

IRAN'S ROLE IN POST-OCCUPATION IRAQ:
ENEMY, GOOD NEIGHBOR, OR OVERLORD?

REIDAR VISSER

A CENTURY FOUNDATION REPORT

THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

HEADQUARTERS: 41 East 70th Street, New York, New York 10021 ♦ 212-535-4441

D.C.: 1333 H Street, N.W., 10th Floor, Washington, D.C. 20005 ♦ 202-387-0400

www.tcf.org

This report is part of a series commissioned by The Century Foundation to inform the policy debate about Iran-related issues.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author. Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Century Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

Copyright © 2009 by The Century Foundation, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of The Century Foundation.

INTRODUCTION

“Despite the speculations by the opponents of Nuri al-Maliki’s government, the Shiite coalition will remain undivided. The Shiites will notify the occupation forces in two different languages that they have no choice but to leave Iraq.”

—*Keyhan*, conservative daily, Tehran, April 23, 2007

The subject of Iran’s role in Iraq—what it is, and what it should be—is a hotly contested one. Some analysts stress the role of Shiite identity and religion as a unifying bond between Iran’s approximately 60 million Shiites and the 15 million strong Shiite majority in Iraq, mostly concentrated in Baghdad and areas south. A few suggest the existence of even vaster schemes of cooperation, with Shiite solidarity extending from Iran via Iraq to the Alawite minority that rules Syria and into the south of Lebanon, which is also dominated by Shiites—a “Shiite crescent” that seems ideally positioned to dominate the entire Middle East through its hold on strategic territory and with its control of combined oil resources that rival those of Saudi Arabia. At the same time, other scholars reject the idea of any particular closeness between the Shiites of Iran and those of Iraq. These analysts tend to stress the Arabness of the Shiites of Iraq—who in many cases descend from recently settled nomadic tribes whose conversion to Shiism took place within the past couple of centuries—and point to historical facts such as the loyal Shiite participation on the Iraqi side in the eight-year war against Iran in the 1980s as proof of the Iraqiness of the Shiites and as a formative experience in its own right. Often, this kind of perspective goes hand in hand with a view that Iraqi Shiites are actively hostile to the model of government instituted in Iran after the 1979 revolution, and that they in

particular despise the idea of clerics holding political office. It has even been suggested that the current government of Nuri al-Maliki, after its turn against certain internal Shiite contenders, constitutes a contemporary example of what this attitude to Iran means in practice.

In this report, a synthesis of these two positions is offered. On the one hand, the Iraqi identity of the Shiites living in the country seems firmly established at the popular level. Historically, the Shiites of Iraq have always shied away from all kinds of schemes that would create a sectarian enclave south of Baghdad or unite the Shiite portions of the country with Iran, and the spectacular failure of the scheme to create a federal Shiite entity in post-2003 Iraq (which was tentatively launched in the summer of 2005) seems to attest to the endurance of an “Iraq first” attitude among the Shiite population. However, on the other hand, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 set in motion a formidable process of upheaval and such tremendous pressures from the outside that internal Shiite elite politics in Iraq changed beyond recognition and shifted away from its historical trajectory. Above all, the particular choice of Shiite partners by the Bush administration (as well as by the two biggest Kurdish parties) gave a minority of pro-Iranian Shiites within the wider and mostly Iraq-oriented United Iraqi Alliance a disproportionately strong position in Iraq from 2003 onward, and led to a situation in which Iraqi Shiite leaders no longer can be viewed realistically as a bulwark against Iranian expansionism. Simultaneously, Iran has been successful in reaching out to (and to some extent neutralizing) at least some of the leaders of the traditionally nationalist segment of the Iraqi Shiites—such as Muqtada al-Sadr—thereby further weakening the Iraqist orientation of the Shiite leadership in the country.

In general, Iran’s policy in Iraq seems to be to co-opt as many Iraqi Shiite factions as possible. This includes old allies, such as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI, formerly SCIRI); more recent entities that have been enlisted to make inroads into the historically more independent Daawa, such as Daawa (Tanzim al-Iraq); and individual players that can speak to broader

audiences, such as Ibrahim al-Jaafari and Muqtada al-Sadr. Iran's game has involved experiments relating to state structure (with some factions posing as decentralizers and others as centralizers and Iraqi nationalists). The irreducible minimum preference for Iran, however, seems to be a model of government in which sectarian identities are amplified (which will also maximize Tehran's chances of playing the Shiite card). In terms of policy implications for the United States, this means that any U.S. withdrawal and "transfer to Iraqi control" that comes without profound institutional changes to the post-2003 Iraqi political system (rather than mere rhetoric and empty promises of "national reconciliation") will most likely mean a "transfer to Iranian control" in practice.

The alternative policy proposal presented in this report involves a last-ditch attempt to reach out to the Iraqi nationalists among the Shiites—a key segment of the Iraqi population that so far has been systematically overlooked and excluded by the U.S. administration. The aim should be to challenge the two features of the 2005 constitution that play into Tehran's hands the most—extreme decentralization (or, rather, the potential for such decentralization) as well as ethno-sectarian quota-sharing (*muhāsasa*). The best instrument would be the 2009 parliamentary elections, which could be turned into a debate about the 2005 constitution and therefore could present a second chance for the Iraqis to express their views on the fateful document that they adopted in such murky circumstances in October 2005.

It should be added that certain policy options currently on the table for the United States pull in the exact opposite direction. For example, many U.S. policymakers seem to believe that Washington, too, can benefit from a weakened and supplicant Iraq internally divided (if not necessarily partitioned territorially) between its ethno-religious communities. A brief look at the relative success of the United States and Iran in dealing with Iraq's Shiite factions so far should give pause however to the proponents of this kind of approach. In a context of strong Iranian influences, to seek to perpetuate the

sectarian hegemony in Iraqi politics with the aim of playing hardball with its various Shiite factions simply seems unrealistic in the long run. Iran's greater versatility in building ties to Iraq's various Shiite Islamist parties between 2003 and 2009 strongly suggests that the United States would be better off with a dilution of sectarian identities than their enshrinement in the Iraqi state structure.

Another recurrent idea is the assumption that any Shiite-dominated Iraqi government will be interested in maintaining some kind of residual U.S. military force in the long run, in order to boost its own chances of survival. This argument, too, rests on rather shaky foundations. It assumes that the Iraqi government is sincere when it adopts a language of Iraqi nationalism, but fails to realize that even its most centralist elements—such as the Daawa party of Nuri al-Maliki—have yet to pass the real test in terms of institutional change and a broadening appeal beyond old core constituencies. Still, in the local elections in 2009, al-Maliki ran on a ticket dominated by Shiite Islamists and fared badly in most Sunni-majority provinces; in parliament, many of his allies keep talking about reconstituting the United Iraqi Alliance (which would mean a return to the framework preferred by Iran). So far, what the local elections show is that the Daawa party is happy to employ a rhetoric of Iraqi nationalism when it suits them, without doing much about it in practice. It might be tempting to them to follow the same approach in questions relating to U.S. troop levels, insisting on a full withdrawal in the name of Iraqi nationalism and instead coordinating behind the scenes with Iran (whilst maintaining a formally correct façade of Iraqi independence).

Finally, it should be stressed that this report is not meant as an attack against Iran's own political system, but rather its active political role in Iraq. There is much to suggest that this role is not considered legitimate by a majority of Iraqis, whether Sunnis or Shiites, and it would be a deeply ironic outcome if American beliefs about the "inevitability" of an Iranian role in Iraq should give Tehran a stronger position than it would have held otherwise.

