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Inside Shiite Politics in Iraq

Internal Strives and Shifting Alliances

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Introduction

The overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the subsequent dismantling of the Ba'ath regime and security apparatus have not only empowered the long oppressed Shi'a majority of the country, it has also created a dangerous security vacuum that has been filled by various sectarian militias and foreign jihadi Salafis. Today, Iraq is at the verge of a bloody civil war, in which Arabs, Turkomen and Kurds quarrel over Kirkuk; Sunni and Shi'a Iraqis quarrel over control of mixed neighbourhoods in Baghdad and elsewhere; home grown Sunni Islamist militias, tribal chiefs and former Ba'athis fight against the US troops and the weak central government; and foreign jihadi groups fight against US forces and the Iraqi government as well as the Shiites.

One conflict, however, that has not featured prominently in the coverage of the global news media, but which will as much determine the fate of Iraq and its future political outlook is that between quarrelling Shi'ite factions themselves. This conflict will surface even more if the new federalism bill that was passed in mid-October 2006 and is, in principal, already enshrined in the new Iraqi constitution is put into practice.

Since the 2003 war, the Shi'a political landscape in Iraq has been dominated by four main groups, which for the sake of consolidating the Shi'a's new influence over the country's political future, have so far chosen to cooperate under the umbrella of the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), the strong Shi'a block that emerged victorious out of the 2005 elections.

The four groups are: Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and the traditional ulama of the Hawza; The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and its Badr Organisation; the al-Da'wa Party headed by Ibrahim al-Ja'afari; and Muqtada al-Sadr and his Mahdi Army (also referred to as the Sadrists). Furthermore, there is also the Fadila

Party, a break away group from the Mahdi army that is particularly strong in Basra, and although not having a strong impact on national politics will be a very important player to keep in mind for the power struggle unfolding in the Shi'a dominated south.

There are other smaller groups such as the Khoi Foundation, the Iraqi Islamic Amal and the Iraqi Hezbollah – for the main political power struggle at hand in Baghdad, however, they are less important.

Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and the quietist tradition

Since the overthrow of Saddam Hussayn in 2003, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the most widely respected Shi'a cleric today, has become a key player on Iraq's political scene, albeit more as a powerful advisor, whose voice can not be neglected, than as the de facto political leader of the entire Shi'a community. Nonetheless, al-Sistani effectively has a veto on all main political decisions taken by all the various Shiite factions.

Al-Sistani's position on politics is a rather pragmatic one. Although his aim has clearly been to empower the voice of the Shi'a and promote Shi'a identity and interests in Iraq's evolving political system, he has also shunned open sectarian politics, calling for a united and nationally self-conscious Iraq to emerge.

Al-Sistani has realised that in a country as divided as Iraq, but with a sizeable Shi'a majority, Shi'a interests can best be served, not by an Iranian style Islamic revolution which has as much failed to transcend sectarian politics than the secular ideologies of communism and Arab nationalism, but by promoting democratic politics based on 'one man one vote'.

This, he hopes, will not only allow the Shi'a to gain international recognition and legitimacy in the eyes of the international community (most notably the US) and bring the Shi'a to power in Iraq simply

as a result of their majority status, but also help Shi'a communities throughout the region in their quest for more political legitimacy, rights and leverage.

Since the US invasion of Iraq, al-Sistani has acted as a moderating voice and encouraged his followers through various fatwas (religious rulings) to embrace democratic values, the creation of a strong and united constitutional government, not to fight the US troops within the country, and not to respond to the emerging sectarian violence against the Shi'a – in the hope of shaping Iraq's future through the ballot box.

Furthermore, al-Sistani is from the old school. As a student and follower of the famous Iranian Grand Ayatollah 'Abd al-Qasim al-Khoi, who, before his death in 1992, appointed him his successor as leader of the Hawza, al-Sistani is an adherent of the quietist tradition in Shi'a jurisprudence and an ardent opponent of Ayatollah Khomeini and his model of "guardianship of the Islamic jurist" (wilayat-al-faqih). The quietist school has held that in the absence of the 12th Imam, Imam Mahdi, who will return in the end days to deliver the 'believers' from all injustice, there can be no perfect form of governance and no truly Islamic one either, thus co-existence with any form of government or political orders is acceptable, as long as it is broadly just.

