A house divided
Political relations and coalition-building between Iraq’s Shi’a

Erwin van Veen
Nick Grinstead
Floor El Kamouni-Janssen

CRU Report

Clingendael
Netherlands Institute of International Relations
A house divided
Political relations and coalition-building between
Iraq’s Shi’a

Erwin van Veen
Nick Grinstead
Floor El Kamouni-Janssen

CRU Report
February 2017
February 2017

© Netherlands Institute of International Relations ‘Clingendael’.

Cover photo: © Flickr.com, Al Jazeera English / Omar Chatriwala

Unauthorized use of any materials violates copyright, trademark and / or other laws. Should a user download material from the website or any other source related to the Netherlands Institute of International Relations ‘Clingendael’, or the Clingendael Institute, for personal or non-commercial use, the user must retain all copyright, trademark or other similar notices contained in the original material or on any copies of this material.

Material on the website of the Clingendael Institute may be reproduced or publicly displayed, distributed or used for any public and non-commercial purposes, but only by mentioning the Clingendael Institute as its source. Permission is required to use the logo of the Clingendael Institute. This can be obtained by contacting the Communication desk of the Clingendael Institute (press@clingendael.nl).

The following web link activities are prohibited by the Clingendael Institute and may present trademark and copyright infringement issues: links that involve unauthorized use of our logo, framing, inline links, or metatags, as well as hyperlinks or a form of link disguising the URL.

About the authors

Erwin van Veen is a senior research fellow with Clingendael’s Conflict Research Unit. A political scientist by training, Erwin applies this lens to research about the power dynamics and organization of security and justice in conflict-prone environments. On top of this, extensive travel in the Middle East after secondary school engendered a lasting interest in the region’s conflicts.

Nick Grinstead is a research assistant with Clingendael’s Conflict Research Unit. Nick’s research and interests lie in security arrangements, governance, and geopolitics of the Middle East and the Sahel, which he views through a political economy lens.

Floor El Kamouni-Janssen works at the Clingendael Conflict Research Unit as a research fellow. Floor’s research at the Clingendael Institute concentrates on security and stability in the Arab region and the policy implications of regional trends and developments including migration and violent extremism.

The Clingendael Institute
P.O. Box 93080
2509 AB The Hague
The Netherlands

Follow us on social media
 @clingendael83
 The Clingendael Institute
 The Clingendael Institute

Email: cru@clingendael.nl
Website: www.clingendael.nl/cru
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Executive summary</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgement</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Out of the frying pan and into the fire</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brutal domestic repression followed by ignorant foreign occupation</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seize the moment: Paint it black and green</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongman consolidation of the Iraqi state</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political dysfunction and state capture exposed by the rise of the Islamic State</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Understanding Shi’a political relation- and coalition-building in Iraq</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key dynamics between 1991 and 2016</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary factors influencing relation- and coalition-building</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary factors influencing relation- and coalition-building</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of effects and consequences</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy insights and recommendations</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annex 1 Methodology</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annex 2 A model for examining political relation- and coalition-building</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Executive summary

Developing a profound understanding of factors that influence Iraq’s future as a nation requires going beyond current affairs such as the siege of Mosul or the political role of Iraq’s popular irregular forces (the Hashd al-Shabi). It necessitates analysis of the heart of political power in Iraq and this means focusing on historical and contemporary socio-political manifestations of Shi’ism. It is for this reason that the report analyses the dynamics of relation- and coalition-building between the country’s main Shi’a political groups from 1991 to 2016. It focuses mostly on the Islamic Da’wa Party, the Sadrist Trend, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and Iraq’s various irregular forces. It finds that Shi’a political relation- and coalition-building can be characterized as follows:

• Iraq’s Shi’a are far from a unified political force despite their shared belief. Instead, their political parties compete viciously with each other, using all means imaginable.
• Historical legacies and the role/quality of leaders dominate political party development.
• There is a high degree of continuity of individual Shi’a leaders and elites in Iraq’s governance at the level of the central state.
• Coalitions between Shi’a parties have been unstable, ad hoc affairs aimed at winning the vote, carving up public authority and resources, and/or responding to an imminent threat.
• Religion-based political influence is strong on issues on which the Shi’a community is united, but limited on issues on which it is not.
• Shi’a political parties unite temporarily in the face of an external threat, especially if called upon by their religious leadership, but this tends to be short-lived and does not reduce opportunistic political behaviour.

It follows from this characterization that there has been no such thing as structural political unity between Iraq’s Shi’a in the period 1991–2016. Its corollary is that the country’s Shi’a political elites share neither a view on how to deal practically with the country’s many challenges nor a broad strategic vision of Iraq’s future. Shi’a national political dominance has taken the form of a fluid, rough-and-tumble affair in which immediate material interests have tended to prevail over longer-term perspectives and national policy. It also follows from this characterization that strong legacies of violence and poor relations persist between a number of Iraq’s Shi’a parties and leaders, regardless of their ability to form coalitions pragmatically, overcome existing enmities and flexibly adjust principles where this has been in their interests. The political instability that has resulted from this mix of fluidity and latent enmity in relations and coalitions has significantly reduced the quality of governance and administration, owing to long periods of coalition negotiations, high levels of discontinuity and significant abuse of public authority.
These findings point to two broad problems for Iraq's future as a nation. First, few channels exist outside of the existing political establishment to manifest grievances and discontent that arise from significant levels of poor governance, insecurity, poverty and inadequate service delivery. This risks storing up socio-political unrest for the future as the political establishment is not necessarily held in high regard by ordinary Iraqis. The quasi-permanence of the cast of Shi’a characters and parties that dominate political competition in Baghdad has discouraged new political entrants, creating a relatively ‘closed’ political marketplace. In consequence, the rejuvenation of the Shi’a body politic has been very limited despite the fact that many of the existing leaders have a distinctly underwhelming track record in terms of their public service performance.

Second, political disunity between Iraq’s Shi’a could actually be positive news if it were to stimulate the formation of cross-ethno-sectarian alliances between Sunni, Kurds and Shi’a that might set Iraq on the path of a more pluriform democracy based on platforms of political content rather than ethno-sectarian identity. However, this is unlikely to happen in the current climate of polarization in the country and ethno-sectarian mobilization across the region. This makes political disunity between Iraq's Shi’a deeply problematic instead, since it suggests that the country's dominant political group will probably be unable to develop a proposition that is attractive enough for Iraq’s Sunni and Kurds to re-engage in national politics and so keep the country together in a meaningful way.

Much of the attention of the international community is currently focused on combating the Islamic State and promoting reconciliation between Iraq’s Sunni, Shi’a and Kurds. These are worthwhile goals. This report suggests that the international community also needs to focus on promoting change in the quality, legitimacy and diversity of political representation of Iraq’s Shi’a, if only to enhance its wider reconciliation efforts. On the one hand, this will need to be done via existing political parties and their leadership because of their dominant position. On the other hand, it will need to be done outside of these very same parties and their leadership because of their dominant position. This is not a contradiction, but a reflection of the fact that change will require complementary political initiatives from inside and from outside Iraq’s political system. From this perspective, the report makes four recommendations with the caveat that external actors will not be able to drive any of them. Nevertheless, they can provide discreet and indirect support with modesty and humility:

**Working with existing political parties and their leadership**

1. Support efforts at political confidence-building and reconciliation between Iraq’s Shi’a political groups.
2. Stimulate a greater level of informal, open and confidential exchange between Iraq’s Shi’a political leadership on possible futures for the country.
Working outside of existing political parties and their leadership

3. Provide long-term support to Shi’a social movements, civil society advocacy groups and nascent political parties.
4. Encourage a civic awareness campaign that raises citizens’ understanding of the role of political parties in an emergent democracy.

Figure 1 below offers a summary visual overview of key relation- and coalition-building dynamics between Iraq’s Shi’a for various periods between 1991 and 2016.
Figure 1  Key headlines of Shi’a relation- and coalition-building dynamics in Iraq between 1991 and 2016

Shi’a political relation- and coalition-building in Iraq from 1991 to 2016

- Tensions build between Shi’a past and future, domestic and foreign imperatives
- The Shi’a body politic awakens, but grows multiple heads
- Chaotic times demand strong leaders, a readiness for violence and flexible alliances
- An emergency causes new alliances to form, but from the same cast of players

Designed by Alfred Marseille and Egbert Bleyenburg
Acknowledgement

The genesis of this report lies in an earlier research project that resulted in the publication *Iraqi imbroglio: The Islamic State and beyond* in November 2014. At the time, we realized it was too quick a job to do justice to the complexities of Iraq and we came to see that it was not the Islamic State that was the key to understanding the future of Iraq, but the country’s Shi’a political groups.

The research that is developed in the pages that follow was primarily conducted for the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and our appreciation goes to Joep Tummers, Monique Korzelius, Sara Offermans and Tim Kreuk for their patience and support.

In addition, we would like to acknowledge the excellent contribution from Renad Mansour (Chatham House) who not only wrote a discussion paper that fed into this report, but also proved very knowledgeable company during field work in Baghdad. His contributions are more fully recognized in the policy brief that follows the report’s publication. Likewise, Nissrine Majdi has our grateful appreciation for the background research she conducted on some of the non-state armed Shi’a groups that currently operate in Iraq.

As good research about places is hard to produce without having been there, we owe a debt of gratitude to those Iraqi parliamentarians, government representatives, clerics and representatives of armed groups who received us graciously and agreed to be interviewed in a time during which their country remains embroiled in serious internal conflict. Neither would our work in Baghdad have been possible without the warm welcome and support of Sajad Jiyad and Ali al-Mawlawi at the Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies. Thank you.

In the same vein, we are very appreciative of the advice of Hayder al-Khoei (European Council on Foreign Relations) and Razzaq Alseedi (Iraqi embassy in The Hague), as well as Wael al-Hafoth’s support and translation services.

The report also significantly benefited from a good peer review and our thanks for this go to Ahab Bdaiwi (University of Leiden), Esben Bruhn Skivild (Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Ali al-Malawi (Al-Bayan Center), Renad Mansour (Chatham House) and Fransje Molenaar (Clingendael). Finally, the report was professionally edited by Jane Carroll and competently typeset by Textcetera. Our thanks to all of you.

It remains to emphasize that the contents of the report are the authors’ responsibility alone and the same obviously goes for any omissions or errors.
Introduction

As a phoenix arising from the ashes of the destruction that the Islamic State (IS) has wrought, a mix of Iraqi security forces, paramilitary Hashd al-Sha'abi,¹ Kurdish Peshmerga and international coalition forces commenced the assault on Mosul in October 2016. Although the fighting is tougher than anticipated, few doubt its outcome. Yet, true victory over the IS is likely to prove elusive. It will take time to address and heal the grievances of marginalization, repression and alienation that stimulated the rise of the IS among Iraq’s Sunni population – especially as they might deepen as a result of revanchism in the battles to come.

Further along the horizon loom Iraq’s provincial (April 2017, at risk of postponement) and national (2018) elections. In a way, they have already begun, as Shi’a political parties stake claims on the reputation and legitimacy that the paramilitary Hashd al-Shabi enjoy within Iraq, due to their successful fight against the IS. Shi’a political parties seek to leverage such claims to electoral advantage. It is becoming clear that many of Iraq’s ruling Shi’a elites are more concerned with their relative power position than with developing an inclusive proposition for the country’s Sunni and Kurds that can withstand the challenges that will follow the defeat of the IS.

Another consideration that influences the prospects of Iraq’s national development after Mosul and the IS are the somewhat premature – but inevitable – speculations regarding the eventual succession of Grand-Ayatollah Al-Sistani (the religious leader of Iraq’s Shi’a).² Irrespective of the degree of influence Iran might exercise in this process, the leadership of the Shi’a religious community will temporarily be more inward-focused than usual, and less able to provide clear and timely authoritative guidance on religious matters of political import. Also, there are sure to be efforts to exploit this temporary ‘vacuum’ for political advantage. This could be consequential as Grand-Ayatollah Al-Sistani has so far exercised significant restraint on political and social forces alike.

However, developing a more profound understanding of the possibilities for Iraq’s future requires going beyond anticipated events in the short term. It necessitates taking analysis to the heart of political power in Iraq and this means focusing on its socio-political manifestations of Shi’ism. It is for this reason that the report analyses

¹ Alternatively known as the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) or Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).
the dynamics of relation- and coalition-building between the country's main Shi'a political groups in the period 1991 to 2016.\textsuperscript{3} It identifies the factors driving such processes and highlights continuities as well as changes in their relative importance.

The rationale for choosing this topic of study is twofold. First, Iraq's Shi'a became the country's dominant political force after 2003 in function of their numerical superiority (c. 60% of the population) and their pre-electoral unity in 2005 and 2010. In short, anyone who wishes to understand political power in Iraq needs to grasp the objectives, the level of (dis)unity and the motivations of the country’s main Shi’a political groups.\textsuperscript{4} This holds especially true in a period when sectarian profiling is common and appealing to many. Second, the degree of unity that Iraq’s Shi’a can negotiate between themselves will influence the likelihood of a political deal that is attractive to the country’s Sunni and Kurds – keeping Iraq unified and whole. This report’s hypothesis is that when Iraq’s Shi’a are united, strong and confident between themselves, there will be a greater chance of such a deal materializing. In this scenario, inclusiveness arises from strength and confidence.

The report understands coalitions as utilitarian vehicles that political groups use when they perceive that realization of their objectives requires developing longer-term collaborative relations with other political groups and a pooling of resources (e.g. votes). A key condition for their formation is that coalitions have the potential to generate collective benefits that can be distributed in such a way that they make all coalition participants better off.

The report uses a basic model to examine Shi’a political relation- and coalition-building across five distinct recent periods. It features eight factors that are used to assess different aspects of the process and outcomes of relation- and coalition-building. The model as a whole is based on a broad review of political science literature on these topics, including social identity issues and electoral strategies. It has subsequently been

\textsuperscript{3} Shi’a political groups are understood in this report as entities that demonstrate a significant level of political influence and/or engagement at the national level. For practical purposes, the term includes political parties, non-state armed groups and religious schools of thought within Shi’ism. The report collectively refers to these groups as ‘Shi’a political groups’ or the ‘Shi’a body politic’. The focus is on political parties for evident reasons. Originally, Shi’a tribes were considered a fourth group of relevance. However, early analysis suggested they do not have institutional political agency in their own right at the national level, even though they do create and foster networks between key political leaders. See for instance: Jabar, F. and H. Dawod (eds), \textit{Tribes and Power: Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Middle East}, London: Saqi Books, 2003. Business interests are considered as part of one or other of the three groups, identified where relevant.

tailored to the Iraqi context and applied to five periods, which are delineated by key events for the Shi’a community (as opposed to Iraq as a whole). These include the Shi’a rising against Saddam Hussein in 1991, the murder of Abdel Majid al-Khoei in 2003, the destruction of the Al-Askari shrine in 2006, the elections of Al-Ja’afari in 2005 and Al-Maliki in 2006 as well as in 2010, Grand-Ayatollah Al-Sistani's fatwa that called Iraqi’s to arms against the IS in 2014 or the Green Zone protests in 2016. Annexes 1 and 2 detail the methodology and model.

Section 1 of the report analyses the relation between the volatile, contested and violent nature of the Iraqi state and Shi’a political relation- and coalition-building. It focuses on events since 2003, but covers the period 1991 to 2016. It weaves the experiences and role of Iraq’s Shi’a into its analysis as markers for how Shi’a relation- and coalition-building should be analysed and understood in the remainder of the report. Section 2 subsequently analyses the primary and secondary factors that have driven such processes over the past 25 years. It applies a comparative analysis of different factors across the five periods, using the basic model that the report employs. Section 5 offers suggestions on how relation- and coalition-building dynamics in Iraq can be stimulated in ways that address some of their problematic aspects and that can break through unproductive established patterns.

Readers familiar with Iraqi politics after 2003 could consider skipping section 1, as it is more general, and dive straight into section 2, where the report breaks most of its new ground.

---

5 Shi’a relation and coalition-building after the Summer of 2016 are discussed in a forthcoming policy brief.
1 Out of the frying pan and into the fire

Between 1980 and 2016, the Iraqi people suffered three large-scale inter-state wars, three major intra-state conflicts and at least three significant episodes of assorted violence. On average, this amounts to a conflict experience once every four years. Six out of these nine conflicts involved the entire Iraqi society while eight out of nine involved significant population groups. Although most of these conflicts happened under the rule of President Saddam Hussein (1979–2003), their brutality did not lessen after his fall from power. Much of the loss of popular confidence in the state, the vicious political competition for power throughout the 2000s and the inadequacy of the state’s capacity to care for its citizens can be ascribed to the insecurity, destruction and survival mechanisms that developed under the duress of quasi-permanent conflict. In consequence, politics in Iraq must be considered at least in part through the prism of recurrent and highly violent conflict.

