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SHIA-ISLAMIST POLITICAL ACTORS IN IRAQ
WHO ARE THEY AND WHAT DO THEY WANT?

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Contents

Abstract

The demise of the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003 was an important watershed in Iraqi political history. Iraq had been governed by groups which belonged to the Arab Sunni minority since the Iraqi state emerged out of the former Ottoman Empire in 1921. More recently, new political actors are in the ascendancy, representing the Kurdish minority and the Shia majority in Iraq.

The subject of this report is the Shia-Islamist movement, which is the predominant political voice of Iraqi Shiites today. The objective of the report is to answer two fundamental questions: Who are they and what do they want?

The report provides an overview of the historical and ideational process, whereby Shia-Islam became politicised in Iraq and analyses each of the main contemporary political actors of the Shia-community: Grand-ayatollah Ali Sistani, the Da'wa Party, the Supreme Islamic Council in Iraq and the Sadr Movement.

The report argues that the Shia-Islamist movement should not be viewed as a political voice of sectarian interest, but rather as an idiom in which classical political grievances such as 'who gets what and who decides what' are expressed. The Shia-Islamist movement previously denied political power, is seen as the political assertion of the majority group in Iraq. The report discusses issues such as democracy and Islamic Law, relationship to Iran and social constituencies in relation to the different Shia-Islamist groups.

The report concludes that in addition to the conflict between Sunni and Shia groups, there is an important unresolved conflict between the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq, which is pragmatic and mainstream, and the puritanical and populist movement of Moqtada al-Sadr. It further argues that this conflict needs to be resolved before the political focus may be changed from present sectarian (and short-sighted) issues towards the much more important collective and long-term interest of the Iraqi people, in promoting public security and economic development.

1. Introduction

The demise of the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003 was an important watershed in Iraqi political history. Historically, Iraq has been governed by groups which belonged to the Arab Sunni minority since the Iraqi state emerged out of the former Ottoman Empire in 1921. From 2003, new political actors came to power, representing in broad terms, the Kurdish minority and the Shia majority in Iraq.

The political voice of Iraqi Shiites is today largely represented by the Shia-Islamist movement, which is the subject of this report. The objective of this report is to analyse these new Shia-Islamist actors and parties. Who are they and what do they want?

The report takes the modernist view that contemporary Iraqi politics are about classical political issues such as 'who gets what' and 'who decides what, when and for whom', but where political actors have utilised sectarian identities to organise and empower themselves as political actors.[1] In this view sectarian identities are mobilised as a means to further national political ends, in contrast to an essentialist approach which view national politics as a means to further sectarian interests.[2]

A second point worth clarifying is the distinction between Islam/Islamic and Islamism/Islamist. I understand Islam as the actual cultural and religious practices of people, who identify themselves as Muslims and who rationalise such practices in relation to Islam. In contrast, Islamism/Islamist refers to the politicisation of Islam and the construction of a political ideology, expressed in relation to and justified with reference to Islam.

The report begins by providing an overview of the historical and ideational process, whereby Shia-Islam became politicised in Iraq. The report then analyses in turn each of the main contemporary political actors of the Shia-community in Iraq: Grandayatollah Ali Sistani, the Da'wa Party, the Supreme Islamic Council in Iraq and the Sadr Movement.

[1]   For a more detailed argument about the relationship between sectarian identity and national politics, see my DIIS-brief: 'Irak – religionskrig eller politisk konflikt?' *DIIS-brief*, August 2007.

[2]   For a further discussion of this distinction, see Fred Halliday: Islam and Europe. 2007, http://opendemocracy. net/article/globalisation/global_politics/islam_europe

The conclusion of the report summarises the national political and developmental challenges of Iraq and discusses the ability of the Shia-Islamist actors to engage in those challenges on a basis of cross-sectarian cooperation.

2. The Politicisation of Shia-Islam

2.1 Introduction

While Shia-Islam provides the background and the idiom in which Shia-Islamism has been formulated, it is the mundane challenges of modernisation to which it responds. Although it would go beyond the scope of this report to explore these issues in any depth, a few remarks on the macro-historical challenges of modernisation are warranted.

For many centuries, Shia-Islam and its religious institutions provided the normative framework for people's lives as well as services in the areas of education, social welfare and legal adjudication, while the pre-modern Ottoman state provided the more 'hard' public services in the form of security and basic infrastructure. This arrangement was challenged by the immense socio-economic development of the modern period, which is predicated on the increased integration of economic and social actors within the framework of the nation state.

One of the results was an enormous increase in the role of the state. The modern nation state dealt a blow to the previous centuries-old distribution of labour between religious institutions and the state. The state took over many of the public services which religious institutions had supplied in the past; in particular, in the legal, educational and social welfare fields.[3] This development has also characterised the post-independent period of Iraq[4] and given rise to a defensive counter-reaction from the Ulama[5] and religious laymen.[6] This was the initial impetus to the development of Shia-Islamism in Iraq (Sakai 2001:2).

A second characteristic of modern development has been the move from the countryside to the cities. The proportion of the Iraqi population who lived in towns doubled from 37% to 75% between 1958 and 1983 (Yapp 1996: 232), and while ag-

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[3]   Beside the increased role of the state relative to religious institutions, historical development was also characterized by an absolute growth of supply of these public services.

[4]   The role of the state reached a pinnacle in 1978 when its share of GDP reached 80% and employed more than 20% of the workforce (Yapp 1996:244).

[5]   Religious scholars and clerics.

[6]   The Ulema played e.g. an important role in the "1920-revolution" which was a reaction to the new Iraqi national state.

riculture in Iraq contributed 32% of GDP in 1953, its share declined to just 7% in 1978 (Owen and Pamuk 1998: 168).

This development had important socio-political consequences. While the population of rural pre-modern societies was predominantly organised within the bounds of social customs and religious institutions, the modern era has been characterised by political and social mobilisation of the urban masses[7] and the introduction of national ideologies. Rulers previously could rely on coercion and social customs as a means of control, whereas political rulers in the modern era were forced to legitimise their rule to a much larger degree vis-à-vis the new political actor: the people.[8] Participatory (as distinct from democratic) politics was the new 'name of the game' of politics and the idiom of Shia-Islam has in this sense been an important vehicle for political entrepreneurs in mobilising Shiites in their social and political demands vis-à-vis the national state.[9]

The confluence of the increased role of the state, the decreased provision of public services by religious institutions, and the role of participatory politics and ideology in mobilising the masses in order to gain influence over the state, is thus crucial in explaining the historical process of how Shia-Islam became politicised and developed into Shia-Islamism.

2.2 The History of Shia-Islamism in Iraq

This development produced two different types of responses from the Shia-Islamic clergy.

One response was very much in line with tradition and accepted the new deferential role of religion and clergy in relation to state authorities. The quietist movement within Shia-Islam, of which Grand-ayatollah Ali Sistani is the most prominent contemporary representative, represented this type of response.

The other response was the development of Shia-Islamism or political Shia-Islam, where the idiom and ideational concepts of Shia-Islam were applied to develop a

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[7] Greatly empowered by the increased level of education and higher levels of income.

[8] See Huntington and Nelson 1984.

[9] See the introduction in Cole and Keddie 1986 for an elaboration of this approach to Shia-Islamism.

new political ideology. This was embodied in combining the mobilisation of Shiites in defence of their social and economic grievances with a strategy to preserve the role of the Shia clergy in society and in relation to the state.

While I shall later discuss the quietist tradition in more depth in connection with Grand-ayatollah Ali Sistani, I will, in the following, outline the main historical developments and critical elements of Shia-Islamism in Iraq.

