Political Landscape in Iraq

Overview and Takeaways

- There are four major Iraqi Shi'a political groups: the Islamic Da'wa Party, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (now splintered with the formation of the Hikma Movement), the Sadrist Movement, and the Badr Organization. These groups are Islamist in nature, retain the highest number of seats in the parliament, and play a major role in government-formation negotiations. For example, the Da'wa party has always filled the Prime Minister position. Other smaller political groups, which include the Fadhila Islamic Party, various parties that split from Da'wa, as well as other local groups, play an important role in the negotiations and typically tip the balance with their choice of alliances, particularly during provincial elections.
- The Iraqi Shi'a parties have long competed among themselves, with the competition manifesting itself in the form of intra-communal violence at certain points despite the common religious background and the common history of fighting Saddam Hussein's Government.
- The fragmentation of Iraqi Shi'a parties tends to be continuous. However, they have demonstrated a pattern of uniting under critical circumstances, such as elections, government formation, and arising security challenges.
- Many Iraqi Shi'a parties have close relations to Iran. However, these relations cannot be classified as a patron-proxy relationship. Iraqi Shi'a political groups chart their own path and make their own decisions based on domestic circumstances.
- The Da'wa Party is dominating the government. This is due to the fact that Da'wa's Secretary General and current Vice President, Nouri al-Maliki, was Prime Minister for two terms. Rival groups, however, may decide to change this status in the future. Moreover, Da'wa continues to be split into a Maliki and an Abadi camp: both are running on a different electoral list in the upcoming 2018 elections.
- The Sadrists have been able to demonstrate political savviness through populism and cultivating grassroots support. The Sadrists have also proven able to represent new political dynamics by forming cross-sectarian alliances in critical areas like Diyala and Baghdad. It will be important to watch whether the Sadrists can do the same in future elections.
- The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) is a good example of the vibrancy of Iraqi politics. The group was weakened after the 2009 provincial elections, but revived itself by regaining seats in the 2013 elections.
- The fight against ISIS created a new payer within the Iraqi Shi'a camp: the predominantly Shi'a Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) that will play a role in the upcoming elections.
- The upcoming elections will pose crucial challenges to Iraq's Shi'a groups. Questions will include Da'wa's position and dominance in Iraq's political structure, the appeal of the Popular Mobilization Units, the role of Najaf's religious authority as well as the potential of newly emerging cross-sectarian alliances.

Shi'a Parties and Political Actors

1. The Islamic Da'wa Party:

Brief History of the Party

The Islamic Da'wa Party is Iraq's oldest Shi'a party. Da'wa is the Arabic word for 'call' and members of the party are called *Du'at* or 'callers'. Most historical accounts agree that Da'wa was officially formed in the late 1950s in the city of Karbala, home to the Imam Hussein and Imam Abbas shrines, after the coup against the Iraqi monarchy and establishment of the Iraqi republic (1958).¹⁵ The Iraqi republic's early days were

characterized by turbulence, as the Middle East experienced social and political changes that included a rise in Communist tendencies also in Iraq.

It is within this context that the Islamic Da'wa Party was born to counter rising secular tendencies in the country. The nucleus of Da'wa came from *Jamma'at al-Ulama*, the Clerics Group, which was most likely formed in the early days of the Iraqi monarchy that came to rule the country in 1921. One of the prominent founders and the theorist of the Da'wa party is Mohammed Baqer al-Sadr, a cleric from southern Iraq with well-established religious credentials. Sadr is considered the most influential figure in the history of Da'wa, and his books and writings are still considered major sources for party members. His work amounts to 17 major books on various issues related to theology, economy, and social issues.¹⁶ His two most prominent books are "Our Economy" and "Our Philosophy" that are still referenced today as significant ideological sources for the Da'wa party. Saddam's government executed Sadr and his sister on April 9th, 1980, a date which is still considered pivotal for Da'wa and is commemorated annually.¹⁷ Sadr's execution was the culmination of Saddam's campaign against Da'wa members that continued into the 1980s and during the Iraq-Iran war. Due to their opposition to the Ba'ath party, many Da'wa members were forced to leave for Iran in the 1970s and 1980s. Given this history, the Da'wa party's literature promotes the idea of "struggle precedence", because of the party's long-term opposition work. Politically, the Da'wa party is an Islamist party, but it has not taken steps to Islamize the Iraqi state or change its laws to reflect this nature. Economically, its policy remains unclear despite the fact that it has been a major player in the Iraqi government since 2005.

The history of the Da'wa party is also characterized by internal splits. The most prominent split took place in 1982, when the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), another Shi'a party, was formed in Iraq along with its military wing, the Badr Organization. Gradually, seven further splits happened within Da'wa. Of these seven branches, four entities that branched out of Da'wa are currently competing for the 2018 elections. These groups include the Islamic Da'wa Party-Iraq organization, headed by Hashim al-Musawi, Islamic Da'wa Party-Internal Organization, headed by Abdul Karim al-Anzi, the National Reform Trend, headed by former Prime Minister Jaa'fari, and the Islamic Da'wa movement.¹⁸

The Perception of a Consensus Party in Post-2003 Governments

Da'wa has been at the helm of Iraq's political structure for the last 12 years. In post-2003 Iraq, the Da'wa Party used the competition within the other Iraqi Shi'a political parties to consolidate its own position and capitalized on its history as the oldest Iraqi Shi'a political party. In the aftermath of the January 2005 elections, the Iraqi Shi'a political parties could not agree on the position of the Prime Minister. The competition was primarily between the Sadrist and ISCI, who gained the highest number of seats among the Iraqi Shi'a base. However, both parties saw themselves as the legitimate leaders of the Iraqi Shi'as. The Sadrist and ISCI also both had military wings represented by the Mahdi Army and the Badr Organization. The presence of these wings alarmed Iraqi Shi'a groups and other social groups in Iraq, who were concerned about handing over the position of Prime Minister to a group that also holds military power. According to their view, such a situation would endow the Sadrist and ISCI with the power and resources of the entire state. The convergence of these events placed Da'wa in a position of favor as the consensus party in post-Saddam Iraq. Iraq's elected Prime Ministers have, so far, all been Da'wa members and leaders; Ibrahim al-Jaa'fari was Prime Minister from 2005 to 2006 and Nouri al-Maliki was Prime Minister from 2006 to 2014. Iraq's current Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who assumed office in August 2014, is also a member of the Da'wa Party.

The Maliki years: From Weakness to Divisiveness

The Maliki years defined Iraq's post-2003 political life. When he first assumed office, he was viewed as a weak political figure, unable to rule the country or provide political and security services. In an October 2006 memorandum, former US National Security Advisor, Stephen Hadley, called for Maliki's replacement given the deteriorating security conditions in Baghdad and the free hand that armed groups enjoyed in Baghdad.¹⁹ Maliki

was in office for two four-year terms. He governed differently in each term given the different circumstances that he had to deal with. In his two terms, he proved to be a savvy political operative, biding his time in order to achieve his objectives and those of people close to him in the Da'wa party.²⁰ He came to office as a result of the other political parties losing faith and trust in the incumbent Prime Minister, Jaa'fari. This was especially the case for the Iraqi Kurds, who were dissatisfied with Jaa'fari's positions on Kirkuk and Article 140 of the constitution, which was intended to address the province's territorial and social challenges.²¹ The replacement of Jaa'fari also signaled the cementing of the Iraqi Kurds as kingmakers in Iraqi politics.

