

“Do Iraq’s various communities have enough in common to remain united as a nation and share a common future, or are the forces of division pushing them in the direction of a breakdown, or even civil war?”

## Democracy in the Rough

PHEBE MARR

The December 15, 2005, parliamentary elections culminated a year of momentous political change in Iraq. Elections for a transitional assembly in January were followed in October by a national referendum that approved a newly drafted constitution for the country. Unfortunately, the insurgency, directed against both foreign forces and the newly emerging political order, continues at a lethal rate, slowing the economy to a crawl, preventing reconstruction, and scaring away regional and international help.

As a result, Iraqis still face a number of unanswered questions. Is the political process—a rough though real form of democracy—going to take root and provide their country with the institutional framework to move toward stability? Will the inclusion of the Arab Sunni opposition in the political process help reduce the insurgency? Above all, do Iraq’s various communities have enough in common to remain united as a nation and share a common future, or are the forces of division pushing them in the direction of a breakdown, or even civil war?

### THE NEW POWER BROKERS

The recent parliamentary election has given Iraq some breathing space, with a new political configuration that includes Sunnis. But much will depend on how well the newly elected delegates and parties are able to compromise on critical and deeply felt issues. In fact, both the issues and the main participants in the December elections came into focus much earlier—in January—when Iraqis were asked to go to the polls in their first free elections in history to vote for an interim assembly. These elections set the pattern for the future.

The January 2005 elections established a 275-member transitional assembly whose main function

was the drafting of a permanent constitution. Essentially, January produced two winners: a large and diverse list of mainly Shiite Muslim parties and individuals, the United Iraqi Alliance, and a more cohesive Kurdish list consisting mainly of Kurdish parties. Both groups dominated the government and the constitutional process.

The United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), which won 48 percent of the popular vote and 51 percent of the seats in the assembly in January, is basically a Shiite bloc of several Shiite religio-political parties as well as a shifting group of individuals. The main driver behind the UIA’s creation is the supposition that Shiites constitute a majority of the population (over 60 percent) and therefore they should have the majority of seats in any elected legislature and a dominant—although not exclusive—voice in shaping the new Iraq. The alliance strongly favors strengthening Iraq’s Islamic identity, particularly in a Shiite direction. In January, the alliance drew heavily for its legitimacy on the blessing of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the chief *marja*, or religious authority of the Shiites. In December, the ayatollah’s support was more nuanced and indirect but nonetheless helped the UIA mobilize votes.

The most important party in the UIA is the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). Led by a Shiite cleric, Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, SCIRI was founded in 1982 in Iran with the encouragement of the Iranian government. Its membership was drawn from the large community of Iraqi Shiite exiles in Iran. With Iranian funding and help, SCIRI developed a hierarchical structure, a bureaucracy, and a military arm, the Badr Brigade, which fought the Iraqi army during the Iran-Iraq War. Not surprisingly, in ideology SCIRI has closely followed Iranian formulas for an Islamic state, the most controversial of which has been the principle of rule by clerical jurists. Although clerics have dominated SCIRI leadership, in recent years it has called for some form of democracy and recognized the need to

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accommodate other groups. Still, SCIRI's long ties to the Iranian government and its earlier (and possibly continuing) reliance on Iranian financial and other support have raised suspicions, especially among Sunnis, of its independence from Iranian influence.

SCIRI is the best-organized and -funded party in the UIA. Chief among its leaders are Adil Abd al-Mahdi, an economist and a front-runner for the prime ministership; Bayan Jabr, the current minister of the interior; and Shaikh Humam al-Hamudi, a cleric who chaired the committee that drafted the constitution.

An important offshoot of SCIRI is the Badr Organization, led by Hadi al-Amiri. This group is simply a political form of the Badr Brigade militia, supposedly dissolved but in fact still in existence and incorporated into various components of local police (especially in the south) and into national security units in the Ministry of Interior.

