

Backgrounder #32

The Iraqi Accord Front's Return to Government

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Introduction

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's recent offensives against Shi'a extremist groups in Baghdad and Southern Iraq have been credited with bringing ancillary benefits to Iraq, as they have been credited by Iraq's main Sunni Arab parliamentary bloc, the Iraqi Accordance Front (IAF, or "Tawafuq") to return to Prime Minister Maliki's government. This appears to strengthen the Iraqi government while serving as a milestone for Iraqi sectarian reconciliation.

At the same time, the IAF's return to government signifies changing dynamics in Iraqi politics. Just as Prime Minister Maliki's power appears to have grown very quickly, the IAF has become significantly weaker in its absence from government and Sunni tribal movements are competing for the IAF's base of support. These factors shifted the scales of power to the point where the IAF faced a crisis and was forced to negotiate its re-entry into government.

IAF's Withdrawal from Government

Prime Minister Maliki's government formed in April 2006 and sought to brand itself as a "unity" government that represented Iraq's numerous ethnic and sectarian groups. Almost immediately after forming, Maliki, whose United Iraqi Alliance (a coalition of Shi'a Islamists), repeatedly faced difficult situations as various groups began to leave his government. Besides the IAF's departure, Maliki's government also suffered when Muqtada al-Sadr's radical Shi'a party withdrew its support for the government and then again when the secular Iraqi National List (led by former-Prime Minister Iyad Allawi) withdrew its support for various reasons (see table below).¹

Given that the groups cited such different reasons for their withdrawal (indeed, the IAF withdrew because the government was insufficiently aggressive against groups affiliated with the Sadrist even though both groups were members of the same ruling coalition), it is clear that Prime Minister Maliki's government was placed in an extremely weak position from the start.

This left Maliki's government in a difficult position, as nearly half the ministers in his government resigned their posts. The IAF had five ministerial portfolios as well as and the position of deputy Prime Minister. For their parts, the Iraqi National List (INL) had five ministerial portfolios and the Sadrists had six.ⁱⁱ

Party/Coalition	Type	Date/Reason for Leaving Coalition	Current Status
United Iraqi Alliance	Shi'a Islamic	Ruling Coalition	Significantly stronger
Iraqi Accord Front	Sunni Islamic	August 2007; Government unwillingness to tackle Shi'a extremist groups, release Sunni prisoners held without charges and insufficient role in Government decision-making	Final stages of negotiating for re-entry into government; likely to fare poorly in Provincial Elections
Iraqi National List	Secular Nationalist	August 2007; Insufficient role in Government decision-making	Early stages of negotiating for re-entry into government
Sadrism Trend	Radical Shi'a Nationalist	Several withdrawals. Last on September 2007; Government unwillingness to demand US withdrawal from Iraq and insufficient role in decision-making.	Increasingly marginalized, fragmented

The IAF's return is coming at a time where the Iraqi government has been successful in taking major steps to rein in extremist actors on all sides, particularly Shi'a militants. This was a marked departure from 2006 and early 2007, when many sides accused one another of supporting various sectarian groups.ⁱⁱⁱ On August 1 2007, six IAF ministers resigned from Maliki's government, claiming that the government had failed to crack down on Shi'a militias while arbitrarily arresting and detaining Sunni citizens. This took away Maliki's ability to claim that his was a government of national unity, especially when combined with the Sadrists' withdrawal from government in June 2006. The Sunni parties did not walk out on the political process altogether; Tareq al-Hashemi remained as Vice President and the IAF's forty-four parliamentarians continued to attend the National Assembly.^{iv}

Dr Hamid Abdallah, an Iraqi political analyst, explained that the IAF's goals in withdrawing from the government were to delegitimize the government by keeping several ministries vacant.

They failed to do this because Prime Minister Maliki filled the vacant positions in the IAF's absence. The second goal in leaving the government was to cause the government to lose its status as a national unity government. The IAF succeeded at this and in doing so forced Maliki into a weaker position.

Though Maliki was weakened by the IAF's absence, the IAF suffered major setbacks as well. In its time out of government, the IAF fell into disunity, with members trading accusations with one another. Furthermore, the tribally-based Awakening movements took root in Sunni areas and drained support for the religiously-based IAF. This situation forced the IAF's hand, leading it to sue for reconciliation with Maliki's government.^v

Negotiated Return

The IAF's return was truly hastened by recent offensives against Shi'a extremist groups. Prior to that offensive, relations between Prime Minister Maliki's government and the coalition were chilly. When the Iraqi government held a three-day conference to foster national reconciliation in March, the Iraqi Accord Front claimed not to have been invited and did not attend.^{vi} Within days of operations in Basra and Sadr City, however, the IAF entered into negotiations with Prime Minister Maliki's government.

Until then, Maliki's government had been viewed as impotent and perhaps on the brink of a no-confidence vote. Prime Minister Maliki clearly gained quite a bit of credibility in undertaking major military initiatives in Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul, as not only the IAF, but also former-Prime Minister Allawi's Iraqi National List and the Shi'a Fadilla Party have sought negotiations to rejoin the cabinet.^{vii}

Though the INL and Fadilla Party's negotiations have proceeded slowly, the IAF's negotiations moved through rather speedily.^{viii} By April 18, the bloc had submitted names for the five ministerial positions to Prime Minister Maliki's office.^{ix} In announcing their desired return to government, IAF leaders cited recently-passed legislation for amnesty that led to the release of many Sunni prisoners as well as the Maliki government's crackdown on Shi'a extremists and criminal groups as their reasons for returning.