In his first term from April 2006 to 2010, Maliki's governing style was weak due to the fact that the country was experiencing political and security challenges. Politically, the system was in the process of defining itself and Iraqi politicians had yet to grasp the significance of an open political system. The Iraqi parliament was only entering its first term, which meant a learning process for a body made up of politicians accustomed to the central government designing policies and making decisions. On the security front, Iraq was in a civil war. On February 22nd, 2006, two months before Maliki assumed office, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) blew up the Askari Shrine in the city of Samarra. This attack triggered a wave of sectarian violence in the mixed provinces of Baghdad and Diyala. The areas known as the "Baghdad Belt", which are rural areas surrounding Baghdad, became "no-go" zones for government forces, as armed groups were kidnapping people based on their sectarian identity. The highway linking Baghdad to southern Iraq was known as the "Triangle of Death".²² Meanwhile, in southern Iraq, armed Shi'a groups were dominant and capable of spreading their influence in the security vacuum. These circumstances weakened Maliki and undermined his legitimacy as Prime Minister. Nonetheless, Maliki was able to maintain his position as a result of his perceived weakness and non-threatening behavior towards other political parties, the Sadrist and ISCI in particular, who were preoccupied with building their own bases and consolidating their influence, effectively overlooking the power Maliki was accumulating.

In 2008, however, Maliki's luck began to turn in both image and perception. In March of that year, Maliki decided to launch an operation known as "Charge of the Knights"²³ in Baghdad and southern Iraq. This operation targeted the Iraqi Shi'a armed groups in Baghdad and in Basra specifically. The Basra part of the operation was notable with Maliki launching it without informing U.S. forces, while flying to Basra to oversee the operation in person. This fact was widely reported in the media, providing Maliki with an aura of law and order commander-in-chief, who was willing to take on fellow Iraqi Shi'a.²⁴ The "Charge of the Knights" operation initially did not go smoothly, but the Iraqi forces eventually came out victorious and provided Maliki with a victory in Basra and later in Baghdad. Maliki was perceived thereafter as a strong leader willing and able to take risks. These developments helped him politically in Baghdad, as Iraq's provincial elections were less than a year away. In the January 2009 elections, Maliki formed the State of Law Alliance (SLA), which competed in elections in all of Iraq's provinces. Maliki presented himself as a non-sectarian candidate capable of providing rule of law in a highly volatile environment, causing his SLA to gain outright majorities in multiple provinces. This election victory was the start of Da'wa emphasizing its history and seeking to dominate the political landscape. Furthermore, it allowed Maliki to become confident in his abilities to govern Iraq not only in the last year of his first term, but in terms of his political ambitions for a second term.

Maliki's Second Term

Maliki's second term began on a controversial note. Despite the SLA gaining seats in Baghdad and southern Iraq, Ayad Allawi's Iraqiyah-Alliance won two more seats. Therefore, Maliki used the court system to allow himself and the SLA to form a majority governing alliance. This meant that Maliki's second term – although it saw wide participation by different groups in his new cabinet– was seen as an attempt to manipulate the system to his own advantage.²⁵

In 2011, a year into his second term, Maliki removed the Sunni Vice President, Tariq al-Hashemi. Al-Hashemi was controversial because of his image as a deeply sectarian politician, but he was one of the more popular Sunni political figures after winning over 200,000 votes in 2010. In December 2012, Maliki issued an arrest

warrant for Anbar's Finance Minister, Rafi al-Issawi, another popular Iraqi Sunni figure. This action triggered waves of Sunni protests against Maliki and the Baghdad government in six provinces including Baghdad, Anbar, Ninewa, Salah ad-Din, Diyala, and Kirkuk. The protests were clearly infiltrated by Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which later transformed into ISIS, but for a moment they served as reminders of Iraqi Sunni discontent and the challenges that Maliki faced in his second term.²⁶ To a larger sense, the protests were a bellwether for a political system facing fundamental challenges and questions that needed to be addressed. The major Sunni challenge to Maliki emerged with a resurgence of ISIS throughout 2013 and, finally, the fall of Mosul in June 2014. But Maliki faced challenges from the Shi'a and Kurdish sides as well. Throughout his second term, they viewed him with suspicion and concern over his governing style. These concerns culminated with the June 2012 vote of no confidence in the Iraqi parliament.²⁷ Kurdish and Shi'a parliamentary blocs led the attempt to isolate Maliki and remove him from office, but he eventually weathered the storm and maintained in his position. Maliki felt emboldened by the failed vote, while his opponents grew increasingly concerned. Maliki survived all the political struggles and challenges, but was eventually replaced after the fall of Mosul in June 2014.

Prime Minister Abadi comes to power

Haider al-Abadi came to power in August 2014, shortly after the fall of Mosul. He is a member of the Da'wa party and was one of its active members in the UK during his time in exile. After 2003, he returned to Iraq and took on many positions, including Member of Parliament, Minister of Communication, Head of the Parliamentary Finance Committee, and Deputy Parliament Speaker. His assumption to office continued Da'wa's control of the premiership, but was also a change in the style of governance in post-2003 Iraq.

Upon his election, Abadi faced multiple challenges that needed to be addressed simultaneously. In August 2014, one third of Iraq was under ISIS control, the country was witnessing an unprecedented wave of displacement, the threat of ISIS was still looming over Baghdad, and Iraq's economy was showing signs of strain. By the end of 2017, Abadi had proven adept in handling these challenges. This is evident in the military defeat of ISIS, his increased popularity in both the Sunni and Shi'a communities, and a more stable economy. Nonetheless, critics agree that Abadi still faces the task of fundamentally changing Iraq's political culture. There is criticism that he has not been able to strengthen the political institutions that previously eroded under Maliki's premiership. Although he has been successful in managing the status of the PMUs so far, questions remain about his ability to handle the future role of the PMU in Iraqi politics, security apparatus and public life.

Da'wa continues to be a significant political party and its future will, ultimately, depend on two things: First, its ability to remain united given the history of splitting; and second, its ability to ward off competition from other political groups that view Da'wa as having had the lion's share of formal political dominance since 2005. The split that took place in light of Maliki's removal from office in 2014 and the ascendance of Abadi continues to divide the party. In fact, in the 2018 elections, Da'wa is running on two separate lists with Abadi's Nasr Coalition and the Maliki's State of Law Coalition. The party will have to contend with this new reality after the May 2018 elections.

2. Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI)

Brief History of the party

The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) is the second largest Shi'a party in Iraq. Established in 1982 in Iran and rooted also in Da'wa, it is currently headed by Humam Hamoudi, a deputy parliament speaker. Until July 2017, ISCI was headed by Ammar al-Hakim, son of former leader Abdul Aziz al-Hakim and nephew of ISCI founder, Mohammed Baqer al-Hakim. The Hakim family is widely respected in Najaf's religious establishment,

in large part due to the religious credentials many of its members gained over the years. The history of the Hakim family is deeply intertwined with that of ISCI in terms of lending the party more political credentials. Ammar al-Hakim announced the formation of a new political grouping called the Hikma (Wisdom) Movement in July 2017, splitting ISCI.²⁸

ISCI was established when its founders and prominent members took refuge in Iran after the rise to power of the Baa'ath party in 1968. It was initially led by Mohammed Baqer al-Hakim and named the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). As a political party, ISCI became prominent for calling for a large autonomous region in southern Iraq after 2003. In its early days, its ultimate goal was the removal of the Ba'ath party government and, as its name implies, the pursuit of an Islamist government. However, since 2003, it has not enacted religious policies when it had the opportunity, neither on the national nor on the local level.

