IRAQ'S PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS: THE STAKES

Middle East Report N°82 – 27 January 2009

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 31 January, Iraqis will head to the polls in fourteen of eighteen governorates to elect new provincial councils. The stakes are considerable. Whereas the January 2005 elections helped put Iraq on the path to all-out civil war, these polls could represent another, far more peaceful turning point. They will serve several important objectives: refreshing local governance; testing the strength of various parties; and serving as a bellwether for nationwide political trends. In several governorates, new parties or parties that failed to run four years ago may oust, or at least reduce the dominance of, a handful of dominant parties whose rule has been marred by pervasive mismanagement and corruption. This in itself would be a positive change with far-reaching consequences as the nation braces for parliamentary elections later in 2009.

In January 2005, key constituencies such as Sunni Arabs and the Shiite urban-slum underclass largely stayed away and thus were excluded from power in the current councils. The result was imbalanced provincial bodies often unreflective of popular needs, as well as an accumulation of local grievances. At the time, weak home-grown parties took a back seat to exile-bred Shiite Islamist parties in Baghdad and governorates south of the capital which capitalised on endorsements from senior clerics.

Today, even before the first ballot has been cast, the elections mark a remarkable transition. In the past four years, politics have evolved from a violent conflict focused largely on the capital to an essentially democratic contest over positions and institutions, including at the local level. Former confessional blocs are fraying, as sectarianism is increasingly challenged by more nationalist sentiment and promises of better governance by political actors seeking to capture the public mood. Competition between communities is joined by competition within them. Violence persists in Baghdad and elsewhere, often fierce and ruthless; the past few weeks alone have witnessed incidents – targeted killings, bombings and intimidation – that in one way or another are designed to influence the vote. But, for now at least, virtually all major players, including those that boycotted the polls in 2005, have accepted the principle of elections and fully thrown themselves into electoral battle.

The elections inevitably will have severe shortcomings. Most significantly perhaps, ruling parties enjoy built-in advantages that will make it hard to translate severe popular disappointment into clear repudiation at the polls. The electoral law may not be as favourable as they would have liked but is probably good enough to give currently dominant parties an edge. They will use their superior access to wealth and patronage to influence the vote. Their control of crucial institutions, from the security apparatus to state-run mosques, is no trivial affair. Fraud is feared, despite domestic monitoring and in the absence of international observers. And the opposition is hopelessly divided.

Yet even an imperfect outcome is bound to begin to redress some of the most severe problems associated with the 2005 elections – from corruption and mismanagement to the enormous political imbalances generated by the boycott of Sunni Arabs and many followers of Muqtada al-Sadr. Indeed, even if ruling parties maintain power, the electoral process would retain virtues and value. It already has introduced a degree of accountability: practices of the past four years have been stigmatised, most council members are not even trying to get re-elected and parties have been forced to change their discourse, put on new faces and recruit independents. A new political elite will make its entrance, if only by this influx of (both nominal and real) independents with a technocratic profile. In constituencies that suffered most from the 2005 boycott, disenfranchised groups will make a comeback, assuring fairer representation of all segments of the population. Sunni Arabs in particular can be expected to strengthen their representation within the political system.

Elsewhere, elections likely will lead to more diverse and equitable representation by at least somewhat diluting the ruling parties' current power and allowing the emergence of new players. In turn, more balanced councils might prevent certain parties from monopolising local institutions. Finally, provincial councils with newly enhanced powers should become a more important

political arena and reinforce the shift away from intercommunal competition, including via new, crosscutting, program-based political alliances.

Electoral subplots abound. An eclectic assortment of opposition parties hope to capitalise on the councils' failings and on popular distaste for the extreme decentralisation advocated by the principal ruling parties, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and the Kurdistan Alliance. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Islamic Call (Daawa) Party is hoping to take advantage of the government's surprising military and political achievements in 2008, which have persuaded many Iraqis to see Maliki more as a national leader than, as in 2006 when he came to office, a narrow sectarian chief. His principal goal in both the provincial elections and parliamentary elections later in the year is to strengthen his position, while keeping ISCI and the Sadrists in relative balance, so as to prolong his tenure at the head of government.

While most governorates may witness only modest rollback of the ruling parties' power, the changes in several could be significant. These are battleground states not because the results are certain to be close but because the fight is likely to be most ferocious. They are Baghdad, the capital, and oil-rich Basra, where stakes are highest, as well as Ninewa (Mosul), Diyala (Baaquba) and Anbar (Ramadi), where the 2005 results were most distorted.

In the face of undeniable enthusiasm surrounding the elections (expressed in the large number of candidates and active campaigning), it would be both unfair to underestimate and wrong to overestimate their importance. Just over a year after the end of a dangerous sectarian war, progress in laying the foundations for sustainable peace and a functioning state has been limited. Both the Iraqi government and the Bush administration defined stabilisation and state building primarily narrowly, as an exercise in recreating the security apparatus. Even in that field, results have been mixed; in other domains, such as the provision of services and the judiciary, they are far worse still. More fundamentally, Iraq will remain a deeply fragile state as long as the main players fail to overcome their differences and reach agreement on the distribution of power, territory and resources, and as long as the US fails to reach an understanding with neighbours both worried about Iraq's instability and willing to fuel it if necessary to protect their interests.

Yet, the current experiment in democracy holds promise. A new generation of politicians, born through grassroots support in the electoral process and bred in councils given new prerogatives, may start to graduate to national office – if not as soon as the parliamentary elections that are tentatively scheduled for late 2009, then surely in four years' time and onward. This brand of homegrown lawmakers will come to the job with less baggage and better credentials than the current leadership and might both be better equipped and more willing to make compromises. This background report is accordingly designed as a guide to elections that could help put Iraq on more stable, albeit still fragile footing.

Baghdad/Istanbul/Brussels, 27 January 2009

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I. INTRODUCTION

The provincial councils that emerged from Iraq's first post-2003 elections, in January 2005, gave hope that a new democratic order, firmly rooted in local governance, might emerge. The powers of this first generation of elected councils were limited but nonetheless constituted a dramatic departure from the Saddam Hussein regime's extreme centralisation. Funded from the national budget, the councils were empowered to, inter alia, set the governorate's priorities, amend projects described in annual ministry budget plans, independently generate and collect local revenues and organise local government. They had no meaningful input into the governorate's budget, however, a prime reason why they often felt toothless in the past four years: it is difficult to set priorities without controlling the budget and when capacity for local revenue collection is close to non-existent.[1]

Whatever hopes the 2005 elections generated, therefore, were dashed. The councils, some of which were not representative as a result of election day boycotts, in many cases failed to govern or became mired in corruption. Public perceptions of them plummeted, and the enthusiasm that accompanied the voting in 2005 appears largely to have dissipated. In the run-up to the 2009 elections, therefore, a principal question is whether a majority of the electorate will turn out to vote and, if it does, whether it will oust the ruling parties or give them a new lease on life.

This report first reviews the disappointments and consequences of the 2005 elections, then examines the prospects for the 31 January 2009 polls, with concentration in both cases on the five key governorates where imbalance was greatest four years ago and on which most attention is focused today.

[1] The powers of the governorate councils were regulated by the Coalition Provisional Authority's Order 71 of 6 April 2004. Art. 2(2) states: "The Governorate Councils may set priorities for the provinces; amend, by two-thirds vote, a specific local project described in an annual ministry budget plan, provided that no such amendment shall increase the spending limits set forth in the ministry plans, or interfere with the efficient and uniform execution of national objectives as implemented by specific programs; monitor and recommend improvements in the delivery of public services; represent the concerns of constituents; independently generate and collect revenues by imposing taxes and fees; organize the operations of the provincial administration; initiate and implement provincial projects alone or in partnership with international and nongovernmental organizations; and conduct other activities, consistent with applicable laws".

II. THE 2005 ELECTION, ITS DISCONTENTS AND ITS LEGACY

A. IMBALANCED COUNCILS

On 30 January 2005, voters went to the polls to choose a national council of representatives, provincial councils in all eighteen governorates and, in the Kurdistan region, a regional parliament. Unprecedented and momentous, these elections were also deeply flawed. In Shiite areas, the popular movement headed by the cleric Muqtada al-Sadr declared its opposition to elections as long as the country remained under foreign occupation; the Sadrists refrained from participating as a party, although Sadr allowed his followers to both stand as independent candidates and vote.[2] In Sunni Arab areas, a burgeoning insurgency blocked popular participation through threats and violence; local political leaders and groups, with one notable exception (the Iraqi Islamic Party), called for an election boycott, which was widely observed.

The result was paradoxical: Despite a respectable nationwide turnout of 55.7 per cent of eligible voters,[3] the elections contributed to further instability and violence. At the national level, the absence of representatives of their own community fed Sunni Arabs' grievances and fears of exclusion (which, no doubt, were partly self-inflicted).[4] These were compounded when the new council of representatives set about drafting a permanent constitution without them.[5] The Bush administration sought to tempt them back into the political process by promising the constitution's early review. While this removed their boycott of both the constitutional referendum – they voted massively against, falling a mere 85,000 votes short of defeating it[6] – and new parliamentary elections in late 2005, the initiative did too little to restore the political balance and came too late. This state of affairs helped catalyse the country's descent into sectarian war.[7]

Results at the governorate level were equally destabilising. There, the absence of one key constituency, Sunni Arabs, and the under-representation of another, the Sadrists, produced several councils that poorly represented the local political, ethnic and confessional makeup. This, too, increased the sense of disenfranchisement in Sunni Arab areas and Shiite slums, helping to fuel the insurgency.[8] The following four years brought dysfunctional politics and poor governance in most governorates and outright conflict in some.

1. Ninewa (capital: Mosul)

Most adversely affected were governorates with mixed ethnic or confessional groups in which the Sunni Arab boycott gave disproportionate power to representatives of other communities.[9] This aggravated polarising,

[2] For reporting on the Sadr movement and its politics, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°72, *Iraq's Civil War, the Sadrists and the Surge*, 7 February 2008; Crisis Group Middle East Report N°55, *Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?*, 11 July 2006; and Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada: Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia Revival, and the Struggle for Iraq* (New York, 2008). Despite the Sadrists' absence in the 2005 elections as a party, Sadr-affiliated politicians gained 32 seats in the council of representatives in Baghdad, thereby constituting the largest bloc within the Shiite United Iraqi Alliance (UIA). This earned them seven cabinet positions, which they held until they withdrew from government in April 2007. This was done purportedly to protest the Maliki government's rejection of a specific timetable for a U.S. troop withdrawal but in reality to weaken Maliki and at the same time cleanse the movement of some of its more unsavoury elements. The Sadrist lawmakers pulled out of the UIA in September 2007 but remained in the council of representatives.

[3] Datasheet provided by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) showing figures for individual governorates, as well as out-of-country voters. The turnout figure was calculated by averaging the governorates after excluding out-of-country voters, who could not cast ballots for candidates in the provincial elections. To make a more useful comparison with the January 2009 elections, a new figure needs to be calculated by excluding the three Kurdish governorates, as well as Kirkuk, as no elections will be held there. On the basis of the remaining governorates, the January 2005 provincial elections turnout figure would have been 49.8 per cent, reflecting high participation in the Kurdistan region.

[4] In the weeks before the January 2005 elections, Iraqi politicians and their Western supporters contemplated a delay in order to have time to address Sunni Arab grievances. But in what may have been one of the most fateful decisions of post-2003 governance, the interim government of Iyad Allawi, with international backing, went full-steam ahead.

[5] For reporting on the constitutional process, see Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°19, *Unmaking Iraq: A Constitutional Process Gone Awry*, 26 September 2005; and Crisis Group Middle East Report N°42, *Iraq: Don't Rush the Constitution*, 8 June 2005.

[6] The constitution could have been defeated if two thirds of voters in at least three governorates had voted against it. The referendum was rejected by the required two thirds in Anbar and Salah al-Din but squeaked through in Ninewa.

[7] For an analysis of factors contributing to Iraq's 2005-2007 civil war, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°52, *The Next Iraqi War? Sectarianism and Civil Conflict*, 27 February 2006.

[8] For developments in the Sunni Arab community since 2005, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°74, *Iraq After the Surge I: The New Sunni Landscape*, 30 April 2008.

[9] Contrast this with Anbar, where a party professing to represent Sunni Arabs, the Iraqi Islamic Party, won most seats in the context of a boycott by a majority of Sunni Arabs (both

destructive ethno-sectarian trends evident since 2003. Ninewa governorate, with its capital Mosul, may have seen the worst of it. Located on the Syrian border in north-western Iraq, it is home to two major rivers – the Tigris and Greater Zab. Ninewa is highly fertile, though large parts toward the Syrian border are desert. The governorate is thought to have major oil reserves; moreover, the strategic oil pipeline from Kirkuk to the Turkish Mediterranean coast crosses it from south to north.

Ninewa is predominantly Arab, with a significant Kurdish minority in East Mosul, the western district of Sinjar and villages in its northern and eastern reaches toward the Kurdistan region; several other minorities – Turkomans, Yazidis, Chaldo-Assyrians and Shabak – are scattered throughout. The governorate counts a high proportion of members of the former regime's security forces, once a source of intense local pride but today a severe stigma in the eyes of Iraq's new rulers.

In the 2005 elections, only 14 per cent of eligible voters went to the polls. Kurdish parties, united in the Kurdistani Nationalist Democratic List (al-Qa'ima al-Wataniya al-Dimuqratiya al-Kurdistaniya), which is dominated by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), ran virtually unopposed, winning 31 of 41 council seats. Five of the remaining seats went to the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI, renamed the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq, ISCI, in 2007), a Shiite Islamist group whose only base of support in the governorate lies in Tel Afar, a Turkoman town with a mixed Sunni/Shiite population. The Kurds' victory gave them control not only of the provincial council and key administrative positions but also of the security apparatus, which they used to press an ethnic agenda that has been deeply resented by the Arab population. Thus Ninewa's fragile mosaic, though maintained in part by locally effective U.S. leadership throughout 2003 and 2004,[10] came undone. A Mosul resident commented:

> The provincial council does not represent the governorate in any way. It was elected in mystifying times and without local participation. It serves the Kurds' policies and ambitions. The Arab governor is more a Kurd than the Kurdish council members.[11] All contracts for projects are given to Kurds or their partners and are designed to strengthen Kurdish dominance over the left [eastern] side of the city. The council has failed to deliver services to the people, and people's worsening circumstances have contributed to frustration and deteriorating security.[12]

The governorate has been racked by violence.[13] Sunni Arab alienation provided a breeding ground for the insurgency; al-Qaeda fighters (initially entering via Syria but increasingly generated locally) exploited ethnic and sectarian divisions in mixed-population areas, carrying out acts of violence that have deepened rifts between communities that are thoroughly intermarried and have coexisted peacefully for decades.[14] Kurdish parties, which consider some of Ninewa's disputed territory historically Kurdish,[15] assumed in effect military and administrative control over those areas in defiance of the wishes of other local residents. They resisted U.S. efforts to establish tribally-based "awakening" councils (*Majalis al-Sahwa*), after a model first developed in Anbar in 2006 (see below), viewing them as a threat to their control over disputed districts. Such councils were effectively established only in Sunni Arab districts such as Qayyara, Rabia and Baaj. Various counter-insurgency offensives by government forces, invariably dominated by Shiite or

local leaders and the voting public). There was no ethnic or confessional dynamic at play. While the council was clearly unbalanced, the issues in dispute were strictly political and never assumed ethno-sectarian overtones (see below).

[10] Crisis Group wrote in 2004 concerning local governance: "One early success story was Mosul (Nineveh governorate), where an orderly internal selection process produced a fairly representative local government. U.S. Major General David Petraeus, the commander of the 101st Airborne Division, told ICG that when he arrived in Mosul in April 2003, he had no instructions. In early May, he called on local leaders to form a council in order to 'fill the political vacuum at the local level and put an Iraqi face on the local administration as soon as possible'….Under Petraeus's guidance, city council representatives were chosen from caucuses of 'natural leaders': tribal chiefs, military officers, political party representatives and technocrats, with some seats reserved for ethnic representation on a quota basis. The relative quiet that reigned in Mosul for much of 2003 can be attributed in large part to the council's fair composition and the U.S. commander's proactive approach toward reconstruction in which the council played a significant role". Crisis Group Middle East Report N°33, *Iraq: Can Local Governance Save Central Government?*, 27 October 2004, p. 7.

[11] Governor Duraid Kashmoula, a nominally independent Arab, is close to the Kurds. The Kurdish deputy governor, Khasro Goran, is generally seen as the governorate's strongman.

[12] Crisis Group interview, academic, Mosul, 28 April 2008.

[13] Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani has claimed that "in the last few years almost 2,000 Kurds have been killed in Mosul". Quoted in *Los Angeles Times*, 11 January 2009.

[14] For an analysis of the ethnic and sectarian factors that tore apart the town of Tel Afar, see Crisis Group Report, *The Next Iraqi War?*, op. cit., pp. 20-21.

[15] For a discussion of the disputed territories issue, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°80, *Oil for Soil: Toward a Grand Bargain on Iraq and the Kurds*, 28 October 2008.

Kurdish units, compounded rather than lessened the problem.

As Arab-Kurdish tensions increased in 2008 following government pressure on the Kurds in Diyala and Kirkuk governorates, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki began rotating Kurdish units out of Ninewa, replacing them with Arabs and sending non-Kurdish police from Baghdad to Mosul.[16] While violence has gradually diminished, political tensions have not. Today, Kurds are in competition not only with local Arabs but also with government forces.

Despite progress, Ninewa ranks as one of the most dangerous governorates. Future trends largely will depend on the election outcome: the empowerment of Sunni Arabs (and allied Turkomans) could undercut the Sunni insurgency as well as any continued presence of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). That said, such a situation would also risk heightening tensions between Arabs and Kurds, particularly if the new local government seeks to roll back the political and territorial inroads made by the Kurds since 2003.

2. Diyala (capital: Baaquba)

A second governorate that has experienced severe turmoil, at least in part due to the 2005 elections, is Diyala, located north east of Baghdad toward the Iranian border. The governorate is named after the river that flows through it, nourishing its rich agricultural lands. Diyala provides the main trade and pilgrimage route between Iran and Iraq via the Kermanshah-Baghdad highway and the Khanaqin border crossing. Like Ninewa, it is thoroughly mixed, though with a higher proportion of Shiites. It also has Kurdish and Turkoman minorities in the oil-bearing northern parts abutting Kirkuk and Suleimaniya governorates. Reflecting a nationwide phenomenon, Diyala's tribes have both Sunni and Shiite branches that commingle and, while sedentary, compete for fresh pastures for their flocks.[17]

In the 2005 elections, only a third of eligible voters went to the polls, and seats were divided between three large coalitions of, respectively, Shiite Islamists (twenty seats), Sunni Arab Islamists (fourteen) and Kurds (seven).[18] The Sunni Arabs belonged to the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), a derivative of the Muslim Brotherhood – which had remained in exile or underground and inactive during Saddam's regime – and the only Sunni party to participate.[19] As in Ninewa and Anbar, however, the IIP in Diyala hardly represents Sunni Arabs, the majority of whom stayed at home, resentful of their loss of power since 2003 and seething over the ascendancy of newcomers. These included the Kurds, who saw their chance to push into areas they called disputed and from which they claimed to have been driven during the previous regime's Arabisation campaigns. But Shiite Islamist parties were the big winners, especially the Islamic Call (Daawa) Party and ISCI. Daawa took the governor's position, the IIP the deputy governor's, and a Kurd became council chairman, while ISCI took charge of the security apparatus.

