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Shi'ites unite in a new power grab

By Sami Moubayed
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DAMASCUS - A new coalition formed to run in the parliamentary elections scheduled for January - announced in Iraq on Monday - has the backing of Iran and could pose a serious challenge to Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki.

The coalition includes 10 political parties - all Shi'ite - and is to be called the Iraqi National Alliance (INA). It replaces the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) and will include heavyweights like Ahmad Chalabi, a former vice president, the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (SIIC), its military wing the Badr Brigade, the Sadrist bloc of cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, and a breakaway wing of Maliki's ruling Da'wa Party.

The INA - as was the UIA - will be headed by Ibrahim al-Jaafari, who held the premiership from 2005 to 2006. The SIIC is a one-time favorite of Iran, and its military wing, the Badr Brigade, fought alongside the Iranian army in its eight-year war with Saddam Hussein in the 1980s.

For years its leadership was bankrolled by the Iranians and always drew criticism from Muqtada for being too pro-Iranian. Muqtada and the SIIC's chief, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, once had a similar goal - to make Iraq an Iran-like theocracy - but Muqtada always argued that it should be free of Iranian influence.

The two men are scions of legendary Shi'ite families who have long competed for leadership of the Shi'ite community. While Muqtada has always seen himself as more Arab than Shi'ite, Hakim has strong Shi'ite loyalties, and once even called for an autonomous Shi'ite district in southern Iraq, a project that was always strongly vetoed by Muqtada, who favored a united Iraq.

In the aftermath of a terrorist bombing on a holy Shi'ite shrine in Samarra in February 2006,

the two men found plenty of room to cooperate against Iraqi Sunnis, sending death squads to the streets of Baghdad by night to strike at traditional enemies whom they blamed for the Samarra bombings.

They also united in the face of increasing Sunni anger, after the execution of Saddam in December 2006, but always disagreed on Iraq's relationship with the United States. Hakim has always managed to walk the tightrope between being both pro-American and pro-Iranian, while Muqtada has been vocal and violent in his opposition to the US occupation of 2003.

On Monday, Hakim was absent from the launch of the INA, receiving treatment for cancer at a hospital in Tehran. Deputizing on his behalf was Vice President Adel Abdul Mehdi, a seasoned statesman who ran unsuccessfully for the premiership in 2005.

Both parties are rallying today behind the leadership of Jaafari, a founder of the Da'wa Party and former boss to Maliki. He left the party in May 2008, in complete disagreement with the prime minister's policies. Jaafari, too, is a protege of Iran, having spent his long exile during the Saddam years divided between Tehran and London.

When serving as premier in 2005-2006, Jaafari crippled political life in Iraq by arrogantly clinging onto power, despite loud accusations against him of being too weak to run a divided country. When he stepped down, an average of 25 Iraqis were dying per day. Maliki succeeded him, inheriting a country that was scarred by sectarian violence, filled with mass graves created after the downfall of Saddam, and divided by political and religious ambitions as never before in its long history.

It was believed then that Maliki had all of Jaafari's weaknesses and none of his strengths. Jaafari was more experienced, better connected in the Arab world, and more politically independent than Maliki. Like Jaafari, however, Maliki is a product of political Islam. Both of them were allied to Muqtada, and both were equally sectarian in their policies, having turned a blind eye to the Shi'ite death squads that roamed the streets and gunned down prominent Sunnis after the holy shrine bombings.

The two men claimed to oppose sectarian violence, and both called for incorporating militias into the Iraqi army. Both were in favor of appointing sectarian officials at the [ministries of Defense](#) and Interior, a demand that was backed by their ally Muqtada. Both are friends of Iran, although they do not take orders directly from the mullahs of Tehran, unlike the SIIC's Hakim.

Jaafari has since accused Maliki of mismanaging the premiership, being unable to bring security to Iraq, and of being too sectarian in his policies by refusing to mend broken fences with Sunnis. He clearly plans on making a comeback as prime minister in January.