In addition to the political wing represented by SCIRI, the party commanded a military formation called the Badr Brigade. The Badr Brigade took part in the Iraq-Iran war by launching attacks from its bases in Iran. In many ways, the formation of ISCI is seen as a consequence of ISCI's desire to establish its own political base in direct competition with Da'wa. This competition continues to play out in Iraq's political arena today. In addition to this rivalry, the Hakim family faces competition from the Sadr family, whose legitimacy mostly stems from theological credentials and the push to establish a foothold in the Iraqi Shi'a political street. In 2007, ISCI changed its name from the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq to Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq in order to reflect the change in its mission after the removal of Saddam Hussein. ISCI's leadership decided to adopt Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani as its source of religious authority in the same year in order to widen its appeal in the broader community that viewed it as an Iranian-leaning organization because of its origins there.

Immediate Post-2003 Prominence

In the immediate aftermath of Saddam's fall, ISCI was well-positioned to play an important role in Iraqi politics. The party's long history, family pedigree, as well as good relations with both the United States and Iran meant ISCI was ready to assume a leadership role and did so through the establishment of offices throughout southern Iraq, where its political base is concentrated. Prior to 2003, ISCI was able to consolidate relations with the United States by being an active member of the Iraqi opposition that worked to remove Saddam Hussein. Additionally, ISCI was an important member of the structures established to govern the country after 2003. One of these structures is the Governing Council, consisting of twenty five members, including Abdul Aziz al-Hakim. ISCI subsequently filled important cabinet positions in Iraq's post-2003 governments. It also received consideration whenever there was competition over the position of Prime Minister. In August 2003, the assassination of its founder, Mohammed Baqer al-Hakim, in a car bombing in Najaf dealt a serious blow to ISCI. ISCI was able to overcome this leadership change when Abdul Aziz became the leader of ISCI, and did so again when Ammar al-Hakim became the leader after Abdul Aziz's death in 2009. ISCI's new challenge after this became an issue of perception, as voters still viewed it as not Iraqi enough. Abdul Aziz's death, its pro-Iranian image, and the rise of Maliki in 2009 spelt trouble for ISCI. This became apparent in the January 2009 elections, as ISCI lost governorship in several provinces, including Basra. As the March 2010 elections approached, Ammar al-Hakim's leadership began to be tested as he inherited the ISCI movement and was facing challenges from other Iraqi Shi'a political groups, who likely saw it as an opportunity to weaken ISCI's leading role in Iraqi politics. Consequently, ISCI saw its provincial losses repeated in the March 2010 national elections. In the aftermath of the elections, ISCI made an unusual decision not to conform to the tradition of Iraqi Shi'a unity. This was most evident when all the Iraqi Shi'a political groups coalesced and decided to support Maliki for a second term, and ISCI, instead of joining this pro-Maliki coalition, decided to refrain from major government positions. Even though this was initially a step that isolated ISCI, it worked to its advantage in the long term, pushing it into a rebuilding stage.

Revival under Ammar al-Hakim

ISCI entered uncharted territory after refusing to back Maliki's second term. Gradually, however, Ammar al-Hakim's leadership was paying dividends. He took steps to position ISCI as a centrist political party that was expanding its relations with all of Iraq's neighbors. Al-Hakim also made ISCI a youthful political party by surrounding himself with young advisors who were not previously affiliated with ISCI. To consolidate its youthful credentials, al-Hakim established the Knights of Hope Gathering (KHG), which became al-Hakim's youth arm that gave a new face to the group and infused it with new energy. Al-Hakim also hosted major reconciliation conferences that portrayed him as a centralist leader and conciliatory figure, right as the country was facing the rise of ISIS. The evidence of Ammar al-Hakim's growing leadership started to bear fruit during the April 2013 elections as ISCI regained its leading position in Baghdad and southern Iraq. This revival included the reclamation of the position of Basra governor by Majed al-Nasrawi. In the April 2014 elections, ISCI was a sought-after partner, as it formed alliances and secured ministerial positions. In these two elections, ISCI under al-Hakim's leadership formed alliances with the Sadrists after both groups realized that the rise of Da'wa and Maliki was not in their interests.²⁹

ISCI's future will now be determined by its ability to operate and maintain the same level of influence after the formation of the Hikma Trend. Conversely, Hakim's leadership and appeal will be tested by his ability to win votes without the presence of established ISCI figures. The Hikma Trend is headed into the May 2018 elections with an agenda calling for an end to corruption and the promotion of a new generation of political leaders.

3. The Sadrist Movement

Brief History of the Sadrist Movement

The Sadrists are Iraq's political group with the greatest support among lower-class citizens since 2003. The trend is led by Moqtada al-Sadr, son of Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr, a prominent Iraqi Shi'a cleric, who was assassinated by Saddam's government in February 1999. Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr was known for his stance against Saddam's government. He used to preach at the Kufa Mosque in Najaf, where he was able to garner support among the working class, who would flock to his Friday prayers in large numbers every week. While ISCI had a large Shi'a post-2003 base due to its regional and international relations, and Da'wa due to its long history, the Sadrists had a large post-2003 support because of Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr's legacy, work, and religious credentials. By the summer of 2003, the Sadrists were becoming a major player in Iraq's politics, particularly in Shi'a areas in southern Iraq. The Sadrists maintain this position until today and are likely to continue to be major players in Iraq's political affairs in the upcoming years. The Sadrist platform is one that calls for the empowerment of working-class Iraqis and addressing the grievances of politically disadvantaged segments of Iraq.

The Different Phases of the Movement

The Sadrist movement has gone through different stages since 2003. These changes indicate the group's ability to adapt its political posturing to changing circumstances. From 2003 to 2007, the Sadrists were mainly gathering and consolidating political support. In the summer of 2003, the Sadrists formed the Mahdi Army, which has since acted as the movement's military wing. The Mahdi Army fought against U.S. and coalition forces twice in 2004. These fights served to position the Sadrists as a major political actor and nationalist force. Furthermore, the presence of the Mahdi Army empowered the group when competing with other political forces. By 2005, the Sadrists were able to claim many strongholds in Baghdad and southern Iraq. These include Sadr City in Baghdad and Hayaniyah in Basra. During Iraq's civil war of 2006, the Mahdi Army was accused of perpetrating violence against Iraqi Sunnis and other political rivals. These allegations made the

Sadrists seem like pure sectarian actors and caused many Iraqis to perceive them as a threat to Iraq's political process. During that period, various groups split from the Sadrist Movement, most prominently the League of the Righteous, or Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) in Arabic. AAH initially consisted of breakaway Sadrists and is led by Qais al-Khazali, a close associate of Moqtada al-Sadr. The Sadrists claim that these splinter groups carried out the sectarian violence in 2006 that intensified after the February bombing of the Askari Shrine in Samarra. The Sadrists did, however, take a step to fix the image of the movement after the clashes in Karbala in August 2007, during which members of the Mahdi Army fought with other Shi'a forces near the shrines of Imams Hussein and Abbas in Karbala, and led Sadr to order the immediate freeze of the Mahdi Army. Parallel to the military wing, the Sadrists were active in the first and second cabinets of the Iraqi government, demonstrating their position as savvy social and political players.

