



Machiavelli in Mesopotamia

Nouri al-Maliki Builds the Body Politic

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BAGHDAD, IRAQ—The country has gone through hell. The morning explosions, round the clock mortaring, day and night gun battles. The bodies dumped on the periphery of neighborhoods. The Shiite and Sunni families who fled their homes after threat letters were slipped under their doors. All that is finished now. Iraq's open civil war, lasting from 2006 until late 2007, has ended. The war affirmed the durability of the new Shiite-led Iraqi state. What has come since is an extended truce, in which Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has begun to consolidate his power and mastery over Iraq's security forces, asserting his will on the provinces.

For now, those rival factions—tribes, insurgent groups, Shiite militias—have come to see the benefits of forging alliances with Baghdad and the consequences of failing to do so. As the situation calms, the country has started to resemble not a Western-style democracy, which was the goal when the United States invaded, but the authoritarian model that governed Iraq until 2003: a place where a strong leader guarantees stability and citizens rally around the state, with one crucial difference—Iraq's Shiite majority is now in charge, not its onetime Sunni elite. After years of violence and the displacement of millions, Shiites and Sunnis

are slowly finding ways to accommodate one another, all under the watchful eye of a single flag and leader in Baghdad.

For the moment, that leader is al-Maliki. To anger him is to risk endless harassment, exile, or imprisonment. To strike an alliance with al-Maliki is an opportunity to amass power and protection from enemies.

Regardless of one's Shiite or Sunni affiliation, Iraqis are ready to accept a leader who asserts his will, with a mix of patronage and force, thereby creating order and unifying the country. If that ruler comes from a religious fundamentalist party like al-Maliki, the result is fine, so long as he produces stability. If al-Maliki oversteps boundaries, then the resulting frictions might ignite violence; but for now, most see benefit in trying to secure the weight of the state on their side.

The current arrangements have been locked in after defining military confrontations—notably the civil war in Baghdad. During that conflict, Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army and militia-laden security forces proved the ascendancy of the country's Shiite majority by beating back Sunni fighters and seizing control of Sunni districts. That battle only stopped when U.S. troops began to intervene forcibly in spring 2007. Equally important, al-Maliki's

crushing of the Sadr movement in the southern port of Basra last spring asserted the government's primacy over Shiite armed factions and reinvented him as a nationalist in the eyes of many Iraqis, who had not believed he would ever take on a group from his own sect. Most sides have gradually adjusted themselves to the new dynamics, with the losers recognizing al-Maliki's strength and ability to harm them. The prime minister's ability to call on U.S. military power also gives pause to those who might challenge the state.

The arrangements could sour, but currently hold—based equal parts on intimidation and the promise of rewards. The quiet has little to do with the establishment of rule of law but rather the clout of individuals and parties on the ground to ensure quiet. Flashpoints like Diyala province, and some of Baghdad's troubled neighborhoods, shine a light on the new equilibrium. Here, alliances are emerging between al-Maliki and some Sunni leaders, based on shared enemies and willingness by Sunnis to show deference to the prime minister. A look at the south shows how the prime minister has used patronage to win tribes to his side. The prime minister's steps have posed a threat to the other main Shiite partner in the government, the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq (ISCI), which had been more powerful than al-Maliki before he started to promote a vision of a strong nationalist state with the Basra campaign. The ISCI has long championed the creation of a Shiite "super state" in the south.

In elections this January, al-Maliki soundly trounced ISCI in Baghdad and southern Iraq, winning six provinces and sharing control of another four. The newfound confidence in Baghdad has also alarmed Iraqi Kurdistan. Al-Maliki has sent troops to challenge the Kurds in disputed border areas and fueled their fears that the national government could one day try to

strip back their self-rule. A battle in the north could reshape the country's border, expelling Kurds and Arabs along a 300-mile frontier line. Such a fight would also be a throwback to Iraq's history of near constant war between Baghdad and its rebellious Kurdish regions.