An important watershed in Iraqi history took place in 1958, when the old monarchy was overturned and the new regime initiated an ambitious and far-reaching process of modernisation, which included expropriation of the large land estates in southern Iraq. Here, the Shia tribal shaykhs had turned themselves into landlords, and their Shia tribesmen into sharecroppers (Yapp 1996: 236-7). This weakened dramatically the traditional political and social control mechanisms of the Shia population, and in combination with the massive movement from the land to the towns and increased education of the Shia-population, induced many Shiittes to engage in secular politics in order to address their social grievances. Between 1958 and 1979 – the year when Saddam Hussein took full formal control of the Ba'th and the Iraqi state – the Communist Party of Iraq (the largest in the Middle East) and the Ba'th were the preferred ways of Iraqi Shiites to engage in the fight for influence of the state.

At the end of the 50s a second strand of political mobilisation of Shia-Muslims emerged with the founding of the Da'wa Party. The ideology of the Da'wa (meaning the call or 'invitation' to Islam in Arabic) was at first a pan-Islamist ideology inviting Muslims to engage in modern social, based on reflections on how to implement God's will in modern social life.[10] As with many other Islamist parties in the rest of the Middle East, Da'wa's initial focus was thus on cultural and social life rather than on politics and the state. The supporters of the Da'wa party were all Shiites and the party in reality, had from the start a predominantly Shiite constituency. It was organised along very centralist and secretive lines, and although clerics played a role in the party, they never constituted the leadership as such.

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[10] In 1980 10 percent of Da'wa's members were Sunni-muslim, according to Da'wa's own claims (Abedin 2003:3)

The leading ayatollah was at that time Mohsen al-Hakim.[11] Although al-Hakim belonged to the quietist strand, he encouraged the development of the Da'wa believing it could be useful in preserving the prerogatives of the Shia clergy (Sakai 2001:2).[12] The expropriation of so-called 'waqf' land (i.e. pious endowments) by the post-1958 regimes, thus undercutting the economic independence of the clergy, was a particularly vexing issue at the time, and al-Hakim hoped that the Da'wa Party could help restore this land to the clergy. The link between Mohsen al-Hakim and the Da'wa took place through his sons, of whom Muhammad Baqir[13] al-Hakim was later to play a crucial role in the Shia-Islamist movement as leader of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). Mohsen al-Hakim died in 1970 and was succeeded by the distinct quietist Abol-Qasem al Khoei (d. 1992). Khoei, was very popular among Shiites all over the Middle East, and followed the line of al-Hakim in pursuing a delicate balancing act with the authoritarian post-1958 regimes in Iraq.[14]

During the 1960s, a new figure emerged within the Shia clergy, competing with Khoei for influence. Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr or 'Sadr 1' as he is also called in the historiographic literature, became a central figure in the development of Shia-Islamism in Iraq. Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr had the status of ayatollah and was a member of the Hawza, the leading ayatollahs of the Shia-community in Iraq. Sadr developed the theoretical foundations of Shia-Islamist political philosophy in his books 'Our Philosophy' from 1958 and 'Our Economy' from 1961, which introduced an

[11] The role of the mujtahid is very important within Shia-Islam, where religious leaders are looked upon as someone, who has esoteric knowledge of the will of God and therefore also knows best how to interpret religious laws and traditions. In the Usuli school of jurisprudence, which came to dominate amongst Shi'ites in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the term 'mujtahid' signifies the one who is authorized to undertake 'ijtihad', i.e. interpretation of the religious texts. The term of mujtahid is related to the term 'muqallid', which signifies the believer who 'imitate' the mujtahid. The model relationship between the mujtahid and muqallid is one where the muqallid asks questions to the mujtahid about ethics and religion and use the advice of the mujtahid as guidance for behaviour. A mujtahid with a large number of followers is called ayatollah and the mujtahid with the highest number of followers becomes grand-ayatollah. The individual Shia-Muslim has a duty to choose a mujtahid, whose guidance he is then obliged to follow. The believer is free to choose a religious leader, whom he wants to follow, which has the result that mujtahids compete in attracting followers. The choice of mujdtahid/ayatollah is not confined by country borders.

[12] Later al-Hakim distanced himself from Da'wa.

[13] Named after the fifth Imam.

[14] In 1989 Khoei established the Khoei foundation in London which provided services for the growing global community of Shiites who had chosen him as their 'mujtahid' or ayatollah. Khoei's only surviving son, Abd al Majid al Khoei was the leader of the foundation At the age of only 40 in 2003 he was too young to become the object of emulation for Iraqi Shiites, but was involved with Iraqi expatriates aiming for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein (Cole 2003:549). He was killed upon his return to Najaf in 2003.

Islamic theory on political economy (Abedin 2003: 1). This line of thought was very much similar to Ruhollah Khomeini's thinking which stressed social justice, the notion of 'just rule', the moral norms and customs canonised by Shia-Islam and the ideology of theocracy (i.e. the notion that political sovereignty belongs to God and not to the people). Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr developed also the institutional notion of the 'objective marja'iya' as a sort of institutionalised collective leadership of the Shiites, with means of enforcing decisions beyond the traditional moral and normative power of the mujtahid (Sakai 2001:4).[15] Like Khomeini, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr appealed in particular to the Shiite urban poor, who didn't feel that clerics of 'high' Islam[16] catered sufficiently to their problems and interests.

During the late 1970s Shia-Islamism gained strength in Iran. This inspired Shiites in Iraq to join the Da'wa Party, which Sadr envisioned would indoctrinate a generation of revolutionaries who would one day seize power and establish a state that would implement Islamic law. Saddam Hussein increasingly felt threatened by the Da'wa and tried to control the Shia clergy demanding that they stopped supporting the Shia-Islamists. The relationship between Saddam and the clergy quickly turned from one of negotiation, into a relationship where Saddam Hussein demanded total submission to his brutal and dictatorial regime.

Saddam Hussein started also to repress the Da'wa Party ruthlessly and party membership was made a capital crime. During the late 1970s the leaders of Da'wa either fled the country or were imprisoned or killed.[17] The pinnacle of this conflict between the regime and the Da'wa Party came in 1979 when Da'wa members attempted unsuccessfully to assassinate the Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz, and in 1980, when Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr was brutally killed together with his renowned sister,

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[15]   Khomeini's thinking is clearly an extension of this theory of 'the objective marjai'ya' and at the same time goes beyond this theory by his proposal to nominate one specific person to represent the Umma as Head of State ('Vilayat-e-faqih').

[16]   The difference between 'high' and popular Islam is quite distinct in Iraq. The clerics of Najaf and other shrine cities consisted to a large part of Iranian and other non-Iraqi clerics and focused on developing the canonized doctrines of Shia-Islam, while the main attachment to Shia-Islam of the Shiite tribes of Southern Iraq was through their participation in the rituals such as the lamentation over Hussein's death – the so-called 'Arba'iin'/Muharram rituals. The existence of religious institutions of Shia-Islam in the shrine cities predates the conversion of the tribes. While the religious institutions were established in the 11th century, the tribes were not converted to Shia-Islam before the 19th century (Nakash 1995).

[17]   The Da'wa Party claims to have lost 77,000 members to the Hussein regime. In addition some 40,000 Shiites were deported by the Ba'thist regime during 1969-1971 after being labelled "Iranians".

Bint al-Huda[18] by Saddam Hussein's henchmen.[19] When Iraq waged war against Iran during the 1980's, the last vestiges of the previous balancing act between clergy and regime broke down.

The brutal repression of the Shia-Islamist parties in Iraq had two consequences. The first was that the

Da'wa party, was to a large degree, dismantled inside Iraq, and its existence continued only as a number of disparate small exile elite groups. The second consequence was that a new organisation, the Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), was created inside Iran, led by Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, son of Grand-ayatollah Mohsin al-Hakim and pupil of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr.