The year 2007 was pivotal for the Sadrists: in addition to freezing the Mahdi Army, Moqtada al-Sadr relocated to the city of Qom to study theology and position himself as a religious authority with the goal of becoming an Ayatollah. This ambition would characterize Sadr's personal outlook in the upcoming years. In August 2008, Moqtada further refashioned the Mahdi Army by renaming it the Promised Day Brigade (PDB) and ordered it to limit its activities. In the January 2009 provincial elections, the Sadrists ran as the Ahrar Bloc ("the Free Ones") and did not favor the SLA and Maliki's ambitions. Nonetheless, the Sadrists were able to strike deals with PM Maliki in the aftermath of the 2010 national elections, when they backed Maliki's second term and gained several positions in the provinces, including the governorship of Maysan Province.

In 2013, the Sadrists surprisingly decided to ally themselves with Sunni political parties in Baghdad and Diyala after the provincial elections. In both provinces, the Sadrists made specific decisions intended to weaken Maliki, limit the rise of his State of Law Alliance, and eventually prepare the ground for an anti-Da'wa front in the 2014 elections. More importantly, the Sadrists repositioned themselves as a non-sectarian force in the eyes of the Iraqi Sunnis, particularly in Diyala, which has always represented the epicenter of ethno-sectarian violence.

Likely Future Ambitions

The Sadrists will continue to be important players in Iraqi politics due to the group's political position, grassroots support, and the buttressing of these two factors as a consequence of their role in fighting ISIS. The Sadrists deployed the Peace Brigades (Saraya al-Salam) after the fall of Mosul in June 2014. Saraya al-Salam, the rebranded version of the Mahdi Army, deployed particularly to the areas of Samarra in order to defend the Shrines, which bolstered their image in the eyes of the Shi'a community. Saraya al-Salam also deployed to other parts near Baghdad.

The question facing the Sadrists now is that of the group's relationships with other Iraqi Shi'a political forces. Questions remain about whether the Sadrists will be able to form a national cross-sectarian alliance despite likely criticism from other Iraqi Shi'a parties.

4. The Badr Organization as Shi'a Party

From an ISCI Military Wing to an Independent Party

The Badr Organization is the fourth largest Shi'a political party in Iraq. This categorization is based on its number of seats in the current parliament, which stands at 20, and its ability to secure significant ministries in the current government. At this point, Badr's Qassim al-Araji is the Minister of Interior, a position he has occupied since the departure of fellow Badr Organization member, Mohammed al-Ghabban in 2016.

Before being a separate political party, Badr was established as the Badr Brigade under ISCI's political tutelage in 1982. Today, Badr is led by Hadi al-Ameri, who has a close relationship with the Iranian government. Ameri is now one of Iraq's most popular leaders, particularly among the Iraqi Shi'a. The Badr-ISCI alliance continued after 2003, with the two entities functioning hand in hand to secure wider bases of support among the Shias. A divergence between their goals only appeared in 2010, when Badr supported a second Maliki term while ISCI withheld its support. This rift was widened by Ameri's ambition to be more influential in Iraqi politics. As a result of these increasingly visible differences, Badr split from ISCI in 2012 in what appeared to be an amicable divorce, as the two still enjoy friendly relations.³⁰ Nonetheless, the split undoubtedly weakened ISCI, who had lost such an important part of its constituency. Still, Badr is now a well-established political and military entity of its own.

Role and rising profile in the war against ISIS

Badr's role in the war against ISIS has allowed the group to earn popular support and political influence. When Mosul fell in June 2014 to ISIS, then Prime Minister Maliki tasked Hadi al-Ameri with the responsibility of securing the strategic Diyala province. Diyala is now effectively in Badr's sphere of influence, both in the security and political realms. Through its fight against ISIS, Badr has developed into a more powerful, visible, and organized military force, whose forces are now divided into battalions and brigades like any other military force.

For Ameri, the war against ISIS led to more influence and public visibility, allowing him to be the most popular Iraqi Shi'a political figure. According to the April 2017 polls by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), Ameri is ahead of Moqtada al-Sadr and PM Haider al-Abadi. This popularity, however, which is largely due to his efforts to clear areas such as Tikrit, Jurf al Sakhar, and Diyala of ISIS control, will be tested in the upcoming elections, as it will be important to watch how this popularity translates in terms of actual votes, seats, and power in the formal political sphere. Moreover, Ameri's popularity will be tested again if he decides to compete for the position of Prime Minister.

5. The Najaf Religious Authority

The Shi'a religious authority in Najaf (Marja'iyah in Arabic) is not a political party. However, it is a significant player in Iraq's politics. Although the Iraqi Shi'a political groups pay the most attention to the positioning and political reading of the Marja'iyah, groups from other ethno-sectarian backgrounds also consider the reasoning and ruling of Najaf as important. These facts show the weight of Najaf and its continued influence on the political future of Iraq. After 2003, Najaf proved its influence in multiple instances: First, the religious establishment did not issue a fatwa forbidding relations with US forces in Iraq. This was important because it allowed for a political process without a major religious opposition. Secondly, Najaf insisted that Iraq holds elections for the National Assembly in 2005, paving the way for the constitutional establishment of Iraq's democracy. Thirdly, Iraq's preeminent Shi'a authority, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, was important in mediating early tensions among Iraq's Shi'a groups. This was most evident in August 2004, when he returned from medical treatment to end the clashes between the Mahdi Army and the Iraqi Army. These events of 2003-2005 helped to shape the future role of Najaf and the leadership of Sistani within the political landscape of Iraq.

The Najaf School under the Leadership of Grand Ayatollah Sistani

Najaf's influence in politics is derived from a history of religious guidance to millions of people and from Sistani himself. Although he is not Iraqi by nationality, he has garnered tremendous support among Shi'a in Iraq and worldwide. According to a study, Sistani's *moqalidun*, or religious adherents reach 80 percent among worldwide

Shi'a.³¹ This level of support is due to his moderate stance and his ability to convey conciliatory tones with regards to important issues. A major sign of Sistani's influence is his willingness to meet with political figures. It is now common understanding that if Sistani meets with a politician visiting Najaf, it indicates that the politician at least has an opportunity to have his views heard by a major influencer. In contrast, if Sistani does not meet with a politician visiting Najaf, it implies that politician does not have his support, hurting his electoral chances or political fortunes. Given Sistani's influence, it remains to be seen how Najaf and Iraq's political class react to the post-Sistani stage.

6. Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) Dimension

The History and Dynamic of the PMUs

The Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), or Hashd al-Shaabi, comprise armed groups that were already active before the fall of Mosul in June 2014. However, the Popular Mobilization Units Commission was formally established by the Iraqi government in June 2014. The religious backing of the PMUs came from a fatwa issued by Ayatollah Al-Sistani after the fall of Mosul. This fatwa mobilized the Iraqi Shi'a as Baghdad was facing the encroaching threat of ISIS. The essential role of the PMUs was to fight ISIS and they have gained the support of the population by participating in major operations to clear ISIS out of Iraq. The PMUs include smaller and major groups that now enjoy considerable support and will have influence in the upcoming elections. Within this larger umbrella, there are eight larger PMUs that are particularly influential: the Sadrist Peace Brigades, the Hezbollah Brigades or Katai'b Hezbollah (KH), Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), the Imam Ali Brigades (IAB), the Najaf-tied Ali Al-Akbar Brigade and Abbas Combat Division, the Badr Organization, and the Nujbaa Movement or Harkaat Hezbollah al-Nujbaa led by Akram al-Kaabi. These groups have considerable military power and political influence. They are all Iraqi Shi'a groups, but as of June 2014, PMU groups of other ethno-sectarian backgrounds have been formed, including tribal Iraqi Sunni groups in provinces like Salah ad-Din and Ninewa, Shabak PMU in the Ninewa Plains area and Turkmen PMU groups in areas close to Kirkuk. The latter groups are usually made up of individuals from those areas and draw from local population support.