In the following years, Diyala descended into spiralling violence which, depending on the location, was either sectarian or ethnic in nature and was aggravated by repeated AQI bombings aiming to stoke enmity in mixed areas. The provincial council barely functioned, its members living inside the governorate compound in Baaquba, unable to move; eight members (out of 41) have been assassinated.[20] Reconstruction, begun in 2003, ground to a halt in a vicious cycle of sabotage, unemployment and insurgency. An estimated 27,000 families fled the governorate southward, some 8,000 from Baaquba itself.[21]

[16] *The New York Times*, 28 October 2008. An Iraqi army officer said, "we came to Mosul to take the place of a brigade that had been deployed in [the Mosul neighbourhoods of] Hay al-Arabi and al-Hadbaa. Some 85 per cent of its troops were Kurds, so I think the rotation had something to do with the Kurdish issue here. This was also clear from Mr Nouri al-Maliki's speech that he gave before we were sent here. Most of his speech was about the Kurds' domination of Mosul neighbourhoods and their misconduct toward civilians – something you will hear about if you listen to people's complaints". Crisis Group interview, Mosul, 5 December 2008.

[17] Although most Diyala tribes are Arab, Khanaqin district has several Kurdish tribes.

[18] The list of Shiite Islamist parties was called the Islamic National Strength in Diyala Alliance (Itilaf al-Quwwat al-Islamiya wa al-Wataniya fi Diyala), while Kurdish parties brought in some token Turkomans and Arabs, much as they had in Kirkuk, and ran as the Kurdish, Arab and Turkoman Democratic Coalition (al-Tahaluf al-Dimuqrati al-Kurdi al-Arabi al-Turkmani).

[19] According to an IIP official, the party's official position was to withdraw from the elections following the November 2004 events in Falluja, but the Diyala branch ignored the order and won fourteen seats. Crisis Group interview, Bahaa al-Din al-Naqshbandi, member of the IIP political bureau, Baghdad, 6 January 2009.

[20] Crisis Group interview, Saja Qadouri, Diyala provincial council member for Daawa, Baaquba, 2-6 October 2008. Ms Qadouri's husband was kidnapped and disappeared in 2006, she said, "because of his affiliation to me".

[21] Ibid. Iraqi families are generally assumed to have an average of six members, so 27,000 families would be roughly equivalent to 162,000 persons.

In 2007, the emergence of awakening councils, called Popular Committees (Lijan Shaabiya) in Diyala, curbed violence by pushing back AQI. But, along with Ninewa, Diyala remained one of the most unstable governorates, in part due to its volatile mix of ethnic and religious groups and AQI's enduring if somewhat diminished strength. One factor that militates against further stabilisation is the security forces' make-up, which reflects heavy dominance of Shiites and Kurds.[22] A local Daawa politician openly recognised the importance of Sunni Arabs' rejoining both the political process and security forces,[23] but expressed concern that some of the Popular Committees, while fighting AQI, "are behaving like al-Qaeda".[24]

In 2008, the Maliki government launched "Operation Glad Tidings" (Amaliyat al-Bashair) to fight AQI in Diyala. It succeeded in part, reducing violence, even as some governorate areas remained unstable. In August 2008, government troops forced Kurdish militias from three disputed subdistricts (Jalawla, Saadiya and Qara Tepe) the Kurds wish to incorporate into their own region and their armed forces (peshmergas) have patrolled since 2003. Yet, the government's campaign both failed to stabilise the situation and deepened tensions with the Kurds, who currently control only the district centre of Khanaqin and two northern subdistricts, Qoratu and Maydan, that abut the Kurdistan region.

3. Anbar (capital: Ramadi)

The situation was different in Anbar, primarily because of the governorate's demographics, which are unique in that the vast majority of inhabitants are Sunni Arabs, many of tribal origin. The insurgency capitalised on the discontent and alienation of people broadly seen by the U.S. and its allies as Saddam-regime stalwarts, regardless of their actual past or present political loyalties or convictions.

In January 2005, the bulk of voters stayed home, either voluntarily or out of fear of insurgent reprisal; only 3,800 of an estimated 574,000 eligible voters went to the polls, less than 1 per cent.[25] A leader of the local awakening councils recalled:

> There were no real elections. People were afraid and the city was led by masked men operating in the name of the resistance [*al-muqawama*]. Al-Qaeda was ruling Anbar. This prevented people from nominating themselves and from voting; they didn't allow anyone to represent the governorate. These were the circumstances in which the current council was established.[26]

Three parties, including the Iraqi Islamic Party, decided to run and, by default, captured 34 of 41 seats.[27] The IIP appointed the governor as well as council chairman.[28]

[22] A Baaquba native said, "al-Qaeda has lost tremendous ground in Diyala because of the government military offensive. But now the conflict is shifting. In Baaquba it is between the Sahwas and government security forces. Sahwa recruits may go back to al-Qaeda if they are not accommodated by the government, but for now there is no sign of this. Foot soldiers will go to whoever will pay them". Crisis Group interview, Amman, 29 August 2008.

[23] Crisis Group interview, Saja Qadouri, op. cit. She said, "it is true that the majority of the army and police forces are made up of Shiites. This is because Sunnis resisted joining the security forces from the beginning. However, this has changed, and the forces have opened their doors to Sunnis. Sunni participation is very important for the stability of Diyala and Iraq. All sects must participate, and what is more important than participation is their belief in the process".

[24] Ibid. She added: "Some of the Popular Committees are doing a great job by putting pressure on al-Qaeda, but some of them are behaving like al-Qaeda".

[25] A prominent Anbar politician had a somewhat different take on what happened in January 2005: "We did not boycott the election. What happened was that we were forced to stay home when suicide bombers were partying in the streets of Anbar, and Harith al-Dhari of the Muslim Scholars Association and people of his ilk declared those choosing to participate in the elections to be apostates and non-Muslims. And we also did not participate because the IIP deceived us when they told us no one was going to run in the elections". Crisis Group interview, Ali Hatem al-Suleiman, founding member of the National Salvation Front and head of the Anbar Tribal Council, Ramadi, 19 November 2008.

[26] Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Jubeir Rashid Nayef, deputy leader of the Anbar Salvation Council, Ramadi, 20 July 2008.

[27] The IIP won 34 seats, the remaining seven going to two small secular parties: the Reconciliation and Liberation Bloc (Kutlat al-Musalaha wa al-Tahrir) of Mashaan al-Jubouri, which won four, and the Independent Iraqi Group (Al-Haya al-Iraqiya al-Mustaqilla) of Thaer al-Naqib, which won three. The IIP has different version of its electoral victory. It claims it submitted a request to withdraw following the Falluja events in November 2004, but the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq (IECI) rejected it on grounds that the legal withdrawal period had expired. Only 3,800 votes were cast in Anbar, of which the IIP won just over 2,000, a fact it attributes to poor communications with its supporters. Crisis Group interview, Bahaa al-Din al-Naqshbandi, IIP political bureau member, Baghdad, 6 January 2009.

[28] The IIP appointed Rajaa Nawaf Farhan al-Mahalawi as governor. He was kidnapped only a few days after his appointment and his body was found shortly afterwards. He was replaced by Maamoun Sami al-Alwani, who is close to the party. As provincial council chairman, the IIP selected Abd-al-Salam al-Ani, an influential member of the party.

The predominance of a party that in an inclusive election likely would have fared poorly hobbled the council's work from the outset; the growing insurgency rendered it impossible. AQI in effect took over the governorate, which descended into chaos and extreme violence. A local awakening leader commented: "I don't want to say bad things about the provincial council, but honestly, Anbar was controlled by al-Qaeda and the flag of the Islamic State was everywhere. Al-Qaeda completely controlled Anbar, and there was no council at all. I didn't know its members and neither did the citizens of Anbar".[29]

Violence ended and political life revived only after the emergence of awakening councils in the second half of 2006, their gathering strength throughout 2007 and AQI's subsequent defeat in Anbar. In November 2006, awakening leader Abd-al-Sattar Abu Risha met with Vice President Tareq al-Hashimi and asked the IIP for seats. Evidently under pressure in light of Anbar's new realities, including from the Bush administration, Hashimi agreed to give him eight, thereby increasing the number of council seats to 49.[30] This unorthodox (and unconstitutional) arrangement merely underscored the illegitimacy of the council and the elections that produced it.[31]

As the awakening councils, assisted by U.S. forces, restored a semblance of order, their leaders, sensing political opportunity, began pressing for provincial elections as soon as possible. One explained:

> After we defeated al-Qaeda in Anbar, we decided to rid Anbar of the one ruling party. As you may know, we have a big problem with the Islamic Party [IIP]. It is as if Anbar were its property. We have been deprived of any senior positions, any funding, or any sort of access to government funding. This is why we decided to rid the governorate of a sect-worshipping party like the Islamic Party, and this is why we instructed our tribes to form political lists and take part in the elections.[32]

Another awakening leader accused the IIP of mismanagement and corruption: "The governorate budget was eaten by the wolves. I have news for you: the Islamists became thieves. They used the budget to pay for their trips to Amman and other places. We have lots of evidence, which we handed over to the authorities, that the governor and provincial council were corrupt".[33]

4. Baghdad

Straddling the Tigris, Baghdad has spread in all directions as it attracts rural migrants (primarily Shiites from the south) and provincial elites seeking connection with the centre (including, for example, from the Kurdish governorates). At its core, it is an amalgam of middle-class neighbourhoods of traders and professionals, who have intermarried over the decades and have been predominantly secular. Sunni and Shiite designations were, therefore, nominal and commonly not used (in fact, spurned) before the fall of the Baathist regime; Kurds and Turkomans were assimilated, favouring Arabic as the language of work, if not family. Beyond the city lies a belt of towns, some Sunni, some Shiite, some mixed, all intermingled, that together with the capital constitute Baghdad governorate.

By the January 2005 elections, sectarian identities had already begun to take hold. The Sunni Arabs' electoral boycott, therefore, had an impact. With many Sunnis staying away from the polls, only some 48 per cent of eligible voters showed up, well below the national average. Predictably, victory went to Shiite Islamist parties divided between two main lists: ISCI's Baghdadis List (Qaimat Ahali Baghdad, literally "Families of Baghdad List"), which won an absolute majority of seats, 28 of 51,[34] and Daawa's Baghdad of Peace List (Qaimat Baghdad al-Salam), which won eleven. The Islamic Virtue (Fadhila) Party, a third Shiite Islamist group, won six. ISCI has been in charge of local government ever since, holding both governor and council chairman positions. Although the Sadrists boycotted

[29] Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Jubeir Rashid Nayef, deputy leader of the Anbar Salvation Council, Ramadi, 20 July 2008.

[30] Crisis Group email communications, Saif-al-din Abd-al-Rahman, adviser and senior aide, office of Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, Baghdad, 7 and 23 January 2009. The agreement signed by the Awakening leaders and local government officials in Anbar on 4 November 2006 was co-signed by a representative of the U.S. Department of State and an official of the local U.S. provincial reconstruction team.

[31] The move was preceded, in August 2006, by an Anbar provincial council decision to replace thirteen council members with new – unelected – members. Of those replaced, four had been assassinated, seven never took the oath of office out of fear of the consequences, one became a governor's aide, and one was elected to the council of representatives in December 2005. "Replacement of Vacant Council Member Seats", Anbar Provincial Council, Order N°2, 23 August 2006. There was no constitutional basis for the move.

[32] Crisis Group interview, Ali Hatem al-Suleiman, founding member of the National Salvation Front and head of the Al-Anbar Tribal Council, Ramadi, 19 November 2008.

[33] Crisis Group interview, Hamid al-Hayes, leader of the Anbar Salvation Council, Ramadi, 20 July 2008.

[34] The Baghdad council elected in 2005 had 51 seats instead of 41, the number in all other governorates.

the elections, some independents close to the Sadrists ran and three won seats.[35]

After the 2005 elections, the Shiite Islamist parties, which had gained control over the national government and its security apparatus, began retaliating against AQI-led sectarian attacks by covertly attacking Sunnis. Following the February 2006 bombing of a famous Shiite shrine in Samarra, the capital descended into all-out sectarian war. The Sadr movement's militia, the Mahdi Army, moved into mixed and Sunni neighbourhoods, driving out not only many Sunnis but also much of the secular middle class (both Sunnis and Shiites), most of whom fled to Jordan, Syria and the Gulf.[36] By early 2009, very few had returned. As a result, the council – which did not reflect the city's make-up in January 2005 because of the Sunni Arab boycott – perversely came to reflect it more accurately.

In 2007, Baghdad's sectarian war gradually ground to a crawl following the U.S.-led surge, a ceasefire declared by Muqtada Sadr and the emergence of U.S.-sponsored, neighbourhood-based "concerned local citizens" groups, as well as anti-AQI awakening councils (also known as "Sons of Iraq"). Reconstruction resumed but was hobbled by mismanagement and delays as well as disputes between the central government and both the governor and provincial council, for example over the appointment of a police chief.[37] Although the governor has played up his achievements, claiming success on major infrastructure projects despite the central government,[38] some local citizens see things differently. As a pro-Sadr merchant put it, "the miserable state of Baghdad speaks to the incompetence of the Baghdad council. The past four years were full of false services and cosmetic projects that did not deliver anything to people, apart from their bribes and commissions. We do not trust these people, and they should not be re-elected".[39]

5. Basra

Basra, located in the predominantly Shiite south, has been one of the most contested governorates, not least because it is Iraq's only outlet to the sea and sits atop the bulk of its oil reserves (three quarters of current production). A coalition that included the Supreme Council (ISCI) did best in the January 2005 elections with twenty seats. However, through adroit manoeuvring, the Islamic Virtue Party (Fadhila), heading a post-election alliance that marshalled 21 seats, was able to appoint the governor and deputy council chairman.[40] In effect, three parties have run the governorate for much of the past four years: Fadhila has occupied key administrative positions and managed the oil industry; ISCI has been in charge of the security apparatus; and the Sadrists long controlled the streets (as well as the port). Basra was racked by violence. In 2007 Crisis Group wrote:

[35] In hindsight, the Sadrists claim that ISCI tricked them out of more seats. According to Sheikh Mazen al-Saidi, director of the Sadr office in Baghdad Karkh (the western side of the Tigris), "ISCI manipulated the previous provincial elections by deliberately misrepresenting and dimming their importance in a way that voters went to the polls thinking they were voting for parliament only, not parliament and the governorate council at the same time. This deprived the field of any significant competition to ISCI". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 14 October 2008.

[36] On the Mahdi Army's campaign in Baghdad, see Crisis Group, *Iraq's Civil War*, op. cit. On the Iraqi refugee crisis, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°77, *Failed Responsibility: Iraqi Refugees in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon*, 10 July 2008.

[37] A local politician said, "we have seen an overlap in duties and authorities between the provincial council as a legislative body and the central government as the top executive authority. This led to a struggle between the two sides and created an atmosphere of confusion. It has definitely affected the provincial council's performance over the past four years. The government stripped it of its powers and acted as Baghdad's main guardian instead, but it failed to carry out all of the council's functions". Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Miqdad al-Baghdadi, secretary general of the Islamic Fayli Gathering (Al-Tajammu al-Islami al-Fayli), Baghdad, 13 January 2009.

[38] Crisis Group interview, Hussein Mohammad Ali al-Tahan, Baghdad governor, Baghdad, 17 January 2009. He said, "building concrete bridges is not the local government's business, but we had to deal with it because the central government was too busy to care about such projects. You can go to any of the districts around Baghdad and ask them about governorate services. They will tell you that we have given them far more than the central government has. This is true for health, education and other sectors as well. Where has the federal government been in all of this?"

[39] Crisis Group interview, merchant, Sadr City/Baghdad, 12 July 2008.

[40] The Islamic Basra Alliance (Itilaf al-Basra al-Islamiya), which included ISCI, the Islamic Daawa Party and six others, gained twenty seats; the Islamic Virtue Party (Hizb al-Fadhila al-Islami, referred to here as Fadhila) won twelve; the secular Iraqi National Accord Movement (Harakat al-Wifaq al-Watani al-Iraqi, referred to here as Al-Wifaq) had four; the Islamic Daawa Movement (Harakat al-Daawa al-Islamiya, not to be confused with the Daawa Party) won three; and the Future Iraq Gathering (Tajammu Iraq al-Mustaqbal, headed by former oil minister Ibrahim Bahr al-Ulum), gained two. Following the elections, the latter four parties formed a unified front against the Islamic Basra Alliance, thus capturing the governor and deputy council chairman positions and handing Fadhila control over provincial government.

> Between September 2006 and March 2007, [UK-led] Operation Sinbad sought to rout out militias and hand security over to newly vetted and stronger Iraqi security forces while kick-starting economic reconstruction. Criminality, political assassinations and sectarian killings, all of which were rampant in 2006, receded somewhat and – certainly as compared to elsewhere in the country – a relative calm prevailed. Yet this reality was both superficial and fleeting. By March–April 2007, renewed political tensions once more threatened to destabilise the city, and relentless attacks against British forces in effect had driven them off the streets into increasingly secluded compounds. Basra's residents and militiamen view this not as an orderly withdrawal but rather as an ignominious defeat. Today, the city is controlled by militias, seemingly more powerful and unconstrained than before.
>
> What progress has occurred cannot conceal the most glaring failing of all: the inability to establish a legitimate and functioning provincial apparatus capable of redistributing resources, imposing respect for the rule of law and ensuring a peaceful transition at the local level.[41]

The situation improved markedly only in April 2008, when a government military effort, supported by U.S. advice and muscle and accommodated by a Sadrist decision to abide by a unilateral ceasefire (in effect since early 2007), displaced the Sadrist movement from its urban strongholds. Yet, political struggles remain intense, given the huge stakes.

A pivotal issue is the governorate's status. Political forces, witnessing oil sales revenue disappear into Baghdad's coffers (or politicians' and bureaucrats' pockets) rather than spent locally in Basra, long have clamoured for greater autonomy. As a council member put it, "we see that Kurdistan gets 17 per cent of the national budget, while Basra, where Iraq's wealth lies, gets about 1 per cent".[42] Basrawis look with envy at the Gulf States, most notably Dubai. Before 2003 they blamed the Baathist regime; after 2003 they concluded their status was not due to any particular regime but reflected a systemic trend within any central government, including a nominally democratic one.

Some decided to act. Under the constitution and subsequent law, a governorate can attain federal status by referendum if 10 per cent of its eligible voters or a third of provincial council members call for one. In late 2008, a Basra parliamentarian and former governor, Wail Abd-al-Latif, organised a petition drive, coordinated by the Independent High Electoral Commission, to collect the required 140,000 signatures (one tenth of eligible voters) within a one-month period ending on 19 January 2009.[43] He failed, however, in a resounding, albeit perhaps temporary, defeat for regionalisation.[44]

B. DYSFUNCTIONAL GOVERNANCE AND THE ROLE OF RELIGION

The outcome of the January 2009 elections will be shaped to an important degree by popular perception of the present provincial councils' performance over the past four years. The 2005 elections occurred in a climate of confusion and chaos but also of hope and elation at the removal of a tyrannical regime. Iraqis were at once traumatised by the past and bewildered by the present but wagering on a clean break. Yet, they had no experience with politics and were presented with electoral options that to many were largely meaningless; the elections also occurred amid intensifying ethnic and sectarian polarisation. For that and other reasons, voters looked to their religious leaders for guidance.

