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Iraq Before the Election: Constructing a National Narrative

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Iraq will elect a new parliament on December 15th. The new government—whatever its composition—will then be in a race to build a democratic order before the insurgency creates enough chaos to break it down.

Whether or not the government succeeds depends on how political events of the past two years have set the stage for the December elections—and on the prospects of creating a national narrative that encompasses all of Iraq's main political and ethno-sectarian groups.

To consider the potential outcomes of Iraq's upcoming elections and their implications for Iraq's future, the U.S. Institute of Peace convened a Current Issues Briefing on November 15, 2005 to discuss "[Iraq: Between Referendum and Elections](#)." [Daniel Serwer](#), vice president and director of peace and stability operations for the Institute, moderated the panel of Institute experts that included [Dana Eyre](#), senior fellow; [Paul Hughes](#), Iraq program officer for Peace and Stability Operations; [Phebe Marr](#), senior fellow; and [Jonathan Morrow](#), program officer for the Rule of Law program.

Iraq's Political Landscape Continues to Evolve



An Iraqi soldier passes by a campaign poster for the Iraqi National List, with head Iyad Allawi pictured, on December 2, 2005.

(Courtesy AP/Wide World)

In the post-war period, an entirely new cadre of leadership emerged in Iraq. As [Phebe Marr](#) observed, three changes of administration since 2003 and a fourth change approaching with the December elections have allowed a huge amount of mobility for [Iraq's leadership](#). But this flux also brought a measure of inexperience to Iraqi politics.

In the last two years alone, 97 individuals have held top political positions. The [Coalition Provisional Authority \(CPA\)](#) in July 2003 sought to promote balanced ethnic, sectarian, and political party representation in the provisional government through its discriminate selection of the Iraqi Governing Council. In June 2004, the CPA handed sovereignty to the appointed Iraqi Interim Government headed by Iyad Allawi, a secular Shiite and co-founder of the Iraqi National Accord.

A shift from the prevalence of centrist, secular, and nonsectarian politics to cultural identity politics—voting on ethnic and sectarian lines—came with the Transitional National Assembly (TNA) elections in January 2005. Voters awarded 51 percent of the seats in the TNA to the

United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), composed of religious Shia parties, including the Islamic Dawa Party, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), the Iraqi National Congress led by Ahmed Chalabi, and supporters of Moqtada al-Sadr. The Kurdish coalition won 27 percent of the vote while the centrist Iraqi List, led by Iyad Allawi, captured only 14 percent of the vote. The majority of Sunni Arabs boycotted the election.

Process Matters

Polarization around ethnic and sectarian identities continued after the election, hampering the formation of a transitional government and compromising the constitutional process. The key negotiators in the drafting process focused on political power brokering at the expense of developing strategies for governing capacity and economic growth. Inexperienced in the skills of governance, they had difficulty compromising on the key issues of identity and federalism, religion and its role in the state, and foreign occupation. Meanwhile, as Eyre pointed out, the electorate's discontent grew as the government failed to deliver security and services.

Morrow asserted that while the constitution that resulted from this transitional government "may be good enough," the drafting process was not, in large part because it did not enable the effective [participation of Sunni Arabs](#). Between the first Constitutional Committee meeting on July 8 and the disbandment of the Constitutional Committee on August 8, Sunni Arab negotiators had only one month to reach consensus on constitutional issues and formulate credible positions. In contrast, other negotiating groups such as the Kurds, who had already received mandates from the Kurdish parliament, had months or even years to formulate their negotiating positions. Morrow added that most key constitutional issues were "hammered out during ad hoc meetings in the Green Zone at which Sunni Arab representatives had no right of attendance."

The push to officially complete the draft by the deadline outlined in the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) did not give Sunni Arab negotiators enough time to build consensus on what the constitution should deliver nor to go back to their constituents and gain their support. The constitutional process could have been instrumental in bolstering the legitimacy of the government through public participation; however, the abbreviated timetable did not allow for an adequate procedure to receive and process public input on the draft. As Eyre asserted, rapid progress came at the cost of the development of the Iraqi polity and a democratic narrative essential to the polity's strength.

While the constitution passed in the October referendum, Sunni Arabs almost universally voted against the draft. Morrow said that the Sunni Arab "no" vote was more a reaction against the constitutional process than against the constitution's content. Sunni Arab arguments against the constitution were based less on a rational assessment of the draft and more on emotional and symbolic issues, such as Iraq's Arab identity. In addition, Morrow observed, toward the end of the negotiating period many Sunni Arab leaders, including representatives from the Muslim Scholars Association, moderated their position on constitutional issues and even came to accept a high degree of autonomy for the Kurdish region. Given the deadline set for completion of a final draft, however, Sunni Arab representatives did not have enough time to go back to their constituencies and gain support for these more moderate positions.

Despite the inadequacies of the process, the strength of Kurdish and Shia positions on federalism and regional authority makes it hard to imagine that any constitutional process would have resulted in a significantly different outcome. The best course of action for Sunni Arab leadership now is to work on strategies to ensure their constituency's interests are met through implementation.

Who and What Will Iraq Vote for in December?

