



SPECIAL REPORT

1200 17th Street NW • Washington, DC 20036 • 202.457.1700 • fax 202.429.6063

ABOUT THE REPORT

This report is part of an ongoing study on Iraq's new political leaders and their visions for the future. Based on extensive background data and personal interviews with over forty top leaders since 2003, the study finds a revolutionary change since the Ba'th in the forces shaping the new leaders and their political orientation. A nationalist regime committed to a strong central government has been replaced by political pluralism and disparate views, with no common vision on Iraq's direction forward. The political process has intensified polarization around ethnic and sectarian identity, which could lead to Iraq's fragmentation.

The report suggests several ways to help Iraqis step back from this divide, including refocusing on economic development, particularly the need for new oil legislation that would give all Iraqis a stake in the nation's major resource, and slowing the political process to give leaders time to absorb change and refine the political system.

Phebe Marr is a senior fellow at the United States Institute of Peace. A leading U.S. specialist on Iraq, she is frequently consulted by government and nongovernmental authorities, and her book *The Modern History of Iraq* is considered the standard source on contemporary Iraq. A former senior fellow at the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University, she has advised high-level officials, often testifies before U.S. Senate and House committees, and frequently appears on network TV as a commentator on Iraq.

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policy positions.

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Phebe Marr

Who Are Iraq's New Leaders? What Do They Want?

Summary

- Understanding the background and visions of Iraq's new leaders is critical to analyzing where the country may go in the future.
- Changes in leadership since Saddam have been revolutionary. Among Iraq's new leaders there are virtually no holdovers from the Ba'th era. A "de-Ba'thification" program to remove the old guard reinforces the divide between those who held office before and those who hold it now.
- The ethnic, sectarian, and regional balance of the leadership has also been reversed since Ba'th times; Sunni dominance is gone, and Shi'ah constitute the largest group, with Kurds and Arab Sunnis making up about a fifth of the leadership. A high percentage of the new leaders are exiles, and most have been shaped by years of opposition to Saddam's regime. Under the Ba'th, affiliation with other parties was prohibited; today's leaders come from a diversity of parties.
- Ideological changes are also dramatic. Under the Ba'th, the vision was of a unified state with an Arab identity, emphasizing economic development, technology, and independence from foreign influence. The newly elected leaders have differing visions. The focus on ethnic and sectarian identity has sharpened; nationalism and a sense of Iraqi identity have been weakened.
- The Kurdish parties make Kurdish identity paramount and seek a highly decentralized federal region that includes Kirkuk. Kurdish leaders are overwhelmingly secular and pro-Western in their orientation.
- Shi'ah leaders have more diverse views. Their primary identity is Iraqi, but their sense of nationalism is weak. The main interest of most Shi'ah leaders is in Islamizing—and reforming—society, in a Shi'ah direction. Because they are a majority, they favor elections and a parliamentary government.

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- The secular center has a commitment to an Iraqi identity and a more centralized state, but it is losing ground rapidly. A clear vision for the Sunnis has yet to be articulated, but judging from their campaign literature, many are still wedded to past Ba'ath visions.
- One surprising finding is the lack of emphasis on economics. Although new government leaders recognize the need for economic development, they do not make it a priority. This puts them at odds with many of their constituents, who say they want services and security.
- The new politics of communal identity is making compromise on governing difficult. While ethnic and sectarian identities have been an important feature of the Iraqi polity in the past, the new political process (elections, constitution making) is sharpening them. So, too, is the insurgency.
- It is crucial to address fragmentation before it becomes irreversible. One step would be to refocus Iraqis on economic issues, especially the formulation of oil legislation that gives all Iraqi communities a stake in oil resources and an equitable share in their benefits.
- The political process should be slowed to allow politicians to absorb changes and work out compromises, especially in the area of regionalization. Iraqis should be encouraged to mend the political system that is producing polarization—for example, by refining political party regulations and the election law.
- The new political leadership must develop an alternative vision for the future that encourages economic development, a new middle class, and communal tolerance, or the incipient fragmentation will become a reality.

Introduction

There are few more important determinants of a country's future direction than the nature of its political leadership. It is now almost three years since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, and new leadership is only slowly emerging under a process that has been disjointed, difficult, and even polarizing. As a result, Iraq's future direction is still only dimly perceived. Iraq has now passed through a year of three elections, two of them designed to select national political leaders. While imperfect, the elections did produce a new set of leaders likely to see Iraq through the early stages of its coming transformation, and they confirm a certain political pattern and direction likely to persist over the next few years—probably even through the decade and beyond. Who are the newly elected leaders of Iraq? How do they differ from their predecessors—under Saddam and under the CPA? And what do they tell us of Iraq's likely future direction?

Although the new government is still in the process of formation, enough is known about the emerging leadership from the earlier election in January 2005 and the election results in December to draw some conclusions. Indeed, many of the same leaders who won in January were also victorious in December. This report examines the backgrounds of the new leaders, and their views on the future of Iraq, through interviews with them and through their published works.

The report will focus on several sets of leaders to see what they can tell us about change and continuity in the new Iraq. To provide a baseline for examining change, the first group will be those who were in power at the close of Saddam Hussein's long dictatorship. The second group will be a cohort of ninety-seven new leaders who have held cabinet-level or other top offices in the state since 2003. Third will be a comparison of Iraqi leaders appointed by the CPA (Coalition Provisional Authority) in 2003 and those elected to office in 2005. Even a brief survey of this data makes possible several important conclusions. One is the sharp—indeed revolutionary—break with the past that the current leadership represents. Another is the significant changes in leadership—and orientation—that have

taken place in the past two years and been reinforced in the December 2005 election. The significance of these new orientations, or visions for the future, is borne out in interviews with selected members of this new, elected elite during the past year.

Background to Changes: Saddam's Regime

To understand just how substantial the changes in leadership and direction have been since 2003, it is useful to start with a brief look at Iraq's political leadership in the last decade of Saddam's rule. A study of the key decision makers in the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) and the top-level Regional Command of the Ba'th party in 1998—a group of eighteen men—reveals certain characteristics.¹

First, at top levels all but one of these key officials, a Kurd, were members of the Ba'th party.² Affiliation with the party was essential, not only for high political office but for a good education and for most careers. In fact, by 2003 there were two generations of Ba'th party leaders in this group. Under this system there was one party, one leader, and no political life outside the party. In fact, by the turn of the century even party life had been largely stamped out and replaced by the dictatorship of one man and his security network. Nonetheless, party institutions remained, as did the need for membership in the party if one hoped for any social mobility, let alone for a rise to the top of the political ladder: hence the sense of entitlement that came to be a hallmark of this elite. The totalitarian nature of this system left its mark on all who participated in it.

The second shared characteristic was the high degree of "continuity" in leadership over time. A snapshot of the Ba'th regime in 1998 shows an ossified leadership unable to change or bring in new blood. Among this top leadership, almost all came from the generation that had joined the Ba'th party just before or just after the 1958 revolution, four decades earlier. Their longevity in office is striking. Some two-thirds had been in the Regional Command of the party for over sixteen years. At least four had been in power for three decades. In May 2001 the party attempted to broaden its leadership through the election of a new Regional Command. The only notable additions from the younger generation were Saddam's son Qusay and Dr. Huda Ammash, the daughter of a veteran Ba'th leader ousted by Saddam in 1971.³ Nor was there much change at lower levels. For example, in the years 1997 and 1998 there were three cabinets, but only one position changed hands. This shows a leadership that over decades had made few changes at the top and had little ability to bring in new figures unless they came from the "Ba'th family."