The principal beneficiaries were parties that had fled into exile or were established there during Saddam Hussein's rule, acquiring thereby an automatic head-start over homegrown opponents. Outside Kurdistan,[45] these were primarily Shiite Islamist parties, namely ISCI and Daawa.[46] A critical ingredient of their over-

[41] See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°67, *Where is Iraq Heading? Lessons from Basra*, 25 June 2007.

[42] Crisis Group interview, Bahaa Jalal al-Din, self-described independent member of the Basra provincial council who ran for the Daawa Party in 2005, Basra, 14 September 2008. The 2008 budget for Basra (including a subsequent addition thanks to higher revenues from oil sales) was $542 million, 1.13 per cent of the $48 billion federal budget.

[43] Reuters, 27 December 2008. The Iraq High Electoral Commission (IHEC) extended the original deadline of 14 January by five days.

[44] See Reidar Visser, "Basra, the Failed Gulf State, Part II: Wail Abd al-Latif Concedes Defeat", 17 January 2009, at www.historiae.org.

[45] The Kurdistan region had been free of central regime control since October 1991 and was governed by two parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). In the January 2005 parliamentary elections, they ran as the Kurdistan Alliance, which comprised several smaller Kurdish parties as well and came in second after the UIA.

[46] The other two main parties returning from exile were Iyad Allawi's Iraqi National Accord and Ahmed Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress. Neither achieved much political traction in post-Saddam Iraq, even if the two leaders assumed prominent roles both inside and outside government thanks in large part to U.S. backing.

whelming triumph was their public association with senior clerics and use of religious places and symbols.

The outcome was a victory by parties that, while popularly elected, lacked deep popular legitimacy. They could gain such backing solely through effective governance: providing security, delivering basic services, creating jobs and rebuilding the economy. That has not been their record over the past four years. To be sure, the sectarian civil war of 2005-2007was a principal reason for poor governance in mixed-population governorates. But it cannot account for a similar phenomenon in governorates south of Baghdad, which on balance witnessed much less violence.[47] Analysis of other factors contributing to the councils' unresponsiveness to constituent demands –lawlessness, corruption, isolation from Baghdad, inexperience and confusion over overlapping authorities between governor and council – would require a separate report, but the bottom line is that many blame council members, the religion-based parties to which they belong and the clerics associated with them.

Council members defend their performance, blaming inexperience and overwhelming security challenges in 2005-2008 for deficiencies in governance. The deputy chairman of the Basra council, for example, claimed that his council had performed "above average….It has provided a lot of services and was able to complete many projects essential to Basrawis. However, some council members fell below their constituents' expectations". Predicting their fortunes in upcoming elections, he said, "Only four or five of the current council members have registered themselves as candidates for re-election. I believe half this number may win, and I think I am one of them".[48]

Another Basra council member suggested that the electorate is unaware of the challenges local government faces:

> People blame local government and the provincial council for their problems but do not realise that the government and council have a limited budget and jurisdiction to tackle such problems. Most of these issues are linked directly to the central government. For example, the water plant director asked us to allocate 50 billion Iraqi dinars [about $42 million] for 2008; the central government responded by giving us a 10 billion dinar budget. Because of his small budget, the water plant director could not buy new equipment or hire new workers, and as a consequence he could not pump water to the people. These are huge problems.[49]

A Salah al-Din council member accused a dysfunctional federal government of spending its money "so slowly that it takes months to execute projects" and lamented the fact that provincial councils, which are the "right tools to implement reconstruction projects", are then faulted for the resulting lack of reconstruction.[50]

Outside the councils, however, views of their performance ranged from critical to devastating. A local Sadrist politician said, "people are completely disappointed with both the local and central government. This is because in the last three or four years we have seen nothing but destruction and killing. We have seen no reconstruction, or infrastructure building, or help for the poor. In brief, we have seen nothing that we did not also see during Saddam's time".[51] An independent politician in Qadisiya lamented pervasive corruption:

> Corruption is everywhere in government. The governor said on TV that Qadisiya is the worst governorate in terms of administrative corruption. Yet, we have seen not a single department head, engineer or doctor being tried on corruption charges. I don't

[47] Some councils suffered more than others from violence. For example, nine members of the Muthanna provincial council, including the deputy chairman, have been assassinated since 2005. The Diyala council also suffered grievously (see above). Moreover, several governors have been assassinated.

[48] Crisis Group interview, Nasef Jasem Ali al-Abadi, Basra provincial council deputy chairman for the Islamic Virtue Party (Fadhila), Basra, 30 November 2008. Another council member claimed: "First, the councils are junior experiments [i.e., a first attempt at having such councils], and mistakes are therefore inevitable. And secondly, both the provincial councils and central government have made some mistakes because of [external] interference in their authorities". Crisis Group interview, Salah al-Battat, member of Basra provincial council for ISCI, Basra, 12 August 2008.

[49] Crisis Group interview, Bahaa Jalal al-Din, self-described independent member of Basra provincial council who ran for the Daawa Party in 2005, Basra, 14 September 2008. The chairman of the Muthanna council said, "what happened in the past four years is that the councils lacked a clear law that distinguished their powers and responsibilities. If we take this into consideration, then I think the councils functioned well. We should not forget that the councils were a new experiment for us. Now that we have gained experience and know our responsibilities through a clear new law, I think the to-be-elected councils are going to function a lot better". Crisis Group interview, Abd al-Hussein al-Dhalimi, Muthanna provincial council chairman for ISCI, Samawa, 26 November 2008.

[50] Crisis Group interview, Khalaf al-Thanoun, head of the education committee of the Salah al-Din provincial council for the Iraqi National Gathering (Al-Tajammu al-Watani al-Iraqi), Tikrit, 18-19 September 2008.

[51] Crisis Group interview, Osama al-Musawi, Qadisiya Sadr office director, Diwaniya, 20 and 29 September 2008.

> see any difference between terrorists and corrupt people. Why are the authorities closing their eyes to corruption cases and focusing only on terrorism?[52]

In Maysan, the only governorate in which Sadrists prevailed in January 2005, several senior local officials (all Sadrists), were arrested on corruption charges following a June 2008 government military campaign called "Operation Tidings of Peace" (Amaliyat Bashair al-Salam). Among them was the head of the Integrity Committee.[53] Because of this and the council's general ineffectiveness, a local politician said, most current council members are unlikely to be re-elected: "I think that most people have lost trust in the council members. I don't think any of them will be re-elected. We have a saying in Iraq: 'The one who was bitten by a snake is afraid of touching a rope'".[54]

By most accounts, public perceptions of religion-based parties have suffered as a result. A former minister commented: "If you were to listen to what people in Baghdad say about religion and politics, you would understand that there has been a radical change in their view. People now understand that religion has been used. They see religion as a precious thing that should not be mixed with politics. People understand that one can make compromises in politics but not in religion".[55] The Sadrist politician quoted above specifically attacked the use of religion in electoral campaigns, a tactic his own movement has not shied away from in the past:

> Parties used to display posters of [Muhammad Muhammad Sadeq] al-Sadr, al-Sistani and other religious figures, but this is not going to work anymore. Religious slogans such as "Followers of Ali" [*Shiat Ali*] are also not going to work anymore. And slogans such as "If you don't vote, your wife will be forbidden to you", and "Voting is more important than fasting and praying" have lost their meaning. People see the use of religion for electoral purposes as hypocrisy and have lost their respect for men of religion. Why are they raising signs with Ali ibn Abi Talib [founder of the Shiite branch of Islam] and al-Sadr during election season and then, as soon as the elections are over, no one mentions them anymore? In my view it is nothing but a display of false virtue. The governor of Qadisiya used to be a turbaned [i.e., religious] man. When he became governor, he put his turban down and started wearing suits. What people infer from this is that he used religion to get his position.[56]

A secular politician went further, blaming religious parties for unleashing the 2005-2007 sectarian war:

> We are the sons of the Tigris and Euphrates. We think the same way, whether we are from the north or the south. We are looking for those who can serve us the best. We tried the white [Sunni] turbans and the black [Shiite] turbans, and this is what we got. They got Iraq and us into a cycle of sectarian killing, ethnic cleansing, racism and massacres. This is a natural result of the failure to separate religion from politics.[57]

[52] Crisis Group interview, Fadhel Sultan al-Badri, independent politician, Diwaniya, 19-24 September 2008.

[53] The deputy later died in detention. Crisis Group interviews, three Maysan politicians and an independent journalist, Amara, July and September 2008.

[54] Crisis Group interview, Alaa Khaseb Abbas, head of Iyad Allawi's Iraqi National Accord Movement office in Maysan, Amara, 2 September 2008.

[55] Crisis Group interview, Pascale Warda, head of the relations office of the Hammurabi Human Rights Organisation and a former minister of displacement and migration, Baghdad, 7 November 2008.

[56] Crisis Group interview, Osama al-Musawi, Qadisiya Sadr office director, Diwaniya, 20 and 29 September 2008. An independent Iraqi observer noted that a common election slogan in slang Iraqi Arabic is: "We've been fooled by the Marjaiya [Shiite religious leadership in Najaf]. We have elected amoral people!" (*"Qashmuratna al-Marjaiya, wa intikhabna al-sarsariya!"*). He said, "such coarse slogans are not uncommon in Iraqi history. Similar ones accompanied every military coup in modern history. They have deep meanings and sometimes act as historic turning points. In this case, the slogan quoted above shows a turning point in the politico-religious wave that hit Iraq after the 2003 invasion". Crisis Group interview, 27 October 2008.

[57] Crisis Group interview, Khalaf al-Thanoun, head of the education committee of the Salah al-Din provincial council for the Iraqi National Gathering, Tikrit, 18-19 September 2008. In a September 2008 survey carried out by the Baghdad-based Al-Amal Association in eleven governorates, only 22.7 per cent of respondents said they would vote for religious parties, while some 63.3 per cent said they would vote for national/democratic/secular parties or independent or tribal candidates; 12.4 per cent were undecided. Crisis Group interview, Jamal Muhammad al-Jawahiri, an official with Al-Amal Association, Baghdad, 11 November 2008. The survey, whose scientific basis and accuracy are unclear, was conducted in the following governorates: Anbar, Babel, Baghdad, Basra, Diyala, Karbala, Kirkuk, Najaf, Qadisiya, Salah al-Din and Suleimaniya. Residents of Kirkuk and Suleimaniya will not vote in these elections. The breakdown was as follows: religious parties: 22.7 per cent; national parties: 6.3 per cent; democratic/secular parties: 23.6 per cent; independent candidates: 26.3 per cent; tribal candidates: 7.3 per cent; undecided: 13.7 per cent. While its findings are suggestive and consistent with other evidence, such polls should be interpreted with some caution, as survey conditions remain difficult, and the people polled tend to be limited to the middle

Even if religious parties have taken a hit in public perceptions, however, they remain strong, organised, disciplined and well-funded, able to mobilise the electorate around religious symbols and to use their institutional power to direct voters to candidates of their choice. They remain formidable powers in any election (see below).

C. ELECTORAL LEGISLATION

The elections' outcome also will be shaped by relevant legislation and rules. Original impetus to hold provincial elections on schedule came from the Bush administration which, echoing the recommendations of the December 2006 Iraq Study Group, a bipartisan U.S. effort to review and guide future Iraq policy, and making good on the October 2005 agreement with Sunni Arab representatives,[58] included this as one of its benchmarks when announcing the surge in U.S. troops in January 2007.[59] In the following eighteen months, the council of representatives endorsed key legislation enabling provincial elections to take place: In January 2007, it passed the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) Law; in April it appointed IHEC's nine commissioners; in February 2008, it adopted the provincial powers law, followed in September by the provincial elections law.

After several postponements, the elections were set to be held in fourteen of the eighteen governorates on 31 January 2009. They are expected to be held later in 2009 in the three Kurdish governorates (Erbil, Suleimaniya and Dohuk), which fall under the Kurdistan region's own constitution and implementing legislation. Nor will they be held in Kirkuk, where controversy over the contested governorate's status has led to the creation of a special procedure for elections.

As a compromise between the ruling parties' preference for a closed list system, in which voting is for parties that each present a list of ranked candidates, and the opposition's demand for an open list system, in which voters choose individual candidates from a party list, the council of representatives settled on a partial open list system. This hybrid leaves voters with the somewhat confusing choice to cast their ballot for either (1) a party list without specifying a particular candidate; (2) *both* a list *and* a candidate running on its slate; (3) a single (independent) candidate; or (4) a candidate running on one of the lists for reserved minority seats in the three governorates that have them (Ninewa, Baghdad and Basra).[60] Women are assured seats via a quota system: regardless of votes collected by their candidates, parties are enjoined to give every third seat to a female candidate on their list, although the share of seats that will ultimately be filled by women in each council will depend on the distribution of votes among parties.[61]

class; polls held prior to the January 2005 elections were not particularly reliable

[58] By boycotting the January 2005 parliamentary elections, Sunni Arab political leaders were excluded from constitution drafting. To prevent a destabilising Sunni Arab boycott of the 15 October 2005 constitutional referendum, the U.S. ambassador, Zalmay Khalilzad, negotiated an agreement that promised an early constitutional review. Although Sunni Arabs participated in both the referendum and subsequent (December 2005) parliamentary elections, the "early" review of the constitution, while initiated, soon ground to a halt and is yet to be completed. In late 2006, acknowledging the local government's legitimacy deficit, the Bush administration began pressing for early provincial elections to allow Sunni Arabs back into the political system. Protracted parliamentary wrangling is the reason these supposedly early elections are only now scheduled, exactly at the expiry of the four-year term. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°74, *Iraq After the Surge II: The Need for a New Political Strategy*, 30 April 2008, pp. 14-18.

[59] Benchmark no. 5 reads: "Enacting and implementing legislation establishing an Independent High Electoral Commission, provincial elections law, provincial council authorities, and a date for provincial elections". U.S. Government, "Benchmark Assessment Report", 14 September 2007. An additional reason for having early provincial elections was that the councils elected in January 2005 had no constitutional standing, as the constitution was adopted in a popular referendum only on 15 October 2005.

[60] The draft law passed by the council of representatives in July 2008 contained a provision (Article 50) giving the Chaldo-Assyrian-Syriac (Christian) minority a number of reserved seats, as follows: three in Baghdad, three in Ninewa, two in Kirkuk, two in Dohuk, two in Erbil and one in Basra. Additionally, in Ninewa the Shabak and Yazidis each received one reserved seat. (The inclusion of Dohuk and Erbil was an oddity, as the law has no legal force in the Kurdistan region, which is supposed to issue its own law and hold its own provincial elections at a later date.) Article 50 was removed from the final draft passed in September. After an outcry by minority representatives, supported by UNAMI, the council of representatives agreed to the following minority quotas in a separate bill on 3 November: one reserved seat each for Christians and Sabian-Mandeans in Baghdad; one each for Christians, Shabak and Yazidis in Ninewa; and one for Christians in Basra. Chaldo-Assyrian leaders denounced the reduction in reserved seats and threatened to boycott the elections, but they later changed their mind and agreed to participate. Crisis Group interviews, Yonadam Kanna, member of the council of representatives, leader of the Assyrian Democratic Movement and head of the Al-Rafidain List, Baghdad, 6 November 2008 and 19 January 2009.

[61] In 2005, parties had to present electoral lists on which every third candidate was a woman. With the partial open-list system in 2009, there is no such requirement, as there are

Insofar as parties must cross a given threshold in order to gain representation, the system is likely to benefit larger parties and coalitions.[62] Still, opposition politicians expressed satisfaction with the new system, which could encourage the electorate to vote for respected independent candidates.[63]

Criticism focused on other elements, such as the fact that Iraqis living abroad, including the masses of refugees, will not be permitted to vote.[64] This principally will hurt Sunni Arab parties and parties representing the secular middle class.[65] Internally displaced Iraqis, by contrast, can vote; once registered in their area of refuge, they can cast a ballot in the governorate in which they hold permanent residence. This is particularly relevant in governorates such as Baghdad and Diyala that suffered mass displacement. That said, there is considerable doubt that many displaced will vote given their difficult living conditions; this may affect the fortunes of parties that count a high proportion of displaced among their followers.[66]

The electoral preparations of the Iraqi High Electoral Commission (IHEC) gained momentum only after passage of the provincial powers and provincial elections laws in 2008. In each of the fourteen governorates in which elections will be held, it appointed a supposedly independent electoral official. Although some parties complained that certain officials were biased, criticism was muted, and the broader consensus shared the view that the commission basically was impartial (see below). A voter registration drive also took place shortly after approval of the provincial elections law in September 2008.[67]

Another important step was the announcement of electoral lists, including single-party slates, party coalitions and individual candidates. A total of 14,431 candidates, almost a third of them women, will be competing for 440 seats in the fourteen governorates in which elections will be held.[68] Some parties formed pre-election alliances to raise both their profile and their chances; others decided to run alone or were shunned by competing parties as a result of their poor governing record. Realignments are likely after the elections.

D. TO VOTE OR NOT TO VOTE?

In 2005, just over half the eligible voters went to the polls. In the above-mentioned Al-Amal Association survey,[69] 58.1 per cent of respondents said they would vote in January 2009, 18.9 per cent said they would not, and 23 per cent were undecided.[70] It is difficult to make accurate predictions, however, as polls are unreliable, and various factors could affect turnout. Those

no fixed lists. According to Article 13(2) of the provincial elections law, parties must now designate a woman for every third seat they win, regardless of how many votes that female candidate collects. The IHEC board of commissioners, however, "determined that among winning lists of three or more candidates, at least one winning candidate will be a female among every three". "Seat Allocation", IHEC International Electoral Assistance Team, Fact Sheet, January 2009. An electoral expert predicted that if all parties win at least three seats in a council, women's share will be 33 per cent, but if there are small parties that win fewer than three seats, it will be less and it may well turn out that no more than a fifth of winning candidates will be women. Crisis Group email communication, 23 January 2009.

[62] The provincial elections law defines the threshold parties must cross as "the number of votes required to obtain a seat in the electoral district, which is reached by dividing the number of valid votes in the electoral district by the number of seats assigned to that district". A Babel council member noted: "Larger parties and lists will win enough votes to pass the threshold, while smaller parties and individual candidates may not. This is a deficiency in the law that was designed and tailored by the large lists in parliament". Crisis Group interview, Murtadha Kamel Muheisen, Hilla, 14 November 2008.

[63] Crisis Group interview, Khalaf al-Thanoun, head of the education committee of the Salah al-Din provincial council for the Iraqi National Gathering, Tikrit, 18-19 September 2008.

[64] In the January 2005 elections, refugees were allowed to vote for candidates for the council of representatives only, not for provincial councils.

[65] A tribal leader in Anbar complained with some exaggeration: "If seven million Iraqis living outside Iraq are not going to vote, then who is going to vote [for us]? Are the Iranians [i.e., Shiite Islamist parties] stealing Iraq?" Crisis Group interview, Ali Hatem al-Suleiman, founding member of the National Salvation Front and head of the Al-Anbar Tribal Council, Ramadi, 19 November 2008.