A portrait emerges of a centralizing state, based on patchwork arrangements with local leaders, where order depends as much on an individual's clout and relationship to power as it does on formal institutions. One's allegiance to the state is born from a calculus of communal interests, and often has less to do with patriotism than self-interest and preservation for a tribe, sect, or ethnicity.

Whether he stays prime minister or not after this year, al-Maliki's legacy is likely to be the reintroduction of the traditional strong-man model into Iraqi politics—not as brutal as Saddam Hussein, but a leader who is willing to quiet the nation through both patronage and an iron fist.

Diyala

On a cold, winter day in Diyala province, northeast of Baghdad, a front line in the country's past battles between Shiite and Sunnis, outgoing Shiite governor Raad Tamimi sat at a speaker's table, clad in a shiny black shirt and matching tie. He was flanked by Iraqi generals from the Diyala operation command and the new square-jawed American general charged with the troubled sector. The ceremony marked the transfer to Iraqi state control of Diyala's 9,000 member Sunni paramilitary program, known as the Awakening, which refers to the decision by Sunni tribesmen and insurgents to revolt against Al Qaeda in Iraq. The leaders of the Awakening, many of them former insurgents, sat in the middle row of the audience.

Their commander, Abu Taleb, sat glowering, dressed in a pumpkin-colored shirt



Al-Maliki: I'm gonna make him an offer he can't refuse.

and tie, as the Iraqi governor and military officers thanked the men in the blandest terms for fighting alongside the police, army, and U.S. forces. But Tamimi did not mention Abu Taleb or his colleagues by name, or acknowledge they were the ones who proved pivotal to ousting the militants from Diyala's capital, Baquba.

And so, with good reason, Abu Taleb was angry they did not let him or his deputies speak—they had risked everything to secure the province. It was a deliberate slight by the local officials and commanders, who viewed the Awakening as a possible fifth column for Sunni militants. In his speech, the outgoing governor, making clear his distrust, warned that only the state would now exist, not a separate group of Sunni fighters. He vowed that Awakening members would be investigated for criminal records before anyone was absorbed into

state jobs. The ceremony ended, and the governor and senior general for Diyala breezed by the Awakening leaders on their way to a lunch of rice, lamb, and chicken. In turn, the Awakening leaders rushed over to a senior American officer and asked him to protect them from pending Iraqi arrest warrants.

Abu Taleb wears his black hair closely cropped. His skin is fair, and his sharp grey eyes speak volumes. In spring 2007, he helped lead members of the Sunni insurgency into an alliance with the American army to wrest back control of the province's capital. Until then, the Iraqi government's only foothold in the capital was the box-like cement government compound, where a small group of politicians camped out under siege from Sunni gunmen who relentlessly shelled the area with mortars from adjacent neighborhoods.

The Awakening broke with Al Qaeda in Iraq because it resented the group's ambitions to impose Islamic law on the country. The fighters also sensed a bleak future under Iraq's Shiite-led government unless they forged an alliance with the Americans to protect them from the government's security forces.

Despite their conciliatory actions, tensions persisted with the Shiite-led local government. The Awakening accused the local and national police forces of working for ISCI's former paramilitary wing, the Badr Organization, and torturing the Sunni fighters they detained. With bad blood between the sides, al-Maliki ordered a security offensive in Diyala that amounted to a crackdown on Sunni parties and paramilitary groups. It targeted Awakening fighters and the Iraqi Islamic Party, one of the largest Sunni political groupings in the country. Hundreds were detained.

In October, a deputy leader of the Awakening, Abu Ali, was jailed by Iraqi Special Forces, which are commanded by al-Maliki's office. Abu Ali was jailed in a special prison in the Green Zone enclave in Baghdad, until U.S. forces intervened and lobbied to free him. The Americans informed al-Maliki's office that Abu Ali had been fighting against extremism and was a force for reconciliation. The prime minister accepted their arguments and ordered his release. Whether it was a political calculation to demonstrate himself a non-sectarian or a sincere conviction remains unclear. Regardless, the decision augured a new relationship between the Shiite national leader and the Sunni paramilitaries in Diyala.

