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[Abstract] Concepts like "Shiite oil" and "Kurdish oil" obfuscate the debate about Iraq's energy resources. This paper starts from the proposition that it would be better to call a thing by its name: in terms of the size of reserves, Iraqi oil is first and foremost Basra oil. Accounting for one of the world's greatest concentrations of petroleum wealth, almost all of Iraq's supergiant oil fields can be found near Basra or in one of its two neighbouring governorates. The other six Shiite-majority governorates of Iraq have little or no oil, and even the most optimistic estimates of new discoveries in Kurdistan pale in comparison with the reserves of Basra and the far south. This paper examines the political implications of these geopolitical realities - with an emphasis on developments after the Samarra bombing of February 2006, intra-Shiite tensions generally, and the questions of implementing federalism south of Baghdad and adopting a new Iraqi oil law in particular.

Introduction

On 22 February 2006, the golden dome of the Shiite Askari mosque in the Iraqi city of Samarra was destroyed by bombs. The attack sparked an unprecedented surge of Shiite sectarian revenge attacks and Sunni reprisals in a country which historically has been characterised by peaceful coexistence between its religious communities, rather than by large-scale sectarian violence. So far, the Iraqi government has not managed to bring to justice the alleged masterminds behind the attack.

This paper considers the "Samarra effect" as far as the struggle over Iraq's "southern" oil resources is concerned. In Western journalese, these oil fields are often referred to as the "Shiite oil" of Iraq – as if they somehow constituted a massive, contiguous hydrocarbon zone stretching from the Gulf to the Iraqi capital. In fact, for all practical purposes, "southern oil" – and, indeed, to a large extent "Iraqi oil" – means "Basra oil".[1] Terms like "Shiite oil" effectively disguise an intense three-way internal power struggle among Iraq's Shiites, in which two competing regional visions – headed by rivalling Shiite political elites – clash with each other as well as with Iraqi nationalist attitudes, which in turn remain strong at the popular level in many Shiite areas (including Basra) and in trade unions within the oil industry itself. The potential implications of this struggle for the oil sector are obvious, and involve many important questions: Will Iraq's vast southern oil reserves remain under central control? Will they be administered by a pro-Iranian Shiite regional government in Najaf? Or could they become a future asset for the local government in Basra?

The Samarra effect at the national level

At the level of national elite politics, the fallout from Samarra appeared to be limited at first. Leading politicians generally maintained a politically correct Iraqi nationalist discourse, and the process of forming of a government of national unity continued. If anything, the emergence of a new government under Nuri al-Maliki in May 2006 represented a partial victory for the more centrist and nationalist factions within the Shiite-dominated United Iraqi Alliance (UIA). Previously, leading figures within the UIA had identified the struggle between premier candidates Adil Abd al-Mahdi (of SCIRI, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq) and Ibrahim al-Jaafari (the incumbent prime minister, of the Daawa party) as a tug-of-war between SCIRI's idea of sectarian decentralisation and a more unitary style of government, as favoured by the Daawa and other Shiites.[2] Accordingly, the failure of Abd al-Mahdi to maintain his candidature (despite considerable support from external parties including the United States) after the initial defeat on 12 February meant that ideas on the constitution and state structure more congenial to Sunni politicians survived this first challenge after Samarra. Maliki comes from the same Daawa faction as Ibrahim al-Jaafari, and subscribes to at least some of the movement's basic ideas about a reasonably centralised, unified Iraq for people of all sects and races.[3]

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[1] See Kamil al-Mehaidi, "Geographical distribution of Iraqi Oil Fields and Its Relation with the New Constitution", Iraq Revenue Watch, May 2006.

[2] Interview with Ammar al-Hakim, "At Heart of Iraqi Impasse, a Family Feud", *Washington Post*, 19 April 2006.

[3] It is sometimes alleged that Maliki's leading role in the de-Baathification process in 2005 made him into a more sectarian politician than Jaafari. Historically, however, Daawa is the Shiite Islamist party with the strongest tradition of compromise and cooperation with Sunnis.

Moreover, some of Maliki's ministerial appointments – especially that of Jawad al-Bulani to the interior ministry – seemed intended to reverse the patterns of aggressive sectarianism that had been blamed on SCIRI-controlled parts of the government apparatus under his predecessor. Maliki's initial attempts at creating a reconciliation plan reportedly continued to ascribe importance to the idea of revising the 2005 constitution (a central Sunni demand), despite protests – ultimately successful ones – from Shiites of a more sectarian mindset.[4] Thus, by the summer of 2006, there was still reason to hope that Iraqi political elites would spend the autumn working on constitutional revisions that could be completed by the end of the year and thereby create the momentum necessary to reduce internal violence. In another indication of the surviving potential for cross-sectarian compromise, much of the Shiite community remained unenthusiastic about the virtues of a federal system – as shown for instance in Karbala by opinion polls (June) and popular demonstrations (October).[5]

SCIRI and the Samarra effect

Beyond doubt, the party to benefit most from the Samarra incident was SCIRI. Even if it failed to challenge Nuri al-Maliki as premier candidate, SCIRI scored numerous other successes in the immediate wake of the blast.

In the first place, SCIRI's hitherto lacklustre campaign for a single Shiite federal region covering all the Shiite-majority areas south of Baghdad received something of a boost. After its formal launch in August 2005, this scheme had tended to entertain Western journalists and scaremongers across the Arab world rather than making any profound impact on Iraq's Shiites.[6] After Samarra, however, an increasing number of Shiites started listening to SCIRI's message that the principal dividend from a federal state structure would be security.[7] Following a series of meetings with Iranian authorities (Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim visited Tehran on 13 June, and there were separate meetings between the Iranian ambassador in Baghdad and Hakim and Abd al-Mahdi, respectively, on 22 and 24 July), propaganda in favour of a single Shiite region (or the Region of the Centre and the South, *iqlim al-wasat wa-al-janub*) virtually exploded in SCIRI's mouthpiece *al-Adala* in early August, backed up with pro-federal statements at ceremonies to commemorate the death of the late SCIRI leader, Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, who was assassinated in 2003.[8]