[66] For example, in a governorate such as Diyala that has seen high levels of violence, the election-day absence of the displaced will affect Shiite Islamist parties disproportionately, as the majority of Diyala's displaced are Shiites. Indicative of low participation by displaced Iraqis, IHEC reported that of an estimated 4,000 eligible displaced Arab voters in Suleimaniya governorate, only 1,765 had registered for the elections. *Rozhnama* (Kurdish daily), 13 January 2009.

[67] People who had voted in earlier elections did not need to register. As a result, the registration drive targeted only those who returned to Iraq or had turned eighteen since the 2005 elections. Some local politicians mistakenly concluded that few bothered to register, denouncing voter apathy; others reportedly mistook the registration process for the elections.

[68] *The Washington Post*, 22 January 2009.

[69] See fn. 57 above.

[70] "It is no secret people are disappointed", an Al-Amal official said. Crisis Group interview, Jamal Muhammad al-Jawahiri, Baghdad, 11 November 2008.

who anticipate depressed participation tend to cite dissatisfaction with current performance and scepticism about possible change as principal reasons. A former government minister noted: "The feeling we get in Baghdad is that people are reluctant to participate in the elections, as they doubt these will bring a change in government. Moreover, local government has done little to win people's support. There is huge corruption and a lack of basic services".[71] An independent politician added:

> People are disconnected and bored with the electoral process. In fact, they despise the whole idea. This is going to affect turnout. When you ask anyone whether he is going to vote, he will answer: "Vote for whom? Why should I vote again? Why should I be fooled again? Enough is enough!" The people have sacrificed a lot. Despite violence, terrorism, explosions and threats, people voted [in 2005]. But what did they gain? They gained the reality that doors were shut in their faces.[72]

In contrast, some believe that constituencies that felt unrepresented in the 2005 elections (Sunni Arabs and poor urban Shiites) will come to the polls in greater numbers, making up for any popular disappointment. In the words of a Basra politician, "Basrawis know this election is different from the previous one and that they will be able to choose the people they want to be in government".[73] Such feelings were echoed in Tikrit, Anbar, Ninewa and Diyala.

Clearly, those whose representatives were locked out following the 2005 elections display the greatest enthusiasm this time around, while those who voted for victorious parties in 2005 evince the least. But this could prove a poor predictor of the ultimate result, as the ruling (essentially Shiite Islamist) parties benefit from far better organisation, superior resources and the simple fact that Shiites constitute a majority. Control of the mosques also give them a formidable in-built advantage (see below).

[71] Crisis Group interview, Pascale Warda, head of the relations office of the Hammurabi Human Rights Organisation and a former minister of displacement and migration, Baghdad, 7 November 2008.
[72] Crisis Group interview, Fadhel Sultan al-Badri, independent politician, Diwaniya, 19-24 September 2008.
[73] Crisis Group interview, Nasef Jasem Ali al-Abadi, Basra provincial council deputy chairman for Fadhila, Basra, 30 November 2008.

III. KEY POLITICAL BATTLES AND THE PARTIES FIGHTING THEM

The powers of the councils to be elected on 31 January 2009 will far exceed those of the incumbent councils.[74] The new ones may elect and remove senior governorate officials, including the governor; identify priorities in all fields, outline policy and develop strategic development plans in coordination with the competent federal ministries; issue local legislation; and approve local security plans. Most importantly, perhaps, they are empowered to ratify the governorate's budget, which will now be prepared by the governor, not federal ministries.[75] The stakes are, therefore, considerably higher than in January 2005. This has been reflected in the fierce political battles that have been fought since it became clear in 2008 that governorate elections would indeed be held.

[74] The powers of the governorates are regulated by the provincial powers law (Law 21) of 31 March 2008. Under Art. 7, the councils are, inter alia, empowered to: (3) Issue local legislations, regulations and instructions to regulate the administrative and financial affairs in a way that enables it to run its affairs according to the administrative decentralization principle in a manner that does not contradict with the provisions of the Constitution and federal laws. (4) Outline the Governorate general policies in coordination with the competent ministries within the context of developing the plans of the governorate. (5-2) Ratify the general budget of the Governorate submitted by the Governor; (10) Approve the local security plans submitted by the security agencies in the Governorate through the Governor, in coordination with the Federal Security Departments while taking into consideration their security plans. (11) Approve, with absolute majority, the administrative changes in districts, sub-districts and villages whether these changes are merger, creation, change of name and center and the resulting administrative formations within the borders of the Governorate, upon a proposal by the Governor or one third of the Council members. (15) Identify the priorities of the Governorate in all fields, outline its policy, and develop strategic development plans in a manner that does not contradict the national development.
[75] Governorates will be allocated a share of the federal budget according to their relative population size. But governors will now prepare their governorate's budget, and the councils will have substantive input through their power of ratification. Moreover, under the new provincial powers law, district and sub-district councils, to be elected later in 2009, will have similar powers regarding local budgets. Because of this, and because of local government's inexperience in preparing budgets, U.S. provincial reconstruction teams and PRT-funded non-governmental organisations, such as the Research Triangle Institute (RTI), have been training local administrators on budget skills. Crisis Group interview, RTI official, Kirkuk, 19 June 2008.

A. SHARPENING THE KNIVES

Little about the elections – their timing, procedures and where they should take place – has been free from controversy and political jockeying. Disputes first surrounded the provincial powers law, passed in February 2008, which set a date for the elections (originally 1 October 2008). It was resisted by members of the ruling coalition, who had little interest in new elections that would likely reduce their power. Moreover, those among them who support broad decentralisation disapproved of a clause, pushed through by an unusually unified opposition, giving the council of representatives the right to dismiss governors.[76] The presidency council, which ISCI and the Kurds dominate, promptly vetoed the bill, then lifted their veto just as suddenly, purportedly following U.S. intervention.[77]

The government's April 2008 decision to send troops to Basra also can be seen at least partly through an electoral lens. Ostensibly designed to confront lawlessness, the campaign appeared aimed at crushing Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army and, more broadly, weakening the Sadrist movement.[78] Poorly prepared and executed, and seemingly headed toward a humiliating setback, the offensive was saved by forceful U.S. action; Sadr responded by ordering his followers to stand down, consistent with his overall strategy, adopted in response to the U.S. surge, not to confront American troops.[79] Government forces entered Sadr-controlled neighbourhoods of Basra and occupied Sadrist offices without a fight. Prime Minister Maliki followed this action with the announcement that no party maintaining a militia would be permitted to stand in elections.[80] This was a clear reference to the Sadrist movement and a blatantly biased move in light of the fact that ISCI and the Kurdish parties both retain militias which they claim have been absorbed by the state's security forces but which in fact remain loyal to their political masters. The electoral ban on parties with militias subsequently was enshrined in the provincial elections law.[81]

The latter law itself became the object of a political tug of war. Negotiated in May-July 2008, the draft contained clauses potentially adverse to the ruling parties' interests, notably its partial open list electoral system, ban on use of religious symbols and delayed elections in Kirkuk based on a formula providing Kurds with less than one third of council seats. The council of representatives passed the bill on 22 July despite a walk-out by Kurdish lawmakers, who denounced the Kirkuk provision. Even though the presidency council again exercised its veto, sending the draft law back to the council, the opposition parties had sufficiently congealed to take the name "22 July Gathering" (Tajammu al-Thani wa al-Ishrin min Tammuz). The law, amended to reflect a compromise on Kirkuk elections,[82] passed in September.[83] The provision prohibiting use of religious symbols was watered down, although the general understanding seems to be that the ban remains.[84] At the time, government critics suggested

[76] Article 7 (8-2) of the 2008 Law of Governorates Not Organised Into a Region states: "The Council of Representatives may remove the Governor by an (absolute-simple) majority of its members based on a proposal by the Prime Minister for the same reasons above".

[77] See Crisis Group Report, *Iraq After the Surge II*, op. cit., pp. 14-18.

[78] It was certainly perceived this way by the Sadrists, one of whose leaders alleged: "It is not as they have claimed – that they were carrying out an attack against terrorists and outlaws. They were directly targeting the Sadrists". Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Mazen al-Saidi, director of Sadr office in Baghdad Karkh, Baghdad, 14 October 2008.

[79] Rather than seek to engage the Mahdi Army, U.S. forces appeared to single out so-called "special groups" loosely associated with the Sadrist current and suspected of acting on Iran's behalf. Some believe this was done with the implicit acquiescence of Sadr, whose hold over his followers has been questionable and who may have seen an opportunity to restore discipline to the Mahdi Army. By standing down, he allowed the U.S. to go after those groups that continued to fight and clearly were not under his command. See Crisis Group Report, *Iraq's Civil War*, op. cit.

[80] See *The New York Times*, 8 April 2008.

[81] Article 33(2) reads: "Any party or a political entity that keeps an armed militia shall be denied from participating in the election".

[82] Lawmakers amended the controversial Kirkuk clause (Article 24 in the 22 July draft but Article 23 in the final law) by agreeing to a separate process for Kirkuk governorate in which provincial elections would be postponed until after a parliamentary committee presents the council of representatives with a set of recommendations about power sharing, property disputes and demographic manipulations in Kirkuk; the committee's deadline is 31 March 2009. Should the committee fail to make recommendations, the council of deputies is to draft its own law for Kirkuk elections; unlike the draft law, the law passed in September 2008 did not provide a seat distribution formula, the clause that was most heavily contested by the Kurdish parties. Established in early November 2008, the parliamentary committee had yet to visit Kirkuk by late January 2009, and expectations for its success were accordingly low. Crisis Group interviews, a range of Kirkuki politicians, Kirkuk, October 2008.

[83] UNAMI played a key role in breaking the legislative deadlock. See Crisis Group Report, *Oil for Soil*, pp. 3-4.

[84] Article 32(2) of the draft law passed on 22 July 2008 stated: "It is prohibited to use or advertise posters or symbols other than those of the candidates". In Article 37(3) of the law that was passed on 24 September, the word "symbols" is dropped, but the effect appears the same: "It is prohibited to place advertisements or distribute action programs, brochures,

the Kirkuk imbroglio was convenient for the ruling parties, who arguably used it to postpone elections.

An independent politician claimed:

> The ruling parties tried to delay the elections because they realised that they are not widely accepted and that they need more time to create programs to win people's hearts and minds or form new coalitions with lists enjoying a good popular base. Using the council of representatives, they created many obstacles to delay the elections. First, they raised the problem of closed versus open lists, which caused protracted discussions. And then the Kirkuk problem surfaced. They make it appear as if these are real problems but in reality these parties don't want elections to happen on time. No one dares come out in public in favour of delaying the elections.[85]

As elections approached, battle lines were drawn. At one level, ruling parties competed against the 22 July Gathering, though realities on the ground were far more complex given the proliferation of independent, or nominally independent, lists and candidates, as well as the possibility of post-election deals to form new coalitions.

B. THE RULING PARTIES

The national unity government that emerged from the December 2005 parliamentary elections has lacked both unity and a national agenda and has barely governed. Differences, always present, have sharpened ahead of elections. Still, the coalition has survived, principally because its members realised this was the price of maintaining power and because their internal differences were less significant than those separating them from the opposition. But cracks have started to appear over the degree to which the country should decentralise, most visibly between Maliki's Daawa Party on one side and ISCI and the Kurdish parties on the other.

1. The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI)

ISCI is the strongest of the ruling parties outside the Kurdistan region. Established in Iran, it has spent much of the past five years seeking to rebut perceptions that it is one of its proxies.[86] In the absence of strong rivals in 2005, it overcame its relative unpopularity through extensive patronage and, most significantly, public association with the Shiites' foremost religious authority, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Claiming that Sistani had endorsed the party, ISCI leaders took advantage of the great numbers who flocked to the polls in response to calls from clerics who saw in Iraq's first democratic elections the opportunity to translate Shiite demographic majority into political dominance.

Sistani's 2005 endorsement remains a matter of considerable dispute; this time, however, his position has been unambiguous. Reportedly upset about four years of mismanagement, corruption, internal bickering and a savage sectarian war, he publicly distanced himself from all political parties (see below). This could have damaging consequences for ISCI, whose social base (a religiously-minded urban mercantile class) overlaps with Sistani's and might look for other candidates. Moreover, ISCI has fuelled considerable enmity, and many parties are engaging in tactical alliances, publicised or not, for the sole purpose of undermining its electoral prospects or post-election governing chances. Reflecting the situation throughout Baghdad and the south (where ISCI's Kurdish allies play no role), a Sadrist politician in Diwaniya said, "all the parties, without exception, are working against ISCI".[87]

All that being said, ISCI's significant advantage over its rivals is its virtual stranglehold over local government since the January 2005 elections. Although it did not win a majority of seats in all provincial councils, it did comparatively well and thus was able to appoint governors in six of the nine southern, predominantly Shiite, governorates, as well as in all-important Baghdad. Moreover, its electoral strength translated into control of the security apparatus in all these governorates. ISCI also can rely on a network of mosques, whose preachers, on the Friday preceding the elections, may exhort their followers to vote for the party.

ISCI has put together a coalition, the "Martyr of the Mihrab and Independent Forces List" (Qaimat Shahid al-Mihrab wa al-Quwwat al-Mustaqilla), a reference

or cards in the name of a candidate not registered on the candidates' list". This suggests that, for example, placing the picture of religious clerics on election posters would be illegal, unless they were candidates in the elections.

[85] Crisis Group interview, Bahaa Jalal al-Din, self-described independent member of Basra provincial council who ran for the Daawa Party in 2005, Basra, 14 September 2008. The director of the Sadr office in Baghdad Karkh, quoted above complaining of ISCI's alleged manipulation of the 2005 polls, claimed: "Knowing that wise men do not make the same mistake twice, ISCI tried its best to prevent or postpone the new provincial elections by voting against them on more than one occasion". Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Mazen al-Saidi, Baghdad, 14 October 2008.

[86] For an analysis of ISCI, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°70, *Shiite Politics in Iraq: The Role of the Supreme* Council, 15 November 2007.

[87] Crisis Group interview, Osama al-Musawi, Qadisiya Sadr office director, Diwaniya, 20 and 29 September 2008.

to its leader, Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, assassinated in 2003.[88] It includes five additional groups: the Shahid al-Mihrab Gathering, the Badr Organisation (the former Badr Corps, ISCI's militia, now nominally demobilised but in fact recast as part of the state security forces), Vice President Adel Abd al-Mahdi's Independent Gathering for the Sake of Iraq, Hassan al-Sari's Hizbollah Movement and the Sayyed al-Shuhada Movement. This is not a new coalition, however, as these groups have long been integral to ISCI's strength. The real question is what alliances the list will strike after the elections.[89]

For ISCI, the electoral stakes are great. Victory in most southern governorates and Baghdad could provide an important boost to its efforts to create a nine-governorate super-region south of the capital.[90] Its federal ambitions have faced considerable resistance from forces that either oppose regionalisation outright or prefer a smaller region comprising Basra alone or Basra together with two adjacent governorates (Dhi Qar and Maysan). ISCI's fortunes will depend on whether its strong institutional control and extensive patronage can make up for its declining popularity. An Iraqi observed:

> ISCI's financial power, organisational machinery, association with the Marjaiya [Shiite religious leadership in Najaf], position in the government, militia power and external links with both Iran and the U.S. all give it confidence it can win the elections. However, a combination of growing competition among United Iraqi Alliance [the 2005 Shiite electoral coalition] factions, increasing patriotic tendencies, rising anti-Iranian and anti-U.S. sentiments among Shiites and the conflict with the Sadrists may thwart its ambitions.[91]

2. The Kurdistan Alliance

The Kurdistan Alliance comprises Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party, Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and an array of smaller groups. It has proved one of the most disciplined and effective political forces since 2003, aided by its unified vision of a federal country, and the Kurdistan region's place in it, as well as its ability to mobilise competent technical expertise for complex negotiations. As a result, Kurds played a pivotal role in the formation of the first two elected governments, those of Ibrahim al-Jaafari in 2005 and Nouri al-Maliki in 2006. The Kurdistan Alliance's principal objective in Baghdad has been to secure far-reaching autonomy for the Kurdistan region and create a federal system in the rest of Iraq whose weak centre and relatively strong regions would prevent the emergence of a powerful authoritarian state that could, once again, oppress the Kurds.

The Kurds' additional objective is to incorporate territories they deem historically Kurdish – Kirkuk in particular – into their region. In Baghdad, they have advanced this cause in the constitution and in the accords that undergirded first the Jaafari then the Maliki governments.[92] They have also sought to shape realities on the ground through their control of institutions, especially the security apparatus, and, since the January 2005 elections, local government. Kirkuk aside, the two governorates in which the Kurds have extended their political power are Ninewa and Diyala. In both cases they exploited the Sunni Arab electoral boycott to achieve disproportionate representation. They fared best in Ninewa, because of its majority Sunni Arab population; Diyala, more thoroughly mixed, required a coalition with Shiite and Sunni Islamist parties. Either way, the Kurdish parties (the KDP in Ninewa, the PUK in Diyala) consolidated their hold over areas within these two governorates that have Kurdish populations.

As Sunni Arab parties have vowed to regain their political strength by exhorting followers to vote, the Kurds' goal in the January 2009 elections is damage-limitation. With Kirkuk out of the picture for now, they stand to

[88] The *mihrab* is the prayer recess in a mosque, similar in purpose to a church altar. The term "Shahid al-Mihrab" (Martyr of the Mihrab) is a reference to Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, ISCI's founder who was killed in a car bomb attack outside the shrine of Ali ibn Abi Talib in Najaf after Friday prayers in August 2003. Ali ibn Abi Talib, the founder of Shiism, was the first person to receive this designation, having been assassinated standing in the mihrab during prayers. ISCI uses this symbolism to establish the link between its leader and the founding father of Shiism.

[89] An ISCI politician said, "we decided to enter the elections as a single list, and we will make alliances after the election results are in". Crisis Group interview, Abd-al-Hussein al-Dhalimi, chairman of the Muthanna provincial council for ISCI, Samawa, 26 November 2008.

[90] ISCI could bring this about only through coordinated local referendums, as allowed by the constitution and relevant implementing legislation. According to the 2006 law on the formation of regions, either one third of provincial council members or one tenth of a governorate's eligible voters must vote to request a governorate-wide referendum on that governorate's joining an existing region, or joining another governorate to form a new region.

[91] Crisis Group email communication, Amman, 4 January 2009.

[92] For reporting on the disputed territories, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N° 56, *Iraq and the Kurds: The Brewing Battle Over Kirkuk*, 18 July 2006; Crisis Group Middle East Report N° 64, *Iraq and the Kurds: Resolving the Kirkuk Crisis*, 19 April 2007; and Crisis Group Report, *Oil for Soil*, op. cit.

lose the most in governorates in which they claim territory, mostly Ninewa and Diyala (see below), and to a lesser extent Salah al-Din. In the rest of Iraq, where there are few Kurds, the Kurdish parties seek to gain influence by supporting parties with which they maintain close bonds, in particular the Shiite Islamist ISCI and, at the other side of the spectrum, the secular Iraqi Communist Party.[93]

3. The Islamic Call (Daawa) Party of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki

Daawa has undergone a remarkable makeover. The first Shiite Islamist party, established in the late 1950s, its fortunes waxed and waned under republican governments until the Baath regime decimated its membership and drove its remnants into exile, where it splintered. At the time of the regime's downfall, in April 2003, the party was a mere shadow of its former self, playing second fiddle to Islamist rivals that had either grown under Iranian tutelage, such as ISCI, or enjoyed support from newly-liberated Shiite masses, such as the Sadrists. It owes its survival as a viable political actor to its distinctive profile – unlike ISCI, it opposes a clerical role in politics and, unlike the Sadrists, has middle-class origins – and to the fact that, after the January 2005 elections, it played a critical bridging role between those parties, neither of which had the strength required to impose one of its own as prime minister.