THE HISTORICAL DISTINCTIVENESS OF IRAQ'S SHIITES

For much of the twentieth century, Western academics tended to see the Shiites of Iraq as some kind of Persian fifth column. It was assumed that Iraqi national identity did not exist, and that bonds of religion would invariably prevail against any competing tribal or regional forces. A typical expression of this view can be found in the writings of Gertrude Bell, whose analyses of the Shiites are among the weakest parts of her scholarship and were always colored by the fact that she never managed to get privileged access to the highest Shiite clerical leadership in Najaf. She would routinely dismiss the higher clergy of the Iraqi Shiites as “Persian frondeurs” that would forever remain at odds with the modern state of Iraq.¹

The Iran-Iraq War and the mostly loyal participation by Shiite Iraqis on the Iraqi side of the front threw this paradigm for understanding Shiism in the region into disarray. Subsequently, several well-grounded empirical studies on Shiism in Iraq during the transition from Ottoman to British rule emerged, and Yitzhak Nakash's seminal *The Shi'is of Iraq* in particular broke new ground and changed established perceptions. Nakash highlighted the Arab identity of Iraq's Shiites, and also associated them with a distinctive, less-politicized tradition that set the community apart from the Shiites of Iran. In Nakash's views, the unsuccessful 1991 uprising by Iraq's Shiites against the Baathist regime (in which pro-Iranian Iraqi factions experienced setbacks within their own constituencies as they raised posters of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini) showed that “if Iran really tried to shape the ideological direction of the insurrection, this attempt did not lead anywhere.”²

Neither paradigm is entirely satisfactory, even though Nakash seems to be much closer to a credible explanation regarding the limited Iranian influence in Iraq. Shiism in Iraq has historical roots that are clearly distinctive from the roots of Shiism in Iran. Shiism did not become a majority religion in Iran until the sixteenth century, whereas in Iraq it has continuous roots dating back

to the seventh century and the time of the first Islamic caliphate. In fact, the distinction between Iran and Iraq is even more pronounced than described by Nakash, because he relies quite strongly on the history of the Euphrates region, where many Shiite tribes had converted quite recently, whereas Shiite continuity further south extends back to medieval times.³ At the same time, with the possible exception of the Hilla-based eleventh-century Mazyadid emirate (which was nominally Shiite rather than a Shiite state in its own right), there is no historical example of orthodox Shiism serving as basis for an attempt to change the territorial borders of the region, by establishing some kind of Shiite state, or by joining the Shiites of southern Iraq with those of Iran and/or Eastern Arabia. But it would be misleading to conflate this Iraqism among the Shiites with complete political “quietism” (as some interpreters of Nakash’s more nuanced work do). That label may be correct for individual scholars such as Abu al-Qasim al-Khoei (d. 1992), but with regard to other Iraq-based scholars (such as Mirza Hasan al-Shirazi, d. 1895, and Ali al-Sistani today), it is the aversion against entrapment in the institutions of state—rather than any programmatic relinquishment of authority in the sphere of politics—that stands out.⁴

It is this historical background that can explain the ease with which Shiite intellectuals in the early twentieth century became enthusiastic proponents of a separate “Iraqi” identity—as seen for example in the jubilant local newspaper articles in Karbala in October 1920, when, “in a triumph for the Iraqi nation,” the “first Arab governor” was installed in the town, and the spread of an anti-British revolt to “Baghdad and the rest of Iraq” was encouraged.⁵ A few years later, Muhammad Mahdi al-Basir, a Shiite from Hilla, praised the people of (Sunni-dominated) Mosul for their Iraqi nationalism in his book about “the history of the Iraqi issue.”⁶ It is also this long line in history that can throw light on the remarkable fact that at no point in the tumultuous twentieth century was an enduring sectarian separatist project launched south of Baghdad. When certain tentative moves of a secessionist character briefly materialized

in Basra in the 1920s, they were entirely unrelated to Shiism and instead based on the opportunism of a wealthy commercial elite headed by an urban coalition of Sunnis, Jews, and Christians.⁷ The downfall of the monarchy in 1958 failed to produce any breakaway movement. The years of war with Iran and the United States in the 1980s and 1990s similarly saw no attempt to establish an enclave with a separate Shiite identity (the 1991 uprising was explicitly focused on Iraq as a territorial whole). Even during the hastily arranged oppositional conferences that were held in 2002 during the run-up to the Iraq War, “federalism in Iraq” mostly meant a concession to the Kurds in the north, with expectations of a unitary state structure for the rest of the country. At this point, it still seemed as if the territorial integrity of Iraq was a paramount concern of all Iraqi Shiites, and that any future relationship with the Iranian neighbor to the east would be based on cordial dialog but also complete separation between the two spheres.

THE EMERGENCE OF A PRO-IRANIAN MINORITY IN IRAQ SINCE THE 1980s

Despite the tendency of most of Iraq’s Shiites to subscribe to an Iraqi framework, soon after the outbreak of the war with Iran in 1980, the Islamist regime in Tehran decided to work to maximize its influence and control over the Iraqi Shiite opposition, and a pro-Iranian minority of Iraqi Shiite elite politicians gradually emerged. The principal instrument in this mission was the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), which during the first years of its existence was more of an umbrella organization than a single party.

However, the original SCIRI soon developed splits, often based on disagreements on how the Shiites of Iraq should relate to Iran and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s leadership. SCIRI’s main faction, headed by Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, took the strongly pro-Iranian course. Throughout the 1980s

and 1990s, the party explicitly advocated subordination of all efforts on the Iraqi scene to the Iranian leadership, as represented by Khomeini and later Ali Khamenei. This sometimes would come in the guise of a program of maintaining Iraq as a separate territorial entity, but it was always on the assumption that Iraq's next leadership would coordinate closely with Iran and defer to Tehran's leader and his leadership role for all Muslims in the world as *wali amr al-muslimin*—especially in issues that would have an impact on the Islamic world at large, such as relations with Israel and Western powers. Baqir al-Hakim was a pioneer in developing a theory that could sustain this kind of arrangement: in the 1990s he wrote a pamphlet called *'Aqidatuna* (Our Doctrine) in which he experimented with the concept of federalism—hitherto an unknown quantity in Shiite political discourse—to create a system that would maintain some kind of “regional” Iraqi autonomy within a broader pan-Shiite system with Tehran as its capital.⁸

Whereas the relationship between SCIRI and Iran remained excellent, the much older Daawa party, which formally was co-opted into SCIRI in the 1980s, had a far more complex relationship with Khomeini. Several of its internal splits were caused precisely by disagreement concerning the principle of clerical rule (*wilayat al-faqih*) as promoted by Iran, and after the Iran-Iraq War, its membership to a considerable extent migrated from Iran, whereas SCIRI stayed put.⁹ One of the splits in this period, whereby the pro-Iranian Kazim al-Haeri left the Daawa, was explicitly related to the role of the clerics in supervising the party, and also resulted from opposition to the subordination to the Iranian line then advocated by Haeri.¹⁰ The physical dispersal of the Daawa followers in this period (including to places such as Syria, Lebanon, and Europe) attested to their unease with Iran as a base of operations and as overlord; likewise, the tendency of many Daawa members to adopt as their religious point of reference the Lebanon-based Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah—who had developed an explicitly pluralistic theory of *wilayat al-faqih*, in which several rulers (*fuqaha*) were permitted—signaled

a degree of dissent vis-à-vis the Iranian leadership (who consider Fadlallah a maverick). At the same time, however, the subsequent emergence in the 1990s of yet more internal splinter groups directly linked to the question over ties to Iran (for example, the Kawadir, or cadre, of Hizb al-Daawa was separated) demonstrates that Iran relations continued to be an issue also within the mainline Daawa faction, and there were evidently some who still thought Iran had too much influence.