The Awakening fighters started to see al-Maliki as someone who could prevent them from being crushed, even though he also tolerated attacks against them. This January, al-Maliki's office blocked an attempt to draw up arrest warrants for more Awakening members in Diyala.

Al-Maliki's ability to intervene has won respect from Awakening leaders like Abu Taleb. He praises al-Maliki's office and says he doesn't fault him for the detentions of his followers. Instead, he blames police officers affiliated with the Badr Organization. Abu Taleb even endorsed one candidate al-Maliki was supporting in the January elections. "We believe the central government will be fairer to us than the local government," Abu Taleb says. "We feel al-Maliki's advisor [for national reconciliation]...is trustworthy. The problem is in the security operations."

Raids in Diyala are directed by an operations room that mixes army and police. The command has been described by Iraqis and outside observers as acting in a blatantly sectarian manner. Now, after parliamentary elections in which Sunni and secular slates won a majority of seats in Diyala, al-Maliki will likely again exert influence through his control of purse strings and the security apparatus. His willingness to tackle his main rival and partner in the government, the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq and its Badr Organization affiliate, should win him goodwill from the Sunnis.

However, he will have to offer rewards to some of Diyala's new Sunni elite, who boycotted the previous local elections in 2005 out of anger over the U.S. occupation. If al-Maliki does not, the consequences are painfully obvious in Baquba neighborhoods like Tahrir, a dusty enclave filled with sandy brick buildings, where Al Qaeda in Iraq once reigned. Here, Awakening forces helped bring Shiite families back to their homes after many fled to Baghdad during the civil war. The Awakening members speak about the returning families as proof of reconciliation but the guests know they are there at their protectors' whim.

A recent visit to a Shiite family's home saw the relatives answer questions cautiously, wary of angering their new hosts, knowing the situation could change at any time.

If al-Maliki alienates too many Awakening members, the fighters could very well seek protection from Al Qaeda or another group. Such a move might ultimately prove to be compensation for the drawdown of U.S. soldiers, who have lobbied the government on behalf of the Awakening. If the Americans are no longer readily available, the Sunni fighters might feel this is their only choice.

For al-Maliki, the best way to handle the Sunnis could be to play one faction off another. On the one hand, he continues to bicker with the Iraqi Islamic Party. He has made peace with some Awakening leaders and then arrested others. His ability to win some factions over and deal harshly with others will prevent the country's onetime Sunni elite from banding together and ever posing a viable threat that could overthrow the government. This is still the lingering deep-seated fear of Iraq's Shiite majority, who rue the day they chose to fight British forces in 1920 and in effect ceded control of the country to Iraq's Sunni minority until 2003.

Baghdad

Nowhere is Baghdad's transformation more remarkable than the western neighborhood of Saidaia, where Shiite militias and Sunni militants fought ruthlessly until January 2008, in what was considered the capital's last true sectarian flashpoint.

Storefront windows had been shattered and minarets left pock-marked by car bombs. More than a year ago, U.S. troops sealed off the neighborhood with blast walls to prevent armed groups from entering freely, set up a small troop base in the center of the district, and sponsored the formation of a local district council that brought together prominent Sunnis and Shiites, many of whom had connections to the armed groups that had been fighting. Soon after,

violence started to drop. The council became the district's de facto government. Al-Maliki involved himself with the neighborhood, which Shiite officials viewed as important because it remained one of just two Sunni neighborhoods lining the main highway to the Shiite south. Last winter, he sent high-level officials to watch the local council elect its head. Although the district had a Sunni majority, a man affiliated with Badr won the council's vote by a narrow margin. Sunni members of the council said

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they felt they were under pressure from al-Maliki's office to pick him.