Daawa leader Ibrahim al-Jaafari was the first head of a freely elected government. However, following the December 2005 elections the Kurds vetoed prolongation of his tenure because, in their eyes, he had failed to support their Kirkuk agenda. Nouri al-Maliki was then plucked from relative obscurity – before 2003 he had been the party's representative in Damascus – to replace Jaafari, who promptly set up his own party, the National Reform Trend (Tayar al-Islah al-Watani). For a time, Maliki remained relatively weak, forced to balance between actors on whom he depended to differing degrees – ISCI and the Sadrists, Sunnis and Shiites, Arabs and Kurds, the U.S. and Iran. The Bush administration reportedly considered replacing him more than once but each time realised that his removal would likely precipitate a prolonged political crisis. Over time, Maliki became indispensable, capable of manipulating and outmanoeuvring both the U.S. and surrounding parties. His April 2008 Basra adventure exemplified his new position: the U.S. was forced to come to his rescue, lest the government collapse.

Maliki has since taken deft steps that, together, have given him a national stature he could only dream of a year ago. First, he moved against the Mahdi Army in Sadr City, Baghdad's sprawling Shiite slum, burnishing his credentials in Sunni eyes. He then pressured the awakening councils by arresting some leaders; the Shiites, fearing a Sunni resurgence, applauded. Following the parliamentary standoff over the provincial elections law in August 2008, he launched a military campaign in Diyala ("Operation Glad Tidings") to fight al-Qaeda in Iraq; however, government forces not only again arrested awakening members,[94] but some soon engaged Kurdish peshmergas in disputed areas under de facto Kurdish control. This infuriated the Kurds[95] but transformed Maliki for many from a sectarian politician into a national (Arab) leader. Finally, a televised speech in November 2008 in support of strong central government and against regionalisation, arguably in response not only to Kurdish ambitions in Kirkuk but also to some parties' attempt to create a Basra region,[96] further enhanced his nationalist credentials.

[93] In Karbala, for example, a provincial council member for the ICP said, "The Kurds informed us that they would vote for the Communist Party". Crisis Group interview, Abd-al-Hamid al-Faraj, Karbala provincial council member for the ICP, Karbala, 10 July 2008. The ICP and main Kurdish parties share a strong secularism and a long history of joint resistance against the Saddam Hussein regime. They are running on a joint slate in Ninewa, Diyala and Salah al-Din governorates.

[94] See, for example, McClatchy Newspapers, 27 December 2008.

[95] Maliki's military manoeuvres in the Khanaqin district and its Jalawla, Saadiya and Qara Tepe sub-districts led to the restoration of government sovereignty in the latter sub-districts, whereas in Khanaqin itself a de facto modus vivendi was established that looked more or less like the status quo ante: effective Kurdish control expressed through police rather than Kurdish peshmergas. On balance, the Kurds lost both face and control over three subdistricts. Maliki subsequently began rotating senior Kurdish military officers out of units stationed in disputed territories such as Kirkuk and Mosul, replacing them with Arabs. This further angered the Kurds, who could not resist the moves lest they be accused of insubordination.

[96] Maliki said, "our constitution mentioned the so-called exclusive federal powers, exclusive powers for regions and governorates, and joint powers. It left all other powers to governorates and regions. I believe that this was an incorrect approach". He then made the following recommendations: "We must build a strong federal state whose government will assume responsibility for sovereignty, security, external policy, and other matters. The powers must in the first place belong to the federal government. Other powers will belong to the regions and governorates as the constitution stipulates. If some powers are not specified, they will be given to the trunk and not to the branches". Speech at the "Iraqi Elite and Effi-

Maliki's actions have not been limited to campaigns designed to improve his national standing. He also has worked hard to advance Daawa's fortunes, using his newfound power and control over state levers to systematically place party loyalists at the head of governing institutions throughout the country, retiring, transferring or even detaining rivals.[97] This could suffice to give him a significant boost in the provincial elections. In the longer term, though, with parliamentary elections looming, Maliki's continued tenure more likely will depend on ensuring that ISCI and the Sadrists still balance each other and that he remains an acceptable compromise. This may explain why he first went after the Sadrists' military power in Basra and Sadr City, then excluded them from the elections before again pursuing limited accommodation.[98]

Maliki's metamorphosis has put Daawa in an ambiguous electoral position somewhere between the ruling parties, of which it doubtless is one, and the opposition, with whose more pronounced nationalism it identifies most closely. The prime minister has put together a coalition of parties that includes, in addition to his own Abd-al-Karim al-Anizi's Islamic Call Party – Iraq Organisation (Tandhim al-Iraq), Hussain al-Shahristani's Independents (Mustaqiloun),[99] Qasem Daoud's Solidarity (Al-Tadhamun), the Al-Intifadha al-Shaabaniya Pact, the Fayli Kurds' Brotherhood Movement and the Turkoman Islamic Union. As the name Maliki has chosen for his electoral list, Dawlat al-Qanoun ("a law-based state"), indicates, he is running on a law-and-order platform that may resonate with voters fed up with chaos, corruption and crime.[100]

4. The Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP)

The IIP has long punched above its weight. An Islamist Sunni party established in 1960, it benefited from Iraqis' turn toward greater religiosity after the Baathist regime's collapse and the emergence of clerics as beacons of hope in uncertain times. It also benefited from the adoption of an ethno-sectarian system of government by the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority in 2003. Like Shiite Islamist parties, it enjoyed a head start in 2003, having previously existed partly in exile and partly as a semi-underground movement, the Muslim Brotherhood. As the Sunni Arab heartland turned toward insurgency, the IIP was the sole Sunni

ciencies Conference" in Baghdad on 8 November 2008, translated by BBC Monitoring Middle East, 11 November 2008.

[97] Events at the interior ministry in December 2008 may have been an example of the latter. In mid-month, the government arrested 23 officers on charges of membership in the neo-Baathist Al-Awda (Return) party and plotting a coup. These accusations appeared concocted, if only because Baath remnants, congregated mainly in the ministry's traffic department, have little realistic chance of taking over the government. The interior ministry is an important locus of partisan struggles, given its role in directing internal security forces. ISCI has controlled it since the January 2005 elections, but its minister, Bayan Jaber Solagh, who stood accused of sectarian reprisal killings in the 2005-2007 civil war, was replaced by a non-sectarian politician, Jawad Kadhem Bolani, when a new government was formed in June 2006, apparently under U.S. pressure. Bolani has since established his own party, the Iraqi Constitutional Party (al-Hizb al-Dusturi al-Iraqi), which is participating in the provincial elections as a rival to Daawa. The arrests could reflect an attempt by Maliki to undercut both Bolani's authority at the ministry and his standing as a national politician. Maliki has since denied that the officers were suspected of Baathist leanings.

[98] During Ramadan in September 2008, Maliki reportedly invited a Sadrist delegation to an Iftar (breaking the fast) celebration. A Sadrist leader explained: "The Maliki government wanted to show that the Sadrist trend is still on its side. It was a move to confront pressure on the government by some greedy factions, such as the Kurds. The government has watched the Kurds demand territories in Kirkuk, issue illegitimate oil contracts, and so forth; it has seen ISCI revive its idea of substituting Maliki with their own man, Adel Abd-al-Mahdi; and it has also watched as Al-Tawafuq [a Sunni Islamist list that includes the IIP] has tried to bring the Baathists back. All these things occurred because the colossus that had scared these parties and curbed their greediness, i.e., the Sadrist trend, had been pushed out of government. Realising all of this, the Maliki government started to flirt with us as a way of playing its final card – threatening the others that it would bring us back into government". Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Mazen al-Saidi, director of Sadr office in Baghdad Karkh, Baghdad, 14 October 2008. This apparent attempted rapprochement, which included the release of a number of Sadrist prisoners as a goodwill gesture, did not translate into an electoral alliance, however, and there is no evidence that the two sides held further meetings to bring about an agreement.

[99] Hussain al-Shahristani, a former nuclear scientist who spent a decade in Saddam Hussein's dungeons for refusing to work on the regime's nuclear weapons program and has headed the ministry of oil since 2006, is a devout Muslim who is closely associated in the public mind with Ayatollah Sistani; his brother is married to Sistani's daughter and serves as Sistani's representative in Iran. This association, as well as his cabinet role and open opposition to greater Kurdish autonomy in oil contracts, may aid him in his quest for votes.

[100] Maliki also might seek to accommodate ISCI where it is strong, for example in Najaf. As a local community figure in Najaf observed, "ISCI controls the city, and Daawa is not well liked here traditionally. However, the fact that it controls the national government makes it attractive to people, especially those tribal and community leaders who benefit from government largesse. While these two parties will compete fiercely, they will also seek to maintain a level of harmony, lest they jeopardise their overall alliance". Crisis Group interview, Najaf community figure, Amman, 13 December 2008.

political party willing to play by the rules of the new political game. This was the situation in January 2005; other parties emerged too late to compete for representation on provincial councils. The IIP, therefore, did well in the elections (in Anbar and Diyala, and to a lesser extent Ninewa) for lack of opposition. In the December 2005 elections, it ran as part of a coalition of Sunni Islamists, the Iraqi Consensus Front (Jabhat al-Tawafuq al-Iraqiya), usually referred to as Tawafuq.

Tawafuq's relationship with fellow governing parties has been rocky. While sharing with them a common experience of repression under Saddam Hussein's regime, it subsequently sought to represent Sunni Arabs ostracised by the ruling Shiite Islamist parties and Kurds; in turn, many Sunni Arabs were dissatisfied with the Tawafuq leadership's excessively close association with those ruling parties and the U.S. Likewise, the other ruling parties needed Tawafuq to maintain the semblance of national unity (IIP leader Tareq al-Hashemi was elevated to vice president) but were frustrated by its inability to "deliver" Sunni Arabs, i.e., bring the insurgency to an end.

Tawafuq's fortunes began to flag with the arrival of the awakening movement, which ousted al-Qaeda in Iraq from Anbar and (mostly) the streets of Baghdad. Presenting itself as the Sunni Arab community's sole legitimate representative, the movement demanded greater political power. In December 2008, however, it disintegrated, as the president of the council of representatives, Tawafuq's Mahmoud al-Mashhadani, resigned, and one of the party's constituent parts, the National Dialogue Council of Khalaf Ulyan, announced that he and it would leave the coalition to enter into an alliance with opposition parties.[101]

As a result, the IIP faces an uphill battle and likely will suffer major setbacks[102] unless it can forge alliances with other parties, including elements of the awakening movement.[103] It is expected to do relatively well in urban centres, while ceding ground in rural areas, where tribal politics predominate. It will also have the advantage of access to the main mosques, a solid bastion of support over which tribal leaders have relatively little influence. But its leadership is well aware that the free ride enjoyed in 2005 will not be replicated. A member of the party's central committee said, "we hope to improve in some governorates and be reduced to a normal size in others. It is impossible to keep our current representation. We will have to go down to a reasonable size".[104]

C. THE OPPOSITION

Opposition groups have been as divided and heterogeneous as the ruling parties. They include religious and secular parties, popular movements (the Sadrists) and tribally based groups (the awakening councils), parties that resisted the Baathist regime (the Iraqi Communist Party, Daawa splinters), others that emerged in exile (the Iraqi National Accord) and some new ones (for example, Fadhila).[105] What increasingly has brought them together is nationalism and rejection of regionalisation.

The first manifestation of this informal, ad hoc alliance took place in early 2008 during negotiations over a package of legislation, when it extracted concessions from the ruling parties on the provincial powers law. It raised its profile in July 2008 during the vote on the provincial elections law, when it became known as the 22 July Gathering.

Such commonality of interest has not produced a formal electoral alliance. To the contrary, the elections have seen a proliferation of parties and personalities. Those

[101] In late January 2009, no such alliance had emerged.

[102] IIP's main presence is in predominantly Sunni governorates such as Anbar, Ninewa and Salah al-Din; during the past years it has improved its presence in Baghdad, Diyala and Kirkuk. It also has a marginal presence in southern governorates such as Waset, Babel and Basra, which have small Sunni populations.

[103] It appeared to be doing so in Anbar (see below). IIP's leadership authorised its branches in the governorates to choose allies they deemed necessary, including the Iraqi Communist Party or Daawa, "to accomplish the party's ultimate objective: to serve the people". Interestingly, the party's political bureau recommended to its Basra branch that it ally itself with ISCI, but the branch leadership rejected the idea "on grounds of ISCI's bad reputation". Crisis Group interview, IIP official, Baghdad, October 2008.

[104] Crisis Group interview, Bahaa al-Din al-Naqshbandi, IIP political bureau member, Amman, conducted over ten days in June-July 2008.

[105] An opposition party that is not participating in the elections is the Muslim Scholars Association (MSA), a Sunni Islamist group whose senior leadership is based in exile. An independent Iraqi observer said, "the MSA, which used to act as the Sunni religious authority in Sunni areas, continues to reject the notion of elections. They continue to preach to their followers that they should boycott the political process until occupying forces have left Iraq. The MSA has very little impact, however. More and more Iraqis see religion as a bogus technique by some to fool others to achieve their political ambitions. Besides, for many Sunnis the MSA discredited itself by the harm it inflicted upon them through its *fatwa* against the 2005 elections". Crisis Group email communication, 27 October 2008.

that win will have to form post-election alliances to effectively reduce ISCI's power in local government, a goal most share. A provincial council member in Najaf, which is controlled by ISCI, said, "the Sadrists have problems with everyone here, but still, when ISCI tried to stop a Sadrist demonstration recently, we supported the Sadrists and 22 council members boycotted a council meeting. We did this not because we like the Sadrists but just to show ISCI that we have power. We wanted to prove that we can balance their influence".[106]

1. The Sadrist current

Ever enigmatic in its objectives and led by the mercurial son of a famous Shiite cleric assassinated by the Baathist regime, the Sadrist movement has performed a remarkable balancing act between rejecting the occupation and participating in the U.S.-backed government, between street violence and parliamentary politics and between thuggishness and charity. It has both been the target of U.S. military action and benefited from U.S. offensives against what Washington termed "special groups" associated with the Sadrists but which undermined Muqtada al-Sadr's authority. It has been in an essentially passive mode since the start of the U.S. surge in early 2007, moving from an informal ceasefire to a formal one, and on to the announcement it was disarming and focusing on politics and social services. It strongly supports the elections, including by pressing for, and voting in favour of, the enabling legislation.[107]

The Sadrist movement emerged from the sectarian war damaged by the excesses of its followers – be they committed cadres or freelancing associates – in Baghdad and the south. The government's campaigns against the Sadrists in Basra and Sadr City cost them political offices, though it is hard to speak of a fatal blow since they always have been a relatively amorphous and informal movement, able to rely on members' homes for meetings and on mosques to mobilise masses. The latter will play a critical role in the Sadrists' electoral chances, a feature they have in common with ISCI. The Sadrists' hold on *husseiniyas* (Shiite mosques) in poor urban neighbourhoods could translate into high turnout and support for candidates associated with the movement.

Having (apparently) abjured violence and (mostly) disbanded their Mahdi Army militia, the Sadrists have adopted the slogan: "Peaceful resistance to liberate Iraq".[108] Because the Sadrists have been blocked from running as a party and fear arrest or worse if they come out into the open as candidates, the Sadrist trend has encouraged nominally independent candidates, including technocrats, to run on individual lists. A Sadrist leader described his movement's electoral strategy:

> The Sadrist trend has suffered a lot in the past few years. It has been a target of those in government for quite a while. They jailed, killed and persecuted Sadrists. To defend us against these oppressors, we are going to participate in the provincial elections, using our popular base to ensure that nationalists and those with national views similar to ours will be elected. But the Sadrist trend is not going to participate directly. We are not going to form a list of Sadrists. Instead we are going to encourage professionals and Sadrist trend followers to participate on independent lists, and we will support them with our popular base to make sure they get elected.[109]

A prominent Sadrist leader in Najaf said, referring in particular to the council there, "we realised that the best way to make provincial councils more effective is to demolish majority rule and leave councils without the control of any one party. No party should get more than five to ten seats. This is why we decided to support independent lists. We will bring independents into the councils to lessen the dominance of the major parties".[110] On 9 January 2009, Sadrist trend spokesman Salah al-Obeidi announced that "according to Muqtada al-Sadr's instructions, the movement will support for now only the Integrity and Construction [Nazaha wa al-Binaa] List, no. 731, and the Liberals' Independent Trend [Tayar al-Ahrar al-Mustaqill], no. 821", two lists of independents and technocrats running in most southern governorates and Baghdad.[111]

The Sadrists' main rival is ISCI, with which it intermittently has sparred since 2003. ISCI repeatedly has sought to bring U.S. military power to bear on the Sadrists and

[106] Crisis Group interview, Najaf provincial council member for Wifaq, Najaf, 9 October 2008.

[107] Reidar Visser noted correctly that "Sadrists are often portrayed in the Western media as an essentially destructive force; it is often forgotten that had it not been for parliamentary pressure by the Sadrists, there probably would have been no local elections at all". Reidar Visser, "The Candidate Lists Are Out", 22 December 2008, at www.historiae.org.

[108] Crisis Group interview, Osama al-Musawi, Qadisiya Sadr office director, Diwaniya, 20 and 29 September 2008.

[109] Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Mazen al-Saidi, Sadr office director in Baghdad Karkh, Baghdad, 14 October 2008.

[110] Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Salah al-Obeidi, Najaf chief spokesman for the Sadr trend, Najaf, 7 October 2008.

[111] Reported on the website www.almalafpress.net, 9 January 2009. The two lists are running in Baghdad, Basra, Najaf, Qadisiya, Karbala, Babel, Maysan, Muthanna, Dhi Qar and Waset. The Liberals' Independent Trend is also running in Diyala and Ninewa. Neither list is participating in Anbar or Salah al-Din.

used control of the security apparatus to detain many rivals.[112] Conversely, Sadrists have appealed for public support against that party, which it portrays as an Iranian proxy hiding behind the U.S. That fight is undecided (and likely will remain so at least as long as U.S. forces remain), but the upcoming electoral contest will provide a useful sense of its direction.

2. The awakening councils

An amalgam of tribal groups united by name only, the awakening councils (*Majalis al-Sahwa*) or Sons of Iraq (*Abnaa al-Iraq*), are the Sunni response to al-Qaeda in Iraq. Given the AQI leadership's original foreign provenance, this was both a nationalist response to the hijacking of the Sunnis' Iraqi cause by an exogenous entity and a defensive move against that entity's growing Iraqisation.[113] Their alliance with the U.S. aims primarily at curbing the influence of a government many Sunnis see as an Iranian proxy. Their aspiration is to reintegrate the political order, realistically for self-preservation, possibly and implausibly to restore Sunni power. They see provincial elections as the first test of their ability to do so and revenge on parties that exploited Sunni disarray and electoral boycott in 2005. It is difficult to assess their support among Sunni Arabs. U.S. funding until late 2008 (when Washington handed salary responsibilities to the government) has enabled the awakening councils to attract young recruits, a captive constituency certain to vote for the councils, reconstituted as political parties.