The only sizeable active Iraqi Shiite Islamist group with a clearly antagonistic relationship to Iran was the Sadrists. Having started as an attempt by the Iraqi regime to cultivate a loyal Shiite Islamist party with a very explicit Arab identity, the movement of Muhammad Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr was soon transformed into something bigger and more threatening than the Baathists had envisaged at first. Matters came to a head in early 1999 when Sadr was assassinated (and regime involvement was widely suspected). What received less attention in the Western world was that, at the same time, a sometimes violent internal Iraqi Shiite struggle about how to relate to Iran as a patron was played out. In early 1999, Sadr had been the object of vehement criticism by SCIRI preachers in Iran, who ridiculed his attempts to establish a separate Islamist regime in Iraq, without reference to and coordination with Iran's supreme leader. When Sadrist supporters among Iraqi refugees in Iran later verbally and physically abused SCIRI's pro-Iranian leader Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim during a commemoration function for Sadr's martyrdom (shoes were even hurled at Hakim), scores were arrested and there were reports about mistreatment of pro-Sadrist and anti-Hakim prisoners on the part of the Iranian security forces.¹¹

On the eve of the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the political situation in Iraq's Shiite community thus seemed fluid, but with heavy Iranian influence confined to SCIRI, and possibly elements of the Daawa. However, it would be unrealistic to expect SCIRI and Daawa to be strong on the ground inside Iraq: for much of the 1980s and 1990s, SCIRI had

tried to engineer some kind of domestic Shiite uprising against the Baathist regime but without ever succeeding. The large masses of Iraq's Shiites had not been mobilized politically at this stage.

AMERICA'S EMPOWERMENT OF THE PRO-IRANIAN MINORITY IN IRAQ AFTER 2003

During the first years of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, the power of the pro-Iranian parties in the country dramatically increased, and very often as the direct result of the choices of the Bush administration. As early as in 2002, SCIRI had been given a dominant role at the U.S.-sponsored opposition conferences that was entirely out of proportion to the organization's stature and real influence.¹² After the invasion, its leadership was given a prominent role in the first governing council and the interim administration that established the rules for "the new Iraq," and, just like the Kurds, managed to achieve special privileges for its militia forces and saw them nominally integrated into the evolving "Iraqi" security structures. Despite the fact that lists of Iraqi parliamentarians showed that SCIRI actually accounted for less than a tenth of the deputies in the national assembly, the party was given preferential treatment by the United States. Three of its leaders in particular—Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, his son Ammar, and Adil Abd al-Mahdi—became considered as Washington's conduit to Iraq's Shiite population in general, despite the fact that none of them had the religious credentials that would be necessary to create popular resonance for their Islamist message. Frequent personal phone calls from President Bush and invitations to visit Washington consolidated this image. Washington did not appear to even consider the alternative of building ties to Shiites with more solid popular support inside Iraq, such as the Sadrists, the Fadila party (Islamic Virtue party), independents, supporters of Sistani, tribal chiefs, or leading figures in Basra.

The official U.S. exegesis of this apparent cave-in to Tehran was that SCIRI had changed its loyalties. After having been a loyal servant of Iran for twenty years from the day of its foundation until 2003, the party was now all of a sudden discovering its Iraqi distinctiveness, according to the Bush administration's interpretation. However, a careful reading of SCIRI's statements, policy decisions, and practices in Iraq since 2003 calls this interpretation into question. True, SCIRI leaders have said that *wilayat al-faqih*, as per the Iranian model, is not suitable for Iraq, due to its ethnic and sectarian mix. Also, its leaders have gone out of their way publicly to stress notions such as "Iraqi independence" and "sovereignty." In May 2007, in an attempt at cleaning up its image, the organization even changed its name from SCIRI to ISCI (the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, thus dropping the "revolutionary element"). But beyond the spin, other tendencies can be found. The name change is a good place to start: in the accompanying official press release, there was in fact no mention of any "switch of allegiance from Khamenei to Sistani," as had been rumored.¹³ In fact, there was no mention of relations with Iran at all. Sistani was merely mentioned as a prominent member of the Najaf *hawza*, which ISCI singled out for praise of a highly general nature.

It is also rather difficult to take at face value public statements by ISCI leaders when sometimes they are patently false: "We are not the clients of anyone and we never were in the past" declared Ammar al-Hakim when faced with a question about ISCI's relationship to Iran in August 2007—a gross falsification of the party's history.¹⁴ Even today, in the Iraqi governorate where ISCI's control is at its greatest, Iranian influences are openly acknowledged.¹⁵ What this all shows is that ISCI is still struggling to define its relationship to Iraq, Iran, and the clergy. To succeed in Iraq, ISCI would need to perform a clean break with Iran's Khamenei and the tradition of subservience to him as the "supreme ruler" of all Muslims (*wali amr al-muslimin*). Today, the paramount question for the ISCI leadership in terms of their allegiance and potential to become a mainstream Iraqi party is an utterly simple one: does the *wali amr al-muslimin* exist—yes, or no?

For those who dismiss the significance of Shiite political rhetoric as something purely theoretical, a more convincing argument could be the physical movement of SCIRI leaders across the Iran-Iraq border since 2003. In the first place, it should be clear that when SCIRI initiated serious contact with the United States in 2002, this could only have happened as a result of an Iranian decision to let them do this, as all key SCIRI operatives at the time were based in Iran. Similarly, it was Iran that decided that Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim and later Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim should be allowed to return to Iraq in the first half of 2003. Over the next five years, Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim went back to Iran at least ten times, including longer stays relating to cancer treatment. The schedule of Iran visits by al-Hakim speaks for itself:

October 2003

January 2004

July 2004

December 2004

June 2005

June 2006

February 2007

May–October 2007 (several long-term stays at least partly
related to cancer treatment)

February 2008

June 2008

The frequent visits are moreover remarkable because Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim has no official role in the Iraqi government, and did not formally represent Iraq during any of these visits. Neither did he seem to indulge in traveling simply for pleasure: apart from two brief visits to the United States (December 2006 and December 2007), his trips abroad to non-Iranian destinations are few and far between. Additionally, members of his close family often

travel to Iran (especially his son Ammar, who on one occasion, in February 2007, was arrested by the Americans upon his return from Iran due to suspicions against some of his travel companions), and some are indeed still residents there (another son, Muhsin, runs ISCI's office in Tehran). Quite divorced from the question of what al-Hakim's agenda may have been in these meetings is the more profound issue of his personal security. It seems entirely inconceivable that al-Hakim and his family could have traveled freely and safely in this manner had the Iranians had any misgivings whatsoever about their policies and activities in Iraq: they are, after all, a regime known for going after its enemies all over the world, and would have had no problem in dealing with challenges so close to home.

Finally, it is also noteworthy that some of al-Hakim's visits to Iran came shortly before SCIRI/ISCI announced major policy changes. Thus, after the October 2003 visit, the name change of the Badr Brigades was implemented. In winter 2004, he visited shortly before the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) was finalized. Soon after the summer 2005 visit, al-Hakim launched his project to create a single sectarian Shiite federal region comprising the nine Shiite-majority governorates south of Baghdad (Iqlim al-Wasat wa-al-Janub, more lately called Iqlim Janub Baghdad). Finally, in 2006, a marked upsurge of pro-federal propaganda on SCIRI's behalf followed al-Hakim's return from Tehran, coupled with an often overlooked increase of pro-federal commentary in the Iranian media as well as clear convergence between the viewpoints of ISCI and Iran concerning the undesirability of constitutional change in Iraq.¹⁶

With regard to the Daawa, the Iranians have had a little bit more of a challenge and an uphill struggle, but on the whole have been successful in maximizing leverage if not actual control. Back in 2002, the London-based branch of the party headed by Ibrahim al-Jaafari (and including such leading figures as Haydar al-'Abbadi) was not considered as being particularly close to Iran. As the run-up to the war against Iraq intensified, Tehran appears to have launched several strategies with the goal of re-establishing control of the