Since then, the district has enjoyed a remarkable renaissance. Shops have opened and families displaced from Saidaia have started to return. The district even has a two-story restaurant, with an ice cream parlor called Sun City Foods. But Saidaia is also a cautionary tale: car bombings and assassinations have not completely vanished. Like other places, the relations that keep the peace are fickle; safety depends on the enforcers from each community, who could help lead a turn back to war.

In a simple room with plastic-covered couches, a few bullet holes scar the walls from an assassination attempt last April against three of the senior Sunni leaders in Saidaia. Prominent Sunnis still come to the real estate office where the assassins burst inside. Abu Marwan, a broad-shouldered man, who mats his last few remaining hairs across his scalp, suffered five gunshot wounds in that attack. Abu Ghaith, who owned the office, was also shot and quit the

council last June in disgust over what he felt was the body's favoritism toward displaced Shiite families returning to Saidaia. Sunnis, he argued, could not yet return to their areas in Baghdad and were being forced to leave the district. Even after he quit, other prominent Sunnis still gathered regularly at Abu Ghaith's shop to socialize and discuss the neighborhood's fortunes.

In late October 2008, Abu Marwan sat in Abu Ghaith's office and spoke darkly about how his brother, an Awakening leader, had been arrested a few weeks earlier by the Iraqi army's Muthanna Brigade, a predominantly Shiite unit that has earned a reputation for indiscriminate arrests of Sunnis. No one knew what the charges were other than terrorism allegations, based on secret informants—a standard method for arrest, which sometimes proved valid, and other times had no traction and served to settle scores or political disagreements. At the time, Abu Marwan wanted nothing mentioned publicly about his brother's arrest. "We don't want to put this case in another light because we are in favor of reconciliation," he told me.

His friends nodded and worried that arrest warrants could be obtained against any of them. Despite their paranoia, all were proud about how Saidaia had changed for the better, especially the flourishing main street. The men joked about how they were so busy now that their wives actually wanted them home for a change.

But, in December, Abu Marwan's worst fears were realized. As he prepared to board a flight to a tribal conference in Iraqi Kurdistan, he was arrested at the airport and jailed in connection with the murder of a local Shiite council member named Abul Amr Ghalman, whose car was blown up outside of Saidaia in September, most likely the result of a personal feud or political quarrel.

The arrest showed the fragility of Iraq's local politics—how the calm depends on an

understanding among dueling players that can easily be shattered. Abu Marwan had played a crucial role in bringing Sunnis to the table in Saidaia, but suddenly he had been charged in the murder of an official. His friends claimed Abu Marwan was innocent and had been wrongly accused. At the same time, there had also been a warrant issued for Ali Amery, the Shiite head of the local council, in connection with the murder. Sunnis in the district said the council head had a bitter rivalry with Ghalman. However, Amery did not worry about being detained. He enjoyed protection from the Badr Organization and continued to roam his district freely. No one dared touch him until he traveled south in late January to Karbala, where security forces arrested him.

Sunnis in Saidaia greeted Amery's arrest as proof that al-Maliki was turning against Badr. The attitude marked a shift for Sunnis like Abu Ghaith, who had been deeply suspicious of all Shiite leadership in the government. The Sunnis in Saidaia believed Badr had carried out assassinations against prominent leaders in their community. The arrest burnished al-Maliki's nationalist credentials in their eyes. As of now, neither Abu Marwan nor Amery has been convicted, but only one year ago, the government would not have dared jail a man of Amery's stature.

"Maliki is decisive and strong. The last two years he started to work in the right way," Abu Ghaith said. "He dealt with Al Qaeda and the Mahdi Army, and, at the same time, now he is fighting [against] Badr."

The South

In southern Iraq, al-Maliki has employed a similar strategy by flexing his muscles and promising patronage to tribes. The tactics proved effective at undermining the Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq, which until elections in January 2009 had been the

largest party in the south, with control of five provinces. Starting last spring, tribesmen rallied to al-Maliki's side, with the lure of money and power. The prime minister created "tribal support councils" during the Iraqi army's fight in Basra against the Sadrists at the end of March 2008. In both Basra and Amara, the tribal councils were involved in detain-

ing Shiite militants opposed to Baghdad. But al-Maliki moved swiftly from employing the councils against the Mahdi Army to using them as a base to erode the popularity of the ISCI, his onetime ally.