SCIRI functioned at first as an umbrella organisation attempting to coordinate the different exiled Shia-Islamist groups. This attempt to be a coordinating organisation rapidly failed in 1984 when the Da'wa leader left and SCIRI became independent. SCIRI was firmly and effectively led by Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, who had direct access to Khomeini and later to the incumbent 'wali'[20]: Ali Khamenei. Iran funded the organisation, and its Revolutionary Guards helped it to build a considerable military force, the Badr Brigade.[21] The Brigade recruited its soldiers from the captives that Iran took in its war with Iraq and from the more than 100,000 Iraqi refuges who fled to Iran throughout the 1980s and following the massacres of the Shiites after the popular revolt against Saddam Hussein in 1991 (Nasr 2006:3). The latter incident happened when the US urged the Shiittes to rise against 'the dictator Saddam Hussein.' An uprising took place in Southern Iraq and a high number of Ba'thist officials were killed. SCIRI's Badr Brigade took part in this uprising, but retreated back to Iran, when Saddam Hussein was allowed by the Americans to use helicopter gun-ships to repress the uprising.

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[18]   Bint al-Huda was an important personality in her own right, known for her religious writings, her efforts to organize Islamic education for women serving as a link between women's groups and the ulema.

[19]   It has been said that nails were driven through the head of the ayatollah. A reference to this is the holes driven into the head of Sunni-muslim victims of Shia sectarian killings in Bagdad. Supposedly, the message of this is: Look, Sunni's! What you did to our ayatollah we can now do to you as well.

[20]   The 'Vilayat-e-faqih' literally means rule (vilayat) by the jurisprudent (faqih). The Arabic word for ruler is 'wali'.

[21]   Named from a crucial battle that the prophet Muhammad fought against the Meccans.

A new trend emerged during the 1990s amongst the Shia-Islamist opposition in Iraq. This was the movement which Muhammad Sadiq[22] al-Sadr (or Sadr 2) initiated amongst the urban poor of Baghdad and other big cities in Iraq. Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr was a distant cousin of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and was at first considered quietist and deferential towards the Ba'th.[23] Sadr 2 followed in the footsteps of his cousin and organised social and pastoral activities for the Shiite urban poor.[24] He built a large and well organised network to direct the obligatory alms and contributions which Shiittes must give to their religious institutions, and attracted in particular lower ranking Shiite clergy into his organisation. He also established informal Shiite courts that would adjudicate issues among Shiites outside the secular legal system of the Ba'thist state. He accepted Khomeini's theory of the guardianship of the jurisprudent and called upon his students and congregations to establish a state like in Iran.

He condemned women for appearing in public unveiled, saying that for even one hair of their head to show was religiously prohibited. He made war against the influence of American popular culture, and discouraged his followers from wearing clothing with American labels. His representatives were tightly networked and had the reputation of being young, upright and highly competent (Cole 2003:552).

Sadr 2 attempted to keep a low profile on politics and to emphasise social and pastoral work amongst Shiites. Saddam Hussein felt threatened by his rising popularity in the Shiite suburbs and his ability to build an independent power-base and had him killed in 1999 along with two of his sons. Besides a mentally retarded son, his only remaining son is Moqtada al-Sadr (Sadr 3), leader of the contemporary Sadr Movement.

While Sadr 1 may be viewed as providing the theoretical basis for a broader Shia-Islamist movement in Iraq, Sadr 2 founded a militant, puritanical and populist move-

[22] Named after the sixth Imam.

[23] He was not considered to be a great Shia scholar (Mottahedeh 2003:3) and was much interested in non-religious learning, learned fluent English and studied psychology and history (Cole 2003:551).

[24] As an example how leftist and Marxist influences circulated in clerical circles in the shrine cities Juan Cole (2003:551) mentions that the history tutor of Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, Dr. Fadil Husayn, considered him his best student and therefore presented him with a rare copy of Karl Marx's The Paris Commune. Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr also wrote a commentary on the 1789 "Rights of Man" issued by French revolutionaries.

ment to which Sadr 3 and the Fadhila Party are the successors. In sum, by 2003, the Shia-Islamist movement consisted of four different strands:

- Ali Sistani. Although Sistani can not be directly compared with the other Shia-Islamist political actors, he is a political actor in his own right, as it is a social convention in Iraq that the most senior grand ayatollah in Najaf can speak on behalf of the Shiite community on overarching principled questions (Cole 2003:547);
- The Da'wa party, which is an elitist and secretive organisation with only tenuous roots inside Iraq, but with considerable standing as the historical initiator of the Shia-Islamist movement;
- SCIRI, which is well organised, has strong ties to the Iranian leadership, and has built an influential military organisation, the Badr Brigade; and
- The Sadr Movement, established by Sadr 1 and Sadr 2, based in the Shiite suburbs, has an independent financial base and is of significant social importance to its followers. The successors to the Sadr Movement are Sadr 3 and the Fadhila Party.

I shall analyse these four different strands in more detail in the next chapter with a focus on their contemporary development and positions.

3. Contemporary Shia-Islamist political actors

3.1 Ali Sistani

Ali Sistani is a crucial figure in the Iraqi political landscape because he is the only figure who most clearly has risen above the limits of group interest-politics and has attempted to steer Iraqi political actors towards reconciliation and national, collective interests. Since 2003 political development has been characterised by a marked absence of this type of political figurehead and Ali Sistani's contribution is therefore crucial for future developments.

In a wider ideological perspective Ali Sistani is an important political figure because he is representing the important strand within Shia-Islamism which tries to reconcile democracy with Islam. Or differently formulated: to reconcile the idea of European Enlightenment that political sovereignty belongs to the people, with that of the Islamic concept of Godly sovereignty.

The geographical displacements of Ali Sistani are few. Sistani was born in Mashad in Iran in 1930 and he started his religious education at the age of 5 years. In 1948, he moved to Qom, south of Tehran, where he studied until 1951, when he moved to Najaf in Iraq. Sistani has ever since stayed in Najaf, except for travels performing the Haj to Mecca and a trip to London in August 2004 for medical treatment.

Sistani has risen slowly and consistently through the ranks of the Shia-Islamic clerical system through peer recognition of his scholarship, and succeeded the quietist Abd-al Qasim Khoei in 1992[25] as the leading cleric in Najaf.[26] The mosque where he preached was shut down in 1994, and did not reopen until after the American invasion. There were several assassination attempts against him during the 1990s. His scholarly production has concentrated on traditional quietist subjects related to issues such as personal hygiene, food preparations and sexual relations (Visser 2006:6).

Sistani is today the mujtahid having the greatest number of followers and has built a formidable global network of social and religious institutions, which extends far

[25] Who was 93 when he died.

[26] His role as successor to Khoei was symbolically cemented when he led the funeral prayers of Khoei.

beyond Iraq to Iran, Pakistan, India, the Arab Gulf and Western countries.[27] Already in 1990 Sistani had started to use the internet as a tool of information, and his website, www.sistani.org is a famous and widely used site, managed by his son-in-law Jawad Sharistani in Qom, Iran.

Before the invasion of Iraq in April 2003, many regarded the quietist tradition of Sistani as apolitical, which explains why it was expected that the clerics in Najaf would at least not oppose the plans of the Coalition. This was soon revealed to be a serious error of judgment.

The tradition of the quietist clerics is indeed not to engage themselves directly as politicians in current day-to-day politics. However, the clerics also think of themselves as the overall guardian of the moral and social fabric of society and in situations where they feel that crucial moral and national issues are at stake, the quietist clerics have indeed a tradition of making their opinions known.[28] Although Ayatollah Ali Sistani had kept a very low political profile prior to 2003, he did in a few instances venture political opinions, such as in 2002, when he condemned a particularly violent Israeli offensive on the West Bank.[29]

Sistani's first intervention in Iraqi politics after the fall of the Ba'thist regime in 2003 was in April 2003 when he condemned theft of "government property" (Visser 2006:9) and warned clerics against seeking political office.[30]

Much more decisive was his fatwa of June 26 2003, where he stated that the group of Iraqis which the Coalition had plans to select through a managed and convoluted process in order to draft a new Iraqi constitution, had no mandate, and that the correct way to institute a new political system in Iraq was to hold a general election in which every Iraqi would vote for representatives to a constituent assembly, followed by a general referendum on the proposed constitution. This fatwa was followed up

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[27] His network consist of seminaries, libraries, residential housing for seminary students, mosques and welfare-based organizations. Institutions also include an eye hospital and an astronomy centre. This last institution provides information on the movement of the moon, which is important to fix the calendar of religious rituals.