For various reasons, these conflict episodes have gradually facilitated the fragmentation of Iraqi society into its main ethnic groups, Sunni, Shi’a and Kurds. This has become its primary political frame that is complemented by a (until now) secondary frame between distinct groups of ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ in terms of resources and power needed to thrive or rule. One could argue that once ethnic and religious group identities were primed as the result of a complex mix of factors, Iraq’s elites have purposefully mobilized and used the country’s increasingly vulnerable masses through the use of

6 The inter-state conflicts include the Iran-Iraq war (1980–88), the first Gulf War (1991) and the second Gulf War (2003); the intra-state conflicts include two conflicts with the US-led coalition forces (2003–08), namely a) between US forces and Sunni/Shi’a militias, and b) between US forces and Shi’a militias, as well as the conflict with the Islamic State (from 2014 onwards); assorted episodes of violence include the Anfal campaign against Iraq’s Kurds (1986–89), the suppression of Iraq’s Shi’a rising (1991) and a series of assassinations of leading religious figures such as Sayed Muhammad Taqi al-Khoei, Ayatollah Shaykh Murtada al-Burujerdi, Grand-Ayatollah Shaykh Mirza al-Gharawi, Grand-Ayatollah Mohammed al-Sadr and Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim (mostly in the 1990s).

sectarian logic in their competition for power and/or in pursuit of their own interests for much of the period 2003–16.\(^8\)

Generally speaking, the period after 2003 brought a rapid and remarkable change of fortune for Iraq’s Kurds and Shi’a as they were finally freed from the repression and constraints imposed by Saddam Hussein. The Kurds were quick to ally with the US while retaining good ties with Iran in a bid to further develop their own proto-statelet. For a while, its buoyant partnership with the US, positive relations with Turkey, increasing self-confidence and economic growth overlaid its deep tribal and political divisions that produce many of the same problems found elsewhere in Iraq, such as patronage politics, corruption, a lack of life prospects for many and an insufficiently diversified economy.\(^9\)

Such problems have manifested themselves more clearly over recent years due to falling oil prices, which has somewhat cooled the aspirations of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to become independent. Public statements to this effect currently seem aimed at increasing leverage vis-à-vis Baghdad to obtain concessions about the division of oil revenue or the status of Kirkuk more than they reflect a genuine intent to take political action towards independence in the short term.\(^10\)

In contrast to the Kurdish drive for regional autonomy, Iraq’s main Shi’a political parties rapidly secured dominance over the central state between 2003 and 2005, but proved to be far from a unified force in the process (see Box 1). Although the Shi’a political community has united pragmatically at critical junctures, competition, intimidation and, at times, violence, have been more salient characteristics of the behaviour of its political groups and factions. In fact, Iraq’s main political Shi’a groups differed markedly in their objectives for much of the duration of the US-led occupation:

- Basic posture: violent opposition to US forces by the Sadrists versus pragmatic collaboration with US forces by Da’wa and SCIRI/ISCI;
- Intensity of ties with Iran: selectively pragmatic on the part of the Sadrists, and to some extent Da’wa, versus more ideological on the part of SCIRI/ISCI;
- Views on the governance of the Iraqi state: SCIRI/ISCI as advocate for federalism versus the Sadrists and Da’wa preferring a centralized state (see also Table 1).


Box 1 Origins, constituencies and tactics of Iraq’s main Shi’a political parties

Introduction

From 2003 onwards, three Shi’a political parties have dominated Iraqi politics: the Islamic Da’wa Party, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI, formerly known as SCIRI) and the Sadrist Trend. Only the Islamic Da’wa Party has consistently been only a political party since 2003; both ISCI/SCIRI and the Sadrist Trend are/have been a combination of a political party with religious following and a formally affiliated armed wing (respectively the Badr Corps until 2007-12 and with the Mahdi Army/Promised Day Brigades/Peace Companies). There are also smaller Shi’a parties, such as the Al-Fadhila Party, Shi’a secularists and Shi’a independents. This report focuses on the three main parties.

The Islamic Da’wa Party

Origins and philosophy

Since its creation in 1958, Da’wa holds that a strong national state should be led by politicians who operate within the confines of established religious parameters. It disagrees with the Iranian notion of direct governance by clerics, but does foresee a political role for them. Although the party’s thinking was inspired in particular by Grand-Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr and has/had its share of clerical leaders, these have not typically dominated the party. As Da’wa was the leading Shi’a opposition party when the Ba’ath party gained political ascendancy, it was ruthlessly suppressed when Saddam Hussein came to power in 1979. In consequence, Da’wa leaders scattered in exile across the globe.

Constituency

In 2003, Da’wa was only one among many competing Shi’a parties, albeit with strong credentials due to its resistance against the Ba’ath party. It had also avoided becoming seen as an Iranian agent as key leaders moved from Tehran to London and Damascus in timely fashion. Despite the group’s dispersed post-2003 leadership that had to be re-united and was considered elitist, a weak popular support base and an unclear policy platform that only developed gradually, the party increasingly gained control over levers of the state and public resources after 2005. In fact, it has so far been the only party in charge of the country’s government – at least nominally – by having provided the prime minister since 2005 and by controlling key parts of the administration.
Views and tactics

Whereas Da’wa has so far largely eschewed the creation of a party-affiliated armed group (note that Al-Maliki used non-state armed groups during his second term and recently strengthened his ties with the Badr Corps), it has invested heavily in expanding its control over the state apparatus. Key to this have been its strategy of pragmatic cooperation with US administrators and forces, moving closer to Iran (especially under Al-Maliki since 2008) and the political skills of the person of Al-Maliki himself. Since 2014, there has been a clear split in the party between Al-Maliki and the current Prime Minister Al-Abadi, with the former now undermining a number of original principles of Da’wa, including its nationalist orientation and its resistance against maintaining coercive capacity outside of the state; while the latter is trying to hold on to these principles.

The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) / The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI)
Origins and philosophy

Established in 1982 in the early stages of the Iran–Iraq war, SCIRI was the Iranian-created umbrella organization for Shi’a resistance against Saddam Hussein, with the Badr Corps acting as its armed wing. From the beginning, the organization was led by the Al-Hakim, one of Najaf’s leading clerical families. It is one of the few Iraqi Shi’a parties that advocated for Iranian-style direct clerical governance in Iraq, although this stance appreciably softened in 2007, as it remains unpopular in Iraq. The group changed its name to ISCI, suppressing the reference to the Islamic Revolution, and shifted its allegiance from Ayatollah Al-Khameini (Iran) to Grand-Ayatollah Al-Sistani (Iraq).

Constituency

ISCI’s support base largely consists of the Shi’a middle classes and, to some extent, the traditional clergy. It used to have a very disciplined party structure that was tightly organized and in possession of a formidable armed wing.

Views and tactics

When it returned to Iraq in 2003, SCIRI was unpopular because it was seen as an Iranian agent that had brought about needless suffering in 1991 by turning an army-led, popular uprising into a Shi’a rebellion that was suppressed as such. This induced SCIRI to collaborate closely with US administrators and forces, which brought it control over key elements of the state in 2005 (the Ministries of Interior and Finance, a Vice-President’s position and nine provinces). Add to this
its control over a significant number of revenue-generating religious shrines as well as its alliance with Al-Maliki, and SCIRI proved a formidable force between 2003 and 2009. Its problems since have been a decline in the (perceived) quality of its leadership, with key figures of the Al-Hakim family dying in 2003 and 2009, the breakaway of the Badr Corps under Hadi al-Ameri between 2007 and 2012 and a series of conflicts between Ammar al-Hakim (ISCI's current leader) and Al-Maliki, notwithstanding a recent rapprochement to unite against the Al-Sadr/Al-Abadi reform drive.

The Sadrist Trend

Origins and philosophy

Influenced by the thinking of Grand-Ayatollah Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr and the religious activism of Grand-Ayatollah Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr in the 1980s, the movement is currently led by the latter's son, Muqtada al-Sadr. The Sadrist Trend is a social-religious movement and a political party at the same time, which also features an armed wing. It blends a belief in the precedence of politicians over clerical leaders in the governance of the state with the view that religious leaders can and should act as influential political advisers in advocacy-type roles. It is one of Iraq’s most clearly indigenous forces, as it persisted under the repressive rule of Saddam Hussein.

Constituency

The movement champions the interests of the impoverished Shi’a underclasses. It is large and heterogeneous with a reliable and loyal core. Sadr city (a suburb of Baghdad) plays a key role in sustaining it in terms of popular support and recruitment. The movement has at times proved difficult to control, since it features a notable degree of leadership competition and factionalism. For example, Qais Al-Khazali commanded parts of the Mahdi Army (Al-Sadr’s armed wing in the 2000s) but split off to form the paramilitary group Asaib ahl al-Haq in 2006 and today fields a competing claim on the legacy of Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr.

Views and tactics

The movement is strongly nationalist, against foreign influence, and anti-corruption. Rhetorically, it is more rigorous and fervent in the pursuit of these principles compared with ISCI’s and Da’wa’s greater pragmatism, but in practice much of this claimed differential disappears. By advocating for a strong political role of clerics and by virtue of Al-Sadr having become a religious authority in his own right, the movement also challenges the traditional Shi’a clerical establishment in Najaf. Its tactics have changed from the use of violence against
US and government forces in the 2000s to largely peaceful confrontation today via sit-ins and street and political protest. It has consistently taken a stance against corruption and sought to improve social service provision – in line with the needs of its support base.


**Key context point for Shi‘a relation- and coalition-building:** After a long period of repression under Saddam Hussein, Iraq’s Shi‘a became the country’s dominant political power in the course of a few short years after 2003. Their historic experience lies at the basis of a strong drive to acquire power for its own sake (including fear of losing it), a political culture of ‘winner takes all’ and a sense of having the demographic ‘right to rule’. The first two make durable relation- and coalition-building difficult. The latter has greatly complicated inclusion of the Sunni and Kurds in Iraq’s governance.

**Brutal domestic repression followed by ignorant foreign occupation**

Only 13 years ago, Iraq was ruled by a well-entrenched dictatorship that showed signs of decay in areas of social governance and service provision, but not in its control over the country’s security forces or its political life.\(^1\) It was under this dictatorship that a number of the fault lines emerged that characterize present-day Iraq. This included, paradoxically, strengthening sub-state religious and ethnic identities by ruthlessly suppressing them, enforcing clerical authorities to stay out of political issues (politically tinted religious activism was likely to result in assassination) and triggering the creation of Iraqi Iranian proxies (such as SCIRI and the Badr Corps) by starting the Iran–Iraq war.\(^2\) Another fault line emerged from the persistent lack of economic prospects after 1991. The decade of sanctions that the United Nations Security Council imposed on Iraq

---


in response to Saddam Hussein’s annexation of Kuwait in 1991 wrecked Iraq’s economy and created a vicious cycle for the livelihoods and health of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis. The result has been a growing – and lasting – inequality between economic insiders and outsiders, i.e. those who have access to economic opportunity versus those who lack it. The associated high rates of poverty and dependency have enabled and perpetuated patronage politics, facilitated populist electioneering and stifled political innovation. Factors such as these existed long before 2003 and have influenced political competition in Iraq more than has been commonly acknowledged.

As to the experience of Iraq’s Shi’a, their expectation of US-support for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein after the liberation of Kuwait became a boulevard of broken dreams when the 1991 uprising was brutally suppressed by Hussein’s security forces. Despite the US role in enacting sanctions and several public expressions of encouragement from the US administration, fear of an Iranian takeover of Iraq ultimately saw the US disengage. The impact of the ensuing repression and large-scale murder of Iraq’s Shi’a should not be underestimated. It contributed significantly to a sense of victimhood and deepened an experience of suppression that became the basis for justifying Shi’a dominance and exclusionary rule after 2003.

The US invasion of 2003 and its ensuing occupation of Iraq unfortunately only brought a brief period of relief from the coercive aspects of Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship. Violent repression was rapidly replaced by violent chaos which was fuelled by several factors. First, violence was triggered by the resentment and rejectionism of Sunni groups and individuals who were abruptly marginalized after the US victory over Hussein’s forces. Second, Shi’a nationalists took to arms as well when they perceived a foreign occupier to be replacing a domestic tyrant. Third, poor post-conflict planning for civilian recovery on the part of the US administration played a role. This included errors such as allowing de-Ba’athification to take on a dysfunctional scope and duration beyond the year of its ‘official’ duration, disbanding the Iraqi security forces, installing an Interim Governance

15 Fisk (2005), op.cit.; ICG (2007), op.cit.
17 The Coalition Provisional Authority enacted the policy of de-Ba’athification in May 2003 and rescinded it in June 2004. A number of its elements continue to be used and applied by the Iraqi government today.

Although Iraq’s newly adopted constitution of 2005 could have channelled some of these tensions, the rushed process of its creation and the widespread dissatisfaction with its content became a missed opportunity that would cost Iraq dearly. Ultimately, the constitution only enjoyed the support of a few political parties\footnote{The exceptions were the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and SCIRI. The Kurdish parties supported the constitution as it enshrined their separate legal status, while it has been suggested that SCIRI had similar designs to create a Shi’a region in southern Iraq. Sources: Musings on Iraq (keyword: ‘2005 Iraqi elections’, 24 February 2014); Al-Ali (2014), \textit{op.cit.}} and became a bare-bones legal framework that deferred critical matters of state to later legislation by majority vote through normal parliamentary procedures.\footnote{Such as the procedure for drafting the electoral law, the precise composition, independence and operations of the Supreme Judicial Council as well as Supreme Federal Court and the purpose, duties and selection of the Council of the Union (one of the chambers of parliament). See: Brown, N., \textit{The final draft of the Iraqi constitution: Analysis and commentary}, Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005b; https://www.opendemocracy.net/zaid-al-ali/iraq-ten-years-of-hubris-and-incompetence (accessed 11 December 2016); Al-Ali (2014), \textit{op.cit.}} Practically, this has meant that Shi’a-dominated parliaments have largely ‘interpreted’ the constitution. The federal structure that the constitution foresaw for Iraq could have mitigated the effect of parliamentary dominance of its interpretation, but the constitution’s low level of cross-party support meant that its ‘federal provisions’ were never applied.\footnote{Brown (2005a), \textit{op.cit.}; Al-Ali (2014), \textit{op.cit.}} The result is that the rules for political competition and adjudication of political conflict are neither solid nor adequately enforceable. This contributes to making coalition-building a more temporary affair, as promises are lightly broken and instruments of state easily leveraged for party political advantage.

As the constitution-writing period illustrates, the initial period following the US invasion was characterized by significant political competition for control over the ‘emergent’ Iraqi state that set Iraqi groups allied with the US against groups that opposed it. Broadly speaking – and for different reasons – the PUK and KDP (Kurdish), as well as SCIRI and the Islamic Da’awa Party (Shi’a) worked pragmatically with the US while various Sunni groups and the Sadrist (Shi’a) worked against it. Much of this collaboration was pragmatic and not necessarily based on shared values or objectives. Nevertheless, it led the US, unsurprisingly, to support certain parties and their political interests over others. As the 2005 constitution either deferred basic rules to regulate exercise of
public authority, or put them in place without consensus, this favouritism enabled the parties involved to quasi-permanently strengthen their power basis. The 2005 elections subsequently brought Shi’a political domination over the central state that had to work with these rules.

**Key point for Shi’a relation- and coalition-building:** The domestic political order of Iraq after Saddam Hussein was put in place by the US administration in a hasty fashion and dominated by a few Shi’a and Kurdish parties. This created permanent fissures in Iraqi politics, both with its Sunni elements and between its Shi’a elements, notably through the exclusion from power of the Sadrist movement in 2003 to 2005.

**Seize the moment: Paint it black and green**

It was not a foregone conclusion that Iraq’s Shi’a would seize political power during Iraq’s first elections after Hussein’s regime in 2005. There were plenty of internal divisions and poor relations between key political groups that were in part based on history, and in part on the events that transpired immediately following the US invasion. The key Shi’a parties nevertheless united and won a resounding electoral victory.

A strong push from both Iran and Great-Ayatollah Al-Sistani were major contributing factors that led to the establishment of the victorious pan-Shi’a electoral list: the United Iraqi Alliance.\(^\text{22}\) The 2005 elections ultimately saw a mix of SCIRI, Da’wa, Sadrist and Kurdish representatives coming to power. In this constellation, the rivalry between SCIRI and the Sadrists (also see Box 1)\(^\text{23}\) meant that neither party could provide the prime minister. Instead, a compromise figure needed to be found and the candidates came from the – at the time – much weaker and smaller Da’wa party in the form of messieurs Al-Ja’afari and Al-Maliki.\(^\text{24}\) Whereas Al-Ja’afari’s tenure was short as he faced declining levels of confidence because of increasing violence in 2005, Al-Maliki used his underdog position (he was seen as a weak candidate) to build, expand and consolidate a credible power base and reputation. Once the United Iraqi Alliance had done its job of securing a Shi’a electoral victory, it fell apart fairly quickly.

---

\(^{22}\) See: *Musings on Iraq* (keyword: ‘United Iraqi Alliance’).

\(^{23}\) Their rivalry was largely based on their different stances towards Iran and the US with SCIRI being both pro-Iran and working with the US, whereas the Sadrists were Iraqi nationalist and working against the US presence.

What followed was an overlaying of two very violent episodes. Between 2004 and 2007/08, violence peaked against US forces who found themselves under attack from various militant and radical Sunni groups (including Al-Qaeda and the predecessor of the Islamic State) as well as Al-Sadr’s Mahdi army. Such US-targeted violence abated only after the combined increase in US military manpower and the increase in Sunni tribal resistance against Al-Qaeda and its affiliates in 2007 (‘the surge-awakening offensive’). Despite providing at least passive support to US forces, both SCIRI and Da’wa kept active ties with Iran in this period.

