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FCO Distribution	eD IRAQ DIRECTORATE;eDL IRAQ/KUWAIT	
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Subject	SIC19E IRAQ: VISIT TO MAYSAN PROVINCE	
Summary	1. Maysan currently belies its reputation. For the last couple of months, it has been (relatively) peaceful, the Sadrist-led local Government functions (reasonably) effectively, and despite intimidation, there is active political debate.	

Summary

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Detail

2. I visited al Amaara, the capital of Maysan, on 2-3 December, meeting the Governor, Adil Mahoder al-Maliki, the local head of the IECI, Dr Na'im, Sistani's representative in the province, Sheikh

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Muhammed al-Ibadhi and Kareem Mahood (Abu Hatem), the self-styled Prince of the Marshes, (and one of Maysan's TNA members). I also tried to meet Dr Adil al-Shari (OMS) who heads the local 555 list and the head of the OMS in Maysan, but although they sounded enthusiastic on the phone, they were unable to secure permission for a formal meeting from Najaf in time.

Background

3. Maysan's population of just over 800,000 is overwhelmingly Shi'a, with the majority concentrated in the four largest towns, al Amaara, Majar al Kabir, Maymunah and Qalat Salih in the Tigris basin. The province varies from arable land in the north, to desert in the centre and the marshes (now beginning to revive) in the south. The main tribes, whose influence remains strong, include the Bani Lam, the Al bu Muhammed and the Suwad.

4. The enormous (and hitherto, little exploited) Majnoon and Halfaya oil fields are situated in Maysan. Despite this, the economy is struggling, with high levels of unemployment (rising to an estimated 80% in the OMS stronghold of Majar al Kabir). Although Maysan has a 220 mile border with Iran, there are no official crossing points. However, there is considerable traffic across the poorly policed border, and smuggling has long been a mainstay of the local economy.

5. Maysan has long had the reputation for being lawless and separate from the rest of Iraq. During Saddam Hussein's time, more than 20,000 soldiers were permanently deployed in the province in an attempt to subdue it. The locals claim that they, rather than coalition forces "liberated" Maysan in 2003, and this helped explain the higher levels of hostility to MND(SE) than elsewhere in the region.

6. Maysan's individualism is evident in other ways. The province recognises Thursday and Friday as the weekend (rather than Friday and Saturday as in the rest of the country) and central Government directives issued on a Thursday are ignored. The Governor and local Council have also sought to prevent electricity from the Province's power stations to enter the national grid (which has led the Ministry of Power to refuse to assist with routine maintenance in retaliation).

Security

7. Despite its reputation, Maysan has been relatively peaceful in recent months. Since September, the number of attacks on MND(SE) has been lower than in Basra, and there have been no attacks on the ISF since early November. 2 December was the ninth consecutive night without an attack on Camp Abu Naji – a record. This is probably due to the Battle Group adopting a lower profile in the past, to improved operations to counter the threat against the camp and to the heavily Badrist police in the province, which can be relied on to take a tough line with local (predominantly Sadrist) trouble makers.

8. That said, the threat to MND(SE) remains relatively high. A very large EFP IED was discovered on the main supply route from Basra on 29 November. Elsewhere, OMS have demonstrated their ability to get their supporters out on the streets at short notice, and to intimidate political opponents.

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Local Politics

9. The Hussein Ideology Forum (effectively OMS in all but name) won most seats (15) in the provincial elections, and secured both the Governorship and Chairmanship of the Council. The Forum seek to portray themselves as a technocratic alternative to the other parties in Maysan. In this, they have been reasonably successful. DFID consider that their Governance Capacity Building Programme in Maysan is probably more advanced than in the other three southern provinces. Intelligent, hard working and (when he wants) charming, al-Maliki comes across as by some way the most impressive of the four Governors in southern Iraq. However, his urbane exterior may be deceptive: there are reports that he was seen directing the Jaysh al Mahdi during the confrontations with the Badrists in al Amaara in August.

10. Local politics is dominated by the Sadr/Badr divide, and the rivalry affects all issues (including MND(SE)'s reconstruction efforts). An uneasy balance of power exists between the Sadrist-led Council and the Badrist Chief of Police, Abu Maytham. The Council's repeated efforts to remove him in recent months have all failed, although Abu Maytham now openly talks about being on the point of moving on (it is rumoured to oversee policing in the whole of southern Iraq).

11. As elsewhere in southern Iraq, the economy and unemployment are the predominant concern, and there is considerable support for three-province federalism. Even al-Maliki saw advantages of a gradual move to a federal structure, dependent on the region developing the necessary administrative capability.

The election

12. Given the current Badr/Sadr dominance in Maysan, it might be expected that the 555 list would sweep the board in the elections. But none of those to whom I spoke thought this would be the case, even following Sistani's statement on 2 December. Al-Maliki said he expected the 555 list to win only four of the seven seats being contested in the province. Kareem Mahood (who is standing in Baghdad, not Maysan as reported in my e-gram 19829/05 – it is his brother, Riyadh, a former Governor, who is standing in the province) thought that independents would win a number of seats with Ali al-Dabbagh's coalition in particular putting in a good showing.

13. Dr Na'im, the competent Head of the IECE, said he did not expect serious problems with the elections. Arrangements (including security) were on track. Measures had been put in place to counter abuses detected during the referendum. Campaigning had largely been peaceful, although an INA candidate had been murdered on the road from Najaf a couple of days previously.

Co-operation with MND(SE)

14. Given the province's hostility to outside interference, I was surprised at the enthusiasm for a continuing MND(SE) presence, due in part to the low key approach adopted by the current commander, Colonel Ben Edwards. The Governor, while arguing that the local Battle Group could in the past have shown greater sensitivity towards the local population, particularly in relation to arrest operations, made clear that he did not favour an early withdrawal. Kareem Mahood went further, saying that MND(SE)

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should be take a greater role in policing in the region to minimise the role of the militias.

Comment

15. From what I saw during my visit, Maysan belies its reputation. It is currently relatively peaceful. The Hussein Ideology Forum offer evidence that the Sadrists can perform effectively in (local) Government. But beneath the surface, there is an underlying tension. Unlike in neighbouring Dhi Qar, the (relative) stability depends on an uneasy balance of power between the Badrists and the Sadrists, rather than co-operation. The potential for the situation to deteriorate quickly remains.

Sign Off
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Attachments

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