Second in importance is the Islamic Dawa Party, whose spokesman is the outgoing prime minister, Ibrahim al-Jafari. Dawa lacks strong organization and a party hierarchy. But as the founder of the Shiite political movement in Iraq, whose members have long been persecuted for their opposition to Saddam Hussein's regime, it has earned considerable legitimacy. The party originated among Shiites at the end of the 1950s as a religio-political movement aimed at combating the appeal of left-leaning groups. During the 1960s and 1970s the movement grew, especially among university students and in Shiite seminaries. Persecuted by Hussein's Baath regime, it became increasingly radical and committed to underground armed struggle. In the wake of Iran's Islamic revolution in 1979 and Hussein's brutal repression, many of its members fled to other countries, especially Iran. Dawa's ties to Iran, however, have never been as strong as those of SCIRI.

A third group, likely to be of increasing importance, is the Sadr Current (Tayyar al-Sadr). The Sadrists are a more diffuse group, currently split into different factions, particularly in provincial areas in the south, where local leaders dominate. They owe their origin to Muqtada al-Sadr, the radical young Shiite firebrand who is their putative leader and who could, presumably, call many of them into action, if he so decided. Sadr has taken an extreme position on the fringe of the Shiite movement, opposing the occupation—sometimes by force—engaging in mob politics, and putting himself forward as a junior cleric. Sadr controls a

militia, the Mahdi Brigade, estimated at 15,000 men. His insurgency in 2004 twice threatened to destabilize the occupation; it fought a bloody battle with US forces in the city of Najaf in April. He has since been persuaded by the Shiite religious establishment to move out of the military arena and into the political process, at least for the moment. Although Sadr refuses to participate in elections personally, his followers do so in considerable numbers, giving him leverage in the political process.

Sadr draws on the prestige of his martyred father, Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, a former chief *marja* until his death in 1999, and on his father's financial assets and extensive network of clerical agents. His following is concentrated among the poor, especially in the working class districts of Baghdad like Sadr City, renamed for his father, and in provincial towns like Kut. Sadrist groups emphasize their roots in Iraq and make a point of distancing themselves from Iranian influence (although Muqtada al-Sadr receives funding from some Iranian groups). This position, along

with his appeal to youth, opposition to foreign forces, and support for the poor, gives Sadr a popular base.

The Sadr Current has produced several offshoots that show signs of playing an independent role. One to watch is the Fadhilah (Virtue) Party. This group seems to appeal to a more educated, middle-class constituency.

In the January election the UIA list included several independent candidates, such as Ahmad Chalabi, the well-known leader of the Iraq National Congress who played an important role in mobilizing opposition to Hussein in the West. Chalabi, however, left this list in December to run on an independent ticket.

## CONSOLIDATING SELF-RULE

The Kurdish list, which came in second in the January election, reflects Kurdish desires for continued self-rule in the north. While Kurds represent about 17 to 20 percent of the population, they received a resounding 26 percent of the vote and 27 percent of the seats in the assembly in the January balloting. The Kurdish list consists primarily of the two major Kurdish parties: the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), led by Massoud Barzani; and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), led by Jalal Talabani. The alliance also includes some representatives of smaller Kurdish parties and those representing Turkmen and Christian minorities in the north.

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The main thrust of this alliance is ethnic nationalism and self-government: preserving Kurdish control over the territory now governed as the Kurdistan Regional Government in the three provinces of Dohuk, Irbil, and Sulaimaniyya; and expanding control to Kurdish majority regions, notably Kirkuk and Khanaqin, now under the central government's authority.

The KDP is the founder of the movement for Kurdish self-government in the north. Established after World War II, it was led for decades by the legendary Mustafa Barzani, father of Massoud. Although the party hierarchy is elected, the Barzani family plays a strong role in the party's leadership. Massoud's nephew, Nechirvan, is prime minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government, and Masrur, Massoud's son, is in charge of KDP internal security. The KDP is essentially a nationalist party with little ideological content.