[28] Historical examples where leading quietist clerics have engaged themselves directly in political issues are the anti-British tobacco-boycott in Iran in 1891-2, the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905-11, the 1920-riots against the British in Iraq and the criticism by Grand-ayatollah Burujirdi of the Iranian land-reform of the 1950s.

[29] Bayan dated 9 April 2002. Quoted from Visser, 2006:9. Sistani repeated his anti-Zionist stance in a fatwa of 29 June 2003, where he prohibited sale of property to "Zionist" Israelis (Visser 2006:15).

[30] Fatwa dated 20 April 2003. Quoted from Visser 2006:10.

by a fatwa of November 29 2003, where Sistani made his point even clearer, saying that only direct elections could ensure the legitimacy of the parliament. [31]

When in January 2004, huge demonstrations to back his proposal were staged all over the country with Sistani's active encouragement, it became clear to the American administrator of the Coalition Authority, Paul Bremer Jr., that he had to cancel his original plans, and accept Sistani's call for general elections as a basis for the transfer of sovereignty from the Coalition Authority to the Iraqis.[32] To implement such elections Sistani called for the United Nations to send an envoy to investigate the political situation in Iraq and to look into how such direct elections could be held (Cole 2006:16). With clear reference to Ahmed Chalabi, and other exile Iraqis who cooperated with the American forces, Sistani stressed that power ought not to be exercised by "those who came from abroad".[33] Paul Bremer accepted Sistani's proposal of sending a UN envoy, and the experienced Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi was dispatched to Iraq during the Spring of 2004.

The ensuing process of this intervention resulted in a general electionheld in January 2005, for parliament-cum-constitutional assembly, a referendum on the proposal for the constitution held in October 2005, and finally new parliamentary elections in December 2005.

Sistani emphasised the virtue of participation in the elections and advised Shiites to vote for the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) list[34] and his portrait was affixed to the election posters of the UIA.[35] The UIA won a majority of the seats in the Parliament in the January 2005 elections and 46% of the seats in the December 2005 elections.

While stressing democracy as fundamental to the Iraqi constitution Sistani also made it clear that it was not sufficient that the constitution mentioned Islam as *a*

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[31]   www.sistani.org/messages/antoni.htm.

[32]   It is claimed that Bremer contacted Sistani to meet in order to agree on a plan of implementation. Sistani, who never met with representatives of the Coalition, is said to have written to Bremer's proposal, that considering that Bremer was American and he Sistani – an Iranian, he found it more wisely to leave it to the Iraqi themselves to sort out the political arrangements. The story is an unverified anecdote, but illustrates very well the thinking of Sistani.

[33]   Al-Hayat, January 15, 2004 via www.juancole.com for January 15,2004.

[34]   UIA was a political alliance formed in the lead-up to the January 2005 elections from almost all Shi'ite groups, including the Da'wa, ISCI, the Iraqi National Congress led by Ahmed Chalabi and the supporters of Muqtada al-Sadr.

[35]   Fatwa dated 11 October 2004. Quoted from Visser 2006:13.

source of legality. Instead Sistani demanded that Islam be stated as *the* source and that a Constitutional Court, whose members should be experts of Islamic Shari'a canonical law, was instituted as a bulwark against the possible irresponsibility of the enfranchised masses.[36] This was of course a contentious point in relation to the Coalition authorities, whose claimed objective for the occupation of Iraq was to install a democratic political system.

At the end of the constitutional process, the following compromise article (article 2) was agreed upon:

Islam is the official religion of the state and is a basic source of legislation:
(a) No law can be passed that contradicts the undisputed rules of Islam.
(b) No law can be passed that contradicts the principles of democracy.

The twin references to democratic and Islamic legitimacy are of course in principle an oxymoron, as democratic legitimacy can not be circumscribed by whatever is viewed as Islamic without contradicting the democratic principle itself. Sistani did not see any such contradiction, as it was self-evident to him that when the majority of the population were Muslims and political legitimacy was based on 'the will of the people', political decisions would by definition also be in line with Islam. The Court would only assist 'the people' to ensure this, and should therefore not be seen as in contradiction to 'the will of the people'.

The tension between the democratic and the Islamic basis for political legitimacy is however still within Sistani's thinking, although the extent of this tension may only be judged properly when the specific modes of implementation of the envis-aged Constitutional Court are specified. It is, for example, still not clear who will nominate the judges, and the degree to which the court will actually interfere in the law-making process.

Sistani also seems blind to the importance of institutional arrangements in order to counter what non-Shia groups feared the most: a tyranny by the Shiite majority of the minorities and the ways in which implementation of Islamic law could disad-vantage Chaldean and Assyrian Christians, Yazidis, and secularists, including secu-

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[36]   The call for a Constitutional Court to ensure compliance with Islamic law was also inscribed in the Iranian constitution of 1911 and has a long tradition within quietist political theory. Sistani often referred to the role of Najaf clerics in theorising a synthesis of Shiite Islam and Western-style constitutionalism in the events leading to this first Iranian constitution (Cole 2006:7).

lar women.[37] Sistani has never mentioned the need for checks on majority power to protect minority rights.

Although liberal and human rights were enshrined in the constitution, Sistani neither seemed to appreciate the importance of such rights for citizens to take part in democracy and to prevent the state from exploiting political power and thus repressing such rights.

In short, Sistani may be said to represent a majoritarian version of democracy without much consideration for the need for institutional arrangements and protection of minority and individual rights. These could soothe the most prevalent fears of minorities and assist in making democracy work.

Sistani has called on numerous occasions for intra-sectarian conciliation in Iraq and called for restraint on behalf of Shiittes to sectarian terrorist attacks by Sunni-muslims on Shiittes. According to his son Reda[38] Sistani, he clearly understood that the objective of the sectarian attacks by the Sunni Salafists were to initiate a process of tit-for-tat, where Shiite retaliation would engulf Iraq in a vicious process leading to an all-out civil war. Sistani's intervention in February 2006 after the destruction of the mosque in Samarra, where the 10th and the 11th Imam are buried and the 12th Imam (the Mahdi[39]) went into occultation was crucial in avoiding an acceleration of the existing low-scale civil war.

On the issue of the constitution, Sistani warned against any kind of ethno-sectarian polity where the distribution of seats and ministries were done on the basis of language or religion.[40] His advice was heeded, although the creation of the four top seats in Government (President, two Vice-Presidents and Prime Minister) was intended to be divided amongst the sectarian groups. The Shiites were given the all important Prime Ministry and one of the two posts as Vice-President, while the Kurds were assigned the largely ceremonial post as President and Sunnis the remaining post as Vice-President.

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[37] Although he condemned a series of "criminal" attacks against Christian churches in Bagdad and Mosul in a bayan dated 2 August 2004 (reference from Visser 2006:22).

[38] Named after the eight Imam.

[39] Most Shiites are 'twelver' Shiites and are convinced that the twelfth descendent of the prophet did not die, but disappeared. In parallel with the belief within Christianity and Judaism in a Messiah, Shiittes believe that the Mahdi will return and at that time install the Kingdom of God on earth. Until this happens, the Mahdi is represented by the ayatollahs.

[40] Bayan of 19 March 2004.

Although there are no firm references to his view on federalism, he is said to have been sceptical towards the inclusion into the constitution of the possibility to establish a separate nine-province Shia region in Southern Iraq.

While the Da'wa as well as SCIRI have been reverential in their relations to Sistani and have never openly challenged him, the young cleric and son of Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr has openly criticised, that Sistani did not speak up against Saddam during the 1990s[41] and that he is Iranian and therefore not a proper representative of Iraqi nationalism. Sistani has indeed never openly and directly criticised the Iranian leaders or the Iranian political system of 'vilayat-e-faqih', partly because he conducts many of activities from his headquarters in Qom, Iran. Iranian leaders, such as Ali Khamenei have reciprocated this attitude by showing him much respect. It seems however abundantly clear that Sistani does not agree with the Iranian political system. For instance, in 2004, Sistani snubbed the invitation from Iran for medical treatment and instead chose to go to London.

