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Maliki's Iraq between Two Elections

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In meetings conducted in Baghdad in May 2009, senior Iraqi leaders indicated how they interpret January's provincial election results, expressed concerns about the recent downturn in security, lamented the tremendous financial pressure the government is feeling due to the decline in oil prices, and projected their hopes for national elections slated for 30 January 2010. The Iraqis, numbering about 20, represented the highest level of nearly all of the main Iraqi political factions, including leaders in the Council of Representatives (COR), members of the presidency, and top officials in the government.

ELECTIONS, ELECTIONS

Political talk in Baghdad is focused on elections: interpreting the results from the January provincial elections and speculating about the coming national elections and possible coalitions that may form, either pre-election or post. There are scattered voices claiming small-scale electoral fraud in the provincial elections, primarily in the political composition of the provincial electoral commission offices, in addition to the more familiar complaints about incomplete voter rolls and the prime minister's abuse of his incumbency. By and large, however, Iraqi leaders think that it was a clean contest—albeit one not conducted on an entirely even playing field—and expect the national elections to be the same. They are planning and strategizing accordingly.

The provincial elections increased awareness of the importance of party organization and formation of strong coalitions prior to election day. Multiple interlocutors pointed to the high percentage of “wasted votes” in the provincial elections, resulting from the fragmentation among Iraqi political parties. These are votes for small parties and single candidates who did not achieve the minimum threshold to earn a seat and thus remain unrepresented. The commonly cited figure (confirmed by independent USIP analysis) is 30%. When compared to the national percentage of the top vote getting list—Prime Minister Maliki's “State of Law” coalition at 19%—this wasted vote represents a major potential pool for the established parties to recruit from, or from which new,

independent voices could emerge if given the proper training and education. Something similar can be said about the nearly 50% of the population that did not vote. These uncounted votes also cast a measure of uncertainty on any attempt to draw national political trends from provincial results, with such a large percentage of the electorate effectively unclaimed.

Almost all agree that an effort to unseat Prime Minister Maliki in the Council of Representatives (COR, or parliament) prior to the national elections is very unlikely. His rivals fear this would only make him a martyr. Those who hope to hold him accountable for the failure of the government to deliver essential services and improve Iraq's economy will be unable to do so if he is out of power. Moreover, it is very unlikely that any political grouping could put forth a replacement candidate capable of attaining a COR majority. Though there will continue to be attempts to make tactical strikes against Maliki and weaken his image, no major reordering of the Iraqi political scene is likely to occur until national elections.

MALIKI AS THE "POINT OF REFERENCE"

It is clear that Prime Minister Maliki has emerged as the dominant force in Iraqi politics. The prime minister has become the "point of reference:" all Iraqi political factions and leaders can be understood by their stance toward him, and any given politician's stance toward Maliki is typically the first subject to emerge in discussion. There are those who seek to challenge and limit Maliki's quest to consolidate power; those who aspire to ally with Maliki in the coming elections; and those who straddle the line, waiting to see what they can get in return for aligning with or against Maliki and in which direction Maliki himself will move politically before committing. Moreover, most salient political issues of the day—from the election of the COR speaker, to the potential elimination of the National Security Advisor post, to the recent rise in violence—are discussed and evaluated first and foremost in their potential to strengthen or weaken Maliki.

Maliki's dominance is perhaps surprising given that he was chosen as prime minister in 2006 largely for his weakness. Maliki's Da'wa party had returned to Iraq in 2003 fragmented and attenuated in exile, without a popular base, and lacking the militia, funding and organization of its rivals. At the time Maliki was elected, the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), the coalition of essentially all of Iraq's Shi'a parties, was bitterly divided between ISCI (the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, at that time known as SCIRI) and the Sadrists. Maliki emerged as a mutually acceptable compromise and assumed the reins of power as a figure largely unknown either in Iraq or in the West. Many of the top figures within the governing coalition he headed had more power and influence than Maliki himself. Early in his tenure the prime minister was seen as either unwilling or too politically weak to take action against militants and establish security. Given the dire situation, the general lack of legitimacy of the Iraqi government, and a newly formed and untested Iraqi security apparatus, many analysts regarded it as unrealistic for Maliki to become a strong leader.

