



Iraq Moves Backward

Reidar Visser

Campaigning for Jalal Talabani.

AYMAN OGHANNA

The easiest way to understand the dramatic changes in Iraqi politics from 2009 to 2010 is to look at shifts in the discourse of politicians belonging to the Da'wa Party of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

Back in October 2009, before the launch of State of Law, Maliki's new alliance for the parliamentary elections, Kamal al-Sa'di said: "Maliki rejected the idea of rebuilding the 'Shi'i alliance' in order to avoid a repeat of the old internal problems. We want to avoid the mistakes of the past and create a strong government that transcends sectarian quotas."¹ The Da'wa politician made it clear he loathed the chronic disagreements within the old United Iraqi Alliance, the coalition victorious in the 2005 elections, whose components had little in common except that they were nearly all Shi'i Islamists. Looking ahead to March 2010, Sa'di envisaged a new formula of government based not on power sharing but on consensus upon key issues. For these reasons, he argued, State of Law would run separately from the other Shi'i religious parties, which had formed another coalition called the Iraqi National Alliance (INA), and instead seek non-Shi'i or secular partners to form the next government.

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Flash forward to January 2010, two months ahead of the elections, when Sa'di spoke on this topic once more. His tone this time was quite different: "We in the two alliances [State of Law and the INA] agree on more than the Baathism issue. In fact, we share a common, national position on all issues."²

Within the space of three months, Sa'di had turned his position upside down. No longer did he talk about internal Shi'i discord. To the contrary, the parties he had dismissed the previous autumn he now considered potential allies with whom his colleagues had found agreement. In reality, there was still a chasm between the INA and State of Law, including on such signal issues as the degree of state centralization, the status of Kirkuk and the role of the Shi'i clergy in government. But these differences were now being pushed into the background due to a sea change in Iraqi politics that would come to the fore in the March 7 voting: a repolarization along sectarian lines.

Sectarian Voting Patterns

No matter how hard one tries, it is impossible to hide the fact that voting patterns in the March parliamentary contests were highly sectarian. This fact is particularly evident when looking at the performance of the two alliances led by Shi'i religious parties, State of Law and the INA, which had both

made at least symbolic appeals to Sunnis. Their scores in the majority-Sunni areas north of Baghdad were dismal: State of Law managed only one seat in Diyala, whereas the INA got three seats in Diyala and one in Nineveh. Even this limited support appears to have come from minority Shi'i voters, since no Sunnis were among the winning candidates.

Similar, if not equally strong, tendencies can be seen in the results for the other main coalitions. Tawafuq, the sectarian Sunni Arab list, lost badly, winding up with only six seats in total. In itself, that result might suggest that sectarianism was in decline, had it not been for tendencies toward "Sunnification" in the two lists that had made efforts at presenting a non-sectarian image: Unity of Iraq, headed by Jawad al-Bulani, and Iraqiyya, led by ex-interim premier Iyad 'Allawi. Despite the more "nationalist" rhetoric of these lists, voting patterns in both cases reveal a support base that is increasingly Sunni in composition. Unity of Iraq won four seats, all in majority-Sunni areas. Iraqiyya did garner 11 seats south of Baghdad, the majority-Shi'i area, and with so many votes that the result cannot be attributed to Sunni minorities alone. Nevertheless, the remaining governorate seats won by Iraqiyya came from Baghdad and majority-Sunni areas north of the capital, showing that its support base in these areas had swollen.

The trend toward sectarian polarization is clearer still when analysis shifts to the ranking of winning candidates within each list. Once more, the Shi'i religious lists stand out. In 2009, both the INA and State of Law rolled out their rosters of aspirants at carefully orchestrated ceremonies in which representatives of every Iraqi ethno-sectarian community, great and small, were represented. The problem, however, was to integrate this mosaic into competitive electoral lists. An exacerbating factor was the open-list system adopted for the 2010 elections, which allowed individual voters to promote their candidates of choice within the list that they preferred. As a result, neither the INA nor State of Law produced a significant number of winners among the non-Shi'a or secularists on its lists.

Witness the results in Baghdad. Neither Sharif 'Ali bin al-Hussein, a relative of the last Iraqi king, nor Nasir al-Chaderchi, scion of an old Baghdad family, was elected, even though both had been placed high on the INA electoral list. Neither man (both are Sunni Arabs) got enough personal votes. State of Law listed the Turkman Hajim al-Hasani, the Sunni figures 'Abbad Mutlaq al-Jubouri and 'Abd al-Qadir al-'Ubaydi, and the secular Mahdi al-Hafiz among its top 22 candidates. None of them won a seat, though their coalition took 26 seats altogether in the Iraqi capital.