Many are asking, however, whether Jaafari will be able to succeed where former protege Maliki has failed since 2006? Will he be able to disarm the militias and bring the Sunnis back into the political process? The two strongest Shi'ite armed groups, the Badr Brigade and the Mahdi Army, are members in his new INA.

Maliki sees himself as more powerful than all of the Shi'ite groups in the INA combined. Although a product of their collective support in 2006, he now regards himself as an independent Iraqi leader, representing a broad constituency that includes Sunnis and Shi'ites and not just a communal chief or head of a religiously driven party.

During the provincial elections in January, he campaigned on a new ticket, the State of Law Alliance, and won votes in both Sunni and Shi'ite districts. Meanwhile, traditional Shi'ite parties like the SIIC lost eight out of 11 provinces in the south, showing that if anything, Maliki is getting the upper hand in Iraq.

The secret of his success is in his non-sectarian program, promising things that matter to all Iraqis, regardless of religion; like clean water, more electricity, better schools, higher wages and cheaper hospitals. The relative stability that Iraq witnessed in the months preceding the elections played nicely into his program and he boasted of being the man to bring security to Baghdad.

That "security success" has now gone down the drain, as six attacks rocked the Iraqi capital last Wednesday in the previously safe Green Zone, targeting government buildings, including parliament and the Ministry of Defense. The attacks, which Maliki blamed on al-Qaeda and former Ba'athists, killed 100 people and wounded another 400.

Despite the attacks, Maliki thinks he can survive without the Sadrists - who are all-powerful in the slums of Baghdad and among young people - and without the SIIC, which is influential in the Shi'ite business community. To a certain extent, he sees the new alliance as a blessing in disguise, liberating him from the towering influence of men like Hakim and Muqtada, who have transformed into an embarrassment for the prime minister.

While he needed them in 2006-2009 to strengthen his power base in Shi'ite districts, he has outgrown their patronage and would rather have influential Sunnis in his coalition, which is due to be announced in the next week. Maliki has not forgotten the severe embarrassment the Shi'ites caused him when they supervised the execution of Saddam, chanting Shi'ite slogans and repeating the word "Muqtada!" in vengeance. They looked more like thugs eliminating a fellow criminal, while Maliki was trying to come across as a polished statesman wanting to melt into the community of Arab leaders - who all happen to be Sunnis.

While Maliki prepares to launch a new coalition next week, so is another prime minister hopeful, former premier Iyad Allawi. He in turn is trying to put together a team of Sunnis, Shi'ites and seculars like himself to challenge both Maliki and Jaafari.

Many are eyeing what the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani will say in the upcoming days, although sources close to the veteran cleric stress that he will not take sides, as he did in 2005, so that his support doesn't influence ordinary voters.

In 2005, Sistani put his full weight behind the UIA, using his image on their campaign posters - and his unblemished record and grandfatherly status - to get young Shi'ites to vote for the

UIA. The UIA swept the polls, but later disintegrated.

The real tipping force will be Iran. At this stage, the Iranians have given no indication of whom they will support of the prime minister hopefuls, Maliki or Jaafari. Allawi's chances are slim, because of his secular record, which is frowned on by the Iranians.

Opponents of Maliki and Jaafari have already blamed the Black Wednesday attacks on Iran, claiming that the weapons used were "made in Iran". Maliki's [security agencies](#) fired back on Sunday, showing confessions of a Sunni Ba'athist, claiming that he was behind the attacks, to clean the prime minister's responsibility and that of Iran.

Iraq has proven, time and again, that sectarian violence is just not enough to bring down a prime minister. Allawi, Jaafari and Maliki all ruled in very difficult security conditions, and thousands were killed during their consecutive tenures, yet none of the attacks, no matter how horrific, managed to bring down any administration.

This might explain why Maliki seemed confident as his contenders announced the launch of the INA. He is undaunted by their coalition and seemingly untouched by the attacks, which he promised to deal with in an orderly manner. What really matters to him is Sunni support - to legitimize himself among different segments of Iraqi society and within the Arab neighborhood - and the backing of the Iranians.

Sunni support is something that the INA does not have - and Maliki knows that very well.