The PUK, while also nationalist, has always been the domain of Kurdish intellectuals and at one point was leftist in orientation. Originally part of the KDP, Talabani broke away from the party in 1975 to form the PUK. The PUK's party structure is also well organized, with a politburo more rooted in elections than family ties. Rivalry between the two parties—and their leaders—for domination of the Kurdish movement has been longstanding and contentious. In the mid-1990s the two parties engaged in armed warfare for several years. The conflict ended with Kurdistan split into two regions: the KDP dominates in Dohuk and Irbil, the PUK in Sulaymaniyya. These differences have been patched up today, but the PUK still has a separate administration in the southwestern part of Iraqi Kurdistan.

Although Kurds are committed to as much self-government as they can achieve in the north, they have also made a commitment to participate in the central government in Baghdad, provided that it is federal and democratic and affords them security.

## THE CENTER ERODES

If the two main ethnic and sectarian blocs were the winners in the January election, the losers were the parties representing the secular center. These have a more Iraqi orientation that appeals to moderate Iraqi nationalists, educated urbanites, and those opposed to the ethnic and sectarian trend in voting. Although the centrists took seats in the assembly in January, as a group they were not a large enough bloc to influence policy and they did not join the cabinet, preferring to take a position of opposition in the parliament.

Chief among this group was the Iraqi List, led by former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi. Centrists also included a ticket led by Shaikh Ghazi al-Yawar, a former president, and the Iraq Communist Party, led by Hamid Majid Musa. Allawi, a Shiite and a former Baathist who had headed the interim government in power during the January election, was willing to get tough with insurgents, but he also stressed outreach to Sunnis and former Baathists. His list won a mere 14.5 percent of the votes in January.

Sunnis, a minority of 15 to 20 percent of the population, were not so much losers as absent from the January elections. A decision to boycott the balloting or stay away from the polls because of intimidation meant that they took only 17 seats in the assembly, or just 6 percent of the total.

The Sunnis have generally not thought of themselves in sectarian terms; rather, they have usually identified with nationalist policies—sometimes Iraqi, sometimes Arab. They have been the strongest supporters of the Iraqi state, which they largely created and dominated. They have also leaned toward an Arab identity, seeing Iraq as a bulwark against a Shiite-dominated Iran. In recent decades, a growing number of Sunnis have turned to religion. One beneficiary has been the Iraqi Islamic Party, a Sunni Islamist group under Tariq Hashimi akin to the Muslim Brotherhood.

After the January elections a few Sunnis were offered positions in the new government, with Ghazi al-Yawar becoming vice president and Sadun al-Dulaim defense minister, but they could not claim to represent the absent Sunnis. The Sunni community was thus marginalized not only in the assembly, but also in the constitutional process.

## A CONSTITUTION IN THE MAKING

The main task of the provisional assembly elected in January was to draft a permanent charter that would define Iraq's political nature and its governing structures. In May, a 55-member committee was formed from parliamentary members, headed by al-Hamudi from SCIRI. The committee reflected the power structure elected to parliament and hence was heavily weighted in favor of the Shiites and the Kurds. The committee operated under severe time pressure; the deadline for a draft was August 15, giving members only a few months to complete their work. (US pressure to meet the deadline foreclosed an option to extend the drafting period another six months.)

The committee agreed to invite unelected Sunnis to participate, but it was not until July, after proceedings and the draft were well under way, that 17

Sunnis, including members of the Iraqi Islamic Party and the National Dialogue Council, were invited in. The Sunni members expressed numerous concerns, among them the issue of “federalism,” lack of recognition of Iraq’s Arab identity, and the future extension of Kurdish control to the oil areas of Kirkuk. Although some modifications were made in the draft to meet their objections, they were marginal. In the end, the Sunni representatives had little real impact on the process.