A third characteristic of the group was its oft-noted ethnic and sectarian imbalance. Although Arab Sunnis have always had the lion's share of positions in most modern Iraqi governments, the imbalance in favor of Sunnis under Saddam, particularly in his last years, was striking. Among the top leadership in 1998, some 61 percent were Sunni; only 28 percent Shi'ah, and a mere 6 percent Kurdish. Another 6 percent were Christian. (At lower levels, among the cabinet, where there were more technocrats, the imbalance was not as great.) As these figures indicate, Sunni dominance was overwhelming in decision-making positions, with Shi'ah greatly underrepresented and Kurds all but absent.

The same trend was evident in the regional distribution of the leadership at the top. Some 61 percent came from the so-called Sunni Triangle, the small cities and towns north and west of Baghdad. Almost a quarter came from Saddam's hometown of Tikrit, with only 6 percent from Baghdad, Iraq's capital and its most integrated city. Few came from the northern (mainly Kurdish) and southern (mainly Shi'ah) areas. The Ba'th regime not only failed to represent broad regions of the country but also failed to incorporate an important social segment of Iraq's population: its urban, educated middle class, best represented by Baghdad's inhabitants.

There were other imbalances as well. Until 2001 the group was entirely male. In the party's long reign of thirty-five years only one woman occupied a high-level post (and, as

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indicated, she was the daughter of a previous Ba'th party member). The same was true of cabinets, although some women were elected to the parliament and others held professional posts. The Ba'th regime, at its upper levels, also tended to be undereducated. In 1998, for example, several members of the top group had not gone beyond high school. Some members, like Saddam himself, later acquired college degrees by well-known arrangements with the faculty in Baghdad. In 1998 no top leaders had the equivalent of a doctoral degree. Some cabinet members were more highly educated, some even with doctorates or other advanced degrees, but only a few of these credentials were attained abroad. It must be kept in mind that in Iraq education itself was highly politicized. Except for some technical fields, such as engineering and medicine, most subjects of study—especially those dealing with political science—required vetting by the regime. As a result, most of the political class that held office under the Ba'th was largely Ba'thized, while those left outside were often deprived of the background and training that might help them in coping with government and public policy issues.

Finally, most of the leaders could be characterized as “insiders,” with little or no exposure to the outside world. In 1998 only a handful of the thirty-six leaders under study had been educated outside Iraq or traveled much outside its borders, and by the late 1990s they were essentially bottled up in Iraq because of sanctions and for security reasons. At the top levels, only Saddam had lived abroad (in Cairo, for a few years in his youth), and only a few of the rest did much traveling abroad, and this under limited official conditions. Drawn mostly from the smaller cities and towns of the “Triangle,” shaped by the conspiratorial nature of the party, they had little contact with the environment of neighboring countries, much less the broader international arena. Some of the ministers had a broader background and were better educated, but their exposure to the outside world in the twilight of the Saddam regime was also very limited.

What did this mean for the orientation of this leadership? While much of the original ideology of the Ba'th party, which had been pan-Arab and socialist, had been reshaped under the mallet of Saddam's personal dictatorship, enough lingered to leave its stamp on the leaders who still held power in 2003. The old ideology's chief characteristic was nationalism, both Iraqi and Arab. Identification with the state, which the Ba'thists led, was strong, as was the commitment to a strong central government, designed to maintain order and stability and to control and exploit Iraq's oil wealth. As is true of almost any long-lasting authoritarian dictatorship, those in the leadership group were possessed of a deep sense of entitlement—to governing power and to benefits from Iraq's wealth. While the Ba'th's original ideology was strongly secular and modern, by the 1990s it had been reshaped to incorporate growing Islamist sentiment among the populace. Indeed, Saddam himself mounted a “faith campaign” in the mid-1990s, which allowed expression of Islamist sentiment and practice, as long as it stayed within the bounds of the Ba'th nationalist orientation. By the turn of the century much of this ideology—if it could be called that—had turned inward, focusing on Iraq's suffering at the hands of foreigners and neighbors under sanctions and other restrictions imposed after the 1991 Gulf War. It is not too much to call this mind-set xenophobic, especially toward the West. It is this orientation, to a greater or lesser degree, that many of the Sunni Arabs who served in the Ba'th administration have taken with them into opposition, and often into the insurgency, and that helps explain their intransigence in the face of the new order.

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Iraq's New Leaders

The new political leaders who have emerged since 2003 stand in sharp contrast with their predecessors in almost every respect. While everyone realizes that there has been “regime change” in Iraq, the extent and depth of the change may not be so widely recognized. Since the fall of Saddam, Iraq has had three different Iraqi administrations and

is embarking on a fourth. The first, essentially appointed by the CPA in July 2003, was the twenty-five-member Iraq Governing Council and an associated Council of Ministers. In June 2004 sovereignty was turned over to Iraq, and a new Iraqi interim government was selected. In January 2005 an election was held for a temporary national assembly, and in May 2005 a new Iraqi government was formed on the basis of that election. This third government, more closely analyzed below, represents a genuine expression of popular opinion and is the best indicator to date of who Iraq's new leaders are and where they are headed. The election of December 2005 is producing a more permanent government in 2006. The election results, however, strongly confirm the trends begun in January 2005, and the new government will contain a number of the same leaders. Altogether, the three governments since 2003 include some ninety-seven leaders—the group that will be used for comparison with the old regime.

Continuity and Change

One of the most striking features of this leadership is just how new it is. There may be some holdovers from the Ba'th era at the second and third levels of bureaucratic structures, but there are very few left at the top, and those who remain were either "nominal" members or had dropped out of the party well before the 1990s. What is most noticeable is the total break with the past. Change in the political leadership has been revolutionary, not evolutionary.

One result of this fundamental change, as table 1 shows, is the lack of carryover in leadership experience—or outlook—from the Saddam era. Indeed, the gulf between those who have come to power since 2003 and those who were in power before then is one of the most critical divides in Iraq today, and it may be increasing. It is this factor that makes "de-Ba'thification" so sensitive and controversial. Moreover, to ensure that such change would be permanent, the CPA issued a law in May 2003 that barred the top four levels of Ba'th party members from holding public office. This law and its results help explain the alienation felt by those who have been dispossessed of power and position, and the suspicion by those now in power of those who came before them. Much of this suspicion permeates the bureaucracy today.

Despite this divide, much about this change has been positive. The Ba'th cohort of political leaders was small and inbred, difficult to penetrate. The new political leaders have opened up the political system, reflected in the large number of new players (ninety-seven) who have gained entry to the leading rungs of political power. The new political system has created considerable political mobility. The newcomers have also brought with them different experiences and a different outlook. Many were residents in Western society and have brought with them exposure to a democratic way of life.

But there have been some negative consequences as well. A number of the newcomers are also unfamiliar with today's Iraq and, as exiles, have few ties with the local constituents whom they are supposed to be serving. Another problem is their lack of experience in governance, which they have had to gain rapidly. The one partial exception is the Kurdish representatives, many of whom have gained valuable experience in self-government in the more open political environment in the north. For the most part, however, ministers have changed posts rapidly and, even when they have served in several cabinets, have not remained in the same post, making it difficult to build bureaucratic institutions or develop expertise in the management of their departments. Nor has there been much time to develop ties to lower levels of the permanent bureaucracy. Indeed, the absence of such ties, as well as changes at the upper levels of bureaucracy, has created much uncertainty and dysfunction. These factors help explain why it has been so difficult to carry out government services.

