

**SHIITE POLITICS IN IRAQ:  
THE ROLE OF THE SUPREME COUNCIL**

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## SHIITE POLITICS IN IRAQ: THE ROLE OF THE SUPREME COUNCIL

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Often misidentified in Western media as “the largest Shiite party” in Iraq, SCIRI – the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (*Al-Majlis al-‘Aala li al-Thawra al-Islamiya fi-l-Iraq*) – is certainly one of the most powerful. Its defining characteristics are a strong organisation, whose leadership hails from one of Najaf’s leading families, the Hakims; a surprising political pragmatism in light of profound sectarian inclinations; and a somewhat incongruous dual alliance with the U.S. and Iran. Since its founding a quarter century ago, it has followed a trajectory from Iranian proxy militia to Iraqi governing party, whose leader, Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim, has been courted and feted by the Bush White House. Today, it is engaged in a fierce competition with its main Shiite rival, the movement led by Muqtada al-Sadr, which may well determine Iraq’s future. To help shape the party into a more responsible actor, the U.S. should stop using it as a privileged instrument in its fight against the Sadrists but press it to cut ties with its more sectarian elements and practices.

As a result of the pervasive distrust, if not open hostility, SCIRI encountered upon its return from Iranian exile in April 2003, its quest for power (political in Baghdad, religious in Najaf) has first and foremost taken the form of a quest for respectability. It has made strenuous efforts to distance itself from its Iranian patron, whitewash its embarrassing past, build political coalitions, profess the importance of Iraq’s unity, maintain the semblance of government and, as conditions deteriorated, use the state’s security apparatus to protect the Shiite community from insurgent attacks. Although it continues to receive Iranian funds, it is in this not all that different from other parties, many of which became beneficiaries of Tehran’s strategy of diversifying support.

In 2007, it removed the word “revolution” from its name, becoming the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (*Al-Majlis al-‘Aala al-Islami al-Iraqi*), or ISCI, thereby suggesting that its days of armed opposition were over. It also hinted that it had dropped adherence to Iran’s brand of theocracy and switched its loyalty from Tehran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, to the Shiites’ foremost religious authority, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Najaf.

If SCIRI/ISCI has so far failed in achieving respectability, it is because it has never quite managed to shake off its past as an Iran-bred group of exiles with a narrow sectarian agenda enforced by a potent militia. SCIRI claims with justification that it was established and inspired in response to the Iraqi regime’s tyranny and crimes but perceptions forged during the hard years of the Iran-Iraq war, in which the party and its Badr militia fought alongside Iranian forces, have been slow to change; suspicion that SCIRI remains guided by a foreign hand even as it plants its roots in Iraqi soil has hobbled its ambition.

Hakim’s calls for the establishment of a Shiite super region in the nine southern governorates have provoked widespread opposition, including among fellow Shiites. Equally suspect to many Iraqis has been the party’s more recent cosy relationship with the U.S. As a result, SCIRI/ISCI enjoys little popularity. Moreover, the party faces a possible succession crisis, as a gravely ill Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim gradually fades from the scene, with his son Ammar perhaps too young and inexperienced to replace him.

Still, the party is a formidable force. As a result of the U.S. surge, it is benefiting from coalition efforts to suppress not only al-Qaeda in Iraq but also ISCI’s principal rival, the Sadrists’ Mahdi army (*Jaysh al-Mahdi*). As long as the U.S. remains in Iraq, its alliance with ISCI will help entrench the party in the country’s governing, security and intelligence institutions, in Baghdad as well as most southern governorates. Its only true challenger remains the Mahdi army, which despite its ruffian credentials and bloody role in sectarian reprisals enjoys broad support among Shiite masses. Their rivalry now takes the form of a class struggle between the Shiite merchant elite of Baghdad and the holy cities, represented by ISCI (as well, religiously, by Sistani), and the Shiite urban underclass.

This struggle, more than the sectarian conflict or confrontation between Anbari sheikhs and al-Qaeda in Iraq fighters, is likely to shape the country’s future. The most plausible scenario is a protracted struggle for power between these two movements, marked perhaps by temporary alliances, such as is presently in force.

The U.S. has fully backed ISCI in this rivalry. This is a risky gambit. Unleashing ISCI/Badr against the Sadrists is a dangerous policy that will further deepen intra-Shiite divisions; it also is a short-sighted one, given the Sadrists' stronger mass base. Instead, the U.S. should adopt a more even-handed approach between the movements, while pressuring ISCI to reform its behaviour. The U.S. can help ISCI move away from its controversial past, and it has an interest in further anchoring the party within the current set-up. An ISCI fully transformed into a responsible, non-sectarian political party could make a significant contribution to the country's rebuilding. In particular, ISCI should:

- ❑ project itself further as a truly Iraqi party that supports the country's unity in both its public positions and actual policy, abandoning its advocacy of a nine-governorate Shiite super region, which has proved highly divisive and has inflamed sectarian debate;
- ❑ urge its representatives to cease sectarian rhetoric, which has further polarised the country;
- ❑ remove commanders who have engaged in illegal detention, torture and death-squad activity; and
- ❑ support total transparency in hiring practices by government institutions, including the interior and finance ministries, which it controls in effect, as well as the army, police and other security services and intelligence agencies.

**Baghdad/Istanbul/Brussels, 15 November 2007**

## SHIITE POLITICS IN IRAQ: THE ROLE OF THE SUPREME COUNCIL

### I. SCIRI BEFORE 2003<sup>1</sup>

SCIRI's peculiar genesis and subsequent travails, as well as its religious ideology and political outlook, must be seen against the backdrop of a country in turmoil: the ferment of Shiite politics in the wake of the monarchy's collapse in 1958, the rise of Arab nationalism, the war with Iran, international sanctions and, finally, the Baathist regime's violent overthrow by the U.S. Its history is a unique admixture of Shiite religious lineage personified by the Najaf-based Al-Hakim family; Iranian patronage and use by Khomeini's regime as a tool; confusion in the 1990s; and, more recently, the alliance with the U.S. after Saddam's fall. Its emergence as a major political actor reflects its adaptability and pragmatism, even as its success and prospects are limited by sectarian origin, personality-based leadership and a lingering Persian aura.

#### A. FOUNDING

Shiite activism may have permeated other parties such as the Baath (in its early years)<sup>2</sup> and the Iraqi Communist Party but in essence these were secular parties which opened their doors to all who signed up to their political outlook. By contrast, Shiite parties with a religious ideology, formed partly in response to the rise of these secular groups and competing with them for the allegiance of the Shiite merchant class and intelligentsia, derived

from the support or inspiration of a senior cleric.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, no Shiite political movement could flourish without the blessing, even posthumous, of a major religious figure – a senior ayatollah, an “object (or source) of emulation” (*marja al-taqlid*) or, better, the most revered among them, the “absolute object of emulation” (*marja al-taqlid al-mutlaq*).<sup>4</sup>

Examples include Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr, a *marja al-taqlid* in the 1950s, for the Islamic Daawa Party, the first such grouping to arise; Ayatollah Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr, a foremost religious leader in the 1990s, for what would become the Sadrism movement, today led by his son, Muqtada al-Sadr; Ayatollah Muhammad al-Yaqubi as spiritual leader of Fadhila, a party prominent in Basra; and, in the case of SCIRI, Grand Ayatollah Mohsen Tabatabai al-Hakim, the primary *marja al-taqlid* in the 1960s.<sup>5</sup>

Daawa Party literature maintains that Mohsen al-Hakim and Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr stood jointly at the party's

<sup>1</sup> In this report, the Supreme Council will be referred to as SCIRI before its name change in May 2007, and as ISCI afterwards. For a discussion of the background to the change, see Section III below.

<sup>2</sup> The Baath party started as a small group of intellectuals in Syria in the late 1940s, then grew rapidly, including in Iraq as Shiites embraced its ideology. By 1957, some 75 per cent of its Iraqi leadership was Shiite. Shiite predominance ended following a 1963 power struggle among its Shiite leaders and the simultaneous rise of its primarily Sunni military wing. The military wing prevailed well before the 1968 coup that brought the party to power. See Ali Babakhan, “The Deportation of Shi'is During the Iran-Iraq War: Causes and Consequences”, in Faleh Abdul-Jabar (ed.), *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologies: State, Religion and Social Movements in Iraq* (London, 2002), p. 191.

<sup>3</sup> In the 1950s, the *marjaeeya* (a loose grouping of the most senior clerics) realised the danger of leaving the political arena to secular parties, such as the communists and the Baath, and to Sunni Islamists who had no qualms about involvement in politics and established the Muslim Brotherhood. The first Iraqi Shiite Islamist party, Daawa, was created precisely to counter secular parties and the Muslim Brotherhood.

<sup>4</sup> In Shiism worshippers declare their support for a senior religious leader, especially one of the grand ayatollahs who make up the collective *marjaeeya*. At times, there is consensus over who is the supreme authority, the *marja al-taqlid al-mutlaq*; at other times, multiple contenders coexist. Today, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani is considered the Shiites' foremost religious authority. Within *al-hawza al-ilmiya*, the network of seminaries in Najaf, he is the *primus inter pares*, towering above three other luminaries: Grand Ayatollahs Muhammad Ishaq Fayadh, Bashir al-Najafi and Muhammad Saeed al-Tabatabai al-Hakim. See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°8, *Iraq's Shiites Under Occupation*, 9 September 2003.

<sup>5</sup> In the case of Mohsen al-Hakim (SCIRI) and Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr (the Sadrists), the movements erected in their name or trading on their legacy arose only after their deaths. It is, therefore, entirely open to question whether they would have blessed and promoted these movements had they been alive. SCIRI has used Mohsen al-Hakim's name especially to gain respectability; politically it has followed Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr, Ruhollah Khomeini and Ali Khamenei.

cradle in the late 1950s, representing the two prominent Najaf families, the Hakims and the Sadrs. Sadr was the more radical of the two, and the party's probable founder; the party's insistence that the quietist Hakim<sup>6</sup> was present at the constituent meeting and that its leadership had roots in the urban elite may stem from an attempt to enhance the party's legitimacy in Shiite eyes, as its political activism contrasted sharply with the conservative milieu in which it was created. The party was sectarian at heart, eager to promote Shiite power. It aimed to Islamicise society and establish Sharia-based government in advance of God's rule on earth via a four-step program: proselytising, challenging the enemies of Islam, seizing political power and imposing an Islamic order.<sup>7</sup> Whatever his stance in the late 1950s, Mohsen al-Hakim distanced himself from Daawa in later years and did much to contain it, alarmed by its activism and independence from the *marjaeeya's* oversight.<sup>8</sup>

Daawa thrived in the turmoil of post-monarchy politics, especially after the Baath seized power in 1968 and even as it met with bloody repression. It staged mass demonstrations and *Arbaeen* processions centred on the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala,<sup>9</sup> directly confronting the regime. Each arrest boosted Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr's popularity. The regime increasingly regarded the party as a serious threat.

In 1975-1979, relations between Iran and Iraq improved after long enmity. Both regimes were led by secular dictators who, in 1975, had signed a treaty in Algiers settling their long-standing territorial dispute over the Shatt al-Arab waterway and withdrawn support for dissident figures and movements they had supported against one another. The Shah pulled the rug out from underneath the Kurdish insurgency in Iraq, led by Mullah Mustafa Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP); in turn, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who had found safe

haven from the Shah's regime in Najaf, was told to leave Iraq.

Peace was short-lived. The Shah's overthrow in the 1979 Islamic Revolution and Khomeini's triumphant return to Tehran from Parisian exile marked a reversal in relations. Shiite activists in Iraq, buoyed by their Iranian brethren's rise to power, escalated their anti-Baath rhetoric and launched attacks against regime figures.<sup>10</sup> Feeling threatened, Saddam Hussein unleashed a wave of anti-Shiite repression (executing Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr, his sister<sup>11</sup> and numerous others) and consolidated his grip on power by declaring himself president and purging his entourage of potential challengers. In September 1980, sensing opportunity in revolutionary chaos in Tehran, he invaded Khuzestan, an oil-rich Iranian province with a majority Arab population, hoping to precipitate an early demise of Iran's fledgling clerical order. Eight years of brutal war followed.

Many Iraqi Shiite activists and political leaders escaped across the border during the war's early days. Among them was Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim, Mohsen al-Hakim's second eldest son.<sup>12</sup> The Iranians took immediate advantage of these oppositionists who could serve their primary war objective of ousting Saddam's regime. They allowed them to organise, or organised them, in a variety of fronts and umbrella groups that embraced Khomeini's call for *wilayat al-faqih* (*velayat-e fakih* in Farsi), or "rule of the jurispudent", a political system subjecting the government to both the religious scholar's supreme authority and Islamic law (Sharia) and the guidance of a supreme leader.<sup>13</sup> However, Iran could not control the Daawa leadership or induce it to embrace *wilayat al-*

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<sup>6</sup> In Shiism a "quietist" is a cleric belonging to the traditional school (*al-madrassa al-taqlidiya*) that propounds, inter alia, clerics' non-involvement in government.

<sup>7</sup> See Abdul-Halim al-Ruhaimi, "The Da'wa Islamic Party: Origins, Actors and Ideology", in Abdul-Jabar, op. cit., pp. 151-155.

<sup>8</sup> Another reason for Hakim's apparent change of heart regarding Daawa may be that he had a keen sense of the importance of keeping the *marjaeeya* above politics and retaining its influence over all Shiites, not just the followers of one party. This may be the principal reason why Hakim pulled his sons, Muhammad Mahdi and Muhammad Baqr, out of Daawa around 1960. Crisis Group interview, senior SCIRI member, February 2007.

<sup>9</sup> *Arbaeen* (40), is a Shiite religious commemoration denoting the end of the mandatory 40-day period of mourning, in this case following the death of Hussein Ibn Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, who was defeated in battle in Karbala in 680.

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<sup>10</sup> Both Daawa and another group, the Islamic Action Organisation (*Munadhamat al-Amal al-Islami*), were active. An IAO operative was behind the attack against regime stalwart Tareq Aziz at Baghdad's Mustansariya University in April 1980, an event Saddam Hussein used as one of several pretexts for invading Iran five months later. See Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 229-233.

<sup>11</sup> Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr's sister, Bint al-Huda, was an important personality in her own right, known for her religious writings, her efforts to organise Islamic education for women and liaising between women's groups and the ulama.

<sup>12</sup> Mohsen al-Hakim's eldest son, Muhammad Mahdi, who played an important role in Daawa's founding, was forced into exile by the Iraqi regime following his father's death and was killed by regime agents in Khartoum in 1988.

<sup>13</sup> For a fuller explanation of the concept of *wilayat al-faqih*, see Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°37, *Understanding Islamism*, 2 March 2005, pp. 22-23; also Middle East Report N°38, *Iran in Iraq: How Much Influence?*, 21 March 2005, and Middle East Report N°55, *Iraq's Muqtada Al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?*, 11 July 2006.

*faqih*.<sup>14</sup> From that moment, it promoted Daawa's rivals instead, eventually settling on Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim and those around him to establish SCIRI and anoint it sole legitimate political representative of the Iraqi Shiite opposition. The founding ceremony in November 1982 was attended by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as Khomeini's representative.