Daawa. Key among them was the dispatch of several Daawa factions to Europe, such as a namesake of the pro-*wilayat al-faqih* branch that had once been created by Kazim al-Haeri in the late 1980s. Another of these factions—Hizb al-Daawa (Tanzim al-Iraq) appears to have been set afloat with the specific purpose of creating a challenge to the mainline branch of Ibrahim al-Jaafari. Often misinterpreted by Western commentators as some kind of “native” Daawa faction (due to the focus on Iraq in its party name), the faction headed by Abd al-Karim al-Anazi appeared in Europe in 2002 and for a short period was known as Tanzim Awruba (the Europe Branch).¹⁷ Apparently, at one point the Iranian wing of the original Daawa joined the newly started Tanzim al-Iraq and together tried to create a greater Daawa coalition named the “Union of the Iraqi Islamic Forces,” but this umbrella organization was short-lived.¹⁸ However, the London fax number for the Tanzim al-Iraq branch was used by them, and it later appeared alongside a post office box address in Qum, Iran.¹⁹

During the subsequent years, Iran vastly improved its influence in Daawa circles. Tehran's hand had never been completely cut off: back in 2003, some leading figures in the mainline branch of the Daawa, such as Ali al-Adib—actually an Iranian citizen—still resided in Iran, and in a television interview, Adib criticized the Arab states for having supported Iraq in the war against Iran in the 1980s.²⁰ Interviews with Nuri (then Jawad) al-Maliki, the Damascus representative of the Daawa, aired on Iranian television and featured sharp criticism of the U.S.-sponsored meetings of the exiled opposition (in which SCIRI participated) as well as critical remarks concerning federalism, suggesting that Iran was happy to employ a two-pronged strategy.²¹ But the American invasion set the stage for further inroads by the Iranians into the Daawa milieu. The Tanzim al-Iraq branch was among the first political parties to return to Iraq after the fall of the Baathist regime, and by May 2003 it had set up shop in Baghdad.²² Without having had much of a presence on the ground previously, it emerged as a surprisingly strong force in several governorates in the

south during the January 2005 provincial elections (notably in Dhi Qar and Maysan), and in December 2005, at the national level, received a quota of seats in the Iraqi parliament that equaled that of the mainline Daawa branch. Local British officials in Maysan were actually scathing in their criticism of the Iranian links of the Tanzim al-Iraq branch, but did little to curtail the militia climate in which the organization thrived.²³ In 2006, in Baghdad, the United States warmly embraced Nuri al-Maliki as premier as soon as he emerged from an internal premier contest inside the Shiite-dominated United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), and for the next two and a half years unquestioningly and unconditionally supported him as “someone President George W. Bush can work with” without ever asking for any kind of substantial political reform in return that could modify the new system of government in Iraq that Iran has supported since it came into existence in 2005.

Whereas the Tanzim al-Iraq branch did receive ministries in the governments of Ibrahim al-Jaafari (2005) and Nuri al-Maliki (2006), the role of its leading member, Shirwan al-Waeli, as minister of state for national security exemplifies how the party has been inserted in key political decision-making in Iraq. Waeli, who hails from Nasiriyya, was sent by al-Maliki to Basra in the wake of the clampdown on the Sadrists in March 2008. From 2007 onward, he also has been a central figure in shaping new intelligence and security units that are controlled directly by the office of Nuri al-Maliki rather than by the defense and interior ministries (and which to some extent replace the intelligence agency headed by Muhammad al-Shahwani, perceived by many as anti-Iranian and linked to the CIA). Whereas al-Maliki himself holds on to a rhetoric that is firmly Iraqi nationalist (and increasingly also centralist), it could be a cause for concern that he relies so heavily on elements such as Tanzim al-Iraq, which repeatedly has been used to increase Iranian leverage over the mainline Daawa. Other Shiite Islamists continue to count all the three main Daawa factions (including the recent breakaway movement by Ibrahim al-Jaafari) as protégées (*mahsub*) of Iran.²⁴

After 2003, Iran even succeeded in establishing at least a foothold among the arch-nationalist Sadrists. To begin with, the Sadrist rhetoric was explicitly anti-Iranian and featured criticism of SCIRI for its Iranian ties and of Sistani for his Iranian origins. Tehran's position was somewhat improved when Sadr agreed to use the Iran-based Kazim al-Haeri—a loyal supporter of the Khomeini worldview—as a source of emulation pending his own advancement in the clerical hierarchy, but this relationship disintegrated soon and had all but evaporated by 2005.²⁵ This appears to have been followed by a second attempt by Tehran to gain control of the unruly Sadrists, this time bottom-up. In a process that was in full swing in certain parts of Iraq (such as Basra) in 2005, individual Sadrist cells were lured into cooperation with the Iranians and enlisted for attacks against the occupation forces by so-called special groups (actually a British rather than an American “discovery”).²⁶ Iranian influences of this kind among the Sadrists appeared to grow stronger after the Samarra bombings in February 2006; however, in late 2007, Sadrist rhetoric still remained emphatically anti-Iranian, and was still dismissive of ISCI as an Iranian puppet using Iranian connections and weapons to clamp down on the Sadrists in parts of Iraq.²⁷ At one point, Sadrist leaders openly expressed frustration about the Iranian attempt to destroy their movement by dividing and ruling it.²⁸

Similarly, in April 2008, Sadrists criticized Iran for not putting up resistance against the negotiations for a U.S.-Iraqi bilateral treaty (suggesting that the two were carving up Iraq for their own best interests)²⁹ and also condemned the other Shiite parties of Iraq for not being independent and for taking orders from Iran.³⁰ It is quite ironic that when American analysts often choose to see the Sadrists as some kind of Iraqi equivalent to the Iranian-controlled Hizbollah of Lebanon, defectors from Hizbollah themselves (such as the prominent Shaykh Subhi al-Tufayli) single out ISCI as the obvious parallel.³¹ In Bahrain, in 2006, Shiite elections propaganda referring approvingly to the “imam's line” (that is, that of Khomeini) featured portraits of the al-Hakim family alongside Hizbollah leaders from Lebanon and the Gulf.³² Military observers have commented that

some Iranian assistance has been rendered to the “special groups”; equally conspicuous, however, is the overall limited scope of the help that has been forthcoming—suggesting a tactical rather than a long-term strategic partnership between Tehran and the Sadrists.³³

It was not until the launch of the U.S. “surge” in early 2007 that Iran appeared to gain decisive influence with at least the top leader of the Sadrist movement, as Muqtada al-Sadr relocated to Qum, possibly fearing for his life in the context of an increasing number of security operations against the Sadrists. While still maintaining a rhetoric of explicit independence from Khamenei (which for example ISCI has yet to copy), the reunion of al-Sadr and al-Haeri and his physical presence in Iran clearly has improved Iranian influence over the young Iraqi student of religion to the strongest level ever seen.³⁴ For the first time, some of al-Sadr’s official statements now seem to echo proclamations by the Iranian foreign ministry (this was quite conspicuous during the Basra clash in March 2008), even if his supporters on the ground in Iraq still maintain a firmly Iraqist discourse. To Tehran, it must be a relief to have al-Sadr in Qum, where he is pursuing studies to become a *mujtahid* (a cleric with the authority to issue fatwas), rather than in Iraq, where he might constitute a risk in terms of an unpredictable Mahdist uprising.