Despite a major split among Sunni Arabs between those who advocate for participation in the December election and those who do not, the panel predicted that some Sunnis will vote, implicitly endorsing the constitution. Allocating seats by population and not by turnout, the new electoral law governing the

December election practically guarantees that there will be Sunni Arab leadership in the new parliament. It remains to be seen, however, how much provincial representation Sunni Arabs will gain and whether those elected representatives will take up the political interests of their constituencies.

The Concord Iraqi Front is the main slate representing religious Sunni Arabs in the December election and includes the Iraqi Islamic party, the National Dialogue Council, and the General Council for the Free Iraqi People. While the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) will still have a strong ticket, it may be weakened by Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani's decision not to endorse the list as well as other splits from the coalition since January. Ahmed Chalabi has formed his own slate—the Iraqi National Congress—and Ali al-Dabbagh, former spokesman of the UIA and member of the Constitutional Committee, formed a moderate Shiite list, which will still be fairly religious but advocate for a clear separation between religion and state and focus more on economic development. While Moqtada al-Sadr has aligned with the UIA, some of his supporters plan to run with Sunni Arab coalitions. Marr noted that if the UIA does turn out to be weakened by these developments, this may result in other parties moving away from more sectarian platforms.

Iyad Allawi and Ghazi al-Yawer have come together to form the Iraqi National List, which also includes the Iraqi Communist Party and may garner more nationalist and nonsectarian participation. This list and Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress are the main coalitions representing the centrist spectrum. Other than the split of the Kurdish Islamic Union, the Kurdish coalition has seen little change since January and remains a strong group.

As compared with the January election, over three times as many parties and two times as many coalitions have registered for the December election. While the participating coalitions still illustrate the country's sectarian divisions, the upcoming election will be more open. Candidates with greater local recognition may make for a more fluid and varied group in parliament. If the election results in changes at the margins and a more fluid assembly, this may lead to more flexibility in developing Iraq's political narrative and vision. It could, however, also lead to stalemate if candidates do not compromise.

Marr highlighted the following as the main issues in the December election: federalism and the prospects for unity and division; political participation of both religious Sunni Arabs and ex-Ba'athists; the process of de-Ba'athification and how deep it should go; oil revenue management and expenditure on the local and national level; bolstering economic development and thwarting government corruption; the withdrawal of Coalition troops and how and when it should take place; and the insurgency.

Sunni Arab Participation Is Critical to the Way Forward

Although there is an agreement allowing a parliamentary review committee to make constitutional amendments after the December elections, Sunni Arabs have lost their leverage with the constitution's ratification. Morrow indicated that it is now unlikely that Kurdish or Shia negotiators will be willing to make significant changes. But even if the constitution were to be amended, he added, it would not solve the problem of Sunni Arab exclusion from Iraqi political life. Working within the framework of the constitution, Sunni Arab leadership must:

- Negotiate mechanisms in legislation to secure a share of national and regional oil revenues for Sunni Arab governorates;
- Consider and pursue the best approaches toward achieving self-government for majority Sunni governorates;
- Negotiate with Shia leadership to delay development of a Shia federal unit to calm anxieties about civil strife;
- Form strategic alliances with Kurdish and secular parties within the parliament and the council of representatives.

While Sunni Arabs may take up parliamentary positions, this alone will not lead to effective constitutional

implementation and democratic governance. They must also develop a robust strategy to promote the interests of their constituencies. Morrow highlighted three ways that the international community can support these efforts:

- Strengthen moderates—Identify and support Sunni Arab leaders who are developing moderate constitutional positions. These leaders should be sought not only within the ranks of already visible moderate leaders, but also within the Association of Muslim Scholars and radical tribal elements.
- Community outreach on federalism—Assist Sunni leaders in going back to the public to communicate that there is room within the constitution to negotiate the terms of federalism and that it will not necessarily lead to Shia separation and expansion.
- Access to expertise—Ensure that Sunni moderates have access to the best advice on constitutional implementation and resource management.

The international community must provide a safe space where this political activity can take place. The role of the United Nations as a third party guarantor, Eyre said, should be considered for the period after the elections.

If Sunni Arab leaders take up an aggressive but peaceful approach to governance, it will give them credibility in the eyes of the public, draining strength from the insurgency. As Hughes pointed out, the insurgency in Iraq is a political fight for legitimacy. Credible Sunni leadership and effective cooperation among all negotiating parties in the new government will weaken the insurgency's ability to prey on a culture of rejection and hopelessness. A central narrative, Eyre added, based on the foundation of Iraqi experience, identity, and a realistic understanding of what democratic participation can offer, is key to a sustainable democracy. Critical to developing this narrative are the networks—maintained through good governance—between citizens, civil society, and a government that delivers security and services.

Of Related Interest:

- [Iraq: Between Referendum and Elections](#)
USIP Event, audio archive available
- [Strategies for Promoting Democracy in Iraq](#)
- [Iraq's Constitutional Process II: An Opportunity Lost](#)
- [Iraq's Middle Class Is the Key to Unity](#)
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This USIPeace Briefing was written by Courtney Rusin, Operations Coordinator in the [Center for Post-Conflict Peace and Stability Operations](#). The views expressed here are not necessarily those of the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies. For additional information about the Iraq program or other Institute activities, please contact the Office of Public Affairs and Communications at publicaffairs@usip.org or (202) 429-3832.

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