In addition, major violence also occurred from 2006 to 2008 between Iraq’s Sunni and Shi’a, which was largely triggered by Al-Qaeda’s destruction of the Shi’a Al-Askari shrine in Samarra in 2006, as well as between the country’s Shi’a themselves. Especially as the threat of Al-Qaeda-sponsored violence against US forces and Shi’a groups abated due to the ‘surge/awakening’ offensive in 2007, intra-Shi’a rivalries became more pronounced. This pitted Iraqi state security units, SCIRI/Badr forces and various lesser groups against the Mahdi army of Moqtada Al-Sadr, Al-Fadhila’s armed wing and several smaller groups. The result was that the Mahdi army suffered serious defeats in both 2007 and 2008. Under Iranian pressure, Al-Sadr was forced to negotiate a ceasefire after the ‘Charge of the Knights’ Operation in 2008, which brought Basra and several other major urban centres back under government control.

The intra-Shi’a violence that resulted from being on different sides of the US deepened existing enmities between SCIRI, Da’wa and the Sadrist movement. While this has typically been managed pragmatically by the leaders of these groups, it has negatively affected the stability of coalitions and alliances that have ruled Iraq. Intra-Shi’a violence also gave the existing narrative of victimhood a new twist as Iraq’s Shi’a masses, its poorest in particular, seemed to have traded suppression by Saddam Hussein for

25 The Mahdi Army has undergone various name changes since the early 2000s – away from its perceived sectarian connotation – to respectively the Promised Day Brigades and today the Peace Companies.


27 A major result of the Sunni-Shi’ a violence was a sharp decrease in demographically mixed areas in Baghdad. This is well illustrated by a series of maps that visualize the progressive ‘ethnic cleansing’ of the city: http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.be/2009/11/blog-post.html (accessed 17 October 2016). See also: Al-Qarawee, H., Sectarian relations and socio-political conflict in Iraq, Milan: ISPI, Analysis No. 200, 2013.


29 Although Al-Sadr’s relations with Iran have been rocky and largely tactical due to his nationalist narrative and resistance against Iranian clerical dominance, Iran supported his resistance against US forces and provided him shelter on several occasions. In 2007, Al-Sadr decamped to Qom, for example, when violence and animosity in Iraq against him increased significantly. Cochrane, M., The battle for Basra, Washington DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2008; Biddle et al. (2012). op.cit.
marginalization by Baghdad’s newly arrived ‘foreigner Iraqis’. The prolonged violence also saw the creation of several new armed Shi’a groups such as Asaib ahl al-Haq (2006) and Kataib Hezbollah (2007). These groups were constituted by Iran as part of a hedging strategy to cope with the unpredictable nationalist and patriotic nature of the Sadrist movement as the main Shi’a group resisting the US. Their existence made sure Iran could continue to fight US forces by proxy after Sunni-driven violence abated. In time, these groups became political forces as well, and further fragmented the Shi’a body politic.

In the short term, working with the US turned out to be an effective power-enhancing strategy. Despite its initially modest domestic support base, SCIRI became an influential force in Iraqi politics from 2003 to 2009 until the death of Abdel Aziz al-Hakeem. Its control over the Ministry of the Interior in particular allowed the organization to use Iraq’s vast paramilitary and police apparatus for political objectives when useful, while also making it possible to bring parts of the Badr corps – its militia at the time – on the state payroll. Furthermore, SCIRI’s control over nine southern provinces provided it with a stronger territorial base, a resource that only Al-Sadr had so far benefited from, by virtue of the urban concentrations of the country’s poor (e.g. in Sadr city). For its part, Da’wa supplied two prime ministers, one of whom rose to become the country’s most powerful politician of the early 21st century. Finally, Iraq’s Kurds managed to strengthen their regional autonomy to the point of realizing de facto territorial partition. The relative political losers were the Sadrist movement and various Sunni groups.

The years between 2005 and 2010 represent the birth of the Iraqi state post-Hussein. It was a prolonged affair with several midwives competing for influence. Towards the late 2000s a measure of peace returned, the consequence of major violence having been neutered by the combined effect of a successful ‘surge/awakening’ offensive in 2007 (against Sunni-instigated violence) and the suppression of the Mahdi Army in 2008 (against Shi’a-instigated violence). Al-Maliki had established himself as a capable and astute politician with sufficient prestige and power to hold Iraq together through a mix of divide-and-rule tactics. This set the scene for what followed in his second term.

30 Makiya (2016), op.cit., coined this label.
Key point for Shi’a relation- and coalition-building: Despite animosities between key Shi’a political groups, they were nevertheless able to form a temporarily unified front to gain political ascendancy during the 2005 elections, in part owing to strong encouragement from Iran and Grand-Ayatollah Al-Sistani. Those working with the US administration, Da’wa and SCIRI, managed to gain control over much of the central Iraqi state.

Strongman consolidation of the Iraqi state

Shi’a dominance created greater scope for intra-Shi’a political differences to manifest themselves in the 2010 elections. The main Shi’a groups could now focus on increasing their share of public power and control over the public purse. It is in part for this reason that the 2010 elections saw the Shi’a-dominated Iraqi National Alliance (including Al-Hakim and Al-Sadr) competing with Al-Maliki’s State of Law Coalition – also Shi’a dominated – and Iyad Al-Allawi’s largely secular Iraqiya list that was cross-sectarian and at the same time featured an appreciable Shi’a component. Despite the competition between these lists and the preceding violence in 2007/08 that pitted some of the armed groups of the political parties involved against each other, it is notable that such enmities did not stop the Iraqi National Alliance and the State of Law Coalition from forming a post-election alliance that kept Al-Maliki in power despite Iraqiya securing a plurality of the vote.\footnote{The Guardian, 5 May 2010, online: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/may/05/iraq-shia-alliance-election; Al-Jazeera, 4 March 2010, online: http://www.aljazeera.com/focus/iraqelection2010/2010/03/20103493048404203.html (both accessed 12 December 2016).} Factors that played a role in this development include Iranian influence and Al-Maliki’s obstinacy while he simultaneously used legal procedure and backroom deals with smaller parties as procedural tactics to retain pride of place.

From 2010 onwards, Al-Maliki, using Da’wa as his vehicle, consolidated his control over what has been termed the ‘deep state’, i.e. key government positions for exercising influence and policy including in the military and intelligence. In addition, the independence of many of Iraq’s ‘independent commissions’ and its Central Bank was neutralized while the courts were largely bent to Al-Maliki’s will.\footnote{See for example: Jabar et al. (2012), op.cit.} This was possible in part because of weak institutions and fragile constitutional arrangements. Neither Iraq’s emergent democracy/administration nor its fragmented political party landscape yet had the strength, maturity or checks and balances to withstand the patronage, use of authority and political manoeuvring that someone of Al-Maliki’s skill and stature was able to muster. Both political dominance and stability resulted. Political dynamics shifted from a free-for-all competition for power using a mix of coercion, politics and religion that was infused by significant and direct foreign influences, to increasing...
authoritarianism and power consolidation. As far as Iraq’s Shi’a were concerned, Al-Maliki’s strategic approach can be stylistically summarized as: ‘cooptation where possible (e.g. with Al-Khazali or Al-Ameri), marginalization where necessary’ (e.g. with Al-Sadr or Al-Hakeem). However, for the country’s Sunni and Kurds he applied rather the reverse formula: ‘marginalization where possible, cooptation where necessary’. This set a gradual dual process in motion of deterioration of inter-sectarian elite relations and penetration of the state by political and private interests that would reduce both the political ability to act in the national interest and core administrative capabilities.

Deteriorating elite relations were on display when arrest warrants were served against Vice-President Tariq al-Hashimi (Sunni) and Finance Minister Rafa al-Issawi (also Sunni), as well as when discord was purposely being sown between Barzani’s KDP and Talabani’s PUK. Such intimidation was facilitated by the fact that the Obama administration had prioritized a fast withdrawal from Iraq. Al-Maliki used the resulting US sense of urgency to empower the executive branch as a way to ready the country for fully independent post-US governance. This, however, went at the expense of the powers of the Council of Representatives and the judiciary.

State capture was illustrated by significant incidents of corruption that remained unaddressed. For instance, the Iraqi Commission of Integrity investigated 14 officials at the Ministry of Defence for taking kickbacks in a USD 4.2 billion deal. None was prosecuted. Multiple ministries’ review committees have also been accused of conditioning approval of projects on payment to committee members without meaningful further inquiries having been pursued. More importantly perhaps, out of the 100,000 ‘Awakening’ fighters that Al-Maliki was meant to incorporate into the state’s payroll as paramilitary forces, he brought in only a fraction. Some interviewees suggested that the budget was used instead to cement his ties of patronage with Shi’a non-state armed groups. It is also clear that Al-Maliki used his control over the Iraqi state to strengthen his power basis by enabling Iraqi non-state armed groups to engage in the Syrian civil war from 2011 onwards. Publicly, the protection of the shrine of Sayyidah Zaynab in Damascus was used to justify the armed involvement in Syria of

---

36 Jabar et al. (2012), *op.cit.*
non-state armed groups like Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib ahl al-Haq. Privately, both Iran and these groups now owed Al-Maliki a favour as he backed Iranian-client President Assad and provided a range of non-state armed groups with renewed legitimacy. It is unlikely that Iraqi Shi’a paramilitary fighters could have been involved in Syria without Al-Maliki’s sponsorship, given his level of executive control.\(^{40}\)

From the perspective of Shi’a coalition formation, it is relevant to note that the other main political groups – the Sadrist movement and ISCI – were forced to find a form of accommodation with Da’wa (Al-Maliki in particular) in reflection of its dominant position. While Al-Sadr had grudgingly supported Al-Maliki’s second tenure in 2010/11 under Iranian pressure\(^{41}\) – in spite of the defeat that Al-Maliki had inflicted upon him in 2008 – he proved unable to translate this support into meaningful gains or leverage. ISCI also saw its influence decline, although this process had already started with the death of Abdel Aziz al-Hakim in 2009. In response to their relative weakness, both parties teamed up with considerable success in the 2013 provincial elections to generate a counterweight to the State of Law Coalition.\(^{42}\)

In short, while Shi’a dominance of the Iraqi state is likely to remain a fixture of future governments, this period saw the nature of this dominance shift from multi-party control towards a greater level of single-party control as a result of Da’wa accumulating control over key state functions (security in particular) and resources (chiefly oil and patronage through jobs).\(^{43}\)

**Key point for Shi’a relation- and coalition-building:** The authoritative manner in which Al-Maliki sought to centralize state power into his own hands created a short-term measure of stability at the cost of reducing cooperation between the country’s main ethno-sectarian groups and of creating both resistance from, and fragmentation between, Iraq’s Shi’a. Despite the occasional manifestation of allying with other ethno-sectarian groups against Al-Maliki (e.g. between Al-Sadr, Barzani and Al-Allawi in 2012 to pursue a non-confidence motion), Shi’a

---


\(^{41}\) In part because Iran hosted him in Qom during the worst of the violence in 2007/08 when his Mahdi Army suffered defeat in Baghdad and other Iraqi cities.


\(^{43}\) Haddad (2016), *op.cit.*
Politics remained largely inward-looking and focused on outcompeting other Shi’a parties to the detriment of Shi’a-Kurdish or Shi’a-Sunni relations.

**Political dysfunction and state capture exposed by the rise of the Islamic State**

In 2014, the brutal onslaught of the Islamic State and the swift capture of core urban centres such as Fallujah, Ramadi and Mosul, brought Iraq back to its darker days of violence in 2006/08. The revanche of a Sunni/Ba’athist coalition against their marginalization due to US neglect and Al-Maliki’s centralization of power was terrible to witness. The Islamic State could advance as far as threatening Baghdad in part because elite relations in the political centre, i.e. between Shi’a, Sunni and Kurds, had deteriorated, intra-Shi’a politics were inward-focused and the capacity of the state to act in the national interest had been significantly reduced.  

At this point, Iraq was ‘saved’ by its reluctant and reclusive religious leader, Grand-Ayatollah Al-Sistani, who issued a fatwa that called upon all able-bodied Iraqi males to take up arms in defence of the country against the Islamic State. The popular response was both massive and decisive. Thousands joined either the existing array of non-state armed groups or the state security forces. This mobilization halted the expansion of the Islamic State and began the gradual process of liberating Iraqi territory seized by it, starting with retaking Jurf Al-Sakhar (a town 50 kilometres south of Baghdad on the road to Karbala).

It was a remarkable intervention because Grand-Ayatollah Al-Sistani had largely stayed aloof from politics since his endorsement of the United Iraqi Alliance in 2005. This distance can in part be explained by the fact that he had been so influential.

---


in forming the Alliance – and more generally politically – that he also started to be blamed for political events and missteps further down the line.\textsuperscript{48} This led to a significant decrease in clerical political engagement during the late 2000s, despite his growing disenchantment with the Shi’a political elite. However, the threat of the Islamic State changed the calculus as it represented a serious threat due to its apocalyptical nature.\textsuperscript{49} As it happened, the 2014 fatwa saved the country, but also strengthened its non-state armed groups and reinforced a Shi’a-centered narrative.\textsuperscript{50} This ‘dilemma of clerical intervention’ is further discussed in section 3.

Although Al-Maliki rapidly issued executive orders to create a new official institution – the Hashd al-Shabi – that was to serve as an umbrella organization and bring all non-state armed groups under government control – at least formally – the reality remains more complex.\textsuperscript{51} A number of powerful non-state armed groups that are formally united under the Hashd al-Shabi are in practice better regarded as partners in a temporary joint venture with government forces than as paramilitary forces that are controlled, commanded and sanctioned by the state’s security architecture (see Box 2).

\begin{boxedtext}
\textbf{Box 2 What and who are the Hashd al-Shabi?}

\textit{Origins}

In response to Grand-Ayatollah Al-Sistani fatwa of 13 June 2014 calling them to arms against the Islamic State, thousands flocked to the banners of Iraq’s various armed groups, such as the Badr Corps and Kataib Hezbollah, or joined state forces. The Hashd al-Shabi was formally created by executive order from Al-Maliki as the state body designated to coordinate and guide the activities
\end{boxedtext}

\textsuperscript{48} For example: Schmidt (2008), \textit{op.cit.}; ICG (2010), \textit{op.cit}.

\textsuperscript{49} Corboz refers to such clerical interventions as ‘moments of participation’, i.e. they represent considered decisions of clerics to engage with the specific aim of having political impact. Other choices on the ‘menu of options’ that senior Shi’a clerics have to achieve a political effect are, for example, refusing to meet with party leaders or choosing a particular angle for a Friday sermon. These are ‘softer’ instruments than a fatwa. See: Corboz, \textit{Guardians of Shi’ism: Sacred authority and transnational family networks}, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. On the apocalyptic nature of the Islamic State see: McCants, W., \textit{The ISIS apocalypse: The history, strategy and doomsday vision of the Islamic State}, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2015.

\textsuperscript{50} Several interviews in Baghdad between 30 October and 5 November 2016.

of the various non-state armed groups (18 June 2014). This was confirmed and elaborated by Prime Minister Al-Abadi (4 July 2015). Iraq’s Shi’a hold the Hashd al-Shabi in high regard. In all likelihood, it has more popular legitimacy than most established security institutions.

Composite groups

The Hasdh al-Shabi essentially consist of three categories of armed groups:

• **Armed groups with a political party.** Akin to ancient Sparta’s ‘army with a state’, the primary *raison d’être* of these groups is to exist as coercive capacity in the service of external interests and/or domestic political purposes. These entities largely originated as either armed groups or armed wings of political parties and later formed a political party of their own. They are Iranian-sponsored and represent the most capable, largest and best-resourced groups in the Hashd al-Shabi. This category includes Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib ahl al-Haq and the Badr Corps. These groups all existed prior to 2014.

• **Armed wings of political parties.** The *raison d’être* of these groups is to extend and support the political objectives of Iraqi political parties. They are subservient to existing parties and are domestically oriented. This category includes, for example, the Peace Companies (Sadrist Trend), the Ashura Brigades (ISCI) and the Supporters of the Faith Brigades (ISCI). Both the parties and their armed wings existed prior to 2014.

• **Armed groups without a political party.** These groups arose specifically in response to the fatwa and are largely affiliated with one or other of the main Shi’a shrines in Iraq. They include the Ali al-Akbar Brigades, the Abbasiyah Shrine Brigades, the Alawite Shrine Brigades and the Husayniyah Shrine Brigades. None of these groups existed prior to 2014.

Significance and analytical difficulties

With between 60,000 and 140,000 men under arms (estimates vary significantly), the Hashd al-Shabi matches the official army and police in size as a paramilitary force. The difficulty in assessing its political influence stems from three analytical dilemmas:

• The Hashd al-Shabi as a response to the aforementioned call to arms has become a revered institution in Shi’a Iraq as it shielded the country from even worse excesses by the Islamic State. An estimated 6,000 of its fighters have died in this struggle. Yet, a number of the groups that compose it have a chequered human rights record, operate partly at the behest of Iran, or
merge a fighting capability with politics and coercion – or feature all three of these characteristics. This creates a sharp contrast of perception and legitimacy between Iraq’s Shi’a on the one hand, and Iraq’s Sunni (as well as many Western actors) on the other hand. A rational public discussion on how to deal with this situation has become difficult as popular perceptions, religious principles and power politics have become mixed up.

• Although the Hashd al-Shabi committee is supposed to administer, pay, supply and coordinate the various armed groups that compose it under the leadership of the national security adviser, its actual scope of control is not clear. The most powerful armed groups are in all likelihood best seen as reluctant or willing partners in a temporary joint enterprise rather than units that can be hierarchically commanded.