The new U.S. military strategy accompanying the troop surge and the dramatic improvement in security in 2007-2008 fundamentally changed the equation. While in 2006 U.S. strategy had focused primarily on the transition of security responsibility to the Iraqi Security Forces, with the new strategy U.S. forces took the clear lead in destroying Maliki's enemies—Al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI), nationalist Sunni insurgents, and Shia militants. This tipped the balance in favor of the state and gave Maliki the confidence to act decisively. Over the course of 2008, Maliki took firm actions against Shia militants in Basra, Sadr City and elsewhere, operations that continue to pay political dividends and strengthen Maliki's popular appeal. As the state established itself and acquired broad legitimacy—arguably for the first time in post-2003 Iraq—Maliki seized the opportunity to identify himself as the indispensable component, primary shaper and spokesperson for the state. The prime minister has been successful in ensuring that security gains of the past two years have redounded politically to him.

To maximize this effect—to be “alone at the top”—Maliki has distanced himself from his partners in his governing coalition (ISCI, the Iraqi Islamic Party, and the Kurds) depicting them as posing obstacles to Iraq’s emerging unity and viability. At the same time, Maliki has opened doors to his erstwhile foes, including mainstream Sunni parties such as Saleh al-Mutlaq’s Hiwar, the newly empowered al-Hadba group in Mosul, Ahmad Abu Risha’s Awakening party in Anbar, and reportedly even to Ba’thists living in exile. The Prime Minister has triangulated himself into the center of the Iraqi political world, aiming to make himself the sine qua non of any conceivable post-election governing coalition and to give himself maximum flexibility to react to changes in the volatile and unpredictable Iraqi political winds. Speculation abounds about what sort of electoral alliance he will eventually choose for the national elections—to stay within the UIA, to ally with a major Sunni group, to go it alone, or something else—but for the moment he is playing his cards close to his vest and keeping his options open as long as possible.

THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

The Iraqi Islamic Party

The IIP remains the top Sunni political party, securing the most seats of any Sunni party in the provincial elections. Over the past few years, the Sunni political community has evolved, especially since the Awakening of 2006-2007 in which a new, emergent class of leaders began to actively aspire to participate in the political process. IIP’s success appears to be a result, in large measure, of extensive recruitment of these new political actors. While it may have been the case that IIP was an exile party lacking a base in 2005, they appear to have spent the past four years addressing this deficiency and, not unlike Maliki’s Da’wa party, becoming a viable political actor with indigenous support.

The IIP has become the leading voice in challenging Maliki’s effort to consolidate all the levers of power in the state into his own hands. IIP leaders and staff accused Maliki of undermining Iraq’s government institutions, particularly the

civilian components of the security apparatus, the Ministry of Interior (MOI) and the Ministry of Defense (MOD), exercising personal control over the full range of security decisions. Moreover, they claim that the council of ministers has largely been sidelined, with all major policy decision-making centralized in the prime minister's office. One member attributed the IIP's tentativeness on the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) (and their support for a provision calling for a popular referendum on it) in part to their belief that the SOFA gives too much power to Maliki. He argued that the relatively rapid U.S. troop withdrawal, and the large measure of control of joint security operations granted to the Iraqi security forces while U.S. troops are still in place, would allow Maliki to lock down the Iraqi political system and eliminate potential rivals and government institutions that limit his power.

The IIP's top priority is strengthening institutions and developing alternate centers of power to the prime minister. The election of IIP leader Ayad Sammarae as COR speaker is universally interpreted as an anti-Maliki vote (but welcomed by almost all groups other than Da'wa). The IIP, and others dismayed at Maliki's increased consolidation of control, have high hopes that Sammarae will transform the COR into a viable entity that can challenge the prime minister and provide a modicum of balance. A clear specific priority for Sammarae is to increase the COR's role in government oversight in the area of hiring and firing, given the pervasiveness of sectarianism, favoritism, and nepotism in the appointment of government employees.

Several interlocutors pointed out the COR's recent success in eliminating Maliki priorities from the 2009 budget: funding for tribal support councils (largely seen as a patronage mechanism for Maliki) and 65 million USD pledged in "reconciliation" funds, widely viewed as a means to co-opt and sideline Ba'athist opponents of the Maliki government. In addition to strengthening the role of the COR, the IIP continues to call for constitutional reform to increase the powers of the presidency in Iraq, to limit the dominance of the prime ministry.