The constitution submitted for the national referendum provided that Iraq will be an “independent, federal country that is fully sovereign” with a republican, representative, and democratic government. It established a presidency, with mainly symbolic functions, to be composed of a president and two vice presidents, a provision designed to provide for representation of Iraq’s three major ethnic and sectarian groups (the presidency must receive approval of two-thirds of parliament). However, the government is essentially parliamentary in form, with a prime minister to be selected by the president from the “parliamentary majority.” His cabinet must receive a vote of confidence by a majority of parliament.

The constitution contains a long list of rights and freedoms—civil, political, economic, social, and cultural—but some are visionary in formulation and potentially limited by ambiguous restrictions. Article 36, for example, guarantees freedom of the press and expression “as long as it does not violate public order and morality.” Work is said to be a right, guaranteeing Iraqis “a decent living.” While many rights are unobjectionable, provisions for enforcement are weak. The constitution makes Islam the official religion of the state and “a fundamental source of legislation.” No law can contradict “the established provisions of Islam.”

### WHO GETS POWER AND OIL?

The charter approved by referendum in October 2005 left many gaps in areas on which it was difficult for political factions to agree; these gaps—having to do, most importantly, with the federal structure and the exploitation and management of oil revenues—must be addressed by legislation in the permanent assembly. In addition, a last-minute adjustment in political negotiations, meant to appease Sunni oppositionists, provided for a new constitutional committee to review the document and make amendments within four months of the

seating of the new assembly. Many question whether these amendments can substantially undo what has already been agreed on. But filling in the gaps in the constitution will be the first order of business for the legislature elected in the December 2005 balloting.

The new assembly will confront two key issues of paramount importance for Iraq’s future. First is the definition of federalism—geographic and administrative. The constitution currently provides for a weak central government in Baghdad, which is to become a self-contained province. The exclusive powers of the federal government are sketched in Article 109: the formation and conduct of foreign and defense policy, managing Iraq’s armed forces to defend the country, fiscal and customs policy, drawing up the national budget, and regulating citizenship.

Nothing is said in the constitution about the power to tax. Several duties are to be shared between the federal government and regional authorities: administration of customs, distribution

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of electrical power, and implementation of environmental, health, education, and development policies. All powers not specifically allocated to the federal government will accrue to the regions,

and in case of a dispute, “the priority will be given to the region’s law.” These and other provisions make clear that the regional government structure, with its large share of power, has been drawn up to satisfy the Kurds, whose minimal demand has been to keep the self-government they now have in the three northern provinces they control and to expand it territorially to Kirkuk.

The constitution anticipates the establishment of more regions, which can be formed from two or more provinces or the unification of two or more regions into a larger regional government. Faced with the strength (and the benefits) of the Kurdish Regional Government and its possible expansion into the oil region of Kirkuk, al-Hakim, the head of SCIRI, proposed on August 8 a new nine-province region, to include all of the Shiite majority provinces south of Baghdad. This would incorporate the rich oil province of Basra, as well as the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala, into one large region that some are already calling “Shiastan.” Such a division would leave Sunni provinces like Anbar and Salah al-Din, now largely in turmoil, in limbo. Many Sunnis—and some Shiites—fear this

would be a fatal step in the division of Iraq into its three major ethnic and sectarian components.

Provision for a future vote in Kirkuk and other Kurdish-inhabited regions on their incorporation into the Kurdish Regional Government by the end of 2007 is also a contentious issue. Whether Sunnis in the new parliament will accept the principle of federalism or its definition in the new constitution is a major question. There is, as yet, little indication that they have come to grips with the reality of decentralization. On the contrary, they—together with a number of other groups like the Sadrists and Allawi's ticket—are resisting any political system that fragments the country, especially along sectarian lines.