• The future operations and impact of the Hashd al-Shabi are uncertain. The Iraqi Parliament adopted a law on 26 November 2016 that turned it into a state-led force (independent, but nevertheless part of the armed forces) under the command of the Prime Minister. The law also stipulates that Hashd members must sever links to political parties and refrain from political activities. However, it is unclear how this legislation will be implemented effectively and it drew immediate Sunni condemnation.


The events of June 2014 and the ensuing emergency situation also meant that Al-Maliki’s bid to remain prime minister became untenable because he was considered – correctly or incorrectly – as the main culprit for the fall of Mosul and the disintegration of the Iraqi army.\footnote{The Iraqi parliamentary elections of 2014 took place in April. They centred more on individual security and local identity where the 2010 elections had emphasized national ethno-sectarian narratives. This is not to say that ethno-sectarian considerations disappeared, but that the broader socio-political current started to work against Al-Maliki’s divisive tactics as well. See: Ali, A., Iraq’s 2014 elections, Washington DC: Institute for the Study of War, Middle East security report 20, 2014; Jabar, F., R. Mansour and A. Khaddaj, Iraq on the Brink: unraveling Maliki’s unraveling, Beirut: Iraq Institute for Strategies Studies, 2014.} Indirect disapproval by Grand-Ayatollah Al-Sistani proved decisive.
This cleared the way for a more neutral Shi’a leader to become prime minister: Hayder al-Abadi. He, however, had to work within existing constraints such as poor inter-sectarian relations, tense intra-Shi’a elite relations and a dysfunctional state. He also had to deal with an aggrieved Al-Maliki who is still influential, both in the public arena and behind the scenes.\(^{53}\)

From a Shi’a coalition formation perspective, these developments caused an informal ‘split’ in Da’wa and created opportunities for other Shi’a parties to reassert themselves.\(^{54}\) This largely happened on the back of the popular protests that erupted in Baghdad in the summer of 2015 against elite self-enrichment, poor service provision and negative perceptions of the general state of governance in Iraq. In contrast with earlier Sunni protests in Anbar province in 2012–14, the 2015 protestors were largely Shi’a demonstrating against ruling Shi’a elites. The protests enabled Prime Minister Al-Abadi to propose a far-reaching agenda that focused on administrative reform by streamlining and ‘de-sectarianizing’ top-level state positions and on increasing the fight against corruption.\(^{55}\) The demonstrations feature two interesting dynamics that illustrate how difficult it will be for Iraq’s political system to develop a greater measure of functionality that serves the average citizen.

First, Muqtada al-Sadr was quick to declare his support for the protests, using his substantial powers of popular mobilization to nurture and grow them. The protests fitted very well with the mass-based and anti-elite profile that the Sadrist Movement is keen to give itself. However, his support also politicized the protests, as it was perceived as a largely self-interested move to increase his political influence. After all, the Sadrist Trend has been part of government at times and its leaders are part of the Shi’a political elite as well. Moreover, many have not forgotten the violence his followers wreaked upon Iraq between 2006 and 2008. Finally, Al-Sadr’s claim to staunchly support Prime Minister Al-Abadi’s desire to install a technocratic government and initiate substantial reform to reduce corruption and increase political/administrative efficiency seems at best incongruous with the breaching of the Green Zone security perimeter – which could only happen because of his support. This made the Iraqi government and in particular its prime minister look weak and it undermined parliamentary procedure. Such factors prevented a wholesale Sadrist takeover of the protests. Nevertheless, many other Shi’a political parties closed ranks in response, for example Al-Maliki’s Da’wa faction and

\(^{53}\) For example, although Al-Abadi eliminated Iraq’s three vice-president posts in August 2015 – one of which was held by Al-Maliki – as part of a broader reform package aimed at streamlining top government positions, his decision was annulled by the Federal Supreme Court in October 2016.

\(^{54}\) However, as a number of interviewees observed, Da’wa is no stranger to splits in its ranks and it was felt the party was sufficiently strong as an organization to withstand or deal with another one.

ISCI. The main force of the protests – popular anger – was in the end both harnessed and neutered by existing political elites.\textsuperscript{56}

Second, many reform measures ultimately got bogged down in parliamentary procedure and/or were subjected to a successful legal challenge for non-respect for proper procedure, authority and/or legal basis – despite street protests, the political lobbying of the Sadrist Trend and the support of Grand-Ayatollah Al-Sistani.\textsuperscript{57} In short, Iraq’s dominant political parties and elites rallied effectively, in part around Al-Maliki, to safeguard their personal privileges and political interests.\textsuperscript{58}

A final factor in this volatile mix of Shi’a relation- and coalition-building after Mosul is the ongoing efforts by many Shi’a political groups and leaders to claim the popular legitimacy and appeal of the Hashd al-Shabi with the aim of increasing their popular/electoral support. That a number of the non-state armed groups under the Hashd al-Shabi are likely to play an influential political role can be inferred from the statements of some of its commanders.\textsuperscript{59} Comparative experiences, for example in Afghanistan or Somalia, also suggest that such organized force with significant foreign support is unlikely to disband without a political bargain of some sort, irrespective of any laws that are put in place.

In short, the main Shi’a parties were facing substantial threats and opportunities at the same time in the summer of 2016. In terms of threats, internal divisions within some parties (Da’wa in particular), poor relations between parties (such as between the Sadrist Trend and ISCI) and growing popular discontent feature significantly. In terms of opportunities, the attractiveness of continuing coopted elite rule that includes all main Shi’a political parties, stalled reforms and riding the coat-tails of a successful fight

\textsuperscript{56} Several interviews between 30 October and 5 November 2016; Mansour, R. and M. Clark, \textit{Is Muqtada al-Sadr good for Iraq?}, War on the Rocks, 2 May 2016, online: \url{http://warontherocks.com/2016/05/is-muqtada-al-sadr-good-for-iraq/} (accessed 19 December 2016)

\textsuperscript{57} See: Martin, P., \textit{Tracking Iraq’s 2016 political crisis}, Institute for the Study of War, online: \url{http://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/isw-tracking-iraq%E2%80%99s-2016-political-crisis} (accessed 12 December 2016). For example, on several occasions either cabinet or parliament (the Council or Representatives) convened and made reform decisions without a quorum being present, rendering such decisions vulnerable to later challenge and reversal. See: several bulletins by Utica Risk Services, \textit{Inside Iraqi Politics}, in May and June 2016 (paid subscription).

\textsuperscript{58} For an interesting account of the episode see also: Chams el-Dine, C., \textit{Warring brothers: Power struggle and the fate of reforms in Iraq}, Amman: Arab Reform Initiative, Policy alternatives, 2016.

\textsuperscript{59} For example, the leader of Asaib ahl al-Haq, Qais Khazali, called for a presidential system for Iraq in 2015. Given his support for Al-Maliki, this was a clear suggestion that Al-Maliki should come back in an even more powerful form. Source: \textit{The New Arab}, August 17, 2015, online: \url{https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2015/8/17/the-heat-of-protests-in-iraq-forces-government-reforms} (accessed 24 November 2016).
against the Islamic State by trying to assert control over (parts of) the Hashd al-Shabi has its place. Coalitions between Shi’a parties continue to prove, as before, to be temporary and convenience-based but may yet solidify in the face of the 2017 and 2018 elections in function of how these threats and opportunities play out.

**Key point for Shi’a relation- and coalition-building:** The decline in the threat posed by the Islamic State and growing Shi’a popular anger with the dysfunctional governance of the central Iraqi state has created a new environment for political competition between, paradoxically, the same group of players. The stakes are high with a view to the 2017/08 elections and key uncertainties include Al-Maliki’s ability to recover the lost ground of 2014 and how the Hasd al-Sha’abi will influence Iraq’s politics despite being legally prohibited from doing so.
2 Understanding Shi’ā political relation- and coalition-building in Iraq

Competition is the default interaction between political groups in any political order. However, in many cases political groups face the necessity of balancing competition with coalition-building with their rivals if they are to achieve their objectives. In this report coalitions are understood to form for utilitarian reasons, i.e. when political groups perceive that they are not able to realize their objectives by themselves, but that this requires developing longer-term collaborative relations with other political groups and a pooling of resources (such as votes or coercive capabilities) so as to generate greater collective benefits that can be distributed in such a way that all coalition participants end up being better off. Objectives can range from increasing general political power to the realization of specific policy objectives.

Good relations between political groups are essential to coalition-building. These do not have to be based on an alignment of political views or political sympathies (although that is likely to help), but they must be grounded in a basic sense of probity, a sense of general trust and reasonable confidence that agreements will be implemented in good faith. The relations between political groups are, so to speak, the texture from which coalitions can arise.60 Naturally, relations influence coalition-building options while coalition participation experiences influence relations. In consequence, the report analyses both the nature of relations between Shi’ā political groups in Iraq and the nature/effects of the coalitions that have sprung from these relations.

The report uses an analytical model to examine the dynamics of relation- and coalition-building between Iraq’s main Shi’ā groups. This model is largely based on existing political science literature and consists of eight factors that analyse how: (a) ‘individual group strengths/weaknesses’ (factors 1–4), (b) ‘group compatibility’ (factors 5–7) and (c) ‘external effects’ (factor 8) influence political relation- and coalition-building. Figure 2 below visualizes the model.

60 It is for this reason that the report does not just use a list of coalitions that have been established between Iraq’s main Shi’ā political groups from 1991 to 2016 as its unit of analysis.
Figure 2  A model for analysing Shi’a relation- and political coalition-building between 1991 and 2016

Designed by Alfred Marseille and Egbert Bleyenburg
The next subsection summarizes key dynamics of Shi’a relation- and coalition-building for each of the five episodes that span the period 1991 to 2016. Although the research analysed each of the eight factors for each of the five periods, a summary is presented here to increase clarity and generate greater insight. This is followed by a factor-by-factor analysis. A distinction has been made between primary and secondary factors that influence relation- and coalition-building to establish a sense of what elements of Figure 2 have tended to matter most.

Together, these sections offer both a general summary of the report’s findings and the more in-depth analysis to substantiate them. This analysis is relevant to policy-makers because the nature, purpose and actions of Shi’a coalitions matter a great deal for the inclusivity of Iraqi politics, the sense of national identity and the long-term governability of the Iraqi state as they dominate its political centre. Understanding Shi’a coalition-formation dynamics is a first step in bringing about greater political participation and a greater sense of the collective good in the way Iraqi politics are conducted.

**Key dynamics between 1991 and 2016**

The complex dynamics of Shi’a relation- and coalition-building in the fast-evolving political environment of Iraq in the past quarter century can broadly be described as evolving from ‘emergence, fluidity and violence’ (1991–2010) to ‘consolidation and authoritarianism’ (2005–14) and finally to ‘unity versus strife and uncertainty’ (2010–16). Table 1 offers a summary breakdown.
Table 1  An overview of key dynamics of Shi’a coalition formation in Iraq between 1991 and 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERIODS, TAGS AND SUMMARIES</th>
<th>Period 1: From the Shi’a rising against Hussein to the murder of Abdel Majid al-Khoei</th>
<th>Period 2: From the murder of Abdel Majid al-Koei to the destruction of the Al-Askari shrine</th>
<th>Period 3: From the rule of Al-Ja’afari to that of Al-Maliki I</th>
<th>Period 4: From the rule of Al-Maliki I to the ‘Hashd al-Shabi fatwa’</th>
<th>Period 5: From the ‘Hashd al-Shabi fatwa’ to the Green Zone protests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emergence, fluidity and violence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics from exile</td>
<td>Politics are domestic but foreign influences matter</td>
<td>The friends of my enemy can be my friends</td>
<td>A strongman rises</td>
<td>Temporarily unified by a new common enemy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under Saddam Hussein, the main Shi’a political actors (except the Sadrist movement) were operating in exile. Shi’a groups were relatively homogenous under strong leadership. They had loyal and historically formed constituencies.</td>
<td>All exiled political Shi’a groups returned to Iraq. Patron–client type relationships between Iraqi Shi’a groups and Iran or the US become more pragmatic and tactical, driven by domestic agendas and objectives.</td>
<td>Shi’a electoral alliance formation in 2005 and 2010 is opportunistic and serves to acquire power, not to exercise it. Alliances fragment rapidly after electoral successes, undermining the quality of governance in the longer term.</td>
<td>This period is characterized largely by the consolidation of power by Nouri al-Maliki and his supporters through increasingly authoritarian and exclusionary means.</td>
<td>The Islamic State becomes the new threat after Saddam Hussein and the US. Grand-Ayatollah Al-Sistani’s fatwa against the IS unintentionally reinvigorated Iraq’s Shi’a armed groups, in particular Iranian-sponsored ones.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

61 A high-ranking Shi’a cleric of the Al-Khoei family who was murdered shortly after the fall of Saddam Hussein because of his perceived collaboration with the US.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KEY DYNAMICS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Growing popular and elite activism</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shi’a discontent with the Baath regime surfaced in the form of the crushed 1991 uprising and the growing popularity of Sadiq al-Sadr’s movement in the late 1990s. Iraq’s Shi’a became more assertive and less accepting of their marginal political status.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Pragmatism can dominate enmity** |
| When the US returned political agency to Iraqi parties, historical rivalries between Shia actors intensified (particularly the Al-Hakim v. Al-Sadr families). Yet, this is balanced by pragmatic collaboration to ensure Shi’a rule. Grand-Ayatollah Al-Sistani emerges as political force by calling on Iraq’s Shi’a to unite. |

| **Leadership matters** |
| The quality, legitimacy and authority of leaders like Al-Sadr, Al-Maliki and Abdel Aziz al-Hakim is crucial for the coherence of their political parties and electoral success. Intra-elite relations strongly influence alliance formation with significant Iranian influence behind the scenes. Al-Maliki commences his stellar rise. |

| **Political fragmentation remains the rule** |
| Al-Maliki’s opponents proved unable to leverage their numerical advantage into tangible action due to infighting between these groups, and because of Al-Maliki’s astute political divide–and-conquer tactics that utilized both state and non-state resources |

| **Effective power requires a strong base** |
| Newly installed Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi managed to retain his post throughout this period. Without a significant political base of his own, however, he was, unable to exercise power effectively, strengthen the state or initiate durable reform. |

| **Political divisions deepen** |
| Towards the end of the period, political divisions between Shi’a parties increased, mostly over the role of Iran, the influence of leaders in exile, and the quietest approach to politics of the Shi’a clergy |

| **Strong legacy effects influence politics** |
| A number of key Shi’a leaders that were (or became) prominent in this period, especially Moqtada al-Sadr and Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, inherited much of their strength from their predecessors/relatives. |

| **Violence deepens** |
| Although intra-Shi’a violence is dealt with pragmatically during alliance formation, its intensity and volume in this period create bitter undercurrents between the Sadrists, Da’wa and SCIRI. Especially as some work with the state, but others against it. |

| **Inclusive governance – by Shi’a political elites for Shi’a political elites** |
| Violent contestation between Shi’a groups is replaced by political consolidation on the basis of an ‘inclusive-tent’ approach. State-based corruption sustains patronage networks of all Shi’a political elites, but to different degrees. |

| **Reform resistance** |
| The anti-corruption protests in 2015–16 cause Baghdad’s political elite to close ranks to defend their interests. This revived the Shi’a National Alliance. Moqtada al-Sadr sought to present himself as an anti-corruption force, which was seen by many as disingenuous. |
Primary factors influencing relation- and coalition-building

Comparative analysis of the eight factors (see Figure 2) across the five periods suggests that the influence of most factors waxes and wanes over time. Nevertheless, on average, four factors are more influential than others and these are discussed in greater detail in this section. They are (in no particular order): i) the level of coherence of (a) group(s); ii) the level of leadership strength and authority; iii) the experience of coalition politics of (a) group(s); and iv) the extent to which shared values enable groups to bridge political differences.

The level of coherence of (a) group(s)

If group coherence is understood in terms of its internal unity and organizational cohesiveness, a marked decrease in the level of coherence of a number of Shi’a political groups can be witnessed between 1991 and 2016. Its effect has been to increase the ad hoc and variable nature of relation- and coalition-building between these groups. In general, the coherence of Shi’a political groups developed from high under Saddam Hussein (1991–2003) and the immediate post-war period (2003–05) to fracturing along old and new fault lines from the 2005 elections onwards (2005–16).

Throughout the 1990s, there were essentially three dominant Shi’a groups: Da’wa, SCIRI and the Sadrist movement (see Box 1). The initial coherence of these groups largely derived from the ‘common enemy’ that the regime of Saddam Hussein was to all of them, as well as the enduring strength of traditional markers of socio-political organization, such as historical legacies, family-inherited leadership and traditional leadership positions. The only significant split that occurred between 1991 and 2005 was the breakaway of the Al-Fadhila party from the Sadrist movement in 2003, just after the US invasion.

Until 2003, leadership of the Shi’a body politic was essentially contested between the Al-Hakim and Al-Sadr families. Together with the less politically oriented Al-Khoei family, they are Iraq’s most prominent Najaf-based clerical families. Although the Al-Hakim and Al-Sadr families together established Da’wa in 1957, the difference in their responses to the repressive actions of Hussein’s regime created an enmity that lasted for decades. Where Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim left Iraq to establish SICRI in 1983 with the aim of

---

62 Relevant indicators include the number of competing factions within a group and the number of splits in a group that result in the exit of a particular faction.