In adopting *wilayat al-faqih* – it recognised first Khomeini and then his successor, Ali Khamenei, as *Wali al-Faqih*, the ruling jurist – SCIRI pursued its self-proclaimed political goal of bringing down Iraq's Baath regime and replacing it with Islamic rule.<sup>15</sup> In response, that regime murdered more than 80 members of Muhammad Baqr's family in 1983, including seventeen sons and grandsons of Mohsen al-Hakim.<sup>16</sup>

At first, SCIRI was an umbrella organisation, a "Supreme Council", comprising three main currents: the so-called *Marjaeeya* group under Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim, which included his brother Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim, Alaa al-Jawadi, Akram al-Hakim, Sheikh Muhammad Taqi al-Mowla and Muhammad al-Haydari; the Daawa group under Kathem al-Haeri, which included Sheikh Muhammad Mahdi al-Asafi, Sheikh Muhammad Baqr al-Nasiri, Dr Ibrahim al-Jaafari, Dr Ali al-Adeeb, Iz al-Din Salim and Sheikh Hussein Farajallah; and the independents, who included Ayatollah Mahmoud al-Hashimi Shahroudi, Ali al-Haeri, Sheikh Jawad al-Khalisi and Sheikh Muhammad Taqi al-Mudarrasi.<sup>17</sup>

Although Daawa's leadership considered SCIRI "an Iranian creation" established in part to compete with and contain it, it maintained formal relations with the Supreme Council and placed representatives on its decision-making

*Shura* (council).<sup>18</sup> Eventually, however, Daawa peeled off, breaking into factions that disagreed over the desired degree of proximity to their Iranian host.<sup>19</sup> The independents dispersed as well; two of their original leaders, Ayatollah Ali al-Taskhiri and Ayatollah Shahroudi, moved on to assume influential positions in the Iranian state apparatus, becoming senior aides to Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader after Khomeini's death in 1989.

Iranian support allowed SCIRI's star to rise, while Daawa's leadership buckled under Iranian pressure and scattered to secondary havens; Daawa militants in Iraq put up a heroic fight against the regime, earning the Shiite masses' admiration and SCIRI's envy, but within years they had been decimated. The Daawa-SCIRI rivalry continued, even though the two parties worked out a *modus vivendi* in post-Saddam Iraq. A de-clawed Daawa played junior partner to a SCIRI funded, trained and armed by its Iranian patron.

## B. THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR: TEHRAN'S PROXY

SCIRI was forged during the Iran-Iraq war to replace, as its name suggested, the Baathist regime with a replica of Khomeini's theocracy. Its legitimacy deficit in post-war Iraq stems from this overly close association with the Islamic Revolution and from its loyal, if not servile, commitment to Iran's war objectives. The Iranians, a retired Iraqi military officer contended, merely "wanted to have some Iraqis speaking on their behalf against the Saddam regime".<sup>20</sup>

Providing an Iraqi face was only part of it; the Iranians simultaneously established an Iraqi military organisation in order to gather intelligence and act as an armed vanguard in frontline battles.<sup>21</sup> This was the Badr brigade, later

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<sup>14</sup> Daawa supports the separation of religious from political authority and never whole-heartedly embraced the notion of *wilayat al-faqih*; it only briefly subscribed to it while beholden to its Iranian hosts. Moreover, its senior leadership circle has never included clerics. Crisis Group interviews, Amman, March 2007. A junior SCIRI cleric declared that Khomeini chose SCIRI over Daawa "because Daawa said that the political party should guide the *wali al-faqih* and not the other way around. Daawa leaders told Khomeini that the *wali al-faqih* [i.e., Khomeini himself] had the honour of associating himself with Daawa", Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 2 January 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group interview, a leading SCIRI member, February 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Pierre-Jean Luizard, "The Nature of the Confrontation between the State and *Marja'ism*: Grand Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim and the Ba'th", in Abdul-Jabar, op. cit., p. 99.

<sup>17</sup> These are the religious titles these men had at the time. Several went on to become ayatollahs, for example Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim, Kathem al-Haeri, Jawad al-Khalisi and Taqi al-Mudarrasi. All names based on Crisis Group interviews with two early SCIRI members, Amman and Baghdad, July 2007.

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<sup>18</sup> Ruhaimi, op. cit., p. 157. Iran provided SCIRI with training camps but gave no such support to Daawa. Moreover, Daawa found support especially among Arab regimes, a factor that distanced it further from the Iranian regime even when it was based in Iran. Crisis Group interview, Badr member, Karbala, April 2007. The Badr corps was SCIRI's military branch before 2003; see below.

<sup>19</sup> After the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988, most Daawa leaders and activists left Iran, mostly for the West, *ibid*, pp. 156-159. One faction, the Abu Yasin Group, joined SCIRI. After 1991, it renamed itself the "Islamic Dawaa"; it returned to Iraq in April 2003 under that name.

<sup>20</sup> Crisis Group interview, retired Iraqi military officer who served in military intelligence during the war, Amman, 2 March 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Some sources suggest that Badr was established as a counterweight to the Mujahedin-e Khalq, an Iranian opposition group based in Iraq that was armed and equipped by the Baath regime, carried out attacks in Iran and participated in some battles

expanded to become the Badr Corps, in name SCIRI's military wing but in reality a force trained, equipped and commanded by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Pasdaran. Many Iraqis considered SCIRI/Badr an Iranian proxy, "a fifth column serving the Iranian war effort by conducting espionage in border-area villages".<sup>22</sup>

SCIRI's origins and role bolstered the pre-existing notion, prevalent among many, that Shiism was a Persian, anti-Arab heresy. Successive Iraqi regimes undertook mass expulsions of Shiites deemed Iranians and accused Shiites expressing grievances (for example, concerning discrimination) of fostering sectarian division.<sup>23</sup> Two main groups were deportation targets, starting in 1969: Fayli Kurds, i.e., Shiite Kurds living in towns like Baghdad, Khanaqin and Kut and, more generally, in an area stretching from the capital eastward to the Iranian border; and a broader group of Shiites whose identity cards classified them as "of Persian origin" (*tabaiya farisiya*) because of their ancestors' refusal, during the Ottoman Empire, to serve in the army.<sup>24</sup> Tens of thousands were affected, especially after the start of the Iran-Iraq war.<sup>25</sup> Having lost their properties and belongings, many of these deportees (*musaffarin*) thirsted for revenge.<sup>26</sup> SCIRI provided the answer. It took advantage of the Iraqi regime's policy by offering young recruits employment as fighters in the Badr Corps and access to subsidised food.<sup>27</sup>

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in the Iran-Iraq war. Crisis Group interview, a former SCIRI member, April 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, former Iraqi military officer and prisoner of war, Baghdad, 17 February 2007.

<sup>23</sup> Yitzhak Nakkash, "The Nature of Shi'ism in Iraq", in Abdul-Jabar, op. cit., p. 31.

<sup>24</sup> For a fuller description of these two categories, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°38, *Iran in Iraq: How Much Influence?*, 21 March 2005, pp. 4-5. While designated as "Persian origin" in the population register, Iraqis deported to Iran for being "Iranians" were mostly (Shiite) Arabs and Kurds. Many returned to Iraq after 2003 and found their properties had been confiscated and their rights as Iraqi citizens removed.

<sup>25</sup> See Babakhan, op. cit., pp. 183-210.

<sup>26</sup> In Arabic, the term *musaffarin*, literally those "sent off on a journey", is softer than *muba'adin*, "deportees", which more accurately describes the victims' fate. The way the regime suddenly and summarily deported these Shiites left many of their children, who were at school when their parents were apprehended and expelled, homeless and orphaned. Some were adopted by neighbours. To this date, this episode remains under-reported and taboo, due to the collective sense of guilt felt by Iraqis at having been the silent witnesses of such an injustice.

<sup>27</sup> Exiled Fayli Kurds desiring to join opposition to the regime had three options: SCIRI; the (predominantly Sunni) Kurdish national movement (headed by the Kurdistan Democratic Party and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan); or the Fayli Kurdish Muslim Movement, a group founded by a former KDP member in exile in Iran and that fell apart (its members joining the KDP and PUK)

Shiite prisoners of war presented a second important pool of recruits, one that grew exponentially as the war dragged on. SCIRI activists scouring Iranian detention camps to fill Badr's ranks preyed on this captive population desperate to go home and played on its guilt for having been "bad Shiites" – Shiite soldiers fighting a Shiite adversary on behalf of a godless regime that suppressed and killed Shiites at home.<sup>28</sup> SCIRI converted any guilt these prisoners of war (POWs) may have felt into a dependency it could manipulate,<sup>29</sup> referring to them as *Tawwab* (penitents).<sup>30</sup>

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after Iraqi forces withdrew from the Kurdish region in 1991. SCIRI offered exiled Iraqis vouchers to purchase subsidised food at Iranian state-run stores (established to feed needy Iranians) and paid recruits to its Badr force a modest stipend. Babakhan, op. cit., pp. 201-204.

<sup>28</sup> That said, even some Sunnis joined Badr. They may have been motivated partly by a desire for revenge against a regime that inducted them and sent them on a hopeless mission against Iran, and partly by the prospect of an Iranian victory that would put them on the winning side once back in Iraq. Some were under Iranian/SCIRI pressure to join. And some married Shiite Iranian women and joined Badr in order to blend in. However, such cases were extremely rare. Crisis Group interviews, former university lecturer, Amman, 7 March 2007; and SCIRI political bureau member Ridha Jawad Taqi, Baghdad, 14 July 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Clearly, not all POWs buckled under pressure. An account by a former POW explains how detainees survived and what choices they had to make: "I was an infantry soldier when my unit was surrounded by Iranian troops outside Ahvaz in 1982. We had no choice but to surrender. We were interrogated by Iranians. They didn't torture us, as we were low-ranking soldiers, but naturally there were bad guards and good guards, and behaviour would change after one or another Iranian offensive failed. Sometime after our capture our treatment improved because we were Shiites, and we could take religious classes from Arabic-speaking mullahs. There were constant calls from friends and fellow believers to become a *Tawwab* and join Badr. They offered to take me to visit the Imam Ridha shrine in Mashhad, and suggested I take a second wife, an Iranian. But, expecting an early release, I didn't want to take a wife in Iran. Moreover, I was afraid that released POWs would report me to security [the *Amn*] in Baghdad, who would then harm my family or my brothers. So I did not join, but to keep them happy I continued doing my prayers and attending religious classes". Crisis Group telephone interview, Baghdad, 6 March 2007. This man was released in 1994, twelve years after his capture. The final release of Iraqi POWs from Iranian captivity took place in early 2003, just before the regime's ouster.

<sup>30</sup> In Shiite lore, the term *Tawwab* denotes those who fought against Imam Hussein in AD680 but then expressed regret, switched sides and pursued those who had killed the imam. To SCIRI and its Iranian backers, the *Tawwab* were Iraqi Shiites who had fought against Iran and its imam, Ruhollah Khomeini, but who now, as captives, had been persuaded to share the fate of their Iranian captors and fight the Iraqi regime. For further detail, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°52, *The Next Iraqi War? Sectarianism and Civil Conflict*, 27 February 2006, p. 17.



These *Tawwab*in “became, and still are today, the backbone of SCIRI/Badr”, said a SCIRI member in Hilla.<sup>31</sup> They provided it with “a significant boost in numbers”, according to a former Iraqi military intelligence officer: “SCIRI’s role in POW interrogations was particularly useful, as the Iranians were not able to handle them all and lacked familiarity with Iraqi affairs”.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the *Tawwab*in knew how to play on the Iraqi Shiites’ deepest emotions: “Badr is especially remembered for its interrogations of other POWs. They leaned on them to start working for them, or recruited them to spy on their fellow detainees. They often succeeded, especially with the weaker ones, the *Shrugis* – poor Shiites from the south”.<sup>33</sup> Allegations of torture in such interrogations abound.<sup>34</sup>

Just as importantly, the *Tawwab*in brought much needed military professionalism into the force, as many were senior officers; they understood Iraq’s order of battle, its doctrine and tactics. That said, as a fighting force, Badr probably played a minor role in the war.<sup>35</sup> It first caught attention in the battle over Haj Omran in the Kurdish mountains in July-August 1983, when some of its fighters were exposed to mustard gas.<sup>36</sup> Badr also participated in other key battles but never outgrew its role as an Iranian auxiliary. Along the southern and central front, it had no

natural advantage over conventional forces; in the Kurdish areas in the north, human intelligence and unconventional methods were in demand, but here the Kurdish guerrillas aligned with Iran and fighting on the home front had a distinct advantage over Badr.<sup>37</sup>

In July 1988, Iran sued for peace, facing powerful Iraqi counter-offensives employing heavy doses of poison gas that demoralised its troops and in the realisation it had made no territorial or political gain in a war that had taken a huge human toll.<sup>38</sup> Khomeini died the following year, and the revolution soon ebbed under the leadership of more pragmatic aides who faced enormous reconstruction challenges.

The war’s outcome was a bitter disappointment to SCIRI. Its objective to return home triumphant and install an Islamic republic under its rule had come to nought and now appeared more distant than ever. “The end of the war left us bewildered”, said a senior member. “We felt betrayed by Iran’s acceptance of the Iraqi terms. We were at our nadir, both in our position in Iran and our political and military activity. Iran wanted to maintain peace at all cost, and wanted nothing to disrupt this”.<sup>39</sup> Only Saddam Hussein’s rash decision to invade Kuwait handed SCIRI a new lease on life.

### C. THE SANCTIONS DECADE: SPREADING ITS WINGS

“The occupation of Kuwait opened new horizons to the Iraqi resistance and ushered in the American era”, commented a SCIRI member.<sup>40</sup> Yet again, SCIRI’s role was controversial. Its fighters had spent nearly three years in virtual quarantine in their Iranian camps when, in early 1991, demoralised Iraqi troops, pushed back across the border after U.S. forces punched into Kuwait, rebelled against a leadership that had sent them to defeat. Often mischaracterised as originally a Shiite revolt, the army mutiny spread throughout the south like wildfire and almost overnight morphed into a full-scale popular uprising.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Crisis Group interview, SCIRI member, Hilla, April 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Crisis Group interview, Amman, 2 March 2007. It took Iran’s military forces (regular army and Pasdaran) a little over a year following the Iraqi invasion to regroup and eject Iraqi forces from Iranian territory. By June 1982, Iranian forces were poised to attack Basra. The Iranian decision to continue the war in 1982 remains controversial, as it led to six more years of death and destruction without tangible gain. See Joost R. Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 24-25. Iran’s lethal annual offensives, while unsuccessful in pushing back the Iraqis, produced a significant loss of Iraqi morale and a growing stream of POWs.

<sup>33</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, former Iraqi military officer and prisoner of war, Baghdad, 17 February 2007. The term *Shrug*i derives from the Arabic *Shuruqi* (Easterner), and is a pejorative used by many Iraqis, including middle-class Shiites, to designate Shiites originating from poor, rural and remote areas in the South, particularly the marshes that extend into Iran.

<sup>34</sup> For example, Crisis Group interview, an Iraqi targeted for recruitment by Badr in the 1980s, Amman, 24 November 2005.

<sup>35</sup> This understandably is not SCIRI’s point of view. A former Badr fighter said, “the Badr corps played a heroic role against the former regime, participating in the war effectively, especially in battles at Shalamcha and Basra”, Crisis Group interview, Hilla, April 2007.

<sup>36</sup> The Badr brigade was not the only Iraqi force fighting on the Iranian side against the Iraqi regime. So was the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Masoud Barzani. The use of mustard gas at Haj Omran was the first confirmed chemical weapons attack in the Iran-Iraq war. Hiltermann, op. cit., pp. 29-30. Many more such attacks followed.

<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group interview, retired Iraqi military officer who served in military intelligence during the war, Amman, 2 March 2007.

<sup>38</sup> Hiltermann, op. cit., chapter 6.