In the early days of their inception, the PMUs were focused on fighting ISIS and their role in this is recognized by Iraqis of almost all backgrounds, particularly by Iraqi Shi'a. However, reports of violent actions against the local population of territories that have been liberated from ISIS caused significant backlash to their presence in some areas, particularly the predominantly Sunni ones. Most of the PMU, though, have been able to secure recognition through battlefield success and their image as saviors of Iraq. Despite these commonalities, the PMUs compete among themselves. Some of this competition is the result of historical leadership challenges like those between Moqtada al-Sadr and AAH's Qais al-Khazali. Other sources of competition stem from the composition of these groups. For example, Najaf-tied PMUs have lamented the fact that they sometimes do not get the necessary military support from the PMU commission. This example indicates that in the period post-ISIS and with elections approaching there is going to be increasing internal competition among the PMU for votes and influence throughout the country. The major question in context of the 2018 elections will be the PMUs' ability to translate this popular support into parliamentary seats and governmental posts.

The Iraqi Sunni Political Landscape

Overview and Takeaways

- The Iraqi Sunni political arena has undergone different phases since 2003. Initially, there was widespread reluctance to engage in the political process. Despite this reluctance, their political forces participated in the December 2005 elections and seemed to fully embrace the new political system during the 2009 elections. Cracks began to appear in 2012, however, as the Iraqi Sunni acceptance of the power-sharing system started to falter.
- In the 2018 elections, there will be a reenergized Sunni political effort with the formation of new political parties which will seek to capitalize in the post-ISIS environment.
- The Iraqi Sunni political scene is characterized by ongoing fragmentation within political groups, predominantly caused by personal differences.
- This fragmentation is not an insurmountable obstacle to a political future for Iraqi Sunnis. Iraqi politics is divided in a cross-sectarian fashion and Sunni political forces are willing to be part of various coalitions.
- The most enduring political party is the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), which will continue to be a player in the future.
- Sunni politics in Iraq is characterized by the conflict between provincial and national movements. Local movements have proven to be more enduring than national ones.
- For the foreseeable future, there will be a political tendency to have relations with Baghdad's federal government on the part of the Iraqi Sunnis.
- The lack of a unified religious Sunni leadership in Iraq has affected the community's ability to develop long-standing political stances. This stands in contrast to the presence of Najaf for the Iraqi Shi'a groups.
- The anti-ISIS war will impact the Iraqi Sunni political scene in the long term. After the military defeat of ISIS, Iraqi Sunnis face challenges on the internal, sectarian, ethnic, security, and social fronts. To overcome them, the Iraqi Sunnis will have to realize that they are the first line of defense against ISIS' reemergence. Furthermore, the Iraqi Sunnis will need the support of Baghdad and the international community.

Sunni Parties and Political Actors

1. Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP)

Brief History of the IIP

The Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) is an Sunni Islamist political group in Iraq with roots in the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). It is currently headed by former Speaker of Parliament, Ayad al-Samaraie. Similar to Da'wa, the IIP officially began to form in the 1950s, mirroring the creation of Da'wa. Iraq and the region were undergoing an ideological battle that included the rise of communist trends. The IIP's identity is based on promoting Islam as the pillar of policies. Despite its beginnings and initial ties to the MB, the modern IIP firmly denies that it is part of the MB.³²

The IIP was officially registered in the 1960s, after the monarchy was overthrown in 1958. Some sources trace its original cells as far back as 1945, during the early emergence of the MB in Iraq with figures like Amjad al-Zahawi and Mohammed Mahmoud al-Sawaf.³³ After operating in the open for only ten months, the Iraqi government froze the IIP's activities, rendering it unable to operate inside Iraq. From that period until 2003, the IIP worked underground in Iraq and was poised to return into the open after the removal of Saddam Hussein.³⁴ For 33 years, the IIP's main leadership also organized in London and was able to not only keep its

work alive, but spread its message through a newspaper called Dar al-Salam. These activities shaped the IIP into a party ready to work within a new political system, as proven by the fact that the IIP had established seventy offices around Iraq less than nine months after the removal of Saddam Hussein. Moreover, when the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) established the Governing Council, the IIP's Secretary General, Mohsen Abdulhamid, became a member of the Council's leadership committee. It is clear that the IIP's approach to politics is not to boycott the political process, but rather to participate in it in order to secure long-term gains. The IIP bases its politics on pursuing the rights of the Iraqi Sunnis, but despite its religious roots, it has not advocated for any religious policies.

IIP Dominance after 2003

The majority of the Iraqi Sunni community boycotted the local and national elections of January 2005 and refused to engage in the political process, as it had not yet properly recovered from the drastic change of the political system in Iraq. Only IIP participated in the elections as part of the Sunni community and has since then been able to maneuver itself into a leading position.³⁵ For instance, despite an extremely low turnout of two percent in Anbar, the IIP's participation gave it a foothold that it maintained until 2009, and it remained in control of senior local positions in most Iraqi Sunni provinces even after the elections.³⁶

The IIP also produced the most prominent Iraqi Sunni figures in the years after 2003, including local officials such as governors and senior civil servants. Former Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, now exiled in Turkey, and Salim al-Juburi, current Speaker of the CoR and a rising member of the IIP, are among those prominent figures. The IIP dominance has created tensions with other Iraqi Sunni groups, who have always competed with the party and sought to dislodge it starting at the provincial elections of January 2009. This competition continues today and is likely to resurface in every round of elections.³⁷

The IIP post-ISIS

The IIP now faces the challenge of how to position itself in a post-ISIS environment vis-à-vis most Iraqi Sunni parties. Overall, the IIP still enjoys a strong standing in crucial Sunni provinces: In Baghdad, it ended a previous deal with the Sadrists and allied itself with the SLA in order to remove Governor Ali al-Tamimi. The president of Baghdad's provincial council, Riyadh al-Adhadh, is a well-known member of the IIP. Ali al-Dayni, Diyala's head of council, is from the Iraqiyat Diyala local list, which includes members of the IIP. The former governor of the Anbar province, Suhaib al-Rawi, is also a member of the IIP. This level of dominance and influence, however, is currently being contested, and the upcoming elections will be a major test for the IIP.

In a move intended to consolidate its position and set itself up for competition, the IIP has engaged in a self-split in an attempt to diversify its base, secure more votes in the upcoming elections, and stave off rivals. The IIP is currently reported to have divided its base into five electoral groups: The first group is within the main IIP under Samaraie. The second group is called the Civic Gathering for Reform and is led by speaker Juburi. The third, also oriented towards civic-minded groups, is led by Minister of Education, Mohammed Iqbal. The fourth group is led by tribal figures, and, finally, the fifth group will be limited to Anbar and will be led by former governor al-Rawi. The purpose behind these groups is to also ensure the IIP rebrands itself as a non-religious party and reaches out to more voters in the contentious post-ISIS stage.³⁸

2. Mutahidun (The United)

Brief History of Mutahidun

Mutahidun is an Iraqi Sunni political group that has local and regional origins in predominantly Iraqi Sunni areas, but particularly in the Ninewa province under the leadership of Osama al-Nujaifi and his brother Atheel al-Nujaifi. In 2009, Atheel competed in the provincial elections in Ninewa by forming the Hadbaa electoral list, which ran on a platform of anti-Iraqi Kurdish stances, capitalized on Osama's membership in the CoR and championed issues related to Arab-Kurdish relations. In the aftermath of the 2009 elections, Hadbaa's performance and the enhanced national role of Osama shifted the balance of Iraqi Sunni political influence from Anbar to Ninewa.