This media push was coupled with some other notable successes. A veneer of symbolism was now attached to the demand for a single region, as pro-federal slogans were reported for the first time – albeit in a "demonstration" held conspicuously close to Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim's compound in Baghdad.[9] The charitable organisation for the late Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim (Mu'assasa al-Shahid al-Mihrab) led by Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim's son, Ammar, focused its role as a principal advocate of a unified Shiite region.[10] Even one high-ranking cleric, Muhammad Said al-Hakim, now spoke

[4] Ned Parker, "Shias Cut Back Olive Branch for Insurgents", *The Times*, 26 June 2006.
[5] *Al-Sabah*, 5 June 2006; *Al-Sabah al-Jadid*, 12 October 2006.
[6] On the genesis of this scheme, see Reidar Visser, "Shi'i Separatism in Iraq: Internet Reverie or Real Constitutional Challenge?" *NUPI Paper* 686, August 2005, http://historiae.org/shiseparatism.asp
[7] SCIRI press release, 20 March 2006; *Al-Adala*, 30 March 2006.
[8] A string of editorials and op-eds advocating this federal vision appeared in *al-Adala* between 2 and 10 August 2006. Several Kurdish or pro-Kurdish writers were also enlisted for the campaign; see for instance *al-Adala*, 12 August 2006.
[9] *Al-Adala*, 3 August 2006.
[10] "Iraq's Federalism Debate Rages On", Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 26 September 2006.

in positive terms about decentralisation – at least as a general concept.[11] (The far more powerful Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani has, however, continued to shy away from the project for a sectarian implementation of federalism.[12]) And on top of this, certain Shiite elite politicians outside SCIRI finally appeared to take an interest in "Shiite federalism" – a conversion which seemed particularly pronounced with regard to individual members of the Tanzim al-Iraq branch of the Daawa movement, but which apparently failed to make headway in Basra, where there were few attempts at spreading propaganda for a single Shiite region except for a visit by Ammar al-Hakim during the summer.[13]

The zenith of this campaign came in October 2006, with the passage of a law for the formation of federal regions. This was after a deliberate attempt by SCIRI (in alliance with the Kurds) to pre-empt the provisions for a one-off constitutional revision that had been added to the Iraqi constitution just days before the October 2005 referendum, aimed at mollifying Sunni concerns about concepts such as federalism. It had always been expected that the process of revision (originally stipulated to take no more than four months) would antedate deliberations over a law for implementing federalism (for which there was a six-month deadline), but SCIRI now attempted to reverse the order – in which case federalism would largely become a *fait accompli.*[14] This resonated with SCIRI's pronounced conservatism as to constitutional changes – a position also shared by the Kurds as well as by Iran[15] – in which modification of detail rather than radical overhaul has been seen as the central task of the constitutional revision committee.

Still, and despite Western press reports that wildly overestimated the significance of the law for SCIRI's specific plan for a single Shiite region, there were important limits to the party's triumph.[16] The law – which was written by an independent member of the UIA rather than by any SCIRI politicians[17] – involves an intricate procedure for establishing regions "from below".[18] This implies that small-scale regions are far more likely to succeed than grand projects aiming to combine a large number of governorates, which will automatically become nullified if they should fail in any of the targeted governorates. The acrimonious atmosphere in which the law was passed (with abstentions widespread in both Shiite and Sunni camps) also meant that its legitimacy as an act of parliament was in doubt from the very start. Hidden behind the voting figures is the continued Shiite disagreement over what federalism should mean in practice, with only SCIRI backing the specific idea of a single Shiite region, and

[11] Press release from Hakim's office dated 10 August 2006.
[12] Symptomatically, during this period of enhanced federal propaganda, SCIRI could produce only a brief statement after a visit by Hakim to Sistani – no photos, and no comment on federalism. See SCIRI press release, 29 July 2006.
[13] Press release from the Tanzim al-Iraq branch of the Daawa party, "Madha jara fi al-barlaman bi-shan qanun al-aqalim", early October 2006; "Shiites Press for Partition of Iraq", *Los Angeles Times*, 9 August 2006.
[14] The loophole that would have allowed this exercise to proceed had been created by the lack of a clear starting point for the four-month period designated for constitutional revisions.
[15] Emile El-Hokayem, "Iran's Nuclear Energy Program: Policies & Prospects", 25 April 2006 (The Stimson Center).
[16] See Reidar Visser, "The Draft Law for the Formation of Regions: A Recipe for Permanent Instability in Iraq?" 27 September 2006, http://historiae.org/aqalim.asp and "Iraq Federalism Bill Adopted amid Protests and Join Shiite–Sunni Boycott", 12 October 2005, http://historiae.org/devolution.asp
[17] Conversation with Shiite Islamist member of the Iraqi government, 25 November 2006.
[18] Reidar Visser, "Federalism from Below in Iraq: Some Historical and Comparative Reflections", available at http://historiae.org/federalism-from-below.asp

most others (including such leading figures as Nuri al-Maliki himself[19] and the secular Basra politician Wail Abd al-Latif) supporting federalism as a principle only – with no outspoken preference for any particular federal map (which, according to the law, is left to the Iraqi people to demarcate and decide). Additionally, it is clear that several clauses in the original bill introduced in late September were altered in a manner inimical to SCIRI preferences; they included the removal of the possibility for federal regions to join with each other to form super-regions, and the addition of an unequivocal assertion that any federal scheme would need to obtain pluralities in each individual governorate targeted – rather than an overall majority, as per the original draft law.[20] Another part of the compromise behind the federalism deal was the long-overdue formation of a committee to revise the Iraqi constitution, which in theory could challenge any part of the Iraqi charter – including the basic concept of federalism itself.