<sup>39</sup> Crisis Group interview, February 2007. Because Iran withdrew its support from Badr, the group’s Iranian officers left. They were replaced by *Tawwab*in. Crisis Group interview, a former *Tawwab*, April 2007.

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interview, February 2007.

<sup>41</sup> Because the revolt started in the south and soon took on a Shiite character, it is often referred to as a Shiite revolt. In its origins, however, it was a non-sectarian army mutiny that took aim at the

The Iraqi regime promptly accused Iran of being behind the revolt, claiming to have killed “Iranian saboteurs” (*mukharrebin*) among the rebels. While evidence of direct Iranian involvement is lacking, Tehran did dispatch Badr fighters to Iraq. Attacking regime symbols, such as Baath party offices and security police buildings, and defacing portraits of Saddam Hussein, these men tried to commandeer the rebellion, putting up posters of Ayatollah Khomeini and Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim in city streets and turning mosques and hospitals into militia headquarters.<sup>42</sup> This gave the popular uprising a new and specific political agenda – establishment of a Shiite theocracy – and thus undermined its support among a broad spectrum of Iraqis.

Once the regime regrouped its forces and the U.S. administration, alarmed at the prospect of a Shiite (read Iranian) take-over of Iraq, virtually gave it the green light, it turned its guns on the rebels, killing thousands and driving tens of thousands more into Saudi Arabia and Iran.<sup>43</sup> To this day residents of Basra (a mixed city of Shiites – the majority – Sunnis and Christians) and other southern towns blame SCIRI for having transformed an army-based anti-regime revolt into an Iran-sponsored Shiite rebellion, only to leave the population exposed to brutal reprisals once defeated Badr fighters slipped back into Iran.<sup>44</sup> “SCIRI pushed the *Tawwab* into Iraq and misled many Iraqis into believing they could defeat the regime. Once Saddam recovered from the shock of the army’s rout in Kuwait, he turned on the people and slaughtered them, which was a natural reaction on Saddam’s part”, said a resident of Nasiriya.<sup>45</sup>

SCIRI is still mostly in denial about its responsibility. While it has acknowledged its fighters’ participation and indeed glorified their role, in none of its publications has it explained why Badr fighters entered Iraq and tried to

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regime that had sent soldiers into Kuwait and, ultimately, to defeat. Retreating soldiers, passing through Sunni towns such as al-Zubeir on the road from the Kuwaiti border to Basra, started taking potshots at ubiquitous portraits of the Iraqi tyrant, thereby setting off a rapidly spreading popular uprising.

<sup>42</sup> The aftermath of these events was witnessed by a Crisis Group analyst visiting Iraq in a different capacity in March 1991.

<sup>43</sup> See “Endless Torment: The 1991 Uprising in Iraq and Its Aftermath”, Human Rights Watch, June 1992, available at <http://hrw.org/reports/1992/Iraq926.htm>. The full extent of these killings, which spread over several years, became known only after 2003 when Iraqis began identifying and opening mass graves in the south. The Iraqi tribunal established to try regime leaders for their crimes has not yet turned to the suppression of the 1991 uprising.

<sup>44</sup> Crisis Group interview, Deborah Amos, reporter with National Public Radio in the U.S., Amman, 6 February 2005, based on interviews she conducted in Basra in January 2005. See also, George Packer, “Letter from Basra: Testing Ground”, *New Yorker*, 28 February 2005.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Nasiriya, 2 March 2007.

take command, and it has failed to accept its share of responsibility for the revolt’s collapse and resulting bloodbath. On its English-language website that was operative in the early 1990s ([www.sciri.btinternet.co.uk](http://www.sciri.btinternet.co.uk)), SCIRI merely claimed that “during the popular uprising of March 1991 the secret cells and elements which were connected to Badr Corps took part actively in launching and spreading the uprising from the south to other parts of Iraq”.<sup>46</sup> In reality, Badr appeared to be far from the launch, and the revolt never reached north of Karbala (the simultaneous Kurdish revolt having been sparked separately).

In later years, SCIRI officials distanced themselves from the notion that SCIRI might have played a role in starting the uprising. One former senior member claimed: “The revolt was a natural reaction to the regime’s loss of control over the towns [because of continuous coalition forces’ air bombardments] and the feelings of humiliation about the army’s defeat in Kuwait. SCIRI did not play any role in starting these events”.<sup>47</sup>

Doubtless the U.S. administration contributed hugely to the uprising’s failure by allowing the regime to use its tanks and helicopters in crushing the insurgents,<sup>48</sup> but SCIRI’s lack of support even among Shiites meant that it could not provide effective leadership. The presence of its fighters gave the events sectarian overtones that were rejected by most and enabled the regime to recast the insurrection as an Iranian-inspired attempt, in a final post-war spasm, to install *wilayat al-faqih*. SCIRI’s failing was particularly evident in Baghdad, where its call for a popular uprising met with barely a response. This allowed the regime to consolidate its hold and send its forces southward to reimpose order.<sup>49</sup> Today SCIRI lives with a legacy of massive popular distrust, and even a sense of betrayal, resulting from its ill-considered attempt to hijack a popular revolt to suit its own narrow objectives.

While Badr benefited from a major influx of fresh recruits from the huge post-uprising refugee population in Iran, its military role during the remainder of the decade and until the 2003 U.S. invasion was limited to cross-border raids and pinprick attacks on regime posts and transport

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<sup>46</sup> A Badr member put it more strongly: “SCIRI had the honour of sparking the Intifada [uprising]”, Crisis Group interview, Karbala, April 2007.

<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group interview, Amman, February 2007.

<sup>48</sup> For contrasting views, see Andrew Cockburn and Patrick Cockburn, *Out of the Ashes: The Resurrection of Saddam Hussein* (New York, 1999), and George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York, 1998).

<sup>49</sup> The same argument can be made in the case of the Kurdish revolt, which found no traction in Baghdad, including among its substantial Kurdish population.

lines far removed from populated areas.<sup>50</sup> Inside Iraq, any association with SCIRI exposed returning POWs to reprisals by a regime that, despite crippling UN-led sanctions, gave every sign of becoming more and more entrenched.<sup>51</sup> SCIRI's growth, therefore, was entirely in exile.

While SCIRI's proximity to and dependence on the Iranian regime encouraged it to formally endorse Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's abortive 1994 bid to become the Shiites' *marja al-taqlid al-mutlaq*,<sup>52</sup> a combination of factors prompted it to diversify its sources of support. These included its disenchantment with Iran's passive approach toward the desired Islamic revolution in Iraq,<sup>53</sup> its unhappiness about Iran's treatment of its followers as surly underlings<sup>54</sup> and the post-1990 U.S. hostility toward the Iraqi regime, which created new opportunities for mobilising foreign support for its overthrow. SCIRI began to look westward, establishing representative offices in European capitals such as Paris, London, Bonn, Vienna and Bern<sup>55</sup> and putting out feelers to the U.S.

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<sup>50</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, former army officer, Baghdad, 4 March 2007.

<sup>51</sup> A former POW recounted that following his release from Iranian captivity in 1994, he was forced to join the Baath party in his neighbourhood. "This was almost part of the custom. What else could a newly released POW do? Not joining the party would raise suspicions and prompt accusations of being a *Tawwab*. This in turn would mean death to you and your family – 100 percent", Crisis Group telephone interview, Baghdad, 6 March 2007.

<sup>52</sup> Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, while Supreme Leader of Iran, has not received Shiite recognition as their pre-eminent religious authority, having to cede pride of place first to Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qasem al-Khoei and, following his death in 1992, to Ali al-Sistani. In fact, the Najaf *hawza*, which today comprises four grand ayatollahs, all of whom reject the clergy's role in government, has overshadowed Ruhollah Khomeini's ideology, of which Ali Khamenei is the main living exponent. That said, Khamenei's official representation in Najaf, heavily funded by Iran, today exceeds even the office of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in splendour.

<sup>53</sup> A retired police officer who observed SCIRI's activities from close-up for many years and has been a critic said, "SCIRI wanted to establish an Islamic republic in Iraq. The only way they could do this was by helping Iran win the war and put them in power. This did not work, so then they went to the U.S. to do the job for them", Crisis Group telephone interview, Nasiriya, 2 March 2007.

<sup>54</sup> During a meeting with Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim and several of his aides at SCIRI's headquarters in Tehran in May 2002, a Crisis Group analyst, visiting in a different capacity, found SCIRI resentment toward its Iranian hosts and their patronising ways palpable.

<sup>55</sup> SCIRI's "diplomats" in Europe went on to assume prominent positions both within SCIRI and in post-2003 Iraq. For example, Adel Abd-al-Mahdi, SCIRI's representative in Paris in the 1990s, is now Iraq's vice-president, and Hamed al-Bayati, SCIRI's man in London, today is Iraq's permanent representative to the

SCIRI's relations with the Clinton administration were mixed, its Iranian association proving both a source of intense suspicion in Washington and, potentially, a useful indirect channel for dialogue with Iranian hardliners. For SCIRI, likewise, its overtures combined promise and risk. It craved respectability through acceptance by the West and a stake in a post-Saddam Iraq should the U.S. oust the regime, yet too close a relationship with Washington could harm in an Iraq chafing under UN sanctions and, more broadly, in a region where anti-U.S. sentiment ran strong. Moreover, SCIRI distrusted both U.S. motives and political will.<sup>56</sup> For Iran, SCIRI's move toward greater autonomy, while loosening the intimate patron-client ties that had defined the relationship since the party's creation,<sup>57</sup> offered a communication line to the West and the ability to signal it did not want to remain an outcast.

In 1992 SCIRI had joined the Iraqi National Congress (INC), an umbrella of Iraqi opposition groups established under the leadership of Ahmad Chalabi in Iraqi Kurdistan. It considered this a turning point in the international community's approach to Iraq and wanted to make sure that the Shiite Islamist component was included alongside the secular and Kurdish components. According to a SCIRI official, "it was very hard to work with the secular parties and communists. But Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim argued that it was important to do so in order to show the Iraqi people and the international community that the Iraqi opposition consists of an array of forces combined in one front".<sup>58</sup>

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UN in New York. Finance Minister Bayan Jabr Solagh, who was interior minister in Iraq's first elected government in 2005, represented SCIRI in Damascus in the 1990s.

<sup>56</sup> According to Hamed al-Bayati, SCIRI's representative in the UK speaking in 2000, "the Americans always feel that we are an Islamic movement based in Tehran, and that our activity could be controlled or influenced by Iranians. The Americans were actually frightened that, even if something happened inside Iraq, it would be under the influence of the Iranians. From our side, the Iraqi people feel betrayed by the Americans, who brought Saddam to power, supported Saddam, and didn't take him when they [had] the chance during the second Gulf war. Even when we had the popular uprising, the Americans stood with Saddam, rather than with the Iraqi people....So it is very difficult for us to convince Iraqi people that we can work with the Americans to topple the regime". "The Survival of Saddam", PBS Frontline, 25 January 2000, at [www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/saddam/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/saddam/).

<sup>57</sup> As Walter Posch has pointed out, Iran could continue to count on personal networks and interrelations between its security apparatus and SCIRI leaders, even if the group became increasingly autonomous and "Iraqified". Walter Posch, "Iran and the Shia of Iraq", *Krakowskie Studia Międzynarodowe*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2005), pp. 100-101.

<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group interview, SCIRI political bureau member Ridha Jawad Taqi, Baghdad, 14 July 2007.

In 1998, the U.S. Congress designated SCIRI a group eligible to receive support under the Iraq Liberation Act. Although this coalition was singularly incapable of mounting any serious challenge to the regime,<sup>59</sup> the Congress viewed it as a potential alternative in the event of a U.S.-engineered coup, or at least as a useful instrument when it wanted to threaten Saddam Hussein or challenge the Clinton administration, whose dual-containment approach toward Tehran and Baghdad had little prospects of undermining the Iraqi regime.<sup>60</sup> Although SCIRI refused any funds under the act,<sup>61</sup> it did not disassociate itself from the INC. It was happy to play the part because the part lacked substance, while offering hope for future returns. It also realised that the Iraq Liberation Act opened the door to cooperation with the U.S.<sup>62</sup>

In August 2002, as the Bush administration was warming up for the Iraq invasion, it invited SCIRI to attend an opposition gathering in Washington.<sup>63</sup> Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim, the leader's brother, headed the SCIRI delegation, which included Adel Abd-al-Mahdi, who would become Iraq's vice-president, Humam Hamoudi, who later served as chairman of Iraq's constitutional committee, and Hamed al-Bayati, the group's London representative and, in 2007, Iraq's permanent representative to the UN.<sup>64</sup> The

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<sup>59</sup> When the INC tried to foment a popular revolt against the regime in 1996, the U.S. did not provide support. Then, when the KDP joined with the regime and together entered Erbil to oust the PUK in August, Iraqi army troops crushed the small band of INC fighters.

<sup>60</sup> The Clinton administration's policy toward Iraq was to weaken the regime through debilitating sanctions and intrusive arms inspections, punctured by occasional air bombardments of regime assets, and to assist high-ranking Iraqi officers in ousting the regime in a palace coup. It never found officers able to pull this off, and the sanctions bled the Iraqi people into utter impoverishment while strengthening the regime. Two of the best studies on the sanctions decade are Cockburn and Cockburn, *op. cit.*, and Sarah Graham-Brown, *Sanctioning Saddam: The Politics of Intervention in Iraq* (London, 1999).

<sup>61</sup> Hamed al-Bayati explained: "We have our reservations about all the material aid that America would like to give to the Iraq opposition...I don't think we need any kind of material support. We need political and moral support, and the implementation of UN resolutions", PBS Frontline, *op. cit.*

<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group interview, SCIRI political bureau member Ridha Jawad Taqi, Baghdad, 14 July 2007.

<sup>63</sup> In his state of the union address in January 2002, President Bush referred to an "axis of evil", including Iran, Iraq and North Korea. Out of deference to its Iranian hosts, SCIRI publicly distanced itself from any U.S. objective to oust the Iraqi regime. Within months, however, as the administration's rhetoric on Iraq changed into actual preparations for an attack, SCIRI realised it could not afford to stay outside the discussions as a member of the Iraqi opposition, lest it forfeit its chance to play a central role in a post-Saddam Iraq.

<sup>64</sup> Six groups attended the meeting: SCIRI, Ahmad Chalabi's INC (from which SCIRI had split), Iyad Allawi's Iraqi National

participating groups met President Bush, Secretary of State Colin Powell and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. Subsequently, SCIRI played a prominent part in pre-invasion opposition conferences in London (December 2002) and Iraqi Kurdistan (February 2003), posing as representatives of Iraq's Shiite community.<sup>65</sup>

By these actions, it staked a claim to a share in post-war power. Yet, when the time came for a significant contribution, SCIRI balked, caught up in a delicate dance between Iranian and American patronage. Rhetorically, it expressed its opposition to any U.S. military role in Iraq.<sup>66</sup> Its participation in the Washington meetings was controversial within the party. A senior SCIRI official explained:

The visit was highly important to us because it was the first by Islamist figures from the Iraqi opposition to the U.S., one that allowed us to demonstrate SCIRI's openness and pragmatism.<sup>67</sup> Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim understood that the U.S. was going to war and would remove the regime. The other forces in the opposition, both Islamists and non-Islamists, feared there might be an agreement between the U.S. and Saddam whereby Saddam would accept the international community's demands in exchange for being permitted to stay in power. They thought that the purpose of bringing military forces to the region was to put pressure on Saddam to accept U.S. conditions.