The second key issue that will require further definition is the role of oil resources in the new state and how they are to be exploited and managed. The constitution states that "oil and gas are the ownership of all the Iraqi people." It further provides that the federal government will administer oil and gas "extracted from current fields" in cooperation with the governments of the producing regions. How this joint management is to operate is not spelled out. More to the point, the oil clauses are silent on development of new regional resources. Kurds are interpreting these regulations in a way that would put future oil exploration and development in the hands of regions. If this interpretation holds, and a new oil-rich region is formed in the south, it would greatly disadvantage Sunnis, since the Sunni provinces currently do not have any producing oil wells. Cutting these provinces out of a share of Iraq's oil wealth is a sure formula for continuing insurgency.

On October 15, Iraqis went to the polls to vote on the draft constitution. A simple majority was required for passage but the constitution could be defeated if two-thirds of the voters of any three provinces rejected it. The vote saw a substantial Sunni turnout, despite some calls for a boycott. As a result, Sunnis came within sight of defeating the constitution. In two Sunni provinces, Anbar and Salah al-Din, the "no" vote was well over the two-thirds threshold; in a third, Ninewah, a majority (55 percent) voted "no." There were reports of pressure and fraud in Ninewah, but the fact that Ninewah has a substantial Kurdish population, which clearly voted "yes," meant that the vote there was likely to be close and controversial. There was a high "no" vote in Diyala (49 percent) and in Kirkuk (37 percent). In Baghdad, 22 percent voted "no." In solidly Kurdish and Shiite areas the vote was overwhelmingly in favor, ranging for the most part from 95 to 99 percent.

The constitutional referendum results appeared to confirm the ethnic and sectarian pattern of vot-

ing apparent in the earlier election for a provisional parliament. The Shiite and Kurdish communities, whose elected leaders had negotiated a bargain with one another, overwhelmingly supported the result. The Sunni communities, left out of the bargain, voted overwhelmingly against. In mixed areas, the vote was mixed. But one positive outcome was participation by some—though not all—of the Sunni community, which indicated that many recognized their mistake in boycotting the January elections. The constitutional referendum marked the first indication of Sunnis' willingness to trade the ballot box for the bullet in attempting to achieve their aims. This break in the "Sunni front" between the hard-line (including many foreign) insurgents, and the bulk of the discontented Sunni population, willing to be drawn into the political process, was accelerated in the December election when Sunnis turned out in high numbers to vote.

With the passage of the constitution, the political process moved on to the final step in Iraq's transition to full sovereignty: election of a new four-year assembly and government. This time, as all the players knew, the results would have more permanence.

## THE DECEMBER ELECTION

The December 2005 election for a permanent assembly generated a vigorous political campaign, despite insecurity in some areas. Some 228 parties and 19 coalitions—twice the number in January—competed for 275 seats. The most important contenders were, essentially, those that ran in January, with a few modifications. The United Iraqi Alliance produced a strong Shiite bloc, which included SCIRI, Dawa, and a group of Sadrist candidates. The UIA suffered some defections, most notably Chalabi, who ran on a separate list. The Kurdistan Gathering was composed of the two main Kurdish parties and assorted minorities, but it, too, lost one component—the Kurdish Islamic Union, a moderate Sunni religious party, which ran on a separate ticket.

Once again, the centrist quarter was led by former Prime Minister Allawi. This time his alliance, the National Iraqi List, included some who had run on separate tickets before, such as Ghazi al-Yawar, Adnan Pachachi, and the Iraq Communist Party. Allawi campaigned vigorously against the sectarian trend in voting and in favor of an Iraqi identity.

There was one major difference in the December elections, however, that changed the political landscape: strong participation by the Sunni community. Two main tickets emerged to represent Sunni opposition forces that had largely been absent in January, either because of a boycott or intimidation from

insurgents. The first and most important was the Iraqi Concord Front, consisting of several religiously oriented groups—including the Iraqi Islamic Party (under Tariq al-Hashimi), the Iraq National Dialogue Council (under Khalaf al-Ulayan), and the General Council for the Iraqi People (under Adnan al-Dulaimi). The first two groups had decided earlier to participate in the constitutional process and had representatives on the constitutional committee, although they opposed many of its provisions. The second Sunni ticket was the National Front for Iraqi Dialogue. More secular in orientation, it had as its major component the National Front Party led by Salih al-Mutlaq. A former Baathist, Mutlaq had participated in the constitutional process but rejected the results. He opposed the constitution in the October referendum and wanted it changed.