In tandem with this relative success in the parliamentary arena came further progress for SCIRI in its relations with the United States and thereby enhanced leverage over internal Iraqi politics. In 2006, the highly disciplined SCIRI-affiliated Badr brigades managed to reduce the direct involvement of their militias in sectarian killings in Iraq (or at least create the impression of such a reduction), leaving it to anarchic Sadrists to spearhead the revenge attacks after Samarra – with the concomitant deterioration of Sadrist relations with Sunnis and the United States, observable ever since the raid on the Mustafa *husayniyya* (a Shiite religious hall of assembly) in Baghdad in March.[21] With this new turn, Washington increasingly saw the arch-Iraqi Sadrists as the more sectarian (or, at any rate, "less moderate") player on the Shiite scene, and intensified its already solid support for pro-Iranian SCIRI – even though SCIRI had been the author of the proposal for a single Shiite region which had become the source of so much moderate Sunni alienation, and apparently also ignoring accusations about SCIRI's association, especially in Baghdad and in the Diyala governorate, with schemes and practices that are even more pronouncedly sectarian and clearly reminiscent of the Balkans in the 1990s.[22] The invitation of Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim to Washington in early December amounted to a *de facto* coronation of the SCIRI leader as a Shiite overlord, and further enabled SCIRI to play a role in Shiite politics quite out of proportion to their relatively modest parliamentary strength.[23]

Further SCIRI successes followed during the autumn, including disproportionate SCIRI representation in the parliamentary committee charged with revising the constitution, and control of the chairmanship as well as one of the members of the five-person leadership and "consensus-seeking" body of that committee. More in the background, but equally important as far as power politics is concerned, is the low-intensity war conducted by SCIRI (or by SCIRI-affiliated units within the Iraqi secu-

[19] Interview with high-ranking Shiite member of the Iraqi security apparatus, 24 November 2006.
[20] Some of these changes were specified in greater detail in *al-Ittihad*, 12 October 2006 and *al-Adala*, 14 October 2006.
[21] "Killings by Shiite Militias Detailed", *Los Angeles Times*, 28 September 2006.
[22] In September 2006, SCIRI were prominent in a meeting in Karbala to which governors from all eleven Shiite-dominated provincial assemblies, including Baghdad and Diyala, had been invited; *al-Adala*, 28 September 2006. The mixed governorate of Diyala does not formally feature in SCIRI's nine-governorate plan, but this is an area where SCIRI and the Badr brigades have been particularly active in securing sectarian hegemony. The constitution bars Baghdad from joining with any other region in a federal scheme.
[23] Reidar Visser, "Beyond SCIRI and Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim: The Silent Forces of the United Iraqi Alliance", 20 January 2006, http://historiae.org/uia.asp; "SCIRI, Daawa and Sadrists in the Certified Iraq Elections Results", 11 February 2006, http://historiae.org/sciri.asp

rity apparatus) against Shiite dissenters who protest against the vision of a single Shiite region. During the autumn of 2006 and the early part of 2007, "resistance against federalism" was mentioned as a possible cause of clashes between pro-SCIRI forces and other Shiites in Amara (Sadrists), Karbala (followers of Mahmud al-Hasani al-Sarkhi) and Najaf (Mahdist supporters of Ahmad al-Hasan and Diya Abd al-Zahra).[24] In conversations with Western journalists, some SCIRI members went so far as to formally recognise the party's role as hit man for the United States, capable of dealing with recalcitrant Shiite elements like the Sadrists.[25]

Basra and the Samarra effect

The Samarra incident posed a particularly grave challenge to local politicians in Basra who, ever since the summer of 2004, had been working to obtain federal arrangements that would make oil-rich Basra the capital of a small-scale region (Region of the South or *iqlim al-janub*) composed of only the three southernmost governorates of Iraq – thereby excepting it, along with its neighbours in Maysan and Dhi Qar, from the rest of the (oil-deficient) Shiite-majority areas to the north.[26] This non-sectarian movement had blossomed during the spring of 2005 but remained alive also after the launch of SCIRI's competing scheme for a large Shiite region in August 2005. (For now, the exact genesis of the SCIRI plan must remain the subject of conjecture, but from the viewpoint of Tehran it was no doubt advantageous that an Iraqi Shiite faction should begin challenging the hitherto fiercely anti-Iranian regionalists of Basra and the far south, and it seems fair to assume that the project at the very least had the tacit approval of Iranian authorities.) The increase in sectarianism after Samarra meant that any project that would create internal divisions within the Shiite camp would face an uphill struggle.

However, the Samarra incident did not derail the Region of the South project. On the contrary, the first month after the blast saw another wave of propaganda that stressed the theme of three southern Shiite regions separating from the rest of the Iraqi Shiites in a federal region of their own. Across the three southern governorates, the Fadila party (in control of the Basra governorate, and quite strong in Dhi Qar) organised a series of public meetings and common Friday prayers featuring regionalist demands.[27] In April, the Basra governor explicitly highlighted the differences between his own preferred small-scale vision and SCIRI's bid for a much larger Shiite region.[28] And in May, there came renewed rumours about a forthcoming oil strike to coincide with further regionalist demands – a strategy widely used during 2005 as well.[29] Additionally, the Basra governor made a very specific complaint about the interference of the

[24] Reidar Visser, "Ashura in Iraq: Enter Mahdism?", 29 January 2007 (http://historiae.org/mahdism.asp). It should be added that, in the course of 2006, Sunni and secular media in Iraq as well as in the wider Arab world developed a speciality of identifying "anti-federal" dimensions in cases where Iraqi grassroots elements clashed with the Shiite-led government; this may have created a certain bias in reports by writers with strong pan-Arab sympathies.
[25] Christopher Dickey, "Baker's Iraq Plan Not So Grand", *Newsweek*, 6 December 2006.
[26] An outline of the emergence of this movement is provided in Reidar Visser, *Basra, the Failed Gulf State: Separatism and Nationalism in Southern Iraq* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2005/New Brunswick: Transaction, 2006) pp. 171–173.
[27] *Al-Manara*, 7 March 2006, 28 March 2006 and 8 April 2006.
[28] Government of Iraq, office of the prime minister, reports of the activities of the governors, 4 April 2006.
[29] "Shiite Faction Menaces Iraq's Basra Oil Exports", *Arab News*, 27 May 2006.

central government: in mid-May he demanded the resignation of the local police chief as well as of the commander of the tenth division of the Iraqi army, who was in charge of Iraqi forces in Basra.[30]