Awakening councils have formed lists in Baghdad and Diyala. Those that did not form their own lists have announced their support for certain Sunni Arab lists, both religious and secular. Dimming their electoral chances, however, awakening leaders have failed to create a unified electoral front, instead fragmenting along clan-based personalities. For example, in Anbar, the leader of the first awakening council to arise in 2006, Ahmad Abu Risha (brother of its founder, Abd-al-Sattar, who was assassinated in September 2007), forged an electoral alliance with the IIP in late 2008, to the fury of other awakening leaders, who saw it as a betrayal of their plan to take power from those who had taken advantage of the 2005 Sunni Arab boycott (see below).

The Maliki government has sought to weaken the awakening movement, arresting some of its leaders and many of its members, especially in mixed-population governorates, where Shiite parties are battling the awakening councils for votes.[114] In Diyala governorate, for example, the arrest of awakening leaders could significantly reduce Sunni Arab chances of getting back into the political game.

3. Shiite nationalist/Islamist parties

Once the bedrock of the Shiites' electoral triumphs, the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) has disintegrated in government. Both the Sadrists and Fadhila left the alliance; the founder of the UIA at Ayatollah Sistani's behest, Hussain al-Shahristani, has established his own party/list, Independents, which has joined Maliki's State of Law coalition; the country's first elected prime minister, Ibrahim al-Jaafari, also went his separate way after Nouri al-Maliki replaced him as both government leader and Daawa Party chief in 2006. Moreover, Interior Minister Jawad Kadhem Bolani established the Iraqi Constitutional Party (al-Hizb al-Dusturi al-Iraqi) as a rival to Daawa, and some of Sistani's followers are fielding their own candidates, either on Shahristani's list or as independents.

What unites Fadhila, the Iraqi Constitutional Party and Jaafari's National Reform Trend is their Shiite middle-class origins, their opposition to ISCI and its regionalist plans and their support for a relatively strong central government in Baghdad. Still, differences abound. Fadhila is a Shiite Islamist party that follows Muhammad al-Yaqoubi, a principal disciple of the late Ayatollah Muhammad Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr, rather than the latter's son, Muqtada al-Sadr, who is a relatively low-ranking cleric. Moreover, as a primarily Basra-based party, Fadhila favours greater autonomy for Basra governorate to retain income from its huge oil fields for local development.

[112] For example, as a Sadrist politician in Qadisiya put it, "ISCI controls security in Qadisiya. The security forces take instructions from the governor, who is an ISCI man. As evidence for their partisanship, look at the fact that the governorate's jails are full of members of the Sadr trend. No one from ISCI is in jail. This is not logical. Is it possible that no one of ISCI has violated the law – that all of them are law-abiding citizens?" Crisis Group interview, Osama al-Musawi, Qadisiya Sadr office director, Diwaniya, 20 and 29 September 2008.

[113] The Sunni argument against Shiites and Kurds has been that their parties, by supporting a separate identity (the Kurds) or acting on behalf of Iran (the Shiite Islamists), seek to destroy Iraq. Al-Qaeda's ideology of a pan-Islamist emirate, if realised, would also leave little of Iraq. While AQI became increasingly "Iraqified" over time, it engaged in outrages against not only Shiites but also Sunnis and thus overstayed the welcome of a community that had played an uneasy host from the outset. For an analysis, see Crisis Group Report, *Iraq After the Surge I*, op. cit.

[114] See, for example, McClatchy Newspapers, 27 December 2008.

Fadhila's local standing has been damaged by the performance of the Basra governor, a Fadhila member whose four-year rule has been marred by mismanagement and accusations of corruption as well as oil smuggling.[115] It has refrained from confronting Daawa, with which it shares enmity toward ISCI; conversely, Maliki adopted a tolerant position toward the Basra governor during the April 2008 military operation. Fadhila may be able to compensate for its losses in Basra through small gains in other southern governorates, such as Dhi Qar, Qadisiya, Maysan, Muthanna, Najaf and Karbala.

Al-Jaafari is in a different situation. His departure from Daawa Party was never interpreted as a break with the larger Daawa movement. This has allowed him to simultaneously retain ties to Daawa followers, criticise Maliki (for example, concerning the bring-out-the-vote Isnaad councils, mentioned below)[116] and draw closer to the Sadrists, with whose winning independent candidates he may ally himself after the elections. He appears to possess considerable resources, judging by those he lavishes to gain support from tribal as well as community leaders and to organise gatherings in various governorates. He may be aided as well by his alliances with cross-sectarian lists, such as Al-Hall (the Solution).

For the most part, these Shiite parties possess a narrow regional base or are defined by a strong personality, neither of which likely will allow them to become serious players. That said, they will be important in defining post-electoral alliances.

4. Secular parties

One of the most salient aspects of the 2005 elections was the secular elite's political vanishing act. Its self-appointed standard bearer, Iyad Allawi, who served as prime minister of the interim government in 2004, failed to deliver on U.S. expectations he could lead the country. Despite massive U.S. funding, his Iraqi National Accord Movement (known as Wifaq) performed poorly, reflecting the powerful role assumed by clerics, the progressive haemorrhaging of the urban secular middle class – which largely left for Jordan, Syria and the Gulf – and perhaps above all his reputation as a weak manager and autocrat who had overseen an administration viewed as corrupt.

Both Wifaq and the other main secular movement, the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), gained between two and four council seats out of 41 in several governorates in January 2005. In the December 2005 parliamentary elections, they were joined by a secular Sunni Arab party, Saleh Mutlaq's Iraqi Front for National Dialogue. While all three have proved ineffectual in either government or opposition over the past four years, they might benefit from public disaffection with the role of religion and clerics in politics. Moreover, Mutlaq's party has been sounding electorally useful patriotic notes by criticising the U.S. occupation and blaming religious parties for all that has gone wrong.

These main parties aside, more than 300 new democratic and liberal groups have emerged. Their large number partly reflects broad public interest in alternatives to the current parties but also is likely to scatter votes. Given the threshold requirement, this could dilute their impact and benefit more established parties.

[115] Crisis Group interviews, notables in Basra, September-December 2008. In neighbouring Muthanna, Fadhila received a blow to its reputation as well. According to a representative of a local non-governmental organisation, "in 2005, a Fadhila man nominated himself as council chairman, but his own party told him to step aside, as it had an agreement with ISCI that ISCI would get the position in Muthanna if Fadhila would get Basra [the governor's position]. This was an order from Ayatollah Yaqoubi himself. The man refused, however, and the council elected him as its chairman. After he came under threat, he stepped down a couple of months later, and ISCI took the position. Fadhila's reputation in Muthanna suffered because of that. People thought: how can a senior member of Fadhila disobey his *marjeaa* [religious guide] for the sake of a position"? Crisis Group interview, member of the Al-Ayn Network for Election Monitoring, Samawa, 4 October 2008.

[116] Crisis Group interview, Ahmad Jabbar, Karbala office director of Ibrahim al-Jaafari's National Reform Trend, Karbala, 3 December 2008.

IV. FACTORS SHAPING THE OUTCOME

A. CONTROL OF INSTITUTIONS

Ruling parties hold a significant advantage in their ability to use institutions under their control. These include state-owned or -controlled mosques, clinics and other facilities that matter to ordinary people, as well as satellite television channels.[117] The parties also make use of government largesse to persuade voters and, in some instances, have sought to buy tribal loyalties (see below). An independent politician said, "the parties are playing with the financial strings and using Napoleon Bonaparte's dictum: 'Make your dog hungry and it will follow you'. Each party is using its power and authority in the government to improve its electoral chances. If you don't enlist in a party today, no one will give you a job, you won't be able to secure a living, and no one will protect you".[118]

In a system steeped in patronage and with high levels of public-sector employment (a third of the labour force),[119] ruling parties can remind government employees of the benefits (job security) associated with their continued hold on power. Conversely, some fear that openly campaigning against a ruling party may lead to sanctions. The same politician remarked: "When I see that the hospital director belongs to party A, the director of another institute also belongs to party A and moreover the police chief is a party A man, then of course I will bow to party A, because I know they are in charge, and I know that if I campaign against them, they might punish me".[120]

Maliki's Daawa appears particularly well placed to translate its institutional control into votes. A tribal leader who was instrumental in setting up Isnaad councils (see below) for Maliki remarked:

> The Daawa Party is using government as a tool to serve its political objectives, perhaps not directly but by providing opportunities to its supporters. By directing government services to certain areas, it gains people's support, which translates in Daawa's favour.[121]

One institution that has come under suspicion, perhaps predictably given its central role in the elections, is the Iraqi High Electoral Commission (IHEC). Opposition politicians of various stripes (including tribal leaders in Anbar and Sadrist sheikhs) have accused the ruling parties of manipulating the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq (IECI) in 2005 and IHEC today, staffing them with nominally independent technocrats who are in fact loyalists. A Sadrist leader alleged: "When they first established IECI, the Sadrists were well represented. But gradually they started pushing our people out by constantly changing officials. Eventually the ruling parties came to monopolise IECI and now [since it has become IHEC] they are in complete control".[122] Likewise, an awakening leader charged: "The IIP controls IHEC in Anbar; its director also belongs to the IIP. We wrote many objection letters to Baghdad but have received no reply".[123] And a Basra lawyer said, "IHEC is the product of a power-sharing arrangement between the major parties. This means it has to keep them happy and prevent [electoral] surprises".[124]

Allegations of IHEC's partisanship notwithstanding, no evidence of electoral bias has emerged. Moreover, independent politicians and civil society leaders across the country have cast doubt on such aspersions, lauding the institution's independence.[125] By challenging IHEC's integrity, parties that could end up losing may be trying to create a record of grievance from which to press for a re-count or a re-vote, or to undermine the elections' legitimacy among their constituents, as the boycotting parties succeeded in doing in January 2005.

[117] Crisis Group interview, Bahaa Jalal-al-Din, self-described independent member of Basra provincial council who ran for the Daawa Party in 2005, Basra, 14 September 2008.
[118] Crisis Group interview, Fadhel Sultan al-Badri, independent politician, Diwaniya, 19-24 September 2008.
[119] Public-sector employment was 31 per cent of the total labour force in 2006 and was expected to reach 35 per cent in 2008, the latest figure available. *International Herald Tribune*, 11 August 2008.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Crisis Group interview, tribal leader, Amman, 20 November 2008.
[122] Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Mazen al-Saidi, Sadr office director in Baghdad Karkh, Baghdad, 14 October 2008.
[123] Crisis Group interview, Ali Hatem al-Suleiman, founding member of the National Salvation Front and head of the Al-Anbar Tribal Council, Ramadi, 19 November 2008. A lawyer in Mosul said: "The IHEC director in Ninewa is neither independent nor qualified for his position. He does not even have a university degree". Crisis Group interview, Fares Abd-al-Sattar Baqou, president of Iraqi Jurists Association, Mosul, 16 October 2008.
[124] Crisis Group interview, lawyer, Basra, 29 November and 11 December 2008.
[125] Crisis Group interviews across Iraq, September-November 2008.

B. INDEPENDENT LISTS AND CANDIDATES

The 2009 elections are seeing a proliferation of independent lists and candidates. Some view this as a positive development, an index of greater diversity and a move away from dominant parties. One analyst said, "many of the independents were members of political parties that are currently in government, so it may be that they have left their parties and have become true independents". Moreover, he added, most are technocrats, whose election would be a net plus.[126] Still, many political observers interpret this merely as an attempt by leading parties to overcome their drop in popular support by creating so-called independent lists that will rejoin or align with them once the votes are counted – or, alternatively, that will split the vote in such a way as to ensure the larger parties' electoral advantage.

An independent Basra provincial council member said, "the ruling parties realised that the populace is reluctant to re-elect them, so they started redefining themselves, for example as independents. Sometimes they use names such as 'the Independent Country List', merely to tickle people's feelings. The individuals on these lists are party-affiliated, however".[127] In Anbar, for example, the IIP is running on its own list, but party members also are heading lists that are IIP in all but name.[128] In the words of a Ramadi teacher, "other lists and community figures are closely related to the IIP and are expected to be friendly toward it once the IIP wins the election".[129]

How effective this will be is a matter of debate, as some are convinced voters will be discerning. A Babel politician said, "some council members will not be re-elected. Some of them will try to change their skins and call themselves 'The Renewal' or 'The Change' or 'The Regeneration' in order to gain votes, but I don't think this will get them very far".[130] A Sadrist politician agreed:

> There is no such thing as an independent list. When the parties saw that people had grown tired of religious parties and would rather vote for independents, they formed independent lists, thinking that having such a façade would help get votes. So ISCI set up its independent list, as did the Sadrists, Sistani's followers and just about every political party. What may happen, however, is that voters lose confidence altogether as they are unable to distinguish between true independents and those affiliated with political parties.[131]

C. USING MOSQUES

The senior Shiite religious establishment has been careful not to endorse any parties this time. It increasingly has distanced itself from local and national government over the past four years, deeming them corrupt and incapable of addressing ordinary people's concerns. A Fadhila politician said, "the Marjaiya [Shiite religious leadership in Najaf] this time is not going to intervene in the election, because it is displeased with what those in government and the provincial councils have achieved in the past four years. It has commented more than once how disgruntled it is with parliamentarians and provincial council members".[132] The deputy representative of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Babel echoed criticism of the local councils, saying, "they did not perform very well, because some council members got busy with their own benefits and narrow political interests. Iraqis should vote for candidates who suffered like them and who are able to take responsibility to change things".[133]

Sistani himself has called on Iraqis to vote as an essential component of nation building[134] but pointedly refrained from favouring any party or candidate. In early January 2009, his office released a statement quoting him as saying, "I wholly support the electoral process

[126] Crisis Group interview, representative of the Tammuz Organisation for Social Development, Baghdad, 24 November 2008.
[127] Crisis Group interview, Bahaa Jalal-al-Din, self-described independent member of Basra provincial council who ran for the Daawa Party in 2005, Basra, 14 September 2008.
[128] For example, Salman Ali Hassan al-Jumayli, who is a member of the council of representatives for the IIP, is heading a list called the National Future Gathering (Tajammu al-Mustaqbal al-Watani), while Vice-President Tareq al-Hashemi's aide Omar Haichal Hamad Shabib has set up the Independent National Tribal Gathering (Al-Tajammu al-Watani al-Ashaairi al-Mustaqil).
[129] Crisis Group interview, teacher, Ramadi, 14 December 2008.
[130] Crisis Group interview, Ali Hussein al-Khafaji, head of the Intifadha Shaabaniya Movement, Hilla, 10 June 2008.
[131] Crisis Group interview, Osama al-Musawi, Sadr office director in Qadisiya, Diwaniya, 20 and 29 September 2008.
[132] Crisis Group interview, Nasef Jasem Ali al-Abadi, Basra provincial council deputy chairman for Fadhila, Basra, 30 November 2008.
[133] Crisis Group interview, Ahmad Hadi Abbadi, deputy representative of Ali al-Sistani in Babel, Hilla, 14 June 2008.
[134] During Friday service on 26 December 2008, Sistani's representative in Karbala told worshipers that "if you vote, then you are 100 per cent right, because participating in the elections and voting is a process that creates a country". Quoted by Agence France-Presse, 27 December 2008.

and stand at a single distance from all the candidates and from all Iraqi citizens".[135]

However, the same is not true of certain lower-level Shiite clerics, who likely will back ISCI or the Sadrists, each of which funds its own networks of mosques and affiliated clerics.[136] ISCI in particular enjoys the support of many clerics, who see it as close to the Marjaiya, an advantage it has over both the Sadrists and Daawa, which is non-clerical and has no direct link to senior clerics.[137] ISCI reportedly has increased the number of religious ceremonies celebrated in local mosques and *husseiniyas* (Shiite mosques),[138] which it uses to mobilise the public. Perhaps more significantly, it continues to invoke Sistani's name in its many media outlets. An election monitor in Samawa said, "ISCI uses Sistani's name a lot in their news and usually refer to him as 'Imam Sistani'. ISCI is trying to show that they are his representatives, and many people believe them".[139]

Sadrists are expected to employ similar emotive religious symbols and the power of the mosques to get their followers to vote. A Sadrist official said, "our trend will support nationalist lists in addition to followers of our trend. We may announce certain names of candidates or lists through Friday prayers closer to election day. This is a huge media tool available to us throughout Iraq".[140] An independent observer predicted that "elections in the south will be determined by mosques and money".[141]

D. THE TRIBAL VOTE

Inspired by the example set in Anbar and concerned about both ISCI's hold on the Shiite clerical class and the Sadrist trend's control of the Shiite street, Prime Minister Maliki started establishing a new brand of tribal groups, called *Isnad* ("Support") councils. Some began as awakening councils in Baghdad neighbourhoods, ostensibly as part of the reconciliation effort.[142] Subsequently, Maliki extended them to Shiite areas north of the capital,[143] then throughout the Shiite south and, finally as well as provocatively, in mixed-population governorates such as Ninewa, Kirkuk and Diyala. He found willing partners in Shiite tribal leaders, who saw the Sadrist movement in particular as a challenge to their authority, supported the Maliki government's military operations against it and agreed to organise their tribesmen as an unarmed counterbalance.

Typically, Isnad councils have offices in neighbourhoods, towns, and even villages, where its members gather, sit and talk. Three or more men stand guard, watching the main road to see who is passing. An Iraqi observer said, "that's all they do. No foot patrols, no car patrols, and definitely no attacks against anyone. If they see anything or are suspicious about a certain house or group of men, they report it to the police or sometimes to the Americans".[144] Unlike the awakening councils, Isnaad councils have not been given weapons, but most Iraqis already have a personal gun. In some cases, the councils have staged pro-government rallies, as in Naseriya on 17 November 2008. More

[135] Quoted in Iraqi newspapers, 5 January 2009. How distant Sistani is from candidates is not entirely clear, as some of his followers are running on independent lists. Even if they did not receive Sistani's explicit endorsement, their allegiances are widely known; and their decision to run would be seen by many as a de facto endorsement from Sistani.

[136] According to a local council member in Babel, "ISCI is doing its utmost to win over clerics and mullahs; it sees them as the only way to reach the masses of people". Crisis Group interview, Babel provincial council member, Hilla, 14 November 2008.

[137] An Iraqi official said, "ISCI and the Sadrists have in common that they both can rely on a network of mosques to bring out the vote and have voters support the right candidates. Daawa does not have that". Crisis Group interview, Amman, 18 December 2008.

[138] Crisis Group interview, representative of the Tammuz Organisation for Social Development, Baghdad, 24 November 2008.

[139] Crisis Group interview, member of the Al-Ayn Network for Election Monitoring, Samawa, 4 October 2008.

[140] Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Mazen al-Saidi, Sadr office director in Baghdad Karkh, Baghdad, 14 October 2008.

[141] Crisis Group interview, Ghassan Atiyyah, London, 11 December 2008.

[142] A community organiser in Baghdad claimed she helped set up Iraq's first Isnad councils in her own neighbourhood of Hay al-Jameaa, as well as Al-Adel, in early 2008, as part of the U.S. stabilisation effort. "The idea was to achieve security from AQI, to effect reconciliation between Sunnis and Shiites and provide basic services at the neighbourhood level". Because the model succeeded, the government replicated it in Saadiya neighbourhood. After this, Maliki took the idea and turned it into an electoral device. Crisis Group interview, Amman, 18 December 2008.

