

The Iraqi National Alliance, the New Shia Coalition

An Iranian 'National' Alliance, or an Anti-Maliki One?

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The battle lines for Iraq's upcoming parliamentary elections seem set among the country's Shia majority. The new Shia-dominated coalition, the **Iraqi National Alliance (INA)**, announced itself on August 24. This was to be a new "national" alliance to purportedly represent a nationalist rather than sectarian line, replacing the old United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), dominated by the **Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI)**. The UIA won 128 out of 275 seats in Iraq's December 2005 elections, but had largely become an ISCI shell following defections in 2007 and conflicts between ISCI and Prime Minister **Nuri al-Maliki** in 2008.

- *The driving narratives of Iraqi Shia politics are empowerment against the community's past Sunni oppressors and the question of Iraqi nationalism versus Shia identification with next-door Iran.* These themes are both defined and complicated by Maliki, with his nationalist rhetoric and highly-centralized style of governance. The key elements of this coalition are former allies of Maliki turned rivals, yet they have little else in common, and the flip-side of empowerment is which faction ultimately weilds power after the rise.
- *The direct stake is who will be the next prime minister of Iraq.* If the INA does well, ISCI will attempt to elect Iraqi Vice President Adel Abd al-Mahdi, ISCI's most senior officeholder. Maliki, meanwhile, has recently launched his Rule of Law Coalition. Yet both Maliki aides and Sunni factions talking to him say they are still negotiating. This paper focuses on Maliki's Shia rivals.

Maliki defeated ISCI in January's provincial elections, although he had to rely on competing factions to form governments.¹ He then excluded ISCI from power while rebuffing calls² for Shia unity. And while Maliki was ultimately able to form governments the Shia provinces, his bare-knuckle political style alienated would-be allies. By July it was clear that Maliki would not be joining.³ The sticking point was that Maliki was demanding a large enough share of the seats to ensure himself the prime ministership.⁴ So while the INA did not begin as an anti-Maliki alliance, it ended up as one.

The shadow lurking behind the INA is Iran's. ISCI was created by Iran in the 1980s and is still viewed as an Iranian pawn. With its own television channel, print newspapers, school system and charitable network, ISCI has resources far beyond its rivals. ISCI's claim that its money derives from religious taxes is not widely credited. Its new leader, 38-year-old **Ammar al-Hakim**, spent 24 years of his life in Iran.⁵ The INA's other large faction, that of **Muqtada al-Sadr**, is also supported by Iran, although Sadrist grassroots are more nationalist, and its alliance with Iran more one of convenience than loyalty.

Iran's stake is quite open; the Kuwaiti newspaper *al-Siyassah*, for example, has reported on how Iran's supreme leader views Maliki as a threat.⁶ That impression is reinforced by public reports of Iranian officials meeting during the INA negotiations with Iraqi figures involved. Hakim met with Iranian Parliamentary Speaker **Ali Larijani** just over a week before the announcement of the coalition.⁷ Larijani also visited Iraq in May, meeting with ISCI leaders and the man once Iraq's prime minister who became head of this coalition – **Ibrahim al-Jaafari** – who then visited Iran after the INA was formed.⁸

Components and Prospects

The key factions of the Iraqi National Alliance, other than ISCI and the Sadrists, are Jaafari's Dawa-splinter the National Reform Faction, the **Dawa Party-Iraq Organization** (Dawa-Iraq), the **Fadhila Party**⁹ and the Sunni Anbar Salvation Council. The inclusion of the Sadrists and Fadhila was something of a surprise, as both left the UIA in 2007 due to their conflicts with ISCI, which they accused of monopolizing power and being too close to the United States and Iran.

Jaafari is to be chairman, a move which ISCI hopes will shield it from criticism that it dominates the group. Under the UIA, ISCI simply held all meetings at their headquarters in Baghdad. Making Jaafari chairman is also a smart tactical move – despite the strong personal antagonism between himself and Maliki, Jaafari coalitioned with him in the provinces. Giving Jaafari the chairmanship allows ISCI to lock in a potential Maliki ally.