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Table 1. Continuity and Change in Iraq’s Leadership

	Continuity	Change
Between the Ba’th Party and the New Leaders	0% (0)	100% (97)
Between 2003 and 2005	37% (15)	63% (23)

Ethnic and Sectarian Balance

Other characteristics of the new leadership also show a clear break with the past. Not surprisingly, the leadership of the post-Saddam period represents a sharp reversal in the ethnic and sectarian balance within the leadership. Sunni dominance is gone, and Shi’ah have the largest number of leaders, while the Kurds and Arab Sunnis have about equal representation. As a whole, Arab Shi’ah constitute at least 45 percent of leaders since 2003; Kurds, 19 percent; and Arab Sunnis, 19 percent. Some 2 percent are Turkmen, and 4 percent are Christian, with 9 percent unknown. (Percentages have been rounded.) This ethnic and sectarian balance was consciously begun in the IGC (Iraqi Governing Council) and its accompanying cabinet, essentially put in place by the CPA. Indeed, giving the country’s ethnic and sectarian groups representation in government roughly proportional to their percentage of the population was one of the main criteria for appointment, in some sense consciously focusing the political process on this communal identity for the first time. Although the numbers and percentages have shifted somewhat in subsequent governments (see table 2), post-Saddam-era leadership plainly reflects the end of Sunni dominance.

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Table 2. Ethnic and Sectarian Comparison between Ba’th and New Leaders

Ethnic and Sectarian Identity	Top Level, Ba’th Regime ¹	Top Level, New Leaders ²
Shi’ah Arab	28% (5)	52% (11)
Sunni Arab	61% (11)	24% (5)
Kurd	6% (1)	24% (5)
Unknown	6% (1)	0%

1. Top level, Ba’th regime, comprised the Revolutionary Command Council and the Regional Command of the party, some members of which also occupied the key ministerial positions.

2. Top level, new leaders, comprises the presidents, vice presidents, prime minister, deputy prime ministers, and ministers of foreign affairs, finance, defense, interior, and state for national security in all three governments.

Geographic Distribution

The same trend is evident in the regional distribution of leadership. The dominance of the “Sunni Triangle” and Tikrit has been totally reversed today. By far the highest number of leaders come from urban areas, with Baghdad in the lead. Among all leaders since 2003, over 21 percent come from Baghdad, 7 percent from Basra, and 3 percent from Mosul. Another 7 percent come from Kirkuk. Thus, some 38 percent come from Iraq’s four main urban centers. The Kurdish area is well represented with some 14 percent, and some 21 percent come from the Shi’ah south. Only 3 percent come from the Sunni Triangle.

(Another 23 percent are unknown.) Again, the loss to the Sunni region that dominated Saddam's leadership group is the most striking change, indicating one reason for problems in the Triangle. Another striking change is the robust representation of Iraq's cities, especially Baghdad, missing under the Ba'th, which relied more heavily on rural and small-town elements.

Gender

The new governments that have come to power already have a record of putting females into power that greatly outstrips the previous Ba'th regime's. In the post-Saddam leadership group, some 13 percent have been women; in the May 2005 government some 15 percent of the posts went to women, some of whom have been quite outspoken. While the issue of quotas for females in the new parliament may come under scrutiny in the future, it is unlikely that any future Iraqi government will be able to leave women out of leadership positions, as the Ba'th did for decades.

Education

Iraq's new leadership is also highly educated. Indeed, higher education is one of its hallmarks. This, too, distinguishes it from the Ba'th regime. Among the new leadership, almost 47 percent have doctoral degrees or their equivalent. Another 17.5 percent have master's degrees or at least some education beyond the college level, and another 20 percent have a bachelor's degree or its equivalent. Almost all this education was acquired in secular institutions, although a number of these scholars went beyond such schools to acquire religious education as well. Some 41 percent—a very high percentage—acquired some higher education in the West. (A few had degrees from Eastern European universities.) A smaller number, 29 percent, were educated wholly in Iraq. (Some 14 percent have unknown academic backgrounds.) For the most part, new leaders have an education in scientific or technological subjects. Over 23 percent specialized in engineering or computer science; 16 percent in sciences, medicine, or mathematics; and 2 percent in agriculture. A minority were trained in subjects related to government. Some 13 percent got law degrees, 16 percent graduated in the social sciences or public policy, and 3 percent were trained in military or police academies. Some 10 percent were trained in other fields.

Age and Generational Change

The post-Saddam leadership as a whole is middle-aged (average age fifty-four). The largest group, 22 percent, are in their fifties, some 20 percent are in their forties, and 15 percent are in their sixties. There is a large group (25 percent) of unknown age, but this is unlikely to change the profile substantially. This makes the leadership slightly younger than that of Saddam's regime. (Saddam himself is now sixty-eight.) But the age factor is less important in itself than in what it tells us of the generation now exercising power and of what they have experienced in those years. Here the differences from the Ba'th era are much clearer and go far in explaining who the new leaders of Iraq are and what they are about. It is clear that the post-Saddam leadership is the generation that came to adulthood after the Ba'th came to power, and that, despite its differences, the new leadership has, in one way or another, been shaped by the regime it grew up under.

If we take the age of twenty—a time when people are graduating from college or going to work and are increasingly aware of their political environment—as a threshold of adulthood, at least 57 percent of the current leadership came of age during or after 1968, the year the Ba'th came to power. The figure would no doubt be higher if some of the unknowns (25 percent) were factored in. Few of these leaders have much recollection of the pre-Ba'th era. In short, Ba'th rule is probably the single most important factor in shaping the lives of these leaders. But unlike the Ba'thists, they were not part of the gov-

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erning apparatus but were on the receiving end of Ba'ath power. While the 1970s were less disruptive than subsequent decades and were marked by considerable prosperity, the end of that decade brought the Islamic revolution in Iran, turbulence and upheaval in Iraq, and then a series of wars stretching into the early 1990s (an eight-year war with Iran, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, and then the first Gulf War with the U.S.-led coalition). The period also included a failed revolt by Kurds and Shi'ah in 1991. A number of contemporary leaders participated in these wars (some on the Iranian side) and were the subjects of the brutal repression that followed the events of 1979–80 and 1991. Not surprisingly, many left Iraq. Of those who remained, few appear to have taken much part in the country's political life, many suffered discrimination, and all suffered through the long decade of sanctions as well. As a result, a sense of oppression and victimization, particularly at the hands of the Ba'ath regime, is one of the hallmarks of this new leadership.

Outsiders versus Insiders

One of the most significant features of Iraq's new political leadership is that exiles—Iraqis who have lived outside Iraq for at least a decade, and in some cases two or three—predominate. (This definition does not include Iraqis who spent time abroad for education). Today's leaders are largely those who either left Iraq or lived in the north, free of Saddam's control. Insiders, defined as those who were living under Saddam's regime in 2003, have not yet come into their own. The contrast with Saddam's regime, which was composed wholly of insiders, is clear. Overall, some 38 percent of Iraq's leaders since 2003 are outsiders, 19 percent are Kurds or others from the "free" zone in northern Iraq, and only 26.8 percent are insiders. The rest are of unknown background.