Neither of these Sunni tickets openly espoused sectarian identity. The Concord Front championed Iraqi unity and recognition of Iraq's Arab identity; Mutlaq was more Iraqi nationalist in orientation. Both tickets were virulently opposed to occupation and foreign influence (Iranian as well as American) and wanted an end to de-Baathification and more protection for their now marginalized community. While these Sunni groups claimed to speak for the opposition, the more hard-line opponents of the new order, such as the Association of Muslim Scholars, under Harith al-Dhari, did not participate.

The results of the election would take weeks to finalize, but early returns once again confirmed the pattern of ethnic and sectarian voting. As expected, the biggest winner was the UIA, which received a large plurality, though it fell just short of a majority. This showing put it in a strong position to serve as the foundation of the new government and to field a prime minister. The Kurdish ticket, although reduced from the high percentage it had received in January, garnered votes more proportional to its demographic weight in the population. If these two tickets ally again, they could form a majority that would put them in control of parliament.

The new element in the assembly is the election of a significant Sunni component. Although the Sunni bloc was divided between the two main Sunni tickets—the Concord Front outpolled Mutlaq's group by a considerable margin—taken together the Sunnis were at least equal to the Kurds, with each receiving about 20 percent of the vote. Allawi's National Iraqi ticket came in fourth, with fewer votes than in January, indicating a continued weakening of the centrist position.

Smaller parties representing religious minorities and individuals with a local or provincial base

picked up the remainder of the seats. These included the Kurdish Islamic Union, which broke ranks with the Kurdish coalition, and Mishan al-Jaburi, a former Baathist and governor of Mosul.

## TO THE BACK ROOMS

The December results portend a difficult deliberative process to form a government, which will decide the orientation of the country for the next four years. Considerable backroom bargaining is expected—for the presidency, the prime ministership, and key cabinet positions. At stake in this bargaining will be the distribution of power among ethnic and sectarian groups as well as the division of much of Iraq's patrimony—particularly its oil wealth.

Even more important will be the issue of whether Iraq will remain a unified country and how its federal units will be defined. The Shiite and Kurdish tickets already struck a bargain in the draft constitution and they would find it comfortable to maintain what they won then. But they must now make room for a Sunni contingent if they hope to move to closure on the insurgency. This will make for uneasy bedfellows since the new Sunni representatives have constituencies opposed to the constitution, to the US presence in Iraq, and to federalism as defined in the constitution.

Nor is it yet clear what the centrist contingent will do in the bargaining. It could make common cause with the Kurds, who are secular, or with the Sunnis, who want a stronger central government and are worried about undue Iranian influence. Another unknown is whether Sadrists will remain in the UIA camp or make common cause with religious Sunnis, who favor more Iraqi unity and an end to occupation.

In the end, the desire for power and control of the government will probably win out over ideological orientations. The intense bargaining and formation of alliances of convenience could make for a weak central government and slow progress on delivery of services.

Whatever the outcome of the bargaining, two results are clear from the December elections. From a relatively unified country with a nationalist orientation under most years of the Baathist state, Iraq has now shifted to the politics of cultural identity. Voting has been organized around ethnicity and sect, rather than platforms and mutual interests; indeed, the political process itself has been divisive. As a result, the sense of Iraqi identity has weakened, although it has not yet disappeared entirely. Second, oil will be a key component in holding the state together. Provisions made by the new legislature to develop and distribute the country's oil resources

will be a main determinant of just how much “unity” Iraq may have.

