

IRAQ IN CRISIS

August 29, 2011

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In the spring of 2011, Iraq witnessed major protests across the country. This article will address the causes of these demonstrations. It will also discuss the obstacles toward forming a stable government and the nature of sectarianism and corruption in the government. Last, it considers the implications for U.S. policy, particularly concerning the December 2011 withdrawal deadline.

INTRODUCTION: AN OVERVIEW OF THE PROTESTS IN IRAQ

As part of what has been widely dubbed the “Arab Spring,” protests began in Iraq on January 30, 2011, when two marches were held in Baghdad.[1] The first demonstration consisted of a crowd of around 100 protestors in Firdos Square, where the statue of Saddam Hussein was torn down during the 2003 invasion. While the intention was in part to show solidarity with the demonstrators in Egypt, who were pressing for the removal of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak from power at the time, those involved in the Iraqi protests had their own demands as well, including better governance, public services, and security. Another protest, also with 100 demonstrators, took place on that day in Baghdad’s Tahrir Square, by the Green Zone. Similar to the Firdos Square protest, demonstrators called for improved public services but also demanded that authorities not evict squatters from public buildings.

The following month, the protests began to escalate, resulting in outbreaks of violence. For example, on February 3, 2011, 1,000 people protested outside the local government building in Hamza, in the Diwaniya Province (about 180 kilometers south of Baghdad),[2] complaining of poor sanitation. The demonstrators threw rocks at the offices, and local police forces subsequently opened fire to disperse the crowd, leaving three protestors wounded and four police officers injured. Two days later, demonstrators hurling rocks and Molotov cocktails attempted to break into a government building and police station in the town.[3] Security forces again opened fire, killing one and wounding at least four. This marked the first fatality as a result of the Iraqi protests.

The demonstrations and unrest peaked on February 25, 2011, which was declared the “Day of Rage” for the protest movement. Rallies were held throughout the country. Around 5,000 people gathered in Baghdad’s Tahrir Square, the crowd throwing stones, shoes, and plastic bottles at riot police. Soldiers were also required to block off a bridge connecting Tahrir Square to the city’s Green Zone, where the Iraqi parliament and U.S. embassy are located.[4] At least fifteen protestors were killed during the “Day of Rage.”[5] Demonstrations became particularly violent in the Kurdistan region during the month of February 2011. For instance, on February 17, two people were killed and 40 wounded after police fired bullets at a rally in the town of Sulaymaniya, where hundreds of young men, chanting slogans against corruption and high unemployment attempted to storm the town’s local government offices.[6]

Following the “Day of Rage,” protests continued but diminished slightly in magnitude both in terms of the numbers of demonstrators and the level of violence. The demonstrations have not approached the scale of those in Syria and Bahrain. In March 2011, new demonstrations arose to denounce the intervention of

the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in Bahrain. On March 16, followers of the Shi'i cleric Muqtada al-Sadr held marches in Baghdad and Basra in solidarity with the predominantly Shi'i demonstrators in Bahrain, decrying the intervention of GCC troops.[7] The next day, several hundred Shi'a protested in the Shi'i holy city of Karbala in the south of Iraq.[8] The following month, even fewer demonstrations were reported. On April 20, however, in Kurdistan, Iraqi troops were called in to prevent protestors from gathering in locations such as Sulaymaniya University, the town's main square, and other sites, according to residents.[9] In addition, thousands of Sadrists held a protest march in Baghdad on April 9 to denounce the presence of U.S. troops in the country, with senior Sadr aide Hazim al-Araji threatening violent reprisals should they fail to leave by the end of 2011 as scheduled, as outlined in the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA).[10] The SOFA stipulates a deadline for complete withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq by December 31, 2011.