The Turn to Sectarian Politics

What happened? Many analysts had viewed the results of local elections in January 2009 as a demonstration of political maturity in which Iraqis laid aside sectarian identities and

focused on political issues. In that round of balloting, the highly sectarian Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) was pummeled, losing its dominance in local councils across the majority-Shi'i south.

To some extent, Iraqi politics have indeed regressed from 2009 to 2010. It should, however, be stressed that the progress observed in early 2009 was fragile and reversible. Though the level of political discourse had been elevated—in particular because State of Law broke ranks with ISCI and mounted an issue-based campaign—voting patterns remained quite sectarian, with the exceptions of Baghdad and Basra. State of Law had performed terribly in areas north of Baghdad in 2009 as well.

The real progress came in the weeks following the 2009 elections, when Maliki and State of Law not only shunned their erstwhile ISCI allies, but also reached out to Iraqiyya and Hiwar—important secular lists with strong Sunni Arab backing—while assembling local council coalitions.³ Not all of the planned coalitions came to pass, but in the provinces of Babil, Salah al-Din and Diyala Maliki-secularist alliances came into being. At the same time, Maliki tried to resist attempts by the "old forces" that had won in 2005 to impose Iyad al-Samarra'i as speaker of Parliament. Hiwar had put forth a challenger. Symbolically, though, the Da'wa deputies reportedly cast blank votes rather than supporting the Hiwar candidate, indicating the fragility of the alliance.⁴

But things were already starting to move in the opposite direction, with external forces playing a central role. Iran quickly started an initiative to restore the old all-Shi'i alliance with a view to contesting the 2010 elections. Ahmad Chalabi, the former darling of the US regime change crowd, has reinvented himself as a pious Shi'i Muslim. He was the Iraqi front man in an agreement between ISCI and the forces of Muqtada al-Sadr. Attempts to get Maliki to join this new Iraqi National Alliance were accompanied by intense Iranian diplomacy and harsh criticism of Maliki's rapprochement with the secular forces, who were described as "Baathists." Meanwhile, a series of unexplained bomb attacks hit Baghdad and other towns, eating into the security credentials of State of Law.

There was nothing coy about the Iranian attempts to recreate the Shi'i alliance. Its preference for a united Shi'i front in Iraq has been communicated in private and in public ever since 2004. In late 2008, Kayhan Barzegar, a scholar at a conservative Tehran-based think tank, described the strategy in the following terms: "The installation of a Shiite-dominated government in Iraq following the 2003 Iraqi crisis has been a turning point in empowering the place of the Shiite factor in Iran's foreign policy. At an international level, bolstering the role of the Shia in the new Iraq and its effects on Iraq's international relations will provide many opportunities for Iran's foreign policy.... The creation of a democratic Shiite government in Iraq will be a serious challenge to the Sunni regimes of the region.... In Iraq, empowering and defining



The unofficial referendum conducted by Muqtada al-Sadr's supporters, Sadr City, April 2, 2010.

AHMAD AL-RUBAYE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

a new role for the Shiite factions within Iraq and as a Shiite state in the Arab world requires the support of a powerful regional state like Iran.”⁵

The other push toward greater emphasis on sectarian identities came from the United States. The newly minted Obama administration appeared to have very little in the way of an Iraq policy in the months following the local elections in January 2009. In particular, the administration lacked the conceptual tools to grasp the regeneration of Iraqi nationalism and the concomitant desire in Iran for sectarian repolarization. When a new policy gradually emerged in the subsequent months, it, too, seemed focused on weakening Maliki’s newfound nationalism, with fears of “concentration of power” a frequent theme among US think tankers at the time. The election of Iyad al-Samarra’i as an “anti-Maliki” speaker of Parliament was well received in Washington, and when Vice President Joe Biden visited Iraq in July he made a point of meeting with as many leaders as possible in addition to Maliki, stressing the goal of re-establishing “contact with each of the leaders among the Kurds and the Sunnis and the Shiites,” and thereby reiterating the community-focused, anti-nationalist paradigm of Iraqi politics that Iran favors.⁶ Whereas the Bush administration had committed itself in principle to the idea that a common Iraqi identity was possible, the Obama administration seemed agnostic, at best.

