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Iran Wins Iraqi Elections 7 Months Later

October 2, 2010

Although it may take some time yet to form a government in Iraq, Friday may have been a turning point. If so, it was a turning point in which Iran won decisively and managed to rebuild a Shiite fundamentalist coalition led by incumbent PM Nuri al-Maliki that, in partnership with the Kurds, could dominate Baghdad for the next four years.

This development would forestall Washington's earlier plans to try to shoehorn into power the anti-Iranian ex-Baathist Iyad Allawi and his largely Sunni-supported Iraqiya party. In recent weeks, since the advent of a new US ambassador in Baghdad and a new commanding general, there have been rumors that the Obama administration had decided to support incumbent Nuri al-Maliki and to give up on any hope of installing Allawi or giving him control over Iraq's security forces, which had been Washington's first preference. Al-Maliki at the same time garnered the support of Iran and of Syria, though these may have each been independent decisions.

On Thursday, September 30, the London-based al-Sharq al-Awsat [The Middle East] had reported that (h/t to USG Open Source Center for the translation):

‘ Another source has stressed that: “the Iranian pressure exerted on Muqtada al-Sadr has reached its peak.” He added: “This has caused the [Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq] under the leadership of [Ammar al-Hakim](#) to threaten to withdraw from the [National Iraqi Alliance] and turn to the Al-Iraqiyah List and the Kurdistan Alliance to form a new alliance.” He told Al-Sharq al-Awsat that [ISCI] and Al-Iraqiyah List leaders held a meeting to discuss this issue yesterday. He pointed out that the meeting was held at the same time when Al-Sadr was making telephone calls to the leader of the Al-Iraqiyah List and Mas’ud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). He said that, in his calls, Al-Sadr hinted at the possibility of supporting Al-Maliki. ‘

[Al-Watan](#) says that the Iraqiya list charged that a Da`wa envoy, [Abd al-Halim al-Zuhairi](#), visited [Qom](#) in Iran recently and hammered out an agreement with Muqtada. Al-Maliki is said to have agreed to act less high-handedly this time. The Mahdi Army and the Asa’ib Ahl al-Haqq paramilitaries would be rehabilitated and given places in the government security forces. Sadrist leaders would be released from prison. The Sadrists would get significant cabinet seats. The Sadrists denied the charges by the Iraqiya.

[The pan-Arab London daily Al-Hayat \[Life\]](#) reports today in Arabic that a party congress of the [\(Shiite fundamentalist\) National Iraqi Alliance](#) was held Friday in yet another attempt to resolve the longest-running hung parliament in the history of Westminster-type parliaments. A preparatory meeting was held beforehand in which incumbent Nuri al-Maliki of the Islamic Mission Party (Da`wa) met with Hadi al-Ameri of the Badr Organization and Muhsin al-Hakim, brother of Ammar al-Hakim (leader of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq). They attempted to convince Ammar to attend the Friday congress, but failed.

So the National Iraqi Alliance meeting was held on Friday. All 159 party delegates did not attend, however, with those representing ISCI boycotting. So too did those belonging to the Fadila or Islamic Virtue Party. It is not clear if any other parties or individuals boycotted, but most Arabic press accounts say it was just those two. In parliamentary terms, the NAI has 70 seats, with ISCI holding 10 and Fadila 6.

The NAI delegates in attendance chose Nuri al-Maliki as their candidate for prime minister in a startling about-face, since the Sadrists had earlier been largely against al-Maliki. (PM al-Maliki launched a military attack in spring of 2008 on the Sadrist Mahdi

Army paramilitary in Basra, Nasiriya and East Baghdad, over which there had until recently at least been hard feelings).

Al-Maliki needs 163 MPs to form a government. It appears to me that he picked up 40 Sadrists and 8 Badr Organization MPs, and it may also be that he got the 5 independents. That is, he may have gained as many as 53 seats.

Al-Maliki's own State of Law coalition, led by Da`wa, has 89 seats. He may now have 142. Were the Kurdistan Alliance, with 43 seats, to join a State of Law/ NAI alliance, the resulting bloc would have 184, a comfortable majority. Although the president has to be elected by a two-thirds majority on the first ballot, that requirement falls to a majority on the second ballot. Al-Maliki plus the Kurds can therefore now choose the president. The president then will ask the bloc with the largest number of seats to form a government. The Iraqi supreme court has ruled that the largest bloc can be one formed after the election, so a State of Law/ NAI alliance would be eligible under this interpretation of the constitution.