The newly formed Maliki government lost no time in responding to these signs of regional ambition, which came at a point when the security situation in Basra was already getting precarious due to persistent infighting between Fadila on the one hand and the Basra branch of SCIRI (which had been marginalised in local government due to Fadila's coalition strategies) and the local Thar Allah militia on the other. In a much publicised visit to Basra on 31 May, Maliki imposed a state of emergency in the southern city (ostensibly to deal with "Shiite–Sunni tensions" and "organised crime"), confirmed the powers of the tenth division commander of the Iraqi army, and went on to appoint a special security committee charged with improving the situation, answerable to Baghdad only. To what extent this action was taken at the behest of SCIRI or as a non-partisan attempt at restoring normalcy in Basra remains unclear. SCIRI had certainly taken the lead in publishing criticism of the deteriorating security situation in Basra, with rich condemnation of their arch-rivals in the Fadila party.[31] And local politicians in favour of Basra autonomy, for their part, clearly considered the action as an attack on their own ambitions. On the eve of Maliki's visit, the speaker of the provincial council reiterated regionalist demands, and stated that Basra would not continue in its present role as philanthropist for Iraq's entire economy.[32] Later, Fadila supporters continued complaining about the security situation (the supremacy of the Baghdad-appointed security committee was repeatedly extended) at a time when SCIRI was trying to put a positive spin on alleged "improvements" under the new regime.[33] And throughout the autumn of 2006, successive statements from Fadila and their local allies that "Basra would no more serve as the camel for Iraq" and accusations that the (previous) Jaafari government had not contributed a single dinar to the local economy showed that the assault by Baghdad had by no means managed to obliterate the regionalist theme in Basra.[34] Even an alliance of secularist parties with a long tradition of Iraqi nationalism mentioned regionalist demands in their new programme, published in November 2006.[35]

If there was any post-Samarra ideological change in southern federalism circles, this revolved about the demarcation of federal entities. Ever since the first tentative soundings about federalism back in early 2004, the theme of Basra as a uni-governorate federal entity (rather than the three-governorate Region of the South) had been popular in some circles, including secularist supporters of Basra's federalism pioneer Wail Abd al-Latif (a member of Iyad Allawi's Wifaq movement). The theme had never disappeared completely. The idea of Basra going its own way had been propagated in the press and in internet discussion groups already in 2005,[36] and by the autumn of 2006 this vision was once more firmly placed on the agenda.

The precipitating factor appears to have been the national parliamentary debate on the new law on implementing federalism, which gave the Fadila party the opportunity to clarify its views on federalism. Until then, the party's message had been decidedly

[30] *Al-Manara*, 16 May 2006.
[31] "SCIRI official defends SCIRI Record on Iraq Security", *Financial Times*, 9 June 2006.
[32] Fadila press release, 31 May 2006.
[33] *Al-Manara*, 5 September 2006.
[34] Fadila press release 5 October 2006, *al-Manara*, 28 November 2006.
[35] Programme of the "Nationalist Current of the Basra Governorate", published in *al-Manara*, 10 November 2006.
[36] See for instance Riyad al-Ali, "Laysa jumhuriyyat al-basra bal iqlim al-basra", www.kitabat.com, 31 January 2005.

dualistic and ambiguous: its spiritual guide in Najaf, Muhammad al-Yaqubi, had generally used the language of the centralised state, whereas the Fadila faction in Basra had been among the most ardent Shiite Iraqi supporters of federalism within a small-scale, non-sectarian framework. In early October 2006, after the draft law on forming federal regions had been introduced in the Iraqi parliament, Yaqubi tackled this vexing issue. In a blunt rejection of a draft law that set no clear ceilings on the size of new federal regions (by implication enabling the formation of sectarian federal entities), the Fadila party launched a counter-project that would allow existing governorates to transform into federal entities in their own right, but without combining into larger units – at least not for the foreseeable future.[37] As for Yaqubi himself, he emphasised the values of anti-sectarianism and "consensus" in challenging the proposed law by Fadila's uni-governorate initiative, but also revealed his more fundamental scepticism to any kind of "deep federalism" on the Kurdish pattern for the Arab areas of Iraq. In his view, creating barriers (*hawajiz*) south of Kurdistan would be a highly unnatural act.[38] At the same time, this new position was consonant with Yaqubi's long-held conviction that the smallest minorities of Iraq (such as the Shabak people) would suffer in a system defined and dominated by the largest ethno-religious groups.

These new ideas were soon reflected in statements made by the Fadila branches in Basra. On 14 October, the Fadila governor of Basra, Muhammad al-Waili, explicitly declared his opposition to the idea of a nine-province Region of the Centre and the South, voicing instead support for Fadila's competing legislative project – in which Basra would be able to form a mini-region of its own.[39] The same position was reiterated in early 2007 by the leader of the Fadila party in Basra on the fourth anniversary of the party's founding.[40] Nor was Basra the only southern governorate with a zest for more unilateral solutions. As early as in May 2005, a letter of protest to the central government from the Fadila party in Amara (Maysan province) had focused on Maysan grievances (rather than "southern" ones), as the writer highlighted the (Shiite-led) Jaafari government's alleged discrimination of Amara in comparison with more centrally located Shiite cities like Najaf and Karbala. Similarly, Nasiriyya (Dhi Qar province) has at times also taken unilateral steps towards the centre on issues of major political significance, including a July 2006 request to speed up the development of oil fields in the Rifa'i, Qalaat Sakr and Bataha areas within the Dhi Qar governorate.[41] Still, the idea of a medium-sized alternative of three southern governorates has not been completely eradicated. August 2006 saw tribal demonstrations in Nasiriyya in favour of the Region of the South, and similar attitudes were reported from Amara.[42]

By late 2006 there were also signs that regional politicians in the south were beginning to recover from the shock of increased interference by the central government since Maliki's visit to Basra in May – to which they at first had reacted with uncompromising attitudes and futile obstructive tactics. One possible indication of this was

[37] Fadila party press release, 8 October 2006.
[38] Fadila press release, 3 October 2006.
[39] *Al-Manara*, 14 October 2006.
[40] *Al-Manara*, 6 February 2007.
[41] *Al-Adala*, 18 July 2006.
[42] *Al-Zaman*, 5 August 2006; statement from the council of elders in Maysan, 24 August 2006. Intriguingly, even reports in SCIRI's own newspaper, *al-Adala* – ostensibly published to back up the idea of a large-scale Shiite federal entity – in fact reveal considerable resentment in Nasiriyya against "central" Shiite dominance, and many of the "pro-federal" figures quoted in the paper may well have been thinking of the Region of the South rather than the Region of the Centre and the South; see *al-Adala* 24 August 2006.