By any standards, this is a remarkably large number of exile leaders and indicates the difficulties that lie ahead in incorporating into the leadership Iraqis who have remained inside Iraq. It may also be difficult to integrate the outsiders, many of whom have left family abroad because of the violence of the insurgency. Tensions between these two groups is clear. Insiders often resent those who have come from abroad, often bringing alien ideas—whether from the West or the East (mainly Iran)—and reputedly failing to appreciate their suffering under Saddam. But outsiders do contribute new ideas and bring badly needed outside support. The outsiders, conversely, bring suspicion of those from inside, particularly those educated under the Ba'ath regime and having some experience within it. These differences represent a major fault line in Iraqi political dynamics, which must be resolved.

Work Experience

More important than where they have been living is what these new leaders have been doing. What kind of work has shaped their adult experience? Among the exiles the largest group, 62 percent, were working either full-time or part-time in opposition activities designed to replace the Saddam government. The rest were simply working, in business or sometimes in the professions, acquiring valuable professional and occupational skills. Those living in the West had some experience in relating to and understanding Western democratic institutions; many, especially those in the United States and the United Kingdom, worked within the system to influence policy in favor of regime change—with remarkable success. Most of those in Iran were engaged in antiregime activities and, during the Iran-Iraq war, fought against the Iraqi army. Whatever their experience, much of the adult life of this group has been shaped by opposition to the Ba'ath, and many have paid a high price in the death of relatives, uprooted family life, and sometimes armed struggle. They are profoundly alienated from, and suspicious of, anyone connected with the previous regime, which will make cooperation with the educated, Ba'athized elite who remained in Iraq difficult.

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A second group, the Kurds and others living in the north (almost 20 percent of the new leadership), bring a different experience. They, too, opposed the regime, and many also fought militarily against it in the Iran-Iraq war and the 1991 revolt. But most of these leaders have also had valuable party and government experience. A number are long-standing leaders of political parties, who for much of the past fifteen years have had the experience, through trial and error, of running a government in real-world circumstances—even through a short civil war. A substantial number have also lived in the West and acted in a diplomatic capacity for their Kurdish government at home. It is not surprising that these Kurds bring unparalleled experience and political skill to the election process (reflected in their robust showing in the January 2005 election) and to government in Baghdad. Compared to other newcomers, they are seasoned political operatives.

The insiders in this new leadership group are harder to characterize. Certainly they have had little or no government experience. A few have been imprisoned by Saddam, indicating some opposition activity. Several have been affiliated with underground Islamist parties. Others have simply worked, including several professionals who may once have been in the Ba’th party and left. But no one with any credentials in the Ba’th party or with high positions within it has made it into this leadership group. Again, the rift between the opposition and the educated elite who “cooperated” with the Ba’th is clear and reflected in the controversy over de-Ba’thification.

Political Party Affiliation

Aside from its opposition to the old regime, the most telling characteristic of the new leadership group is its adherence to a variety of political parties. The contrast here with the Ba’th regime is too clear to need much comment. Some 70 percent of the leaders under study belong to political parties; less than 15 percent are independent. The unknown group makes up about 15 percent, but a number of these are assumed to have been simply professionals or technocrats. But these are a minority in the new regime, unlike during the Saddam era, when many ministries were occupied by technocrats who, although competent in their fields, were devoid of any political ambitions or experience. Technocratic expertise is not a valued avenue of political mobility in the new regime.

As these figures indicate, 2003 marked the return of political life in Baghdad, with new and different parties competing for power and debating real issues. The removal of the Ba’th party, and the ban against its members participating in politics, created political space for competitors. This gap was filled by a number of older, well-known parties that had not been able to operate inside Iraq. Some, like the National Democratic party (NDP) and the Iraq Communist party (ICP), go back to the Second World War or earlier. Both of these parties had a well-established life among Iraq’s intelligentsia in the 1950s and 1960s. Of the two main Shi’ah religio-political parties, the Da’wah originated at the end of the 1950s and dominated the Iraqi Shi’ah movement until its decimation by Saddam at the end of the 1970s, whereas SCIRI was founded in 1982 in Iran, during the Iran-Iraq war. The main Kurdish parties are also old and well established. The Kurdistan Democratic party (KDP), dating from the end of World War II, dominated the Kurdish national movement for half a century; the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) broke away from the KDP and established its independence in 1975. Even the two most important Western exile opposition parties, the Iraq National Congress (INC), led by Ahmad Chalabi, and the Iraq National Accord (INA), led by Ayyad Allawi, are both well over a decade old. The INC, originally an umbrella group of diverse opposition parties, was established early in the 1990s. Allawi claims to have broken with the Ba’th as early as the 1970s, and his INA was openly established in the 1990s as well. After 2003 many new and smaller parties emerged. Most of these have had difficulty establishing themselves. The exception is the Sadrist movement, which has been able to garner much support among “insiders,” youth, and the poor.

Compared to other newcomers, the Kurds are seasoned political operatives.

2003 marked the return of political life in Baghdad, with new and different parties competing for power and debating real issues.

There is no doubt that party affiliation and competition among political parties are dominant characteristics of the new leadership. This has been even more striking since 2005, when genuine elections became the chief means of selecting Iraq's leadership and distributing the power and patrimony of the state. As a result, leadership has largely been determined by party membership, party organization, and the parties' relative ability to mobilize mass support. This return of real politics to Iraq is the single most important change from the Ba'th era and is clearly reflected in the leadership that has emerged.

Changes in Leadership between 2003 and 2005

If these are the most important departures from Saddam's regime, what of changes in leadership since 2003? How do the leaders installed in government after a genuine election in 2005 differ from those installed by the CPA in 2003, and what do these differences portend? This can best be gleaned by comparing the government of 2003 (the Iraq Governing Council and its ministers) with the government formed in May 2005 after the January 2005 election. As expected, a comparison of these two groups shows few significant changes in some areas (educational background, gender, age, and generational experience) but some pronounced changes in others. It is these that we will explore here.

Of the elected government of 2005, only 40 percent of leaders are carryovers, that is, have served at least once before in a previous government.

One minister compared the situation to musical chairs: she no sooner got a handle on one ministry than she was shifted to another.

Establishing government and getting services to the populace are key elements in creating some stability in Iraq, and the rapidity of change in leadership may be hampering this process.

Continuity and Change

While change in leadership over the past two years has certainly not been as dramatic as the change from the Ba'th era, there is nonetheless a high degree of turnover. Of the elected government of 2005, only 40 percent of leaders are carryovers, that is, have served at least once before in a previous government. At best, new leaders who have carried over have been able to acquire only a little more than two years' governing experience in national office. Of this 40 percent, most have been shuffled around in various ministries. (Most have been appointed to satisfy party requirements or for ethnic and sectarian balance.) Only three have been in the same ministry through all three administrations, and interestingly, all these have been Kurds. One Shi'ah has been in the same ministry twice. One minister compared the situation to musical chairs: she no sooner got a handle on one ministry than she was shifted to another. Of course, a rapid turnover in leadership is to be expected in any revolutionary situation such as that which has taken place in Iraq; it will simply take time to develop a new leadership cadre. Under these circumstances, perhaps Iraq's rate of continuity—almost 40 percent—is not all that bad. Nonetheless, this factor helps explain why it has been so difficult to build up government capacity, and why services are slow. A minister moved from one ministry to another after a year cannot build up the infrastructure necessary to govern. Discontinuity affects not only the ability to establish government structures but also the links and ties to constituencies. Indeed, disconnection with the populace is one of the common complaints of the electorate, which is demanding water, electricity, and jobs. Establishing government and getting services to the populace are key elements in creating some stability in Iraq, and the rapidity of change in leadership may be hampering this process.