What has been the U.S. role in all of this? First and foremost, it has contributed to the inflated role of SCIRI/ISCI, historically the main plank of Iran’s policy in Iraq, as well as ISCI’s ideas with regard to the structure of the Iraqi political system. Through approaching Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim as some kind of baron of an imagined Shiistan south of Baghdad, Washington not only strengthened his hand, but also agreed to a sectarian conceptual framework that automatically put Iraqi nationalists at disadvantage. These tendencies were evident already during the drafting of the TAL in early 2004, but they became much more pronounced in the summer of 2005 when the United States not only put pressure on the Iraqis to finish the constitution “on time,” but also allowed a process in which SCIRI and the two biggest Kurdish parties

essentially dictated the terms of a strongly decentralized, ethno-sectarian quota system of government that few native Iraqis could recognize at first. No model of government could have been more perfect for Iran, because it pushes the commonalities between Iran and the Iraqi Shiites (the sectarian identity) to a maximum—for example, through permitting the creation of sectarian federal regions, by way of a (temporary) presidency that is clearly sectarian in its tripartite design, and via the general highlighting of ethno-sectarian identities in a way that many Iraqis, regardless of their own social background, found to be foreign. At the same time, Washington has helped weaken Iran's historical enemy in Iraq by judging the entire Sadrist movement on the basis of splinter groups that probably were created by the Iranians for the very purpose of generating a low-level conflict in southern Iraq that could occupy the U.S. forces and the problematic followers of al-Sadr (who for years have been at odds with ISCI). In general, Washington uncritically has given support to al-Maliki and ISCI in battles with whomever al-Maliki defined as a "terrorist," such as marginal Mahdist groups in 2007 (many of whom were actually virulently anti-Iranian), and the Sadrists as a whole in 2008.³⁵ Washington has at times issued pleas for political reform, but never thought of using conditionality as a means of putting pressure on the Iraqi government. Indeed, the Bush administration explicitly rejected this kind of approach.³⁶ Olive branches from the Sadrists such as an emphasis on a timetable for a U.S. withdrawal (rather than an immediate retreat) have generally been ignored.

These maneuvers all helped ISCI in achieving disproportionate influence in key posts and committees in the Iraqi government. It helped consolidate ISCI's dominance at the provincial level of government between 2005 and 2009, and has influenced arenas such as the constitutional revision committee, where ISCI along with the Kurds today still can block any attempt to revise basic concepts such as federalism. This despite the fact that a cross-sectarian parliamentary majority (often referred to as the 22 July forces) are in fact in favor of more wide-ranging constitutional reform. Symptomatically, despite

representing close to half the Iraqi parliament, they have never received any U.S. assistance or encouragement.³⁷ Instead, it seemed clear by late 2008 that Washington still favored attempts by ISCI and the Kurds to deal a blow to the 22 July parties' flirtation with an increasingly centralist Nuri al-Maliki, which had become a cause of concern for the pro-federal forces.³⁸ But in a situation of a divided parliament, simply adopting a more neutral stance would have helped the United States toward better alignment with the important trends in Iraqi politics and society.

WHAT DOES IRAN WANT?

Iran is often represented on both sides of the political divides in Iraq. This was seen as early as 2002: Iran supported SCIRI's dialogue with the United States, while at the same time promoting a faction whose rhetoric was far more anti-American—Daawa (Tanzim al-Iraq). To some extent, this overlapped with different ideological positions as far as state structure was concerned—SCIRI was prepared to accept federalism, whereas Daawa (Tanzim al-Iraq) warned against it. Since 2005, ISCI has been pro-federal on the basis of sectarian identity (aiming for a nine-governorate all-Shiite federal region from Basra to Baghdad), whereas Hizb al-Daawa (Tanzim al-Iraq) appears to be reverting to a more Iraqi nationalist discourse after a stint in early 2005 as small-scale regionalists speaking on behalf of “the far south” (the oil-rich Basra, Maysan, and Dhi Qar, which accounts for only a small portion of the Shiite population of Iraq). From Qum in Iran, Muqtada al-Sadr still appears to speak an Iraqi nationalist language.

Moreover, the pro-Iranian parties themselves often tend to make sure they have a foot in each camp. ISCI can appear to be quite pro-American in some contexts (such as when Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim travelled to Washington in late 2006), but they also criticize the Americans when they speak for an

Iranian audience, for example when al-Hakim addressed the Mujahedin-e Khalq issue in November 2007.³⁹ More recently, ISCI have supported Nuri al-Maliki's campaign of "imposing the law" (and thereby primarily going after the Sadrists); this, however, was balanced with sharp criticism of the al-Maliki-appointed commander in Basra prior to the March 2008 security operation, as well as with outright collusion with some of the smaller Iran-financed parties that ended up being targeted in those operations (Tharallah, in particular; the party was formally part of SCIRI's electoral coalition in Basra in 2005). During the run-up to the 2009 provincial elections, tensions between Daawa and ISCI again became more pronounced due to different views on the virtue of a centralized state system and the prime minister's attempt to build an independent power base in the security forces and among the tribes.

Western observers often dismiss this apparent lack of policy coherence as the inevitable and somewhat helpless result of Iran's complex decision-making process and its polycephalous governmental structure. An alternative and perhaps more realistic interpretation would be to posit Iran as the government in the world that knows best to deal with the Shiite Islamist factions of Iraq, and that it pursues a deliberate policy of betting on as many horses as possible, playing them off against each other when convenient (as may have been the case when the Tanzim al-Daawa branch threatened to withdraw from the United Iraqi Alliance in June 2008).⁴⁰ For a long time, Tehran probably calculated that, as long as the United States was tied to a single Shiite partner (ISCI), Iran would come out on top regardless; accordingly, it has been free to experiment with policies and coalitions.⁴¹ For example, leaders like Khamenei are probably wary of unorthodox firebrands such as Muqtada al-Sadr, and the ultimate aim of engaging with the Sadrists is probably to weaken this traditionally Iraqi nationalist movement as a whole. Also, given Tehran's longstanding problem with Najaf as a potential challenge to the model of government favored by Iran (the clerics of Najaf are less inclined to see religious scholars becoming directly integrated in state institutions), it makes sense for them to

maintain a degree of pluralism among Iraq's Shiites, which can help avoid the consolidation of a single successor for Sistani, the current top ayatollah.

As for the Islamist parties that returned from exile, Tehran can afford to remain at the sidelines and watch the federalism/centralism debate unfold. There has been much fanfare in Western media about the recent "nationalist turn" of prime minister Nuri al-Maliki and his greater emphasis on centralism. But while his embrace of centralism is undisputable (and there is even a degree of contact with the 22 July parties through the Sadrists and Ibrahim al-Jaafari), a look at the narrow composition of the coalition he put together for the January 2009 provincial elections—all Shiite Islamists—still suggests there are limits to his turn away from sectarianism and that he has a long way to go before he is able to reach out to all Iraqis and mark a break with Iran (for which constitutional reform, not nationalist rhetoric, should be the key indicator). What also cannot be excluded is the possibility that Tehran is interested in the notion of Shiite federalism to a far greater extent than admitted by Western researchers (whose standard answer is that Iran is nervous about falling apart itself along ethno-sectarian lines as some kind of domino effect). This cliché is problematic because ISCI leaders repeatedly have been given the opportunity to promote their pro-federal beliefs for Iranian audiences, suggesting that Iran possesses far more self-confidence in its own nationalism (which integrates communities like the Azeris on the highest level of government) than what Western commentators tend to think.⁴² Should the nine-governorate scheme fail, Iran still may hope to control Iraq from the center, where it also retains good connections. And vice-versa, of course, although ISCI's own propaganda for the big Shiite region has abated considerably since 2006, and what remains of it seems to be entirely at odds with the bottom-up procedure for forming federal regions that made its way into the Iraqi constitution as the result of U.N. advice.⁴³ Still, as late as February 2008, al-Hakim was prepared to pick a fight with al-Maliki over the more general question of state structure—federalism versus centralism—and this re-emerged as a major theme in the 2009 provincial

elections, even if al-Hakim now emphasized wide-ranging power to the existing governorates rather than the formation of entirely new federal entities.