SCIRI participated for the following reasons: First, to convince the U.S. that Saddam could be removed without war. We opposed such a war. Secondly, to suggest an alternative way of removing Saddam by enabling the Iraqi people to revolt against him with the international community's support. We wanted

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Accord, Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party, Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Constitutional Monarchy Movement. Other SCIRI officials in the delegation were Muhammad Taqi al-Mowla and Ahmad al-Khafaji.

<sup>65</sup> SCIRI has often claimed to represent the "followers of Ahl al-Bayt". In Shiite Islam, Ahl al-Bayt is the Prophet Muhammad's household and their direct descendants, including his daughter Fatima and son-in-law (and cousin) Ali, as well as the imams who followed in Ali's wake. To Shiites the term "followers of Ahl al-Bayt" denotes all Shiites. Many Sunnis also consider themselves to be followers of Ahl al-Bayt, but they define the term more narrowly to refer to the Prophet's immediate household only.

<sup>66</sup> In August 2002 Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim publicly opposed a U.S. attack against and occupation of Iraq, claiming that SCIRI's participation in the Washington talks was designed to "keep off threats against Iraq". Agence France-Presse, 13 August 2002. If SCIRI harboured more than rhetorical opposition to U.S. military intervention, the war itself put an end to any criticism.

<sup>67</sup> Hamed al-Bayati, SCIRI's representative in London, had visited the U.S. in the mid-1990s but had only low-level meetings.

guarantees that Saddam would not be allowed to move his armour and troops into areas where people were rising up, and we wanted a no-fly zone in the south similar to the one in the north. Thirdly, to learn who would be running the country in the hours following the regime's ouster. We proposed setting up a government in exile that, upon its arrival in Iraq, would read a statement [establishing itself as the legitimate government]. But the Americans refused. A gap emerged between the U.S. and us when we realised they had no plan for running the country after the regime's ouster. We wanted them to repeat the Afghanistan experience; the Afghan opposition met at a conference in Bonn to form a government.<sup>68</sup>

Under SCIRI's preferred scenario, U.S. forces would reduce Iraq's military capability enough to allow for a popular uprising that the regime could not suppress – the 1991 insurrection done right, in other words. This would allow the establishment of an interim government, which SCIRI accepted would be a coalition government in its early iterations, given pre-war cooperation between opposition parties in exile.

To prove that it would practice what it preached – an Iraqi insurrection – SCIRI deployed a Badr unit in Iraqi Kurdistan that staged a military parade in March 2003, just before the war and after the Bush administration suggested that it intended to delay a post-war handover of power to a provisional government formed by opposition parties.<sup>69</sup> The parade triggered a stiff U.S. warning that any armed Badr fighters its forces would come across would be treated as enemy combatants. SCIRI was thus reduced to sneaking its fighters across the border from Iran and wisely waited to do so until U.S. forces in Kuwait, thrusting northward to Baghdad, had driven out the regime. But rather than competing with U.S. troops for control, these fighters found a total power vacuum in towns close to the frontier, such as Kut, Khanaqin and Baqouba – and then rapidly sought to fill it.

<sup>68</sup> Crisis Group interview, SCIRI political bureau member Ridha Jawad Taqi, Baghdad, 14 July 2007.

<sup>69</sup> Badr fighters had been stationed in Kurdistan, clearly with approval of the PUK, which controlled the area, for most of the 1990s; in 2002 they began preparing for their entry into regime-controlled territory.

## II. SCIRI IN POWER

### A. HOMECOMING

Eyewitnesses recount that SCIRI first came into sight when pictures of Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim started appearing on walls in Shiite cities announcing his impending arrival from Iran. On the day of his homecoming, in May 2003, a crowd gathered at the border, carrying his picture and that of his father, the late Grand Ayatollah Mohsen al-Hakim. Following a mini-tour of the south in which he failed to draw large audiences,<sup>70</sup> he moved to Najaf, the city of the grand ayatollahs, and promptly visited Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the Shiites' spiritual leader, the *marja al-taqlid*. He set up an office near the city centre, close to both the religious seminary (*al-hawza al-ilmiya*)<sup>71</sup> and the sacred Imam Ali shrine, where he began preaching. He explained his views in his Friday sermons, seeking to win listeners over to his goal of building a government that would serve the interests of the Shiites, who had been politically marginalised for decades.<sup>72</sup>

SCIRI was defensive about its arrival from Iran. A senior official explained:

Badr's reputation has always been distorted because of the fact that Badr was founded in Iran. There is a difference, however, between an organisation founded in a given country and one that declares its loyalty to that country. When we left Iraq, no one was willing to receive us, except Iran and Syria. The Arabs and Europeans supported Saddam's regime. This does not mean that Badr is an Iranian organisation or loyal to Iran.<sup>73</sup>

Laden with this Iranian baggage, SCIRI also was saddled with an apparent association with the U.S. war effort. This perception was fed by the fact that, criticism of Washington policy notwithstanding, SCIRI proved more than willing to ride to power on U.S. coattails. While many ordinary Iraqis initially were grateful toward the U.S., this began to sour when they realised that U.S. forces allowed chaos to reign in the streets. This affected how they saw the exiles who had returned in their wake, SCIRI included. "SCIRI returned to Iraq with the Americans, even though they do not acknowledge this", said a Basra native. "By denying it, they are trying to distance themselves from

<sup>70</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Iraqis in the south, 2003.

<sup>71</sup> *Al-hawza al-ilmiya* in Najaf is a conglomeration of Shiite seminaries headed by the *marjaeeya*.

<sup>72</sup> Crisis Group interview, Iraqi journalist, Baghdad, 17 August 2007.

<sup>73</sup> Crisis Group interview, SCIRI *shura* council member Hadi al-Asadi, Baghdad, 25 September 2007.

other elements of the Iraqi opposition who collaborated more openly with the occupiers”.<sup>74</sup>

SCIRI, therefore, was compelled to navigate a difficult course that emphasised its independence from Iran and the U.S., an almost impossible task given both its past and the situation in an Iraq which was under U.S. occupation but large parts of which were beginning to fall under Iranian influence. To distance itself from Iran, SCIRI publicly embraced democracy as the way forward and tacitly shed its earlier embrace of an Iranian-style theocracy.<sup>75</sup> Another view holds that SCIRI embraced democracy as part of an Iranian ploy that would allow the party to gain the Americans’ trust and outlast their presence: “The Americans did not trust SCIRI and they therefore did not hand over power to them. So SCIRI went in it for the long haul, with an Iranian sort of patience, avoiding confrontation, pretending to follow a democratic course and maintaining good relations with the U.S. as the way to reach their long-term objectives”.<sup>76</sup>

At the same time, Badr fighters’ surreptitious arrival from Iranian exile and early altercations with U.S. troops allowed SCIRI to claim it was not an American auxiliary. One immediate area of conflict was the status of the Badr Corps, which the U.S. insisted be disbanded. In late April 2003, U.S. troops set off to Baqouba to disarm Badr fighters who had taken control of the city. In a compromise, SCIRI nominally agreed to demobilise its armed militia and turn it into the “Badr Organisation for Development and Reconstruction”, a political party affiliated with SCIRI.<sup>77</sup> A SCIRI official later rationalised this concession:

After the regime’s ouster, the U.S. prohibited Badr Corps from entering Iraq because, they said, Badr is loyal to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. But we were able to come anyway because Badr had sources of support inside the country. Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim then changed Badr from a military corps into a civilian organisation, because we no longer needed military activities. This was a strategy, not a tactic. Badr quit its military activities and turned to political work. In observance of Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim’s orders, Badr fighters did not bring any weapons with them; they came as civilians.<sup>78</sup>

Nevertheless, Badr apparently retained its military capability. If its fighters did not bring their weapons, they could easily obtain new ones in the post-war free-for-all.<sup>79</sup> After Hakim’s assassination in Najaf in August 2003, SCIRI criticised the U.S. for failing to provide security and made a point of deploying armed militia fighters around the Shiites’ holy shrines. In 2005 its commanders and fighters took charge of the interior ministry and infiltrated the country’s security forces; from then on Badr fighters were able to operate in the uniform of state agents.

SCIRI also had profound differences with the Bush administration about who should lead the country. In a speech in Najaf shortly following his return, Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim called on the U.S. to hand over power to a provisional government. Its refusal to put Iraqis fully in charge was a bitter pill for the former exiles, who realised they had a head start in post-war Iraq but sooner or later would face organised domestic opposition. They changed their strategy accordingly, agreeing to be the key players inside U.S.-established institutions and thus benefit from U.S. protection, while banking on their power to control the political process and move it in their favour. By denouncing the occupation, they sought to step up pressure on Washington to hand over power to them as soon as possible. At the same time, they insisted that any resistance to the U.S. presence be non-violent.

SCIRI was particularly drawn to this strategy of engineered ambivalence – active participation in the new institutions, rhetorical rejection of them, and rejection of violent resistance – given the Shiite community’s history. In the early 1920s, Shiites rose up against British forces, resulting in their loss of power in post-Ottoman Iraq.<sup>80</sup> SCIRI did not want the Shiites to lose out again by failing to associate with foreign occupiers and play the political game, so when the U.S. thwarted its bid for immediate post-war power, it (and others), showed flexibility. When Paul Bremer’s Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) set up the Interim Governing Council in July 2003, SCIRI took one of the 25 seats for Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim, the leader’s brother, who had commanded the Badr Corps in Iran. It also agreed to participate in local elections or to be assigned seats where the U.S. and its allies established councils without elections. It criticised these councils as illegitimate and distrusted them as pro-U.S. organs but saw them as

<sup>74</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, university lecturer, Basra, 26 February 2007.

<sup>75</sup> See Section III below.

<sup>76</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, university lecturer, Basra, 26 February 2007.

<sup>77</sup> SCIRI is nominally a coalition of parties; Badr simply became one of them.

<sup>78</sup> Crisis Group interview, SCIRI *shura* council member Hadi al-Asadi, Baghdad, 25 September 2007.

<sup>79</sup> A Crisis Group analyst visiting Iraq in a different capacity in June 2003 saw Badr fighters assembled in a Baghdad mosque. They had crossed the border unarmed but had easily replenished their arsenal in a country that was by then awash with weapons, owing to the U.S. military’s failure to secure arms depots.

<sup>80</sup> For an analysis of the Shiite revolt in the early 1920s, see Tripp, *op. cit.*, pp. 43-58.

potential vehicles for its own ambitions from which it could not afford to be excluded.<sup>81</sup>

By and large, SCIRI proved highly pragmatic in the post-war order. It denounced the U.S. presence in public while accepting it in practice; denied any direct association with the occupiers while working through the institutions they established; accepted the notion of democracy despite its adherence to the concept of *wilayat al-faqih*; gradually extended its political control over the new order through its alliance with the two main Kurdish parties and its fellow Shiite groups; and turned the Badr Corps into the Badr “organisation”, suggesting – although not carrying out – a metamorphosis from military to civilian activity for this militia.

## B. SCIRI IN GOVERNMENT

SCIRI’s current power is the outcome not of activities tested in an open electoral contest but of its steady march through post-war institutions and tactical alliances forged along the way. These alliances successively, and in some cases simultaneously, included such different political actors as Ahmad Chalabi’s Iraqi National Congress (INC) before the war, the U.S. (both the Clinton and current Bush administrations), rival Shiite political parties like Daawa and the Sadrists and the two main Kurdish parties. Each helped lift SCIRI further up the political pyramid.

Despite its conservative religious outlook, SCIRI could trade on its pre-war alliance with secular opposition parties (Iyad Allawi’s Iraqi National Accord, the Iraqi Communist Party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, in addition to the INC) to burnish its standing with the U.S. This, in turn, translated into a position of influence in post-war Iraq, most importantly via a seat on the Interim Governing Council and ministerial positions in the first two post-war cabinets,<sup>82</sup> as well as in the drafting of the interim and permanent constitutions.

Likewise, when Ayatollah Sistani, in late 2004, appeared to support the formation of a Shiite coalition to ensure that Shiites as a community would prevail in the January 2005

parliamentary and provincial council elections,<sup>83</sup> SCIRI played along. It ensured its predominance vis-à-vis other Shiite parties in the resulting front, the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), through its principal assets: a coherent party structure and leadership, strong internal discipline, a powerful militia that protected the holy cities and religious leadership and a record of pragmatic politics that diluted (or diffused suspicions about) its sectarian agenda and Iranian roots. Its leader, Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim, topped the UIA’s electoral list.

Proximity to Sistani and, in turn, acquiring his blessing was crucial. SCIRI – and indeed all other Shiite religiously-based parties – have manipulated their relationship with this supreme religious figure, professing to convey his pronouncements<sup>84</sup> and carry out his rulings (*fatawi*) and instructions.<sup>85</sup> A local SCIRI official claimed that the SCIRI leadership frequently met with Sistani to discuss political developments. In response, “he always tells us to be open and to explain to the people everything. We do what his Eminence instructs us to do”.<sup>86</sup> Another local SCIRI official explained how the UIA won:

Most Iraqi people follow the religious leadership’s orders, even if many of them are not religious. People in the south are simple and tend to follow the clerics’ orders blindly. There were hints that Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani wanted people to vote for a particular list because some of his representatives were on it. The people respect his Eminence and obey his orders. I think this is the main factor explaining why people voted for our list. Moreover, his orders will play an important role in future elections.<sup>87</sup>

During the campaign, SCIRI hired media advisers and sent some of its most visible (and most outspokenly sectarian) personalities, such as Jalal al-Din al-Saghir, to the south to mobilise the masses. A key objective was to persuade Shiites that Sistani had endorsed not just the UIA but

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<sup>81</sup> In an earlier report, Crisis Group quoted a SCIRI official as saying that the councils “have been appointed by the Americans, and even in places where they organised partial elections, such as in Samawa and Nasariya, they made sure that these returned candidates friendly to their interests”, Crisis Group Middle East Report N°33, *Iraq: Can Local Governance Save Central Government?*, 27 October 2004, p. 15.

<sup>82</sup> In the 2003 cabinet under the Interim Governing Council, SCIRI had two ministers: Bayan Jaber Solagh (reconstruction) and Ali al-Ghaban (sports). In the 2004 interim government of Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, SCIRI also had two ministers: Adel Abd-al-Mahdi (finance) and Ali al-Ghaban (sports).

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<sup>83</sup> Although documentary evidence of Sistani’s instruction has proved elusive, a senior aide close to the religious leader claimed he was acting on his behalf in establishing the UIA and composing its electoral list, Crisis Group interview, Hussein al-Shahristani, The Hague, 20 December 2004.

<sup>84</sup> Shiite politicians make frequent visits to Sistani, afterwards reproducing his oracular pronouncements as law. In the absence of records of the conversations, there is no certainty that Sistani actually said the things attributed to him.

<sup>85</sup> Like other *maraajee* (plural of *marja*), Ayatollah Sistani issues religious rulings (*fatawi*, plural of *fatwa*) on a range of religious, social and even political concerns. These are available on his website, [www.sistani.org](http://www.sistani.org). Moreover, Sistani lets his wishes on a range of daily issues be known via his son, Muhammad Ridha, and allied imams who lead Friday prayers and deliver sermons.

<sup>86</sup> Crisis Group interview, August 2007.

<sup>87</sup> Crisis Group interview, August 2007.