The non-IIP Sunnis

Outside of the IIP, which remains by far the strongest and most cohesive Sunni party, the Sunni political environment remains in flux. Many of the individuals and fledgling political entities within Tawafuq—the coalition that IIP formed four years ago—have broken away due to their discontent with the IIP. These non-IIP Sunnis, generally more nationalist and tougher in rhetoric than the IIP, complain of IIP's Islamic nature and frequently lump the IIP together with the likes of ISCI and Da'wa as Islamist parties. But the secularists remain deeply fragmented and lacking a leader and message to unify them.

The primary grouping of this volatile mix of Sunni parties is known as the Iraqi National Project Alliance, the clear second place finisher to the IIP among the Sunni lists in the provincial elections. This 15-party coalition comprises Saleh al-Mutlaq's Hiwar party, Awakening groups (the most prominent led by former Islamic Army leader Abu 'Azzam al-Tamimi), and a variety of parties that have splintered away from Tawafuq, including Khalaf al-'Ulayan's National Dialogue Council and Dhafir al-'Ani's National Future Gathering. National Project leaders stated that the alliance was a mechanism only to find strength in numbers for the provincial elections, and that no one foresees its continuation in the national elections.

Two dominant forces appear to be emerging out of this wash of Sunni parties. Saleh al-Mutlaq's Hiwar party claims the lion's share (if not the entirety) of credit for National Project's success in the provincial elections and members appear to be enjoying the large degree of media attention Hiwar is getting. Maliki's much publicized opening to Mutlaq appears to be benefiting both men—Maliki because it emphasizes his openness to an alliance with a hardcore nationalist Sunni party, Mutlaq because this opening raises his status as a sought-after coalition partner. Thus, though an ultimate alliance between the two, at least prior to elections, is unlikely, both will milk the possibility for a while.

The other dominant force among the Sunnis is the burgeoning alliance between former IIP member Dhafir al-'Ani and the charismatic Deputy Prime Minister Rafi' al-'Issawi. The latter is the former director of Faluja general hospital, who played a key role in negotiations with US forces in both sieges of Faluja in 2004. He went on to serve as Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and quickly rose to deputy prime minister after the position was vacated by Salam al-Zawbai in mid-2008. Multiple interlocutors, Sunni and Shia, saw 'Issawi as a rising star. It will not go unnoticed in Iraq that 'Issawi will be visiting Washington next month.

Al-Hadba, the virulently anti-Kurdish party that won the majority share in Ninewa's provincial elections, has clearly captured the imagination of the Iraqi political class. Al-Hadba, and particularly its leader and newly elected governor of Ninewa Atheel al-Nujayfi, are seen as a dynamic political force with potential to reshape the Iraqi political landscape, despite being a distinctly local Moslawi party (its name, a poetic term for Mosul meaning "hunchback," refers to a famous mosque in the city with a crooked minaret). Nearly everyone save the Kurds and the IIP (whom al-Hadba successfully painted as Kurdish collaborators during the elections) seems to harbor aspirations to ally with al-Hadba, not only to capitalize on their political dynamism but also to secure a large portion of the electorate in Mosul, Iraq's third most populous city. Al-Hadba's critics, on the other hand, see the party as lacking any platform other than hatred of Kurds and view their success as merely a product of circumstance. One of the most ardent suitors of al-Hadba appears to be Maliki himself, as he has taken a specific interest in backing al-Hadba's claims against the Kurds in the *peshmerga*-controlled disputed territories in Ninewa.

The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq

ISCI is trying to take its losses in the provincial elections in stride. As one member put it, "at such an early stage in the Iraqi political experiment, one cannot speak of 'winners' and 'losers.' Better to think of it as competitors surging

ahead or falling behind in a race that is far from over.” Senior leaders spoke of a “review phase” currently ongoing in which the party is taking a look at its program and developing ways to convey their message to voters more effectively. This apparently includes both a “clarification” of the party’s relationship to Iran, as well as an unequivocal statement that ISCI has backed away from its initiative to form a Shia super-region in the south, acknowledging the proposal’s unpopularity and that circumstances are not propitious for it at the moment.

Though not raised in interviews by ISCI members themselves, one clear issue for the party is the health of party leader ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Hakim, and the consequences his death will have on the unity of the party. Many Iraqi political observers, outside the party, believe that ISCI would likely split into at least two factions: one comprising the old-school leaders from Badr Corps like Hadi al-‘Ameri and Bayan Jabr, the other mainline ISCI, including ‘Ammar al-Hakim and Vice President ‘Adel ‘Abd al-Mahdi.