Ethnic and Sectarian Balance

The basic ethnic and sectarian balance in the leadership has not changed significantly over the past two years, but some important shifts bear noting. The IGC of 2003 was designed to reflect the ethnic and sectarian distribution of the population fairly. Among the IGC and its accompanying cabinet, some 54 percent—a slight majority—were Shi'ah, 22 percent were Kurds, and some 16 percent were Arab Sunnis. Turkmen and Christians each made up 4 percent. Although not perfect, this makeup came closer to approximating the real ethnic and sectarian distribution of the population than had any government

since Iraq’s founding. Of course, it reduced the Sunnis’ representation to a more realistic level, better represented the Shi’ah majority, and may have overrepresented the Kurds a bit. Among the leadership of the government formed after the election in January 2005, the mix shifted somewhat, interestingly, in favor of the Kurds. In that government, Arab Shi’ah constitute less than half (almost 45 percent), Kurds almost 29 percent, and Arab Sunnis 21 percent, with Turkmen and Christians 2.6 percent each. The Kurds have been the biggest winners here, with a proportion of seats in the government higher than their percentage of the population, while Arab Sunnis have seats about commensurate with their numbers in the population. These proportions are expected to change in the forthcoming government, with the percentage of Kurds dropping somewhat and a new Sunni contingent participating. Sunni parties gained about 20 percent of seats in the assembly and are expected to take part in government. (This will not change the ethnic and sectarian balance of the government, only the political affiliation of the Sunnis.)

Insiders versus Outsiders

The government elected in January 2005 has made only modest progress in integrating insiders into the leadership and reducing the number of outsiders. As we can see in table 3, in the IGC, essentially brought in by the coalition, 38 percent of the leaders were outsiders, and some 18 percent were Kurds from the free zone in northern Iraq. Only 28 percent, a little over a quarter, were insiders. In the elected government of January 2005, exiles were nearly 37 percent—still the largest component—and some 29 percent were Kurds or others who had been living in the north. Insiders moved up to 31.6 percent but were still less than a third. Exiles who had lived mostly in the West declined modestly from 26 percent to 21 percent. The problem here is that most “insiders” who might have been tapped for positions had affiliations with Ba’thism, whereas most “outsiders” are oppositionists—a divide that will remain difficult to overcome.

Table 3. Comparison between the IGC (2003) and the Elected Government (2005)

Insiders versus Outsiders	IGC (2003)	Elected Government (January 2005)
Insiders	28% (14)	32% (12)
Insiders in Northern Free Zone	18% (9)	29% (11)
Outsiders (Exiles)	38% (19)	37% (14)
Unknown	16% (8)	3% (1)

Political Parties	IGC (2003)	Elected Government (January 2005)
Membership in Parties	66% (33)	67% (24)
Centrist Parties	30% (15)	3% (1)
Religio-political Parties	22% (11)	36% (13)
Kurdish Parties	14% (7)	28% (10)
Independents	12% (6)	19% (7)
Unknown	22% (11)	14% (5)

Political Party Affiliation

The most telling change in political leadership between the appointed government of 2003 and the elected government of 2005 is political party affiliation. Here the change—and what it portends for Iraq’s future orientation—is striking.

The most telling change in political leadership between the appointed government of 2003 and the elected government of 2005 is political party affiliation.

In the ICG government, political party representation was high; some 66 percent of the leaders belonged to parties, and only 12 percent were independent. (The unknown factor is 22 percent). But in that leadership group, which leaned westward, centrist, Iraqi-oriented, secular parties were prominent. These included the National Democratic Party (led by Nasir al-Chadirchi), the Iraq National Congress (Ahmad Chalabi), the Iraq National Accord (Ayad Allawi), the Assembly of Independent Democrats (Adnan Pachachi), and the Communist Party (Hamid Musa). This group made up 30 percent of the leaders. Next came the religio-political (mainly Shi'ah) parties, composing 20 percent. They consisted mainly of SCIRI and the Da'wah but also included the Sunni Iraqi Islamic Party. Third came the Kurdish parties—mainly the KDP under Mas'ud Barzani, and the PUK under Jalal Talabani—which are themselves relatively secular but committed to Kurdish rather than Iraqi goals. Kurdish party members made up 14 percent of the leaders. Thus, the first IGC government was one with wide, inclusive representation of Iraq's political parties (and of its ethnic and sectarian groups), but one in which secularists (including the Kurdish parties) predominated; and those secular parties that were moderate, even liberal, and had a stronger Iraqi national identity were the largest single group. In short, the cabinet was weighted in favor of a moderate, secularist “center” with an Iraqi-oriented identity.

As table 3 shows, the elected government of 2005 changed that balance. This government, too, was dominated by political party members (68 percent), with 18 percent independents. But the most striking difference was the domination, first, of the Shi'ah religious parties (34.2 percent), and second, of the Kurdish nationalist parties (26.3 percent). Secular, Iraqi-oriented, centrist parties, which did secure some seats in the assembly, were virtually absent in the government, except for one vice president. There were a few parties representing minorities, and no Sunni parties, although individual Sunnis were present. In the election itself, a number of the smaller, older secular parties, such as the NDP, lost outright, disappearing from parliament as well as from the government. The Iraqi List, led by Allawi, was the main secular centrist group in the running, but it declined to join the government and instead chose to remain an official opposition in parliament; however, its proportion of seats in parliament—14.5 percent—was small. The leadership in this government was divided between two ethnic and sectarian blocs: a Shi'ah contingent, the UIA, led by two parties, SCIRI and the Da'wah, with support from other Shi'ah factions such as the Sadrists and Ahmad Chalabi; and the two Kurdish parties, the KDP and the PUK, which united to follow their own Kurdish-oriented agenda. The virtual elimination from government (though not from parliament) of the moderate center, and the shift to parties based on ethnic and sectarian identity, is clear. So, too, is the absence of any party representing Sunni—or Iraqi nationalist—interests.