When Sistani brokered a cease-fire between the Mahdi Army and the US military after three weeks of fighting in August 2004 in Najaf, he forced Sadr to recognise his supreme authority. Sadr's submission to Sistani's authority was repeated in 2007, when fights broke out in Karbala between Sadr's forces and other Shia-militias. Sadr lost political legitimacy in both cases because he unsuccessfully attempted to contest the supreme authority of Ali Sistani.[42] When Sadr left the coalition Government in late 2006, Sistani advised Sadr to re-enter the Government early 2007, to which Sadr acquiesced.

Since his many and forceful interventions in 2003 and 2004, Sistani has reverted very much to his previous strictly religious and pastoral role for the Shiite community. His most direct political statement was in 2005, when he condemned the Danish caricature drawings of the Prophet Muhammad.[43] He has also made statements, which were critical of the effectiveness of the Jaafari and Maliki Governments of providing security in Iraq.

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[41] As a token of Sadr's claim that Sistani represent the 'silent Hawza' in contrast to himself, who represent the 'speaking Hawza' (Al Hawza an natiq) a well-known anecdote tells the story, that Sadr sent Sistani a sleeping pillow as present where the words 'here sleeps the Hawza' was embroidered.

[42] Sabrina Tavernise: 'Relations sour between Shiites and Iraq militia.' *New York Times* 12 October 2007.

[43] Bayan dated 31 January 2006. Reference from Visser 2006:27.

Reverting to his traditional quietist role however does not preclude that at a later stage he may choose again to make use of his moral voice and decisive influence on Shiites in Iraq.[44] Time is running out. Sistani is now 77 years of age and his successor may need a number of years in order to assert his authority. Of the other three leading ayatollahs in Najaf, Ishaq Fayyad, is considered the most likely successor to Sistani as the leading cleric.[45] However, the nativist nationalist movement of Moqtada al-Sadr will certainly try to undermine the authority of Fayyad with reference to Fayyad's non-Arab (he is of Afghani descent) identity and maybe even try to unseat him before he is able to assert his authority as religious leader of the Shi'a community in Iraq.

It may be argued that Sistani's ability to constrain sectarian tensions have been weakened by the terrorist attacks on Iraqi Shiites and the inability of the Iraqi Government to provide security. This in turn, has instigated a demand for reciprocal sectarian actions amongst Shiites against the Sunni community. As the centrifugal political forces are getting stronger, Sistani's attempt to conciliate democracy and Islam, his role as arbiter within the Shia-community, conciliatory attitude towards other sectarian groups and defence for the up-holding of the national Iraqi state, is needed more than ever. A person with the institutional capacity and moral capacity as head of the Shiite community like Sistani is of paramount importance to bring Iraq back from the brink of an all-out civil war.

3.2 The Da'wa Party

The Da'wa quickly developed from being a social organisation into a distinct political organisation that expressed claims on the state. Although the party drew inspiration from ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, its leadership has always consisted of laypeople rather than clerics, as is the case of SCIRI and the Sadrists. Two of the most prominent Da'wa leaders, former Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari[46] and the incumbent Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki[47] serve as an indication that laypeople continue to play an important role in the party.

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[44] A call for an up-rising against Western forces could e.g. not be ruled out if Western powers were to attack Iran.

[45] The other two leading ayatollahs are Bashir Hussein al-Najafi – of Indian descent – and Muhammad Said Hakim – the only leading ayatollah of Iraqi descent and a relative to Abd al Aziz al Hakim.

[46] A former medical doctor.

[47] Nuri al-Maliki is the 'nom de guerre' of Nuri Abu al-Mahasin, who was first based in Tehran and subsequently in Damascus during his many years in exile.

As mentioned previously, the party as a broad-based organisation virtually disappeared in Iraq by the beginning of the 1980s, and its activities were transformed into loosely coordinated secretive groups of which a number took active part in terror activities (Kadhim 2007).

During the 1980s, Da'wa groups undertook a number of spectacularly violent operations. In December 1981, groups staged the first modern suicide bomb attack against the Iraqi embassy in Beirut that claimed the lives of 27 people, and in July 1982, a Da'wa group carried out an attempt to kill Saddam Hussein near the town of Dujayl. In April 1987, Da'wa gunmen ambushed Saddam's motorcade in Mosul, claiming the lives of several senior bodyguards of the former Iraqi leader, and in December 1996, Da'wa assassins nearly succeeded in killing Saddam's eldest son, Uday.

Encouraged by Iranian intelligence, Da'wa groups also struck against Iraq's Western and Arab allies in the war against Iran. In December 1983, a Da'wa group bombed the French and US embassies in Kuwait, resulting in six deaths and in May 1985, an al-Da'wa suicide bomber struck the motorcade of the Kuwaiti emir in a failed assassination attempt.

In was during this period that Nuri al-Maliki was heading the Da'wa office in Damascus and was active in organising help in establishing a new Shia-Islamist organisation in Lebanon, the Hizbollah.[48] Another connection here is the former spiritual leader of Hizbollah, Hussein Fadlallah, who was the clerical leader from whom the Da'wa Party often sought moral guidance.

The Da'wa leadership split during the 1980s on the issue of the Khomeinist notion of the Vilayat-e-faqih and established two different branches of the party: Da'wa Tandhim[49] and Da'wa Party, where Da'wa Tandhim did not either adhere to Khomeini's theory nor accept Iranian meddling in the party's affairs.[50]

At the same time, the party split into three exile groups based on the location of its leadership in Tehran, Damascus and London.

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[48] Al-Maliki supported Hizbullah versus Israel in the war in the summer of 2006.

[49] Meaning 'organization' in Arabic.

[50] There is also to-day a split between the Da'wa Party and a Da'wa Tandhim. However, this split has nothing to do with the split from the 1980s. Today, the Da'wa Tandhim is very pro-Iranian, pro-Vilayat-e-faqih and was launched by Iran in 2002. They have voted with ISCI on several occasions including on the law on federalism. The former Prime Minister Jaafari is reported to be trying at present to establish yet another Da'wa Party because he is critical of Maliki's pro-ISCI political line.

Today, unlike the two other Shia-Islamist parties the Da'wa party has neither grass-roots political organisation[51] nor a militia. Its leadership is a composite, not only of its two wings, but essentially of the three above mentioned exile groups. The Da'wa's parliamentary representation is due to its alliance with the other Shia-Islamist parties within the UIA-list and its ability to attract votes on its own is deemed to be much weaker than the other two parties of the list. At the same time, the party has a place in the popular mind because of its long history of opposition to and persecution by the Ba'thist regime. Largely as a result of this, the Da'wa was able to bargain for thirty seats in the December 2005 elections, equalling the leading contender SCIRI. It was however only allocated four seats in the cabinet albeit one of those being the important post of Prime Minster.

The Da'wa's role may be described as a sort of buffer party between the two other more important Shia-Islamist parties within the UIA.

Historically, the Da'wa maintained a close alliance with the much larger SCIRI and SCIRI's present leaders received their political-ideological schooling in the clandestine study centres of the Da'wa. While there have been persistent reports of tensions between al-Da'wa and SCIRI, their close political and military co-operation continued during the 1990s, in part because Iran's mediating role has prevented the escalation of doctrinal and political disputes into open conflict.

Although the historical goal of the party was to establish an Islamic state in Iraq, it also supports elections and the parliamentary system[52]. In December 2002, Nuri al-Maliki said[53]: "We prefer the democratic game. What the people decide is the thing that matters, away from sects and ethnicity. This although we call for an Islamic – not religious – state as long as the Iraqis voluntarily and willingly supports such a state."