In line with this, in the autumn of 2008, Iranian news media were happy to pay homage to the resistance to the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) by *both* ISCI and the Sadrists.⁴⁴ (Subsequently, when concessions were achieved by al-Maliki, these, as well as the conclusion of a “withdrawal agreement” in itself, were celebrated both by the Iranian regime and ISCI preachers as an end to U.S. hegemony in the region.) Evidence of rapprochement between the two camps is sometimes hailed as a step towards greater Shiite unity,⁴⁵ but the notion of creative chaos and the advantages of creating pressure on the United States through different channels simultaneously are also highlighted. Perhaps Iranian policy in Iraq was described most faithfully by the conservative daily *Keyhan* in its commentary on the departure of the Sadrists from the Iraqi government in April 2007, when it highlighted the “two languages” strategy and the possibility for extracting concessions from the Americans through both the al-Maliki government/ISCI as well as the Sadrists, henceforth operating outside government.⁴⁶ And perhaps it is sometimes worth taking Iranian policy statements at face value instead of inventing a strained and non-empirical narrative about “Iraqi Shiites rejecting Iranian influence.” When asked about Iranian support for anti-government insurgents in 2007, the Iranian foreign minister retorted: “Why should we undermine a government in Iraq that we support more than anyone else?”⁴⁷ Today, Iran is maximizing its leverage in Iraq through cooperating with (and, when necessary, co-opting) as many Shiite Islamist organizations as possible. It is very easy, because there is not much competition. Moreover, on the one point that Iran seems to keep coming back to as a red line in Iraq—the maintenance of a sectarian system of government based on quotas (*muhāsasa*)—it continues to receive active support from American circles (where conceptualizations of Iraq as a tripartite union of Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds still prevail).⁴⁸

Despite the obvious interest of Iran in pursuing relations with as many Shiite partners in Iraq as possible, U.S. policymakers prefer to hold on to a

discourse in which the Sadrists are seen as the sole vector of Iranian influence. This exercise takes the form of a contradictive mixing of statements that may be true with regard to the Shiite population in general but are evidently false when it comes to the Shiite leadership cultivated by the Americans. For example, on April 8, 2008, in the U.S. congressional hearings on Iraq, the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, suggested that the anti-Iranian stance of the Iraqi population during the long war with Iran proved their Iraqi orientation. That is exactly right with regard to the majority of Iraqi Shiites, except that the small minority that Crocker and Bush have promoted to top positions in the Iraqi government fought on the other side, killing and arresting Iraqis and taking them to Iranian prisons. Days later, President George W. Bush emphasized how the U.S. project in Iraq would show that “mainstream Shiites reject the ideology of Iran’s radical regime.” Again, correct with regard to the population at large, but many of these people find it problematic that the Bush administration is sponsoring an elite group of people whose frequent and friendly visits to Tehran hardly can be described as “rejection.” In a super-optimistic take, Vali Nasr has even suggested that Tehran’s apparent decision to prioritize the Iraqi state and support al-Maliki instead of “sub-state actors” (the Sadrists) somehow shows that Iran has “stumbled” in Iraq.⁴⁹ If Tehran enjoys good relations with al-Maliki and ISCI, why is that a problem for Iran? The idea that Iran should have no “Shiite policy” in Iraq simply seems naive in a context where its proselytizing activities in such distant areas as Senegal and Germany (among Alevite exiles) are well known.

CONCLUSION

Once there is a realization that Iran is working both inside and outside the Iraqi government and on either side of the federalist/centralist dichotomy to promote its power, many of the axioms relating to U.S. policy discussions about

Iraq collapse.⁵⁰ In the first place, it becomes clear that handing over to “Iraqi” control without any profound political and institutional reform for all practical purposes means providing Teheran with excessive channels for interfering and ability to control events through its proxies and allies. Iran, alongside the Kurds and ISCI in particular, has been adamant that any changes to the 2005 Iraqi constitution at the behest of “ex-Baathists” would be unacceptable,⁵¹ and ISCI preachers such as Sadr al-Din al-Qabbanji are consistently at the forefront shouting about “coups” and “the return of the Baathists” when the questions of political reform or a change of government hit the agenda.⁵² And even if Nuri al-Maliki seems to have discovered that centralism and Iraqi nationalism hold rather greater popular appeal than ISCI’s federalism, his continued reliance on political allies closely affiliated with Iran (such as the Tanzim al-Iraq branch of the Daawa) sows doubts as to the likelihood of him emerging as a truly national figure capable of cutting ties to Tehran. He repeatedly has talked about “progress” in national reconciliation despite the absence of any real institutional change, and the composition of his coalition for the January 2009 provincial elections—he ran separately from ISCI—showed a miniature UIA in that it was once more entirely Shiite-dominated, with no attempt to integrate Sunnis in a meaningful way. Despite appealing to the concept of centralism during the local elections campaign, some Daawa members still talk about reconstituting the sectarian UIA (as seems to be consonant with Iranian aims), and when some talk about adding Sunnis to it, they seem to do so in a rather condescending way (“we also have some Sunni tribes aboard”).⁵³ At any rate, with the problematic pre-history of decades of cooperation between Iran and some of the exiled Shiite Islamist parties, it would be prudent to look for constitutional reform rather than impressive and “strong” personalities when evaluating the Iraqi transition process.

Secondly, any “regional conference” to deal with Iran in Iraq or acknowledging a “legitimate regional role” for Iran in Iraq would consolidate Iranian domination over Iraq on false premises;⁵⁴ that is, unless Iraqi internal issues

were dealt with separately beforehand, by a more representative conference of Iraqis than the current constitutional revision committee. But if Iran is allowed a say in internal Iraqi issues at a “regional conference,” the result will be a system of government just as artificial as the 2005 constitution, and long-term regional stability will fail to take root. The United States needs to realize that the majority of Iraqi Shiites simply will not accept Iran as a “regional” negotiator on their behalf in the same way as Serbian leaders could negotiate for Bosnian Serbs leading up to the Dayton peace accords in 1995. Similarly, when it comes to the domestic Iranian situation, the policies of regionalization (and recognition of Iranian spheres of influence) are bound to backfire. The reformist movement in Iran is specifically hostile to scenarios in which hardliners can resort to expansionist regional adventures at the expense of much-needed reforms at home, and within Shiism more generally, important currents that remain critical of Khomeinism and *wilayat al-faqih* would suffer setbacks.

It also should be clear that when al-Maliki, possibly with a degree of Iranian support, has decided to ride the tiger of Iraqi nationalism, he means business as far as U.S.-Iraqi relations are concerned. The SOFA is already universally referred to in Iraq as “the withdrawal agreement,” and al-Maliki apparently had no qualms about postponing the final decision to a popular referendum in the summer of 2009 that might well precipitate an even earlier withdrawal. (The referendum idea itself actually received prominence in Shiite circles, including ISCI, before it was construed as a “Sunni demand” in the international press.) There is genuine fear on the part of many Iraqi nationalists that the SOFA will be implemented according to plan but without any political-reform component (there is none in the SOFA) and hence bring Iran’s quest for domination in Iraq to a conclusion. Even the most cursory reading of Iraqi history should make it clear that there is no space for “residual” forces or even “advisers” (it was precisely the presence of such elements that helped bring about the 1958 revolution), and al-Maliki will

find it exceedingly difficult to turn away from the veneer of Iraqi nationalism once he has adopted it. “Out” means “out” in Iraq, and hopes among American military personnel that “key officers close to al-Maliki” will ask for an extension because Iraqi military forces are not sufficiently trained to assume full responsibility seem somewhat far-fetched.⁵⁵ Al-Maliki is interested in exploiting the American presence in Iraq as long as possible, but he knows that the pressures from Iraqi nationalism will become unbearable at some point, and probably thinks that if he is to avoid the fate of his namesake Nuri al-Sa‘id (the longtime premier and strongman of the Iraqi monarchy who was executed in 1958), pragmatic and/or covert coordination with the Iranians in a context of nominal Iraqi “full independence” may be a safer bet than a long-term U.S. occupation of the country.