[143] A tribal leader instrumental in establishing Isnaad councils in areas north of Baghdad said these councils "started initially as a mechanism to protect tribal and rural areas from al-Qaeda in Iraq, which dominated these regions and reduced the power of the sheikhs and community leaders". The model was then extended elsewhere. Crisis Group interview, tribal leader, Amman, 20 November 2008.

[144] He added: "The U.S. Army paid for some of these councils from the very beginning but soon, perhaps in May 2008, it decided they were not functioning very well and then Maliki began paying their monthly salaries from the emergency budget to which he has unlimited access. He also started forming new councils". Crisis Group email communication, 18 January 2009.

broadly, they are seen as a get-out-the-vote mechanism for use in provincial elections.[145] In exchange for patronage, a tribal leader is expected to bring his men to the polls to vote for the party that provides him with a steady income.

As such, the councils have incurred the wrath of Maliki's main rivals among both ruling parties – ISCI and the Kurdistan Alliance – and opposition, including the Sadrists,[146] all of whom are involved in an intense competition for the tribal vote. The three-man presidency council, comprising leaders who are Maliki's rivals in government, denounced the Isnaad councils on 21 November 2008 and called on Maliki to suspend them until their legality could be determined.[147] Maliki responded: "We see no practical or legal justification for abolishing these councils after they have succeeded in establishing security and stability and aiding national reconciliation efforts".[148]

A senior ISCI politician in Qadisiya governorate denounced creation of the Isnad councils as divisive:

> The Isnad councils are the prime minister's brainchild. He has established them here without consulting with the local government and without its knowledge. The local government disapproves of them. They have caused sedition [*fitna*] among local tribes in Qadisiya. They comprise local tribes led by certain sheikhs, but these are not well-known tribal leaders. In response, well-known tribal sheikhs announced the formation of a central tribal council in Qadisiya, which called for disbanding the Isnaad councils.[149]

A Fadhila member in Dhi Qar echoed this view:

> We have many Isnad councils in towns and districts, made up from the tribes of Dhi Qar. They are unarmed, and they are not allowed to man checkpoints or run patrols. They only have offices. We do not need such councils, because we have a stable security situation. They function as tribal support for the government, as represented by the prime minister. Sometimes it uses them to organise demonstrations, for example after recent remarks by Masoud Barzani against the Isnaad councils [see below] and also in support of the security agreement with the United States.[150]

Many tribes also have put forward their own candidates. An observer in Qadisiya attributed this activism to the new provincial powers law, which he said gives "vast new powers to the provincial councils". Once they saw the law, he claimed, tribes in Qadisiya split between those, like the Al-Khuzai, Al-Aqraa and Al-Jubour, who planned to field their own candidates and those who allied with certain political parties (an allusion to the Isnaad councils).[151] In Dhi Qar, many tribal candidates are running partly because the governorate is heavily tribal but also because tribal leaders have realised, as a local politician noted, that "areas lacking

[145] Heads of families, clans or tribes can cast votes on behalf of their male and female members or followers, an established, though not legal, practice. Moreover, these men and women could still cast their own votes independently. "This is what ISCI is afraid of". Crisis Group interview, independent Iraqi observer, Amman, 16 October 2008.

[146] ISCI reportedly experimented with organising tribal groups, which it called "Popular Committees", a couple of years ago, providing them with weapons, but the project ran aground. Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Salah al-Obeidi, Najaf chief spokesman for the Sadr trend, Najaf, 7 October 2008.

[147] President Jalal Talabani specifically denounced Maliki's initiative: "Maliki is clinging to his decision to form Support Councils, and he considers it legal, but we will go to the constitutional court to see whether it is legal or not". Agence France-Presse, 3 December 2008. The presidency council consists of Talabani and Vice Presidents Adel Abd-al-Mahdi and Tareq al-Hashemi. They belong to the three parties – ISCI, the Kurdistan Alliance and the IIP – that together with Maliki's Daawa constitute the ruling alliance.

[148] Agence France-Presse, 3 December 2008.

[149] Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Hussein al-Khalidi, chairman of the Qadisiya provincial council for ISCI, Diwaniya, 28 November 2008.

[150] Crisis Group interview, Hassan Waryosh al-Asadi, Dhi Qar provincial council member for Fadhila, Naseriya, 29 November 2008. An independent Iraqi observer presented a different critique of Maliki's tactics: "Maliki's image as a law keeper and security achiever is a key feature of his election campaign. But some of his electoral initiatives, such as the Isnaad councils, are very short-sighted. They became a focal point for critics and give too much weight to a social group – fictitious tribal figures – that has been exhausted; the old regime also used the tribes, and it proved a failure. The Isnaad councils could be used successfully for any other mission but not for gathering popular support in elections". Crisis Group email communication, Amman, 4 January 2009. Maliki has defended his position, saying, "tribal councils are not meant as a party project; they cannot serve one party at the expense of others; they serve the Iraqi government and the interests of the public". Quoted in *Niqash*, 6 November 2008, at www.niqash.org. Few appear convinced by the prime minister's assurances.

[151] Crisis Group interview, Salem Haloul Obeid, Diwaniya district director (*qaim-maqam*), Diwaniya, 29 November 2008.

representation have attracted little attention from the government and few reconstruction projects".[152]

E. FRAUD

Although so far there have been no allegations of pre-election fraud, a spectrum of Iraqis interviewed by Crisis Group expressed fear that political parties, especially ruling ones, would use improper practices both during and after the vote. "The weakest part of the chain is the human factor", said a Baghdad engineer. "The parties can plant their own people in polling stations and bribe, buy or threaten other officials present there. These tend to be the same people used for past elections and the referendum; they know the procedures and the tricks to circumvent them".[153]

Those interviewed for this report were eager to list the many opportunities and methods of fraud that exist, some of which they claimed had been used in 2005.[154] At the same time, they made clear that chances of fraud could be minimised by a combination of party- and UN-trained independent observers.[155] In fact, it is unlikely that massive fraud could be employed without active collusion of IHEC officials and associated election staff, who are supposed to ensure free and fair elections. IHEC has hired 210,000 teachers to operate polling centres, which are routinely located in schools.

This is no guarantee against bias, but to many the use of teachers as local election administrators is somewhat reassuring. A provincial council member said, "IHEC will be using teachers and academics to operate polling stations. This is comforting, because these people are educated and have a degree of reliability; many are unlikely to be strong sympathisers with religious or sectarian groups".[156] Moreover, multiple voting, a problem in previous elections, will be difficult this time, as voter lists are produced at the polling station level, meaning that a voter's name will be found on only one list in one polling station nationwide, so that he or she will be able to vote only at the pre-assigned polling unit.[157]

The concerns expressed indicate the depth of distrust among both politicians and the general electorate. Because it is so widespread across party lines, however, lack of trust paradoxically could have the salutary effect of encouraging more comprehensive monitoring. The proliferation of parties arguably contributes to the elections' occurring in a free and fair manner, and the ruling parties have been put on notice that their actions are being watched carefully. It should also be noted that losing candidates will have reason to cry fraud even if there is no malfeasance. As an independent observer noted: "No matter the outcome, losers will never accept the results. It would be hard for them to say they lost because they lack popularity. All they could say is that they lost because the elections were unfair".[158]

[152] Crisis Group interview, Hassan Waryosh al-Asadi, Dhi Qar provincial council member for Fadhila, Naseriya, 29 November 2008.
[153] Crisis Group interview, Farouq Mahdi Saleh, engineer, Baghdad, 11 July 2008.
[154] Reported methods of fraud include: allowing heads of household to vote for the entire family and tribal leaders to turn in the votes of their men ("block" votes); using names of voters who do not show up at the polls to cast votes; allowing voters to vote more than once by not having them dip their index fingers in indelible ink; allowing displaced Iraqis to vote for the council in the governorate in which they are currently living but in which they have not been registered as residents; allowing votes to be cast on behalf of refugees living outside Iraq via food ration cards left behind with relatives; manipulating ballots before they are deposited in the ballot boxes or tampering with the boxes when these are being transferred to a secure place for vote counting. Crisis Group interviews, September-October 2008.
[155] The government reportedly has hired 46,000 non-partisan election observers, while thousands of other monitors belonging to parties will also be given access to polling stations. *The New York Times*, 8 January 2009. There has been no rush of offers for international monitors, given security concerns.
[156] Crisis Group interview, Babel provincial council member, Hilla, 14 November 2008.
[157] IHEC adopted this measure, following UN advice about best practices to mitigate multiple voting. Crisis Group email communication, electoral expert, 23 January 2009.
[158] Crisis Group email communication, 10 January 2009.

V. THE BATTLEGROUND STATES

A. NINEWA

An area largely neglected by the U.S. after 2005, Ninewa governorate continues to be beset by violence. No awakening movement has arisen; a score of insurgent groups, including AQI remnants, remain active, setting off bombs and carrying out killings; and a creeping territorial conflict brews in mixed Kurdish-Arab areas, including part of the capital Mosul. All this has made for a highly volatile mix awaiting ignition. The governorate has seen intermittent outbursts, most recently in October 2008, when an apparently orchestrated campaign of killings of Chaldo-Assyrian Christians in Mosul by masked men led to a Christian exodus; some 2,000 families (an estimated 11,000 persons) fled their homes, moving in with relatives in the Kurdistan region or parts of Ninewa claimed by the Kurds.[159]

Politicians promptly turned the event into an electoral issue. A Chaldo-Assyrian leader placed the campaign inside the larger conflict over disputed territories: "We have become victims of the Arab-Kurdish conflict. The Kurds want to add Sinjar, Tel Afar, Tel Qayf, Hamdaniya, Sheikhan and other areas to their region by having one third of Ninewa's 37 council members vote in favour of a referendum. Obsessed by this threat, Arab nationalists suspect that the minorities in Ninewa will ally themselves with the Kurds".[160] While no culprits have been identified, Kurdish leaders have accused Arabs and others associated with AQI of spreading terror in the Chaldo-Assyrian community in order to sow intra-communal tensions. Kurdistan region Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani said, "the terrorists have recruited support from a mix of ethnic and religious groups in an effort to sow doubt, fear and tension among the people of Mosul. This is a classic terrorist tactic".[161]

By contrast, Arab leaders have charged that the Kurds, pretending to be Arabs by wearing masks, terrorised the Chaldo-Assyrians to convince them they would be safe only with the Kurds. In a comment echoed throughout Mosul's Arab community, a college administrator said, "Kurds will take advantage of minorities, such as the Christians, Yazidis, Shabak and the Shiite Turkomans of Tel Afar. These minorities are not united, and the Kurds are using all sorts of means to win them over or terrorise them or eliminate factions or individuals that prove to be obstacles to the Kurds' ambitions".[162]

In 2009, unlike 2005, alliances with Chaldo-Assyrians and other Ninewa minorities may be critical to both Arab and Kurdish parties' fortunes, given political fragmentation. Although Kurds dominate local politics and the security apparatus, several secular Arab nationalist groups have emerged to confront them in the elections. Most prominent appears to be the Al-Hadbaa List,[163] headed by Osama and Atheel al-Nujayfi, which opposes both the Kurds (whom it accused of being behind the attacks on Chaldo-Assyrians[164]) and – on religious grounds – the IIP. But there are other lists as well, each spending significant amounts of money and distributing food to the poor – an effective tool in a situation of poverty for many people throughout the country.

The Kurdish-dominated provincial council attempted to postpone voting in Ninewa for six months but failed to gain support for its proposal,[165] including from the Kurdish leadership itself, which may have seen little benefit in fighting an unwinnable political battle in Baghdad. A Kurdish official predicted that the Kurdish parties, which are running jointly on the Brotherhood List,[166] would win only between nine and twelve

[159] "Forced from Their Homes: Mosul Emergency Response Action Report, October 8-27, 2008", International Medical Corps, 28 October 2008, at www.imcworldwide.org.

[160] Crisis Group interview, Yonadam Kanna, member of the council of representatives, leader of the Assyrian Democratic Movement and head of the Al-Rafidain List, Baghdad, 6 November 2008. He also said that Arabs had stopped referring to Ninewa, preferring Mosul, because of the echoes of Ninewa's Assyrian past.

[161] Barzani further defined "the terrorists" by stating: "The city of Mosul has today become a safe-haven for many terrorist organisations and some lingering members of the former Ba'ath regime. The so called 'Islamist State,' for example, has become an umbrella association under which all these terrorists operate. It is true that most of the members are Arabs, but the groups consist of Turkomans and Kurds too". "Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani speaks to KRG.org about the attacks on the Iraqi Christian community", Kurdistan Regional Government, 5 November 2008, at www.krg.org.

[162] Crisis Group interview, academic, Mosul, 28 April 2008.

[163] Al-Hadbaa is another name for Mosul, after one of its prominent, curved (*hadbaa*), minarets.

[164] Nujayfi was quoted as saying, "we have concrete evidence and proof that Kurdish militias were behind the fleeing of more than 1,400 Christians from Mosul". Deutsche Presse-Agentur, 14 October 2008. More Chaldo-Assyrians fled in subsequent days.

[165] Khasro Goran, Ninewa's (Kurdish) deputy governor, said, "I am the head of the Kurdish bloc in Ninewa, and we asked to postpone the elections for six months. There are Kurds who were displaced by Saddam and have returned but do not have ration cards and therefore cannot vote. Moreover, the security situation remains bad. We want to solve these problems before holding elections". Crisis Group interview, Mosul, 14 January 2009.

[166] The Brotherhood List comprises five Kurdish parties, the Iraqi Communist Party and the Assyrian National Party.

seats, down from 31 in 2005 (the total number of council seats has been reduced from 41 to 37).[167]

Whether elections can be held safely, and whether the population will feel sufficiently secure to make their way to the polling stations, will depend on the effectiveness of the security forces. In a disturbing sign of continued violence, gunmen assassinated Muwaffaq al-Hamdani, a candidate on one of the Arab lists, "Iraq For Us", on the last day of 2008.[168]

B. DIYALA

Parts of Diyala remain unstable and unsafe, including the capital, Baaquba. A local politician said that security remained "perilously fragile: I know of displaced families who had returned to Diyala but have left again. In the Tahrir area [in Baaquba], in front of the police academy and governorate building, the situation is very bad; the terrorists roam freely".[169] Because of this and the fact they face a resurgent Sunni Arab community eager to seize control through elections, Shiite Islamist and Kurdish politicians unsuccessfully sought to postpone the polls.[170]

Despite ongoing violence, most people have been gearing up for the elections. Among them, in rural areas, are tribal groups which, empowered by the awakening campaign and Maliki's subsequent effort to establish Isnad councils, aim to find their way into government. A tribal sheikh explained:

> Since early 2007, tribes in Diyala began questioning the role of the provincial council and suggested projects that would serve our areas and people's living conditions. Unfortunately, the council performed far below expectations and was unable to respond to our needs. So when elections were organised, tribal leaders decided to play a role in electing more representative and capable people. Sheikhs of nine major Arab tribes established a tribal council for Diyala. This grew to include more than twenty tribes today, both Sunni and Shiite. The council is organised in groups and alliances that either have pushed some candidates to represent them or support an existing list that reflects their aspirations.[171]

The awakening's aim is to weaken the hold on local government exercised by the Kurdistan Alliance[172] and ISCI/Daawa. "This election is going to be different from the previous one", said the leader of the Popular Committees, Diyala's version of the Awakening councils. "We have newly formed lists made up of professionals and academics. There are lists formed by tribal elites and sheikhs".[173]

Moreover, Diyala's main cities have seen the political emergence of new groups led by secular professionals who also are dissatisfied with the existing council. An Iraqi Communist Party supporter said, "people are fed up with the current council and would hate to see the governing parties return to power. Baaquba and towns like Muqdadiya and Khalis have considerable numbers of graduates and professionals willing to serve

[167] Crisis Group interview, Saadi Ahmad Pirra, Suleimaniya, 23 December 2008. In percentage terms, and assuming the high-end prediction of twelve seats for the Kurdish list in the upcoming elections, the loss would be from 75 per cent of council seats in 2005 to 32 per cent in the new council.

[168] United Press International, 2 January 2009.

[169] Crisis Group interview, Saja Qadouri, Diyala provincial council member for Daawa and a member of the council's security committee, 10 January 2009.

[170] A Daawa politician said, "we tried to postpone the elections, but two days ago we learned that this would not be possible". Crisis Group interview, Saja Qadouri, Diyala provincial council member for Daawa, 10 January 2009. Ibrahim Bajalan, the Kurdish chairman of the provincial council, said, "I called for postponing the elections, because al-Qaeda is still powerful – they control about 30 per cent of the governorate – and many displaced [Kurdish] families that have returned do not have food ration cards [which would allow them to vote]. Moreover, there is fear that some former Baathists may be elected". He indicated, however, that the Kurdish leadership did not support him, so he had to drop his demand. Crisis Group interview, Baaquba, 15 January 2009. A Kurdistan Alliance spokesman in Diyala said that his side preferred to go ahead, as it felt unified and strong. Crisis Group interview, Salar Mahmoud, Khanaqin, 15 January 2009.

[171] Crisis Group interview, tribal leader, Baaquba, 15-16 December 2008. A leader of the Popular Committees said that the tribes are staking their political position on strong criticism of the provincial council, which he claimed "had zero achievements", and were using "the routine excuse of the security situation". Crisis Group interview, Hamid Abdullah Saleh, field commander of the Baaquba Popular Committees, Baaquba, 7-9 October 2008.

[172] The Kurdistan Alliance list in Diyala comprises five Kurdish parties and the Iraqi Communist Party.

[173] Crisis Group interview, Hamid Abdullah Saleh, field commander of the Baaquba Popular Committees, Baaquba, 7-9 October 2008. He added: "People in the street [meaning: especially his followers] are looking eagerly to the coming elections. They were very angry about earlier postponements [from October to December 2008], and they are angry again that elections were pushed back into 2009". A Daawa politician complained: "The awakening councils have established many lists. They don't say they belong to the awakenings, but we can tell from the names that these lists are directly related to them". Crisis Group interview, Saja Qadouri, Diyala provincial council member for Daawa, 10 January 2009.

their city and not leave it at the mercy of the illiterate thieves who currently sit on the council".[174]

The ruling parties' grip on power in Diyala remains strong, however, and opposition politicians fear they will use governing institutions to fix the vote. A leader of the Popular Committees said, "it is no secret that people here are worried about fraud after they saw what happened in 2005. There was huge fraud then that led to the unusual results that we have seen".[175] While these allegations were not supported by the electoral commission at the time, in the losers' eyes this merely underlined the commission's manipulation by the winners.