In Babil province, where ISCI controlled the local government and police force, the tribal council made quick inroads. In November 2008, I visited the tribal support council in Hilla, south of Baghdad. The headquarters was filled with several tribesmen who had belonged to Badr, but had apparently been lured to al-Maliki's new scheme. They denied they were drifting away from Badr, but did not apologize for now spending their time with a body their party had vehemently criticized and viewed as a clear threat. Even the brother of the outgoing governor, affiliated with ISCI, had started to attend the council meetings. He was embarrassed to be spotted by journalists at the office. ISCI and its Badr wing had been the main power bloc in Shiite politics since the war, due to their deep cash reserves, their effective militia force, and ability to secure backing from both the U.S. government and Iran. They had won control of Baghdad and most of the south's provincial councils in local elections in 2005. Al-Maliki and his Shiite religious party, Dawa, had in effect been their junior partner. But

after the successful Basra campaign which routed the Mahdi Army, in large part due to U.S. air support, al-Maliki had tapped into the country's desire for a strong nationalist leader. And by virtue of his steady accumulation of power over the army and police, along with his access to state money, he now challenged ISCI. His vision of a central gov-

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ernment appealed more to people than did ISCI's promotion of a Shiite "super region," which many Iraqis viewed with suspicion. With momentum on his side and the tribal councils in his pocket, al-Maliki began to win over ISCI's once stalwart supporters. Even some of its members were now ready to follow the prime minister's lead.

In private, a senior ISCI official worried about supporters leaving the ranks and joining al-Maliki's councils. In the run up to the January 2009 provincial elections, the vitriol between al-Maliki and his Shiite rivals became uglier as they clashed over the future vision of the state. The ISCI advocated a federal region in the south and al-Maliki's Dawa Party called for a strong central government. Despite their partnership in recent years, Dawa and ISCI have long been rivals. Dawa was founded in the 1950s by Shiite clergy in an effort to create a modern state in accordance with their brand of Islam. Its members turned to arms in the 1970s against Saddam's regime. After a brutal crackdown, most members fled to Iran, where followers of a famed family of clergy, the Hakims, broke from Dawa and

formed ISCI under Iranian tutelage. During this period, Dawa—battered from the crack-downs, the flight into exile, and broader fragmentation—became a shadow of its former self. Al-Maliki's ascent has led to a reversal in its fortunes.

Two days before the January vote, I caught up with Sheik Ali Mirza, al-Maliki's top candidate in Najaf. The city is home to one of Shiite Islam's holiest places: the shrine of Imam Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed. Here, in the shadow of the shrine, Mirza lobbied tribal diwans for votes. Crowds shook his hand, and kissed him at every house. Dressed in brown robes and sporting a snowy beard, he lauded al-Maliki and made veiled references to ISCI as a corrupt force that would plunder the state's money. He smiled as a tribesman recited a poem to the prime minister: "Al-Maliki is a grandson of Imam Ali.... He is the one who signed the execution order for Saddam Hussein." Between campaign stops, Mirza unleashed his bile against ISCI as we drove in a non-descript sedan, tailed by a vehicle filled with Kalashnikov-toting bodyguards.

Mirza badmouthed ISCI's preacher at the Imam Ali shrine, claiming he lacked the credentials to preach at such a holy site. He accused Najaf's outgoing governor from ISCI of having skimmed money off reconstruction projects. Such inflammatory talk would have been unthinkable in public even a few months earlier, when both Dawa and ISCI officials went to great lengths to hide their animosity. He accused Badr of trying to intimidate voters. "People say Badr became a civilian organization, but now they are threatening others with weapons," Mirza told me. He hinted that Badr could pick up arms against the new order: "The other side, if they lose their interests, you could expect anything from them."