As the 2010 elections approached, the Nujaifi brothers cemented their status as power-brokers among Iraqi Sunnis in the national political scene and became sought-after actors in the period of forming political coalitions. Hadbaa, now a major part of Mutahidun, allied itself with Ayad Allawi's Iraqiyah, which secured 91 seats in the elections. Out of the 91 seats, Hadbaa won the majority in Ninewa. In the end, Iraqiyah did not get the chance to form the government, but as part of the agreement to form a second Maliki cabinet, Osama al-Nujaifi was able to get the position of CoR Speaker. Within this context, the Mutahidun began to achieve national prominence under Nujaifi.

Inheriting Iraqiyah and Post-ISIS

As the second Maliki term began, Iraqiyah, which got the most votes among Iraqi Sunnis, began to disintegrate due to ideological differences and a lack of internal unified leadership. The Nujaifi brothers, on the other hand, were gaining more influence and became a source of reference for Iraqi Sunnis. During this period of time, Mutahidun acted as an umbrella for the splintering Iraqiyah, attracting various Sunni groups within Iraqiyah, and eventually becoming an essential actor in most majority Iraqi Sunni provinces that were witnessing anti-government protests.³⁹

After a year of protests, Mutahidun and the Nujaifi brothers' popularity and influence were put to the test during the April 2013 provincial elections. Mutahidun performed well but lost some of their appeal in Ninewa for two probable reasons: first, their improved political relations with the Iraqi Kurds and, second, lower voter turnouts in most Iraqi Sunni provinces. With the fall of Mosul, Mutahidun lost even more of their appeal and the Nujaifi brothers' political influence gradually diminished. Subsequently, Mutahidun's Osama al-Nujaifi lost his position as Speaker to Salim al-Juburi. Mutahidun was part of an effort to unify Iraqi Sunni forces in the CoR by forming the Iraqi Forces Coalition just two weeks after the fall of Mosul. Through this initiative, Osama secured the position of Vice President, but Mutahidun still needed to regroup following their decrease in popularity and political influence.⁴⁰ In May 2017, Osama al-Nujaifi announced the formation of a new political party called Mutahidun for Iraq which includes Iraqi Sunni figures from multiple provinces and is set to compete in the 2018 elections. The challenge for this new political party will be to rebuild influence and credibility in the eyes of the Iraqi Sunnis throughout the country and particularly in the Nujaifis' home base of Mosul.⁴¹

3. Tribal Leaders and Parties

Rise after al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)

In post-2003 Iraq, tribes continued to play significant roles in the country's social and political structures. Socially, Iraq's tribes were able to maintain a semblance of structure as the country grappled with the collapse

of law and order in the immediate aftermath of Saddam's fall. Tribes were particularly important for the Iraqi Sunnis, as the community lacked unifying religious authorities in comparison to the Shi'a community. Almost fifteen years after the fall of Saddam Hussein, this situation still holds true. Iraqi Sunni tribes continue to be courted for their perceived influences and ability to sway voters. When tested, however, these authorities have faced problems in proving themselves.

Firstly, the Iraqi Sunni tribes faced problems in their traditional areas, including the provinces of Anbar, Salah ad-Din, and Ninewa. Armed groups, including al-Qaeda in Iraq, were able to affirm their authority given that the tribes were unable to consolidate a social base. These developments meant an increasingly weaker influence of the tribes and an almost total collapse of their centuries-old power. AQI, however, overplayed its hand and abused the locals without regard to their customs and traditions. By 2006, AQI's behavior had led to tribal reorganization in order to be more active politically and on the ground.

Beginning in 2006, and with the support of U.S. forces, the tribes formed groups known as the Sahwa ("Awakening") Councils.⁴² The Sahwa started as military formations fighting AQI mostly in Anbar and other areas, and succeeded in militarily neutralizing AQI. The challenge for the Sahwa by late 2007 and early 2008 became the translation of military success into political power. With the approach of the 2009 provincial elections, Anbar tribes formed the Iraq Awakening Council, which was meant to act as the political arm of the tribes.⁴³ This Council still stands and is headed by Ahmed Abu Risha. Other tribal leaders formed political groups as well, including Hamid al-Hayes, who formed the Iraq Salvation Council, and Ali Hatem al-Sulaiman, who has and continues to work to establish lasting political influence using his tribal credentials.

In terms of electoral performance, these parties did not fare well on the national level. This stands in contrast to the Nujafis' ability to secure more national support. For example, an examination of the national parliament since 2010 reveals that tribes competed in every election and sought to work together more cohesively. Nonetheless, there is currently no national tribal political force. To be certain, there are influential tribal figures that have the gravitas, but lack the ability to transcend this into a solid support base. Tribal forces argue that they face vigorous competition from the IIP and claim that it controls electoral tools in their provinces that hinder their political ambitions. This competition will certainly continue in the future.

4. Provincial Political Parties

One of the most intriguing phenomena in Iraqi Sunni politics is the appearance of provincial political parties that have been able to gain national power in some cases. These groups emerged as a result of charismatic figures and local dynamics like the Iraqi Masses Group, headed by Ahmed Abdullah al-Juburi, also known as Abu Mazen. Abu Mazen and his party originated from Salah ad-Din, but he and his group will compete in the upcoming elections after the 2017 announcement of a new political party called the National Masses Party. In Anbar, Jamal al-Karbuli formed the Hal Movement ("Solution"), which has been functional since 2006 and will compete in the next elections. Even for Salim al-Juburi, the ability to form a locally-oriented group called Diyala is Our Identity aided him in securing the speakership. In addition to these groups, it is very likely that other groups will emerge in the next elections given the changes caused by the emergence of ISIS and the fall of Mosul.

The Iraqi Kurdish Political Landscape

Overview and Takeaways

- The Iraqi Kurdish political structure is well-defined given the recent history of Iraqi Kurdistan. The region benefited from the 1991 no-fly zone implemented by the U.S. and the international coalition. This 22-year period gave the Iraqi Kurdish parties an opportunity to introduce geographic zones controlled by three main political parties.
- The three dominant political parties in Iraqi Kurdistan are: the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and the Change Movement, which was established in 2009 and is known as Gorran in Kurdish.
- The two-year civil war between the KDP and PUK in the 1990s played a major role in enshrining a two-party system in the region.
- There are Islamist parties in the region that are small but have nonetheless played a role in governing coalitions since 2003.
- Political relations between the KDP and PUK improved after 2003, as the Iraqi Kurdish political sphere sought to capitalize on the removal of Saddam Hussein.
- The rise of Gorran upset the Iraqi Kurdish political balance not only in PUK-controlled areas, but in general.
- The PUK and Gorran have both experienced leadership challenges. However, both groups have, so far, been able to manage these challenges. Nevertheless, the PUK currently faces serious challenges, as the party suffers from internal division after the death of Jalal Talabani and the events of Kirkuk in October 2017.
- Iraqi Kurdish parties presented a unified front in regard to Baghdad politics until the national elections of 2014. This unity was fractured in 2016 and again in 2017. It will be tested further in 2018, both in the run-up to the elections and in the government-formation negotiations.

