

IRAQ ON THE EVE OF ELECTIONS

INTRODUCTION

This backgrounder provides an update on the political landscape in Iraq on the eve of parliamentary elections. The paper begins with a brief overview of the electoral process. The second part of the backgrounder documents the Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurdish political landscapes. This paper concludes with some considerations on the post-election period of government formation.

With the campaign season underway, Iraqi politicians and parties have actively sought to shore up support before the March 7, 2010 vote. The official campaign period began on February 12, 2010. During this two week period, cities and towns have been covered with campaign posters. Candidates have travelled throughout the country seeking the support of voters in the upcoming election. Though some candidates have stoked sectarian tension to garner support, issues such as reducing unemployment, expanding electricity and essential services, and ensuring security have been chief amongst the electorate's concerns.¹ As has been the case in previous elections, politicians have also sought to secure votes by offering handouts such as food, clothing, guns, and money.²

In an effort to set some guidelines for the campaign period, representatives from five leading electoral coalitions—the State of Law list, the Iraqi National Alliance, the Iraqi List, the Unity of Iraq List, and the Kurdistan Alliance—signed an electoral code of conduct on February 17, 2010 affirming their commitment to ensuring a free, transparent, and fair vote.³ Though there is no guarantee that the parties will abide by the promise

to run a clean campaign, it is significant that they felt compelled to make public agreement.

All campaigning must cease on March 5, 2010, forty-eight hours before the polls open. Special needs voting will be held on March 4, 2010 for hospitalized voters, detainees, and the Iraqi Security Forces.⁴ The regular vote will be held on March 7, 2010. Registered voters living outside of Iraq will be able to vote from March 5-7, 2010 at polling centers in sixteen countries worldwide.⁵

The Iraqi High Electoral Commission (IHEC) is the main body tasked with administering the election. IHEC has been working closely with the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), the Iraqi Security Forces, and a number of other non-governmental organizations to facilitate the election.⁶ This includes logistical preparations, such as transporting the twenty-six million ballots into Iraq and to and from the polling stations; voter registration and education; the registration and certification of political entities, coalitions, and observers; the tallying of votes; the adjudication of electoral complaints; and the certification of election results.⁷

Roughly 18.9 million Iraqis are registered to vote in the upcoming election, at more than 10,000 polling centers across the country.⁸ Each polling center comprises one or more polling stations, of which there are more than 50,000 in total.⁹ More than 300,000 domestic election observers and observers from various political parties will monitor the election; in addition, eight diplomatic missions and international organizations have been asked to participate as international election monitors.¹⁰ Security for the polling sites will be provided by the Iraqi Security Forces, with some planning assistance and enablers provided by U.S. forces.¹¹

In all, 6,172 candidates are vying for 325 seats in the Council of Representatives.¹² 310 seats are allocated into eighteen electoral constituencies, with each province considered one constituency.¹³ Eight of the remaining seats are reserved for minorities, including five for Christians, and seven of the remaining seats are compensatory seats that “are awarded to winning lists in proportion to the governorate seats they won in the country as a whole.”¹⁴ Candidates are registered to run in a specific province, and voters may only cast a ballot in their home province. Ballots from out-of-country voters are tallied in their home province. The 2009 electoral law stipulates an open list arrangement, allowing voters to select an individual candidate from a political party or a political party itself. Seats are awarded to the candidates with the highest number of votes.¹⁵ Once the results are certified and the winning candidates are seated in the Council of Representatives, the alliance-making continues in earnest as political parties vie for key concessions from one another in the distribution of ministerial appointments. This process of government formation will be discussed in greater detail at the end of this paper.

SHI’A POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

There are two predominantly Shi’a coalitions vying in the election, the Iraq National Alliance (INA) and the State of Law list. Prime Minister Maliki’s decision not to join the INA and instead run as the head of the State of Law list has meant that, unlike in the 2005 elections, the Shi’a political landscape

GOVERNATE	SEATS ALLOCATED
ANBAR	14
BABEL	16
BAGHDAD	68
BASRA	24
DAHUK	10
DHI QAR	18
DIYALA	13
IRBIL	14
KARBALA	10
KIRKUK	12
MAYSAN	10
MUTHANNA	7
NAJAF	12
NINEWAH	31
QADISIYAH	11
SALAH AD-DIN	12
SULAYMANIYAH	17
WASIT	11
COMPENSATORY & MINORITY SEATS	15
Total	325

TABLE 1 - 2010 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION SEAT ALLOCATION

is divided. What’s more, the *marja’iya*, four of Iraq’s most respected Shi’a clerics in the Najaf *hawza* (or seminary), have refused to publically back a coalition as they had done during the 2005 election with their support of the main Shi’a coalition, the United Iraqi Alliance.¹⁶ The competition between the INA and State of Law has been fierce, particularly in the provinces of southern Iraq where candidates from both lists have been actively campaigning for the support of Shi’a voters.