Al-Sistani's positions on politics and the future of Iraq have to be understood in this context. For him, a faqih is predominantly a teacher and religious guide that should safeguard the religious message and societal cohesion and stay away from direct involvement in political affairs. This is not to say, however, that al-Sistani has not tried to influence political developments in Iraq behind the scenes, but rather, that he does not see the rulership of the faqih as an Islamic obligation.

Only recently, al-Sistani has even issued a statement announcing his complete withdrawal from the political scene, stating

that from now on he would only address questions of a religious nature. This move seems to be a direct result of the developments within the Shi'a fold itself, and reflects his frustration over the fact that his advice has increasingly been neglected.

Al-Da'wa's vanishing importance

The Islamic al-Da'wa party is the oldest Shi'a Islamist party in Iraq. It was founded in the late 1950's by Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr with the aim of countering secularism's growing influence in Iraq in the form of communism, socialism and nationalism. Al-Da'wa was particularly active throughout the 1970s and 1980s, trying to agitate and overthrow the Ba'ath regime.

Although supporting Ayatollah Khomeini, who temporarily resided in Najaf after being expelled by the former Shah from his native Iran, and his ambition to topple the Shah and establish an Islamic state in Iran, Baqir al-Sadr also had reservations about Ayatollah Khomeini's model of wilayat-al-faqih, espousing the alternative model of wilayat-al-ummah (guardianship of the community), a concept that comes close to advocating an Islamic form of democracy. The four principles of governance al-Sadr laid out in his work "Islamic Political System" also became the de facto political manifesto of al-Da'wa as a political party.

Al-Da'wa, as much as most Shiites at the time, at first, wholeheartedly supported the Iranian revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini's ambitions, regarding the revolution as a genuine manifestation of Shi'a interests, identity and a victory of 'true' Islam over atheist and secular forces. As a result, Shiites throughout the region turned to Tehran for help and support against the oppressive regimes under which they lived, hoping that the influence and power of Khomeini could help them to improve their political situation.

However, these first reactions were based more on a general sentiment of hope and religious piety, and on the growing influence of Political Islam in general, than on a genuine theological acknowledgement and embracing of the concept of *wilayat-al-faqih*.

The theological and political differences within the Shi'a community only became apparent in the years following Saddam Hussein's proscription of al-Da'wa, when al-Da'wa members fled to Iran to avoid persecution. After the murder of al-Sadr and his sister by Saddam Hussein, many within the party wanted to align themselves closer to the Iranian regime and pledged allegiance to Ayatollah Khomeini's successor Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as well as to the concept of *wilayat-al-faqih*, breaking with al-Da'wa's official position.

Internal disagreements on this matter were not only a reason for the creation, in Iran, of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution (SCIRI – see next section) by Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, formerly part of al-Da'wa, and once a staunch supporter of *wilayat-al-faqih*, but also led many influential al-Da'wa members to leave Iran for London in order to safeguard their independence from the Iranian influence. Ibrahim al-Ja'afari was one of those who left for London, and it was this London branch of al-Da'wa that became representative of al-Da'wa as a whole after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. However, the London branch continued to uphold Baqir al-Sadr's model of governance that, although granting the ulama an important advisory function, has been based on the idea that technocrats, elected by the people, should lead the government and refused to embrace the Iranian model. This led many former al-Da'wa members to join SCIRI instead.

Thus, it is wrong to assume that al-Jaafari and Nouri al-Maliki have particularly close ties to the Iranian regime, as has so often been claimed. Although acknowledging that Iran is a regional power that can not be ignored

in the quest for stabilising Iraq, and whose influence and interests have to be considered, al-Da'wa is far more independent and less beholden to Iran than SCIRI is, for example.

Although al-Da'wa used to be the most widely respected Shi'a Islamist party amongst Shiites in Iraq, its influence has significantly weakened as a result of its close association with the Iraqi government and its failure to deliver security and basic services under the premiership of al-Ja'afari. With the absence of its own militia, al-Da'wa has placed all its hope and energy in the political process, whose failure has also led to al-Da'wa's vanishing influence, at least compared to its past prominence.