the tentative (but potentially hugely significant) rapprochement with the British military authorities in Basra towards the end of 2006. As late as in November, Basra arch-rivals SCIRI and Fadila had both continued to support the notorious serious crimes unit at the Jami'at police station in Basra, which had functioned as a kind of cross-party criminal cartel that often overrode ideological and party differences. However, when British forces raided this police station in the final days of 2006, the Fadila governor had given his consent in advance. Thus it fell to SCIRI members of the provincial council (and, confusingly, members of the Baghdad-appointed security committee which ostensibly represented the Maliki government but which may have drifted towards a more pronounced pro-SCIRI position) to condemn the operation.[43]

Similarly, signs of an increasingly constructive role on the part of the Fadila party could be seen in its dealings with Basra's Sunni community during the autumn of 2006, with several inter-sectarian gatherings and propaganda in favour of the Mecca agreement (October 2006) – a joint initiative by Shiite and Sunni clerics to bring an end to confessional violence in Iraq.[44] An entirely new dimension to Fadila's pragmatism, however, concerned its relationship to Iran. Hitherto explicitly anti-Iranian (this theme had been central in Fadila's electoral campaign prior to the January 2005 local elections, where they openly accused their rivals of links to Iran), the Fadila governor personally presided over the first Iranian–Iraqi trade fair and agreed to open a free-trade zone along the joint border in August 2006.[45] This apparent rapprochement with Iran is perhaps the kind of development that can be expected with regard to the traditionally Iraqi nationalist Sadrists in a situation where the Western world does not have relations with any other party than SCIRI.

Neighbouring Maysan, on the other hand, has been slower in developing a coherent "regionalist" response to the new challenges. After considerable intra-Shiite violence (mostly Sadrist versus SCIRI) in the wake of the regrouping of British forces in the governorate in the late summer and autumn, a Baghdad-appointed emergency committee patterned on the Basra precedent was introduced in November 2006.[46] Internal divisions in the regionalist camp have persisted, with Sadrists (who control the local assembly) and more secular, tribal supporters of Abd al-Karim al-Muhammadawi (who have launched a competing power structure, the "senate" of Amara) remaining at odds with each other.

The Samarra effect and Basra's oil sector

All key participants in this three-way struggle – the central government (or, at least those islands of "centralist" ideology that remain inside it), SCIRI and Fadila – have made efforts at obtaining control over the real prize in the Battle of Basra: the local oil industry.

So far, the Fadila party has had the greatest success. In particular, it has managed to gain a foothold among high-ranking officials in the powerful Southern Oil Company

[43] Aswat al-Iraq, wire report, 25 December 2006.
[44] Fadila party press release, 21 November 2006.
[45] Aswat al-Iraq, wire report, 6 August 2006. The spiritual chief of Fadila, Muhammad al-Yaqubi, opened an office in Tehran a few months later; Fadila party press release 22 October 2006. This in itself might be simply an expression of Yaqubi's desire to play a more leading role in Iraqi affairs after Sistani: any Iraqi cleric who wishes to establish himself inevitably needs to have some sort of working relationship with Iran – even Muhammad al-Sadr, who was deeply critical of Tehran, sought to establish an infrastructure there.
[46] Aswat al-Iraq, wire report, 14 November 2006.

(SOC). The director of that company, Jabbar al-Lu'aybi, is thought by some analysts to have strong ties to Fadila, and it is believed that other members of the leading management have similar relationships with the party of the Basra governor. Whatever the exact links, it is evident that Lu'aybi's public statements often dovetail with Fadila's ideas about a small-scale region centred on Basra. In April 2006, for example, Lu'aybi demanded that the south should receive the lion's share of oil ministry allocations for developing the oil sector.[47] Similarly, in July he emphasised how the charitable work of SOC aimed at improving the condition of the "sons of the governorate".[48] Lu'aybi himself hails from a Shiite family from Basra, with connections to Shiites elsewhere in the Gulf region.

Equally important is the relationship between Fadila and the powerful trade union of workers in the Basra oil industry. During 2005, it was alleged that stoppages in various branches of the Basra oil sector had been orchestrated by Fadila in collusion with local workers – especially the strike in July that almost coincided with discussions between the Basra governor and the central government. At that time, Waili himself made a point of publicly voicing support for the workers' "legitimate demands", which he construed as a part of "regionalist" sentiment.[49] In 2006, similar tendencies could be seen when the Basra trade union announced its intention to go on strike in early May, and rumours as to the involvement of Fadila surfaced just days before Nuri al-Maliki's dramatic visit to the Gulf city.[50] Anti-foreigner attitudes and hostility towards foreign contractors in the industry have similarly been blamed on an alliance of Fadila and the trade union movement – which is headed by a Basrawi, Hasan Juma Awwad al-Asadi.[51]

There are, however, important limits to any such strategic partnership between politicians and the oil industry. In the first place, leading figures in the oil industry remain focused on Iraq as a national oil enterprise. Reportedly, Lu'aybi was under consideration as new minister for oil to replace Husayn al-Shahristani in November 2006. Earlier, shortly after Shahristani's appointment in May 2006, Lu'aybi had been quick to place an announcement in Basra's biggest newspaper in which he personally welcomed the incoming head of the ministry.[52] Whether tongue-in-cheek or a genuine olive branch, this did signal an intention on the part of Lu'aybi to formally adhere to the established rules. Similarly, in early 2006, Falah al-Amiri, head of the tanker division in the south, was recruited to lead the State Oil Marketing Organisation (SOMO), which is headquartered in Baghdad. Again, other key actors in the Basra oil industry may owe their loyalties to the ministry in Baghdad rather than to local interests in Basra, such as Karim Jabbar al-Sa'di, who was appointed by Shahristani to succeed Amiri. And the Fadila party itself is torn on this issue: to a considerable extent, especially in 2005 and early 2006, it attempted to exercise direct control of the oil ministry in Baghdad, and the personalities it proffered as leadership candidates were often from Shiite families in central Iraq, rather than from the south.