63 The 1990s also saw quasi-permanent arguments between the different Da’wa factions located in London, Damascus and Tehran. The first two ultimately proved the most influential and participated in the Interim Governing Council under Ibrahim al-Ja’afari.

replacing the Baath regime with a replica of Iran’s theocracy, the Sadrist movement stuck it out in Baghdad by taking on a low profile and persisting quietly. This changed in the second half of the 1990s when Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr became an increasingly vocal religious advocate for political change. He paid with his life in 1999. Simplified, the Al-Hakims have since been reproaching the Al-Sadrs for having tacitly supported Hussein’s regime, while the Al-Sadrs have accused the Al-Hakims of abandoning Iraq. Nevertheless, the level of political coherence within Iraq’s main Shi’a parties was high until 2003 as these two families exercised effective control over their respective constituencies and dominated the Shi’a social and political community.

This situation initially remained unchanged after the US invasion. It saw both parties jockeying for influence in a fairly disciplined manner. SCIRI had to manoeuvre between its Iranian patron and the US Coalition Provisional Authority. It chose a strategy of pragmatic cooperation with the US to secure power to rule, which was in large part necessitated by its unpopularity among Iraq’s ordinary Shi’a (see Box 1), while retaining its Iranian connections. The Sadrist movement manoeuvred between its rejection of the US and its desire for greater influence on Iraqi affairs. It ultimately chose a path of armed resistance against US forces. Already in the early days this included selective coercion, or even violence, against Iraqis who were perceived as advising or working with the US, as was most prominently illustrated by the tragic murder of Majid al-Khoei, a senior and respected cleric, in broad daylight in Najaf in 2003. The Islamic Da’wa Party was a minor player at the time, seeking to recover from its long absence from Iraq, its internal splits and the absence of a powerful sponsor. It was buoyed up by the credibility it retained for its resistance against Saddam Hussein and the sacrifices it made.

Splits and factionalism within the main Shi’a political groups became more common after 2005, including Asaib ahl al-Haq under Qais Khazali breaking away from the Sadrist movement in 2006; Kataib Hezbollah from Badr in 2007, Badr distancing itself from ISCI in 2007 and breaking with it in 2012, and the National Reform Trend under

---

65 A relative of Dawa founder Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr.
66 ICG (2007), op.cit.
67 Although Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim was distrustful of the US, he credited it with the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime and expressed some willingness to cooperate with it in the transition towards civilian government. Yet, while he publicly called for an abandonment of violence, the Badr Corps was significantly implicated in sectarian killings. He was assassinated in 2003 by Al-Qaeda and former Ba’athist elements. His son, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, pursued a strategy of pragmatic, double-sided collaboration. See: ICG (2007), op.cit.
68 He returned to Iraq in 2003 after a period of exile in London, only to be killed on suspicion of close association with the US-led coalition which he had advised on several occasions. See: Makiya (2016), op.cit.; Jabar et al. (2012), op.cit.
Al-Ja’afari breaking away from Da’wa in 2008.69 This pattern continued until 2014 when the rise of the Islamic State once more provided Iraq’s Shi’a with a common enemy. This decrease in coherence of key political groups can be explained by a mix of factors:

- **Temporary weaknesses of leadership facilitated internal group dissent and exit.** This includes, for example, Moqtada al-Sadr’s decision to contest the US presence, which put him into permanent conflict with the US, SCIRI and, after 2005, Da’wa-led government forces, internal competition within Da’wa between Al-Ja’afari and Al-Maliki in 2005/6 and the death of Abdul Aziz al-Hakim in 2009 that accelerated the decline of SCIRI.

- **Gradual disappearance of a common enemy increased the space for intra-Shi’a competition.** Al-Qaeda was on the retreat in 2007/08 and the US presence started to be reduced rapidly afterwards. Meanwhile, Iraq’s Shi’a had firmly established control over the central government in 2005 via their United Iraqi Alliance coalition.

- **Iran hedging its bets by encouraging splits where it considered this useful.** Iran purposely avoided becoming over-reliant on a single Iraqi group to represent its interests and correspondingly encouraged splits when particular client groups became too independent-minded in its view (like the Sadrist movement in 2005/06 or ISCI during the late 2000s).

A further break, this time not within a party but between parties, occurred in 2009/10 when Al-Maliki established the State of Law coalition to run separately from the United Iraqi Alliance, which had been the vehicle via which Iraq’s Shi’a acquired control over the central state in 2005. This was a meaningful split because it manifested significant competition between Iraq’s Shi’a in the absence of a common threat or enemy, as both lists were Shi’a-dominated. The main reason for this split was Al-Maliki’s remarkable rise to power (discussed in greater detail in the next section).

The civil war in Syria gave a new impetus to intra-Shi’a divisions on the question of whether or not to engage in the fighting that had erupted next door. This saw Liwa Abu Fadl al-Abbas splitting from the Sadrists’ Mahdi army in 2012 when Al-Sadr prohibited his forces from fighting in Syria; Harakat al-Hezbollah al-Nujaba distancing from Asaib

---

Ahl al-Haq in 2013, while the Badr Corps formally split from ISCI in 2012 to gradually drift into Al-Maliki’s camp, including establishing a presence in Syria.\(^{70}\)

This cabal of internal debate, fragmentation and splitting of political groups quietened down after 2014 when the Islamic State emerged as a clear and present danger. It instilled Iraq’s Shi’a with a new sense of unity, underlined by the creation of the Hashd al-Sa’abi and stiffened by the religious authority of Najaf in support of joint resistance. In the background, however, a rift emerged within Da’wa between Al-Maliki and Al-Abadi. While this has not yet resulted in a formal leadership contestation or split, it is waiting to happen. Moreover, there is reason to expect present Shi’a unity to last no longer than the siege of Mosul. Signs of growing lobbying, jockeying for position and electoral competition can already be clearly discerned.

In short, the initial coherence of Iraq’s main Shi’a parties gave way to much more competitive intra-party politics after control of the central state had been established in 2005. Markers that used to guide intra-Shi’a political relations, such as historic legacies and traditional leadership, lost significant influence after 2005. The combination of reduced party coherence with the proliferation of parties has contributed to making coalitions unstable, ad hoc affairs that are based on short-term confluences of interests. In turn, this has increased political unpredictability and heightened the difficulty of actually executing the business of government.

**The level of leadership strength and authority**\(^{71}\)

Strong leaders have been an influential factor in relation- and coalition-building throughout the entire period of research. It is no exaggeration to say that political power in Iraq centres on individuals and is tied to leaders’ personalities. Perhaps it is leadership more than any other factor that determines when Shi’a political groups are strong and how/when they engage in coalition-building processes. In fact, it is remarkable how a relatively small number of individual leaders have managed to concentrate significant power in their hands on a more or less permanent basis. This includes the likes of Moqtada al-Sadr, the Al-Hakim family and Al-Maliki. Nevertheless, changes are under way in the parameters that frame and enable leadership.

---


71 This factor refers to the prestige, standing and power of a political group’s leadership that keep it unified and in negotiating its relations with other political groups. Relevant indicators include the status and prestige of a group’s leaders and the extent to which group leadership is disputed. It is closely related to factor 1, but merits separate treatment in Iraq as many political groups are dominated by particular individuals.
First, a major shift is taking shape in what makes leadership legitimate and effective. From a classic notion, which is based on inheritance and religious credibility combined with principled political advocacy and non-state sources of authority, there is a shift to a more contemporary notion, which is based on patronage-conferral and deal-making abilities, as well as control over key parts of the state. This is best illustrated by contrasting the development trajectories of two of Iraq’s better-known politicians.

Moqtada al-Sadr originally fitted the classic notion of leadership. He inherited from his father a vast network of charities, schools and mosques as well as a significant popular following. The combination of this legacy and his endorsement by Ayatollah Kazem al-Haeri (his father’s teacher) as his representative in Iraq enabled his rapid development from a young cleric of relatively poor religious standing into a figure of national political influence. Events played a role too, in that the US invasion of Iraq created the space he needed to develop a home-grown, radical and populist movement on the basis of the popularity and esteem his father had accumulated under Hussein’s repressive regime. Moqtada al-Sadr’s achievement is that he merged a political party, religious standing, a network of social service organizations and a non-state armed group into a broad platform for exercising political influence. A shrewd political operator, he developed a quasi-personality cult by championing the lower social Shi’a classes while periodically rejuvenating himself. But the fact remains that much of his initial ‘leadership status’ was inherited. The same argument can be made for the leadership inheritance of figures such as Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr (claimed by a number of individuals within Da’awa and the Sadrist movement) and Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim (conferred upon Abd Aziz al-Hakim and today Ammar al-Hakim).

Although Al-Maliki was also able to leverage Da’wa’s resistance credentials, it is his political skill and patronage, ruthlessness, capture of key elements of the state and good fortune that offer a better explanation for his rise. Al-Maliki’s skill as political operator was proved between 2006 and 2009 when he gradually expanded his network and control over key parts of the administration (such as the Ministry of Defence and the Supreme Court), took credit for the decrease in violence between 2007 and 2009 (largely the result of the combined US troop surge and Sunni tribal ‘Awakening’), and built a strong political...

---

72 The endorsement enabled him to start collecting Islamic taxes that soon became a large source of income for his movement.


74 Al-Qarawee (2014), op.cit.
rapport with Iran.\textsuperscript{75} His ruthlessness showed both in his military operations against the Sadrists in 2008 and in his confrontation with the Kurds in Diyala province, for example.\textsuperscript{76} In respect of using state resources, Al-Maliki used his position as Prime Minister from 2005–10 to lay the basis for far-reaching centralization and personalization of the central state by allocating public positions and funds to cement networks of patronage and influence after 2010. As to the element of good fortune, it must be recalled Da’wa did not have an armed wing of its own in 2003, fewer resources than SCIRI and much less popular support than the Sadrists.\textsuperscript{77} Because of this, a Da’wa Prime Minister proved acceptable to SCIRI and the Sadrists in 2005. Al-Maliki subsequently took advantage of poor perceptions of Al-Ja’afari’s leadership to replace him.

This short analysis of the stellar rise of two of Iraq’s most influential political figures shows the importance of reputation and ‘inheritance’ effects for the legitimacy and effectiveness of leadership between 1991 and 2005. Such legacies flowed from a few towering figures in Iraqi society, who mixed principled political advocacy with religious credibility, to their successors. Once the political environment opened up and competition for power and resources became a possibility, the importance of this factor declined, making space for more patronage, ‘self-made’ and material resource-based notions of leadership. The aforementioned ‘inclusive big-tent approach’ to power by accommodating all main Shi’a political parties means that this style of leadership has become common – a far cry from the more religious and principles-based leadership of before.

A second major development in the parameters that frame political leadership is the increase of religiously inspired political influence and advocacy that has intermittently emanated from Najaf since 2003.\textsuperscript{78} Such religious guidance cannot be politically ignored and sets the frame for political focus, response and action. While the Najaf-based clergy always offered religious guidance, it kept a very low political profile throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, especially after the attempt on Grand-Ayatollah Al-Sistani’s life in 1996. This changed after the US invasion. For example, Al-Sistani issued a fatwa in June 2003 to demand that Iraqis would elect representatives to draft

\textsuperscript{75} Biddle et al. (2012), \textit{op.cit.}

\textsuperscript{76} This mostly refers to a series of incidents in Khanaqin: \url{http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/maliki-government-confronts-diyala} (accessed 19 December 2016); Jabar et al. (2012), \textit{op.cit.}


\textsuperscript{78} By way of background, it should be recalled that the principle of ‘emulation’ is highly influential in Iraqi society and politics. This refers to Shi’a individuals and political groups looking for guidance to a senior cleric (within Shia circles known as an ‘object/source of emulation’ (marja al-taqlid). For example, Grand-Ayatollah Mohnsen Tabatabai al-Hakim was the primary source of emulation for SCIRI in the 1960s, as Grand-Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani is today for many Shi’a political groups.
their constitution, basically declaring the US proposal for a hand-picked constitutional council unacceptable. In the same period, he also shielded Moqtada al-Sadr from the fallout over clashes around the Shi'a shrines in Najaf ith US and SCIRI forces in the wake of the murder of Abdel Majid al-Khoei. Furthermore, his offices and authority were instrumental in pulling the United Iraqi Alliance together, which enabled Iraq’s Shi’a to win the 2005 elections. Later major political interventions by Grand-Ayatollah Al-Sistani include his fatwa that called to arms against the Islamic State in 2014, his call for a change in political leadership in the same year (effectively barring Al-Maliki from a third term as prime minister) and his injunction against corruption in response to the Green Zone protests in 2016. Throughout, he has also provided religious guidance with political relevance via his many representatives during Friday sermons. His personal behind-the-scenes influence is more difficult to assess, but likely equally influential.

While the overall increase in religiously inspired political guidance is clear, its results are more mixed. For example, the United Iraqi Alliance’s electoral win in 2005 assured Shi’a political dominance, but also reinforced sectarian logic and negatively affected the quality of government as the alliance fell apart rapidly after the elections. In similar vein, the call to arms against the Islamic State effectively stopped its expansion, but also reinvigorated an array of non-state armed groups that had become a new political force to reckon with. Worse, the injunction against corruption and pro-reform largely fell on deaf ears.

Reviewing the range of examples above suggests that the influence of the Shi’a religious leadership in Najaf in setting the parameters for political relation- and coalition-building between Iraq’s Shi’a political groups is greatest when its appeals can be framed as: 1) defending a clear community interest (such resisting a US-driven constitution drafting process) or countering a clear threat to the Shi’a community (such as the Islamic State); 2) being relevant to ordinary people, and; 3) can be addressed by straightforward action. The first element provides a shared cause, the second enables direct action on the basis of undisputable religious authority while the third reduces the possibility for interference. For example, fighting the Islamic State meets all three criteria, barring Al-Maliki only two of them (countering a threat and direct action) and targeting corruption just one (a community interest). In short, while Najaf’s religious establishment is effective in framing political issues, it is less influential in bringing about complex change. It has neither the power nor the ambition to see political issues through in an action-oriented manner. Its guidance will not be publicly resisted by political operators, but they are likely to manipulate it ever so subtly if that serves their interests.

79 Schmidt (2008), op.cit.
80 In contrast, his office explicitly forbade the use of religious- and/or Al-Sistani-related symbols and images during the 2010 elections.
Experience of coalition politics

Opposition parties and an independent press were basically non-existent during the rule of Saddam Hussain. The lack of freedom of association and speech meant that such things existed only in exile or underground. This severely limited the ability of political parties to engage in coalitional politics before 2003 as it served little purpose. Although the most pre-eminent political/religious figures of Iraq’s opposition in exile regularly spoke with each other in places like Tehran, Damascus or London, this generated little in the way of coalition-building experience but rather created the networks, perceptions and individual relations that would later matter for how political competition/alliances took shape.

One important aspect of these politics-in-exile dynamics was that much of the opposition against Saddam Hussein was organized on an ethno-sectarian basis, despite the existence of the Iraqi Nation Congress that featured communist, secularist and Shi’a participation. The salience of ethno-sectarianism in Iraq also grew over the same period as a result of the declining ability of the Iraqi state to provide for the basic needs of its citizens, especially after the Iran–Iraq war (1980–88) and the first Gulf War (1991). Social networks (such as tribes and clerical charities) stepped into the local governance and service provision voids that opened up and many of these were affiliated with an ethnic group or religious community. This set the scene for ethno-sectarian identity politics in post-2003 electoral competition as the respective constituencies had already formed out of the necessity to survive. In consequence, when the Iraqi political scene ‘decompressed’ after decades of authoritarian rule, coalition politics have tended to be characterized by three experiences.

- Fragmentation of the party-political landscape. The Iraqi political landscape quickly fragmented after 2003 into a colourful array of competing political groups and coalitions. This made it difficult to build relations – and especially coalitions – with sufficient organizational cohesion, general alignment of political views and a common short-term platform required for creating more durable partnerships. For example, the 2005 elections featured three major contending coalitions that each

81 This factor refers to political parties’ exposure to the practice of combining competitive with collaborative behaviour in order to achieve their political aims, and the experiences they have accumulated in developing approaches and working methods to make such behaviour possible and more effective. Relevant indicators include prior coalition participation and its duration, as well as the experience of a group actually operating in a specific coalition.
84 See for example: Jabar, in: Jabar and Dawod (2003), op.cit.
consisted of a range of parties (the United Iraqi Alliance, the Kurdistan Alliance and the Iraqi Accordance Front) while the 2010 elections featured seven of them (the State of Law Coalition, the Iraqi National Alliance, the Kurdish Alliance, Iraqiya, the Unity of Iraq, the Iraqi Consensus and the Change List) – a 133% increase.85

- **Personality-based parties.** Because Iraq’s Shi’a political parties have tended to be largely personality-based (as opposed to being ideology- or programme-based), they enjoy only modest identities beyond their leader. In short, they are vehicles for leaders to assert their authority, acquire power and amass patronage rather than organizations that advance a vision and a work programme for the actual business of government.86 This has meant that coalitions have been built on the basis of understandings at the top of parties involved, which are easily disrupted and vulnerable to change.