Such antipathy for ISCI was also on display among Shiite tribal leaders in the

south. Sheik Wahid Issawi, a wrinkled 82-year-old tribal leader, who claims 80,000 clansmen in the mid-Euphrates region, says he sat in his tribal guesthouse on election day, telling his clan to vote for al-Maliki. The prime minister had wooed Issawi by appointing one of his sons to the prime minister's office. Al-Maliki didn't neglect the father either: Issawi was named to head a tribal support council in Kufa, a suburb of Najaf. Through the council, he hopes to have a say in reconstruction projects in his region. Issawi makes clear that what he wants now is a strongman, whether it's al-Maliki or someone else, who will root out the other warring parties in Iraq and impose martial law. In his mind, democracy is an affectation. What matters is respect for the tribe and a national leader who will rebuild the country.

Issawi portrays Iraq's tribes, including his own, as the long-time guardians of Iraqi interests. The tribes, he says, rose up against the Ottoman Empire and again against the British in 1920. "We will support al-Maliki because the tribes are the base of the state. There will be no state or country without the tribes." When the topic of conversation turns to ISCI, he is unflinchingly blunt: "They are from Iran."

His words draw attention to the very fractious nature of Iraq, where groups think their interests come first, and equate what they want as good for the nation. Despite their apparent self-interest, most factions—including Issawi's—pay tribute to the ideal of an Iraqi nation and citizenry, and vigorously reject the idea they are just a collection of disparate peoples stitched together inside borders to fit the need of colonial powers when the Ottoman Empire collapsed. Iraqis increasingly feel that they must make a display of their nationalism and band together as citizens of a single nation, or they have no hope of leading or commanding followers. In turn, they often

see an autocratic leader as the only force capable of holding them together as a state, and see the absence of such a ruler as a threat to Iraq's existence.

A case in point, Issawi cursed the Iraqi constitution drafted in 2005 under the auspices of the United States, the Kurds, and ISCI, which advocates a weak central state. It was "written by foreign hands," says Issawi. He calls for Baghdad to declare martial law and ban all political parties or risk permanent instability. "This is the reality," he warns.

Back to the Past

Six years on, Iraq has come almost full circle. The country is far from the dream of democracy championed by the Americans in 2003. Instead, the country has endured anywhere from 90,000 to 200,000 dead, a bungled foreign occupation, a vicious civil war, and the flight of up to four million Iraqis who were displaced internally or fled for their lives to neighboring countries. But at the end of it, a natural order is once more asserting itself.

The country's Shiite majority is now firmly in control for the first time in Iraq's 89-year history. An uneasy co-existence is emerging between the country's new Shiite elite and the minority Sunni population that once dominated the country's leadership and took up arms after 2003. The age-old tensions between Baghdad and the Kurdish north are reemerging as the national government gains strength.

The next three years should see the cementing of a Shiite-led authoritarian-style

state, with only the trappings of democracy. Democratic institutions will largely be symbolic and bypassed, sacrificed in the greater name of stability. Iraqis want a leader in Baghdad who takes unilateral actions through the security forces, tribes, and other alliances—someone who can provide them calm, safety, and economic benefits. If al-Maliki cannot, another will come along. Without such a leader, they fear once again

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seeing the country slide back into brutal strife—to the time when warring groups killed with impunity and security forces represented the whims of parties, not the state.

Indeed, Iraqis would rather have security than absolute freedom. What does matter is staving off lawlessness and providing a space where people can live and work in relative peace. People do not believe in a new democratic Iraq—rather they believe in a state where they know their leaders are watching them and will mercilessly smite those who pose a threat. So, for now, Shiite and Sunni Arabs alike look to Baghdad for leadership, in a throwback to the traditions of the past—whether one sees in the distance the silhouette of Iraq's first king in 1920, or the specter of Saddam Hussein. This is what always has worked for them, not the follies of the American years. ●