Of note is the rapid decline in media coverage concerning Iraq and the protests, although some news outlets began reporting about demonstrations in July 2011.[11] Since late January 2011, major U.S. newspapers have reported most about Iraq. For example, in February 2011, the *New York Times* (NYT) featured 16 pieces that at least mentioned protests in Iraq. The following month, the NYT ran just one story on Iraq; it published three stories in April, with one was concerning Shi'i support for the people of Bahrain.[12] The NYT, however, has provided more coverage than outlets such as the *Christian Science Monitor*, which ran three stories about the demonstrations in February 2011, one in March, and none in April.[13] Of the most prominent U.S. newspapers, the NYT ran the largest number of stories on Iraq due to the fact that it continues to operate news bureau in Baghdad. Most other sources began withdrawing their reporters and closing their offices from 2008 onwards following the rapid drop in violence as the sectarian civil war reached its conclusion.[14]

Other outlets fared little better than the major American newspapers. Fox News did not run a single story on protests in the country, whereas National Public Radio (NPR) had seven stories in total: four in February 2011, two in March, and one in April.[15] The latter, of course, benefited from having reporters on the ground in Iraq, while Fox News did not. Nonetheless, the British media showed the same marginal interest as their American counterparts. For instance, the *Independent* ran no pieces on protests in Iraq, the *Guardian* published two in February, one in March; and though the BBC has a correspondent, Jim Muir, posted in Baghdad, its "Middle East Protests: Country by Country" section does not even cover Iraq. [16]

Thus, Iraq has generally received no more than minimal media coverage since the beginning of 2011. This has created a distorted picture of the country, where the only events seemingly worthy of attention are now incidents of terrorist attacks. Thus, to receive updates regarding ongoing protests in Iraq, one has to turn to sources beyond the mainstream media, such as the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI). More relevant, however, is the cause of the protests in Iraq. To answer this, one must examine four major problems plaguing the country: sectarianism, corruption, inadequate public services, and poor security provisions.

PROBLEMS FORMING AN IRAQI GOVERNMENT

It was not until nine months after the March 2010 national elections that a coalition government was finally formed under Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. A coalition government naturally does not consist of homogeneous political bodies. The Iraqi coalition government is marked by ethnic, sectarian, and religious diversity. Though sectarianism has always been a part of Iraq's history, with what was essentially Sunni-Arab minority rule in the country until the 2003 invasion, it was only institutionalized after the removal of Saddam Hussein's regime. Indeed, members of the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), which was set up as a provisional government in the country from July 12, 2003 until June 1, 2004, were selected on an entirely sectarian basis. Roughly correlating with the divisions among the Iraqi population, thirteen Shi'a, five Sunni Arabs, five Kurds, one Turkmen, and one Assyrian were appointed to the council.[17] Since then, the distribution of administrative positions along sectarian lines has been an ingrained feature of Iraqi political life.

The March 2010 elections in saw a huge number of individual political parties participate, such that most chose to run in alliances with other parties as coalition blocs. From the elections, two key blocs emerged: the Iraqi National Movement (al-Iraqiyya) led by Ayad Allawi—whose bloc at the time won the largest single number of seats in the parliament (91)—and Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law coalition bloc, which garnered 89 seats.[18] According to the Iraqi constitution, the bloc that wins the largest single number of seats has the right to form a government.[19]

Iran therefore pressured both the followers of Muqtada al-Sadr and the Supreme Islamic Council to join al-Maliki's bloc and thereby form the Iraqi National Alliance (INA), which then became the largest coalition group in parliament. It is of note that the Supreme Islamic Council has lost much power since the 2005 elections when it emerged as the largest political bloc. This was in part due to the organization's ties to Iran, making it widely perceived as a foreign agent. Indeed, in the 2008 provincial elections, Nouri al-Maliki, then running on a secular, non-sectarian and Iraqi nationalist platform,[20] exploited this by calling on Iraqis to vote only for candidates "who are loyal to Iraq." [21] Consequently, al-Maliki's State of Law bloc won the majority of votes in the provincial elections, with the Supreme Islamic Council finishing in a distant second place.

However, the newly formed INA still could not secure enough seats to form a government and thereby needed the votes of the Kurdish Alliance. Nonetheless, the Kurds, Sadrists, and Supreme Islamic Council all refused to back al-Maliki for a second term as prime minister without the incorporation of the al-Iraqiyya bloc into the new government.[22] As with the decision to join Maliki's bloc, Iran advised both the Sadrists and Supreme Islamic Council that excluding al-Iraqiyya would be perceived as excluding the Sunni Arabs, who accounted for a large share of the votes for Allawi's bloc, thereby creating potential for reigniting the Sunni insurgency. On the other hand, members of al-Iraqiyya continued to insist that they had the right to form the new government.[23] This led to a stalemate, which persisted until December 2010, with various groups entering into talks with each other to discuss the possibilities of forming new blocs. The deadlock was finally broken by Masoud Barazani, who convened a meeting with the quarrelling parties in Erbil and drew up a compromise.[24]