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[47] *Al-Manara*, 11 April 2006.
[48] *Al-Manara*, 18 July 2006.
[49] *Al-Mu'tamar*, 19 July 2005. SCIRI responded by accusing Waili of "exploiting" the striking workers, *al-Manara*, 23 July 2005.
[50] *Al-Manara*, 9 May 2006.
[51] Michael Knights, "Increased Factional Fighting Pulls Basra towards Chaos", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, December 2006; Michael Knights and Ed Williams, *The Calm before the Storm: The British Experience in Southern Iraq* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy Studies, 2007.)
[52] *Al-Manara*, 24 May 2006.

Perhaps the most important limit to this symbiotic relationship between Fadila and the trade union concerns ideology. Whereas Fadila in Basra have distinguished themselves as strong defenders of regional rights, the oil workers' union (which claims to represent some 23,000 workers across the industry) remains firmly Iraqi nationalist in its rhetoric. The union backs up this theme with an outspoken anti-privatisation and anti-capitalist message, and has voiced concern about the draft law for the Iraqi petroleum sector, citing the ample opportunities it offers for foreign investment.[53] It is hard to see how this robust nationalism can be reconciled with the comparatively parochial regional vision of the local branch of Fadila, and one might well argue that the trade union sometimes appears to have had the upper hand in the relationship. Anti-foreigner pressures from these quarters allegedly prompted Waili to take a cautious line towards foreign investment in Basra during the autumn of 2005, and, in March 2006, the Fadila party (whose leadership in Baghdad and Najaf is similarly sceptical to outside influences in Iraq in general) trumpeted the alleged "refusal" of the Basra governor to discuss oil investments with a visiting British Foreign and Commonwealth Office minister.[54]

This dualism appears symptomatic of an increasingly widespread schizophrenia within the Fadila party, which has continued to take a critical line towards Kurdish challenges to the unitary state framework, and is clearly interested in staging a comeback in Baghdad should any ministerial reshuffle come on the agenda.[55] It would be a great mistake to overlook Fadila's considerable ambitions at the national level and focus solely on their activities in Basra, even though it is there that they have had their greatest electoral success thus far. Also Basra's population at large may well tend to side with the trade union and its Iraqi nationalism on this point. Despite the regionalism antics of many Basra politicians, local newspapers in October 2006 reported widespread Iraqi nationalist opposition to the new law on the implementation of federalism, and in late 2006 leading politicians within the United Iraqi Alliance claimed that whereas the struggle in Basra was clearly between the single-governorate federal vision and Iraqi nationalism (in other words, the large-scale Region of the Centre and the South was seen to be consigned to the sidelines), they expected the forces of nationalism to prevail in the long run.[56] It should be added though, that whatever the limitations of Fadila's relationship with the Basra oil sector, other key actors – SCIRI in particular – have been decidedly less successful in establishing such ties. SCIRI made a few early attempts to take over existing trade unions after the fall of the old regime in 2003, and although some of these tiny associations have been conspicuous in criticising the local government and the Fadila party in particular, their influence is generally considered to be negligible.

The regionalism question and the new petroleum law

The drafting of the new Iraqi oil and gas law has to some extent proceeded quite detached from the local power struggle in Basra. At first, the Iraqi oil ministry granted

[53] *Al-Manara*, 24 June 2006 and 28 August 2006.
[54] Fadila press release, 28 March 2006. In the same period, Fadila did, however, play up the visit by a Russian diplomat to the Basra oil facilities.
[55] Report from Fadila party meeting in Basra, 20 December 2006.
[56] Reidar Visser, "In Basra, Iraqi Nationalism Remains Proud and Articulate", 20 November 2006, http://historiae.org/nationalism.asp ; interviews with two UIA parliamentarians from Basra, 24 November 2006.

exiled technocrats considerable leeway in producing the drafts. Later, in the second half of 2006 when Iraqi politicians became involved, representatives of the comparatively small-scale Kurdish oil interests (rather than spokesmen for the south) accounted for the main "regionalist" input to the process. Indeed, in the latest round of negotiations, Kurds, rather than Shiites, fronted demands that a number of southern oilfields be declared as "future" fields that would be opened up to foreign investment.

One might expect the complex battle for control in Basra to be affected by such a key piece of legislation. However, the first two drafts of the proposed law did not actually suggest that Basra's status as a player in the oil industry would be markedly different if the local population should opt for a federal solution. Often overlooked in Western analyses of Iraq is the strong role accorded to the existing governorates in the Iraqi constitution of 2005 (among other things, according to the article originally numbered 111, governorates retain residual powers just like the regions, even if, confusingly, certain powers have been explicitly specified as "gubernatorial" ones). This trend was perpetuated in the first drafts of the petroleum law, where "governorates" and "[federal] regions" consistently appeared on an equal footing, i.e. with rights of representation in certain central organs like the federal oil and gas commission, rights to invest up to 50 per cent in operating provincial subdivisions of the Iraqi National Oil Company (INOC), and rights to participate in negotiations with non-state and foreign companies with regard to "future" oil and gas fields.

However, in the latest draft of the oil and gas law, there seems to be tendencies of a stronger distinction, with an apparent omission of the original provision that all of the competencies of the regional authorities should also be bestowed upon oil-producing governorates that are not organised in a region, and with an explicitly recognised right for federal regions (but not, apparently, for mere governorates) to sign contracts for undeveloped fields.[57] Tension related to these different drafts could have an impact on the struggle over Basra, and the Iraqi parliament will doubtless have strong views on the bill which is due to be presented in 2007. The early adoption of a law where governorates enjoy the same rights as regions would inevitably give the upper hand to the administrative units already in existence. Whereas the formation of new regions has been delayed until April 2008 at the earliest, the possibility that existing governorates could start negotiations over their oil resources as early as 2007 might become a determining factor in ongoing identity struggles in the affected areas. In particular, the trend seen in the south during 2006 towards increased popularity of the uni-governorate federal alternative might grow stronger, further marginalising the prospect of any large-scale federal entity – for instance, in the Shiite areas south of Baghdad – ever coming into existence. In areas like Maysan, there has already been talk of local initiatives to form oil companies. It is even conceivable that this kind of framework would be able to satisfy local aspirations of a greater share in the oil industry while maintaining the unitary state framework, as regional status would be irrelevant to achieving oil privileges. Conversely, if leaked information about a greater distinction between regions and governorates in the third draft is indeed correct, a far more contentious debate about federalism can be expected. This would be especially so if the law should come into effect before a constitutional revision has been arrived at, with a potential for an ugly race of foreign companies competing to conclude deals with local entities and thereby precipitating a sudden eruption of previously unheard-of federal regions.