Iraqi National Alliance

The Iraqi National Alliance includes the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI, led by Ammar al-Hakim), the Badr Organization, the Sadrism Trend, former Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari’s Reform Trend, Ahmed al-Chalabi’s National Congress, the Islamic Virtue Party, and other smaller parties. The list is overwhelmingly Shi’a, with very limited Sunni and Turkmen representation.¹⁷ Hamid al-Hayes, a Sunni who heads the Anbar Salvation Council, joined the INA in an effort to undercut his rivals in Anbar province. Al-Hayes has received considerable funding from the INA, which he has used in the hopes of increasing his influence and votes received in Anbar.¹⁸ ISCI and the Sadrists are

the main parties in the alliance and are expected to garner the most seats for the coalition. Though these two parties are running together as part of the INA, this is largely an alliance of convenience given the significant differences between them.

2009 was a difficult year for ISCI, which did not perform as well as it had expected during the January provincial elections. ISCI also faced an important transition in party leadership, after the death of Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim in August 2009. The party spent much of the year seeking to improve its position in advance of the 2010 parliamentary election, attempting to learn lessons from the provincial election and to adapt to the emerging political realities amongst the Iraqi electorate.¹⁹ Even as it pushed to rebuild the United Iraqi Alliance (the Shi'a coalition that won the most votes in the previous parliamentary election), ISCI sought to cast the bloc as nationalist and cross-sectarian.²⁰ Leading figures within ISCI, including Ammar al-Hakim and Iraqi Vice President Adl Abd al-Mahdi, have highlighted the party's nationalist and inclusive platform.²¹ In a series of interviews in late 2009, Hakim distinguished between loyal "Saddamists" and Ba'athist ideologues, and individuals who joined the Ba'ath party out of professional necessity, saying that the latter "have the right to a decent life like other citizens."²² At the time, such conciliatory comments contrasted Prime Minister Maliki's increasingly aggressive rhetoric towards former Ba'athists.

As competition between Shi'a parties has intensified in the southern provinces in recent months, ISCI has sought to shore up support amongst the Shi'a electorate. Members of ISCI supported the ban and stoked anti-Ba'athist sentiment in the southern provinces during the controversy over the candidates that were banned for their alleged Ba'athist ties.²³ Campaign posters have appeared in southern Iraq depicting the INA as the bulwark against a Ba'athist return.²⁴

Religion, which was the dominant theme in the 2005 election, has been largely overshadowed by economic messages.²⁵ Just as Prime Minister Maliki tapped into the anti-incumbency sentiment to undercut ISCI in the 2009 provincial elections, ISCI

has sought to use a similar tactic against Maliki's bloc by highlighting the lack of economic improvements. Ammar al-Hakim, Adl Abd al-Mahdi, and other prominent ISCI politicians have campaigned widely throughout southern Iraq and Baghdad emphasizing the need for better provision of essential services, the creation of jobs, and overall economic development.²⁶

The Sadrism Trend, like ISCI, has emphasized the need for improvements in the provision of essential services and jobs—a message that appeals to their prime constituency of Shi'a urban and rural poor.²⁷ Muqtada al-Sadr has also issued statements upholding the de-Ba'athification process, and the need for better security, citing the Maliki government's security failures.²⁸ Yet unlike other parties, the Sadrists have maintained the platform of armed resistance, a tenet that has drawn criticism from Ammar al-Hakim as well as Maliki and his allies.²⁹ In late February, as the campaigning intensified in advance of the election, Muqtada al-Sadr issued a Code of Honor for his followers to abide by during the election that upheld each of these principles.³⁰

The Sadrism Trend has worked to rebuild its movement and improve its image since mid-2008, when Muqtada al-Sadr announced that he was transitioning his militia, the Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM), into non-violent organizations, the *Mu-mahidoon* and later, the *Munasiroon*.³¹ While a select group of fighters, the Promised Day Brigade, have continued their attacks on U.S. forces, the other branches have focused on educational, social, religious, and cultural projects of the Sadrism Trend.³² Such efforts to rebrand the movement have met with success, and the Sadrists are expected to perform well in the parliamentary election.