The most important feature of this compromise was the idea of "national partnership" or "power sharing." [25] Thus, political positions were granted to various figures on a strictly personal basis: Jalal Talabani was to remain president of Iraq for a second term; Nouri al-Maliki secured a place as prime minister, likewise for a second term.[26] In the meantime, ministerial portfolios were given to respective partners of the two men, but an office known as the "Supreme Council for Strategic Policies" was also created,

designed to placate Ayad Allawi and the al-Iraqiyya bloc. The council's purpose was to formulate policies on a national and strategic level.[27]

Yet once approved as prime minister for a second term, al-Maliki quickly went back on many of the terms of the compromise, doing all he could to strip the proposed council of its powers and fill it with his followers. Allawi therefore resigned from his position as head of the council. Frustrated about the lack of success at the political level, members of the al-Iraqiyya bloc have begun to defect and form their own parties. For example, on March 7, 2011, eight members of the Iraqi National Movement (INM) left Allawi's bloc to form their own "White Iraqi National Movement." The group was led by Hassan Aliwi and included Minister of State for Tribal Affairs Jamal Batikh.[28] Among the reasons cited by the new organization's leaders for leaving the INM were accusations that Allawi failed to implement the INM's program, had not fulfilled the bloc's promises to its followers, and could have aligned himself with al-Maliki's bloc to rule the country but did not do so.[29]

Thus, Iraq's politicians appear to have been preoccupied with their own political gains and have made little attempt to address the numerous problems facing the country as a whole. Iraq's major socioeconomic and security challenges are detailed below.

CORRUPTION AND POOR PUBLIC SERVICES

On October 26, 2010, the German-based think-tank Transparency International (TI) released its 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index. The survey included 178 countries rated on a transparency scale from zero to ten (with ten the maximum score for transparency). Accordingly, the highest ranked countries are the least corrupt. For the second year in a row, Iraq was ranked the fourth most corrupt country in the world with a score of 1.5, only 0.4 points higher than the most corrupt country, Somalia.[30] Also behind Iraq were Myanmar and Afghanistan, which scored 1.4.[31] Two cases will demonstrate the deeply entrenched nature of corruption in Iraq.

A common feature of a corrupt government is rampant nepotism. Like other politicians, al-Maliki has placed friends and family in key positions to exploit government largesse.[32] For instance, he appointed his son Ahmad al-Maliki as an assistant to the director of the prime minister's office.[33] Previously, he had been the head of procurement in the same office.[34] During that time, he amassed a large fortune, especially through investment in real estate abroad.[35]

A second aspect of corruption in Iraq is the widespread problem of fake documents being used to obtain government jobs, such that the bureaucracy has become filled with personnel without qualifications. Fake academic degrees and similar forged documents have become a common sight in the country since the 2003 American-led invasion. Under Saddam Hussein's regime, forged papers were primarily limited to passports used by Iraqis attempting to leave the country.[36]

Indeed, whereas the country's Integrity Commission has affirmed that some 20,000 government employees have used such fake documentation, the Justice Ministry estimates that the real figure could be as high as 50,000.[37] The Integrity Commission adds that the exploitation of forgeries has not been confined to junior staff; high-ranking government officials have also used forged documents. As Alia Nassif, a member of the commission and an al-Iraqiyya MP, told the news site Niqash, "Investigations

carried out by the Commission reveal that some of the current MPs submitted forged certificates to the electoral committee more than a year ago.”[38] This is a clear sign of the rampant bureaucratic corruption in the country that runs from top to bottom.

The bogus papers can easily be purchased on the black market, with a high school diploma costing around \$1,500 and \$7,000 for a Ph.D.[39] The most well-known place in Iraq to obtain forged credentials is the poor Sadr City neighborhood in Baghdad,[40] where one man, identifying himself only as Abu Haydar, claimed that the forgers are protected by the police and some government officials.[41] If this claim is true, it shows implicit support by the authorities for an illegal practice that is punishable by Iraqi law. According to the law, anyone found guilty of using forged documents must be fired from his/her position and may be required to pay back all earnings received from that job.[42]