[57] For a critical analysis of this third draft, see Tariq Shafiq, "Iraq's Draft Petroleum Law: An Independent Perspective", *Middle East Economic Survey*, 19 February 2007.

It is the petroleum law's intimate association of "devolution" and "foreign investment" ("future fields" are the domain in which both foreign investors and local authorities will have a role to play) that could also mean that its passage through the Iraqi parliament may prove thornier than its authors had foreseen. On the one hand, there are quite a few good arguments for early adoption of the law: it could help to kick-start the Iraqi economy; it might initiate a project of piecemeal reform via separate legislative acts in a context when the original vision of a grand constitutional compromise seems increasingly elusive;[58] and, to those who accept the basic premise about decentralisation in Iraq, it may not be such a bad idea that international companies (who, at least in theory, are supposed to abide by high standards of transparency) become partners alongside Iraqi local authorities, who have a poor reputation with regard to corruption. But, on the other hand, given the linkages between foreign investment and decentralisation in the law, Iraqi nationalists may also come to see it as the purest manifestation yet of an "external", capitalism-driven plot to partition Iraq – and it is also far from clear whether international oil companies (who themselves struggle with corruption problems) will have such a benign effect after all.[59] On top of this, there are reports that the latest draft contains further changes as regards the centre–periphery balance in the law: even INOC, Iraq's family silver, has had its wings clipped and is being "invaded" by centrifugal forces through the law's provisions for provincial representatives to sit on its board. Somewhat more ambiguous are the enhanced powers of the planned federal oil and gas commission. There is little doubt that this commission represents a step towards a spoils logic and increased politicisation of the executive power in questions related to oil (in many areas of policy it effectively divests the oil ministry of any real power), but to which extent this will also represent an alteration of the relationship between centre and the regions will depend on the exact outcome of the Iraqi regionalisation process once it gets underway – in 2008, unless any constitutional changes are made.[60]

This may prompt precisely the sort of anti-capitalist, anti-foreigner reactions already in evidence in the Basra trade union of oil workers, but on a larger scale. There is also the very real danger that, far from becoming the first milestone in an anticipated series of legislative projects aimed at stimulating national reconciliation, the law could end up marking a terminus. It satisfies US interests as far as investor access to Iraqi oil is

[58] Characteristically, early press reports on the law construed it as a "compromise between Kurds, Shiites and Sunnis" as regards oil distribution, even though the law itself probably refers to governorates, not ethnicities. The third draft simply reiterated the constitutional provisions for distribution of revenue, thereby postponing the questions concerning the exact mechanisms.

[59] For a critical perspective on the law, see Kamil Mahdi, "Iraqis Will Never Accept This Sellout to the Oil Corporations", *The Guardian*, 16 January 2007.

[60] The exact balance between centre and peripheries in this key institution remained somewhat unclear in the third draft. It names as members of the oil and gas council five specified ministers of the central government and another five executives from other institutions of the central government including the central bank and INOC. As of today, provincial representation would be limited to three members, because only Kurdistan has regional status, and only Basra and Kirkuk among the governorates have oil production large enough to qualify as "producing governorates" according to the law's definition. Hence, ironically, in this particular decision-making body, peripheral power would be strengthened by a large number of separate producing governorates (Maysan, Dhi Qar, Wasit and possibly Mosul may reach the required output level in the future) rather than by two big regions, which would only have one representative each. The oil and gas council represents a radical solution to the stalemate in demarcating federal and provincial powers: in some areas of decision-making it effectively reduces the role of the traditional ministerial infrastructure in Baghdad to that of a think tank. Opponents of the enhanced role of the commission stress the prospect of a large number of seats (if many regions are formed) and the resultant dependency of the commission on the Iraqi peripheries for implementing policy, not least because a two-thirds majority requirement has also been introduced for decisions of importance.

concerned, while also relieving SCIRI and the Kurds of some of the pressure for a more profound constitutional revision.[61] Opposition framed in such Iraqi nationalist terms may perhaps not succeed in derailing the law completely, but it could create the sort of awkward atmosphere seen in October 2006, when a half-full parliament pushed through the law on the formation of regions, amid accusations that the legal quorum had not been reached, and with parliamentarians allegedly being aggressively chased up by sponsors of the law so that a minimum number would be present. This in turn could set the stage for an unexpected revival of Iraqi nationalism, as well as for some surprising referendum results when the process of forming regions finally gets underway in 2008.[62]

Conclusion

Western analysts often forget that popular referendums – and not elite designs – are the mechanisms by which Iraq's new federal map supposedly will be demarcated. If Iraq's constitutional road map is adhered to, this process will start in early 2008. Currently, the most likely outcome in Basra is the launch of two competing federal visions – the uni-governorate Region of Basra versus the nine-governorate Region of the Centre and the South, with the former more likely to succeed. However, the amount of dormant Iraqi nationalism at the popular level in Basra is often underestimated, and it is not inconceivable that the bid to convert Basra into a federal region may encounter stiff opposition – possibly even to the point where it may falter – from the governorate's very own residents. Despite coming across as comparatively articulate in a wider Iraqi perspective, the federalism current in Basra as of early 2007 seems flimsy and even shallow when compared with the steadfast nationalist rhetoric of the local trade unions. As such, this is indicative of a more widespread phenomenon in Iraqi politics: elite parliamentarians in their Green-Zone bubble wrangle about highly theoretical visions for the future, whereas the population at large is more concerned about the immediate day-to-day agenda where security, health and jobs constitute the most pressing issues. It is also the persistence of this kind of sentiment that makes it meaningful to continue to maintain the distinction between the Maliki government as a national institution and the (Shiite) UIA as one of its key backers: personalities with a national (as opposed to sectarian agenda) are still identifiable within the Iraqi government apparatus – at least in certain ministries – and even if many elite politicians are becoming increasingly narrow-minded in their approach, the public at large shows continued resistance to some of the politicians' more divisive pet projects.