If the Sadrists succeed in having a high turnout of voters from their strongholds in central and southern Iraq—something they are actively seeking—they could emerge as the leading party within the INA.³³ High turnout would give the Sadrism more leverage vis-a-vis ISCI and other parties during the post-election negotiations.³⁴ Still, a strong showing for the Sadrists does not guarantee a driving role in government formation, as the party has alienated

many potential allies, such as the Kurds (whose support will likely be required to form the governing coalition).³⁵ Even ISCI and Dawa remain wary of an alliance with the Sadrists, given their uncompromising stances against issues like the continuation of a security partnership with U.S. forces and the recent negotiation of oil deals with international oil companies.³⁶

Overall, the INA is poised to perform well in the election, though it will likely fail to capture a majority of seats. Moreover, a likelihood of an ISCI-Sadrism split after the election would necessitate the creation of alliances with parties from other coalitions to form a majority bloc.³⁷ Potential alliances will be discussed at length below.

State of Law

The State of Law list is led by Prime Minister Maliki, who heads the Islamic Dawa party. Despite Dawa's Islamist roots, Maliki has recast himself and his coalition as a secular, nationalist list. The State of Law platform emphasizes nationalism, unity, and non-sectarianism; a strong central government with control over security, natural resources, and foreign policy; the maintenance of security improvements; increased accountability and the reduction of corruption; and the importance of economic growth and reconstruction.³⁸ Maliki has also called for the distribution of Ministerial positions to the winning blocs, taking a position against the consensus system that has characterized the Iraqi government for the last five years.³⁹

Prime Minister Maliki had initially courted a number of Sunni politicians to join his alliance, including Saleh Mutlaq and Ahmed Abu Risha;⁴⁰ however, when his alliance was announced in October 2009, it lacked the broad cross-sectarian support and prominent politicians that many had expected. The State of Law list is predominantly Shi'a, despite the participation of some small cross-sectarian parties. Prominent parties include the Islamic Dawa Party, the Islamic Dawa Party-Iraq Organization, Oil Minister Shahrastani's Independent Party, the Anbar National Salvation Front (a Sunni group led by Sheik Ali Hatem al-Suleiman),

and a number of small tribal Shi'a parties.⁴¹ Still, the State of Law list remains dominated by Prime Minister Maliki and his Dawa affiliates. Maliki is the face of the bloc, with his image appearing on campaign posters across the country.

Prime Minister Maliki has lost ground in recent months. The handful of spectacular attacks in August, October, and December 2009 undercut his campaign platform of improving security.⁴² In response to these attacks, Maliki sought to place blame for the series of bombings and spoke out against Ba'athists in language that increasingly alienated the Sunni constituency he was trying to attract. His efforts to appeal to Sunnis were also undercut by growing momentum of the Iraqi List, which by late 2009 was seen as the main predominantly-Sunni challenger to the Shi'a coalitions.

Maliki ratcheted up his hostile rhetoric towards Ba'athists in January 2010 during the controversy over the Accountability and Justice Commission's decision to ban hundreds of candidates on account of their links to the Ba'ath party.⁴³ Though it does not appear that Maliki instigated the ban, he and his allies emphatically supported the move on the grounds of upholding the legal framework for de-ba'athification.⁴⁴ When the Cassations Court initially reversed the ban on the candidates in early February, Maliki adamantly resisted the move, asking the Speaker of the Council of Representatives to call an emergency session of parliament to review the Court's ruling.⁴⁵ Ultimately, the emergency session was not held, as the Federal Supreme Court reviewed the appeals from banned candidates before the start of campaign season and upheld the ban on most candidates, including Saleh Mutlaq.⁴⁶

Like the INA, Maliki benefitted from the candidate ban as it undercut the Iraqi List and the Unity of Iraq list. He also portrayed himself as defending Iraq's sovereignty against undue foreign (namely U.S.) influence, in an effort to appeal to nationalist sentiments.⁴⁷ Maliki's harsh rhetoric against Ba'athists also appealed to Shi'a voters in southern and central Iraq and helped garner some support from those voters who may have otherwise supported the INA. Maliki has spent much of the

campaign season in southern Iraq, meeting with tribal groups and local officials in provinces such as Basra and Dhi Qar.⁴⁸ Maliki used a similar tribal outreach strategy successfully in the 2009 provincial elections.