The Da'wa has not offered more specific ideas on how it intends to carry out its vision of an Islamic-cum-democratic state. As a sign of pragmatism the Da'wa has opposed strict imposition of Islamic dress codes in Shiite areas.

Considering its history of terrorist activities, it was remarkable when Ibrahim al-Jaafari in January 2003 travelled to the United States and met with the former State

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[51] Marr 2007:10

[52] Marr 2007:10.

[53] Al Safir, 17 December 2002. Quoted from Cole 2006:8.

Department official and present US ambassador to the UN, Zalmay Khalilzad, in order to prepare for the US invasion of Iraq. Since then, Da'wa has shown considerable pragmatism in its relations with the US, recognising the need for continued US support in order to stay in power and fight the insurgency.

Concomitantly, it has refused to subordinate itself to Iran and has in contrast to SCIRI, remained independent of the Iranian clerical establishment (Abedin 2003:1). As previously mentioned, it has never endorsed the Iranian idea of the 'Vilayat-e-faqih'. The Da'wa is opposed to the SCIRI idea of a Shia-dominated nine-province region in the south and the Da'wa broke with Ahmad Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress in 1995 precisely because Chalabi acceded to Kurdish plans for a loose federation, whereas al-Da'wa wanted a strong central Iraqi state. As the civil war and local militia control gains strength in Iraq, the role and influence of the Da'wa is expected to decline, in part due to its lack of grass-root organisation and militia.

3.3 SCIRI

In May 2007, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution decided to omit 'revolution' in its name as a sign that the Iraqi constitution had superseded the need for revolution.[54] This should not be considered a mark of the ideological transformation of SCIRI, but rather as testimony to the pragmatic (some would say opportunistic) policies of the organisation, where gaining power is deemed more important than ideology (International Crisis Group 2007:11). At the same time, it should be seen as an attempt to distance the organisation from Iran, and an opportunity to stress its indigenous roots.

Although the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) as it is now called, was established in Iran with the active help of Ruhollah Khomeini, and at that time adopted the theory of the Vilayat-e-faqih, it has since managed to form an alliance with both the Kurdish parties in Iraq and the US,[55] to become the most important political party in Iraq. It has successfully positioned its cadres in the most important political and security positions of the Iraqi state.

[54] www.almejlis.org/news_article-13.html

[55] Its leader, Abdul Aziz al Hakim visited the White House in Washington in December 2006.

When the US invaded Iraq in 2003, ISCI was in a relative good position to take advantage of the situation. Its leader, Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim[56], built up a coherent and effective organisation during the years in Iran and commanded a militia, the Badr Brigade, with more than 10,000 men funded by Iran and organised by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

While ISCI embraced the principle of 'Vilayat-e-faqih' during their stay in Iran, they quickly adapted to a more democratic and liberal stance after the fall of Saddam Hussein.[57] On June 6, 2003 Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim said that if the new Iraqi government was to function well, it should be founded on several key pillars, which included respect for the will of the people as expressed at the ballot box, respect for ethnic minorities via a federal system of government, and respect for Islam through the enforcement of Islamic canon law, Shari'a (Cole 2006:10).

Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim himself was an ayatollah and most other leaders of ISCI are clerics, although not of the highest ranks. Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim was killed in a massive car bombing outside the Shrine of Ali in Najaf in August 2003, and was succeeded by his younger brother Abdel-Aziz al-Hakim, who was previously the leader of the Badr Brigade.[58] Abdul Aziz al-Hakim has recently been diagnosed with lung cancer and his son, Ammar al-Hakim, is gradually taking over. The unbroken line of al-Hakim leadership of the party indicates the clannish or dynastic character of Shia-politics in Iraq. The Hakim family suffered greatly during the 1980s, as Saddam Hussein's regime assassinated 27 members of the family including 8 of Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim's brothers.

During the time in Iran ISCI built trust and cooperation with all other elements of the Iraqi opposition and established a close cooperation with the Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani in particular, who were also supported by Iran in his fight with the

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[56] Hakim was known to have been a leading member of al-Daawa and was imprisoned for his clandestine activities in 1972, 1977 and 1979. Upon his release from prison in 1980, he fled to Iran and established an organization called Mojahedin fil Iraq, which comprised former al-Daawa cadres. In 1981, the Mojahedin fil Iraq metamorphosed into the Office for the Islamic revolution in Iraq, which in turn became the SCIRI in November 1982.

[57] There remains serious doubts on the severity of this ideological change. At a recent conference in Washington Hakim refused to answer yes or no to a question on whether he supported Vilayat-e-fazih. See audio at http://www.usip.org/events/2007/1203_iraq.html

[58] Abdel-Aziz al-Hakim's clerical rank is 'hojjat-al-islam', which is the lowest clerical rank and is used for almost everyone who has studied just a little theology. The number 2 man of ISCI: Adil Abd al-Mahdi is from a non-clerical family and has migrated politically from membership of the Ba'th to espousal of Maoist principles and finally joined ISCI in 1980s. Adil Abd al-Mahdi vied unsuccessfully for the post as Prime Minister with Nuri al Maliki of Da'wa.

Saddam Hussein regime (International Crisis Group 2007:12). The good relationship with both Kurdish parties came to serve ISCI well in the post-Saddam period.

When the US discovered that their preferred Iraqi partner, Ahmad Chalabi, did not possess sufficient political capital in Iraq to enable him to serve as their Iraqi partner, the Kurdish parties and ISCI (and in a minor role, the Da'wa) quickly filled the gap. ISCI decided from the very first day after the invasion to cooperate with the US and became a member of the Interim Governing Council, and even approved of the plan to have a constitution-drafting parliament elected through a system of caucuses, until this proposal was opposed by Ali Sistani. When the first elections took place in January 2005, ISCI participated as part of the UIA list, which gained 140 seats in the 275-seat council of representatives. Sunni parties and the Sadrists both boycotted these elections and because these general elections were combined with elections for the Governorate councils, ISCI gained control of 9 out of 11 provinces where there are substantial Shiite populations – including Baghdad. When the general elections were repeated in December 2005 and both the Sunni parties and the Sadrists participated, provincial elections were omitted and ISCI therefore retained its control of the 9 provinces it had won previously.[59]

From the very start, ISCI managed to establish itself in the important ministries of Finance and the Interior, as well as filling one of the two posts of Vice-President (with its no. 2 man, Adil Abd al-Mahdi). The combination of control of the political and security apparatus in a majority of provinces, as well as its control of important national political posts and associated economic resources, has enabled ISCI to establish itself as a sort of political machine. This is closely based on a system of patron-client relationship where its supporters are motivated more by self-interest and personal benefit, than by ideological and religious conviction.

The cadres of the Badr militia have been largely integrated into the official security forces[60] and ISCI has used its political position to ensure that the recruitment of new Shiite police officers, and other replacements of public sector staff were used to establish a patronised client group to form part of its political base (International Crisis Group 2007:14-15).[61] The Interior Ministry, headed by one of the top ISCI

[59]   ISCI has for the same reasons resisted the idea of holding new provincial elections as proposed by the US and other Western countries (International Crisis Group 2007:23).

[60]   The Badr militia organization has formally been turned into the "Badr Organisation for Development and Reconstruction", a political party affiliated with SCIRI (International Crisis Group 2007:10).

[61]   The Shaheed al-Mihrab Foundation is an ISCI-controlled institution dispensing its patronage. The foundation

leaders Bayan Jabr, engaged in 2005 in sectarian violence against Sunni-Muslims in retaliation to Al Qaida in Mesopotamia and other groups' violence against Shiites. During the recent American military surge, these activities have decreased.

While ISCI's pragmatic cooperation with Iran and the US and its ability to establish a top-down system of patron-client relationships has served it well and rendered it a central political actor in Iraq, this has at the same time also been its weaknesses. Aside from its opponents in the Sunni community, its main contender in the on-going power struggle in Iraq is the Sadrist Movement and its leader Moqtada al-Sadr. The social conflict between the middle class and central-Iraq based ISCI and the working class and Baghdad and Southern cities suburb-based Sadr Movement lies behind this conflict (International Crisis Group 2007:19). The recent confrontations between Sadrists and ISCI-loyal security forces in Karbala and other places in the south, including the assassinations of several ISCI Governors and other high officials, bear witness to this escalating conflict between the two Shia parties.