SCIRI and Abdul Aziz al-Hakim

While SCIRI was, as mentioned above, established by influential al-Da'wa exiles, it was created in Iran in 1982, in the heat of the Iran-Iraq war, and is thus very much an Iranian creation. SCIRI's military wing, the Badr Organisation (formerly Badr Brigades), has been trained and equipped with weapons by the notorious Iranian Pasdaran and is almost certainly the most professional and disciplined Shiite militia in Iraq today.

Similar to Hezbollah in Lebanon, SCIRI was intended to export the Islamic revolution of Iran abroad. During the Iran-Iraq war, the Iranian government hoped that SCIRI would once come to form the future Iraqi government in case Iran would win the war and oust Saddam Hussayn. This also explains the extensive support that SCIRI has received from the Iranian leadership up until this day.

SCIRI's founder and leader until his death in 2003, Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, had been heavily criticised by other Iraqi exiles, particularly those al-Da'wa members that left Iran for London, for being a mere vassal of Iranian interests. However, this criticism did not extend to Iraq, where ordinary

Iraqis did not know of these accusations.

Despite this criticism by some Iraqi exiles, when al-Hakim returned to Iraq after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, he was received with open arms and massive celebrations. As relatives of the much revered Muhsin al-Hakim, the sole source of emulation (marja al-taqlid) for all Shiites from 1961 until his death in 1970, and one of the few Iraqi Shi'ite ulama of hundred percent Arab origin, the Hakim family has enjoyed a high standing amongst Iraqi Shiites.

In the few months Muhammad Baqir lived in Iraq before he was killed by a car bomb outside the Imam Ali mosque in Najaf, he gave various sermons and speeches in which he repeatedly called for a united and democratic Iraq to emerge, at least publicly turning away from his previous support for Iran. Although virtually no Shiite would explicitly renounce the model of wilayat al-faqih in public, the public embrace of democratic values signals either a re-orientation towards the quietist tradition, or the embrace of al-Sadr's model of wilayat al-umma. This u-turn in his position might also be one of the reasons for his assassination.

Al-Hakim and thus SCIRI, al-Da'wa and al-Sistani came to represent and speak with one united and relatively moderate voice. The death of al-Hakim changed all this and gave way to an increasing power struggle within the Shi'a fold itself, as a result of which al-Sadr and his Mahdi Army could emerge as political heavyweights.

Al-Hakim's brother, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, the former head of the Badr Brigades and today's leader of SCIRI, has shown much less backbone than his brother and has led SCIRI in the opposite direction, re-establishing closer ties to his Iranian sponsors and often opposing al-Da'wa's and al-Sistani's political lines.

Although becoming closely associated with a pro-US stance and one of the US's closest allies in Iraq in the immediate aftermath of the war, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim has never

made a secret of his closeness to the Iranian leadership and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, making it very clear where his true loyalties lie. Realities, particularly in Basra today, where SCIRI has wielded significant influence and where Iranian agents are particularly active, more and more resemble those of an Islamic state modelled after the Republic of Iran.

The Mahdi Army

The last, but one of the most important actors in the Shi'a power struggle is Muqtada al-Sadr, the proclaimed leader of the Mahdi Army, who has gained much prominence since the beginning of the US occupation. A virtual nobody in the run up to the Iraq war, he has managed to improve his standing and power significantly, although lacking religious credentials.

His main power base has been the large Shi'a slum in Baghdad, Sadr City. More recently however, increasing numbers of Shiites in the South are looking to the Mahdi Army and al-Sadr for leadership. This is a result of his relentless anti-American and anti-occupation rhetoric, coupled with his claim to stand for a genuine Iraqi nationalism and opposed to any federal solution for Iraq. Al-Sadr has also played the Arabist, anti-Iranian card, trying to appeal to those Sunnis and pan-Arabist Shiites (especially former communists) that are critical of both, the Iranian roots of most of the Shiite clergy, such as al-Sistani, and the perceived threat stemming from Iran and its interference in the internal affairs of Iraq.

The constantly worsening sectarian violence has led many Shiites, who had previously supported rather moderate Shi'a parties such as al-Da'wa and the UIA dominated government, to withdraw their support and trust in the political process, and look for a strongman like al-Sadr, who offers them protection from Sunni violence and promises

retribution for any assault on them and their families. Followers of al-Sadr are widely held responsible for much of the random sectarian violence emanating from Shiite militias and for the ensuing violence in Iraq in general.