Though Maliki performed better than his Shi'a rivals in last year's provincial elections, it is unlikely that he will be as successful in the parliamentary vote. Maliki's actions and rhetoric have allowed him to regain some ground since January and Maliki will likely perform respectably in Baghdad and the southern provinces. Yet, he faces a strong challenge from ISCI and the Sadrists. State of Law and the INA are expected to have similar showings with neither list gaining the majority of seats.⁴⁹ This will make the post-election alliance-making all the more important.

A potential post-election ally for Maliki's State of Law list is the INA, or members of it. Such an alliance has been long-rumored, and members of the INA have made statements indicating their willingness to have Maliki join their coalition.⁵⁰ A united Shi'a coalition is also something that Iran has pushed for since the negotiations during the formation of the INA in mid-2009.⁵¹ Yet, members of both lists remain wary of one another, as one party's success has historically come at the others' expense.

Tension between Maliki and the Sadrists surfaced in January 2010, when representatives from both parties sparred publicly in statements to local media. On January 31, 2010, Sami al-Askari, a close ally to Maliki, stated that the State of Law list would not ally with the Sadrist Trend as their insistence on "political action and armed action is not consistent with the motto of the State of Law."⁵² Al-Askari's comments came in response to a statement issued only days before by Muqtada al-Sadr, which insisted on the principle of armed resistance of the U.S. presence in Iraq.⁵³ Sadrist MP Bahaa al-Araji responded to Al-Askari by claiming that only a week before Maliki had been "begging" for an alliance with the Sadrists.⁵⁴

SUNNI POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Iraq's Sunni voters are entering the 2010 elections as a fragmented constituency.

Historically, the Sunnis of Iraq have had an uneven participation in their country's electoral politics. In 2005, the majority of Iraq's Sunnis boycotted the parliamentary elections as a result of their widespread belief that Iraq's newly constituted government was illegitimate.⁵⁵ This electoral boycott had drastic consequences for Iraq's politics. Sunnis, who make up thirty-four percent of the population of Iraq,⁵⁶ were so underrepresented in the vote that their main party, the IIP, garnered only forty-four seats in the Council of Representatives, roughly sixteen percent of the entire assembly.⁵⁷ The boycott has been cited by many as causing a near-universal sense of political disenfranchisement among Sunnis that led to the civil insurrection that beset Iraq in the following several years.⁵⁸

The 2009 provincial elections, the next major set of elections in Iraq, saw the Sunnis return to the polls in large numbers. In addition to broader Sunni political participation, the last few years have seen the emergence of new Sunni politicians and parties.⁵⁹ These parties have challenged the existing Sunni elites, namely the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP). Many of the IIPs most important leaders left the party in 2008 and 2009 in order to join other electoral coalitions or to create their own political parties. Despite their ability to retain some seats in Sunni provinces such as Diyala, Anbar and Ninewah in the 2009 provincial elections,⁶⁰ the IIP has suffered a severe blow to its influence since the defections began in late 2008 and is unlikely to fare as well in these parliamentary elections as they have in the past.⁶¹

Among the many political currents to have emerged in Iraq in the last few years is that of secular nationalism. Many political parties, in reaction to the sectarian violence that had plagued Iraq's recent past, and in an attempt to broaden their potential constituencies, have sought to cast themselves as nationalist and cross-sectarian. These parties and electoral lists are commonly composed of a grouping of Sunni and Shi'a political parties with avowed platforms of governmental reform

and non-sectarian government.⁶²

These new political realities have dispersed Sunni political parties across a broad range of Sunni-Shi'a coalitions, effectively reducing the number of avenues of purely Sunni political expression. Among the political groups that have created such coalitions are the Iraqi List, headed by Iyad al-Allawi and the Unity of Iraq list, led by Interior Minister Jawad al-Bolani, a Shi'a who heads the Constitution Party, and Ahmad Abu Risha, a Sunni who heads the Awakening Council of Iraq party.⁶³ Though several of these lists, despite being covered in the Sunni section, are composed of and in some cases headed by, Shi'a politicians, these cross-sectarian lists are included with the Sunnis as they are the mostly likely political entities to garner Sunni support.