Kurdish Parties and Political Actors

1. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)

Brief History of the KDP

The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) was established on August 16, 1946. It is the oldest Iraqi Kurdish political party rooted in the Kurdish political movement of liberation. The founder of the party is Mullah Mustafa Barzani, who played a role in the establishment of the short-lived Mahabad Republic in Iranian Kurdistan. The Mahabad Republic under Qazi Mohammed is still the only independent Kurdish republic to ever exist today. Mustafa Baryani led the KDP through turbulent times both inside Iraq and regionally until he died in exile in the U.S. in late 1979. He was succeeded by his son, Idriss Barzani who died in 1987. The KDP is currently led by former president Masoud Barzani and the current Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Nechirvan Barzani, acting as his deputy.⁴⁴

The KDP's initial objective was to gain more political autonomy for the Iraqi Kurds within the state of Iraq. It also acted as an umbrella group for other Iraqi Kurdish political figures, who were seeking more rights for Iraqi Kurds. According to its official principles, the KDP seeks to promote better relations with all Iraqi Kurdish political parties.

The KDP was one of the two major Iraqi Kurdish parties poised to receive significant gains after the 1991 Gulf War, when the international community established a safe zone covering Iraqi Kurdistan. The other party that

was set to benefit after this war was the Patriotic Movement of Kurdistan (PUK). During the post-war period, the KDP created a space of control in the province of Dohuk and parts of Erbil. At the same time, the PUK was more dominant in the Sulaymaniyah areas. This division of control became more pronounced after the PUK and KDP fought a civil war between 1994 and 1996. In the aftermath of that war, which was called *shri braa kozhi* in Kurdish, the spheres of control were officially delineated. The KDP obtained complete political and security control in the provinces of Erbil and Dohuk, while the PUK controlled the areas extending from Koya, west of Erbil, to the town of Panjwen on the Iraq-Iran border.

The KDP after the Removal of Saddam

The KDP decided to work closely with other political parties in Baghdad after the removal of Saddam Hussein to secure Iraqi Kurdish interests. The party's leader, Masoud Barzani, was a member of the Governing Council and his input was widely sought-after by Iraqi figures and U.S. officials alike. Additionally, KDP senior member and Masoud Barzani's maternal uncle, Hoshiyar Zebari, became the first Iraqi foreign minister in July 2003 and held this position for eleven years before becoming Iraq's finance minister.

Closer to Iraqi Kurdistan, the KDP reopened field offices in Kirkuk and Ninewa and launched a campaign to build up influence in those areas. This endeavor has been more successful in Ninewa, while in Kirkuk it faces severe competition from the more dominant PUK.

In local Iraqi Kurdish politics, the KDP sought to gain more influence in elections, both on the national and regional levels. To this end, it ran unified campaigns on the federal level with the PUK in particular, while competing separately on the regional level as a way to measure regional political influence. The PUK followed the same pattern and competed against the KDP on a local level. Another level of cooperation between the KDP and PUK was the 2006 unification of the KRG governments, one based in Erbil and led by the KDP and one based in Sulaymaniyah and led by the PUK. Although the unification was a significant step for the two groups, it did not include the security forces of the Peshmerga and the intelligence, the Asayish. These two establishments are still separate in their command structure, with units reporting to both KDP and PUK commanders.⁴⁵

The KDP and PUK signed a strategic agreement in 2007 that was meant to dictate their relationship and the balance of power between them, both in Baghdad and Erbil. The agreement dictated relations between the two parties, including the rotation of senior positions and managing relations with Baghdad.⁴⁶ This agreement remained in place until 2014, when both groups ran under separate lists in the national elections.

2. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)

Brief History of the PUK

The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) was established in June 1975 and was led by Jalal Talabani until his death in October 2017.⁴⁷ Prior to his death, Talabani had two official designated deputies: Kosrat Rasul and Barham Salih, each of whom is known and highly regarded. Rasul is a traditional Peshmerga commander with great support among PUK members in Erbil. Salih was Prime Minister of the unity government in 2009, and also served as a deputy Prime Minister in Baghdad's federal government, which helped him achieve national and regional popularity. Similar to the KDP, the PUK was established to gain more rights for the Iraqi Kurds. However, the PUK is a socialist political party by nature and has, contrary to the KDP, a decentralized leadership structure. In October 2017 and shortly before the death of Talabani, Salih split from the PUK and formed the Democracy and Justice Coalition that is competing in the 2018 election on an anti-corruption platform.⁴⁸

Post-2003 PUK

After Saddam's removal, Jalal Talabani became the president of Iraq from 2006 until 2014, effectively making the PUK a central force in Baghdad's political establishment. Furthermore, the PUK consolidated its presence in the critical province of Kirkuk. The post-2003 PUK also saw the rise of young personalities such as Talabani's sons, Qubad and Bafel, in addition to Talabani's nephew, Lahur Sheikh Jangi, who enjoys wide popularity in the region due to his role in leading the Counter-Terrorism Group (CTG). These young figures will undoubtedly play a role in the future of the party.

The PUK leadership suffered a blow in 2012 when Talabani stepped out of the political scene due to a stroke. As there was no clearly established line of succession, this event brought about leadership challenges for the party and it soon after split into two camps: one camp that is closer to Talabani's wife, Hero Khan, and another that includes deputies Rasul and Salih. This split came to the fore in the run-up to the Kurdish independence referendum in September 2017 and again in October 2017, when Iraqi security forces regained control over the oil-rich province of Kirkuk, which had been held by Kurdish Peshmerga since 2014.

KDP and PUK Relations in Baghdad

The KDP and PUK coordinated their roles closely to secure Iraqi Kurdish interests in Baghdad. Both parties worked to include constitutional articles that covered contested territories such as Kirkuk, whose status was supposed to be addressed by article 140 of the Iraqi constitution. However, this again became a contested issue after the deployment of federal forces in October 2017. Early on after 2003, the Iraqi Kurds closely engaged with Iraqi Shi'a parties to form coalition governments; this was true for all governments since 2005. Until late 2015, the KDP and PUK built unified political fronts and disregarded their internal differences when negotiating government positions in Baghdad to the extent that they became sought-after governing allies. The picture, however, is different today. The Kurdistan independence referendum of September 2017 was seismic for internal Iraqi Kurdish politics and future Baghdad-Kurdistan relations. Inside Kurdistan, politics are becoming more competitive and unclear. The political fragmentation that the post-referendum period produced will continue to manifest itself in the next elections. Iraqi Kurdish parties are now pondering the best options for their future. Specific questions such as government institutions and representation inside Iraqi Kurdistan as well as the overall Kurdish front vis-à-vis Baghdad all need to be dealt with in the upcoming years. Political parties in the south may choose to work with the Sulaymaniyah-based political parties at the expense of the KDP. This may be more evident in the run-up to the 2018 elections and is likely the result of a perception that the PUK is able to work in Baghdad.

3. Gorran (Change Movement)

Gorran is a political party that rose to prominence in 2009 after PUK co-founder Noshirwan Mustafa decided to split from the party in 2006.⁴⁹ Its early platform centered around anti-corruption and anti-nepotism themes. These themes resonated well with the population and allowed Gorran to achieve successes in the 2009 regional parliamentary elections. The 2009 votes for Gorran came mostly from Sulaymaniyah, where the party is most popular, as it has not been able to garner a similar level of support from Erbil and Dohuk. Noshirwan Mustafa died in May 2017 and Gorran is now led by Omar Sayid Ali.