- **Ethno-sectarian mobilization as vote-winner.** The fastest way to build a constituency in the post-2003 environment has been through ethno-sectarian mobilization for the reasons mentioned above.87 This was further strengthened by a lack of mature national political structures, such as a functional electoral commission, and by having rules in place that strengthened ethno-sectarian competition (such as an electoral system of proportional representation with lists organized by region and sectarian quota).88

A brief look at the actual coalitions that formed after 2003 lends support to this reading of experiences in coalition politics. Both the Iraqi National Congress and the Iraqi National Accord proved too diverse in their composition to effectively counter the challenge of the Shi’a-only Iraqi National Alliance in the crucial 2005 elections. More

---

85 Carothers (2008), op.cit.; *Musings on Iraq* (keyword ‘United Iraqi Alliance’), 5 March 2010; Ottaway (2009a), op.cit. It is useful to note here that Iraq uses the Sainte-Laguë method for allocating parliamentary seats in its system of party-list proportional representation. Practically, this means that the translation of the popular vote into seats favours smaller parties, i.e. smaller parties obtain more seats relative to their proportion of the vote. An example in Iraq is how Hanan Fatlawi split from the State of Law coalition ahead of the 2014 elections in order to gain more seats/votes as an ‘independent’ party, only to rejoin the coalition after the elections. See: Grofman, B. and A. Lijphard, *Electoral laws and their political consequences*, New York: Agathon Press Inc., 2003.


87 It should be noted that sectarian identity was initially mostly a Shi’a issue as the dominant state discourse was nationalism and the state was ruled by Sunni. Consequently, the Sunni perceived themselves far less as Sunni than was the case for the marginalized Shi’a majority that made more of an issue out of their sectarian identity and the associated notion of victimhood/entitlement. See: Faddad (2016), op.cit.; Al-Qarawee (2014), op.cit.

importantly, all these three coalitions were short-lived in their active form and were mostly tactical alliances of convenience to win the vote. They did not represent common political platforms with a shared agenda, programme or principles.

The 2010 elections basically offered a repeat performance in respect of coalition experiences being short-lived. Deviating from the United Iraqi Alliance script, Al-Maliki set up the State of Law Coalition around his person in a bid to cement his political position. He overreached electorally and was beaten in the popular vote by Iraqiya. However, he outcompeted it by having recourse to the courts. With Iranian assistance, he subsequently enlisted the Iraqi National Alliance, including ISCI and the Sadrist movement, in support of his own list to obtain a majority and retain his prime minister post. These parties, however reversed course shortly thereafter, citing differences of political views, and went on to compete together against the State of Law Coalition in the 2013 provincial elections. Such fragmentation of pre- and post-electoral alliance meant there was limited experience with durable coalition-building among Shi’ā political groups.

In sum, it is safe to say that political coalitions in Iraq after 2003 have mostly been short-term utility vehicles to acquire power, not to exercise it coherently after electoral victory. Coalitions have been unstable, temporary alliances of convenience that do not provide a common political platform, structure or guiding mechanism. They tend to implode shortly after elections owing to internal rifts, which was the case in both 2005 and 2010. In 2014 it was only the advance of the Islamic State that arguably prevented a similar scenario. The exception has been the continuous presence of the State of Law coalition since 2010. Yet, this is more a manifestation of Al-Maliki’s dominance of Da’wa, supported by a range of satellite parties drawn in by his patronage and power.

**The extent to which shared values enable groups to bridge political differences**

There is a consistent pattern between 1991 and 2014 of Iraq’s Shi’a coming together politically because they are Shi’a. More specifically, this happens when they are faced with an existential threat (e.g. a common enemy) that affects their entire community of belief. It is in these cases that guidance and instructions from the clerical establishment in Najaf are most powerful in providing an interpretative frame of events and in setting a course of action.

---


90 This factor refers to the extent to which groups were able to (temporarily) transcend their political differences because of values they share. Relevant indicators are events that trigger inter-group solidarity, effective political or religious appeals to group commonalities or the presence of a ‘common enemy’.
The pattern consists of events such as the 1991 rebellion against Saddam Hussein after the liberation of Kuwait by coalition forces, the 1999 uprising in the wake of the murder of Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr by regime hitmen, the rise of Al-Qaeda in 2004–2007 (exemplified by the destruction of the Al-Askari shrine in Samarra) and the expansion of the Islamic State in 2014–2016 (exemplified by the capture of Mosul in 2014). Interestingly, the US invasion (and subsequent occupation) were not uniformly considered a threat by the Shi’a community. Its political parties took different sides and religious guidance limited itself to specific processes and objectives that the US administration pursued – without necessarily pronouncing itself on the merits of the US presence in itself. Such specific processes included Grand Ayatollah Al-Sistani’s resistance against the US-designed process for drafting a new constitution in 2004/5, his protection of Moqtada al-Sadr when his Mahdi army clashes with coalition forces around the shrines of Najaf in 2004 and his insistence on a joint Shi’a alliance to carry the 2005 elections.  

Politically speaking, however, these periods of increased intra-Shia solidarity that resulted in a united political front proved to be intense and brief. They did not ultimately result in higher levels of confidence or lasting political coalitions. Factionalism and strife re-emerged rapidly after occurrence of the event or threat, even when the common enemy remained. Examples include the disintegration of the United Iraqi Alliance after the 2005 elections when Shi’a dominance of the state was not yet fully consolidated, or the rapid return of political competition and intrigue after the worst of the threat of the Islamic State had abated, stalling reform efforts and hindering the fight against the group.

Compounding the brevity of such unity in response to external threats, is the likelihood that the socio-economic development of Iraq’s Shi’a community will limit the type and volume of threats that can be addressed through appeals to communal solidarity. As Iraq becomes poorer due to a combination of lower oil prices, a growing population, the cost of fighting the Islamic State and political nepotism, the mass of Shi’a poor is likely
to grow.\textsuperscript{93} This will empower the Sadrist movement which champions this constituency. In contrast, parties such as ISCI and Da`wa have more support among the Shi’a middle classes, Shi’a merchants and the Najaf-based clergy. It is a straightforward matter to see why an issue like corruption is more relevant to Al-Sadr’s constituency than to others. It also helps understand why the anti-corruption drive has largely stalled despite Grand-Ayatollah Al-Sistani’s effort to frame it as a threat to the entire Shi’a community.

To make matters more complex, added to this socio-economic fault line within the Shi’a community is a clerical cleavage that emerged towards the end of the 1990s. It takes the form of junior and younger clerics resenting and rebelling against what they perceived as an insufficient level of political engagement and traditionalism of older members of the clerical establishment. A range of younger clerics considers that the poor social conditions of many Iraqi’s and the low quality of the country’s political leadership necessitate more religion-based political advocacy.\textsuperscript{94} This more interventionist philosophy was powerfully articulated and effectively popularized by Sadiq and Moqtada al-Sadr. It enabled them to build a large popular following that includes a sizeable number of Hawza students in a bid to obtain more political influence that is, however, resisted by the traditional clergy.\textsuperscript{95}

In sum, political relation- and coalition-building between Iraq’s Shi’ा on the basis of common values is likely to become a rarer and more complex endeavour as economic and religious differences in the community deepen. The recent anti-corruption and pro-reform drive provided a taste of what is to come.

**Secondary factors influencing relation- and coalition-building**

Just as the preceding four factors are, on average, more influential in understanding relation- and coalition-building processes between Iraq’s main Shi’a parties, so are the four that follow less influential. This is a difference of modest degree only, however, and it is for this reason that they are also extensively discussed. They include (in no particular order): i) the extent and nature of foreign sponsorship (a) group(s) enjoy(s); ii) the domestic power base and perceptions of (a) group(s); iii) the degree of structural compatibility of political objectives with other groups; and iv) the level of enmity or amity with other groups.


\textsuperscript{94} ICG (2007), *op.cit.*

\textsuperscript{95} Cockburn, P., *Muqtada Al-Sadr and the Battle for the Future of Iraq*, New York: Scribner, 2008; ICG (2007), *op.cit.* On the logic, objectives and frequency of senior Shi’a clerics engaging with the aim of influencing political developments or decisions see also: Corboz (2016), *op.cit.*
Extent and nature of foreign sponsorship that (a) group(s) enjoy(s)\textsuperscript{96}

Given that Iraqi politics experienced eight years of US occupation (2003–11) and remains exposed to substantial Iranian influence, it may come as a surprise that this factor is considered to be of secondary importance. This is largely the case because US political (not military) influence declined substantially after 2004/05, because Iranian influence gradually shifted from political parties to armed groups and because Iraqi nationalism and patriotism meant that Iranian influence always had to contend with Iraqi domestic political imperatives.\textsuperscript{97} In fact, one could argue that Iraq’s Shi’a political elites have been rather adept at using Iranian connections and resources to further their own political objectives – much like the Afghans have done with the US or the Congolese with international donors.

This notwithstanding, Iran was and remains the most influential foreign actor in Iraq by far, largely because of its close affiliation with a number of Iraq’s Shi’a political and armed groups. Iran’s twin objectives are to ensure Iraq is Shi’a-dominated and well disposed towards Iran (partly to avoid any possibility of a repeat of the horrors and defeat of the Iran–Iraq war) and to secure an axis of influence connecting south Lebanon (Hezbollah), Syria (Assad), Baghdad and Tehran.\textsuperscript{98} There are many moments when Iran exercised substantial influence, such as when it supported the creation of the United Iraqi Alliance in 2005 (although Al-Sistani’s role was more decisive), pressurized Moqtada al-Sadr to accept a ceasefire several times between 2007 and 2008 (the military odds were also stacked against the Mahdi army), brokered Al-Sadr’s tacit support for Al-Maliki after the 2010 elections (it was unable to prevent the pre-election split between the State of Law coalition and the United Iraqi Alliance of which the Sadrist movement was a member) and kept Al-Maliki in power in 2012 when Al-Sadr, Al-Allawi and Barzani nearly unseated him as Prime Minister through a no-confidence vote.

To achieve these objectives, Iran has consistently pursued a dual strategy to hedge its bets by, on the one hand, maintaining good relations with several Shi’a political groups at the same time and, on the other hand, by encouraging splits in groups that it considered to have become too autonomous (consider Asaib Ahl al-Haq breaking from the Sadrist movement or Kataib Hezbollah from the Badr Corps). The level of Iranian

\textsuperscript{96} This factor refers to the extent to which (a) group(s) benefit(s) from foreign sponsorship and the degree to which this influences their actions. A key indicator is the discourse of group leaders in terms of the sympathies or antipathies they express vis-à-vis foreign actors.

\textsuperscript{97} This report provides a nuanced, although dated, analysis of Iraq–Iran relations and intentions: International Crisis Group, Iran in Iraq: How much influence?, Amman/Brussels: ICG, Middle East report No. 38, 2005.

influence on Shi’a political parties has waned since 2005–10 as these groups acquired political power of their own and reduced their ties with Iran for a variety of reasons, including electoral ones.

A good example of this development is SCIRI. The party has had to make practical adjustments, culminating in 2007, to the fact that Shi’ism has historically been less politically significant in Iraq, that popular sentiments on the territorial integrity of Iraq run high, nationalism is strong and that Iraq’s influential clerical establishment largely rejects the notion of clerical rule (wilayat-al fiqh).\footnote{Alaaldin, R., ‘Iran’s weak grip: How much control does Tehran have over Shi’a militias in Iraq?’, \textit{Foreign Affairs}, 11 February 2016, online: \url{https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2016-02-11/irans-weak-grip} (accessed 19 December 2016).} As to Da’wa, a distinction must be made between the party and the person of Al-Maliki. The party has generally taken a pragmatic, relatively sympathetic approach to Iranian interests while prioritizing domestic considerations. Al-Maliki established stronger relations with Iran from 2011 onwards by allowing Iranian supplies to pass Iraq \textit{en route} to Syria and by permitting Iraqi Shi’a non-state armed groups to commence expeditionary operations on their neighbour’s territory.\footnote{Al-Khoei (2016), \textit{op.cit.}} Although the Sadrist movement is strongly nationalist, the reality is that the movement has, on occasion, also accepted Iranian support, and accommodated Iranian preferences.\footnote{Musings on Iraq (keyword ‘2005 Iraqi elections’), 6 August 2014}; ICG (2006), \textit{op.cit.} This decreased after 2010, however, and was usually driven by transactional convenience.\footnote{Ibid.; Jabar et al. (2012), \textit{op.cit.}}

In contrast, Iran remains highly influential in respect of a number of non-state armed groups. Some of these groups have been effective in developing a political profile (such as the Badr Corps with over 20 seats in parliament) while others have been less successful in this regard (like Asaib ahl al-Haq). The rise of the Islamic State has empowered such armed groups, but their political relevance and future remain unclear.

A final word is needed on US influence on Shi’a relation- and coalition-building in Iraq. SCIRI and Da’wa pragmatically worked with the US administration and forces for various reasons that have been discussed earlier on in this report (more between 2003 and 2005 than between 2005 and 2011). This served them well and increasing Iraqi political agency meant that US political influence declined correspondingly, especially after its peak in 2005 when it managed to get the Kurdish parties (PUK and KDP) and SCIRI to support its constitutional project.\footnote{Musings on Iraq (keyword: ‘2005 Iraqi elections’), 24 February 2014.} After 2005, the US was politically largely outmanoeuvred by Iran that worked with it via SCIRI/ISCI and Da’wa while also working against it via Asaib ahl al-Haq (2006), Kataib Hezollah (2007) and the Sadrist (until 2008).

100 Al-Khoei (2016), \textit{op.cit.}
101 \textit{Musings on Iraq} (keyword ‘2005 Iraqi elections’), 6 August 2014); ICG (2006), \textit{op.cit.}
102 Ibid.; Jabar et al. (2012), \textit{op.cit.}
Degree of structural compatibility of political objectives with other groups

This factor plays a secondary role in understanding political relation- and coalition-building between Iraq’s Shi’a because political ideologies, viewpoints and programmes have been less differentiating characteristics of groups and their activities than their general socio-political identity, the charismatic authority of their leadership and their historic legacy and legitimacy. Simply put, expediency has mattered more for coalition-building than political viewpoints. Having said this, different viewpoints on three main issues nevertheless differentiated the key parties. These were fairly constant until about 2007/08 and can be summarized as per Table 2 below.

Table 2 Summary of the main issues and political viewpoints differentiating Iraq’s Shi’a parties until about 2007/08

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue 1: US presence in Iraq</th>
<th>Resisting US presence</th>
<th>Collaborating with US presence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sadrist movement</td>
<td>SCIRI, Da’wa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue 2: future territorial governance of Iraq</th>
<th>Federal governance structure</th>
<th>Centralized state</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SCIRI</td>
<td>Da’wa, Sadrist movement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue 3: future spiritual governance of Iraq</th>
<th>More direct clerical influence/control</th>
<th>More indirect clerical influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SCIRI</td>
<td>Da’wa, Sadrist movement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nevertheless, such positions were generally treated pragmatically in processes of coalition-building and there have been few, if any, ideological non-negotiables if temporary compromises and/or alliances could increase the share of power of any particular group. In short, the scope for negotiation and compromise under the right conditions was significant.

Partly as a result of being fed up with deteriorating socio-economic prospects resulting from years of violence, the Iraqi electorate started to attach less importance to the issues listed in Table 1, historical legacies/loyalties, and national ethno-sectarian identity politics after 2008. Instead, it prioritized local issues (such as local identity) and day-to-day priorities (such as housing and security). ISCI (formerly SCIRI), for example, lost a significant slice of the vote in the 2009 provincial elections because it was perceived as contributing to insecurity rather than reducing it. In contrast, Al-Maliki’s State of Law

---

104 This factor refers to the degree to which the objectives of Iraq’s various Shi’a political parties overlap and so facilitate coalition-building. A key indicator is document and speech analysis of the major political groups and leaders to identify their objectives.

coalition managed to benefit in the 2010 national elections from an improving security situation that occurred under his watch. The surprise win of the Al-Iraqiya list in the same elections on the basis of a non-sectarian and pragmatically oriented platform provides further evidence for this shift (it outcompeted the State of Law Coalition by two votes). Generally, both ISCI and the Sadrist movement continue to be hindered by the popular memory of their part in the terrible sectarian violence of 2006–08.

This development of voters prioritizing acute daily life problems and what political parties propose to do about them, can be expected to continue. The recent protests about corruption and clamours for government reform illustrate its potential. However, there are also opposing trends. One is that several parties, Da’wa in particular, have established such deep influence/control over many parts of the government and Iraq’s public resources that they can run extensive patronage networks that are more decisive for electoral results than the quality of their political ideas and policy programme.

Another opposing trend is that few channels exist for Shi’a opposition parties and/or movements to register their discontent and exercise political influence, despite widespread disgust with the Shi’a ruling elite among both the population and the Najaf-based clergy. The governance of Iraq has become somewhat of an insider job between the usual suspects that are superficially united in a ‘big tent’ division of power and resources. This creates the possibility that dissenting voices and an aggrieved population will look for different ways to manifest their grievances, as Al-Sadr has already sought to pioneer with the street protests and storming of the Green Zone in the summer of 2016, temporarily abandoning the internal logic of the political system altogether.