Despite these pressures, Maliki resisted any move toward reconstituting the 2005 pan-Shi’i alliance, claiming that any new alliance should be built upon ideological and political coherence, not on sectarianism. The INA then went ahead with its formal launch in late August 2009, with State of Law holding a separate event on October 1. Throughout this process, the whole spectrum of opinions about Iran within State of Law—from expressions of friendship to deep anti-Iranian sentiment—came into play. Over the summer, ‘Abd al-Karim al-‘Anizi pushed for a merger with the INA but lost the argument and decamped, taking a subset of Da’wa politicians with him into the Tehran-backed alliance. By September, the rivalry had engulfed the main faction of Da’wa itself, with key parliamentarians and Maliki advisers Hasan al-Sunayd, ‘Abd al-Halim al-Zuhayri, Tariq Najm and ‘Ali al-‘Allaq all reportedly favoring a renewal of the sectarian alliance, and Haydar al-‘Abbadi, Sadiq al-Rikabi and Sami al-‘Askari all preferring Maliki’s approach of going it alone.⁷

Sidelining Kirkuk

The problem for Maliki was that, in order to succeed on a separate ticket, he would need allies. Attracting friends was difficult, however, and, once more, external factors played their part. On the one hand, the Iranians said that Maliki

should not cooperate with “Baathists.” Equally important was the message from the Obama administration: He should not make trouble with the Kurds or seek to politicize the Kirkuk issue.⁸ Kirkuk is a major bone of contention in post-invasion Iraq. The Kurds want to annex the oil-rich town to their autonomous zone in the north; Arabs and other ethnic groups, particularly the ethnic minorities in Kirkuk itself, are adamantly opposed. Kirkuk was also the issue that had enabled a cross-sectarian tendency to emerge in Iraqi politics in 2008. Its standard bearers had been the so-called July 22 group of parties, most of which were in opposition to Maliki in Parliament, but it was clearly the momentum created by this movement that allowed Maliki to break with ISCI and run separately in the January 2009 elections. As the 2010 contests approached, however, he was told by Washington to back off the Kirkuk issue, which in turn made it far harder for him to find credible partners in the majority-Sunni areas where feeling that Kirkuk should remain controlled by Baghdad runs particularly strong. Instead of responding to the calls from the Sunni-dominated Hadba group for sending more government troops to Nineveh, Maliki ended up promoting an American idea of tripartite patrols (Kurdish *peshmerga* militiamen, US troops and Iraqi soldiers) patrols in “disputed areas” that effectively acknowledges the Kurdish definition of that controversial term.⁹ Kirkuk is the sole constitutionally recognized “disputed territory”—the dispute being between the Kurds and Baghdad—but the Kurds would like to extend the designation to encompass swathes of land to the west and south.

During the debate on the parliamentary election law in the fall of 2009, Kirkuk remained a divisive issue between Kurds and other Iraqis, giving it the potential to bring about inter-sectarian alliances south of Kurdistan. But this time, thanks in part to the efforts of the US and the UN Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), Kirkuk was kept off the agenda, and no cross-sectarian alliance emerged. Technically, the end result featured “special arrangements” for Kirkuk to guard against presumed Kurdish tampering with voter rolls, but these clauses were so diluted that they could equally be construed as a victory for the Kurds. The Obama administration, essentially, had prematurely dissolved the glue that was holding Sunni and Shi’i Arabs together by repeatedly backing the Kurdish position that no special status for Kirkuk was required in the election law. Shortly after the adoption of the law in November, it was vetoed by Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, a Sunni Arab, with particular emphasis on the arrangements for voters living in exile. The objections were perfectly cogent from the point of view of democratic theory, but the ensuing debate fast descended into an ethno-sectarian brawl. The Kurds used the opportunity to improve the number of seats for the Kurdish regions, whereas Shi’i Islamist parties seemed concerned about keeping the election schedule on track, which would give them the advantage of having elections right after the Shi’i holy month of Muharram. Hashimi’s position, in turn, was

construed as “sectarian” and “Sunni” because the Shi’i parties label exiles and refugees as “Sunni” (if not “Baathist”). In a particularly worrisome development, Maliki allies like Khalid al-Atiya made a mockery of the whole “State of Law” concept when they suggested that the Hashimi veto was unconstitutional—it was not—because it did not offer specific references to constitutional violations in the adopted law.¹⁰

By December 2009, the solo run of State of Law had become a fight of one against all, rather than a roundup of non-Shi’i partners. But the run persisted for a few more months. Leading up to the debate on the budget in January 2010, Maliki continued to face strong opposition from the INA deputies in Parliament, who tried to impose restrictions on the spending power of the government in the period before the elections. At the same time, the INA searched for weak links in State of Law’s coalition who were prepared to think along more sectarian lines. In late January, a critic of Maliki identified Jaafar al-Sadr and ‘Ali al-Adib as the leading figures in a move to sideline Maliki and bring State of Law back into the Shi’i fold. The line of attack was Maliki’s allegedly soft treatment of Baathists, some of whom were said to be State of Law candidates. ‘Abboud al-‘Issawi in Najaf was one name singled out for opprobrium.