At present, the Integrity Commission and the Iraqi prime minister are still locked in a debate over the question of who should be prosecuted for these crimes. In December 2010, the latter proposed that only high-ranking officials be held accountable, while those who are lower-ranking should be excused for using fake papers. The Integrity Commission, however, has opposed Maliki’s suggestion, and in March 2011, reaffirmed its wish to pursue the issue at all levels. One reason al-Maliki has pushed for a compromise is because his political party, Da’wa, is no less guilty than the others are of using forged papers. In fact, it was reported in 2011 that some 37 officials in the prime minister’s office, all from the Da’wa party, had used fake diplomas.[43]

Inadequate public services—including water, electricity, and housing—has likewise been an endemic problem and is closely linked with the massive amount of corruption. Inadequate provision of basic services cannot be blamed on a lack of funding. Rather, billions of dollars have been stolen or wasted on fictitious contracts and non-existing projects, especially in the Ministry of Electricity.[44] In addition, the inability to liberalize the economy has meant that bureaucracy has impeded reconstruction efforts.

Iraq is still stuck with the centralized, command system it inherited from the days of Saddam Hussein. For example, Iraq currently has a five-year development plan to construct two million housing units by 2014 and thereby end the nation’s housing crisis. In reality, little has been done to achieve this goal. In May 2010, the city of Karbala in southern Iraq announced its intention to construct 250 housing units within four months. By the end of June, however, nothing had even happened, as the bureaucracy proved itself a hindrance in obtaining the necessary licenses to commence building.[45] In the World Bank’s “Doing Business 2011” report, Iraq was ranked 166th out of 183 countries in terms of ease of doing business.[46] On average, 14 steps are required to obtain a construction permit, taking some 215 days to finish.[47]

Just before the wave of demonstrations, the 15 U.S. Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), which have been evaluating Iraq’s provinces since 2006, issued a report in January 2011 on Iraqi Kurdistan and 15 other provinces. The report employed a new method called the Stability Development Roadmap (SDR), based on public opinion as to whether there would be civil unrest. As far as the criterion of “basic services” was concerned, the PRTs almost proved themselves prophetic in foreshadowing protests that would break out throughout Iraq in February 2011. Fifteen of the sixteen provinces surveyed received the lowest rating of “very unstable” in the field of basic services.[48]

Sensing the increasing restlessness of the Iraqi people over wide-scale corruption and poor public services, al-Maliki cancelled the purchase of 18 F16 fighter jets in order to free up money to calm the growing tensions over supplies of basic foodstuffs under the ration-card system.[49] Following the “Day of

Rage” protest on February 25, 2011, al-Maliki gave his ministers 100 days to fight corruption and improve public performance, affirming that he would evaluate each minister’s performance after this period to assess whether he/she should retain his/her post.[50] Yet no specific benchmarks were set, and critics justifiably saw the PM’s plan as a charade.[51] Indeed, on April 2, 2011, in an interview with the Associated Press, Maliki affirmed that for those ministries that had not yet met their targets for improvement, the deadline would be extended.[52] This suggestion was echoed by various officials in early June 2011, just before the June 7 deadline.[53]

In the end, no ministers were fired due to poor performance. Even if al-Maliki had been intent on improving ministerial practices, implementing such extensive changes in this short time period would have been extremely difficult, due to the nature of an Iraqi bureaucracy that constricts independent decisionmaking; corruption, which absorbs much of the money; and contradictory laws on foreign investment.[54] In addition, different parties control the various ministries, and none would have accepted the dismissal of their members.[55]

Meanwhile, the government’s inadequacy in tackling corruption and shortcomings in public services has even alienated the most influential Shi’i cleric in the country, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who now refuses to meet with Iraqi leaders because of what he views as the government’s failure to address the people’s legitimate grievances.[56]

MILITANT GROUPS AND THE U.S. WITHDRAWAL

Another major concern among the protestors has been an ongoing lack of security. Despite a dramatic drop in violence since the sectarian civil war in 2006, both Sunni and Shi’i militants remain active in Iraq. The Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)—essentially the Iraqi branch of al-Qa’ida—still stages dozens of attacks each month, including bombings and random shootings with mass casualties. For example, in late March 2011 the ISI attacked the government compound of Salah al-Din’s provincial administration in the city of Tikrit, Saddam Hussein’s hometown. Over 60 people were killed and more than 100 wounded. It took a joint U.S.-Iraqi team to reclaim the provincial government building.[57]