The domestic power base and perceptions of (a) group(s)

This factor can also be considered of secondary importance in terms of its influence on Shi’a relation- and coalition-building processes because, for various reasons, the main three Shi’a political parties of 1991 remain so in 2016. Although the power bases

---

106 Ibid.
107 For example, one interviewee commented that Al-Maliki’s resistance against government reform stemmed in part from the proposal to replace ministers as well as their deputies and directors-general. Allegedly, many of these latter two categories are staffed by individuals loyal to him and this is where much administrative power is said to reside.
108 This factor refers to the domestic power base of a group as well as popular and elite perceptions of a group that influence its weight and ability to engage in coalition-formation processes. Relevant indicators are historic legacies of a group and prevailing popular/elite perceptions at a particular point in time.
109 A tentative case could be made that they have been joined by the Badr Corps as a significant political party after its formal split from ISCI in 2012. The 2018 elections will show whether Badr’s political presence is durable.
and perceptions of SCIRI, Da’wa and the Sadrist movement have waxed and waned throughout the research period, they have remained constant enough in overall relative terms to maintain approximate political parity. The issue is perhaps not so much their primacy, but the relatively narrow support base on which it is based. Each party typically obtains a relatively modest part of the vote of around 10–15%, which suggests that none has a sufficient socio-political power base to lead without either entering into (a) durable coalition(s). Both stand in the way of building the durable coalitions that have so far proved to be rather elusive. Be that as it may, the main shifts in the relative positions of Da’wa, SCIRI and the Sadrists between 2003 and 2016 are the following:

When Da’wa re-entered Iraq from exile in 2003 it had great credibility, but was without constituency, foreign sponsor and unified leadership. This explains why it started out as the junior Shi’a party in 2003 compared with the Sadrists and SCIRI. In 2016 it arguably is the main Shi’a political party, even despite its internal division between Al-Maliki and Al-Abadi. In the period 2003–10, Da’wa acquitted itself professionally of the tasks of re-uniting its globally dispersed leadership after exile, avoiding overt association with either the US or Iran, retaining a belief in the need for a strong state (in part by not building up its own armed wing and by avoiding being seen to contribute to sectarian violence) and rebuilding a domestic constituency. As a result of these efforts and Al-Maliki’s individual leadership skills, it came to exercise substantial control over important parts of the Iraqi government and administration. It also remained relatively secular but with sufficient religious affiliation to be broadly acceptable. Despite Al-Maliki’s divisive style, the party still has a broad political cadre and enjoys appreciable popular legitimacy.

SCIRI entered the Iraqi political fray in 2003 as an Iranian proxy with strong discipline, tight organization and abundant financial resources. But it lacked a domestic support base and faced substantial popular mistrust in Iraq. Through its collaboration with the US, it gained control over nine provinces (including Baghdad) and parts of the central government, notably the ministries of the interior and finance and a vice-president position. It subsequently rebranded itself as an Iraqi Shi’a middle- and

---

110 The lists of which they are part do better and tend to gather between 20–30% of the vote (consider the 2010 and 2014 elections, for example). Yet, it should be recalled that these lists are loose and diverse platforms. See: Jabar et al. (2014), op.cit.; Ali (2014), op.cit.; http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/03/11/world/middleeast/20100311-iraq-election.html?_r=0; the Iraqi Independent High Election Commission: http://www.ihec.iq/Arabic/index.aspx (both accessed 20 December 2016).

111 It also points to the fragmentation of Iraqi politics. Jabar et al. (2014), op.cit. note that the 2014 elections featured 9,000 candidates linked with 270 electoral entities that were allied in 36 blocs (lists) competing for 328 seats.

112 This statement is largely based on Interviews conducted in Baghdad between 30 October and 5 November 2015. To the authors’ knowledge, no reliable public opinion polls exist.

113 Schmidt (2008), op.cit.
upper-class party in 2007/08. But where Da’wa was able to claim credit for the security improvements of 2008/09, ISCI was blamed for contributing to insecurity and for failing to provide essential government functions. The rise of the State of Law coalition (2008/09), the death of Abdul Aziz al-Hakim (2009) and the breakaway of the Badr Corps (2007/12) led to a decline in the (electoral) fortunes of the party. It sought to revive these – rather successfully – via alliances with the Sadrist in the provincial elections of 2013 and national elections of 2014. Today the party is diminished but remains a relevant force.\textsuperscript{114}

In 2003, the Sadrist movement featured a strong popular following. It provided a wide range of social services to the Shi’a poor with dedication and discipline in the wake of the US invasion. Its strong nationalist agenda enabled it to stay clear of accusations of being a proxy of anyone (save from the charge of having collaborated with the Ba’ath regime). This strong starting point was, however, diminished by its violent resistance against the US that saw combined coalition and domestic security forces bear down on the movement to the point that it had to cease its armed struggle in 2008. Al-Sadr subsequently ‘re-invented’ himself by positioning himself as a religiously based political advocate for the Shi’a underclasses with a willingness to work across sectarian groups, as was recently demonstrated during the 2016 street protests against corruption. However, his self-styled role as ‘outsider’ has not prevented the movement from joining electoral lists (2005), teaming up with vote-winning ‘others’ (Al-Maliki II in 2010) or running various ministries (e.g. 2010–12).\textsuperscript{115} In short, depending on what best serves its interests, the movement blends participation in government with exit from government and street protest.

In short, it is perhaps fair to say that at present ISCI is the party with the weakest domestic support base but, until 2012, had the strongest foreign sponsorship. The Sadrist continue to have the strongest popular support base, but have largely been unable to translate this into decisive political influence and power. Da’wa has steadily increased its support base, in part as a result of the skilful political leadership of the person of Al-Maliki. The ultimate effect of his divisive style cannot yet be assessed, however, and casts a shadow over the party.

\textsuperscript{114} Jabar et al. (2014), op.cit.

\textsuperscript{115} See also Mansour and Clark (2016), op.cit. on this point who argue that Al-Sadr aspires ‘to be part of a system in which he himself represents the change’.
Level of enmity/amity with other groups

This factor is of secondary importance in influencing relation- and coalition-building because the significant enmities – historical and more recent – that exist between Iraq’s main Shi’a political groups have generally not stopped them from pragmatically working together when this was in their interests. However, the absence of trust such enmities have engendered, helps explain why durable Shi’a political coalitions are so hard to establish.

Unsurprisingly, in the long years of intra-Shi’a violence between 2004 and 2008 many enmities accumulated. To an appreciable extent, these built on historic family feuds and long-simmering tensions between leaders that preceded the US occupation of Iraq. A primary example is the rivalry between ‘Sadr’ and ‘Badr’ (SCIRI) between 2003 and 2008 that continued the clash for control and influence between two of Iraq’s most powerful religious families, the Al-Hakims and the Al-Sadrs. Major episodes include the firefight between their forces in Karbala in 2007 (50 Shi’a pilgrims died) and the 2008 Charge of the Knights operation during which Badr forces fought on the side of government and coalition forces against the Mahdi army in Baghdad, Basra, Amarah and other cities. This did not prevent both parties from teaming up in the United Iraqi Alliance (2005 elections), the Iraqi National Alliance (2010 elections) or during the provincial elections of 2013. Yet, mutual distrust lingers.

Other significant enmities between Shi’a political groups include Al-Maliki/Da’wa initiating the 2008 military operation against Sadrist forces, Da’wa efforts to marginalize and reduce the influence of ISCI in the second half the 2000s, Al-Maliki’s divisive policies during his second tenure (2010–14), a series of assassinations of leading Sadrists by Asaib ahl al-Haq in 2012 or, more recently, the stand-off between Sadrists

116 This factor refers to the positive or negative relations that exist between political groups on the basis of past and current events, experiences, and perceptions. Relevant indicators include relations between leaders of different groups, ‘hate’ or ‘ally’ elements in group discourse and the actual use of tools of power against other groups.


118 Williams, C., Iraq’s Sadr orders militia to stand down, Los Angeles Times, 30 August 2007; Stanford University, Mapping militant organizations, online: http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups (profile on the Mahdi Army) (accessed 20 December 2016).


120 Several interviews conducted in Baghdad between 30 October and 5 November 2016.
and other Shi’a groups on the reform agenda that nearly resulted in violent clashes across Baghdad city.\(^{121}\)

The general impression that emerges is that enmity/amity between political groups does not stand in the way of pragmatic power deals that further their specific interests at a particular point in time. A common enemy, if present, does further reduce levels of enmity as it prompts Shi’a groups to close ranks, while its absence amplifies intra-Shia rivalries.

\(^{121}\) Although, surprisingly, Sadr’s peace brigades, Asaib ahl al-Haq and Kataib Hezbollah seem to have good relations. See: Stanford University, *Mapping militant organizations*, online: http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups (relevant profiles) (accessed 20 December 2016).
Of effects and consequences

Shi’a political parties, objectives and manifestations journeyed from a repressive dictatorship through a period of chaotic competition for power and bloody civil wars with their Sunni compatriots and their own to consolidate temporarily around the figure of Nouri Al-Maliki. This fragile balance was shattered by the brutal expansion of the Islamic State. Despite the peculiarities and uniqueness of each major political manoeuvre between 1991 and 2016, it is nevertheless possible to identify a few overarching tendencies that have characterized Shi’a relation- and coalition-building. This a useful exercise because victory in Mosul will only mark the next waystation on the winding path of Shi’a politics in Iraq.

An observation that is as critical as it is obvious, is that Iraq’s Shi’a are far from a unified and homogeneous political force: their political and religious leadership is contested, their loyalties divided and their worldly views diverse.\(^{122}\) In short, when external threats are removed from the equation, Shi’a politics and political parties are, in many regards, remarkably similar to those found in non-sectarian democracies. This suggests a need for fine-grained analysis of parties, factions within parties and existing political interests as a precursor to understanding Shi’a political activity in Iraq. Notions that a ‘Shi’a crescent’ – including Iraq – represents an existential and uniform transnational threat to regional peace and stability must be treated with considerable scepticism as they are too selective of reality.\(^ {123}\)

In the context of Iraq’s emergent post-Hussein democracy, Iraq’s Shi’a parties have consistently sought to acquire and maintain political power for the sake of it.\(^ {124}\) In the main, Iraq’s Shi’a parties have not differentiated themselves a great deal by offering competing views on how they wish to develop governance and stimulate society in Iraq. Even principled positions, such as views on the role of clerics in political life or the structure of the Iraqi state, have proved flexible to the point of unreliability while they retained discourse and voter mobilization value. Examples include the gradual loosening of SCIRI’s alliance with Iran, Al-Sadr’s pragmatic cooperation with Al-Maliki or his tacit

---


123 The notion of a ‘Shi’a crescent’ is attributed to the Jordanian king Abdullah II in 2004.

124 This is quite unsurprising and understandable, given a history of religious repression, political marginalization and the emergent, uncertain and violent character of Iraqi democracy and society between 2003 and 2008. Its effects and consequences have, however, been less salubrious.
acceptance of Iranian support in the mid-2000s. Instead, Iraq’s Shi’a political parties have adroitly jockeyed for position and ferociously competed with each other for political power by use of most means imaginable.

In this quest for power, the role of individual leaders and their predecessors has been highly salient, both in terms of the success of specific parties and in terms of relation- and coalition-building. Iraqi Shi’a politics are both historically influenced and highly personalized. Individuals such as Moqtada Al-Sadr and Abdul Aziz Al-Hakim have capitalized on the religious and political legacies of illustrious relatives by force of association. For example, Moqtada al-Sadr rapidly rose from being a junior cleric to a dominant political/religious figure via the broad popular base he inherited from his father and by continuing his championship of an under-represented constituency (the Shi’a poor).

**Box 3  Characteristics of Shi’a political relation- and coalition-building between 1991 and 2016**

- Iraq’s Shi’a are far from a unified political force despite their shared belief. Instead, their political parties compete viciously with each other, using all means imaginable.
- Historical legacies and the role/quality of leaders dominate political party development.
- There is a high degree of continuity of individual Shi’a leaders and elites in Iraq’s governance at the level of the central state.
- Coalitions between Shi’a parties have been unstable, ad hoc affairs aimed at winning the vote, carving up public authority and resources, and/or responding to an imminent threat.
- Religion-based political influence is strong on issues on which the Shi’a community is united, but limited on issues on which it is not.
- Shi’a political parties unite temporarily in the face of an external threat, especially if called upon by their religious leadership, but this tends to be short-lived and does not reduce opportunistic political behaviour.

A consequence of the combination of political competition for its own sake and the personalized-cum-patronage character of Iraqi Shi’a politics has been that political coalitions have largely been vehicles of opportunity to win power and associated resources. They have tended to take the form of either pre-electoral lists to legitimately acquire control over the state, or of post-electoral alliances to form government. Examples include the United Iraqi Alliance electoral list of 2005 or the post-2010 elections alliance between the State of Law Coalition and the United Iraqi Alliance. Such coalitions have equally rapidly fallen apart once the business of government got
serious after elections. This has had a negative impact on the quality of governance due to long periods of negotiation, high levels of discontinuity and a heightened risk of abuse of public authority.

The above notwithstanding, Iraq’s Shi’a political groups have also repeatedly demonstrated a sense of solidarity and unity when threatened by clear and imminent danger. This is based on their historical marginalization, a shared sense of victimhood and fear of Ba’ath revanchism. Examples include resistance against an inclusive constitution drafting and electoral process in 2003–05, the rise of Al-Qaeda and other radical Islamist Sunni groups between 2004 and 2007 or the Islamic State in 2014. Yet, such unity tends to be temporary. The front against the Islamic State, for instance, is fraying at the edges now that the group is presumably contained in Mosul, as different parties stake claims on the success of the Hashd al-Shabi.

Furthermore, Iraq’s main Shi’a parties became willing participants in a ‘big tent’ political logic after 2010, which is premised on accommodating them by giving each a stake in the form of political influence on government policy, control over parts of the administration and/or public resources. This was largely instigated by Al-Maliki and his tactical approach can be stylistically summarized as: ‘cooptation where possible, marginalization where necessary’ in respect of Iraq’s Shi’a and ‘marginalization where possible, cooptation where necessary’ in respect of the country’s Sunni and Kurds. That this approach has increased levels of state capture, enhanced sectarian frames and led to the fragmentation of public authority has been well documented.125

Finally, the level of continuity of Shi’a political parties and individual leaders has been remarkably high since 2003. There have been few new political parties entering the fray or fresh faces taking on a leadership role. Da’wa, ISCI and the Sadrists Trend were, and have remained, the key political platforms. Their leaders dominate the political scene together with individuals who have a more militant background but who are gradually increasing their political influence. These includes figures such as Qais al-Khazali (Asaib ahl al-Haq), Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (Kataib Hezbollah) and Amer al-Ameri (Badr Corps). Moreover, Iraq’s Shi’a leaders seem largely occupied with each other and their relative positions. A key consequence is that rejuvenation of the Shi’a body politic has been very limited. As poor governance, insecurity, low economic growth prospects and inadequate service delivery are creating a growing body of grievances, few channels exist outside of the political establishment to manifest them.126

In sum, coalition formation between Iraq’s main Shi’a groups has been an unstable, rough-and-tumble affair that has, since 2003, largely been conducted by the same

126 Several interviews conducted in Baghdad between 30 October and 5 November 2016.
A house divided | CRU Report, February 2017

cast of characters and parties. Despite violence and poor relations between a number of them, they have pragmatically formed coalitions, overcoming existing enmities and adjusting principled positions with flexibility where this was in their interests. While this has ensured the consolidation of Shi’a political dominance, increased the confidence of the main Shi’a political parties and established a measure of stability of governance, it has also reduced the quality of governance and administration and discouraged new political entrants. A key question for the future is to what extent these negative effects can be remedied on the basis of current Shi’a political strength and confidence. Present-day political dynamics between Iraq’s Shi’a suggest that competition and fragmentation are likely to remain the norm, perhaps with new alliances forming from the same cast of players.

Policy insights and recommendations

As the dominance of ethno-sectarian logic makes the emergence of cross ethno-sectarian alliances less likely and as Iraq’s Shi’a will continue to dominate the central state, their political unity and attitude are critical factors influencing Iraq’s future. One would assume that if there was unity of purpose among the political leadership of Iraq’s Shi’a, and if they held a positive attitude towards the country’s Sunni and Kurds, that this would increase the chance of an attractive deal being developed that could keep the country together. Focusing on the first part of this hypothesis, the report’s findings suggest that such intra-Shi’a political unity was absent for most of the 1991–2016 period. Intense and personalized political competition for power between the same cast of elite players, fractious coalitions and a low level of trust indicate that general agreement on major future policy challenges for Iraq, let alone a broadly shared vision of the country’s future, has not generally been in place between the main Shi’a political groups.

That makes it paramount that greater efforts are made to address this gap. On the one hand, this will need to be done via existing political parties and their leadership because of their dominant position. On the other hand, this will need to be done outside of these very same parties and their leadership because of their dominant position. This is not a contradiction, but a reflection of the fact that change will require, in all likelihood, complementary political initiatives from inside and from outside Iraq’s political system.

As domestic politics are a notoriously difficult area to understand for external actors, let alone to engage effectively with, a high degree of modesty and humility is in order. External actors will not be able to drive any of the recommendations suggested below. The rapidity with which the political influence of the US declined after 2003 – despite

the vast resources it brought to bear on the twin tasks of securing and rebuilding Iraq –
offers a cautionary tale, as does the mixed record of Iranian intervention. Yet, external
actors can discreetly and indirectly support these recommendations. The preceding
analysis suggests four that may have particular merit. These are briefly discussed below.