Another conflict with the Sadrists is the ISCI proposal to establish a nine-governorate province in the South. The constitution provides for the possibility to establish such a super-province and ISCI, in 2006, managed with the backing of the Kurdish Alliance, to pass a law in parliament that provided the procedures for establishing such a province. Sunni-based parties, the Da'wa and the Sadrists are all opposed to the idea, which they believe will lead to the disintegration of the Iraqi state and deprive them of access to the oil revenues of the South, which account for 85% of Iraq's total oil resources. The minor Sadrist branch, the Fadhila Party, representing local Basra interest, is also opposed to the idea and advocated a smaller province consisting of the three southern governorates.[62] Since 2006, Fadhila has advocated that federal autonomy should only comprise one governorate (i.e. Basra). These different positions on the federal issue are of course related to the divergent interests of the parties and their respective constituencies. While ISCI may be expected to dominate the proposed Southern super-province due to its strong standing in central Iraq, the Sadrists will loose relative power, largely because its constituency in Baghdad will be excluded from such a province. Although ISCI casts its proposal of

has built 400 mosques in Iraq since 2003 and the largest seminary in the holy city of Najaf as well as a chain of schools. It has now has 95 offices throughout Iraq. The foundation is winning over adherents to the party through e.g. all-expenses-paid mass marriages along with cash payments and gifts for the newlyweds, free education and stipends at its new schools, and an array of other charitable projects such as caring for orphans and displaced families. ISCI also offers free medical treatment in Iranian hospitals.

62   Their ambition is supposedly to establish something akin to Dubai on the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates.

a southern super-province as a proposal to maintain the present Iraqi state in combination with a federalist system, many observers expect such as a province to lead to the actual disintegration of the Iraqi state. The the centre is seen as lacking the ability to manage such a federalist system where all power and control of resources would be devolved to the provinces.

It remains unclear whether the proposal for a Southern super-province is meant as a fall-back position for ISCI, or if it views it unrealistic to manage and for its constituencies to prosper within the existing unitary state, or whether it intends to go ahead with the proposal under all circumstances.

The war and the struggle against the Saddam regime have left an indelible imprint on the party and its leaders, while strengthening the suspicion and distrust of those who were on the other side. This goes for the Arab Sunni nationalists, the secularists and the Sadrists. A number of observers, e.g. the previous US ambassador to the UN and Secretary of State in-waiting of a (likely) future Hillary Clinton administration, Richard Holbrooke[63], view ISCI's strategy as non-accommodating and an attempt to exit the present conflict as the sole winner in an all-out fight with other parties.

This stands in contrast with the potential to develop into a broad-based Iraqi national mainstream party with legitimacy amongst the ordinary Shia population, while at the same time being patronised by the clerical establishment in Najaf and the cultural and economic elites of Iraq. In order for this to happen ISCI will need to reach out to the other major groups in Iraq and resolve its outstanding conflicts with the parties based in the Sunni community as well as the Sadrists and Fadhila. Such steps must necessarily include dropping the planned national referendum on the proposal to establish a Southern super-province by April 2008.[64] Its future ability to balance and reconcile the interests of its two main external backers, Iran and the US, will also be important in determining whether ISCI will emerge as *the* Iraqi political actor providing stability and conciliation in Iraq.

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[63] Radio Open Source, September 22nd, 2007: Interview with Richard Holbrooke, http://www.radioopensource.org/index.php?s=holbrooke

[64] According to Cole (2003) al-Hakims largest disagreement with Sistani, is over whether Iraqi governance is best pursued through a strong central government or through a decentralized, loose federalism.

3.4 Moqtada al-Sadr

The Sadr movement is currently the most popular political tendency among religious Shiites in post-Ba'thist Iraq, and is growing in popularity. As the name indicates, it is led by the young Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Who is he and what and whom does he represent?

Sadr was previously regarded as an outsider and a temporary phenomenon that would disappear when the Coalition forces had conquered his 'Mahdi Army', which was seen a sort of advanced street-gang. But most observers now agree[65], that this was an incorrect assessment of Sadr and his movement, and has, in fact, only revealed how little was known of what went on amongst ordinary Iraqis.

Sadr does not possess the virtues which traditionally characterise Shia-Islamist politicians: eloquence, charisma and high status within the religious hierarchy. Sadr does however, possesses something, which makes him one of the most important political players in Iraq to-day: he represents the massive group of Iraqis who live in the slum dwellings outside of the big cities and in the poor provinces in the south of Iraq.[66]

Khomeini created a political movement in the 1970s in Iran which opposed the traditional leaders within Shia-Islam, the quietist ayatollahs and also mobilised the people, who were up-rooted from the countryside, and moved to the city slums as a direct result of the modernisation which the Shah had initiated in the country. As mentioned previously, Moqtada al-Sadr's father, ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, inspired by his relative Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, started an activist, political Islamist movement in Iraq under Saddam in a similar way.

Moqtada al-Sadr, who is married to a daughter of Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, is the new leader of this puritanical movement and his influence is due to the fact that his followers worship him and believe he is their only chance to get out of poverty and hopelessness. Like Khomeini, Sadr has criticised the quietist ayatollahs and Ali Sistani in particular, for having reduced Najaf to a "dormant seat of learning" and has in contrast, attempted to define his own "articulate" seminary (Visser 2006:21).

[65] See for instance D. Filkins 'Moqtada al-Sadr', Foreign Policy, Vol. 159, p.41, 2007

[66] In the 1990s the swamps in the south were used by Iran-based ISCI forces and the marsh Arabs themselves often resisted Ba'th rule. They were organized politically and militarily by the Iraqi Hizbollah, a radical group that fought a guerrilla war against the Iraqi state. The Ba'th drained the swamps and the marsh Arabs were forced to settle in poorer southern towns, where they largely subsist in poverty, having lost their livelihoods. A large part of these destitute shii'tes have become followers of Moqtada al-Sadr in the south. (Cole 2003:548).

In parallel with the failure of the reconstruction of Iraq after the invasion in 2003, and the resentment caused amongst ordinary Iraqis, by the former exiled politicians cooperating with the foreign coalition forces, Moqtada al-Sadr's popularity rose. Sadr criticised them for having gone in exile in Iran and other places, while he and his family had paid the price for staying in the country under Saddam. He accused them for being dependent on Iran and demanded that the foreign forces left the country.

The fact that Sadr first and foremost positions himself as an Iraqi nationalist, has made him a potential partner for the Sunni-Islamist parties, with whom he is now trying to create a coalition in Parliament. During the Coalition's attack on Faluja in 2004 the Sadr Movement organised assistance to the Sunni-Islamist fighters in that city. The Sadr Movement has likewise taken a critical stand on the attempt of the Kurdish parties to have the oil-rich Kirkuk region attached to the Kurdish-ruled area supported by a referendum, which is planned to take place by the end of 2007.[67]

One of the reasons for Sadr's conciliatory attitude toward the Sunni-Islamist parties is that both parties have a common interest in preventing an autonomous super-region to be created in Southern Iraq, as proposed by ISCI. As mentioned previously, 85% of Iraq's oil is in this area, and it would be much easier for ISCI to marginalise the Sadr Movement in a future super-region in the South, rather than in Iraq as a whole.

As a result, Sadr has taken a strong position in favour of Iraqi unity, opposing any decentralisation and federalism that would divide Iraq.