Given the fact that the Sunnis make up a significant percentage of the population of Iraq and the fact that the Sunnis of Iraq stand poised to participate fully in the upcoming elections, they are likely to have a far greater voice in the government than they have had in the past. Sunnis will likely take a far more important role in the formation of the new government, though they are unlikely to form a single, powerful bloc within the Council of Representatives. Two of the potentially powerful electoral lists—the Iraqi List and the Unity of Iraq list—count among their members a significant number of Sunni political parties and, should these lists fare well in the election, their constituent members are likely to remain at least partially allied. This will give the Sunnis a large, if dispersed voice in the formation of a government as they work through their post-election coalitions to bargain for ministerial positions and government appointments. More importantly, it will provide evidence for the Sunni population of Iraq that they are full participants in their nation's government.

The Iraqi List

Composed of a grouping of Shi'a and Sunni political parties and headed by Shi'a former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, the Iraqi List is among the most credible of the secular, nationalist coalitions

contesting this election. Prominent Sunni parties and politicians within the Iraqi List include, among others, the National Dialogue Front (a Sunni party headed by the recently disqualified Sunni parliamentarian Saleh Mutlaq), Osama al-Nujaifi (a Sunni politician from the Iraqi National List), Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi (a Sunni who has formed the Renewal party since his split from the IIP), Deputy Prime Minister Rafa al-Issawi (a Sunni who belongs to the Iraq National Future List).⁶⁴

The Iraqi List ended 2009 with a great deal of support and momentum. When the Justice and Accountability Commission's candidate ban eliminated several of the electoral list's leaders, it appeared that perhaps the Iraqi List might have suffered a devastating setback. Fears of another Sunni boycott like that of 2005 were raised with the recent disqualification of several hundred candidates, among them several prominent Sunnis, by the Justice and Accountability Commission for alleged ties to the outlawed Ba'ath Party. After two months of political bickering, legal review and appeals, many of the candidates were officially allowed to run, but among those who remained disqualified was the head of the National Dialogue Front, Saleh Mutlaq, a high-profile Sunni parliamentarian. Though throughout the electoral crisis, many Sunni politicians and their political allies threatened to call upon their supporters to boycott the election, it has become clear that Sunni political will does not lie in the direction of a boycott.⁶⁵ This feeling was expressed by Saleh Mutlaq himself who, despite being barred from candidacy, has called upon his supporters to participate fully.⁶⁶ For more information on the recent electoral crisis, see ISW Backgrounder, "Iraq Elections Update," dated February 15, 2010.

Despite the candidate ban and grumblings of possible boycotts, the Iraqi List has continued with their plans to contest the election and it still enjoys the support of a large Sunni constituency. In the run up to the election, the Iraqi List has gained an ever-growing following.⁶⁷ It is possible that the Iraqi List could perform very well in the upcoming election, providing its Sunni constituents turn out in large numbers on election day. A strong showing

would give the Iraqi List a relatively powerful voice in the formation of government and a corresponding number of seats in the Council of Representatives.

Unity of Iraq

The Unity of Iraq list is a secular and cross-sectarian list, whose members are predominantly Sunni. The two principle parties are the Shi'a Constitution Party, led by Iraq's current Minister of the Interior, Jawad al-Bolani and the Awakening Council of Iraq, led by Ahmad Abu Risha.⁶⁸

Jawad al-Bolani is a Shi'a politician who has been a member of several political parties throughout his career, but came to prominence as the Minister of the Interior who sought to reform the ministry and the National Police, retraining the force and removing members who were sectarian partisans or loyal to outside militias.⁶⁹ He has been touted at various times as a potential rival to Prime Minister Maliki and has established himself as one of the principle politicians associated with the security gains in recent years.⁷⁰ His Constitution Party was formed to contest the 2009 provincial elections in which they did not fare well;⁷¹ however, his participation in a large cross-sectarian electoral list may strengthen his party's position in the upcoming election.