The Isnaad councils established by Prime Minister Maliki are a particularly controversial phenomenon, seen by the Kurds as a direct threat. In a November 2008 speech, Masoud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan regional government, denounced them as "an effort to plant seeds of sedition in Iraq".[176] Arguing that militias are illegal, and the councils were created merely to help Daawa, other Kurdish officials decried the initiative as an unconstitutional electoral ploy.[177] The Kurds fear that the use of these tribal groups will harm their chances of eventually incorporating the disputed areas into the Kurdistan region, as it could reduce their power in the governorate and thus their ability to use the security apparatus and local government to advance their territorial aims. Meanwhile, the (Kurdish) chairman of the Diyala provincial council, Ibrahim Bajalan, said he expected the Kurdish list to gain only four seats in the new council, down from seven in 2005 (though Diyala now will get 29 council seats compared to 41 in 2005), and Sunni Arab parties to win as many as twenty.[178]

C. ANBAR

As the awakening councils are pushing to replace the IIP as the dominant party in Anbar, their greatest enemy appears to be their own internal divisions. Not only have the councils, almost all rooted in the Duleimi tribe, split into a bewildering array of clan-driven groups bearing similar names, but at least one major branch has reached out to their avowed principal enemy, the IIP. In November 2008, Ahmad Abu Risha, brother of the founder of the awakening movement, the late Abd-al-Sattar Abu Risha, formed an alliance with a pro-IIP list. A second sheikh, Amer Ali Suleiman, then forged an electoral bond with the IIP as well.

Both were denounced by other awakening founders, such as Ali Hatem al-Suleiman, head of the National Salvation Front, who warned that "whether we win the elections or not, Anbar is ours, and we are not going to allow the IIP to stay in the governorate".[179] Another tribal leader cautioned: "The alliance between Abu Risha and the Islamic Party will not serve any of the sons of Anbar. It will damage the awakening councils. Most of the tribes and councils have denounced the alliance; if it goes through, it will be devastating for the governorate".[180]

The IIP is the likely beneficiary of the awakening movement's disarray. It has a well-oiled electoral machine and considerable support in urban centres such as Ramadi and Falluja, though is weaker in rural

[174] Crisis Group interview, engineer and building contractor, Baaquba, 15 December 2008.

[175] One method he cited involved less fraud than a trick he attributed to IECI: "In the 2005 elections IECI deliberately placed two or three polling stations in remote areas, leaving inhabited residential areas without a single polling centre [because Baaquba was unsafe]. Many people could not reach far-away polling stations, particularly given that the government banned the use of vehicles on election day". Crisis Group interview, Hamid Abdullah Saleh, field commander of the Baaquba Popular Committees, Baaquba, 7-9 October 2008. Moreover, suggested an Iraqi Communist Party supporter, "suicide attacks and explosions could deter people from going out to vote and subsequently facilitate fraud". Crisis Group interview, engineer and building contractor, Baaquba, 15 December 2008.

[176] See "President Barzani's Remarks on Recent Trip to America and Europe", 12 November 2008, available at www.krg.org. He said, "if these forces are needed in some places, it is fine. But in the Kurdistan region, as they are not needed, they will not be accepted. In the disputed areas, we will stand against it. These attempts constitute an effort to plant seeds of sedition in Iraq. We consider this to be a very dangerous game".

[177] A Kurdish official said, "Maliki ordered the creation of the Isnaad councils among Iraqi tribes in order to win supporters for the Daawa Party". He argued that the councils were illegal, because the constitution bans militias. Crisis Group interview, Jaber Yawar, KRG deputy minister for peshmerga affairs (PUK) and spokesman of Kurdistan regional protection forces, Suleimaniya, 15 December 2008.

[178] *Hawlati* (Suleimaniya-based independent Kurdish weekly), 12 November 2008. Bajalan is not running for re-election. A PUK official in Khanaqin, Salah Kwekha, predicted five to six seats for the Kurds. *Rudaw* (Kurdish daily), 10 November 2008. In percentage terms, and assuming four seats for the Kurds, their loss would be a mere 3 per cent, from 17 per cent of council seats in 2005 to 14 per cent in the new council.

[179] Crisis Group interview, Ali Hatem al-Suleiman, founding member of the National Salvation Front and head of the Al-Anbar Tribal Council, Ramadi, 19 November 2008.

[180] Crisis Group interview, Sheikh Ali al-Duleimi, secretary general of the Central Council of Iraqi Arab Tribes, Ramadi, 25 November 2008.

areas, where the awakening movement rules.[181] The IIP also could use its affiliated clerics to exhort the faithful to vote through Friday prayers.[182] A party leader declared it would not let itself be drawn into a confrontation with the tribes and awakening councils: "These groups have only limited capacity and experience and might benefit from such confrontations, while we could only lose".[183] Moreover, intra-tribal infighting could turn off voters, to IIP advantage.

The overall picture suggests that a certain modus vivendi between the awakening movement and the IIP may be possible if the right balance can be found on the provincial council through secret pre-election deals. This would be, as another local teacher put it, a "coalition based on interest and corruption".[184]

D. BAGHDAD

Baghdad has remained a mixed governorate but with the Sunni outflow during the sectarian war now has a strong Shiite majority. Occupying key positions, ISCI retains a powerful presence but has found no allies outside its own narrow circle of constituent parties. In the elections, it faces four rivals whose individual strength remains unknown: resurgent Sunni Arabs – via local Awakening councils that have formed electoral lists; Maliki's Daawa Party, which came in second to ISCI four years ago and now hopes to take advantage of Isnaad councils; Iyad Allawi's secular Iraqiya List and a fresh crop of secular independent groups;[185] and the Sadrists.

The elections raise the question in particular whether the Sadrist trend, aided by government failure over the past four years and despite the Mahdi Army's extreme violence, will chip away at ISCI's power via independent candidates. It retains a strong popular base: in Sadr City but also in Shula, Hurriya, Hussaniya, Obaidi-Kamaliya-Fidhailiya, Zaafaraniya and south-western Baghdad. These areas and other smaller pockets house at least 40 per cent of the governorate's population, some two million people. Numerically speaking, this should give independents supported by the Sadrists a significant share of the 57 council seats. However, Sadrists may be deterred from voting by security forces dominated by their rivals or may not care to cast ballots for candidates endorsed by the leadership but who, as independents, are unlikely to be known to the ordinary voter.

ISCI is taking no chances. Baghdad's governor, Hussein Mohammed Ali al-Tahan, who claims to be an independent but in his positions and statements is evidently associated with ISCI (which appointed him in 2005), is running for re-election at the head of a list called Our Independent Baghdad Gathering (Tajammu Baghdadna al-Mustaqill) and trading on a few reconstruction successes over the past year.[186] Recognition for projects funded by a 2008 budget that was inflated by the high price of oil is the one advantage ISCI has over its rivals after the violence and destruction of a sectarian war and the dysfunctionality of local governance. Now that the oil price has gone down, however, ISCI is facing a much tougher challenge in the capital, the biggest electoral prize of all.

E. BASRA

The electoral stakes in Basra are high: under new legislation, the governorate could sue for autonomous status as a region. In this it is no different from other governorates, but Basra holds special significance given its oil wealth and has a history of pressing for region-

[181] The awakening movement controls security in the governorate, having placed its fighters in the army and police forces and kept its tribal militias on hand as well. Crisis Group interview, Abd-al-Karim al-Asal, media office Awakening Conference of Iraq (Mutamar Sahwat– al-Iraq), Ramadi, 24 November 2008.

[182] Awakening leaders say they warned the party not to do so. An awakening leader said, "we warned the IIP not to use religion as a propaganda card in the elections. We warned them not to use the mosques or the imams. They won't have immunity if they use such methods". Crisis Group interview, Hamid al-Hayes, leader of the Anbar Salvation Council, Ramadi, 20 July 2008.

[183] Crisis Group interview, Bahaa al-Din al-Naqshbandi, IIP political bureau member, Amman, conducted over ten days in June-July 2008.

[184] Crisis Group interview, Ramadi, 8-9 August 2008.

[185] The independents face the challenge of having little time at their disposal and only limited resources (compared to those of large parties) to become known to the electorate. A politician and university professor said, "there are independents, but I don't know their names or who they are. We don't even know the names of candidates on the main party lists, except for the number one, who is usually not a candidate, however, because he is a member of the council of representatives. We don't know if these candidates are qualified, have a degree or are honest. The only thing we know is that they are on either a Sunni or Shiite list. Therefore, I am personally going to boycott this election". Crisis Group interview, Wamidh Nadhmi, spokesman and founding member of the opposition Founding Iraqi National Congress (Al-Mutamar al-Tasisi al-Watani al-Iraqi), Baghdad, 12 January 2009.

[186] The list has 56 candidates: ten Sunni Arabs, one Chaldo-Assyrian and 45 Shiites. The governor said, "the list was put together on a sectarian basis, but we also tried to be inclusive". Crisis Group interview, Hussein Mohammad Ali al-Tahan, Baghdad governor, Baghdad, 17 January 2009.

alisation. Some of its political forces have made headway toward regional status since 2003, despite the petition drive's failure in January 2009. A community leader said:

> ISCI is interested in controlling provincial councils in the south to establish a network that would enable it to implement its southern federalism scheme, its Al-Hakim Emirate [after ISCI leader Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim]. Fadhila and the Sadrists do not share this vision; they want to control local government to serve their financial and commercial interests. Smaller groups, including liberals, want to take advantage of the current government's mistakes, but they have failed to develop momentum. The population's lack of education and strong religious influences do not help them. I expect low turn-out. And I expect the main religious parties to win, but with a reduced majority, giving them diminished dominance.[187]

The main electoral struggle is likely to be between Fadhila, ISCI, Daawa and the Sadrists. Fadhila, the local ruling party, has repeatedly faced corruption charges.[188] In turn, it has accused the Maliki government, and Daawa in particular, of seeking to fix the electoral outcome by placing loyalists in local institutions, a process begun after the April 2008 military operation. By controlling more institutions, Daawa is able to extend its patronage and thus ensure loyalty of a growing segment of the electorate. The provincial council's deputy chairman alleged:

> The Maliki government has started appointing its own people in Basra. It removed many departmental heads and replaced them with Daawa Party loyalists. No new appointment has been made since the military operation in Basra except for Daawa people. And when we, in the provincial council, want to remove a department head, we cannot do so if his department is controlled by Daawa.[189]

The Sadrists are on the defensive following the April 2008 military operation. A local observer noted that they considered "the campaign targeting them as elections-related and intended to discredit them. They are correct. This has always been the case between the government and its opponents in Iraqi history".[190]

[187] Crisis Group interview, community leader, Basra, 20 November 2008.

[188] For example, a Basra resident said, "al-Fadhila has lost its popularity following the disclosure of many corruption cases involving its people, in particular the governor and his allies, and also because of the deterioration in services". Crisis Group interview, resident, Basra, 18 July 2008.

[189] Crisis Group interview, Nasef Jasem Ali al-Abadi, Basra provincial council deputy chairman for the Fadhila, Basra, 30 November 2008.

[190] Crisis Group interview, resident, Basra, 18 July 2008.

VI. CONCLUSION

Despite huge disappointment caused by the 2005 elections, both the public and political actors are taking the approaching polls seriously. Facing an electorate disillusioned by mismanagement and corruption, the ruling parties have been forced to adapt. They are hoisting the banner of patriotism, clean politics and effective service delivery. Their opponents, in the name of similar causes, point to four years of misconduct. Having experienced the failure of outgoing councils to deliver basic services, voters have grown disaffected with both the religious parties and the clerics that sponsored them. Their record is such that throughout the country voters appear willing to gamble on new faces to replace those who, accusations notwithstanding, have at least gained valuable job experience and could argue that they often had to labour in conditions of extreme violence. All this is a promising development in a country only recently emerging from a fierce and ruthless sectarian civil war.

There is no guarantee, however, that the elections will prompt widespread satisfaction. Ruling parties have a tight grip on power and may use government institutions, patronage, alliances, subterfuge and perhaps outright fraud to maintain it. Nonetheless, there are indications that the exercise could bring in new politicians untainted by corruption, more technocratic in background, less religious in outlook and more nationalist in ideology.

Even if the elections prove to be less than free or fair – and this could certainly be the case in some of the fiercely contested governorates – they still could have value. As interviews across Iraq showed, voters fully expect a certain degree of fraud, take it in stride even as they condemn it and appear willing to see it as an inevitable teething problem with democracy development. To most Iraqis, it seems, electoral contests are the best venue – for now – in which to settle political disputes and produce new leadership.

Furthermore, by producing a subtle but unmistakable shift away from extreme decentralisation, the elections could signal a reversal of the centrifugal forces that put the country's fate in jeopardy. Somewhat paradoxically, while the incoming councils will have unprecedented powers, their new occupants are likely to favour a unifying role for federal government.

Finally, the new councils likely will enjoy a quality the current ones have lacked – popular legitimacy – though they would still have to stand the ultimate test of acceptance by establishing clean, effective governance in the coming four years. If they do, it would be another encouraging sign that Iraq has turned the page on the black chapter of the 2005-2007 sectarian war and is on its way toward more sustainable recovery.

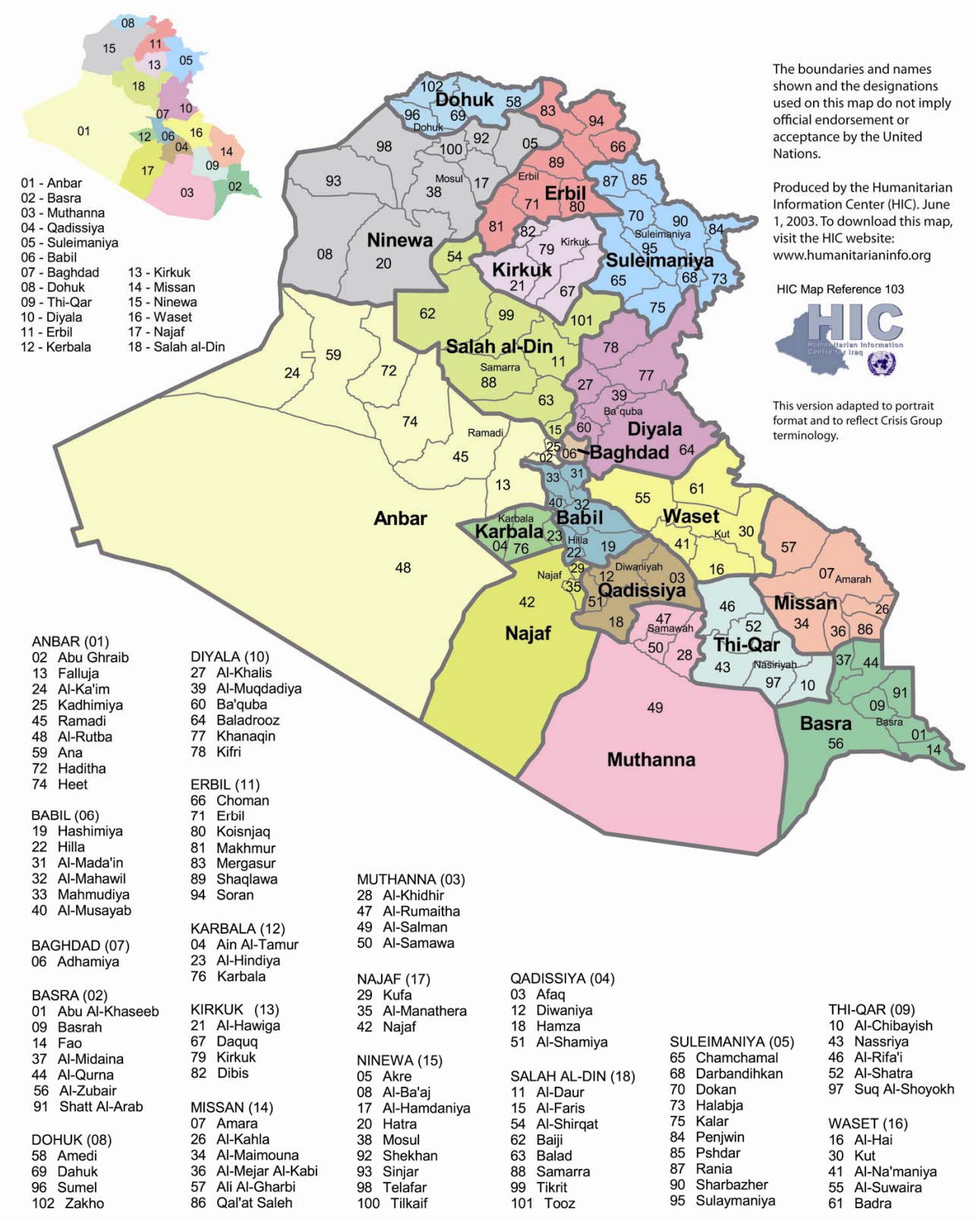
Baghdad/Istanbul/Brussels, 27 January 2009

APPENDIX A

MAP OF IRAQ

APPENDIX B

MAP OF IRAQ'S GOVERNORATES AND DISTRICTS



APPENDIX C

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

AQI	al-Qaeda in Iraq, an Iraqi insurgent group of foreign origin and apparently leadership, also known as al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia or, in a somewhat different configuration, the Islamic State (or Emirate) of Iraq
Fadhila	Islamic Virtue Party
Hiwar	Iraqi Front for National Dialogue
ICP	Iraqi Communist Party
IECI	Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq, the body that was responsible for supervising elections in January and December 2005, as well as the constitutional referendum in October 2005
IHEC	Iraqi High Electoral Commission, an independent commission established to manage Iraq's elections and referenda
IIP	Iraqi Islamic Party, a Sunni Islamist group and a political expression of the Muslim Brotherhood
ISCI	Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq, a Shiite Islamist party known until May 2007 as the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq
ISF	Iraqi Security Forces, the army
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party, one of two principal Kurdish parties, led by Masoud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan regional government
KRG	Kurdistan regional government
MSA	Muslim Scholars Association, a Sunni Islamist group opposed to the political process
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, one of two principal Kurdish parties, led by Jalal Talabani, president of Iraq
SCIRI	Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, see ISCI
Tawafuq	Iraqi Consensus Front (often mistranslated in the media as the Iraqi Accord or Accordance Front)
UIA	United Iraqi Alliance, a coalition of mostly Shiite parties put together in late 2004 to run in the January 2005 elections. It survived as an alliance until 2007, when defections reduced it to a skeletal frame run by ISCI
Wifaq	Iraqi National Accord Movement

APPENDIX D

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 130 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and printed copy to officials in foreign ministries and international organisations and made available simultaneously on the website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by the former European Commissioner for External Relations Christopher Patten and former U.S. Ambassador Thomas Pickering. Its President and Chief Executive since January 2000 has been former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans.

Crisis Group's international headquarters are in Brussels, with major advocacy offices in Washington DC (where it is based as a legal entity) and New York, a smaller one in London and liaison presences in Moscow and Beijing. The organisation currently operates eleven regional offices (in Bishkek, Bogotá, Cairo, Dakar, Islamabad, Istanbul, Jakarta, Nairobi, Pristina, Seoul and Tbilisi) and has local field representation in seventeen additional locations (Abuja, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Colombo, Damascus, Dili, Dushanbe, Jerusalem, Kabul, Kathmandu, Kinshasa, Ouagadougou, Port-au-Prince, Pretoria, Sarajevo and Tehran). Crisis Group currently covers some 60 areas of actual or potential conflict across four continents. In Africa, this includes Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan, Uganda and Zimbabwe; in Asia, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Kashmir, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar/ Burma, Nepal, North Korea, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan Strait, Tajikistan, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan; in Europe, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, Georgia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Russia (North Caucasus), Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine; in the Middle East, the whole region from North Africa to Iran; and in Latin America, Colombia, the rest of the Andean region, Guatemala and Haiti.

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January 2009

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ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT

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