There are other factions which coalitioned with Maliki in the spring but appear to have been alienated by the prime minister's heavy hand. The Sadrists were willing to vote for Maliki's nominees for governor in the southern provinces simply to keep their archrival ISCI out of power. But throughout the negotiating process – which lasted from February through May – the Sadrists ceaselessly complained that Maliki was arresting their members to pressure them in negotiations. According to *al-Malaf Press*, the Sadrists joined the INA with reservations.¹⁰

Dawa-Iraq is notable here because they were actually part of Maliki's "inner circle" of political factions which ran jointly with his "mainline" **Dawa Party** on his Rule of Law Coalition electoral list. While Dawa-Iraq received appointments in several provinces, they were subordinate Dawa, and tensions were most obvious in Wasit, where Dawa-Iraq nearly left Maliki's coalition over the selection of the governor.¹¹ They and Sadr both may be using the INA simply as a means of pressuring Maliki.

The decision by the Anbar Salvation Council, led by Hamid Hayes, to join the INC fits within the anti-Maliki framework. Hayes has nothing in common ideologically with the Shia parties, but they did share a common enemy. Hayes' key Sunni rival in the Anbar, Ahmad Abu Risha, had suggested that he would run with Maliki¹² (although he pulled out just before Maliki's announcement).¹³

One reason Maliki gave for not joining the INA was its stability,¹⁴ and with reason. The two largest factions, ISCI and the Sadrists, hate each other, and have been engaging in tit-for-tat killings for years, while ISCI has used provincial police to arrest Sadr's followers. The UIA itself has spent most of its four years in power riven by splinters.

The more likely reason for Maliki's decision is that he wouldn't be in charge, and furthermore, separating himself from a coalition with an Iranian taint feeds into his Iraqi nationalist political line. Finally, he doesn't need to join. Counting on the INA's internal contradictions, Maliki can wait until after the elections and conduct bilateral negotiations with each faction.

In fact, it appears that the INA has already suffered its first minor splinter. On October 5 a group within Jaafari's party announced that they were joining Maliki. According to *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, they include over 1,500 members.¹⁵ That both Jaafari and Maliki's followers are from Dawa makes this easier, but it underlines the fragility of the INA.

Also notable is that Iraq's senior religious authority, the **Ayatollah Ali Sistani**, has ensured that the INC could not claim his endorsement. In 2005, Sistani backed the UIA but regretted the association as its inability to govern became clear. ISCI's defeat last January may be partially due to the fact that it insisted on using Sistani's picture at rallies, even as Sistani representatives repeatedly reminded the public that the ayatollah endorsed no one. And when Jaafari went to meet Sistani in June, the ayatollah made clear to him that coalition negotiations were for politicians and that he would have no part in it.¹⁶

The new Shia-dominated Iraqi National Alliance, then, appears to have little to hold it together beyond the momentary self-interest of its component factions. How much sway Iran holds over factions other than ISCI is questionable given past conflicts between them. If the INA does well in January against Maliki, the post-election distribution of ministries which comes with forming a government may hold them together. If not, expect Maliki to pull them apart.

¹ See my online exclusive on how Maliki formed his provincial coalitions, and how that process reflects on both his leadership style and Iraqi Shia politics. "Nuri Maliki, the Shia Factions and Iraq's Provincial Elections," KirkSowell.com, October 3, 2009 (<http://www.kirksowell.com/Content/Documents/Maliki,%20Shia%20Factions%20and%20Iraq%27s%20Provincial%20Elections.pdf>).

² "Hakim Reaffirms Call for Broaden Coalition to Prepare for Elections," *al-Malaf Press*, May 30, 2009 (<http://almafpress.net/?d=143&id=86152>).

³ "Maliki Heads Separate Bloc from the Shia Coalition with Support from Awakening and Employees," *al-Raeed*, July 21, 2009 (<http://al-raeed.com/preview.php?id=7354>). The latter part of the title is awkwardly-worded, but the key point is that Maliki publicly broke off negotiations here, even as the article reports that Dawa-Iraq was moving toward ISCI. The article also notes that Sunni tribal leader Ahmad Abu Risha was supporting Maliki; ultimately Abu Risha pulled back from Maliki, but his initial inclusion in Maliki's circle is the best explanation for the decision of his Anbar rival Hamid Hayes to join the INA.

⁴ "Implications of the Formation of the New Shia Coalition in Iraq," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, August 29, 2009.

⁵ "Ammar Hakim Follows his Father as Head of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq," Radio Sawa, September 1, 2009 (http://www.radiosawa.com/arabic_news.aspx?id=8030386).