### COMPROMISING WITH THE ENEMY

What does all this portend for a reduction in the insurgency and the prospects for US withdrawal? The insurgency has been effective so far in achieving two aims, both designed to dissolve the bands holding Iraq together. First, it has cut Baghdad and its environs off from both the Kurdish areas in the north and the Shiite areas of the south. The insurgency is centered mainly in Baghdad and the Sunni towns and villages north and west of Baghdad. This means a large swath of territory in the center of Iraq, including the capital, is unsafe or unstable. These realities are doing more than anything else to reinforce ethnic and sectarian divisions and to create a highly decentralized—and ineffective—polity.

Second, the insurgency has cut Iraq off from the outside world, greatly reducing its capacity to rebuild and revive. This is less true of the Kurdish area and some areas in the south, but insecurity has driven out most foreign NGOs and businesspeople needed to help Iraq revive. Neither oil production nor electrical capacity is back to what it was before the occupation and unemployment is still high—at least 40 percent. Nothing would mitigate ethnic and sectarian tensions more than increased prosperity and a revival of Iraq’s middle class; both depend on ending the violence caused by the insurgency.

The insurgency includes a wide variety of participants and supporters, but these may be grouped into three broad categories. The first is the foreign Al Qaeda supporters, drawn mainly from radical Sunni jihadis from outside Iraq. They are a minority without much local support. The second includes supporters of Hussein still loose in Iraq; they, too, are a tiny minority. The third and far more numerous group is the Iraqi “rejectionists.” These are mainly Sunnis living in the provinces of Anbar, Salah al-Din, Ninewah, Baghdad, and Diyala. They have a variety of motives for supporting or engaging in insurgency: objection to the occupation and the presence of foreign troops, resentment at the dramatic reversal of Sunni status, fear of Shiite (and Iranian) domination in the new government, economic deprivation, and now fear of arrest and execution.

The first two groups are unsuitable negotiating partners for the new government or the United States and are likely to continue their violence. But the new government must begin to deal with the

third group, some of whose representatives have just been elected. In time, layers of Sunni opposition must be peeled back and rejectionists brought into the political process. With the December elections, this process is well under way. But electoral participation is not enough. Easing some Sunni grievances is also essential, as is greater Sunni acceptance of the new order in Iraq. And Sunni representatives must be able to bring their constituents along on compromises, which may not be easy.

Many Sunnis are still in shock and denial over the dramatic change in their fortunes and have not yet formulated realistic aims. First and foremost is their opposition to the occupation and the US presence in their midst, as well as the killing and detention of actual and suspected insurgents. For Sunnis, amnesty, a release of detainees, and a “timetable” for withdrawal are probably a bare minimum.

Most Sunnis also deride “federalism,” a synonym for the “breakup” of “their” state. It is not clear, however, if they would espouse local rule under a different name—in short, a “Sunni” region—or whether this issue is simply an indirect way of opposing Shiite majority rule. Sunnis are also calling for a rule of law and government by meritocracy, from which many of their educated middle class would stand to gain. This puts the issue of de-Baathification front and center. But these are just the issues on which it is difficult for Shiites and Kurds, former oppressed oppositionists, to compromise with Sunnis.

Getting compromises on these concerns will be hard and will take time. It will also require some diplomatic pressure from outside—from the United States, regional actors, and the international community. Ultimately, the one issue on which most parties may be able to agree is the withdrawal of US forces—if not immediately, eventually—and on a timetable that does not include military bases at the end of the process. This may put the newly elected Iraq parliament on the same track as public opinion in the United States.

The insurgency is not likely to dissipate without compromise on some of these concerns. Compromise is the best possible outcome of the election process, but it is also the most difficult. If the newly elected leaders (especially the Sunnis) cannot—or do not—compromise, Iraq is in for more of the same, or worse. Violence will escalate, simmering ethnic hostility will break out in real civil war, the modest economic development now under way will be curtailed, and Iraq itself could cease to exist. This outcome is so dire that it should focus minds on making certain it does not occur. ■