The IAF's return signals a major political victory for Prime Minister Maliki as he carries out major military initiatives in Basrah, Baghdad, and Mosul.^x These claims seem somewhat spurious, however, as the IAF has recently complained about the slow pace of the government prisoner releases as well and the bloc was unable to negotiate a greater say in decision-making on security matters.^{xi}

Furthermore, the IAF is slated to receive its former posts heading the Ministries of Culture, Higher Education and Women's Affairs and the State Ministry for Foreign Affairs. It is unclear, however, whether the IAF will receive either the Planning or Transport Ministerships.^{xii} The Planning Ministry, which the IAF previously ran, is relatively powerful. Nevertheless, it is clear that the IAF is not gaining any more say on political issues than it was able to exercise prior to its departure from government. Furthermore, when Prime Minister Maliki expressed reservations

regarding some IAF nominees for ministerial posts, the IAF did not protest but quietly re-entered negotiations to put forth more palatable nominees.^{xiii} This makes it clear that the IAF's negotiated return to government was conducted from a position of weakness. The IAF's major reason for wanting to return to government seems to be the challenge it will face from Awakening movements in October's Provincial elections.

The Awakenings and the IAF

The IAF faces a major challenge in the form of tribal Awakenings movements. The Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP, which is a member of the IAF bloc), was the only Sunni group to participate in the political process in post-war Iraq while many tribes associated with the Awakening were either actively or passively supporting the insurgency. The Iraqi Islamic party was the only significant party in Anbar's provincial election of January 2005. As a result, today, the Anbar provincial government is made up almost exclusively of IIP members.^{xiv}

As the tribally-based Awakening movements took root in Anbar and then spread to other Sunni Arab areas in Iraq, Iraq's Sunni Arab tribes grew in strength. The Anbar Awakening movement gained credibility with its military successes over al-Qaeda. Conversely, the Sunni Arab Islamist parties that make up the IAF grew relatively weaker. As a result, the Awakening group members – many of whom had been rejectionists and did not want to participate in Iraq's government – sought political representation. To that end, they moved to form a national political organization based on tribal lines.^{xv}

The tribes of al-Anbar province which famously drove al-Qaeda out of its former stronghold have entered negotiations to organize themselves in preparation for the elections. Ahmad Abu-Rishah, whose brother was the leader of the Awakening movement and was later killed, heads the Iraq Awakening Conference and stated his desire to take part in provincial elections and then to participate in the national elections.^{xvi}

In mid-April, Awakening leaders from Baghdad and its suburbs joined with former Iraqi Army officers to announce a new political front called the Iraqi Al-Karamah [Dignity] Front.^{xvii} The front painted itself as a political rather than religious or sectarian organization, in contrast to the IAF, which draws upon a Sunni identity. The Karamah Front put forth a platform stating its belief that Iraq is an Arab state (which somewhat mirrors Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist Arab nationalist ideology), opposition to sectarianism and extremism, and that the United States' presence in Iraq is less dangerous than meddling by neighboring countries (a reference to Iran).^{xviii}

Beyond these high-sounding slogans, the Awakening councils recognize that the violent fight against al-Qaeda has wound down in many areas and that they must shift to the political arena in order to remain relevant. Furthermore, the Iraqi government has taken a strong stand against militias running in elections, which made it necessary for the Awakening groups to develop themselves as political entities rather than relying on armed men as their base of support.^{xix}

These factors have created direct competition between the IAF and the Awakening groups for votes among Iraq's Sunni Arab constituency. Indeed this rivalry appeared rather heated as the Awakening Councils in al-Anbar province demanded that the Iraqi Islamic Party leave the province.^{xx} Additionally, a leader of a major Awakening faction, Sheikh Hamid Farhan al-Hayis, accused the IIP of "seeking an extremist religious state."^{xxi} This situation appeared tense for some time, though it was later brought under a degree of control.

Conclusion

Because the IAF was set to fare relatively poorly in the upcoming provincial elections, it appears that it decided to act in order to avoid being wiped out as a significant political entity. By returning to government, the IAF will be able to use its position at the head of ministries to establish patronage networks by providing jobs for its constituents through those ministries. That will afford it greater support among the Sunni Arab population. It does not appear that this strategy will lead the IAF to victory, but one will have to wait until the release of the October Provincial election results to be certain.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Lake, Eli. "Iraqi Political Crisis Near End as Tawafuq Chief Quits." *New York Sun*. 7/6/2007. Available at <http://www2.nysun.com/article/57938>
- ^{iv} Al Jazeera and Agencies. "Iraq Sunni bloc quits coalition." *Al Jazeera*. 8/1/2007. Available at <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/73B20040-C171-4C31-A0D3-2480CCF2EF18.htm>; MH and SR. "Al-Hashemi: five years results 'painful and regretful.'" *Voices of Iraq*. 3/24/08. Available at <http://www.aswataliraq.info/look/english/article.tpl?IdLanguage=1&IdPublication=4&NrArticle=73819&NrIssue=2&NrSection=1>
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^{xvi} Abd-al-Qadir Sa'di. "Al-Anbar tribes, Awakening Councils to take part in Iraq elections." Al-Arabiya TV. 4/26/08. Translation provided by BBC Worldwide Monitoring.

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