The provincial elections witnessed fierce competition and mutual recriminations between Maliki and ISCI. ISCI is critical of Maliki’s use of state funds and patronage appointments to secure votes. As one ISCI leader put it, “Among the electoral lists that are composed of political parties, we came in first. We lost to the list of the state.” Party leaders are quick to emphasize that they do not accuse Maliki of cheating, but rather claim that the power of incumbency has resulted in an exaggerated representation of Maliki’s popularity. This criticism notwithstanding, ISCI still aspires to align with Maliki in the national elections and is stepping up its campaign to ensure that Maliki remains part of the UIA. ISCI’s firm conviction that they will succeed in doing so perhaps explains their sanguine attitude about the provincial elections results.

It is universally established among the Iraqi political class that Iran’s top priority in Iraq is the reformation of the UIA as an all-Shia bloc (with perhaps a fig leaf of Sunni participation). The idea is that Iran benefits from a unified Shia political

community, with divisions among its constituent parts not bruited and settled as part of the open electoral process but rather resolved behind the scenes, presumably with the participation and guiding hand of Qom. Whether Iran and ISCI will convince Maliki that he needs them more than they need him remains to be seen. He would presumably need a guarantee that they will support his continuation as prime minister before agreeing to throw in his lot with the other Shia parties.

The Kurds

Tensions between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Arbil and the central government in Baghdad remain high. Iraqi Army (IA) and KRG *peshmerga* are engaged in a cat-and-mouse game across the disputed territories, including Ninewa, Kirkuk, and northern Diyala province. Through a process of attrition, IA units are slowly taking possession of disputed territory controlled by *peshmerga* since spring 2003, and challenging strategically critical *peshmerga* positions.

The situation is a cause of serious concern among top Kurdish and US military leadership, both because of the clear potential for major violence to erupt between the two sides and because the IA/*peshmerga* face-off provides a haven for non-state militant groups to operate. However, the issue does not raise the blood pressure of most Arab politicians in Baghdad. None of our Arab interlocutors foresaw the Arab-Kurd conflict spiraling out of control and leading to civil war, and all predicted that the issue would stumble along for years without any clear resolution. This blasé attitude perhaps reflects a confidence that time is on the side of Baghdad in this conflict, as the Kurdish position will weaken as the central government continues to consolidate and its armed forces grow stronger. As one US military officer put it, “Once the IA completes its purchase of 140 American tanks, the Kirkuk conflict is over.”

Immediately prior to our visit, the UN had delivered its analysis of the disputed territories to the key stakeholders in the conflict, including the presidency council in Baghdad, the prime minister, and the KRG leadership. The report, as of yet not leaked to the press, reportedly is 520 pages long (with no executive summary) and contains detailed historical, legal, and demographic analysis of the territories as well as options for settlement and suggested confidence-building measures. It is intended as a starting point for negotiations. It appears that the UN had originally intended to make firmer recommendations about the final disposition of the disputed territories, but after the reaction of Arab and Kurdish leaders to the preliminary reports, opted to present a more analytical document. Kurdish leaders suggested privately that the document had been well-rendered and would indeed be helpful should serious negotiations ever begin, but their public reaction remains muted. Absent a serious push by the U.S.—as of yet not in the offing—the process to resolve the disputed territories will likely remain stillborn.

The so-called Article 23 committee in the COR—created as part of the provincial elections law compromise and intended to make recommendations regarding power sharing, property claims, and the borders of Kirkuk province (which were altered by Saddam)—is widely viewed as a charade. The committee rarely meets, has not been adequately funded, and is not expected to deliver recommendations anytime soon. The committee has failed because it appears largely intended as a public relations mechanism to make the COR look like it was making an effort on the Kirkuk question following the stalemate over provincial elections. It is thus not surprising that some Arab politicians in Baghdad, given their general complacency on this issue and their suspicion of what they see as UN and U.S. interference in internal Iraqi affairs, refer to the feckless Article 23 committee as the controlling authority on the Kirkuk question.

The “Shia Center”

One consequence of Maliki’s distancing himself from the UIA and his eschewal of Islamist rhetoric was the decline in fortunes of moderate Shia parties in the provincial elections, which presumably lost votes to Maliki. Prominent examples include Minister of Interior Jawad al-Bolani’s Constitutional Party, Iraqi government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh’s “Competents” party, and ex-Da’wa, ex-prime minister Ibrahim al-Ja’fari’s National Reform Trend. Though these parties did win a handful of provincial council seats, their futures looked much brighter a year ago than they do today. One member of Ja’fari’s group remarked with some bitterness that Maliki recognized the appeal of Ja’fari’s more national message, stole it and used it for himself, and thus explained the sweeping extent of Maliki’s victory. Having had their thunder stolen, Ja’fari’s group and other factions representing the Shia center appear likely to try to ride the Maliki juggernaut. As one Sunni nationalist opponent of Maliki joked, “Ja’fari left through the front door and came back in through the window.”