The election of December 2005 reinforced the pattern of the January election. Ethnic and sectarian voting predominated, and the “center,” represented mainly by Allawi's coalition, shrank further in terms of the popular vote. This time the dominant Shi'ah coalition (the UIA), consisted of three main components: SCIRI, the Da'wah party, and the Sadrist Current. (Ahmad Chalabi dropped out and ran on a separate ticket, which lost in the election.) The UIA won a large plurality of seats, short of a majority, in parliament and will probably dominate the new government. The Kurdish coalition, composed mainly of the KDP and the PUK, won about 19 percent of the seats in parliament, more commensurate with its numbers in the population. The Kurdish Islamic Union, a party akin to the Muslim Brotherhood, broke ranks with the Kurdish front, ran its own ticket, and won five seats, thereby slightly weakening the Kurdish nationalist front. Although the centrist List, led by Allawi, ran a strong ticket, including Sunni leader Ghazi al-Yawar, the NDP (led by Adnan Pachachi), and the ICP (headed by Hamid Musa), it got only 9 percent of the vote, indicating a shrinkage of the moderate middle. The new factor in this election was the participation of Sunni political parties. The first and strongest grouping was the Iraq Accordance Front, consisting of three parties: the Iraqi Islamic Party (an older Iraqi Sunni party, established in the early 1960s and close in ideology to the Muslim Brother-

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hood), led by Tawfiq al-Hashimi; the National Dialogue Council, led by Khalaf al-'Ulayan; and the General Conference of the Iraqi People, led by Adnan al-Dulaimi (the latter two post-2003 formations). The second was a more secular group, the Iraqi Front for National Dialogue, led by a former Ba'thist, Salih al-Mutlaq. Together, these two Sunni groupings managed to get about a fifth of the seats in parliament, and either or both are expected to represent Sunnis in the next government. While these Sunni parties ran essentially on nationalist platforms, their support came almost wholly from Sunni areas, reinforcing the pattern of ethnic and sectarian voting. Whether the leaders appointed to Iraq's new government will compromise in ways that enable Iraq to step back from this ethnic and sectarian divide and refocus on issues that bring Iraqis together—rather than on cultural identity, which seems to divide them—is the big question for the future.

The Vision of New Leaders

Much of the answer to this question lies in the vision—or the political orientation—of the new leaders and the political parties that have won in the recent elections, and in whether there is enough of a unifying vision to bring them together. Evidence suggests that the underlying ethnic and sectarian differences, exacerbated in part by the disastrous policies of Saddam in his last decades, have now become powerful, mobilizing forces in an environment where politics and the political process are primary. But these differences are only a part of a more complex social and intellectual environment. Moreover, vision is a nebulous and often changing concept, as is “identity,” but interviews conducted in 2004 and 2005 with a range of key figures in Iraq's government and its political parties provide some clues on how the new leadership is thinking about Iraq's future and on where they would like to take it. For proper perspective, these views, too, must be compared with those of the preceding Saddam era, which form the backbone of the current Sunni insurgency and the nationalist opposition to the current government, centered in the Sunni community.

The Ba'th

Under Saddam Hussein, the “vision” that guided Iraq was that of a unified state that was part—indeed, a leader—of the Arab world. It was seen as relatively secular and modern, emphasized economic development and the acquisition of technology, and stressed independence from foreign influence and control. A degree of Kurdish separatism was acknowledged in an autonomous region in the north, but central government control of the region was firm.

Even under Saddam, by the 1990s this vision no longer conformed to reality. The Kurds in the north were developing their own separate institutions, virtually free from central government control. The bulk of the Shi'ah population in the south was suppressed and alienated. Foreign powers, mainly the United States and the United Kingdom, had greatly curtailed Iraq's independence, through sanctions, control over vast stretches of its air space, and weapons inspections, and the government itself did not adequately represent Iraq. Dominated by Arab Sunnis from Iraq's Sunni Triangle and by Saddam's family and clan, the regime relegated educated professionals in the Ba'th party to secondary positions. But despite the reality, the vision persisted among those who were part of the regime, including much of its educated middle class, indicating the power of rhetoric to influence hopes for the future. The idea of a unified, independent, modern, relatively secular Iraq, which was part of the Arab world, was an integral part of the vision or mind-set of most of the apparatus that served the Ba'th regime. This was especially true for the Sunni population, although some middle-class Shi'ah also agreed. It is certainly a view that informs much of the insurgency, and it is the bedrock of the Arab Sunni parties and groups that ran in the December elections. Among those removed from power, it is a vision that appears to be dying hard.

Whether the leaders appointed to Iraq's new government will compromise in ways that enable Iraq to step back from this ethnic and sectarian divide is the big question for the future.

Evidence suggests that the underlying ethnic and sectarian differences have now become powerful, mobilizing forces in an environment where politics and the political process are primary.

Increasingly, parties are focusing on communal identity rather than on programs or interests.

This tendency was even more pronounced in the December election than in January.

The Kurdish leaders have the clearest vision of where they want to go—not surprisingly, since Kurdish leaders have had over a decade of self-rule and practice in governing in which to define their goals and work toward them.

The current Kurdish leadership is also the most pro-American, pro-Western group in the country.

The new leadership that has come to power in Iraq since 2003—and, more particularly, since the elections of 2005—has not only a different background but a different outlook. Political activity (mainly opposition to the former regime) and party affiliation have been the new guard's defining characteristics. Among this group, however, no unified vision of the new Iraq has emerged. Rather, there are different and increasingly divergent visions. Parties that could be characterized as secular, liberal, centrist, and, above all, having a stronger national identity are weak and have done poorly in Iraq's national elections. In fact, the combination of the political process, itself involving intense competition for political power, a system that rewards political organization and mass mobilization, and a vicious insurgency has polarized political leaders around more primordial orientations, especially ethnic and sectarian identity. Increasingly, parties are focusing on communal identity rather than on programs or interests. As we have seen, this tendency was even more pronounced in the December election than in January. The divergent visions for Iraq have likewise become more pronounced. While democracy, however defined, is still a shared hope, and there is some overlap of aspirations, a pattern of different emphasis by different groups emerges. This is borne out in interviews with about forty leaders in the new 2005 government (many of them reelected in December) about their hopes and desires for the future of Iraq.

The Kurds

The Kurdish leaders have the clearest vision of where they want to go—not surprisingly, since Kurdish leaders have had over a decade of self-rule and practice in governing in which to define their goals and work toward them. On the critical issue of identity, there is near unanimity in defining Kurdish identity as paramount. This is particularly true of a younger generation of leaders, taught in Kurdish rather than Arabic, who have spent their critical formative years isolated from “Arab” Iraq. It is less true of an older generation of Kurds, who went to school in Baghdad and Mosul, know Arabic, and are more pragmatic about the prospects for independence in the near or intermediate future. Among these older Kurdish leaders there is a strong secondary Iraqi identity, but that identification is conditioned by the nature of the newly emerging state. This new state must be democratic and inclusive, and Kurds must be able to play a pivotal role within it. Otherwise, the impetus to separatism will grow.

Not surprisingly, on the issue of Iraq's political structure and the kind of “democracy” the Kurds would like to see, the concept of federalism dominates. Kurdish leaders, whose views are enshrined in the new constitution, want something more akin to confederation: a strong regional government that deals with other Iraqi regions and groups on an equal basis. Kurdish leaders are focused on consolidating Kurdish rule in the north and extending it to cities and towns considered to have a Kurdish majority, notably Kirkuk. In short, Kurds want a federal structure that allows them to keep much of the self-government they already have. Within their own region, however, visions of the future are more diverse. Minorities (Turkmen, Christians) have mixed feelings about domination by Kurdish nationalist parties. So, too, do smaller Kurdish parties, such as the Kurdish Islamic Union (KIU) and the Kurdish Socialist Party, and a younger generation of Kurds is dissatisfied with the absence of real democracy and with the iron grip of two parties on their region. Hence, the leadership of the two Kurdish parties, who are more moderate on the Iraqi scene, face real dissatisfaction from below with their own governance in the north. More democracy and freedom is the chief goal of these groups.