Even if al-Maliki only picked up the Sadrists and the Badr Organization, he would have 180 if the Kurdistan Alliance went with him. And it should be noted that there are a few other small parties in parliament (including reformist Kurds and Muslim fundamentalist Kurds) that might support al-Maliki, strengthening his bloc.

Would the Kurdistan Alliance go with al-Maliki? Absolutely. They are seeking a formal agreement about the future division of powers between the federal government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan confederacy with its capital in Irbil. They also want a referendum held in Kirkuk Province about whether it will join the Kurdistan Regional Government (which absorbed and erased the lines between the three former provinces of Dohuk, Sulaymaniya and Irbil).

The Kurdistan government recently sent a delegation to all three of the more prominent candidates for prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, Iyad Allawi and Adil Abdul Mahdi.

In an interview with journalist Raghidah Dergham in al-Hayat on Sept. 29 (h/t USG Open Source Center for the translation), outgoing Iraqi president Jalal Talibani (also a Kurdish leader) said:

‘ (Dargham) Is it impossible to sidestep Al-Maliki?

(Talabani) Sidestepping Al-Maliki is not easy at this moment. First, Al-Maliki has a large bloc of 89 seats, and his position is closer to the Kurdistan card than any other. This is in accordance with the report brought by the Kurdistan delegation to the Kurdistan parliament. Moreover, there is a strong rumor that the Sadrists will support Al-Maliki. If they support Al-Maliki, this means that he cannot be ignored. But nothing is certain to date.’

So Talibani was putting his money pretty explicitly on al-Maliki already before the NAI vote, and was signalling that al-Maliki was perfectly acceptable to the Kurds. Other KA officials [have also spoken of their preference for al-Maliki](#). (Iyad Allawi of the Iraqiya is backed by the Sunni Arabs of Mosul and Kirkuk, who have a feud with the Kurds).

A Shiite-Kurdish alliance would replicate the outcomes of the January, 2005 and December, 2005 parliamentary elections that set the stage for a Sunni-Shiite civil war in 2006-2007. Iyad Allawi of the Iraqiya list, for which some 80 percent of Sunni Arabs voted, has vocally pledged not to join any government headed by al-Maliki. If the Sunni Arabs of Iraq feel that the Shiites and Kurds have cut them out of the deal yet again, those grievances could fuel terrorism. My impression from field work is that the Iraqi Sunnis are disheartened and don't have the stomach for another civil war. But small cells are already engaging in significant terrorism, and that could increase unless Sunnis are brought into the government.

Ironies abound in Friday's developments. Ammar al-Hakim and his Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq had earlier been the closest political grouping to Iran, but it is now the one bucking Tehran's plans for Iraq (though I imagine it will fold if al-Maliki's ascendancy seems assured). ISCI had put forward its own candidate for prime minister, Adil Abdul Mahdi, whom the Sadrists had some weeks ago said they would support, but whom they have now abandoned.

The Sadrist movement of Muqtada al-Sadr in contrast had tended to be Iraqi nativist and somewhat anti-Iranian, but its leader is now studying in the Iranian seminary city of Qom and has acquiesced in Iranian pressure to support al-Maliki. It was Gen. David Petraeus who put so much pressure on Sadr in 2007 that he fled to Iran, so the US inadvertently delivered Muqtada into Iranian hands and heavy influence.

The one element in the story that makes perfect sense is the way the Badr Organization peeled away from its parent, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq. The latter is a political organization. The former began as its paramilitary, and from the late 1980s it carried out guerrilla operations against Baath targets, crossing from Iran where it was based. Badr began running for seats in parliament in 2005. During its years in exile in Iran it was more or less a wing of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, and it is rumored that some Badr officers are still on the Iranian payroll. So as a sort of extension of the IRGC (though of course it has become more Iraq-centric since 2003), Badr was the most likely Shiite Iraqi grouping to take orders from Tehran (presumably via IRGC Quds Brigade commander Qasim Sulaimani). A further irony is that the US considers the IRGC a deadly enemy but is quite cozy with the Badr Organization.

All in all, Friday's developments seem highly likely to pave the way for a second term as prime minister for Nuri al-Maliki. He and his coalition partners will be more beholden to Iran than ever, and if I were the US Department of the Treasury I wouldn't expect much Iraqi help with those sanctions on Iranian banks.