⁶ "The New Shia Coalition' Accuses Maliki of Going Against Sistani and Threatens to Destroy him in Upcoming Elections," *al-Seyassah*, September 7, 2009 (http://www.al-seyassah.com/news_details.asp?snapt=%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9&nid=69907)

. The reference to Sistani in the headline is only because Maliki follows Sistani, but the article's focus ties the INA to Iran. Note that the date on the page shows the date when the page is viewed not the publication date, due to a website error; I've used September 7 because it was reprinted elsewhere on that date.

⁷ "His Excellency Sayyid Hakim Meets with the Speaker of the Iranian Parliament," al-Majlis.org, August 15, 2009 (http://www.almejlis.org/news_article_2204.html).

⁸ "Jaafari Discusses with Larijani Improving Bilateral Iraqi-Iranian Relations," *Voices of Iraq News Agency*, May 10, 2009 (<http://ar.aswataliraq.info/?p=172581>). Jaafari then visited Iran after the formation of the coalition and met with President Mahmud Ahmadinejad; "Ibrahim Jaafari Visits Iran and Meets Senior Leaders," *Voices of Iraq*, October 7, 2009 (<http://www.sotaliraq.com/iraqnews.php?id=49079>).

This impression was further reinforced by the fact that ISCI's late leader, Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, was undergoing chemotherapy in Tehran, and Maliki had to visit him there in order to conduct coalition negotiations in May. See "Maliki Arrives in Tehran in Unofficial Visit to Meet with Hakim," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 31, 2009 (<http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=521355&issueno=11142>).

⁹ Muqtada Sadr's political faction, referred to formally as *al-tiyar al-sadri*, the "Sadr Current," and the Fadhila Party ("Islamic Virtue Party"), are both ideologically Sadrist, but for convention here we will refer to Muqtada's followers as "Sadrists" and Fadhila simply as Fadhila. Both factions derive from the movement established by Sadr's father, Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, during the 1990s. Sadiq Sadr was murdered by the Baathist regime in 1999, and after four years of quiet organization, it sprang into action following the 2003 invasion. At that point, the Ayatollah Muhammad al-Yaqubi, a student of Sadiq Sadr, broke with Muqtada and formed his own movement, Fadhila.

¹⁰ "Iraqi National Alliance Declares Formation without Dawa Party... Sadrists and Fadhila Attended, but Don't Commit Completely," *al-Malaf Press*, August 24, 2009 (<http://almalafpress.net/?d=143&id=90596>).

¹¹ "Karbala, Anbar and Diyala Councils Begin Work as Najaf Council Expected to be Concluded Today; Formation of Coalitions in Salah al-Din and New Cleavage in Wasit," *al-Sabaah*, April 11, 2009 (<http://www.alsabaah.com/paper.php?source=akbar&mlf=copy&sid=80730>).

¹² "In-Depth Analysis of the Iraqi Political Scene," *al-Malaf Press*, August 30, 2009 (<http://almalafpress.net/index.php?d=175&id=90923>). This article contains a broad analysis of political rumors swirling in the Iraqi media shortly after the INA announcement. Among other things, it mentions Abu Risha's declared intention to join Maliki.

¹³ It is not clear why Abu Risha talked about joining Maliki and then did not, but it may be related to a conflict within Abu Risha's family over the decision of Ali Hatem Sulayman, head of the Dulaim tribe and an Abu Risha rival, to work with Maliki. "Conflict Within Abu Risha Family Because of Rule of Law Coalition," *Ur News Agency*, October 7, 2009 (<http://www.uragency.net/index.php?aa=news&id22=1541>). Some speculate that Abu Risha backed out of Maliki's coalition at the last moment due to pressure from Saudi Arabia.

¹⁴ "Rule of Law Coalition and INA Continue Merger Discussions," *al-Ittihad*, August 31, 2009 (<http://www.alitthad.com/paper.php?name=News&file=print&sid=61090>).

¹⁵ "Splinters from Jaafari Heading Toward Maliki," *al-Sharq al-Aswat*, October 5, 2009 (<http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=11269&article=538750&feature=>).

¹⁶ "Jaafari: Sistani Says Clerical Authority Not to be Pulled into Formation of Political Coalitions," Radio Free Iraq, June 9, 2009 (<http://www.iraqhurr.org/content/article/1750477.html>).