Allawi and the other secular exile parties

The group of secular exile parties who, in the December 2005 national elections united behind Ayad Allawi in the Iraqi List, or Iraqiya, has almost completely fallen apart. In the provincial elections, Iraqiya consisted only of Ayad Allawi’s Wifaq party and a single other small tribal grouping. Erstwhile Iraqiya members, such as the Iraqi Communist Party and the National Democratic Party, struck out on their own or formed new coalitions and largely failed to win seats. Iraqiya itself managed to win at least 4.9% of the national vote, a respectable showing, but short of expectations prior to the elections that the anti-sectarian mood of the Iraqi electorate would favor Allawi, who enjoys the reputation among the Iraqi middle class of being thoroughly secular (in the Ataturk, anti-religion sense) and “technocratic.” As with the “Shia Center” parties, it is likely that Maliki’s new image cut away a share of Iraqiya’s votes. Ayad Allawi himself is still an important figure in COR coalition building, if only because he is one of the few credible alternatives for the prime ministry.

Sadrists

The Sadrists remain a mysterious factor. A few points are nonetheless obvious: the Sadrists have been constrained after anti-Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) Iraqi and US operations in the Iraqi south in 2008. Nonetheless, they managed a reasonable showing in the provincial elections (at least 5.9% of the nationwide vote), though far less than one would have predicted at the peak of the movement's power in late 2006. Maliki appears to be tentatively opening up toward them as part of his broader effort to triangulate and keep all of his options open. Since Sadr's recent trip to Turkey, the Sadrists are reportedly reforming their organizational infrastructure, and some in Baghdad are speculating that Sadr will return to Iraq in the next few months.

THE SECURITY SITUATION

The recent uptick in violence—specifically high-profile suicide bombing attacks—is clearly a subject of concern among Iraqi leaders, but there is nowhere near the level of anxiety about the security situation that was common even a year ago. None of our interlocutors saw this recent phase as foretelling an unraveling of the situation, collapse of the government, or a return to the violence of the 2006 civil war. Most believe that forces hostile to the government and the U.S. are exploiting the U.S. departure from the cities scheduled for the end of June and the resultant security vacuum to tilt the political balance in their favor.

Explanations abound about who specifically is behind this violence. The charge that Iran is sponsoring these attacks is universal among Sunnis. Their logic is that Iran is hoping to scare Maliki, make him feel vulnerable, pressure him back to the UIA, and thereby demonstrate their veto power at the highest levels of the Iraqi government. Everyone else, including the U.S. military, attributes most of the recent uptick to an alliance of the vestiges of AQI and resurgent Ba'thist cells of the insurgency, with some Shia politicians for obvious political reasons putting more emphasis on the latter.

It is now commonplace for Iraqi politicians to speak of the shadowy group known as “The Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order,” or “Naqshbandia” for short, as the primary Ba’thist grouping supporting AQI’s attacks on Iraqi civilians. This group, whose name refers to an order of Sufism and which adopts a Sufi veneer, is said to have ties to former Iraqi vice president ‘Izzat al-Duri, himself a Sufi, though of the Qaderi rather than the Naqshbandi order. The principal remaining safe haven for insurgents and terrorists, by common account, is the area along the Hamrin Mountains northwest through Mosul, the area of overlap between Arab and Kurdish populations in Iraq. The tension between the IA and Kurdish *peshmerga* in these areas has resulted in neither force being able to adequately secure the area and has thus given these militants room to operate.

One notable dissonance between the Iraqi elite discussion of the security situation and that of the U.S. analytical community concerns the importance of the Sons of Iraq, or SOIs, and whether the failure of the Iraqi government to fully assume responsibility for contracts the SOIs signed with the U.S. is contributing to the decline in the security situation. Only one Iraqi interlocutor independently raised the issue. To be sure, some Iraqi leaders think in terms of “Ba’thists,” or “terrorists,” who may be behind the recent uptick in violence, and the groups who constitute the SOIs may, at least implicitly, fall in those categories. But in itself, the SOI contract issue is largely viewed as an American concern and an American responsibility, and whatever its true relevance to the security situation, it is by and large not part of the discussion among top-level Iraqi leaders. For his part, a staffer for the prime minister responsible for this issue told us that all mechanisms for Iraqi government payment of SOI contracts would be in place by the end of May.

ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL: THE USIP EXPERIENCE IN DIYALA

While the sectarian divide between Shia and Sunnis and ethnic tension between Arabs and Kurds remain major themes in Iraqi politics, other dimensions are also

important. We had an unusual opportunity to see the issue of relations between provinces and the central government up close and personal. Asked by the U.S. Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Diyala to help the newly elected provincial council (PC) to form a “vision” for the next four years, we spent two days working with a team of USIP-trained Iraqi facilitators to help the PC develop a list of priority problems in the province and four-year goals. The resulting [“Diyala Declaration”](#) is available online.

Diyala, like Ninewa, is a contested province. Previously run by a Shia-dominated provincial council and a Shia governor, the January elections brought to power a coalition led by Tawafuq (in this case IIP and locally oriented Sunni parties) and including the Kurdish alliance and ISCI. This coalition mirrors Maliki’s (currently very fractured) governing coalition, notably without Maliki’s State of Law coalition, whose single representative has joined Iraqiya and National Project in the opposition. U.S. and Iraqi forces continue to do battle against AQI in parts of the province, while JAM is a problem in other areas. Kurdish *peshmerga* and IA face off around Khanaqin. Iraqi police frequently arrest IIP and Awakening members in the province, and at least three PC members on the Tawafuq list have warrants outstanding. The week after our departure, the leader of the Tawafuq list in the PC was arrested. The *mujahideen e-khalq* (MEK)—an Iranian dissident group located at Camp Ashraf in the Khalis district of Diyala—is a bone of contention between political parties in Baghdad.

Notably, none of these broader national conflicts were much in evidence when the PC met to brainstorm the major problems it faced. The only exception was when the PC chair sought the members’ support in protesting the PC’s not having been briefed on the second phase of “The Glad Tidings of Prosperity,” a major IA-led operation that had begun the previous day. Even then he readily received the unanimous support of the PC, whose members seemed far more interested in the PC becoming a viable body whose prerogatives were recognized than in pursuing ethnic or sectarian advantage, or in adhering to the

agendas of their political bosses in Baghdad. In fact, it was very hard to tell from what they said who belonged to which political parties, sects and ethnic groups. “Sunni,” “Shia” and “Kurd” were terms never used, and the *peshmerga*/IA standoff in the province also went unmentioned.

The PC members were primarily concerned with how they could facilitate the delivery of services to the province. Acutely aware that the previous PC had been turned out because it failed in this respect (reportedly even returning an unused 200 million USD of their capital investment budget to Baghdad), PC members seemed determined to work with the central government ministries to make sure resources are available for improved education, economic development, return of displaced people, and other priorities.

In Baghdad, the provincial elections are often viewed as a harbinger of national elections next year. But in fact, at least in Diyala, provincial concerns do not reflect national concerns and local leaders do not appear to take their marching orders only or even primarily from party leaders in Baghdad. The open-list mechanism for seat allocation in the provincial elections, in which voters, not party leaders, got to choose which specific individuals represented them, is likely a key factor in the connections of Diyala PC members to the community and their sense of responsibility and accountability to their constituents. This is not only refreshing, but potentially significant in allowing Iraq to develop more issue-based and cross-sectarian political configurations.

The big question is whether Maliki, the point of reference for national politics, will align himself with this more issue-based politics, as his “State of Law” coalition did in the provincial elections, or whether he will opt under Iranian pressure for a Shia coalition based essentially on sectarian identity. This will likely not be Iraq’s last chance for a turn towards less sectarian politics, but it is an important decision point that may not return soon. Iran’s pressure should be a strong hint

of where Washington should stand, although admittedly it may do no good for the U.S. to attempt to intervene openly. When it comes to making people in Diyala and elsewhere better off, issue-based politics is far more likely to deliver the goods.

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The Center for Post-Conflict Peace and Stability Operations designs and manages the Institute's efforts in areas emerging from conflict. The Center also conducts research, identifies best practices, develops new tools for post-conflict peace and stability operations, and supports related training and education efforts. [Daniel Serwer](#) is the vice president of the Center for for Post-Conflict Peace and Stability Operations.

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