Reaching out towards the Sunni-Islamist parties has not prevented Sadr's Mahdi army being active in ethnic cleansing in Baghdad, where the city has been divided into cleansed Sunni and Shia neighbourhoods, and where the proportion of Shiites in Baghdad has increased dramatically since 2003 and by some considered to be 80% to-day.[68] The Mahdi army has also participated in assassinations of Ba'thists

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[67] The Constitutional Article 140 on Kirkuk contains three elements: normalization, census and referendum. The Sadr Movement does not question the article as such, but underlines normalization and census as preconditions for holding a referendum and maintains that these preconditions have not been met and expect that if the first two steps are taken properly, the result of the referendum will run counter to expectations (that Kirkuk is included in the Kurdistan region). (Sadrist leader Baha' al-A'raji Ilaf ,Friday, November 23, 2007 quoted from USG Open Source Center).

[68] Juan Cole at the Informed Comment blog (www.juancole.com) for January 9, 2008.

and 'takfiris', i.e. Sunni-Islamists who want to excommunicate Shiites as Muslims. A number of Mahdi army members have participated in these activities as employees of the official security services, which were opened up to large scale Shiite recruitment after 2003.

The Sadr Movement has likewise participated in parliament. On and off individuals have served as ministers in the Government and at the same time fought its adversaries – whether Sunni insurgents or ISCI – with military means in Baghdad and other places. The Mahdi Movement is seen to be behind a number of recent assassinations of ISCI affiliated Governors and in Southern Iraq.[69] Since the initiation of the American military 'surge' strategy, the Sadr Movement has declared a freeze on the activities of the Mahdi army and ethnic violence has decreased markedly. In November 2007, this freeze has been extended for another six months.

Sadr has a little more than 10% of the seats in Parliament, but holds the balance of power in terms of which Government can be formed. The survival of the Nuri al-Maliki is therefore critically dependent on the support of the Sadr bloc. Its political actions are also expedient. The Sadr Movement joined forces with the other Shia-Islamist parties during the elections in December 2005, and joined the United Iraqi Alliance list, it has since left this coalition and constituted its own bloc in Parliament.

The Sadr Movement has also become stronger militarily by transforming its previous rag-tag street-gangs into a forceful militia, which together with the Badr Brigade forces of ISCI and the Kurdish Peshmerga, constitute the real military force in the country – aside from the Coalition forces. Sadr's popularity is steadily rising and he is expected to carry the majority in Baghdad and at least the southern province of Maysan, when and if new provincial elections are held. The Sadr Movement is demanding that the Government take steps to hold such new provincial elections, but so far without any success due to opposition from ISCI.

After the dramatic fights which took place in Najaf in 2004 between the American forces and the Mahdi Army and which ended in a draw and after the recent fighting in Kufa between Iraqi security forces and the Mahdi Army, all actors seem to recognise that it is not possible to circumvent Sadr and his Movement. In addition to the conflict between the Sunni and the Shia political blocs, the future of Iraq seem in

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[69] See *Informed Comment* (www.juancole.com) for Nov. 9, 2007.

many ways to depend on the outcome of the conflict between the two dominating Shia-Islamist blocs: ISCI and the Sadr Movement.

The crucial question is whether Sadr wants Iraq to solve its problems within the existing constitution and while the coalition forces are in the country. If he does not want this or thinks it is not feasible, then it will be more rational for him to prepare for an all-out confrontation and only afterwards contemplate entering into a compromise with the other actors. A number of elements indicate that it is this last scenario that he believes is the most likely.

For instance, Sadr's ministers have, by and large, used their ministerial posts to channel resources to the Sadr Movement, instead of trying to make them function as national ministries delivering public services. Although he has kept a low profile during the on-going American 'surge', this does not mean that the military capacity of the Mahdi army has been dismantled. ISCI does have a robust and well organised leadership, however, its top man, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim is presently undergoing chemotherapy for lung cancer in Iran. This could unsettle ISCI until the designated successor to Abdul Aziz – his son Ammar – has consolidated his hold on power.

The Fadhila (Virtue) party is an offshoot of the Sadr Movement of Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr. It is located in Basra and attracts a more educated and middle-class clientele than the Sadrists (Marr 2007:18). Although Fadhila is not opposed to the establishment of regions, it favours a more restricted three province region of the South, where its relative influence would be much stronger than in a nine-province region of the south and the centre. The party is led by ayatollah Muhammad Ya'qubi and has 15 seats in parliament[70]. Like the Sadr Movement, Fadhila took part in the elections on the joint UIA list, but has since left the Shia-Islamist coalition and constituted its own parliamentary bloc.

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[70] Led by Hasan al-Shammari.

4. Conclusion: conflict or cooperation?

While the present development in Iraq seem to deepen sectarian conflict and strengthen identity politics, the analysis of Shia-Islamist parties gives us reason to believe that the sectarian antagonism over time could give way to more cooperative and pragmatic cross-sectarian politics, emphasising interest and issues, rather than identity.

The analysis reveals that there exist substantial differences between the ShiaI-Islamist parties with regard to social constituencies, policies and organisation. Sadr predominantly mobilises the urban poor in Baghdad and in the Southern provinces such as Maysan and Dhi Qar, and is critical of federalism and cooperation with Iran, while emphasising Iraqi nationalism and wanting an early exit of Coalition forces. ISCI's support comes more from the middle classes in central Iraq, favours establishing a nine-province southern region and cooperation with Iran and the US. Although ISCI also wants the Coalition forces to leave Iraq, it clearly has a more pragmatic view on when and how this should be. Da'wa tend to side with Sadr on the issue of federalism and with ISCI on the issue of Iran and the timing of the exit of Coalition forces. The support for Da'wa is more based on ideology than on interests. The salient point in relation to Fadhila is that it seems to support a restricted Southern three-province region, rather than a super nine-province region. Sistani attempts to reconcile the overall interests of the Shia population with preservation of the Iraqi nation state and to suppress sectarian hatred. Although Sistani is pragmatic and realistic in relation to Iran, he is also critical of the Iranian political system and wants to maintain the role of the Shia clergy in its present pastoral role, rather than involving it directly in politics.

While it is clear that distinct differences between the Shia-Islamist parties exist, it seems equally clear that the longer term interests (such as economic development) of the constituencies of political actors in Iraq would be much better served by cooperation rather than conflict. This is underlined by several opinion polls which show that the main interest of the ordinary people in Iraq, regardless of sect, is to improve their economic livelihood and security, while more ideological issues take a second place.

Oil is the best example of the principle that all communities have more to gain over the long term by cooperation than by splitting up into regions and taking the oil

with them. This will be true for the Kurds in particular. Even if they incorporate Kirkuk into their region, oil resources in the northern fields are in decline, and Kurds will gain more from sharing in an equitable partition of all Iraq's oil revenue (Marr 2007:20).

In the case of another important economic resource, water, cooperation would also benefit all parties much more than conflict. Irrigation of the plains of central Iraq depends on the management of the system of dams. Armed conflict between the Sunni-dominated central and Western Iraq (where the dams are located) and Shia-dominated middle and Southern Iraq where the water is used for irrigation, would clearly have overall consequences for Iraqi agriculture.

A number of other economic issues where cooperation would be more beneficial than conflict could also be mentioned. Such as, establishing national communication networks and external outlets, securing national markets and maintaining Iraq's national power grid. For example, where Bagdad depends on power generation from the Derbendikhan Dam in the Kurdistan region.

The challenges are immense, but it seems logical, that as the present conflict develops, issues such as distribution of oil revenues and federalism will create new alliances and hopefully progressively help parties to focus on interests and issues rather than primordial identity. This will enable the much more important longer-term collective interests of parties in cooperation to gain the upper hand over the much more limited short-term gains of the individual parties of the conflict.

Shia-Islamist parties will play an important role in this process because they represent a large part of the Iraqi population. In a similar way to how Shia-Islamism in Iran has been transformed through its confrontation with the challenges of development, Shia-Islamism in Iraq should also be expected to be changed as it tries to cope with the simultaneous challenges of reconstituting the Iraqi state, and of promoting socio-economic development. It seems inevitable that in the longer run, new cross-sectarian political coalitions will be created, hard ideological positions will soften, and identity-based politics will give way to issue and interest based politics, in order to cope with these challenges.

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