SCIRI itself as the favoured party. This was particularly effective at the local level, where Shiite parties ran in provincial council elections individually rather than as part of the UIA. In a signal accomplishment, SCIRI got a senior Sistani spokesman, Hamid al-Khafaf, to convene a symposium in Najaf at which he presented Sistani's point of view regarding the elections, a position that was then explained as support for the UIA and SCIRI.<sup>88</sup>

SCIRI has succeeded in claiming proximity to Sistani in part because it shares a middle-class, predominantly mercantile power base that shapes its political outlook and contrasts sharply with, for example, the Sadrist's humble roots. Moreover, the *hawza* (religious seminary) and its history provide a certain affinity: "Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim supports Sistani and, being the son of Grand Ayatollah Mohsen al-Hakim, he, and through him SCIRI, win Sistani's support in turn".<sup>89</sup>

The January 2005 elections marked SCIRI's rise to power. At the provincial level, it arguably performed far above its weight, owing not only to Sistani's alleged support but also to a boycott by both Sunni Arabs (evident especially in majority-Sunni and mixed-population areas) and the Sadrist movement (evident in southern governorates). SCIRI either ran alone or entered into ad hoc local coalitions in Shiite-majority governorates where it feared stiffer opposition, using its organisational strength to dominate its main rivals: Daawa and, in Basra, the Islamic Fadhila party, neither of which had military strength at the time.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Hamid al-Khafaf represented Sistani in negotiations that ended the dangerous stand-off in the Imam Ali mosque following the U.S. military's attempt to dislodge Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi army from Najaf in August 2004. Other factors aided SCIRI's campaign, both individually and as part of the UIA. Party members hung election posters throughout the south with Sistani's visage and the UIA's list number (169), suggesting the ayatollah's endorsement. Al Jazeera TV, based in Qatar, inadvertently helped SCIRI and the UIA by hosting a person on one of its shows who insulted Sistani's character; SCIRI used this clip to underline the dangers of the possible return to power of the previous regime, whose atrocities it highlighted in its leaders' speeches. Crisis Group interview, a person who attended the event, Baghdad, 16 August 2007.

<sup>89</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior SCIRI member, February 2007.

<sup>90</sup> Daawa and Fadhila were inherently weaker than SCIRI. Fadhila did not exist before 2003 and started arming itself in 2006, as sectarian fighting and political jockeying intensified in Basra, where it has since become a powerful actor. Daawa, which did exist in 2003, had been decimated by the regime and had splintered in exile. It attempted to set up a militia in 2003 but gave up soon thereafter. The Sadr movement would have been SCIRI's only serious challenger had it not decided to boycott the polls based on its rejection of the occupation, its institutions and electoral exercises.

In most cases, SCIRI came in first or second, including in the two governorates that are home to the Shiites' holy cities, Najaf and Karbala, thereby earning the right to appoint senior local government office holders. In only one key governorate, Basra, did it end up having to share power with parties that, while Islamist in outlook, had little else in common.<sup>91</sup> Apart from Basra (and, for different reasons, Maysan), its electoral performance allowed it to seize control over governorate institutions and security forces in the south.

Nationally, the UIA won 48 per cent of the votes and 140 seats in the 275-seat council of representatives; its nearest competitor was the Kurdish list, comprising the two main parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and an array of smaller ones, which scored almost 26 per cent and 75 seats. By joining forces, the two lists spawned successive elected governments in 2005 and 2006. More importantly, the backbone of these two governments has been an alliance between the Kurds and SCIRI (not the UIA), without which SCIRI would not have gained its current prominence. SCIRI's ties with the Kurds date back twenty years to a strong friendship with Jalal Talabani's PUK in particular.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> A SCIRI-dominated ten-party slate, the Islamic Basra Alliance, emerged as the winner with twenty seats on the 41-seat council but was subsequently outmanoeuvred by a coalition of Fadhila and three smaller parties, whose one-seat advantage enabled it to appoint the governor. This constellation has turned out to be a prescription for chaos, with shifting alliances in which, invariably, two parties, armed to the teeth and engorged by revenues from oil smuggling, tend to gang up on the third. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°26, *Where Is Iraq Heading? Lessons From Basra*, 25 June 2007, pp. 11-14.

<sup>92</sup> Some claim the starting point was Mohsen al-Hakim's refusal, at the start of the Barzani insurgency in 1963, to issue a *fatwa* allowing Muslims (in this case, the Iraqi regime) to fight the Kurds. Luizard, op. cit., p. 94. Luizard states that, contrary to frequent claims, there is no evidence that al-Hakim issued a *fatwa* in 1966 forbidding Muslims to fight against the Kurds. A senior SCIRI official explained the episode: "The Shiite *Marjaeeya* has always defended Kurdish rights. At a Baghdad conference [in] 1965, Iraqi President Abd-al-Salam Aref urged Sunni and some Shiite clerics to issue a *fatwa* to kill the Kurds who, he said, were the aggressors [in a growing insurgency]. The *fatwa* was issued but Grand Ayatollah Mohsen al-Hakim, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim's father, issued a *fatwa* declaring the killing of Kurds a taboo and calling for peaceful resolution of the conflict between the Kurds and the government. It was not a written *fatwa*; His Eminence announced his position vis-à-vis the anti-Kurd *fatwa* in a meeting with Sunni and Shiite clerics in Najaf. The Kurds still remember Grand Ayatollah al-Hakim's *fatwa* but everyone else has grown to forget that al-Hakim saved the blood of our fathers and grandfathers and stood against the government to protect the Kurds. This is another reason for the close relationship between the Shiites and the Kurds". Crisis Group interview, SCIRI *shura* council member



During the difficult days of the Iran-Iraq war, SCIRI fighters operated inside Iraq in PUK-controlled territory and participated jointly in key battles in the north. Both were sponsored by Iran but pursued its own agenda and suffered casualties, for example in Haj Omran (1983) and Halabja (1988).<sup>93</sup> A senior SCIRI official summarised: “Racism prevented the Kurds from joining the political system, sectarianism prevented the Shiites, while tyranny repressed Kurds and Shiites alike”.<sup>94</sup>

The somewhat odd wartime partnership between the staunchly secular Talabani and the radical Islamist Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim was grounded in both parties’ underlying pragmatism, as well as their shared desire to overthrow the regime.<sup>95</sup> It survived despite SCIRI’s failure to recognise Kurdish national rights in its original program or offer solutions to the Kurdish predicament.<sup>96</sup> It survived also the confusing politics of the 1990s (precisely because no firm program was required in the absence of realistic hope of replacing the regime) as well as the regime’s 2003 ouster. It continues to survive in the shape of a strategic bond, which by virtue of superior organisation and military power has been able to rule Iraq.

The January 2005 combined parliamentary and provincial elections catapulted SCIRI into seats of power in Baghdad and many governorates. It was particularly interested in the interior ministry, which its former representative in Damascus, Bayan Jaber Solagh, was appointed to lead. Crisis Group has recounted how SCIRI commandeered that ministry and its security forces and infiltrated them with Badr fighters, escalating sectarian conflict.<sup>97</sup> Al-Qaeda in Iraq’s suicide bombings triggered retaliatory raids on Baghdad’s predominantly Sunni Arab neighbourhoods and towns in mixed-population areas by special police units that became death squads, depositing victims in underground torture chambers and detention centres or simply disposing of their bodies in empty lots or the Tigris. Assassinations multiplied of former regime elements, as well as of senior officers in the old army and pilots who

had flown in the Iran-Iraq war. SCIRI is widely viewed as primarily responsible, at least before the February 2006 shrine bombing in Samarra, when the Sadrist movement took the initiative in attacking its perceived enemies in the streets.<sup>98</sup>

One testimony, from a resident of Baghdad’s Zafaraniya neighbourhood, deserves quotation at length, as it sheds light on the process by which SCIRI translated its institutional power into effective control on the ground:

We used to live in harmony in the area, Shiites and Sunnis. We did not have any problems before the regime’s ouster or immediately after. The problems started with [al-Qaeda in Iraq leader] Zarqawi’s calls against Shiites, which were answered with calls against Sunnis in the form of threats of eviction followed by actual eviction. Most of us offered protection to our Sunni neighbours, as they were very afraid.

The calls against Sunnis started to get louder as the ferocity of suicide bombings and the number of casualties increased. Some Shiites started talking of the risks of having [Sunni] neighbours who might harbour suicide attackers, although this never happened. Such stories usually originated with religious people and clerics who used mosques to spread them.

At a later stage, some people in the neighbourhood began offering assistance to police, army and security forces. This provided them with acceptance among the wider local community, and they began to establish groups under the banner of SCIRI or Badr that grew as more and more people offered their allegiance, including by going to mosques or attending events at *huseiniyas* (Shiite places of worship); we don’t know for real their association or how deeply felt it was. These groups started collecting information about Sunnis in the neighbourhood and making inventories; they also gathered information about former Baathists. I

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Hadi al-Asadi, Baghdad, 25 September 2007. A *fatwa* should be written to have the force of religious law.

<sup>93</sup> Hiltermann, *op. cit.*, pp. xx, 29, 110-115.

<sup>94</sup> Crisis Group interview, SCIRI *shura* council member Hadi al-Asadi, Baghdad, 25 July 2007.

<sup>95</sup> Additionally, the PUK and SCIRI’s different ambitions were not incompatible: SCIRI wanted to overthrow the regime and replace it, whereas the PUK (as well as the KDP and other Kurdish parties) had no interest in gaining power in Baghdad, only in ensuring that Baghdad would not hinder its aspirations in Kurdistan.

<sup>96</sup> Babakhan, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

<sup>97</sup> Crisis Group Report, *The Next Iraqi War?*, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-21. See also the insightful piece by Ned Parker, “Interior Ministry mirrors chaos of a fractured Iraq”, *Los Angeles Times*, 30 July 2007.

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<sup>98</sup> SCIRI officials have strenuously denied these charges. One contended: “Some forces [countries] in the region have accused Badr of being behind attacks on former army officers and pilots. The problem is that in the past Badr was always accused of any killing that took place: killings of Sunnis, of officers, of pilots. I say that Badr was not involved in these killings because it became a political organisation that joined the political process. The accusations against Badr are false; none of its fighters have been arrested and there is not a single document that proves they were involved in these killings”. Crisis Group interview, SCIRI *shura* council member Hadi al-Asadi, Baghdad, 25 September 2007. The U.S. reportedly has evidence implicating SCIRI members in death squad activity but has been reluctant to use it. Crisis Group interview, U.S. military officer, September 2007.

found out from friends and neighbours that these lists were passed on to security personnel affiliated with SCIRI. A pattern of harassment and pressure emerged against Sunnis, usually under some pretext, even a silly one like a problem with women or children, and always under the banner of Islam and Shiism. They did this to establish domination and control.

A number of Baathists were assassinated in the area, and others were forced to flee. Some people were more vicious than others; they claimed they were members of security or regional committees of SCIRI or Badr. The most active ones may have had bad experiences with some of the targeted people, who perhaps used to inform the Baath party or the regime's security forces about their sons and relatives, a number of whom were executed for being members or supporters of the Daawa party. Some others were themselves Baath party members before the regime's ouster and benefited from having relatives or friends in high positions in the government or Shiite parties.

As a result of all this a lot of our neighbours left the area, and their properties were occupied by people evicted from Sunni areas, or at least they claimed to be.<sup>99</sup>

When SCIRI took charge of the security forces, it faced two immediate challenges: set up by Iyad Allawi's secular government in 2004, these forces comprised many former Baathists (both Sunni and Shiite), who were broadly inimical to SCIRI and were present at all levels of the hierarchy; and SCIRI did not have manpower to take their places. It therefore started pushing officers it did not like out of their positions (and into exile), replacing them with Badr cadres whom it promoted beyond their years of experience, and it began recruiting vigorously among unemployed Shiites to fill the rank and file.<sup>100</sup> As this process was set in motion, it gained a dynamic of its own. Sunni Arab members of the security forces have claimed they thought it wise to resign in the face of overt hostility from the steadily growing Shiite ranks.<sup>101</sup>

To replenish the officer corps, SCIRI reached out to a variety of local actors, often drawn from the middle class and including former members of the local Baath,

trading on its link to the *marjaeeya*. Ordinarily, Shiites tend to go to *huseiniyas* to meet people with influence and connections, hoping to receive a job in exchange for money, services or the promise of future services. For example, a new police officer may reciprocate his benefactor's favour by facilitating that man's affairs at the police station or his passage at a checkpoint. A Shiite who said he was recruited into the police force by a relative who had joined SCIRI after 2003 recalled:

I began supporting SCIRI when they gave me the opportunity to work as a police officer, as a result of which I enjoyed a very good standard of living. I received the rank of captain, while my relative, who had changed his name after the fall of the regime, gave himself the rank of colonel, even though he used to be a police captain before 2003 and was a member of a local Baath party division (*firqa*). Many senior police officers are SCIRI members, or at least they pretend to be. Most of these officers used to be Baathists, some very senior who had links with the top leadership. Even today some of them still maintain those links. They all switched loyalties when the regime collapsed, and they would change sides again if the regime came back tomorrow.<sup>102</sup>

To ensure loyalty, SCIRI must approve a new recruit. A Sunni Arab officer who joined the army under Allawi said:

SCIRI's principal method is to make applicants understand that their enrolment [in the national police force] is subject to SCIRI's approval. Once they have joined up, they are grouped together in police stations and sent on joint patrols. It is quite normal for Shiites to feel at ease in such an environment. Sunnis have no chance of passing through this net or living in such an environment. Those who sign up do not do so because of any political or religious conviction, but simply out of self-interest and personal benefit. Most of these guys, except for those who are strongly committed, would switch sides as soon as their interests shift in a different direction.<sup>103</sup>

When Badr's officer corps entered the security forces, Sunnis were pushed out. The same Sunni Arab officer recalled:

<sup>99</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Baghdad, 22 March 2007.

<sup>100</sup> In its haste to gain control over the security forces, SCIRI recruited widely among unemployed Shiites. This is how it let Sadrists into these forces, a development that has sharpened the rivalry between SCIRI and the Sadrism movement over time.

<sup>101</sup> Crisis Group interview, former senior officer in the interior ministry, Amman, 2006, as well as telephone interviews with former ministry officials and officers, Baghdad, March 2007.

<sup>102</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Baghdad, 2 March 2007. The same man was later forced to leave the police force after questions were raised about his qualifications and rank.

<sup>103</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Baghdad, 4 March 2007. A former Badr member asserted that Badr brought people over to its cause by inducting them in the security forces and offering them assistance through affiliated charity organisations or free medical treatment in an Iranian hospital. Crisis Group telephone interview, Baghdad, 6 March 2007.

I was one of the original army officers who joined the new army, along with some colleagues, all Sunnis. Badr's tactics came unexpected. Our brigade commander was first accused of wrongdoing and then threatened; when his brother was killed, he quit. I also was the target of an assassination attempt, after which they started threatening to submit complaints about me to Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari's office for being a Baathist. I used to be in the Baath, as did all my friends. They also started warning American officers about my being a Baathist. At a later stage, they accused my unit of supporting the insurgency and me of threatening inhabitants of Dujail at the time of the Dujail trial. The final incident was when they ordered me to report to Jaafari's office alone, without my guards. My commanding officer advised me not to go, as they would find some ground to charge me with a crime or kill me on the road to the prime minister's office. So I decided not to go, and instead went into hiding with my wife and deserted.<sup>104</sup>

The December 2005 parliamentary elections ratified SCIRI's hold on power, again as part of the UIA and in alliance with the Kurdish parties. Once again, however, SCIRI was unable to secure the prime ministership. In 2005 and 2006, its rivalry with the Sadrists forced these two groups to settle on a compromise candidate who, in both cases, was drawn from Daawa, a party that was weak enough to constitute a threat to no one (al-Jaafari in 2005, Nouri al-Maliki in 2006). SCIRI's inability to impose its candidate, Adel Abd-al-Mahdi, as prime minister is the one issue that has clouded its march through the institutions.