Unlike SCIRI, however, which is known to draw its support mainly from more wealthy tribal leaders, merchants and clerical cadres, al-Sadr is regarded a man of the poor and disenfranchised. He has taken on the vast social network of his father, Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, which significantly helped him consolidate his influence. The problem with al-Sadr, although it seems that he is gaining more influence by the day, is that he rather represents a figurehead of a trend, social class and widespread sentiment, than actually being in charge of his so called followers.

While a great deal of violence is being committed in al-Sadr's name, he claims that he has no influence over, or knowledge of, it. He also once stated in an interview that he was convinced that Iranian Pasdaran have infiltrated Iraq, committing atrocities in his name. Be that as it may, the overall economic situation, widespread poverty, frustration and the absence of security has led many urban poor, especially amongst the younger generations, to resort to violence and take law into their own hands.

The most important inter-Shiite rivalry is taking place, and fought out, between the Badr Organisation and the Mahdi Army, the latter trying to maintain the geographic integrity of the Iraqi state, albeit calling for the creation of an Islamic state on a national level, while SCIRI is favouring a federal solution for Iraq.

It has also been argued many times that al-Sadr is funded by Iran, but be that as it may, al-Sadr has proven continuously that he is pursuing his own agenda, particularly in the 2005 elections when he returned from Iran after a meeting with Ayatollah Khamenei and instead of supporting the SCIRI's representative for the post of Prime Minister, gave

his vote to the al-Da'wa party, with whom he had entered a strategic alliance to counter SCIRI's and Kurdish federal ambitions.

The Federalism debate and Shi'a disunity

Today, SCIRI under Abdul Aziz al-Hakim is the most ardent proponent of an ethnic-sectarian federal system inside Iraq, advocating the emergence of a Shiite mini-state in the South, comprising the nine mainly Shiite southern provinces and hoping for political control over the oil rich region with Basra at its centre. SCIRI, alongside the Kurdish parties, was the main initiator of the federalism bill that was passed with only a slight majority in October 2006 and allows for the formation of semi-autonomous regions upon approval by the electorate through a referendum.

Particularly, as a result of the Samarra shrine bombings, a federal solution to the Iraq crisis has become increasingly feasible, although there are many problems connected to it. SCIRI's ambition to create a more or less independent Shiite mini-state in the South, much like the Kurdish region in the North, however, is not the only conception of how federalism could look like in practice.

According to Reidar Visser of the Norwegian Institute of International Studies, especially the Fadila Party, backed by some tribal elders in the three provinces of Basra, Dhi Qar and Maysan, has favoured the much older idea of a federal entity comprised only of the three oil rich southern provinces, while excluding Karbala, Najaf and the other four southern governorates. Even some break away al-Da'wa representatives in the South have warmed up to this notion of a federal system for Iraq.

Clashes between the Mahdi Army and the Badr Brigades in southern cities have become more frequent and intense over recent months and reflect an overall trend towards increas-

ing power struggles within the Shi'a fold itself, a fact that has so often been neglected.

What one can witness in the Shiite south today, is representative of this overall disunity. This is not only visible in the older debates between al-Da'wa and SCIRI about the role of the ulama in politics, and more recently about the issue of federalism, but also in SCIRI's and Fadila's differences over the preferred model of federalism, SCIRI's and al-Sadr's clashes over a federal versus a united Iraq as well as over SCIRI's loyalty towards Iran and tribal leaders' struggle over influence, power and resources.

If the federalism bill that was adopted by the Iraqi parliament comes into effect in 2008, or even earlier, one might wonder how many federal entities will emerge in the divided Shiite South, how the various stakeholders in this debate, particularly the US and Iran will try to influence the outcome, and what levels the already unfolding violence between quarrelling Shiite factions will reach.

The question remains, however, where al-Da'wa and al-Maliki stand in all this and whether the recent decision by al-Sadr representatives to boycott the government in face of al-Maliki's meeting with George W. Bush in Jordan has ultimately undermined this obscure pro-nationalist alliance. The main issue is thus, whether al-Da'wa and other pro-national elements will align themselves closer to SCIRI and its federal model in order to safeguard the fragile Shiite unity on the national level, and focus on stability in the Shiite-dominated south, or whether these untenable conditions will persist even in light of the increasing US pressure on the Maliki government.

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