

# Democracy in the Balance?

## Iraq's Next Government

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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### Brief Analysis

On November 30, 2010, Daniel Serwer and Mithal al-Alusi addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute. Mr. Serwer, a visiting scholar, senior fellow, and professorial lecturer at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, previously led U.S. Institute of Peace teams working on rule of law, governance, economics, security reform, media, technology, and gender issues in Iraq. Mr. al-Alusi, a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute, is founder and secretary-general of the Iraqi Nation Party and a former member of the Iraqi Council of Representatives. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Daniel Serwer

The general outlines of the next Iraqi government have begun to materialize over the past several weeks: Nouri al-Maliki will continue to serve as prime minister, most likely leading a coalition comprising his State of Law Alliance, the Sadrist movement, and several other Shiite parties, along with the major Kurdish parties and Iraqiyah. Yet the government's precise outlines (e.g., ministerial allocations) remain uncertain due to the role that personalities will play in the formation process and to the myriad internal contradictions that characterize such a broad coalition.

One variable that could upset the process is the National Council for Strategic Policies, a new body established to secure Iraqiyah leader Ayad Allawi's participation in the new government. Allawi insists that the body, which he would lead, be granted at least some executive and monitoring power; currently, it lacks a constitutional basis, and its responsibilities and powers are undefined. Allawi and Iraqiyah would likely withdraw from any ruling coalition if the council proves powerless.

The emerging coalition also raises the specter of increased Iranian influence in Iraq. Although the Sadrist movement is nationalist in orientation, it is also beholden to Tehran in many ways. And al-Maliki, while not slavishly pro-Iranian, owes his position at the head of a potential governing coalition in large part to Iranian pressure on the Sadrists. Such leverage will allow Tehran to pull Iraq further into its orbit. Accordingly, the United States must open a dialogue with the Sadrists, which it has thus far failed to do. Despite their admitted anti-American leanings, many Sadrists are concerned about the planned U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and are open to private discussions with Washington.

The growing Iranian influence in Iraq poses a number of specific threats to U.S. interests. One of the most serious potential problems stems from Baghdad's future oil policies. Iraq is a low-cost, high-volume oil producer, in contrast

to Iran's high-cost, low-volume operations. Therefore, Tehran will likely push the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries to lower production and raise oil prices in the near term, and it will do everything it can to convince Baghdad to follow this line. Such a development would be of great concern to the United States, which depends on the steady supply of cheap energy made possible by higher production volumes.

Another potential Iranian threat could emerge if U.S.-Iraqi military cooperation fails to solidify into a long-term defense relationship. The 2003 invasion of Iraq upset the regional balance of power that had previously existed between Baghdad and Tehran. Going forward, Iran will seek to maintain its status as the dominant regional power by discouraging Iraq's rearmament with advanced American weaponry, particularly air and naval systems.

Accordingly, reestablishing balance through a continued defense relationship with Iraq is one of the most important U.S. priorities in the Middle East.

Above all, the United States must remain committed to Iraq's nascent democratic system. Although the new government has not yet been established, Washington should already be looking ahead to the next Iraqi election. Specifically, the United States must support efforts to strengthen Iraqi civil society institutions and reinforce democratic parties in order to bolster the country's confidence in democracy as a whole. Paradoxically, the sectarian fragmentation of Iraqi politics, while a source of instability at present, also serves as a bulwark against renewed authoritarianism.

Mithal al-Alusi

The fact that Iraq's government formation process is nominally over should be cause for celebration. At the same time, the new government will face difficult challenges related to its composition and to Iraq's underdeveloped political institutions.

Although the general consensus is that the March 2010 elections were legitimate and reflected the will of the Iraqi people, Iraq's democratic system is nevertheless deeply flawed. The complete lack of government transparency obscures the impact of foreign influence on domestic politics. Moreover, the continued presence of militias associated with political parties, both Shiite and Sunni, is emblematic of a system that has adopted democratic forms but still has not internalized democratic values. Meanwhile, the Council of Representatives lacks a proper committee system, which hinders its ability to craft and vet new legislation. And the government has yet to enshrine human rights in the constitution -- a process that must be carried out in consultation with Iraqi nongovernmental organizations and media in order to ensure that proposed reforms benefit the people, not politicians.

More broadly, the lack of a common national identity and strategic vision continues to hamper Iraq's development into a stable member of the international community. During the government formation process, Iraqi politicians made numerous trips to regional capitals, highlighting the uncertainty regarding Iraq's current and future identity and geopolitical orientation. Baghdad must begin to follow its own strategic priorities rather than those of Riyadh or Tehran. Without such clarity, it will be unable to set policies or formulate a national security strategy. Moreover, the continued focus -- both within and outside Iraq -- on sectarian divisions has retarded the emergence of a national identity based not on ethno-religious distinctions, but on shared values and goals.

Without a deeply rooted sense of identity, Iraq will face expanding threats from Islamist terrorism and Iranian domination. Tehran continues to provide material support to insurgents and Shiite militias in Iraq, where inadequate controls over financial flows have allowed violent actors to secure the resources they need to conduct attacks against civilians and military forces.

Ultimately, if Iraq is unable to evolve into a stable, democratic society, the region will suffer dire consequences. Seven years of insurgency have left the country with an abundance of experienced Islamist fighters, and a security breakdown could allow such actors to spread to neighboring states, particularly Jordan. Alternatively, if Iraq is

caught in Iran's orbit, it could make resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict exponentially more difficult to achieve. In sum, without a strong, peaceful Iraq, there can be no peace in the region.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Samuel Cutler. ❖

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