### III. FACING THE FUTURE

#### A. METAMORPHOSIS

At the conclusion of a pivotal party leadership conference in May 2007, Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim announced important changes in SCIRI's appearance and outlook. He said the party had dropped the word "revolution" from its name now that its primary mission had been accomplished with the regime's removal and it had entered a constitution-based political process that mandated the peaceful handover of power through free popular elections.<sup>105</sup> A member explained: "SCIRI did not change its name; it only deleted the word 'revolution'. The Supreme Council was founded in Iran with the aim to overthrow the Iraqi regime. Now that it has been removed and the people have elected a government, we no longer need to keep the word 'revolution' in our name".<sup>106</sup>

The new name in Arabic was *Al-Majlis al-'Aala al-Islami al-Iraqi*, the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council. Confusion in the media over the name's translation – should it be SICI or SIIC in English? – led to an official announcement at the end of July that the English name would henceforth be "The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq", "ISCI".<sup>107</sup>

The name change was made to suggest SCIRI's transformation from an exile-based rebel group associated with the Islamic Revolution in Iran to a responsible party of government in Iraq. Just as important, therefore, was Hakim's simultaneous announcement regarding his party's allegiance to religious authority:

The conferees value the great role that *Al-Hawza al-Ilmiya*, the Islamic scholars and the supreme religious authority [*marjaeeya*] headed by the source of emulation [*marja al-taqlid*], Grand Ayatollah al-Sayed Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani – may God preserve his shadow – have played and continue to play in protecting and maintaining the unity of Iraq and Iraqis, preserving the people's blood and helping

<sup>105</sup> Final statement issued by ISCI and read by Ridha Jawad Taqi, 12 May 2007, on behalf of Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim, available at [www.almejlis.org/news\\_article-13.html](http://www.almejlis.org/news_article-13.html).

<sup>106</sup> Crisis Group interview, ISCI *shura* council member Hadi al-Asadi, Baghdad, 25 September 2007.

<sup>107</sup> Statement issued by Karim Almusawi, ISCI's Washington representative, 31 July 2007. This clarification appears to have been made at the urging of SCIRI's backers in the Bush administration, who were concerned about the possible negative connotation of the words "siic" and "sici", which are close to the English "sick" and "sicko". Crisis Group interview, ISCI official, July 2007. If "sici" sounds bad in English, it does no better in Arabic. The word "*sikki*" in Iraqi street slang suggests the lowest of the low, a vulgar and criminal element.

<sup>104</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Baghdad, 4 March 2007.

them build a political system based on the constitution and law. We pledge to follow their steps and their sound policy in administering justice among all Iraqi communities.<sup>108</sup>

This statement was less significant for what it said than for what it failed to say. While it seemed to endorse Sistani as a source of *political* inspiration (“helping them build a political system”, “administering justice”), it remained silent on Sistani as a principal source of *religious* inspiration, the foremost role of Shiite *maraja* (plural of *marja*). Nor did the statement explicitly reverse SCIRI’s long-standing and publicly expressed adherence to Khomeini’s principle of *velayet-e fakih* and Ali Khamenei’s supreme authority<sup>109</sup> Does this suggest that the new ISCI remains beholden to both this principle and the Iranian supreme leader as SCIRI was in exile, despite its utterances in favour of Sistani?

ISCI officials suggest that the change was decisive and, moreover, that it occurred not in 2007 but as early as May 2003, upon Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim’s return to Iraq:

As soon as he returned, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim announced that Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani is the *marja al-taqlid*. He has always held that Najaf is the primary seat for the Shiites’ religious authority, the *marjaeeya*. The number of Sistani’s followers reveals his stature and importance in the Shiite world. Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim made his announcement to show that Sistani is the one and only *marja* to follow and to indicate that we obey his instructions. He also made it to show that we do not follow Iran. Some people said that we did not announce our allegiance to Sistani until 2007. But we had already issued statements in Iran, after the regime’s fall but before our return to Iraq, that we followed Sistani as the *marja al-taqlid*.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Final statement issued by ISCI and read by Ridha Jawad Taqi, 12 May 2007, on behalf of Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim.

<sup>109</sup> When Grand Ayatollah Mohsen al-Hakim died in 1970, his followers lost their *marja al-taqlid*, so many shifted their allegiance to one of the living *maraja*, as has been the Shiite custom. When Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim arrived in Iran in 1982, he declared his loyalty to Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. At the latter’s death in 1989, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, succeeded Khomeini as the country’s supreme leader. A lesser religious authority, Khamenei has commanded fewer followers in the global Shiite community, but SCIRI, beholden to the regime that had established and nourished it, acknowledged him as its *marja al-taqlid*.

<sup>110</sup> Crisis Group interview, ISCI *shura* council member Hadi al-Asadi, Baghdad, 25 September 2007. Another senior ISCI official concurred. “Upon his return, Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim understood the Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani’s position in Iraq because he saw that the majority of Shiites there were his

Along with its Iran-based *marja*, they say, ISCI cast off the theory of the rule of the jurisprudent:

*Wilayat al-faqih* was something that had to do with Iran and the Iranian constitution. Even when we were in Iran, we were neither with it nor against it. But after our return to Iraq, we had to work according to the reality on the ground. We used to accept Ayatollah Khomeini’s resolutions because we were in Iran, and he was the leader, but SCIRI came to Iraq and now we are in Iraq.<sup>111</sup>

What these statements reveal is neither SCIRI’s strong commitment to the Iranian leadership’s ideology nor its decisive conversion to a new ideology but instead the absence of any ideology whatsoever. They suggest the reality of a party that, in its quest to survive and thrive in two successive and radically different environments, embraced ideological positions that are at most cosmetic. If anything, ISCI’s explicit reference to Sistani in May 2007 reflects a bid for respectability within Iraq’s Shiite community, which it seeks to rule. Nor does ISCI have an alternative *marja* to whom it could turn. If the party harboured any illusions in the past to see its leader, Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim, promoted to *marja al-taqlid*, they were dashed with his assassination by a suicide bomber in Najaf in August 2003. His brother Abd-al-Aziz could have no such aspiration, given his lowly status in clerical ranks: as a *hujja-t-al-Islam*; he is not even a *mujtahid* – a senior cleric in Shiism, who can make independent rulings in theological matters.<sup>112</sup>

In the final analysis, SCIRI’s May 2007 makeover was the formal conclusion to a process that began in 2003 and amounts to little more than the party donning a different set of clothing as it headed into new political terrain. It underlines that the Supreme Council is pragmatic – some would say opportunistic – and the party, by its lack of ideology, seeks to reach out to a wider audience, paying lip service to the Najaf *marjaeeya* in order to remain in tune with popular sentiment. “SCIRI differs from other Islamist parties in that it is open to other ideas. We are characterised

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followers. And so the moment he returned he expressed his full support to Sistani and his readiness to follow his orders”. Crisis Group interview, ISCI political bureau member Ridha Jawad Taqi, Baghdad, 14 July 2007.

<sup>111</sup> Crisis Group interview, ISCI political bureau member Ridha Jawad Taqi, Baghdad, 14 July 2007.

<sup>112</sup> To become a *mujtahid*, a Shiite cleric needs to attain a level of knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence that allows him to exercise independent reasoning (*ijtihad*). In practice, this tends to require a formal certificate (*ijaza*) from an established *mujtahid*, although there are some prominent exceptions. The basic schism in Shiism is between *mujtahids*, who can issue rulings, and everyone else. Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim has not reached this position, nor has he published anything on Islamic jurisprudence, another important criterion for moving up the clerical ladder.

by pragmatism, openness and flexibility. At the same time, we keep our Islamic beliefs and try to protect them”, said an ISCI official.<sup>113</sup>

At the same time, ISCI is handicapped by having become, essentially, a Hakim family franchise. In Iraq, a country in which one’s provenance is often more important than one’s ideas, association with a single leading family may hamper a party’s ability to extend its support across a community, let alone the nation; hence the proliferation of small parties known only by their leader’s name. In SCIRI’s case, Iran appointed Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim, possibly in order to regain influence in Najaf once the party returned to Iraq; upon his death, he was replaced by his brother, Abd-al-Aziz, a less charismatic figure<sup>114</sup> who, moreover, is gravely ill and appears ready to hand over power to one of his two sons, Ammar.<sup>115</sup> The latter’s junior status in both religious and political terms may prompt a debilitating internal challenge to his leadership, although it may be overlooked because of his unique ability to keep the party unified in the face of several powerful contenders and carry on the family name.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Crisis Group interview, ISCI political bureau member Ridha Jawad Taqi, Baghdad, 14 July 2007.

<sup>114</sup> A political ally put it this way: “Things changed after Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim’s death. He was a clergyman with social impact and the charisma of a powerful speaker. Abd-al-Aziz, by contrast, is blunt and direct, a first-rate pragmatic businessman. He speaks his mind without any hesitation or regard for the consequences of what he says and how he says it”. Crisis Group interview, February 2007. Others were less charitable in their assessment: “Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim had a bad reputation for the way he dealt with the POWs in Iran but that was a long time ago. He was more liked than his brother, Abd-al-Aziz, who is mean and wicked and hated by a lot of Iraqis”. Crisis Group telephone interview, retired Shiite police officer from Naseriya, Baghdad, 2 March 2007.

<sup>115</sup> Formally, Ammar al-Hakim is ISCI’s deputy leader. ISCI officials insist that Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim’s successor will be chosen by the party’s *Majlis al-Shoura* (*shura* council), essentially its executive committee, and that the choice must be endorsed by its *Hay’at Aama* (general committee), a larger gathering of senior members. Crisis Group interview, ISCI official, 4 November 2007.

<sup>116</sup> Ammar is not known to have any religious credentials and is a political novice, especially compared to his father, who in exile was the Badr Corps’ commander, an Interim Governing Council member in 2003, and ISCI’s leader ever since his brother’s death. In May 2007, ISCI began putting up posters of the Shaheed al-Mihrab Foundation, which is headed by Ammar, most likely to prepare the public for the succession. With the decline in religious and political authority within the Hakim family circle, others within ISCI may seek to gain control over the party. Potential contenders include Adel Abd-al-Mahdi, Iraq’s vice president; Humam Hamoudi, head of the constitutional review committee; and Hadi al-Ameri, chairman of the defence and security

Given its history of Iranian sponsorship and its reliance on the Hakims to carry the party forward, the Supreme Council has had to look for political issues that would garner broader popular support. It may have thought it found this in the notion of southern federalism.

## B. RULING A “SHIASTAN”?

In 2005, SCIRI pioneered an idea designed to capture the Shiites’ hearts and minds. Just after he had returned from a visit to Iran in June, Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim floated the notion of a nine-governorate, Shiite-dominated federal “super” region covering the territory south of Baghdad. Such a region, which some have dubbed “Shiastan”, would offer the Shiites both protection from insurgents’ terror attacks<sup>117</sup> and, through Basra’s oil and the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala, economic and spiritual self-sufficiency. The unstated assumption was that ISCI would govern this region.<sup>118</sup> (Exclusion of Sadrist-dominated Baghdad from the region would facilitate ISCI’s political hold.) ISCI’s critics saw in the scheme a bid for power and oil wealth that the party could never achieve through a nationwide election, with Hakim becoming “the Barzani of the south”.<sup>119</sup>

The proposal provoked a highly charged sectarian debate at a critical moment, just as constitution drafting reached its apex. To Sunni Arabs, it meant that the Shiite and

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committee in the council of deputies and commander of the Badr corps.

<sup>117</sup> One defender explained ISCI’s motives as follows: the plan is “due to terrorist attacks against Shiites and the resulting feeling that it may be safer [for Shiites] to stay far from the Iraqi body politic. The issue is a reactive one, not one of choice”, Crisis Group interview, long-time ISCI member, February 2007.

<sup>118</sup> As one critic put it, “SCIRI is trying to position itself prior to a referendum [on the establishment of federal regions]. They are getting ahead through a wide recruitment campaign by handing out gifts and according privileges to top administrators, security officials and police officers. Before the last election, they bribed the electorate by handing out food rations”. Crisis Group interview, former university lecturer at Nahrain University, Amman, 7 March 2007.

<sup>119</sup> Crisis Group interview, Iraqi commentator, Canada, May 2006. One critic said, “the Supreme Council began advocating southern federalism as a way to get the oil in the south, just as the Kurds want in the north. They hope to win over the simple people in the south, by force if necessary, but otherwise by making references to Najaf. They are more interested in the financial pay-off than in serving the interests of the people”. Crisis Group telephone interview, retired military officer, Baghdad, 17 February 2007. Another critic, a Basra native, echoed this view: “They covet the wealth of southern oil. They want to imitate the Kurdish experience with respect to Kirkuk and oil”. Crisis Group telephone interview, retired police officer, Baghdad, 2 March 2007.

Kurdish parties were divvying up oil fields between them (Kirkuk to the Kurds, Basra to the Shiites), leaving them landlocked and without resources.<sup>120</sup> They therefore opposed it vehemently, even before any step was taken toward establishing such a region. Indeed, the constitution suggested a bottom-up approach, by which the voting-age population in each governorate would have to indicate by referendum its desire to merge with another governorate, a process that would be unlikely to yield the same result in as many as nine governorates. However, facts were less important than the emotions the proposal generated.

ISCI may have miscalculated. If its brand of federalism infuriated Sunni Arabs, it did little to unify Shiites. Regionalism has a long tradition in Iraq but it has never been based on religious identity. It enjoys significant purchase in Basra, for example, whose population, in theory the wealthiest in Iraq, has long felt neglected by central governments that have sucked up oil revenues and in return have bestowed little in the way of investment, construction or development.<sup>121</sup> Basrawis' ambition is to establish something akin to Dubai on the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates; instead they feel they own a dump.<sup>122</sup> To them, an autonomous region makes sense, but its boundaries should not extend beyond those of Basra governorate itself, joined possibly by two more governorates, oil-rich Maysan and Dhi Qar.<sup>123</sup> ISCI's scheme threatens to bring yet more governorates into the region and to force Basrawis to share their wealth without significant returns.

Nor has the proposal been popular among Sadrists, whose strength is in Baghdad, a city and region poor in oil, and who accordingly prescribe a strong central state controlling all parts of the country. They publicly have taken the position that no decision ought to be taken on federalism as long as Iraq remains occupied; in fact, they oppose any

kind of federalism that threatens, as does ISCI's scheme, to break up the country. Crucially, Ayatollah Sistani also proved unenthusiastic, as did the many politically unorganised independents who follow his lead.

Following another visit to Tehran, in July 2006, Abd-al-Aziz revived the idea, which he has reiterated on various occasions.<sup>124</sup> Raising such an inflammatory issue while the country was engulfed in sectarian violence was highly irresponsible, and many Iraqis suspected an Iranian hand. While the announcements following his visits to Iran may suggest this, evidence remains elusive; nor is it clear that Iran would benefit from Iraq's virtual break-up. A more reasonable explanation for Hakim's push for greater regionalism may be his wish to rule a territory he can actually control. This is risky, however. In the absence of a central state apparatus capable of managing a federal arrangement, the probable outcome of such a scheme would be the country's total collapse, which is not in ISCI's interest. This may partly explain an apparently growing debate within the party.<sup>125</sup> Until now, however, neither Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim, nor his son Ammar, who has been one of the proposal's primary backers, has backed down; nor have they explained how they would prevent their radical federalism from breaking up the country.