On October 31, 2010, ISI perpetrated an attack on the Our Lady of Salvation Assyrian Catholic Church in Karradah, central Baghdad.[58] Insurgents armed with suicide vests held around a hundred people hostage for four hours, until Iraqi security forces brought in a counter-terrorist squad to storm the church and lift the siege. Eight militants were killed, but only after they had set off their explosives, which left 58 dead and 67 wounded. It was one of the worst assaults on Iraq’s Christian community since 2003, creating an atmosphere of terror similar to that following al-Qa’ida’s imposition of the *jizya* (poll tax) under threat of death in March 2007 in the predominantly Assyrian Christian neighborhood of Dora in southern Baghdad.[59] This was followed by a series of eleven roadside bombings and two mortar attacks on Christian neighborhoods in Baghdad, killing a further five and leaving twenty injured.[60] The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that 133 Christian families had registered as refugees in Syria and 109 more had done so in Jordan as a result of these attacks.[61] An Assyrian Catholic priest also told the *Guardian* newspaper that another 450 families had arrived in Beirut in December 2010.[62]

The Iraqi army and police thus continue to suffer from problems of poor performance and morale, despite years of training by American forces. Since early April 2011, there has been a U.S. lobbying effort to keep U.S. troops in Iraq beyond the official December 31, 2011, withdrawal deadline stipulated in SOFA. For example, on April 7, 2011, Defense Secretary Robert Gates traveled to Baghdad, meeting with al-Maliki, Deputy Prime Minister Salih al-Mutlaq, President Jalal Talabani, and Kurdistan Regional Government President Masoud Barazani.[63] He emphasized that the United States was willing to stay beyond 2011 if Baghdad requested this but stressed that the Iraqi government would need to make a decision soon.[64] Under the current plan, the United States will accelerate its withdrawal of the 47,000 troops still in the country beginning in the late summer and early fall.[65]

On April 21, 2011, Admiral Mike Mullen, the chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, met with al-Maliki, who affirmed that the Iraqi “military and the security forces have become able to take the responsibility, to maintain the security and to work with professionalism and patriotism.”[66] Yet some senior U.S. military officials have also openly advocated an extension of the U.S. presence to improve stability within Iraq. In particular, they are concerned about Arab-Kurdish tensions in the north,[67] the Iranian influence,[68] and Iraq’s inability to ward off foreign threats in what is perceived as an “increasingly volatile region.”[69]

Depending on the audience being addressed, some senior Iraqi military figures have expressed their agreement with the U.S. military’s assessment. For example, in an interview with the Kurdish newspaper *Rudaw*, Chief of Staff of the Iraqi Army General Babaker Zebari declared that “an American presence after the deadline will create more problems than solutions.”[70] Yet in another interview with *AK News*, published on May 10, 2011, Zebari warned that the departure of U.S. forces by the end of 2011 would “harm” Iraq.[71] He explained that Iraq still requires an American military presence to protect its air space and borders from foreign interference.[72] He further declared his anxiety over ethnic tensions in cities such as Kirkuk and Mosul, as well as insurgent activity in the latter.[73]

Why did Zebari change his opinion in the two interviews with the small Kurdish outlets? His conversation with *Rudaw* appears to reflect the political climate in the country, whereby the political elite are careful not to declare openly a desire to extend the withdrawal deadline. In fact, all the major blocs and parties have publicly expressed disapproval for the proposal to keep U.S. troops in Iraq after 2011 and—with the exception of the Kurdish Alliance[74]—have only had negative things to say about the American presence. At the same time, they have tried to avoid discussing the matter extensively, fearing a loss of power within the new government, still not fully formed. In May 2011, Salah al-Obaydi, Sadrist Current deputy and spokesman, accused Parliament Speaker Usama Nujaifi and the government of seeking to retain U.S. forces in Iraq.[75] Nonetheless, it is more probable that Zebari’s interview with *AK News* reflects his real convictions about the impending U.S. withdrawal.

If the withdrawal deadline is extended beyond 2011, Muqtada al-Sadr may realize his threat to revive his “Mahdi Army” militia, which was officially disbanded in 2008 after a prolonged conflict with Iraqi security forces and an Iranian-brokered ceasefire. On April 9, 2011, Sadrists held a rally in Baghdad to commemorate the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime and demand an end to the U.S. “occupation” of Iraq. [76] Salah al-Obaydi warned that any extension of the U.S. occupation beyond the end of 2011 would lead to an “escalation of military resistance work and the withdrawal of the order freezing the Mahdi Army.”[77] Since 2010, there have been speculations as to whether the militia has been revived. Most recently, U.S.