Is there an alternative to this scenario of increased Iranian regional dominance? Things would look very different if the United States had reverted to the historical point of departure: that the majority of Iraqi Shiites—with the exception of those parties who were exiled in Iran in the 1980s and even fought on the Iranian side in that war—are Iraqi nationalists who genuinely fear the prospect of Iranian domination. There are Shiites in Iraq today who consistently hold such anti-Iranian views, and who publicly complain that Iran is trying to marginalize them or even murder them: in other words, they are “rejecting Iran” (Bush’s term) in a more credible fashion. These Shiites are far more inclined toward working with the Sunnis and other Iraqis in a system that would transcend the logic of ethno-sectarian quotas. But they are not the ones that are in government, and the United States has never seriously engaged with them and their ideas of Iraqi nationalism, preferring instead to hold on to the fiction of a “moderate, multi-ethnic pro-American coalition of Shiite and Kurdish leaders.”⁵⁶

As long as the current political system remains biased against nonsectarian forces, their numbers will remain unimpressive. But their potential is certainly interesting. One example is the Fadila party. Its members typically

travel to the Arab Gulf countries rather than to Iran. On national reconciliation issues, such as federalism, de-Baathification, and the integration of the Sons of Iraq militias, it takes a position that often resembles many of the secular and the Sunni Islamist parties.⁵⁷ In Basra, the local branch of the Fadila party has explicitly portrayed its scheme for transforming Basra to a nonsectarian federal region as a counterpoise against ISCI's project to create a purely Shiite region of nine governorates and what they perceive as the concomitant increase of Iranian influence, whereas national leaders of the party remain hesitant when it comes to any federalization in the current circumstances.⁵⁸ Fadila members repeatedly have suggested votes of no confidence against ministers sometimes criticized of being too close to Iran⁵⁹ and complain that the al-Maliki government has facilitated the transfer of pro-Iranian terrorists such as Yusuf al-Musawi of Tharallah from Iraqi jails to Iran.⁶⁰ The Fadila party has formally proposed postponing constitutional revision to the next parliament, which is a workable proposition that would ensure debate about these issues and therefore a more Iraq-focused parliamentary election in 2009.⁶¹

Another nonsectarian example is the tribal forces in the south. Examples include the Council of the Tribes of the Arab South of Iraq (Kazim 'Anayzan and Muhammad al-Zaydawi), who explicitly criticize Iranian influence in the central government,⁶² and the Council of the Elders of Basra (Kazim Abbud). Al-Maliki himself has explicitly recognized the tribal potential,⁶³ and more recently has moved to try to exploit it for his personal gain, through the "support councils." But as long as he presides over a government that is perceived as being too close to Iran, there will be limits to this kind of outreach, and the tribes will remain a potential that can be mobilized to swing Iraq back to a more nationalist course. A more controversial exponent is Karim Mahud al-Muhammadawi, founder of "Hizbollah of Iraq," which despite the name has a rather secular and fiercely anti-Iranian orientation (it should not be confused with "Hizbollah in Iraq," which is a copycat outfit that was created by Iran and SCIRI in an attempt to compete with Muhammadawi in the marsh areas).⁶⁴ As

is the case with the Sahwa forces in Anbar, there have been accusations about Muhammadawi and his tribe being implicated in crime and corruption. But his anti-Iranian attitude reflects a wider phenomenon among the tribes in Iraq's Shiite-dominated south into which the United States has yet to tap.

Such examples aside, it is probably unadvisable to suggest any more machinations by the United States to pick the right partners in Iraq, because so many mistakes have already been made. Instead, there are certain measures that undoubtedly would push in the right direction without creating accusations of further U.S. meddling in Iraqi affairs. They include denying Iran the right to have any influence on internal Iraqi issues in any kind of "regional conference" (but at the same time opening up for serious bilateral negotiation concerning the nuclear dossier and the U.S. boycott); singling out the 2009 parliamentary elections in Iraq as the key to constitutional reform and emphasizing (and assisting) transparency and the widest possible participation in those elections; and promptly abandoning the Bush administration's policy of encouraging the governments of the world to restore ties with the al-Maliki government unconditionally, without asking for political reform in return.

When Barack Obama in July 2008 declared, "Iraq is not going to be a perfect place . . . we are not going to . . . eliminate every trace of Iranian influence," he severely underrated the Iraqiness of the Shiites between Basra and Baghdad.⁶⁵ The majority of Iraqi Shiites would prefer to live without Iranian influence; it is the Bush administration's unintended strengthening of a pro-Iranian minority that would become enshrined if Obama's ideas from his "New World" speech were adopted in Iraq. But Obama also has referred beautifully to the motive of "giving Iraq back to the Iraqis." This is a noble intention, but the extent to which care must be exercised to make sure that it is actually the Iraqis that get their country back seems to be underrated in the United States at present.

NOTES

1. The Gertrude Bell Archive, Robinson Library, Newcastle University, Gertrude Bell to her father, November 1, 1920.
2. Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 277.
3. For example, the marsh areas north of Basra produced numerous Shiite *ulama* in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 123.
4. Contrary to the prevailing cliché in Western media to the effect that Sistani entirely refutes *wilayat al-faqih*, a series of fatwas published in Iranian newspapers in 2004 (and for a time appearing also on the Sistani Web site) clearly showed that Sistani accepts some kind of "societal" *wilaya* by a supreme jurispudent that at times may also interfere with political questions; *Keyhan*, November 30, 2004.
5. *Al-Istiqlal* (Karbala) no. 6, October 10, 1920.
6. Muhammad Mahdi al-Basir, *Tarikh al-qadiyya al-'iraqiyya* [History of the Iraqi Question] (London: Laam Books, 1990 reprint), p. 238.
7. Reidar Visser, *Basra, The Failed Gulf State: Separatism and Nationalism in Southern Iraq* (Piscataway, N.J.: Transaction, 2005).
8. Reidar Visser, "Taming the Hegemonic Power: SCIRI and the Evolution of US Policy in Iraq," *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies* 2, no. 1 (2008).
9. Abdul Halim al-Ruhaimi, "The Dawa Islamic Party: Origins, Actors and Ideology," in Faleh Abdul-Jabar, *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues* (London: Al Saqi Books, 2002).
10. Faleh Abdul-Jabar, *The Shiite Movement in Iraq* (London: Al Saqi Books, 2003), p. 258.
11. A key source on these developments is Fa'iq al-Shaykh Ali, *Ightiyal Sha'b* [The Murder of a People] (London: Al-Rafid, 1999).
12. Abdul-Jabar, *The Shiite Movement in Iraq*, p. 19.
13. Reidar Visser, "SCIRI More Flexible on Federalism, but Fails to Resolve Khamenei Ambiguity," *Historiae*, May 12, 2007, available online at www.historiae.org/khamenei.asp.
14. Arabic version of interview with *Los Angeles Times*, published at the new ISCI Web site, August 22, 2007, available online at www.almejlis.org.
15. Mohammed Abbas, "Iran's Influence? You Can Hear It on Iraqi Streets," Reuters, September 30, 2008.
16. See for instance, "Iraq Today," Al-Alam Television, September 10, 2006.
17. See for example press release by Ittihad al-Qiwan al-Islamiyya al-'Iraqiyya, dated April 2, 2002.
18. *Al-Jihad* magazine (Tehran), no. 80, 2002.
19. *Al-Daawa* newspaper, no. 1, March 2003.
20. Interview with Iranian television (Channel 2), December 2002.