Debaathification

It was the revival of the debaathification issue that cemented the return to sectarianism in Iraq in early 2010, and, importantly, enabled quarrels in the Iraqi parliament to affect a wider Iraqi audience in a way that would ultimately hurt Maliki’s list to the north of the Iraqi capital and the other major non-sectarian list, Iyad ‘Allawi’s Iraqiyya, south of it. In the wake of the 2003 invasion, debaathification—forcible removal of ex-Baathists from positions of responsibility, down, in some cases, to provincial schoolteachers—was so overzealous that it became a major cause of anti-US feeling and, eventually, sectarian fighting. The 2010 version threatens to be equally fateful. Painstakingly carried out by two INA candidates, Ahmad Chalabi and ‘Ali al-Lami—and applauded in all the newspapers affiliated with key INA leaders—the fresh debaathification campaign served first and foremost to set a particular atmosphere for the elections, effectively preempting discussion of the bread-and-butter issues that had dominated the local elections only one year earlier. Concepts like “due process” and “rule of law” were conveniently laid aside in an all-out attack on political enemies, mainly in the secular parties. Importantly, and contrary to a common misunderstanding, the Baath Party was never exclusively Sunni; it is the selective and disproportionate targeting of Sunni members during the debaathification campaigns that has added a sectarian dimension to the issue.

Another target was State of Law, as seen in the move to bar ‘Abboud al-‘Issawi from running in the elections only days before the voting (as Maliki’s Da’wa rival Adib had reportedly wanted months earlier). Crucially, however, State of Law had

now experienced so many setbacks that it was unable to offer effective resistance. Instead, it jumped on the bandwagon, creating a grotesque contradiction with its own “rule of law” ideals, and destroying the prospect of winning new voters outside its established bastions. Particularly unseemly were the attempts at ad hoc debaathification in the provinces, sometimes entirely without reference to the existing debaathification legislation. In Baghdad, the State of Law governor Salah ‘Abd al-Razzaq played a key role in an especially savage drive to eliminate suspected “Baathists” from positions in the local administration, supposedly because their employment was “unconstitutional.”¹¹ In Karbala’, the Da‘wa Party organized a demonstration claiming that the decisions by Chalabi’s commission were “constitutional” and could not be challenged.¹² In February, the provincial council in Basra voiced an interest in debaathifying the South Oil Company, the workhorse of Iraq’s oil economy.¹³ After this turn of events, it was increasingly difficult for people south of Baghdad to support ‘Allawi, whose list was the main target of the debaathifiers, since doing so in public could easily cost someone his job.

In fact, the debaathification had been anything but legal and constitutional. Its leaders, Chalabi and Lami, were very secretive about the charges brought against individuals, but it has emerged that attempts were made to exclude individuals because they were low-ranking members of the Baath or had participated in the suppression of the 1991 rebellion.¹⁴ These categories of person are exempted from debaathification according to a January 2008 law and the 2005 constitution. The constitution establishes that no one who helped suppress the 1991 revolt can serve on the presidential council, but it does not say they cannot serve in Parliament. Additionally, attempts were made to exclude individuals without reference to the debaathification law at all, but instead on the basis of Article 7 of the constitution, which outlaws racism, sectarianism and glorification of the Baath. The only problem is that Article 7 calls for a special law to be adopted by Parliament, and this law has not yet been passed.

The Obama administration and UNAMI effectively gave in to the debaathification initiatives, even as they claimed to be doing the opposite. Focused as ever on timetables, Washington’s first proposal in January was to postpone the whole matter until after the elections. Biden gate-crashed the Iraqi capital with this message on January 23, and faced with an overt attempt at dictating the outcome, Maliki had little choice but to ask him to refrain from intervening. After that experience, the Obama administration quickly changed its approach to a focus on having elections on time, regardless of transgressions of basic democratic principles. In a press conference in Washington on February 18, Christopher Hill, the US ambassador to Iraq, essentially adopted the judicial principles of Ahmad Chalabi by referring to Article 7 of the Iraqi constitution as a legitimate basis for exclusion, focusing instead on “campaign placards all over every surface in the country” as a sign that things were going well. To add insult to injury, Hill

and Gen. Ray Odierno, the US ground commander in Iraq, took turns dismissing Lami and Chalabi as “pro-Iranian” operators (even as they turned a blind eye to most of their decisions), and continued to meet amicably with other members of the INA, such as ‘Adil ‘Abd al-Mahdi, whose newspaper *al-Adala* supported debaathification.¹⁵