Ahmad Abu Risha, a Sunni from al-Anbar Province, leads the Awakening Council of Iraq. This political movement was started by Ahmad's brother Abdul Sattar to lead the effort of the tribes of Al-Anbar Province in their resistance against Al-Qaeda. Despite the founder's assassination in 2007, the Awakening movement gained momentum and Awakening councils began to form across Iraq. councils formed a fractious and unorganized political movement, and in the lead up to the 2009 provincial election, the movement split into three groups, each led by Abu Risha, Hamid al-Hayes, and Ali Hatem al-Suleiman.⁷² Ahmad Abu Risha's party, the Awakening Council of Iraq, succeeded in winning the largest single bloc of seats in the provincial council.⁷³ In advance of the 2010 elections, the three major political blocs in Anbar have allied

with different electoral lists.⁷⁴ This has had the effect of diffusing the Awakening movement's votes across a wider set of political parties and prohibiting the Awakening movement from having a single, strong voice in the upcoming elections. Though the Awakening movement is certainly a powerful political movement, it is unlikely to form a coherent political bloc within the Council of Representatives post-election.

Tawafuq (Iraqi Accord Front)

Tawafuq, led by the Iraqi Islamic Party, has historically been one of Iraq's most successful Sunni political coalitions. One of the sole Sunni lists to contest the 2005 parliamentary election, Tawafuq won forty-four seats in the Council of Representatives, the largest of any Sunni bloc in that election.⁷⁵ Yet, Tawafuq has seen its influence wane in recent years and the main Sunni alliance in the parliament suffered major defections in late 2008 and early 2009, which essentially left the IIP as the only real party in the alliance.⁷⁶ The IIP has tried to revamp its image with a change in party leadership in the spring of 2009,⁷⁷ but this has failed to give the IIP a needed boost for the upcoming elections. The party suffers from a reputation of being an expatriate political party and may face further difficulties in the polls as a result of Iraq's widespread impulse toward anti-incumbency. Though it has been a significant political force among Iraq's Sunnis, the IIP is unlikely to retain its position within the Sunni political hierarchy. IIP will likely manage to hold onto some seats in Diyala and Baghdad, where it retains support,⁷⁸ but will lose to rival Sunni parties in Anbar, Salah ad-Din, and Ninewah provinces.⁷⁹

KURDISH POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

The most important aspect of Kurdish politics in the upcoming election is the fragmentation that has occurred since the last parliamentary elections. This political fragmentation, which extends to Kurds living in areas outside the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) proper, has greatly changed the Kurdish approach to these parliamen-

tary elections.

Until 2009, Iraq's Kurds overwhelmingly adhered to one of two major parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), headed by Iraq's president, Jalal Talabani, and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), led by the Kurdistan Regional Government's President, Masoud Barzani.⁸⁰ Historically, the PUK was influential in southern part of the KRG, centered on Sulaymaniyah, while the KDP was more powerful in the north with its headquarters in Dahuk.⁸¹ Despite the frequent and sometimes violent contests between the two parties to gain advantage within Kurdistan, together they enjoyed a virtual duopoly on political power in the region for decades.⁸² The two parties ran together in the 2005 parliamentary elections on a single, combined list along with several other marginal parties, The Democratic Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Receiving over ninety percent of the votes in the simultaneous elections within Kurdistan, the unified list won seventy-five seats in Iraq's Council of Representatives in 2005.⁸³

The solidarity of the KRG's politicians ended with the Kurdistan Regional Government's elections in the summer of 2009. For a detailed description of the politics preceding the KRG's 2009 regional election, please see ISW publication of July 23, 2009, "Kurdish Elections." Briefly, one of the two dominant political parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, saw its leadership split over internal political matters. The long-serving Deputy Secretary General, and media entrepreneur, Neschervan Mustafa, left with members of the PUK's "reform wing," to found a new political party, the Goran (Change) List. This defection of several of the PUK's highest leaders along with a number of rank-and-file membership greatly weakened the party.⁸⁴

The two parties that formed the core of the Democratic Patriotic Union of Kurdistan contested the KRG's 2009 regional elections again by running on a single list.⁸⁵ Though the KDP and PUK won the majority of seats in the KRG's III seat unicameral legislature, the Change List won twenty-five seats and other marginal parties and minorities won a combined twenty-seven.⁸⁶

Emboldened by their successful electoral campaign against Kurdistan's main political parties, the Change List immediately prepared to contest the national parliamentary elections.⁸⁷ The same alliance between the PUK and KDP that gave rise to the Kurdistan List in the KRG's regional elections was employed for the national parliamentary elections, this time under the name The Kurdistan Alliance.⁸⁸

As with the fragmentation of the PUK, other marginal political parties have sought to run independently with a total of four lists fielding candidates. The lists (from most to least likely to garner votes) running are:⁸⁹

The Kurdistan Alliance

Composed of the two dominant political parties within Kurdistan, the KDP and the PUK, the Kurdistan Alliance, though weakened, will take the majority of votes from among Kurdish voters.