Gorran also did well in the 2013 regional elections and was able to position itself as a major political player in Iraqi Kurdistan's politics. In a move likely intended to weaken the PUK, it joined the KDP in a coalition government. This backfired and resulted in Gorran losing its popularity, as the movement ran on a platform of anti-corruption and end of partisan hegemony in the region, but was now seen as consolidating both.⁵⁰ Gorran will compete in the 2018 elections without Mustafa's leadership for the first time.

4. Islamist Parties

Iraqi Kurdish politics include Islamist parties, which are small but nevertheless capable of playing a role in coalition-building. These Islamist parties include the Islamic Union of Kurdistan (KIU), headed by Salah Aladin Baha Aladin, the Kurdistan Islamic Movement (KIM), headed by Irfan Ali Abdul Aziz, and the Kurdistan Islamic Group (IG), headed by Ali Bapir. All of these are noteworthy due to their role in tipping the political balance. For example, the KIU was more positive with the KDP in some instances such as the summer 2015 crisis over president Barzani's presidency term.⁵¹ Despite the level of influence they might enjoy, it is not likely that they will gain any significant ruling power in the region in the foreseeable future, as their grassroots support is not as large as the KDP's or PUK's.

The Cross-Sectarian Political Landscape

Overview and Takeaways

- The cross-sectarian political landscape is still underdeveloped. It faces competition from Islamist parties and is unable to articulate a message that appeals to the general public.
- There have been two major efforts to organize non-sectarian fronts: Iraqiyah in the 2010 elections and the Civic Democratic Alliance in the 2014 elections. Iraqiyah eventually became perceived as Iraqi Sunni, while the Civic Democratic Alliance will face questions about its structure during the 2018 elections.
- In the 2018 elections, cross-sectarian voices can capitalize on an emerging trend of seeking different political alternatives.
- For the cross-sectarian groups to succeed, they need to have a unified leadership and public message.
- Even if the cross-sectarian groups do not perform well in the 2018 elections, they have an opportunity to prepare themselves better for the 2022 elections.

Cross-Sectarian Parties and Political Actors

Brief History of Iraqiyah and Ayad Allawi

Iraqiyah was a major political coalition that was formed before the parliamentary elections in 2010. It consisted primarily of Ayad Allawi's Wifaq National Movement, the Nujaifi brothers, former Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, Saleh al-Mutlaq, and other smaller groups. The group sought to present an alternative political alliance and option for voters. This coalition was meant to show a cross-sectarian front with Allawi being Shi'a and the rest Iraqi Sunnis. This party was successful in the elections, as Iraqiyah gained 91 seats, mostly in Iraq's predominantly Sunni areas such as Ninewa and Anbar.⁵² Iraqiyah's leaders themselves performed well: Allawi and Hashemi came second and third to Maliki in the number of direct votes they received in Baghdad in the 2010 national elections. This was encouraging for those looking for political alternatives to Iraqi Islamist parties. Despite its breakthrough in Sunni dominant areas, Iraqiyah was not able to gain a foothold in Iraq's Shi'a south, making it seem like an Iraqi Sunni group more than a cross-sectarian group.

As the results came out in 2010, Iraqiyah faced three major challenges: First, Maliki saw its success as a major threat to his chances for a second term as Prime Minister and sought to prevent it from assuming the premiership by stalling government-formation negotiations for months. During these months, he worked to build his own alliances and eventually succeeded in having the Federal Supreme Court issuing a decision that allowed Maliki and the SLA to form a government first. This decision diminished Iraqiyah's chances of assuming the premiership and led to Maliki becoming Prime Minister for a second term. Second, Iraqiyah had its own internal challenges. The biggest one was its own leadership, whose diversity became a source of weakness.⁵³ The prolonged negotiations to form the government allowed Maliki to slowly peel away figures from Iraqiyah with promises of government positions. Cracks appeared when Maliki convinced Kadhim al-Shimari to ally with him, threatening Iraqiyah's unity. Third, the party's leaders also continued to point out that there was a lack of regional and international support for their cause. Iraqiyah ceased to exist in 2010, when the parliament voted for Maliki's second term in November.

Brief History of the Civic Democratic Alliance

The Civic Democratic Alliance is a combination of secular Iraqi groups and figures who intended to capitalize on growing discontent with Islamist parties in the 2014 national elections. The Alliance is considered the only truly

secular group, and was initially led by Mithal al-Alusi, who is well-known for his anti-Iranian stance and desire for a civic and secular Iraq. His party, the Iraqi Nation Party, usually lacks funding and has a base primarily among young Iraqis who aspire for a civic state. The leadership and charisma of Alusi has also played a role in the party's success; he is considered a man of principles among secular-minded voters. Other notable figures in the alliance who won seats in the 2014 elections are Shrouk al-Abaychi and Faiq al-Sheikh Ali. The Iraqi Communist Party was also a member of the Alliance but chose to eventually ally with the Sadrist in the summer 2015 reform protest.⁵⁴

The 2018 elections will show whether the Civic Democratic Alliance will be able to sustain itself. Whether it is able to benefit from Iraqi voter discontent with Islamist parties and use it to its advantage will be a decisive factor in how well it does in 2018. They will undoubtedly face challenges from the Islamist parties and also have to contend with personality differences within their leadership structure.

Conclusion and Outlook

Iraq's political culture of competition over resources and power will continue to define its political process and partisan maneuvering for the foreseeable future. The post-2003 period has created incentives for political groups to approach negotiations as zero-sum games. This dynamic tends to change only after rounds of talks and when political groups sense a tangible advantage from changing their position. This is a regular political dynamic in many countries, including established democracies. But in Iraq's young democracy it has led to a development in which a great part of the society is discontent with the political process and holds little faith in the political institutions. These conditions will be damaging to Iraq's political future.

Iraqi actors and the international community have an interest in protecting the integrity of elections and consolidating the electoral process. In that regard, Iraq's judiciary branch and Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) will have to guard Iraq's democracy and fend off their image as politicized instruments of the ruling elite. Moving forward, a reform of the political apparatus and the governance bodies will be important for Iraq. Iraqis themselves will have to take the lead in establishing a political environment that is inclusive and reform-oriented. After years of civil war and the emergence of ISIS, ending the marginalization of ethnic or religious groups is a precondition to create a stable Iraqi state and political environment. Any new political system that emerges after the defeat of ISIS will need to address the conditions that led to the rise of ISIS. These conditions include political decisions based on sectarian or personal interests, personal ambitions, and a deterioration of trust in the political structure. The new system will also have to introduce sound economic policies in both federal Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan as oil prices dropped significantly and are unlikely to return to the peak days of one hundred dollars per barrel. The current low prices of fifty to sixty dollars per barrel will only sustain the country's economy for now, but not in a long run. Iraq's delicate political system cannot withstand an economic collapse, especially in light of the current reconstruction efforts and the re-integration of displaced persons and refugees. A re-examination of Iraq's economic future will be needed to bolster the trust of the citizen's in the system. The international community can be essential in leading Iraq to a more consolidated democratic stage. It can work with Iraq's independent and vibrant civil society and it can also work with the Iraqi government to establish free media and protection for all Iraqis. Otherwise, the rise of armed groups is possible again, including the reemergence of ISIS.

Ahead of the 2018 elections there is growing discontent among Iraqis over the current political class and the ongoing lack of basic service delivery and poor economic situation. This trend has successfully capitalized on social media and mobilized Iraqis to take a stand against certain laws or governmental actions that are seen as an overreach by the government. It needs to be seen if this discomfort will eventually lead to a high voter turnout in the elections on May 12th 2018 and a subsequent transformation of the political landscape and processes.

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