The current Kurdish leadership is predominantly secular and believes in a separation of mosque and state. This is clearest in the case of the PUK (with its past leftist orientation), but it is also true of the more socially conservative KDP. But Islamist parties and influence, though moderate in tone, are gaining in the Kurdish region, and they are more committed to an Islamic society. The Kurdish Islamic Union (KIU), which established an independent presence in the National Assembly, is a good example. The current Kurdish leadership is

also the most pro-American, pro-Western group in the country, partly because of Western protection of the Kurds since 1991, but also because of continuing contacts between Kurds and Western leadership. The Kurdish leaders, alone among Iraqis, would like a continuation of the American military presence in Iraq. Kurdish leaders are skeptical of their neighbors, especially Iran and Turkey, but Turkey is now viewed as a country whose traditional hostility to Kurdish self-rule can be modified by EU pressure. Relations with the Arab world are seen as troubling because of Arab reluctance to accept the newly emerging order in Iraq, especially Kurdish aspirations for a decentralized Iraq.

Shi'ah Leaders

The views of Shi'ah leaders are more diverse. As indicated, most of the Shi'ah leadership (particularly the dominant Da'wah and SCIRI parties) is new to national politics; thus, there is less unanimity in views. Nonetheless, among leaders interviewed, certain themes have emerged.

Among virtually all Shi'ah leaders, the primary political identity is Iraqi, but their sense of nationalism, from which they suffered under Saddam, is weak. A strong secondary identity is that of being Shi'ah (and a majority in Iraq), but that identity is not yet strong enough to pull them toward separatism. But as the insurgency brutally targets Shi'ah, and as a successful model of Kurdish separatism grows and is "taken for granted," Shi'ah separatism is growing. Among the Shi'ah, Arabism and tribal ties are sometimes competing identities, but they do not yet override Iraqi identity. But identification with a cohesive Iraqi state is not what drives most new Shi'ah leaders; rather, the driving forces are religion and, to a lesser extent, reform of society. Shi'ah leaders assume the continued existence of Iraq but want to make its chief orientation Islamic. The nature of this Islam has not yet been clearly defined. Since 95 percent of Iraqis are Muslim, they may assume that this would be a unifying factor. But in fact, differences in interpretation and practice—as well as in communal identity—between Sunnis and Shi'ah could prove divisive. Indeed, they already are. So, too, could the fact that many Iraqis, Shi'ah and Sunni alike, are more secular and may reject an Islamized society. None of the leaders interviewed was inclined toward compelling Islamic compliance; rather, they hoped to accomplish this Islamization through persuasion. Nonetheless, in the end, a more Islamic Iraq was their vision.

On the question of Iraq's new political structure, the Shi'ah leadership does not yet have a cohesive view, but certain strands of thought continually surface. There is a strong desire for a reformed and more democratic society, not surprising from a community that has suffered repression. But most leaders revealed an instinctive distrust of a strong state; they do not want to resurrect an authoritarian power at the center of government. Rather than thinking in terms of the state, they are thinking in terms of society. Thus, many will look favorably on a decentralized government with considerable checks and balances against authority. On this they may find agreement with the Kurds on strong regional government and a weak center. Federalism has gotten more attention, and one leader, Abd al-Aziz Hakim, has suggested the formation of a nine-province Shi'ah region in the south, similar to that of the Kurds in the north. But this is not a unified Shi'ah position, and it faces some opposition, especially among Sadrists and some Da'wah. Shi'ah also favor elections, which they expect to benefit them as a majority, and a strong parliament. But their leadership also faces the dilemma that a weak central government cannot confront an insurgency or deliver services, which many constituents seem to want. So far, however, Shi'ah leadership does not have a strong sense of direction on governance. On the role of religion and clerics in the state, there are also divergences among the Shi'ah, with some wanting a stronger clerical role than others.

On the critical issue of relations with the United States and its allies, Shi'ah politicians showed considerable pragmatism. Few like the occupation or the way in which power has been exercised, nor do they see occupation as a long-term solution. But most recognize

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Among Shi'ah leadership a divide has developed between senior leaders, many of whom spent time in Iran, and those who stayed behind in Iraq and are therefore more Iraqi in their loyalties.

The problem for these parties is that their more Iraqi-centered, secular vision, to judge by their weak showing in both elections of 2005, has difficulty in mobilizing mass support and is being squeezed out of power.

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the need for continuing U.S. support if they are to maintain power, create a new governing structure, and take on the insurgency themselves. Hostility is high toward many of Iraq's Arab Sunni neighbors, suspected of helping the Sunni insurgents. There is ambiguity toward Iran, from which many Shi'ah leaders also draw support. While some Iraqi Shi'ah leaders have strong ties with Iran, within Iraq Iranian ties are still seen as a liability. Among Shi'ah leadership a divide has developed between senior leaders, many of whom spent time in Iran, and those who stayed behind in Iraq and are therefore more Iraqi in their loyalties. Those in the Sadrist movement most clearly make this distinction. Sadrists are also more anti-Western.

One rather surprising element in interviews with all new government leaders was their lack of emphasis on economics. Economic development did not appear to be a paramount concern. Although all leaders gave lip service to economic development and jobs, none put it at the top of their priorities. At local levels, however, all evidence (anecdotal and polling) indicates that the population does put these issues first. Their vision of Iraq is one in which they have security, jobs, and services such as electricity and water. This indicates a disconnection between the political leaders at the national level and their constituents. It also seems to demonstrate the primacy of politics in the new Iraq—one outcome of the focus on elections, a redistribution of power, and establishing a new constitutional order.

The Iraqi-oriented centrist parties are losing ground, but their vision is fairly clear. They have an Iraqi identity (indicated by the name of the list on which they ran in December: the Iraqi List). They are also more secular and more willing to reach across sectarian and ethnic lines for alliances in running for office. They fear sectarian politics and separatism and want a unified Iraq. They also favor a relatively strong, although not authoritarian, central government. Most are Western oriented and favor continued cooperation with the United States. But the problem for these parties is that their more Iraqi-centered, secular vision, to judge by their weak showing in both elections of 2005, has difficulty in mobilizing mass support and is being squeezed out of power.

A clear Sunni vision for Iraq has yet to be articulated, but the Sunni political groups that ran in the December election and won seats in parliament best represent the views of the Sunni mainstream now reentering the political process. To judge from the campaign rhetoric, they are strongly committed to an Iraqi—and an Arab—identity, with a varying mixture of both. Of all Iraq's communities, the Sunnis are the strongest nationalists, seeking a unified, independent Iraq. Overwhelmingly, they put their emphasis on freedom from foreign influence and control, and an end to occupation. Whether secular or religious, they see a unified Iraq, with a strong central government as their chief goal, indicating that they would like a modification of federalism. They run the gamut on views of Islam, from those who are thoroughly secular—especially the ex-Ba'thists—to those who want an Islamic state (the Iraqi Islamic Party). In this they mirror the Shi'ah community, although their community is probably more tilted in the secular direction. They are deeply suspicious of the Iranian orientation of Shi'ah leaders and favor keeping Iraq's Arab identity and its role as an Arab state. However, despite these nationalist tendencies, in Iraq's new political environment they are increasingly identifying as Sunnis and as a persecuted and marginalized minority—an entirely new phenomenon for them. How deeply rooted this new communal identity becomes will depend on how much of their emerging vision can be accommodated in the new Iraq.

Preliminary data indicate that cross-cutting issues and values among Iraq's leaders are not strong, although some do exist. Iraqi leaders will have to work hard to find a new vision around which most Iraqis can willingly coalesce and cooperate, but the concept of a unified Iraq, which finds expression for Iraq's cultural and ethnic diversity, still has a chance of success. It will require new thinking and a new vision, as well as healing among Iraq's communities. Otherwise, the disparate views and visions expressed here will harden, and Iraq's fragmentation—in fact if not in name—may occur.

