

## **Iraq on the Path to a Shiite Dictatorship**

*By Guido Steinberg*

**Baghdad's new Kurdish-Shiite coalition may end efforts at national reconciliation with the Sunnis. But a government pursuing common interests is Iraq's only hope. Even stability brought about by a Shiite-dominated regime would be better than the chaos that currently reigns.**

The violence in Iraq continues to dominate the headlines. Last week's front-page news was a particularly spectacular attack by Islamist terrorists, who had targeted the small Yazidi minority in northern Iraq. Hundreds of people died in the attacks west of Mosul.

Unfortunately, the gruesome events overshadowed an important political development in Baghdad, where the core of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's national unity government agreed to the formation of a new coalition. This is good news, because only a smaller government of partners capable of effective cooperation offers hope of long-term stabilization for Iraq. Indeed, it is political steps like the one Maliki took last week that will shape the future of Iraq, not the violent acts of terrorist groups.

The members of the new coalition include, for the time being, the two Kurdish parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), as well as two Shiite groups, the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council and Maliki's Daawa Party. These are exactly the four parties that have favored transforming Iraq into a federalist state since the drafting of the constitution in 2005. These "federalists" are the only forces in Iraqi politics that can be expected to make any headway when it comes to stabilizing the country. This does nothing to change the observation that they are less interested in a functioning federal system than autonomy motivated by the desire for political power.

For the two Kurdish parties, the federalism project is a compromise solution between the long-entertained wish for an independent Kurdish state and the realization that neighboring countries would be too opposed to its establishment. They have attempted to expand their autonomous zone, set up in 1991, by annexing neighboring territory. In light of the situation in central Iraq, the Kurdish parties want to be sufficiently strong and independent of Baghdad so that they could secede quickly and easily if the conflict escalates. The Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council is driven by similar motives. As the strongest Shiite group in Iraq, the council is calling for the establishment of a federal region consisting of the nine majority Shiite provinces south of Baghdad. The Daawa Party is merely its junior partner. It too wants to secure a stable power base in case the civil war in central Iraq spins out of control. As the US's key allies in the new Iraq, the Kurdish parties and the Supreme Council have been able to move forward with their plan largely unopposed since 2005.

### **Hope for Effective Action**

Of course, there is a major risk inherent to a federal system: the country could break up if the violence in central Iraq continues. But it also presents an opportunity: that the four parties, effective partners since 2005, will be capable of implementing their projects and preserving their influence in Baghdad at the same time.

A consolidation of the central government can only succeed today if the new coalition is given the chance to go about its work effectively. It proved to be a serious mistake when, in the spring of 2006, the United States forced the federalists to form a government of national unity that included Sunni groups. It did not bring about reconciliation between the opposing parties in the civil war, and at the same time it made the job of governing the country impossible.

But today there is at least hope that a smaller government run by the federalists will be capable of taking effective action. If the approach produces positive results, the Kurdish parties and the Shiite Supreme Council will no longer have any reasons to secede from the Iraqi state. Because of their strong positions in the provinces in the country's north and south, they are the only players with enough power to potentially pacify the country within the next few years.

On the other hand, the alliance itself may not be strong enough. It has the support of just under half of the members of parliament, where the Sadr movement and Sunni organizations form the bulk of the opposition- camp.

Nevertheless, the establishment of a smaller government is the only option for quickly addressing Iraq's future problems. Most importantly, it would be the only government capable of developing effective security forces. The sad thing, however, is that this does not promise to bring an end to violence in the country. Instead, the new government would be strongly influenced by the Shiites, just as Shiites would dominate the security forces under its control. In this situation, there would be no hope of reconciliation with the Sunnis, although there would be a chance that effective security forces could gradually be developed. The civil war would continue, but at least there would be an end in sight.

This may appear cynical to all those who tout "national reconciliation" and the "democratization" of Iraq. But democratization of the country was never more than a daydream of the Bush administration in 2003. In contrast, the only realistic objective today is to establish a minimum of stability, even if this is achieved by a Shiite dictatorship in the Arab part of Iraq. The continued presence of US troops in this scenario could help prevent neighboring countries from intervening more heavily and changing the balance of power to the disadvantage of the Iraqi government. This would offer the new alliance a chance to gradually address the tasks at hand. Ideally, the US government could see to it that the new coalition is expanded to include a handful of Sunnis. But the Bush administration should quickly abandon the notion that it is capable of doing any more than just preventing the worst-case scenario -- a complete failure of Iraq.

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