### C. FACING A DIFFERENT REVOLUTION

In removing "revolution" from its name, ISCI intended to denote its changed political stance. But what it now faces is a different kind of revolution, one directed against it – a

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<sup>120</sup> The Kurdish parties warmly embraced ISCI's proposal, seeing in it justification for their own regionalism while diluting the strength of a central state they fear might oppress the Kurds as it has in the past. Moreover, in the constitutional debate between the Kurdish and Shiite Islamist parties, the Kurds saw the southern-region scheme as a handy quid pro quo for their own bid for Kirkuk.

<sup>121</sup> Moreover, many people in the south feel that the Shiites of the mid-Euphrates (Baghdad and the holy cities) treat them as second-class citizens.

<sup>122</sup> Crisis Group interviews, a range of Basrawis, Basra, April 2005.

<sup>123</sup> Different proposals have been floated. One, advocated by a group calling itself "Government of Southern Iraq", envisions a union of five governorates: Basra, Muthanna, Maysan, Dhi Qar and Qadisiya. A second, advocated by a group called "Council for the Southern Region", seeks the union of three governorates: Basra, Maysan and Dhi Qar. See Crisis Group Report, *Where Is Iraq Heading?*, op. cit., pp. 4-7.

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<sup>124</sup> In a March 2007 speech in Karbala, Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim proclaimed: "Iraq's unity is a priority, and we reject any attempt at dividing the country. We also call for implementing the constitutional articles that give the governorates constitutional powers. We believe that the governorates' role is important for the country's progress. We call for building a federal system in Iraq according to the will of the Iraqi people. I pledge to proceed with our attempts at establishing a region in the centre and south of Iraq, because this will lead to stability and prosperity for Iraq", (as recorded by Crisis Group, 9 March 2007). Following ISCI's May 2007 conference, it reiterated the need for "implementing the project of regions in accordance with popular will and constitutional mechanisms". Final statement issued by ISCI and read by Ridha Jawad Taqi, 12 May 2007, on behalf of Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim. In the same announcement, ISCI presented a carefully calibrated position on Kirkuk: "We call for a practical and constitutional solution to the issue of boundaries of governorates and disputed territories, including Kirkuk, while stressing the rights of all Iraqi communities in the disputed territories".

<sup>125</sup> In the words of one ISCI official, "I am very much against it. At first I thought it was designed to improve our bargaining position but now I realise it is real. I am against my leader on this issue", Crisis Group interview, June 2007.

Shiite middle-class party centred on the holy cities – by the Shiite urban underclass represented by the Sadrist movement, which is predominant in Baghdad. The person quoted above about events in Zafaraniya, his Baghdad neighbourhood, also recounted what happened after Shiite parties had driven out most Sunnis and established control:

At a later stage the neighbourhood witnessed a growing rivalry between SCIRI and followers of Sadr. This was after they had finished with the Sunnis. The Sadrists are stronger and braver and also larger in number. Most of the young people are with the Sadrists; they tend to be poor and unemployed, and they find Muqtada's character more appealing than Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim's. They despise Hakim for his role in Iran and his dealings with our POWs, with many stories circulating of his role in torturing them.<sup>126</sup>

The Sadrists are followers of Muqtada al-Sadr, the son of Ayatollah Muhammad Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr, who died, along with two older sons, in a 1999 hail of gunfire in Najaf that was widely considered to be a regime assassination. From April 2003 they have been the only mass-based, indigenous post-war movement to challenge the returning exiles.

It would be too easy to ascribe the Sadr-vs.-Badr dynamic merely to a dynastic rivalry between two famous families. The chasm reaches deeper – into ideological differences between the conservatives (the Hakims post-2003) and the militants (Muhammad Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr and his son Muqtada) and, more importantly, class differences. These were visible from April 2003, when poor Iraqis, many of them Shiites who ended up following Muqtada al-Sadr, filled the power vacuum in the streets as U.S. forces stood aside in the face of rampant lawlessness and criminality, while SCIRI was still in Iran, plotting Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim's return. They became institutionalised when SCIRI took over the interior ministry in May 2005.

Intent on avenging al-Qaeda in Iraq's suicide attacks with reprisals against Sunnis, poor Shiites filled the ranks of the

security forces and – even as they operated under SCIRI-appointed commanders – often expressed loyalty to Muqtada al-Sadr.<sup>127</sup> Both SCIRI and the Sadrists shared an interest in driving Sunnis out of Baghdad and other mixed towns, so they could engage in this de facto division of labour. But any such cooperation ended once the U.S. surge and other factors froze sectarian realities into place in 2007, and both groups came to see the other as the more immediate enemy.

If the Sadrists succeed in extending their control over the Shiite "street", it will in large part be due to ISCI's failure to govern and provide essential services. In many Shiite neighbourhoods, the Sadrists often appear to enjoy the common people's trust, radiating from local mosques to address pressing concerns, especially security. By contrast, with its elite base in Najaf and Karbala, SCIRI/Badr has staked its ambitions on control over state levers of power, including the security apparatus, an enterprise it has pursued single-mindedly, earning it success far beyond its popular support.<sup>128</sup> Although this has given it deeper coffers to draw from and better sinecures to offer, it has failed to translate its control over local government into material benefits for the population (security, infrastructure, services), and grumbling has become widespread. Moreover, the Sadrists are quick to point scornfully at SCIRI's Iranian baggage.<sup>129</sup> Finally, ISCI's middle-class support is dwindling, in part because large parts of that class has fled abroad.

<sup>126</sup> He added: "A number of these POWs still privately talk about him and especially his dead brother [Muhammad Baqr], how they treated them and how they are associated with Iran rather than Iraq. Some of us respect the Hakims only because of their father, Grand Ayatollah Mohsen al-Hakim. As for their Iranian ties, these are undeniable regardless of how they deny or spin the issue", Crisis Group telephone interview, Baghdad, 22 March 2007. For example, a former POW in Iran who was scarred by his experience with SCIRI observed: "The Hakims are a dominant family that developed into a clan using gangster tactics against their opponents and throwing the blame for these on the Sadrists, so that the latter become hated in the streets", Crisis Group telephone interview, Baghdad, 17 February 2007.

<sup>127</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Iraq's Muqtada Al-Sadr*, op. cit. A subsequent Crisis Group report will analyse the Sadrist movement further.

<sup>128</sup> Moreover, SCIRI has sought to gain control over Iraq's main (Shiite) mosques. This would allow it to issue the Friday sermons, which often are political statements and as such have huge influence on worshipers. It presently controls the Gailani and Buratha mosques in Baghdad, as well as the Khadraa mosque in Najaf. Following clashes between U.S. forces and followers of Muqtada al-Sadr in Najaf in 2004, Ayatollah Sistani brokered an end to the fighting and prohibited Friday prayers in the Imam Ali shrine in Najaf to prevent it from becoming a focal point for intra-Shiite strife. Instead, he allocated the Khadraa mosque to SCIRI, while giving the main mosque in Kufa to the Sadrists. Sistani himself, through his local representatives, controls the Imam Hussein and Imam Abbas shrines in Karbala, as well as the principal mosques in Basra. Crisis Group telephone interview, Karbala native, Karbala, 18 October 2007.

<sup>129</sup> In the 1990s Ayatollah Muhammad Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr criticised Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim for having sacrificed his relatives in Iraq for an active political life in Iranian exile and for being an Iranian proxy. After 2003, Muqtada al-Sadr picked up his father's theme, painting SCIRI/Badr as Khamenei's mercenaries. See Crisis Group Report, *Iraq's Muqtada Al-Sadr*, op. cit.

A revolt from the disaffected Shiite underclass is what ISCI now seeks to prevent. Its alliance with the U.S. surge in 2007 placed it, through the security forces it commands, in direct confrontation with the Sadrists who, pushed onto the defensive, lashed back.<sup>130</sup> A number of assassinations in 2007 – of ISCI governors and senior clerical aides to Sistani<sup>131</sup> – appear to have a Sadrist signature, although hard evidence has remained elusive.<sup>132</sup> Moreover, clashes have repeatedly broken out between Sadrists and Badr elements, especially near the holy shrines. Aside from their religious importance to all Shiites, these have been a huge cash cow for ISCI as well as the religious leadership; the Sadrists would love to put their hands on them.

In late August 2007, a serious altercation took place in Karbala, apparently after guards belonging to the Shrines Protection Forces at the Abbas shrine insisted on searching approaching Sadrists, who rejected the formality as an indignity and started a fight.<sup>133</sup> Scores of people were killed or injured in the two-day gun battle between Sadrists and Badr members. Sensing his men had overreached (they were seen and filmed firing at the holy shrines), Muqtada al-Sadr declared a unilateral six-month ceasefire.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> For example, the governor of Qadisiya, Khalil Jalil Hamza, an ISCI official assassinated in Diwaniya on 11 August 2007, was accused by local Sadrists of siding with the U.S. against them, Crisis Group interviews, August 2007.

<sup>131</sup> These assassinations include: Rahim al-Hasnawi, a Sistani representative, near Najaf, 6 June 2007; Abdullah Falak al-Basrawi, a Sistani representative, Najaf, 19 July; Kazem Jaber al-Budeiri, a Sistani representative, near Najaf, 26 July; Fadel al-Aql, a Sistani representative, Najaf, 2 August; Khalil Jalil Hamza, an ISCI official and governor of Qadisiya, 11 August; Muhammad Ali al-Hassani, an ISCI official and governor of Muthanna, 20 August; Muslim Battat, an imam close to Sistani, Basra, 31 August; Ahmad al-Barqawi, a Sistani representative, near Diwaniya, 20 September; and Amjad al-Janabi, a Sistani representative, near Basra, 20 September.

<sup>132</sup> For example, Iraqi politician Mithal al-Alousi, who has openly warned of a looming intra-Shiite conflict, has questioned the Sadrist role in the assassinations, seeing instead a foreign hand intent on sowing chaos. Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 26 September 2007.

<sup>133</sup> The Shrines Protection Forces are a small guard force established independent of the police by Ayatollah Sistani's office in 2004. Sistani's office runs it and pays the guards' salaries. Regardless, to Sadrists the SPF are members of ISCI's Badr corps, and they claim that the Karbala events were set off by an attempt of Badr fighters to disarm Sadrists. Crisis Group interview, a Sadrist, Baghdad, 15 September 2007.

<sup>134</sup> It is very likely that the confrontation was not ordered by the Sadrist leadership but rather was a spontaneous event triggered by local circumstance. All the same, it fit within a larger Sadrist plan to seize the shrines and their revenue from religious tourism. This enabled Muqtada to claim that the clash involved loose elements. On the days of the clashes, it was clear that Muqtada

The Maliki government and ISCI officials initially blamed al-Qaeda in Iraq for the assassinations. But a fiery ISCI cleric, Jalal al-Din al-Saghir, suggested in a sermon in early September 2007 that the culprits for both the hits and the Karbala clashes should be sought among Shiites:

Al-Qaeda isn't in Diwaniya, or in Samawa, or in Karbala, Najaf, Amara or Basra! Who is compelling us to keep forces in these places? From where is the threat coming? Definitely not from *Takfiris*<sup>135</sup> or al-Qaeda but from ourselves! From among us! Every day people are kidnapped from Dujail. Every day Balad is attacked by mortar rounds. The same in Sayediya, Amel and other places [all towns or neighbourhoods that are either Shiite or mixed/majority Shiite]. Who is compelling us, as a government, to keep troops in the southern and central parts of Iraq? Who is fighting our security forces there? Who is stopping religious tourism that could bring us more income than oil? Who is stopping investors from working in the southern and central parts of Iraq? There are no al-Qaeda or *Takfiris* there! But there is a group of criminals who must be fought by all. There should be no appeasement; we must not hesitate to say that whatever will happen isn't bigger than what happened in Karbala.<sup>136</sup>

If this was not sufficient to identify the Sadrists, he continued: "I think my words were very clear regarding what side I was talking about. The U.S. has always talked about this particular matter, and it will also be mentioned in the Petraeus-Crocker report".<sup>137</sup> The only Shiite group specifically mentioned by the U.S. as a target of its operations in 2007 has been the Sadrist militia, the Mahdi army (*Jaysh al-Mahdi*).

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had lost control. The Mahdi fighters ignored his orders to stop shooting, which were communicated by megaphone by his representative in Karbala, Sheikh Muhammadawi. Crisis Group observations, August 2007.

<sup>135</sup> "*Takfir*" means: "charging with unbelief". *Takfiris* are Muslims who call for other Muslims' excommunication on grounds that they have in effect abandoned their faith through their practices or their adherence to beliefs eschewed by the *Takfiris*, who tend to be followers of one particular school in Islam, Salafism. Al-Qaeda in Iraq has repeatedly referred to Shiites as unbelievers. See Crisis Group Report, *The Next Iraqi War?*, op. cit., pp. 14-17.

<sup>136</sup> Excerpts from a speech delivered by Sheikh Jalal al-Din al-Saghir at the Buratha mosque in Baghdad on 7 September 2007 and provided to Crisis Group by Ned Parker of the *Los Angeles Times*.

<sup>137</sup> *Los Angeles Times* interview notes shared with Crisis Group, 7 September 2007. The "Petraeus-Crocker report" refers to the report of the U.S. military commander and ambassador to Iraq on the status of the U.S. "surge" strategy in September 2007.



Several weeks later, ISCI and the Sadrists announced an agreement that included a mutual ceasefire, a halt to negative media propaganda and the formation of joint committees in the governorates to mediate disputes.<sup>138</sup> The fact is that neither side would benefit from a confrontation at this time. ISCI counts on its institutional power and alliance with the U.S. to build up its security forces that are dressed in government-issued uniforms, a project that is far from complete. The Sadrists want to confront ISCI but realise that as long as the U.S. is backing the party, the cost might be high; for them it is better to lie low until the day the Americans have left. Moreover, the Karbala events and the Mahdi army's activities more generally (whether organised or not) have generated a popular backlash.<sup>139</sup> Shortly after the agreement was signed, tensions between the two movements started rising again, suggesting that the real struggle between Badr and Sadr is yet to come.

#### D. BETWEEN WASHINGTON AND TEHRAN

To ISCI, its relationship with the U.S. is critical. One reason is the additional strength it offers the party in its battle with the Sadrists. The 2007 U.S. security plan was designed to create space for political deals by suppressing some of the most violent actors, specifically al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Mahdi army. To ISCI this was an opportunity in its struggle against the Sadrists: U.S. forces could defeat the Mahdi army, or at least deal it a severe setback. One reason why ISCI has opposed – and Muqtada al-Sadr called for – a quick U.S. pullout is precisely because the U.S. has proven a powerful ally against the Sadrists. As one Iraqi put it, “the Supreme Council wants to please the Americans so that they can use American power against other Iraqi parties. Once the Americans are gone, as one day they inevitably will be, SCIRI will be crushed by the Iraqi people, Sunnis and Shiites together”.<sup>140</sup>

ISCI sees the relationship more broadly as a way of building a new Iraq in which it would play a prominent part, although it has framed the issue as one benefiting the country as a whole. ISCI's representative in Washington said, “our relationship with the United States is crucial in order to stabilise Iraq. We have a common mission. Once it is accomplished, we will have strong economic and trade

relations with the U.S. This is a strategic relationship, not only for ISCI but all of Iraq”.<sup>141</sup>

Yet if ISCI must please the US so as to gain its help, it cannot afford to alienate its other – older and arguably more important – ally, Iran. Although the extent of ISCI's continued involvement with it is a matter of debate, there is no question that Tehran exerts significant influence over the party and that ISCI's ties to Iran's security establishment remain strong. The Badr Corps was established, funded and equipped by the IRGC, and Hadi al-Ameri, the Badr Corps commander and chairman of the council of representatives' defence and security committee, has long been accused of being on its payroll.<sup>142</sup> Nor is such a bond surprising, given the history of shared combat experiences in the Iran-Iraq war, during which IRGC commanders and Badr officers (as well as PUK and KDP commanders) met regularly, including socially, and conducted joint operations.