Helping Iraqis to coalesce rather than fracture will be difficult but should be the main aim of U.S. policy over the next phase of Iraq's transition.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study shows that while ethnic and sectarian identities have been an important underlying feature of the Iraqi polity in the past, the new political process is sharpening these sentiments by mobilizing them for votes. Iraq under Saddam was a political monolith, with a huge imbalance in power among ethnic and sectarian groups. Sunnis from the Triangle predominated, with almost no Kurds in power in the central government, and with Shi'ah greatly underrepresented. Today the ethnic and sectarian balance in power very closely represents the balance in the country. But the politicization of ethnic and sectarian divisions has never been so severe. The political groups ousted from power, mainly Sunni ex-Ba'athists, now joined by religious jihadists, have fomented a determined and destructive insurgency, not just against the United States but against the new leadership as well, which has bitterly divided communities. Meanwhile, in the race for power in the new electoral process, leaders of political parties have used appeal to ethnic and religious sentiments to mobilize mass constituencies, playing on communal identity to win elections. But the process, and the conflicting visions of these parties, makes it difficult to compromise once power is achieved, while the insurgency makes it even more difficult to bring ex-Ba'athists and Sunnis back into the process.

The intense focus on the political process (three elections in one year; drafting of a constitution in a few months) has absorbed virtually all the energy and attention of emerging new leaders, distracting them from concentrating on other essential areas, such as economic development and delivery of services. Interviews conducted for this study indicate that these aims do not have a high value for the new national leaders, or they assume that such tasks will be left for "technocrats," despite dissatisfaction of most constituents with their failure to deliver. But elections have not forced politicians to pay a price for this lapse; indeed, politics reign supreme. While this may be producing a new set of leaders in the short term, it is likely to exact a high price for Iraq and Iraqis over the long term. Fragmentation and overpoliticization are likely to continue to inhibit investment and economic development in Iraq, and with them the strengthening of Iraq's educated middle class, on which the future of the country—as well as its democracy—depends. Indeed, economic development and a growing middle class are the factors most likely to undercut identity politics, by providing new avenues of mobility and new visions for the future. These problems and ways to overcome them need to be addressed and confronted by Iraqis themselves before the situation becomes irreversible.

What, if anything, can be done?

While the United States has diminishing influence in Iraq as new Iraqi leadership takes charge of the country, the United States can exercise its remaining leverage to help Iraq gradually walk back from the recent political polarization, and help put a floor under the slide toward ethnic and sectarian fragmentation. There are several steps that would be helpful:

1. *Help refocus the attention of Iraqi politicians on economic issues, which not only are critical to development but also cut across ethnic and sectarian divides and will produce alternative visions for Iraq's future.*

- First, encourage Iraqis to formulate a new oil law that is national in scope, encourages foreign investment in Iraq's dilapidated oil infrastructure, and gives all of Iraq's citizens and communities a stake in its oil resources, or assured distribution of its benefits on an equitable basis. Such legislation should be the new government's first order of business. How this issue is dealt with will define the

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If “regional” interpretations of the new constitution go so far as to deprive the oil-poor Sunni region of Iraq of an equitable share of oil resources located mainly in Kurdish and Shi’ah areas, there will be little hope for ethnic and sectarian peace.

Mixed-ethnic and -sectarian communities must have protected space in which to interact, and this space must be expanded.

Three areas need attention: financing of political parties, transparency in the process of nomination, and a decoupling of parties from militias.

prospects for Iraq’s future unity. If “regional” interpretations of the new constitution go so far as to deprive the oil-poor Sunni region of Iraq of an equitable share of oil resources located mainly in Kurdish and Shi’ah areas, there will be little hope for ethnic and sectarian peace.

- Encourage the international community to provide the financial support it has promised and to devote these resources to projects that cut across ethnic and sectarian communities, rather than to those that reinforce divisions or are structured so that they benefit only one location or community. It should not be difficult to identify such projects and focus on them, making the point that economic development, not identity, will be rewarded.
 - Focus on development in one or two mixed communities as a model for economic cooperation. Baghdad should be a focus of this activity.
2. *In the short term, the United States should slow down the political process to allow politicians to absorb the changes that have taken place and to work out compromises. For example:*
- Slow the process of regionalization, especially the creation of a new nine-province federal region in the south. This would give the new Sunni political leaders time to accommodate themselves to the concept of federalism and to come up with ideas of their own on decentralization.
 - Postpone the proposed referendum on constitutional amendments slated for 2006, giving the Iraqis more time to work out differences. The interim period could be used to fill in the many legislative gaps in the constitution on which there is more agreement.
 - Stop local ethnic and sectarian relocations in mixed-population areas where intimidation by political forces has occurred (especially south of Baghdad, in Diyala, and in Kirkuk), by providing better security in these areas. Mixed-ethnic and -sectarian communities must have protected space in which to interact, and this space must be expanded.
3. *Encourage Iraqis to fix the political system that is producing this polarization. Actions that could be considered:*
- Legislation to regulate political parties, making them more open and accessible to ordinary Iraqis. Three areas need attention: financing of political parties, transparency in the process of nomination, and a decoupling of parties from militias.
 - Revision of the election law in ways that move it away from the single-list system (which seems to favor ethnic and sectarian identity) and focus more on district and local representation. Many different models and examples can be drawn on, but a system that encourages new leadership in local areas is likely to be less ideological and more oriented to satisfying constituent demands.
 - Development of mechanisms to encourage new leadership at municipal, local, and provincial levels, where leaders appear to be more responsive to the economic and social needs of the population and less oriented toward ideology and identity.
4. *The United States and its international partners need to refocus Iraq’s emerging leadership on an alternative vision for the future, one that encourages economic development, a stronger middle class, and communal tolerance.*
- This is a long-term effort, which needs to be rooted in education and the public media, but a very necessary one. While Iraqis must take the lead—and a number are—the international community can encourage cross-cultural activities and attitudes by
- funding more robustly international exchanges of leaders and opinion makers;
 - supporting Iraqi think tanks that explore different visions and policy options;

- working on social studies and humanities curricula, in schools and online, which encourage cross-cultural tolerance and differing visions of the future, at all levels from primary school through university;
- encouraging the establishment of an American University in Iraq, in an area accessible to all Iraqis and dedicated to teaching all communities;
- helping to establish “charter” or “model” schools that emphasize a modern, cross-cultural curriculum that will turn out leaders with a new and different vision.

Notes

1. This group of eighteen not only made decisions but controlled the bureaucracy and the military through overlap of personnel and functions. For example, in 1998 the government consisted of a president, two vice presidents, and a cabinet. Of the twenty-three people who held these positions, seven were among the party’s top leaders, and four more were high-ranking party officials. In this study a wider group of leaders at the cabinet level has been used in the 1997–98 period for comparison with the post-Saddam period. The cohort group is thirty-six: eighteen top leaders and eighteen cabinet members—a small group compared with the post-2003 cohort.
2. One, Taha Yasin Ramadhan, was of Kurdish origin but was so Arabized that he considered himself an Arab.
3. Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2004), 310.

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**United States
Institute of Peace**

1200 17th Street NW
Washington, DC 20036

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