21. Interview with al-Maliki on Iranian television (Sahr), December 24, 2002.
22. *Al-Mustaqbal*, May 22, 2003.
23. Rory Stewart, *The Prince of the Marshes: And Other Occupational Hazards of a Year in Iraq* (New York: Harcourt, 2006), pp. 237, 245. See also International Crisis Group, "Iraq's Shiites under Occupation," 2003, p. 12.
24. Author interview with leading member of the Fadila party, October 2008. Ibrahim al-Jaafari's breakaway faction is interesting in that its opponents still label it as pro-Iranian and even suggest that its genesis may have been an Iranian attempt at putting increased pressure on al-Maliki, but the new party has gone further than other Daawa branches in emphasising Arab nationalism in the Kirkuk question, and explicitly rejecting "Safavid Shiism," *al-Malaf* interview with al-Jaafari dated May 22, 2008.
25. There is a much overlooked pre-history to this that can explain the apparent contradiction of Sadr reaching out to a Khamenei supporter. Only six days after the clashes between anti-al-Hakim Sadrists in Iran and Iranian security forces in 1999, al-Haeri offered Sadrist supporters the option of switching allegiance to him now that their former leader (Muqtada's father) was dead. In January 2003, before the Iraq War, a pro-Sadrist meeting in Damascus was arranged by al-Haeri's office and was attended by Afif al-Nabulsi, a supporter of the Lebanese Hizbollah. This seems to suggest a deliberate attempt by the Iranians to regain control of the Sadrist element through loyal clients such as al-Haeri and Hizbollah.
26. For an insightful discussion of these processes (and their limits in terms of Iranian cooperation with Iraqi insurgents), see Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, *Iranian Strategy in Iraq: Politics and "Other Means,"* Combating Terrorism Center, October 2008, pp. 55–70.
27. Radio Sawa, November 18, 2007; Reidar Visser, *The Sadrists of Basra and the Far South of Iraq: The Most Unpredictable Force in the Gulf's Oil-Belt Region?* (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2008), p. 14.
28. Ned Parker, "Cracks in Sadr's Army," *Los Angeles Times*, April 3, 2007.
29. *Al-Hayat* newspaper, April 30, 2008.
30. Interview with Salah al-'Ubaydi, Al-'Arabiyya, April 16, 2008.
31. Interview with Subhi al-Tufayli, *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, February 9, 2007. There is no doubt that some Sadrists are inspired by Hizbollah, but that is an entirely different issue. Some claim that Hizbollah operatives were used by Iran in attempts at creating breakaway "special groups" from the Sadrist mainline movement precisely because anti-Iranian sentiment among the Sadrists was so strong that Arab interlocutors were needed.
32. Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).
33. Michael Knights, "No-Go No More—The Battle for Sadr City," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, June 2008.
34. Interview with al-Sadr on al-Jazeera, March 29, 2008.

35. *Al-Sirat al-Mustaqim* newspaper, September 24, 2008.
36. Michael R. Gordon, "Rivals Present Sharp Divide on Iraq Goals," *New York Times*, October 5, 2008.
37. On the early emergence of the July 22 trend, see "The Law on the Powers of Governorates Not Organised in a Region: Washington's 'Moderate' Allies Show Some Not-So-Moderate Tendencies," *Historiae*, February 11, 2008, available online at www.historiae.org/governorates.asp.
38. Amit R. Paley, "In Iraq's Provincial Elections, Main Issue Is Maliki Himself," *Washington Post*, January 17, 2009.
39. IRNA news agency, November 11, 2007.
40. *Al-Zaman* newspaper, June 24, 2008.
41. For an early observation of this "strategy of managed chaos," see International Crisis Group, "Iran in Iraq: How Much Influence?" *Middle East Report* no. 38 (March 2005): pp. 22–23. It seems likely that with the election of Obama and the more likely prospect of a U.S. withdrawal, Iran is more interested in stabilizing Iraq to its own benefit.
42. Interview with Muhsin al-Hakim by the Iranian Student News Agency, January 31, 2007.
43. See for example comments by Rida Jawad Taqi in "Iraq's Holy City of Najaf Witnessing a Boom," Associated Press, August 27, 2008.
44. Fars news agency, October 8, 2008.
45. Mehr news agency, October 9, 2007.
46. *Keyhan* newspaper, April 23, 2007.
47. *Financial Times*, May 10, 2007.
48. On the Iranian position, see Kayhan Barzegar, "The Shiite Factor in Iran's Foreign Policy," Centre for Strategic Research in Tehran, November 2008.
49. Vali Nasr, "Iran on Its Heels," *Washington Post*, June 19, 2008.
50. This is the logical opposite interpretation of that favored by the Bush administration, which consistently refused to see any Iranian influences inside the Iraqi government, reducing instead the entire issue of Iranian influence in Iraq to militant groups. For typical examples, see Kimberly Kagan, "Iran's Proxy War against the United States and the Iraqi Government," Institute for the Study of War, 2007, and Charles Krauthammer, "Iraqi Agreement Changes Balance in Region," *Silver City Sun-News*, December 5, 2008.
51. For the Iranian position, see Emile El-Hokayem, "Iran's Nuclear Energy Program: Policies and Prospects," report from a joint conferences of the Pugwash Conferences and the Center for Strategic Research Tehran, April 25, 2006.
52. Aswat al-Iraq news agency, December 8, 2008.
53. *Al-Bayan* newspaper, February 22, 2009.
54. "So We've Got a Date," editorial, *New York Times*, November 10, 2008.
55. See Elie Lake, "Not So Fast," *New Republic*, December 24, 2008.
56. The attempt by the Bush administration to spin the "multi-ethnic" nature of the new regime in Iraq as something particularly positive exemplifies the large gap between American and Iraqi thinking. Iraq has always been multi-ethnic, but most

Iraqis with the exception of the Kurds detest the enshrinement of ethnic identities in the institutions of government, which they see as retrograde and dismiss as quota-sharing or *muhāsasa*.

57. Reidar Visser, "Shia Leaders Disagree on Integration of Sons of Iraq into Army," *CTC Sentinel*, November 2008.

58. Interview with Ismail al-Waeli, *Al-'Arab al-Yawm*, November 29, 2008.

59. Aswat al-Iraq news agency, July 29, 2008.

60. *Al-Ghad* newspaper, July 15, 2008.

61. Fadila party press release, June 10, 2008.

62. Kazim 'Anayzan interview with al-Sharqiyya, April 7, 2008.

63. Michael Gordon, "The Last Battle," *New York Times*, August 3, 2008.

64. Al-Arabiyya television, April 17, 2007.

65. "A New Strategy for a New World," Speech delivered by Barack Obama, Washington, D.C., July 15, 2008.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

REIDAR VISSER is a research fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs. He has a background in history and comparative politics and holds a doctorate in Middle Eastern studies from the University of Oxford. He has published extensively on the history of southern Iraq and the issues of decentralization and federalism, including two books, *Basra, the Failed Gulf State: Separatism and Nationalism in Southern Iraq* (2005) and (edited with Gareth Stansfield) *An Iraq of Its Regions: Cornerstones of a Federal Democracy?* (2007). Many of his writings are available from his Iraq Web site, www.historiae.org.

ABOUT THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

The Century Foundation sponsors and supervises timely analyses of economic policy, foreign affairs, and domestic political issues. Not-for-profit and non-partisan, it was founded in 1919 and endowed by Edward A. Filene.

BOARD OF TRUSTEES OF THE CENTURY FOUNDATION

H. Brandt Ayers	Richard C. Leone
Alan Brinkley, <i>Chairman</i>	Jessica Tuchman Mathews
Joseph A. Califano, Jr.	Alicia H. Munnell
Alexander Morgan Capron	P. Michael Pitfield
Hodding Carter III	John Podesta
Edward E. David, Jr.	Richard Ravitch
Brewster C. Denny	Alan Sagner
Christopher Edley, Jr.	Harvey I. Sloane, M.D.
Charles V. Hamilton	Theodore C. Sorensen
Matina S. Horner	Kathleen M. Sullivan
Lewis B. Kaden	Shirley Williams
James A. Leach	William Julius Wilson

Richard C. Leone, *President*