

JIC Assessment, 16 February 2005

IRAQ: POST ELECTION LANDSCAPE

This paper was discussed and approved by the JIC at their meeting on 16 February 2005.

Key Judgements

- I. The Shia United Iraqi Coalition is likely to stick together long enough to decide on the new prime minister and make up of the presidency. SCIRI member and Iraqi Interim Government (IIG) finance minister al-Mahdi, and Dawa Party leader and IIG vice-president al-Jaafari are the front runners for prime minister. Allawi's chances of retaining the premiership are slim. Talabani is the likely president.
- II. There are already encouraging signs of Shia outreach to the Sunnis, but the test will be the degree to which the Shia are willing to include them in the government and in drafting the constitution, and the extent to which Sunnis are willing to respond. Inclinations towards inclusiveness by Shia leaders will have to be balanced against wider Shia expectations of dominating the government and transforming years of repression into real power.
- III. Without Sunni engagement in the political process, it will not be possible significantly to undermine the insurgency. Improved security is itself a prerequisite for political progress, and there is no sign yet of this happening in the Sunni Arab heartlands. This will be the new government's central challenge.
- IV. The new government will face other challenges from the fragile nature of the Shia-Kurd relationship and tensions within Shia and Kurd parties themselves. Significant changes within ministries, the security forces, and intelligence agencies will add to these challenges and risk harming the counter-insurgency effort.
- V. The insurgents will maintain their attempts to derail the process. Sectarian attacks, especially on the Shia, and attacks on Iraqis associated with the Coalition will continue. The announcement of the Assembly and the government will give the insurgents a new range of targets.

Policy Implications:

- The new government will need strong support, including for its efforts to reach out to Sunnis. Efforts at outreach to Sunni rejectionists by the Iraqi government and others may help to divide them from the more extreme elements.
- The UN will need cooperation from Security Council members in its role coordinating international support for the drafting of the constitution.

IRAQ: POST ELECTION LANDSCAPE

Commissioned by the FCO, this paper looks at the emerging political landscape, and at key political and security issues as the process of forming the new government begins, and attention turns to the constitution.

The Elections

1. Provisional election results show the United Iraqi Coalition (UIC), the main Shia list, took 140 of 275 seats in the Transitional National Assembly (TNA), gaining a slim overall majority. The Kurdish Alliance secured 75 seats and Allawi's "Iraqi List" 40. We do not expect the final results to be any different. It is not yet clear how many Sunni Arabs were elected to the TNA. It may be as low as 15 seats (5% of the Assembly), but the figure could be higher. Turnout across the country was 58%, but as expected Sunni Arab turnout was very low: perhaps under 10% in the Sunni heartlands (and only 2% in Anbar province).

2. Certification of the results is expected by 20 February, followed by the first meeting of the TNA to elect the 3-person presidency. The presidency will then appoint a prime minister, and on the latter's recommendation, a cabinet. Under the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) this must be completed by April, but in practice may be sooner. We should not expect much effective action from the outgoing IIG in the interim.

Political Landscape: President and Prime Minister

3. Although a loose coalition that will probably fragment soon, the UIC is likely to stick together long enough to decide on the new prime minister and make up of the presidency. [...]

4. Followers of Muqtada al-Sadr have gained a number of TNA seats: possibly up to 20 from the UIC List, plus some from other lists. Al-Sadr's continued acquiescence in the political process may depend on satisfying his wishes to have influence in both the government and assembly. The risk that some of al-Sadr's followers will return to violence will anyway remain, especially if there is no movement on a timetable for MNF withdrawal.

Shia Outreach and Sunni Reactions

5. There are early post-election signs that senior Shia figures are actively engaging with the Sunnis. [...] Shia attempts at outreach will aim to capitalise on the greater legitimacy that the new government will enjoy on the back of a successful election, and take advantage of the increased momentum behind the political process.

6. Early responses [...] are encouraging, [...] The boycott policy of the MUC has been criticised by leading Sunnis. However, some members of the MUC continue to advocate boycotting the political process unless there is a clear timetable for MNF withdrawal. [...]

7. But the test of outreach to the Sunni will be the degree to which the Shia are willing to include them in the government and in drafting the constitution, and the extent to which Sunnis are willing to respond.

Sistani will remain committed to inclusion, and will apply his influence to this end. Inclinations towards inclusiveness by some other Shia leaders will have to be balanced against wider Shia expectations of dominating the government and transforming years of repression into real power. There will also be expectations of patronage in favour of Shia.

8. The low Sunni turnout in the elections was due to the campaign of violence and intimidation by the insurgents; grievances over the "occupation", combined with reduced security and quality of life; the reluctance of the few Sunni Arab parties to become engaged (and the wider lack of a coherent Sunni political entity) – all in the context of at best Sunni ambivalence towards a democratic dispensation which means the end of their dominance. This will be the new government's central challenge, as without Sunni engagement in the political process, it will not be possible significantly to undermine the insurgency. Improved security is itself a prerequisite for political progress, and there is no sign yet of this happening in the Sunni Arab heartlands.

Outlook

9. The new government will also face internal challenges due to the fragile nature of the Shia-Kurd relationship and tensions within the Shia and Kurd parties themselves. Overlaid on these difficulties will be the turbulence of attempting to establish an administration based on potentially significant changes at ministerial level and amongst senior officials. Changes will also be made in key positions within the Iraqi security forces and intelligence services. This turbulence will take time to settle down, and will complicate coalition efforts to build Iraqi capability. There is a danger that Shia zeal for further de-Baathification, and the installation of their own officials in the security forces at the expense of more experienced officials, will harm counter-insurgency efforts.

10. Meanwhile the insurgents will maintain their attempts to derail the political process. Sectarian attacks, especially on the Shia, and attacks on Iraqis associated with the Coalition will continue. (The forthcoming Ashura festival will provide attractive targets.) The announcement of the Assembly and the government will give the insurgents a new range of targets.

11. Notwithstanding these challenges the political timetable is tight. There will be a number of difficult issues during the constitution negotiations, including the role of Islam, the status of Kirkuk, and the practical application of federalism. The ability of the Sunnis (and the Kurds) to veto the constitution will increase pressure on all political parties to reach agreement: the alternative being collapse of the TNA and a political crisis. Sunni insurgents have identified the means to derail the process – by a "no" vote in three provinces – although it will not be clear for some time whether they will be able to engineer this. It seems very possible that the TAL provision to delay the referendum and subsequent election will be exercised.

12. Iran will want the new Shia-led government to succeed, and will try to influence it. A perception of strong Iranian influence or control over the ITG would further undermine the potential for Sunni engagement.