The difference between a federal (uni-governorate) Basra and a decentralised Basra governorate will remain unclear pending the adoption of the new petroleum law by the Iraqi parliament (and until there is specific legislation on the prerogatives of the governorates that are not organised into federal regions). But one trend seems to have crystallised in Basra after Samarra: the local inhabitants continue to show scant inclination to the third alternative in the mix – that of a single Shiite region south of Bagh-

[61] This would resonate with the "changed assumptions" published by the National Security Council in January 2007 to justify the "Iraq surge". These implied that US hopes of a single successful revision of the constitution were rapidly fading.

[62] The secular Basra politician Wail Abd al-Latif has taken an interesting intermediate position on this. He favours federalism as a general principle (and personally prefers Basra to form a uni-governorate region) but sees the oil sector as firmly belonging to the domain of the central government.

dad. If this tendency persists, the future Iraqi oil sector will be dominated by executives partly from Basra and partly from the central government in Baghdad, rather than by representatives of a pro-Iranian Shiite super-state with its capital in Najaf.

The one power that could, in theory, derail the constitutional process towards decentralisation along these lines would be its current sponsor – the United States. This would mark a definitive break with Washington's policy to date, which has consistently favoured constitutionalism (including support for the constitutionally mandated one-off revision of the charter itself, with Washington ostensibly wishing to move away from the radical decentralisation established in the 2005 version), and which has also scorned the idea of enshrining ethno-sectarian cantons with wide-ranging powers. On the other hand, there are indications that the greatest casualty of the Samarra incident was public opinion in America. Increasingly after February 2006, the Democratic Party opposition has aggressively – at times almost hawkishly – touted the thesis that Iraq's main problem is a chronic, "centuries-long" civil war involving its three main ethno-religious groups. This argument – which rests on an outrageous falsification of history[63] but has clearly been seized upon in a deliberate attempt at establishing an opposition counter-narrative on Iraq – is being put to use to advocate a "Dayton-style" settlement that would presumably exonerate the United States by establishing three loosely federated ethno-religious states in the ashes of the old Iraqi state. This approach effectively means tearing up the Iraqi constitution (where the initiative for forming federal regions is vested at the local level), but this point is largely ignored by Democratic Party politicians today. Some may simply be unaware of it, some are unable to conceptualise an Iraq built on anything other than ethnicities, and some do not care a fig for constitutionalism in Iraq as long as American soldiers remain bogged down in the country.

So far, and the numerous problematic aspects of its Iraq policy notwithstanding, the Bush administration has proved resilient to this particular kind of challenge. True, it too has occasionally strayed in a "Dayton-style" direction – as in its advocacy of "Sunnis finding a role in an Iraqi federation", and, more recently and perhaps more forcefully, in the lavish treatment of selected Iraqi sectarian leaders, such as Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim of SCIRI and Tariq al-Hashimi of the Iraqi Islamic Party. But the Bush administration has invested significant amounts of symbolic capital in the vision of a unified, multi-ethnic Iraq, and this factor – along with the appropriation of the ethnic confederation scheme by Bush's Democratic arch-rival, Joseph Biden – might deter the administration from launching a full-blown partitionist model even as a desperate last-resort solution.[64] It seems more likely that Bush will aim for a strategy that could gloss over the situation, for instance by formally maintaining the unified state structure as well as the democratic constitution, while at the same time generously propping up selected sectarian elites (like SCIRI) as a "moderate coalition" and according them *carte blanche* for dealing with "internal" (i.e. intra-sectarian) dissent by whomever they would like to define as "extremists" and "terrorists", such as the Sadrists. A desire on the part of the British government and Tony Blair to declare victory in southern Iraq as soon as possible may pull in the same direction. So far at least, there have been signs of the same paradoxical strategy in which the left hand bulldozes op-

[63] Reidar Visser, book review of Peter Galbraith's *The End of Iraq*, August 2006, at http://hnn.us/roundup/entries/29297.html

[64] However, in late February 2007, Republican Sam Brownback emulated Biden's calls for an imposition of a US-inspired partition plan for Iraq. On the problems of this kind of approach, see Reidar Visser, "Other People's Maps", *The Wilson Quarterly*, winter 2007, available at www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=wq.essay&essay_id=215618

position to Iran's principal ally in Iraq (the two governorates handed over by the British in the south, Muthanna in July and Dhi Qar in September 2006, are both under SCIRI control), while the right hand supposedly works energetically to maintain a cordon sanitaire along the Iranian border to ward off any possible Persian influences (border patrols were defined as a new priority task as the British government in February 2007 announced plans for withdrawal from Iraq).

This kind of scenario is probably the only realistic way in which SCIRI could manage to annex Basra to its projected Shiite mega-region. Basra, and British troop dispositions around it, will become something of a testing ground: local SCIRI officials in early 2007 declared that a handover to Iraqi forces would be premature whereas Fadila governor Muhammad al-Waili seemed to welcome the idea, suggesting that both parties take the view that SCIRI have not been able to catch up with their rivals.[65] If British forces were willing to hand over Basra to Iraqi forces also in the absence of SCIRI control locally this would constitute an important recognition of the complexity within Iraq's Shiite community. Iraqi nationalists among the Shiites who have hitherto looked askance at Washington's and London's leanings towards pro-Iranian SCIRI might see this as a first step towards a more balanced approach. If, on the other hand, Britain should become party to a forceful imposition of SCIRI hegemony also in the far south, this would provide another astonishing example of how short-sighted Western calculations and long-term Iranian interests could come to dovetail in Iraq.

About the author

Reidar Visser is a research fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs. He has a background in history and comparative politics from the University of Bergen and a doctorate in Middle Eastern studies from the University of Oxford. His recent work includes the monograph *Basra, the Failed Gulf State: Separatism and Nationalism in Southern Iraq* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers; Berlin: Lit Verlag) as well as several articles and research papers on the Iraqi transition process and the question of decentralisation in southern Iraq. Many of his publications are available at the website http://historiae.org, and a condensed Arabic translation of his studies on federalism in Iraq is now available as a booklet published by the Iraq Institute of Strategic Studies (Baghdad/Arbil/Beirut), titled *Shi'at al-'iraq: judhur al-haraka al-fidiraliyya* [The Shiites of Iraq: Roots of the Federal Movement].

[65] "Iran, Militias Could Gain from British Pullout", *USA Today*, 21 February 2007.

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