Old Wine in New Bottles

When the election results were published in late March, State of Law was in disarray. Everyone had expected Maliki to emerge with the largest number of seats, but he was beaten by the Iraqiyya list of Iyad ‘Allawi, who got 93 seats to Maliki’s 91. At first, Maliki resorted to challenging the result through legal means, including a successful demand for a Baghdad recount. His position vis-à-vis Iraqiyya was also somewhat strengthened by a Supreme Court opinion that put pre-election and post-election coalition forming on the same footing with respect to identifying the leader of the “biggest bloc in Parliament” and hence the presumptive new premier.¹⁶ In brief, the court ruling enabled a post-election combination of the INA and State of Law to supplant Iraqiyya as the biggest bloc, although Maliki at first seemed wary of that option, fearing Sadrist ascendancy within the INA and still apparently hoping that he could attract like-minded politicians from among the “Kurds, parts of the Iraqi National Alliance, parts of Iraqiyya, Tawafuq and other small parties.”¹⁷

On April 16, Maliki capitulated to the proponents of a power-sharing government. Even though a recount in Baghdad would be announced a few days later, he had apparently given up hope of emerging victorious and felt cornered both domestically and internationally. (Eventually, indeed, the recount changed nothing.) Instead, for the first time, he gave up talking about a “majority” government, and switched to talking about the “national unity” government that the INA had favored, with Iraqiyya serving as a representative of the “Sunni” community (but with Shi‘a and Kurds in the lead).¹⁸ He seemed to regret the development, indicating that the new government would probably be weaker than its predecessor, but repeated the formula to US officials later on.¹⁹ On May 4, State of Law and the INA announced their merger and their intention to claim status as the largest bloc in Parliament with the right to designate the new premier.

The irony is that the political maturation from 2005 to 2008 has been reversed, but camouflaged in new rhetoric. The hated term *mubasasa* (referring to the ethno-sectarian quotas that prevail, for instance, in Lebanon) was replaced by the fresh concept of partnership (*shiraka*), which means exactly the same thing in practice—and was enthusiastically welcomed by Iran, the US and even Saudi Arabia. In a symptomatic development, the Kurds have demanded 25 percent of ministerial portfolios, and the INA has responded that they should only have ministries proportional to their share of deputies in the legislature.²⁰ The idea that ministers should be appointed on

the basis of agreement with the government's political program or professional qualifications is again expressed only *sotto voce*. US officials singled out an all-inclusive solution as the only way forward, thereby sacrificing the possibility of an alliance rooted in issue-based politics (such as an alliance between State of Law and Iraqiyya), and consigning Iraq to four more years with an oversized and likely weak and corrupt government. "Politics has finally broken out in Iraq," said Biden after an April trip to the country. "Everyone is in on the deal, and it's real."²¹ As on earlier occasions—and though he congratulated himself on "a real stick in the eye to the Iranians"—Biden had seconded a power-sharing solution based on an ethno-sectarian grand coalition of the kind preferred by Iran and INA before Maliki had done so. Put simply, the inability of US officials to conceptualize Iraq as anything other than a random collection of Sunnis, Shi'a and Kurds has prevented them from discovering cross-cutting nationalist alliances of the kind Iran fears the most. The hopeful tendencies in Iraqi politics from 2009 are dead—in no small part because external players kept agreeing with Iraqi elites that ethno-sectarian identities should remain the alpha and omega.

So Iran has got what it wanted in Iraq: a return to the sectarian atmosphere of 2005. Whether the United States will also get what it apparently wants—inclusion of the Kurds in government—is less clear. So far, the Obama administration's attempts at fostering dialogue between Baghdad and Erbil have yielded few results in the shape of lowered Kurdish demands, and with the Shi'a and the Kurds unable to agree on key issues like Kirkuk and oil at the height of their dominance in 2007, it is unclear why they can do it this time. Perhaps only if the Shi'i-Kurdish condominium breaks down once more will it be possible to rediscover the hints of cross-sectarian, issue-based alliances that existed in Iraq in 2009. ■

Endnotes

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- 3 *Washington Post*, March 20, 2009.
- 4 These developments are elaborated upon in the April 19, 2009 post at www.historiae.org/samarraie.asp.
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- 18 Reuters, April 16, 2010.
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