The List of Change

The List of Change is composed of one political party, the Goran (Change) Party. It is composed primarily of disaffected members of the PUK and, like the PUK, finds most of its support in the southern region of Kurdistan. Goran is led by Neschervan Mustafa.

The Kurdistan Islamic Union

The Kurdistan Islamic Union, led by Salaheddine Bahaeddin, is a single party representing Kurdistan's minority Islamist population. Kurdistan is a fairly secular region of Iraq, and the KIU is likely to poll as a small minority party again. In the KRG's 2009 regional elections, the KIU had their best electoral results to date, taking 13 of III seats within the regional parliament.⁹⁰

Islamic Group

The Islamic Group of Kurdistan, led by Ali Babir,

is another Islamist political party, smaller and more marginal than the Kurdistan Islamic Union. They have run in the past with the PUK and are likely to fare poorly in the upcoming elections.

Unlike the KRG elections in the summer of 2009, these elections cast a wider net, with Kurdish voters from across Iraq participating in the elections. There are significant Kurdish populations in many of the provinces outside the KRG proper. Ninewah, Tamim, Salah ad-Din, Baghdad, and Diyala governates will all contribute a large number of Kurdish votes in the election.

Right now, the Kurdistan Alliance stands to win the majority of Kurdish seats in the parliamentary elections and of those, the majority will be garnered from KDP, not PUK supporters. Change appears likely to make another respectable showing, but all three established parties will suffer from losses to fringe parties, whether left or Islamist.⁹¹ In the end, the Kurds are likely, as a bloc, to lose seats as the 2010 electoral law has added seats to the Council of Representatives and their relative numbers within the chamber will diminish.

However, in light of political fragmentation and infighting in other Iraqi factions, the Kurds may find themselves, as a bloc, even more powerful than in the aftermath of the 2005 elections. A coherent political bloc will almost certainly have the power to weigh-in significantly on the choice of prime minister and cabinet appointments, not to mention establishing major components of the new parliament's legislative agenda following the formation of the government, a key interest for any new Kurdish Member of Parliament regardless of party affiliation.

POST-ELECTION ALLIANCE-MAKING

A new government is formed once the election results are certified and the parliament is seated. The newly-seated Members of Parliament (MPs) must elect a President by a two-thirds majority; if no candidate wins a two-thirds majority, then the two candidates with the highest number of votes participate in a run-off where the winner requires a simple majority.⁹² Article Seventy-Six of the

Iraqi Constitution states that "The President of the Republic shall charge the nominee of the largest Council of Representatives bloc with the formation of the Council of Ministers within fifteen days from the date of the election of the President of the Republic."⁹³ The Prime Minister-designate must name his Council of Ministers within thirty days of his selection. If the Prime Minister-designate is unable to name the ministers to form his Cabinet within thirty days, then the President selects a new Prime Minister.⁹⁴

Once the Prime Minister-designate names his ministers, the Council of Ministers and ministerial program must be approved by an absolute majority of the Council of Representatives.⁹⁵ Within first session of parliament, the Council of Representatives must also elect a speaker and two deputy speakers, by an absolute majority.⁹⁶ The Speaker of the Council of Representatives is a powerful position that shapes what legislation is and is not brought to the floor for a vote.

The language in Article Seventy-Six is vague, and it is unclear whether the "bloc with the largest number of seats" refers to the electoral list that garnered the most seats or the largest alliance formed after the election. This creates the potential for a fight over the interpretation of the constitutional clause, as there is no clear precedent on the matter. Yet, this does not diminish the importance of alliance-making as a majority is required both to elect the President and the Speaker, and to approve the Council of Ministers.

Though the Iraqi Constitution spells out a clear timeline for government formation, past history has shown this can be a much more contentious and complicated process. During the period of government formation, politicians and political parties jockey intensely over the selection of these high offices in a process that can be volatile and lengthy. In the 2005 parliamentary elections, the newly-seated parliamentarians took five months to form a government.