Major General Vincent Brooks claimed that Sadr loyalists had been engaging in acts of intimidation and extortion in Iraq's southern provinces.[78] In February 2010, Hussein Kamal, head of intelligence at the Ministry of the Interior, said that the Mahdi Army had once again become active.[79]

Nonetheless, Sadr is torn by conflicting interests. Despite wishing to draw support from the street in maintaining a populist, anti-American image of protecting Iraq against foreign occupation, he desires political power as well, which translates to joining the regular political process.[80] In an attempt to balance these interests, in 2005, he urged his followers to participate in the elections and joined al-Maliki's first administration. Eventually, however, he boycotted the government, and his militia splintered, culminating in the armed conflict with al-Maliki's security forces in 2008.[81]

Sadr must also face the problem of ongoing demonstrations against the lack of basic services such as electricity and health care, as many of his politicians are in charge of the ministries responsible for providing those services.[82] His threats to revive his militia at a time when the country is focused on politics and economic development could well prove a disastrous miscalculation, similar to what happened in 2005.[83]

On May 11, 2011, a meeting of tribal sheikhs of the Southern Tribes Council in Basra called for a revolt along the lines of the anti-British "Twenty Revolution" of 1920 if the U.S. presence were extended, claiming that "Basra province is living in security and stability and there is no need for the U.S. forces within its territory." [84] Since, Sadr seems to have backed away from his earlier threats to revive the Mahdi Army. Around the time of the meeting of the tribal sheikhs, when al-Maliki urged all factions to allow an extension of the deadline of the withdrawal of foreign troops by a simple majority in parliament, [85] a leader of the Sadr forces announced the next day that a two-thirds majority could do so.[86]

In addition, a day later, in a sermon in Najaf, Sadr called on Iraqis to rid the country of American troops by means of non-violent protests.[87] He added that he would reconsider his threats to revive the Mahdi Army even if the majority of the Iraqi government voted in favor of the U.S. military presence being extended.[88] The prime minister, realizing that he could not have Sadr threatening violence when the Sadrists formed a key part of his administration, called out the Shi'i cleric on his rhetoric. As a result, Sadr has toned down his rhetoric, aware of the need to consider his own political interests. If U.S. troops stay beyond 2011, their presence could serve as a convenient scapegoat for the Sadrists, enabling them to blame the country's problems on foreign actors.[89]

A further challenge is posed by the Iranian-backed Special Groups, such as the "Hizballah Brigades and the League of the Righteous. These militant organizations—taking orders directly from Tehran—are naturally opposed to the U.S. presence. In light of the ongoing debate about the planned withdrawal of American troops, they have stepped up their attacks (including mortars and rockets) on U.S. soldiers and U.S. army bases. The Hizballah Brigades, for example, openly brag about these assaults on their website. [90] They have also posted videos of the attacks on YouTube.[91] Despite the groups' official claim to be acting in solidarity with the Shi'a of Bahrain, part of the motivation has been to win publicity and claim credit for the U.S. withdrawal. As the withdrawal deadline approaches and following the final decision on extending the troop presence—whatever it may be—the Special Groups will likely intensify their militant activities.

Assassinations attributed to the Special Groups (rather than al-Qa'ida) by security officials in Baghdad[92] have become prevalent in cities such as Baghdad, as well as provinces like Tamim and Salah al-Din,

which are still hotspots for insurgent activity. Dozens of incidents in 2010-2011 have been documented in the U.S. Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction's (SGIR) quarterly reports.[93] The *New York Times* reported that in April 2011 alone, there were 44 assassination incidents in Baghdad, compared with 31 in March and 12 in February.[94] Shi'i militants appear to be targeting Sunni Arabs in the government and military, suspecting them of being Ba'athists and thus trying to forestall the return of the Ba'ath party.[95] Nonetheless, it is difficult to determine the proportion of assassinations that can be attributed to the Special Groups. Based on the locations of the various attacks, either Sunni or Shi'i insurgents could be responsible, and these groups rarely claim responsibility.[96]