**Working with existing political parties and their leadership**

1. **Support efforts at political confidence-building and reconciliation between
Iraq’s Shi’a political groups.**

Reconciliation efforts in Iraq have so far largely focused on bridging the divides between
Iraq’s three main ethno-sectarian communities: Sunni, Shi’a and Kurds.\(^{128}\) However
necessary and urgent such efforts are, the preceding analysis suggests that they may
be a step too far as Iraq’s Shi’a are insufficiently politically united to give them much
traction.\(^{129}\) Although not covered by this report, the same fragmentation characterizes
Iraq’s Sunni community, given its fragmented and delegitimized leadership, as well as
its Kurdish community, given the deep political rifts between the PUK, Goran and KDP.
This suggests that building political confidence and bringing political reconciliation
about *within* ethno-sectarian groups is of the essence. Practical initiatives that could be
supported to this effect at the national political level include:

- *Enable a series of facilitated meetings* between Iraq’s Shi’a political parties with the
explicit aim of trust-building. The composition of such meetings could vary to respect
the time and the needs of politicians of different levels of seniority and to work from
smaller to larger meetings, but the key is that an organization with experience in
trust-building between entities that naturally oscillate between competition and
collaboration, has a clear mandate from the Shi’a National Alliance and implicit
endorsement from the Najaf-based clergy. One could think of an organization that
excels in the field of mediation, such as the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, or
an organization with knowledge of multiparty systems, such as the Netherlands

---

\(^{128}\) See for example: [https://agendaeurope.wordpress.com/2016/11/17/european-parliament-assists-
reconciliation-efforts-in-iraq/](https://agendaeurope.wordpress.com/2016/11/17/european-parliament-assists-

\(^{129}\) For example, the Shi’a-dominated National Alliance recently announced the completion of its ‘Historical
Settlement’ document, but given that this body is rather fractious and that national reconciliation efforts
since 2003 have largely remained at the declarative level, some scepticism is justified. See: [http://www.
15 December 2016).
Institute for Multiparty Democracy, working with one or several Iraqi organizations. A specific programme would need to be developed consultatively.

- **Support a long-term leadership development programme** that is initially focused on Shi’a political parties. It is likely that the volatility, violence and marginalization of Iraq’s recent history, combined with long-standing cultural and religious influences, have produced a notion of leadership that is no longer sufficient to serve, guide and govern a country of such mixed composition, with such raw wounds and facing huge peacebuilding and development problems. An intervention that brings political leaders together over a longer period of time in a format oriented towards relationship-building, increasing reflective capacities and exploring different concepts of leadership, could make a positive difference. Similar efforts have been made to reasonably good effect in places such as Burundi or East Timor that can be built upon.

2. **Stimulate a greater level of informal, open and confidential exchange between Iraq’s Shi’a political leadership on possible futures for the country**

Iraq faces a range of daunting development problems including the need to improve its economic situation, defeat the Islamic State, resolve territorial divisions and ethno-sectarian divides, as well as increasing the poor quality of governance. Most of these issues are politically contentious, as was well illustrated by the recent reform and anti-corruption efforts. In other words, creating more deliberative space, which is less politically charged and more infused by evidence-based ideas of what can be done, would seem useful. It would seek to bring the Shi’a political leadership together to discuss policy issues and options for the future of Iraq in a confidential and informal manner. Whatever emerges from it, could then be exposed to political preferences and debate. It would have the dual aim of enabling more open, less sensitive exchanges on key political issues while also increasing the quality and diversity of ideas to address them. Practical initiatives that could be supported to this effect include:

- **Facilitate a policy dialogue initiative** that develops ideas and solutions for a current or upcoming policy issue of lesser salience through a series of informal, closed-door sessions that mingle politicians with experts and civil society representatives. Similar initiatives have been piloted in Kyrgyzstan on opening the media landscape.

---


in Tunisia on social justice and in Ghana on women’s participation in political life that can provide learning experiences and inspiration.\textsuperscript{132}

- **Organize a scenario-planning trajectory to envision different futures for Iraq.** The aim here would be to engage the Shi’a political leadership in a joint thought exercise of what might come to pass for the country, depending on what particular actions and decisions are taken by key entities and actors. Again, this would help create more of a shared general background on, and perhaps understanding of, significant political challenges. This will not lead to immediate political change, but may stimulate longer-term convergence. An example of how this can work is provided by the scenario-planning work on South Africa’s future that was done within the Anglo-American Corporation and subsequently presented in a range of town hall meetings across the country as well as to De Klerk’s cabinet. Further influential scenario-planning exercises have followed, such as the ‘Mont Fleur’ scenarios from the University of Capetown.\textsuperscript{133}

**Working outside of existing political parties and their leadership**

3. **Provide long-term support to Shi’a social movements, civil society advocacy groups and nascent political parties.**

Given the high level of Shi’a political elite and party continuity and the difficulty of penetrating existing arrangements, there is value in supporting the development of new Shi’a political actors that constructively and peacefully challenge the performance of those in charge of Iraq by contributing new ideas, tapping into new constituencies and reinvigorating debate. This will help to shake up some of the apparent current complacency and perhaps even to break through some of the resistance in the course of time. In other words, countervailing Shi’a social forces are needed to create more meaningful social contestation. This may seem a bit paradoxical, given Iraq’s many ethno-sectarian divides that already exist, but merely reflects the need to redress Shi’a elite capture of Iraq’s political centre. Practical initiatives that could be supported to this effect include:

- **Provide long-term core funding to set up an incubator for new Shi’a movements and organizations with a political orientation** that is open to applications on the basis


of impartial criteria such as having a mission to influence Iraqi politics at local or national level, operating peacefully, contributing constructively and being inclusive in terms of socio-political and religious affiliation, as well as gender. The key is to avoid donor-bias by making selection dependent on alignment with short-term donor priorities. Such an incubator should provide qualifying organizations with multi-year funding to cover operational expenses (such as premises, a skeleton staff and daily running cost), as well as organizational advice (on capacity-building, advocacy, campaigning and the like). The aim is to provide a long-term enabling environment for the emergence of new, viable political organizations that express new voices. As ‘new’ organizations typically have a significant failure rate, such an initiative is best considered as a high-risk venture capitalist investment.

- Offer discreet ‘diplomatic protection’ to such movements, initiatives and parties. Process of social contestation in fragile societies are unlikely to be free of coercion, intimidation or even violence. While the utmost should be done to avoid them, preparations should also be in place to face them. Sponsoring and nurturing new or emergent political/civil society organizations for positive change in the face of elite capture and continuity will inevitably generate a backlash once such new actors become effective by, for example, pushing existing parties to develop more specific programmes and demonstrate greater accountability for their governance track record. This is when they require diplomatic protection in the form of relations, speaking out at the highest levels when needed and public support within, of course, the bounds of diplomatic convention and the legal framework.

4. Encourage a civic awareness campaign that raises citizens’ understanding of the role of political parties in an emergent democracy.

Iraq is an emergent democracy with a young population that has seen significant levels of violence and deteriorating ethno-sectarian political relations in the first 13 years of its post-Hussein existence. It has little by way of an independent press that provides unbiased, high-quality reporting, and economic prospects are worsening. Its economy is dominated by state-provided employment in which oil revenue plays a substantial role. The convergence of these elements means that popular conceptions of what might be expected from political parties in an emergent democracy are relatively easily influenced and managed by Iraq’s elites. Citizens are largely dependent on the state for employment

---

134 Experience elsewhere, for example during Yemen’s National Dialogue Conference, shows that supporting civil society organizations on a project-by-project basis in countries that are emerging from repressive rule by dictator or strongman does not create the long-term capabilities needed to create real influence. See for example: Gaston, E., Process lessons learned in Yemen’s National Dialogue, Washington DC: USIP, 2014; Alwazir, A., Yemen’s independent youth and their role in the National Dialogue Conference, Berlin: SWP Comments, 2013.
and services, and these are increasingly patronage-based. In short, the quality of politics and governance in Iraq can be raised by increasing the political expectations of its population. Practical initiatives that could be supported to this effect include:

• **Supporting the development of independent, high-quality media outlets.** Although the internet penetration rate in Iraq is low (c. 13%), its literacy rate is high (c. 80%). Efforts to increase the quality of its political reporting can help to increase both transparency and accountability of political processes. It can also complement a support strategy for new political actors by increasing the information that is available for political activity, seen as a common good. A cautious start could be made by leveraging the United Nations’ experience in setting up an in-country Arabic-language radio station through the good offices of the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI).\(^{135}\)

• **Setting up an Erasmus-like study programme** so that Iraqi youth have the possibility to follow a political-science oriented curriculum during a semester at a European university. If done at reasonable scale, this would serve to increase the political awareness, networks and exposure of Iraqis who will influence, one way or another, the future of their country. Such an initiative could also be combined with support for new organizations trying to exercise political influence by including their members as a prominent target group.

Although further action research is needed to operationalize these recommendations, they offer a direction for building on the positive features of Shi’a relation- and coalition-building in Iraq, such as its pragmatism, speed and ability to develop compromise, while addressing its less productive aspects.

Annex 1 Methodology

This report is based on a mix of political science theory, analysis of existing qualitative research, a set of interviews conducted in Baghdad and social media analysis of three key Shi’a political/armed groups. All analysis was conducted between June and January 2016.

• The model for analysing factors that influence political relation- and coalition-building processes was developed on the basis of existing political science literature using key words such as ‘coalition formation’, ‘social identity’, ‘political party alliances’ and ‘electoral strategies’. Searches were focused on the particular political conditions of fragile and conflict-affected environments. The resulting insights were tested against more Iraq-specific analyses to ensure emerging factors were fit for purpose. Annexe 2 provides the model in full.

• This model was subsequently used to comb through existing analyses of the political situation in Iraq from 1991 to 2016. These 25 years were divided into five distinct periods that are delineated by major markers relevant to Iraq’s Shi’a community. We focused on events relevant to the Shi’a community because of the report’s focus on Shi’a coalition formation. Section 2 of the report relates such events to Iraq-wide events over the same period. This provided a useful frame for understanding the direction and relevance of different factors over time. The result was five non-published working reports of c. 15 pages each. We also commissioned a discussion paper to inform this phase of the work that was produced by Renad Mansour of Chatham House. The periods are:

Table 3 Five distinct periods of Shi’a relation- and coalition-building since 1991

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Start and finish events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991–2003 (12 years)</td>
<td>From the Shi’a rising against Saddam Hussein to the murder of Abdel Majid al-Khoei</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003–2006 (3 years)</td>
<td>From the murder of Abdel Majid al-Khoei to the destruction of the Al-Askari shrine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005–2010 (5 years)</td>
<td>From the election of Al-Ja’afari to the end of Al-Maliki (I)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010–2014 (4 years)</td>
<td>From the election of Al-Maliki (II) to the fatwa that called Iraqi’s to arms against the Islamic State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014–2016 (4 years)</td>
<td>From the fatwa that called Iraqi’s to arms against the Islamic State to the Green Zone protests</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• Twenty interviews were conducted in Baghdad between 30 October and 5 November 2016 with a mix of government representatives, parliamentarians, members of armed groups (both paramilitary and non-state) and religious representatives. These interviews were conducted on the basis of anonymity and lasted about an hour each.

• In-depth analysis of Arabic-language social media was conducted by Nissrine Majdi of three Iraqi Shi’a groups that seemed under-analysed in English-language works despite their relevance: the Badr corps, Asaib ahl al-Haq and the Sadrist Trend (including its various armed wings). This analysis mapped group objectives, recent experiences and alliances.

The main weakness of the report is that it does not properly analyse ‘secular’ Shi’a parties, movements and/or protesters (secular in the sense of separating politics from religion to some degree). The interviews in Baghdad sought to remedy this gap, but were unsuccessful.
Annex 2  A model for examining political relation- and coalition-building

The eight factors below form the analytical model that the report uses to examine relation- and coalition-building processes between Iraq’s main Shi’a groups. Although the model was designed for this study, it is likely to have broader applicability due to its (partial) grounding in political science literature. The factors assess how the interplay between individual group strengths/weaknesses (factors 1–4), group compatibility (factors 5–7) and external effects (factor 8) influences political relation- and coalition-building.

Table 4  A political science based model for analyzing political relation- and coalition-building

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Possible indicator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(A). Group strengths/ weaknesses</td>
<td><strong>1. Level of coherence of (a) group(s)</strong></td>
<td>Number of competing factions within (a) group(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Higher levels of unity of (a) group(s) makes it easier to build coalitions as their greater singularity of purpose and discipline gives (a) group(s) better confidence and greater leverage in negotiations, and it facilitates implementation of compromise once it is reached. Lower unity has the opposite effect.</td>
<td>Number of splits within (a) group(s) that result in exit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>2. Level of leadership strength and authority</strong></td>
<td>Status and prestige of (a) group(s) leader(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strong, unified leadership makes it easier for (a) group(s) to engage in coalitions as it enables both effective representation and compromise. It is also a factor that influences the level of homogeneity of (a) group(s): strong leadership makes groups more cohesive if it is seen as legitimate. The reverse holds for the opposite.</td>
<td>The extent to which group leadership is disputed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>3. Domestic power base of (a) group(s) and perceptions of (a) group(s)</strong></td>
<td>Historic legacies of leaders, events, alliances and actions of (a) group(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(A) group(s) with a greater domestic power base and/or that enjoy(s) more positive perceptions from either masses or elites, is/are likely to have a more decisive influence on the formation of coalitions. Such groups are not only more attractive coalition partners, but can also provide leadership in coalition-formation processes more easily, provided they have the wherewithal to do this diplomatically and do not feel they are so powerful that they can go it alone. If (a) group(s) has/ have a smaller power base and/or if negative perceptions of (a) group(s) prevail, this is likely to have the opposite effect.</td>
<td>Popular/elite perceptions of (a) group(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Relative electoral power (votes) and resources of (a) group(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Factor</td>
<td>Possible indicator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Extent and nature of foreign sponsorship (a) group(s) enjoy(s)</td>
<td>Foreign sponsorship consists of material and immaterial support that influences a group’s resource base and perceptions of the group. Substantial foreign support makes groups more powerful, eases coalition formation with groups supported by the same sponsor and makes coalition formation more difficult with groups that are not. Sponsor pressure on particular political or policy objectives can also influence coalition formation positively or negatively.</td>
<td>Discourse analysis of key group leaders on foreign political sympathies/loyalties that can be connected to known relationships of support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(B). Group compatibility</td>
<td>5. Degree of structural compatibility of political objectives with other groups</td>
<td>Having broadly compatible political objectives on structural issues makes it easier to engage in coalitions as common ground is more readily identified. However, this can also make coalition formation more difficult when groups tap into the same pool of voters/supporters as their identities become more difficult to distinguish.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Level of enmity / amity with other groups</td>
<td>Greater levels of enmity make it more difficult for (a) group(s) to engage in coalitions because of existing ‘enemy images’ and constituency resistance. Consider e.g. past episodes of mass violence, assassinations or political betrayal. Greater levels of amity make it easier for (a) group(s) to engage in coalitions. Consider e.g. positive experiences or good relations between leaders. The level of enmity / amity is also likely to be influenced by the degree of structural compatibility of political objectives with other groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Experience of engaging in coalition politics</td>
<td>Positive experiences of working in coalitions to achieve political ends demonstrate the value of balancing competitive with cooperative behaviour to (a) group(s) and may strengthen it in the future. Positive experiences are those that generate the expected benefits of coalition formation over a reasonable amount of time, i.e. they are sustained. Conversely, negative experiences are likely to do the opposite. Moreover, the experience(s) of engaging in coalitions also makes it operationally easier to do so again as a group has already gone through the practicalities of this type of relation- and consensus-building.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The experience of (a) group(s) actually operating in a specific coalition over a particular period</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8. The extent to which shared values enable groups to bridge political differences

(Latent) commonalities between competing political groups, such as religious affiliation, sectarian identities, citizenship or kinship, can become unifying factors under particular circumstances that, temporarily or permanently, enable political groups and/or leaders to transcend their differences and influence coalition formation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Possible indicator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(C). External effects on</td>
<td>8. The extent to which shared values enable groups to bridge political</td>
<td>Events that triggered commonalities between groups, e.g. because they generated inter-group solidarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>group(s)</td>
<td>differences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Latent) commonalities between competing political groups, such as</td>
<td>Effective political or religious appeals to group commonalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>religious affiliation, sectarian identities, citizenship or kinship,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>can become unifying factors under particular circumstances that,</td>
<td>Presence of a 'common enemy'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>temporarily or permanently, enable political groups and/or leaders to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>transcend their differences and influence coalition formation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The table represent a model developed by the authors of this report that was inspired by the following general works: Lijphart (1977); Dahl (1991); Higley and Gunther (1992); Bäck (2005); Menkhaus (2006); Anderson (2006); De Mesquita et al. (2011); Cunningham et al. (2012); Asal et al. (2012); McLauchlin and Pearlman (2012); as well as by a number of Iraq-specific reports, articles and books, in particular: Van Veen and Grinstead (2014), Al-Qarawee (2014), Makiya (2016) and Haddad (2016).
References

Books and articles

Alaaldin, R., ‘Iran’s weak grip: How much control does Tehran have over Shi’a militias in Iraq?’, *Foreign Affairs*, 11 February 2016, online: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2016-02-11/irans-weak-grip


Cunningham, K., B. Bakke and L. Seymour, ‘Shirts today, skins tomorrow: Dual contests and the effects of fragmentation in self-determination disputes’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 00 (0), 1-27 (online), 2012.


Online newspapers, blogs and sites

Al-Jazeera Arabic on http://www.aljazeera.net/portal
Al-Monitor on http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/home.html
Al-Sistani on http://www.sistani.org
Associated Press on https://www.ap.org/en-gb/
Carnegie Middle East Center – Diwa on http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan?lang=en
Financial Times on https://www.ft.com/
Musings on Iraq on http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com
Open Democracy on https://www.opendemocracy.net/
Stanford University Mapping Militant Organizations on http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups
The Los Angeles Times http://www.latimes.com/
The New Arab on https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english
The Guardian on https://www.theguardian.com/international
War on the Rocks on http://warontherocks.com/