No one electoral bloc or party is expected to garner a majority outright. This will require the formation of alliances in order to have enough votes to elect

the President and the Speaker and to approve the ministerial appointments. There is currently no clear frontrunner and analysts predict that at least three parties may be required to form a majority alliance.⁹⁷ Although parties have begun discussions of alliances in advance of the election, no concrete alliances will materialize until after the vote.⁹⁸ Moreover, the alliances forged in the electoral lists pre-election are not guaranteed to endure beyond the vote. Individual parties will seek to form alliances to advance their interests after the election as they vie for key elected positions and ministerial appointments—namely, the Presidency, the Prime Ministership, the Speakership of the Council of Representatives, and key Cabinet ministerial appointments such as the Minister of Defense, Minister of Interior, Minister of Finance, and Minister of Oil. They will also fight to shape the legislative agenda for the next parliament.

While it is very difficult to predict the alliances that will emerge, there are some observations that can be drawn. Much will depend on the performance of Maliki's State of Law list and Allawi's Iraqi List, as well as whether the Sadrism Trend or ISCI will emerge as the largest vote-winner from within the INA.

If the State of Law list does well (perhaps even garnering a plurality of votes), other parties will have to decide whether to ally with Maliki or against him. Such a calculation is not new, as this time last year various parties worked together to check Maliki on issues such as the selection of the Council of Representatives Speaker and the 2009 budget.⁹⁹ Maliki would likely push hard for the Prime Minister post if he were to get a strong showing in the polls. Such a move might prompt parties to ally against him, as Maliki has already alienated a number of potential allies that do not want him in the position again.¹⁰⁰ If State of Law does not perform as well as it hopes, Maliki will likely seek an alliance with the INA and the Kurds, an alliance he has already suggested he would pursue.¹⁰¹ It remains to be seen whether such an alliance is indeed feasible without significant concessions from Maliki, given the growing tension between him and the Kurdish bloc.

If Allawi and the Iraqi List perform well in the election, not only will it give them greater leverage over the government formation process, but Allawi may also be courted by ISCI and the Kurds to form a governing coalition that does not depend on support from Dawa or the Sadrists. Such a possibility has been rumored, and both Allawi and Hakim have held meetings to discuss a possible alliance.¹⁰² Still, this is by no means an assured outcome.

If ISCI comes out as party with the most votes in the INA electoral list, it will be able to make confident approaches to other parties to form a governing coalition in the absence of Sadrism support. This could be a coalition with the Kurds and Allawi's party, neither of which would appeal to the Sadrists. Additionally, Maliki's State of Law list would be a potential addition to any ISCI coalition. A broad Shi'a alliance is certainly a possible outcome, and one that Iran will also press for given its desire for a overwhelmingly Shi'a government. Yet, Maliki's participation in an ISCI-led coalition would require ISCI's calculation that tensions internal to their alliance would be worth the larger governing majority. It is unclear as to whether the State of Law list would choose to participate as a minority partner in a coalition or instead forge a separate opposition alliance.

If the Sadrists are the party with the most votes in the INA, the INA as a group would be unlikely to exploit their electoral advantage. The Sadrists are not an attractive ally for many parties, as a result of their uncompromising positions in opposition to the presence of international security forces in Iraq, the agreements struck with international oil companies to develop Iraqi oilfields, and federalism and regional governments within Iraq.¹⁰³ ISCI and the Kurdish bloc are unlikely to agree to Sadrism demands in the formation of the coalition. Still, the Sadrists could likely garner the support of other Shi'a politicians such as Ahmed al-Chalabi and Ibrahim al-Jaafari.

Despite wrangling within the Kurdistan Regional Government, it is extremely unlikely that the Kurdish delegates to the Council of Representatives will break ranks with one another. Kurdish objectives vis-à-vis the central government do not

vary with party affiliation. Such unity will give the Kurds a strong role in the formation of a governing coalition. The Kurds have proven repeatedly that their support is required to pass key legislation and maintain a governing coalition.

CONCLUSION

The formation of the government will be messy, as parties maneuver to form a governing coalition and to distribute key positions. Some analysts predict that this process could take months, with negotiations prolonged into the summer. During this critical period, U.S. forces are scheduled to complete their accelerated withdrawal of combat forces. These factors will present challenges for governance and security and the next few months in Iraq may be the most important yet.

It is difficult to predict with certainty the alliances that will form after the election, but what is evident is the likely continuation of the ISCI-Kurd alliance that has formed the backbone of the current government over the last five years. More will be known after the initial uncertified returns are released by IHEC. At that point, further analysis of the negotiating positions of the different parties and likely alliances will be possible.

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