CONCLUSION

Compared with the Iranian, Saudi, and Syrian regimes, Iraq has thus far been able to retain many features of political life important for a healthy democracy. This has been most evident in the field of press freedom. Yet in response to the protests, Iraqi authorities have also displayed an authoritarian tendency counter to the rule of law. This has included shooting at protestors[97] as well as the arrest and torture of people reporting on the disturbances in the country.[98]

Furthermore, the Iraqi government continues to suffer from the scourges of sectarianism and corruption, both of which have seriously hindered reconstruction efforts and fueled political turmoil in the country. These factors combined with the threat of militant groups in the face of the U.S. withdrawal make al-Maliki's (who is dependent on the Kurds to maintain his government) chances of surviving his second term, expected to end in 2014, questionable.

Still, this does not mean a military coup is likely. While Iraq has a long history of military interference in politics (e.g. the coup in 1958 that deposed the pro-Western constitutional monarchy), the military lacks political muscle for two reasons. First, the expansion of the new Iraqi army was largely implemented by the United States. From 2003 to 2008, U.S. policy aimed to build up the security forces as quickly as possible, opting for quantity, not quality. This meant that group loyalties and political parties placing their supporters in the military's ranks were generally overlooked. For example, after the 2005 elections, the Shi'i and Kurdish parties recruited their followers en masse, such that 35,000 former Kurdish Peshmerga fighters ended up in the army. [99] As a result, the army lacks cohesiveness in its ranks.

Second, the army's command structure is too decentralized and divided for a general to secure enough authority to launch a successful coup. The Iraqi army is divided into 14 divisions[100] under the Joint Headquarters and the Ministry of Defense, as opposed to the 56th Baghdad Brigade, the first and second Presidential Brigades, and 15 independent battalions that answer to the Office of Commander in Chief, which is part of the prime minister's office and bypasses the Ministry of Defense. Furthermore, the United States assisted in the creation of a separate Baghdad Operations Command that falls under the leadership of al-Maliki himself.

On the other hand, it is apparent that Ayad Allawi, al-Maliki's biggest rival, is planning to bring down the

Iraqi government. Allawi has claimed that no genuine “national partnership” exists unless Barazani’s compromise is implemented fully, while criticizing the prime minister for centralizing so much power in his hands.[101] Ahmad Chalabi, the head of the Iraqi National Congress whose candidacy for the position of Minister of Interior was vetoed by al-Maliki, and Adil Abd al-Mahdi of the Supreme Islamic Council, who withdrew his candidacy for the vice presidency due to the government’s decision to have three people serve as vice president,[102] share Allawi’s concerns. The three disgruntled politicians have begun to discuss the need for a “shadow government,” a term borrowed from the British parliamentary system to signify an opposition government in waiting.[103] It is likely that civil and political unrest will continue well into the coming months, further aggravating the country’s general instability.

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[1] Mohammed Tawfiq, “Protestors in Iraq Decry Lack of Basic Services, Shortages,” CNN, February 3, 2011.

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[4] “Toll Rises as Iraq, Yemen Protests Rage,” ABC News, February 26, 2011.

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[7] Khalid al-Ansary, “Iraq’s Sadr Followers March Against Bahrain Crackdown,” Reuters, March 16, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/16/us-bahrain-iraq-idUSTRE72F4U220110316> (accessed July 13, 2011).

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[9] “Iraq Government Tenses Up Tone Against Protests,” *al-Sumaria* (Iraq), April 26, 2011.

[10] Muhanad Mohammed, “Iraqi Cleric Warns of Violence if U.S. Troops Don’t Go,” Reuters, April 9, 2011, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2011/04/09/uk-iraq-protests-idUKTRE73817C20110409>.

[11] See, for example, Mohammed Tawfeeq, “Activists: Protestors Beaten in Baghdad,” CNN, July 8, 2011, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/07/08/iraq.protest/index.html>.

[12] Tim Arango, “Shiites in Iraq support Bahrain’s protestors,” *New York Times*, April 1, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/02/world/middleeast/02iraq.html>.

[13] Joel Wing, “How the Media Forgot About Iraq’s Protest Movement (REVISED),” *Musings on Iraq*, May 6, 2011, <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2011/05/how-media-forgot-about-iraqs-protest.html>.

[14] See for example the News Index produced by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, which notes that Iraq failed to reach the top ten in any media format for June 2009.

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