When he was president of Iraq's Interim Governing Council in December 2003, Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim said Iraq should pay Iran reparations for the 1980-1988 war,<sup>143</sup> a statement that won him few friends in Iraq, where nationalist and anti-Iranian sentiment runs strong. Moreover, Iran has played a critical role in the party's political calculations, insofar as it can protect ISCI and the broader Shiite community against Sunnis. Referring to Arab states' ostracism of the Maliki government, al-Ameri warned, “you deserted us. You sold us. We have no door to knock on but Iran's”.<sup>144</sup> Finally, ISCI is acutely conscious of the fact that Iran will always be a neighbour, whereas the U.S. will almost certainly be gone in the not-too-distant future.

By the same token, Iran clearly saw SCIRI yesterday and sees ISCI today as an actor that can further its agenda. Even if SCIRI's adherence to Khomeini's ideology was never more than pro forma, the party has had a closer affinity to Iran ideologically, militarily and politically than any other Iraqi actor. Through the many ties that bind them, personal and political, Iran can be expected to think

<sup>138</sup> *The New York Times*, 7 October 2007.

<sup>139</sup> In many places ordinary people have started reacting openly and in revulsion to some of the lawless actions carried out by young and apparently leaderless people who claim to belong to the Mahdi army. Crisis Group interviews, Baghdad, September 2007. See also, Sabrina Tavernise, “Relations sour between Shiites and Iraq militia”, *The New York Times*, 12 October 2007.

<sup>140</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, former POW in Iran, Baghdad, 17 February 2007.

<sup>141</sup> Crisis Group interview, Karim Khutar al-Musawi, ISCI representative to the U.S. and adviser on foreign affairs to Iraqi Vice-President Adel Abd-al-Mahdi, Washington DC, 18 July 2007.

<sup>142</sup> For example, *Iran Focus*, 15 November 2006.

<sup>143</sup> He said, “according to the UN, Iran deserves reparations. She must be satisfied. Whether we will pay or not is something which we need to discuss further”, BBC News, 18 December 2003. In making such a statement, Hakim must have anticipated a backlash from Iraqis, and been willing to incur it. His decision therefore suggests there was Iranian pressure.

<sup>144</sup> Quoted in *Al-Zaman* (London), 9 June 2007. The warning was clearly meant to have rhetorical value only; SIRI/ISCI has nurtured good relations with Gulf countries both before and after 2003.

that SCIRI/ISCI will help serve its interests in Iraq, which are to bring the country enough within its sphere of influence that it never again will threaten or invade or use weapons of mass destruction against it, as it did during the 1980-1988 war. Iran prefers a unified, relatively weak and Shiite-controlled Iraq, and it may well believe that ISCI can deliver that.

This is not to say that Iran's relationship with ISCI is either exclusive or without tension. Indeed, it is far more complex than that of patron to proxy. While both may share an interest in a continued U.S. presence in Iraq for some time to come, they do so for very different reasons: Tehran in order to trap U.S. forces in a quagmire that lessens the prospects of an attack against Iran; ISCI in order to consolidate its hold on power. Moreover, as discussed in a previous Crisis Group report, Tehran has methodically diversified its political investments in Iraq in order to ensure good relations with whoever prevails.<sup>145</sup> In particular, it established strong ties to the Sadrist despite their conflict with ISCI, as Muqtada al-Sadr's frequent and extended visits to Tehran suggest.

Iran may have been using the Sadrists as an – evidently willing – card in response to its desire to keep U.S. forces tied down and in order to keep ISCI from becoming too pro-US. It may well favour ISCI over the Sadrists in the long term because it is easier to deal with and has a clear structure and an identifiable leadership with a strong hold over its base.<sup>146</sup> Still, it might well continue to support both while continually playing one against the other. Both parties can serve the Iranian agenda of maintaining plausible deniability about its policy toward the U.S. While Sadrists attack U.S. troops in the name of Iraqi nationalism, ISCI offers to mediate between the U.S. and Iran, keeping the door to a peaceful resolution of their conflict ajar.

While the reasons for Iran's relationship with ISCI and ISCI's reliance on both Iran and the U.S. are relatively clear, less obvious to some is the U.S. administration's selection of Hakim's party as a privileged partner. Sunni Arab countries in particular argue that, in so doing, Washington unwittingly is strengthening Iran, handing Iraq over to America's most threatening foe. King Abdullah II of Jordan's December 2004 reference to a "Shiite crescent", in the run-up to Iraq's first elections in which the Shiite Islamist parties were expected to prevail, was an

unambiguous allusion to this common fear.<sup>147</sup> Yet, from the early days of Paul Bremer's Coalition Provisional Authority until today's surge, U.S. officials have carefully nurtured the relationship, casting Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim as a moderate and Muqtada Sadr as an extremist, and arranging for Hakim to meet with George Bush at the White House in December 2006.<sup>148</sup>

The reasons why the Bush administration views ISCI as a moderate party are that it is conservative and represents, by and large, the Shiite middle class, including its secular elements. It also realised that, Shiites being the largest group in Iraq, it needed a Shiite partner in establishing a new order. Phebe Marr, a long-time Iraq scholar, observed: "What may have happened is that the U.S. kind of backed into ISCI, and Maliki, by default, because of the absence of a real alternative".<sup>149</sup>

Indeed, ISCI and the two main Kurdish parties, the KDP and PUK, have become the cornerstone of a new "moderate" alliance that Washington has put up against the perceived twin dangers of al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Mahdi army and on which it has pinned its hopes to stabilise and govern the country. The alliance includes Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and his Daawa party, as well as (at least potentially) the Sunni Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP).<sup>150</sup> While this alliance does not command a majority in the council of representatives, it is far more cohesive internally and mutually agreed on strategy than its adversaries (the Sadrists, Fadhila, Shiite independents, the Iraqi Consensus Front, Iyad Allawi's National Iraqi List and Saleh Mutlaq's Iraqi Front for National Dialogue), which remain hopelessly divided and can put up little more than token resistance against the government in the legislature.

The contradictions inherent in this policy surface from time to time. Thus, in December 2006, a mere two weeks after Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim met with President Bush in

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<sup>147</sup> See the discussion of this episode in Crisis Group Report, *Iran in Iraq*, op. cit., pp. 1-3.

<sup>148</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Washington DC, 2006 and 2007. Abd-al-Aziz al-Hakim had a two-hour meeting with Bush in Washington on 5 December 2006. He had earlier visited the White House as part of an Iraqi delegation of senior Interim Governing Council members in 2004.

<sup>149</sup> Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, 3 July 2007.

<sup>150</sup> Such an alliance was first mooted in a memorandum written by U.S. National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley in November 2006, available at [www.nytimes.com/2006/11/29/world/middleeast/29mtext.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/29/world/middleeast/29mtext.html?_r=1&oref=slogin). How "moderate" this alliance is, and how well placed to hold the country together, should be questioned. The two Kurdish parties want the Kurdish region to secede, and ISCI is a profoundly sectarian party that has advocated creation of a southern region which risks breaking up the country. The IIP is a very small party; while the moderate face of Sunni political Islam, it has little grassroots support among Sunni Arabs.

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<sup>145</sup> Crisis Group Report, *Iran in Iraq*, op. cit.

<sup>146</sup> A Badr member said: "ISCI weighs heavily on the political scene these days. Even when it carries out military operations, it does so intelligently and discreetly. I believe that the Iranians know very well that the Sadrist trend is an unmanageable movement and that their cooperation with the Sadrists will not last very long". Crisis Group interview, Baghdad, 23 September 2007.

Washington, U.S. forces raided the party's compound in Baghdad and detained two Iranians from Hadi al-Ameri's house.<sup>151</sup> Later released, they were accused of belonging to the Al-Quds (Jerusalem) force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Pasdaran.

Such incidents underline the difficulty ISCI faces in navigating a middle course in its relations with the two powers and, somehow, managing their mutually adversarial relationship, which may harm Iraq and jeopardise ISCI's own ambitions. As one ISCI official put it, "we use our friendly relations with Iran, the U.S. and others to try and remove Iraq from an external conflict. We have been pressing for a dialogue between the U.S. and Iran, and between the Arab States and Iran. It is logical and wise to play a role in reconciling the two, or at least in defusing the crisis. It is like having two friends fighting in your own house".<sup>152</sup> ISCI's historic ties with both countries make it, as well as the two Kurdish parties, potential mediators between them, as their rivalry over other issues – Iran's suspected military nuclear program and support for Hezbollah and Hamas on one side, U.S. support for Israel and alleged attempts to extend its sphere of influence in the Middle East on the other – may cause havoc in the one country where their interests may be most closely aligned.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Mid-surge, ISCI appears to be the U.S.'s most attractive Shiite partner, given its power, flexibility in playing along with Washington and willingness to suppress some of the excesses in which it engaged in 2005 and 2006 (secret detention centres, torture and death squad activities). Moreover, the U.S. counts on the experience and skill of ISCI/Badr's militia fighters, now dressed in Iraqi military garb, in its battle against the Mahdi army. But this alliance remains deeply problematic.

Both sides are using the relationship to further their particular agendas, which in the longer term are likely to clash. While Washington is intent on stabilising Iraq, for example, ISCI is bent on ruling it, and the two may well disagree over which political coalitions will best serve their respective aims. This issue manifests itself frequently. In announcing the surge in January 2007, the Bush administration presented the Iraqi government with a number of benchmarks, including the holding of provincial elections.<sup>153</sup> The benchmarks were designed to recalibrate a political structure that had been severely skewed by the Sunni Arab boycott of the January 2005 legislative and provincial elections.<sup>154</sup> Yet, ISCI has firmly resisted the idea, fearing it will lose control over the governorates it gained in 2005, when not only Sunni Arabs but also the Sadrists shunned the polls.

ISCI realises that in a free and fair electoral contest, it could not prevail alone and that even as the leading part of a coalition, it would face a tough challenge from the Sadrists. Although there are yet no concrete plans or dates for such elections, some of the violence in the south in 2007 is said to reflect pre-election posturing between ISCI/Badr and the Sadrists/Mahdi army.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> The Bush administration has indicated it wants a new round of provincial council elections to appease the Sunni Arabs, who boycotted the earlier round in January 2005.

<sup>154</sup> The Sunni Arab boycott of the January 2005 elections led to their exclusion in effect from constitution drafting and to the creation of councils in some governorates which poorly reflected the local population's composition and political outlook. Immediately prior to the nationwide constitutional referendum in October 2005, the U.S. ambassador in Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, negotiated a deal with Sunni Arab politicians which sought to reincorporate their community into the political system and security services in exchange for their participation in the referendum. The deal included, for example, an early constitutional review. The benchmarks announced by President Bush in January 2007 reinforced this deal, which remains to be implemented. Among others, the benchmarks include early provincial elections (otherwise not due until 2009), a constitutional review and an oil law.

<sup>155</sup> Crisis Group interviews in southern Iraq, 2007.

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<sup>151</sup> *The New York Times*, 25 December 2006.

<sup>152</sup> Crisis Group interview, ISCI official, 4 November 2007.

Moreover, in the longer term, ISCI's empowerment through U.S. protection and support may open the door to greater Iranian involvement, especially once U.S. forces begin to withdraw. ISCI's control over government security forces is far from complete and is challenged by many. As a result, it may seek even greater Iranian support in its battle for power. Iran's influence is already considerable but a military embrace of a faltering proxy could extend it even further. This would be part of Iraq's neighbours' worst nightmare, especially Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states, who have warned of such a scenario since at least 2004. It could drag them into a quagmire and possibly a direct confrontation with Iran that few want but none may be able to prevent.

As long as the U.S. relationship with ISCI holds, however, Washington has an opportunity to shape the party into a more responsible partner. It can only do so, however, if it also pursues a more even-handed approach toward the Sadrist movement, which both it and ISCI have held up as a bogey man. Using ISCI/Badr as an instrument with which to militarily defeat the Sadrists is a policy that is bound to backfire, polarising the Shiite community and creating the foundations for endemic intra-Shiite strife. U.S. engagement with a broader range of actors stands a far better chance of delivering stability than excluding a movement like the Sadrists that enjoys mass support.

By diversifying its strategy and exerting greater pressure on ISCI, the U.S. might force the party to act responsibly within the political arena, i.e., not as a militia masquerading as a political party waiting for the right moment to pounce on its adversary. ISCI has undeniably exhibited signs of pragmatism, which have already helped transform it halfway from a rebel group and Iranian proxy to a political party that, while elitist in methodology and sectarian in outlook and practice, has by and large agreed to play by U.S. rules (and keep its militia largely under wraps). Such pragmatism should be encouraged, as it will offer ISCI an opportunity to do away with some of its most controversial features. In particular, the U.S. should pressure the party to cleanse its ranks of the most serious offenders – men who have tortured and killed at will, and others who by their sectarian rhetoric have contributed hugely to polarising a fragile post-war society.

The U.S. should also help ISCI move away from its inflammatory demand for a Shiite super region in the south. Not only is the demand unrealistic from a constitutional perspective,<sup>156</sup> but such a region, if imposed, would

not lead to the country's "soft" partition, as some have advocated, but most likely to its break-up. Finally, the U.S. should insist that the government establish transparent hiring practices. These would prevent the kind of favouritism that has harmed the ISCI-controlled interior ministry, as well as the various security forces. These measures combined could finally accord the party a measure of the popularity it has always craved.

**Baghdad/Istanbul/Brussels, 15 November 2007**

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<sup>156</sup> The constitution requires a bottom-up process of referendums in each governorate to determine whether its population desires to join another governorate or region. Given such a process and political realities, the likelihood that a super region will emerge

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in the nine southern governorates with Shiite majorities is remote. Such an option would, therefore, have to be imposed by force.

## APPENDIX A

### MAP OF IRAQ



## APPENDIX B

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

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

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**Frontier Strategy Group**

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**Charlotte and Fred  
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**Iara Lee & George  
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**Sheikh Khaled Juffali**  
**George Kellner**  
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**Shiv Vikram Khemka**

**Scott J. Lawlor**  
**Statoil ASA**  
**George Loening**  
**McKinsey & Company**  
**Harriet Mouchly-  
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**Najib A. Mikati**  
**Donald Pels**  
**PT Newmont Pacific  
Nusantara (Mr. Robert  
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**Michael L. Riordan**

**Tilleke & Gibbins**  
**Baron Guy Ullens de  
Schooten**

**VIVATrust**  
**Stanley Weiss**  
**Westfield Group**  
**Yasuyo Yamazaki**  
**Yapi Merkezi  
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Industry Inc.**  
**Shinji Yazaki**  
**Sunny Yoon**

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**SENIOR ADVISERS**

*Crisis Group's Senior Advisers are former Board Members (not presently holding national government executive office) who maintain an association with Crisis Group, and whose advice and support are called on from time to time.*

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*(Chairman Emeritus)*

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**Paddy Ashdown**  
**Zainab Bangura**  
**Christoph Bertram**  
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**Alain Destexhe**  
**Marika Fahlen**

**Stanley Fischer**  
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**I.K. Gujral**  
**Max Jakobson**  
**Todung Mulya Lubis**  
**Allan J. MacEachen**  
**Barbara McDougall**  
**Matthew McHugh**

**George J. Mitchell**  
*(Chairman Emeritus)*

**Surin Pitsuwan**  
**Cyril Ramaphosa**  
**George Robertson**  
**Michel Rocard**  
**Volker Ruehe**  
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**William Taylor**  
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