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SPECIAL REPORT

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Phebe Marr

Who Are Iraq's New Leaders? What Do They Want?

About the Report

This report is part of an ongoing study on Iraq's new political leaders and their visions for the future. Based on extensive background data and personal interviews with over forty top leaders since 2003, the study finds a revolutionary change since the Ba'th in the forces shaping the new leaders and their political orientation. A nationalist regime committed to a strong central government has been replaced by political pluralism and disparate views, with no common vision on Iraq's direction forward. The political process has intensified polarization around ethnic and sectarian identity, which could lead to Iraq's fragmentation.

The report suggests several ways to help Iraqis step back from this divide, including refocusing on economic development, particularly the need for new oil legislation that would give all Iraqis a stake in the nation's major resource, and slowing the political process to give leaders time to absorb change and refine the political system.

Phebe Marr is a senior fellow at the United States Institute of Peace. A leading U.S. specialist on Iraq, she is frequently consulted by government and nongovernmental authorities, and her book *The Modern History of Iraq* is considered the standard source on contemporary Iraq. A former senior fellow at the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University, she has advised high-level officials, often testifies before U.S. Senate and House committees, and frequently appears on network TV as a commentator on Iraq.

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policy positions.

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Summary

- Understanding the background and visions of Iraq's new leaders is critical to analyzing where the country may go in the future.
- Changes in leadership since Saddam have been revolutionary. Among Iraq's new leaders there are virtually no holdovers from the Ba'th era. A "de-Ba'thification" program to remove the old guard reinforces the divide between those who held office before and those who hold it now.
- The ethnic, sectarian, and regional balance of the leadership has also been reversed since Ba'th times; Sunni dominance is gone, and Shi'ah constitute the largest group, with Kurds and Arab Sunnis making up about a fifth of the leadership. A high percentage of the new leaders are exiles, and most have been shaped by years of opposition to Saddam's regime. Under the Ba'th, affiliation with other parties was prohibited; today's leaders come from a diversity of parties.
- Ideological changes are also dramatic. Under the Ba'th, the vision was of a unified state with an Arab identity, emphasizing economic development, technology, and independence from foreign influence. The newly elected leaders have differing visions. The focus on ethnic and sectarian identity has sharpened; nationalism and a sense of Iraqi identity have been weakened.
- The Kurdish parties make Kurdish identity paramount and seek a highly decentralized federal region that includes Kirkuk. Kurdish leaders are overwhelmingly secular and pro-Western in their orientation.
- Shi'ah leaders have more diverse views. Their primary identity is Iraqi, but their sense of nationalism is weak. The main interest of most Shi'ah leaders is in Islamizing—and reforming—society, in a Shi'ah direction. Because they are a majority, they favor elections and a parliamentary government.

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then had to be replaced. The current period may be another such era, as the new leadership gradually builds up the expertise and linkages necessary to run a government.

Table 1. Continuity and Change in Iraq's Leadership

	Continuity	Change
Between the Ba'th Party and the New Leaders	0% (0)	100% (97)
Between 2003 and 2005	37% (15)	63% (23)

Ethnic and Sectarian Balance

Sunni dominance is gone, and Shi'ah have the largest number of leaders, while the Kurds and Arab Sunnis have about equal representation.

Other characteristics of the new leadership also show a clear break with the past. Not surprisingly, the leadership of the post-Saddam period represents a sharp reversal in the ethnic and sectarian balance within the leadership. Sunni dominance is gone, and Shi'ah have the largest number of leaders, while the Kurds and Arab Sunnis have about equal representation. As a whole, Arab Shi'ah constitute at least 45 percent of leaders since 2003; Kurds, 19 percent; and Arab Sunnis, 19 percent. Some 2 percent are Turkmen, and 4 percent are Christian, with 9 percent unknown. (Percentages have been rounded.) This ethnic and sectarian balance was consciously begun in the IGC (Iraqi Governing Council) and its accompanying cabinet, essentially put in place by the CPA. Indeed, giving the country's ethnic and sectarian groups representation in government roughly proportional to their percentage of the population was one of the main criteria for appointment, in some sense consciously focusing the political process on this communal identity for the first time. Although the numbers and percentages have shifted somewhat in subsequent governments (see table 2), post-Saddam-era leadership plainly reflects the end of Sunni dominance.

Table 2. Ethnic and Sectarian Comparison between Ba'th and New Leaders

Ethnic and Sectarian Identity	Top Level, Ba'th Regime[1]	Top Level, New Leaders[2]
Shi'ah Arab	28% (5)	52% (11)
Sunni Arab	61% (11)	24% (5)
Kurd	6% (1)	24% (5)
Unknown	6% (1)	0%

1. Top level, Ba'th regime, comprised the Revolutionary Command Council and the Regional Command of the party, some members of which also occupied the key ministerial positions.

2. Top level, new leaders, comprises the presidents, vice presidents, prime minister, deputy prime ministers, and ministers of foreign affairs, finance, defense, interior, and state for national security in all three governments.

Geographic Distribution

The same trend is evident in the regional distribution of leadership. The dominance of the "Sunni Triangle" and Tikrit has been totally reversed today. By far the highest number of leaders come from urban areas, with Baghdad in the lead. Among all leaders since 2003, over 21 percent come from Baghdad, 7 percent from Basra, and 3 percent from Mosul. Another 7 percent come from Kirkuk. Thus, some 38 percent come from Iraq's four main urban centers. The Kurdish area is well represented with some 14 percent, and some 21 percent come from the Shi'ah south. Only 3 percent come from the Sunni Triangle.

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since Iraq's founding. Of course, it reduced the Sunnis' representation to a more realistic level, better represented the Shi'ah majority, and may have overrepresented the Kurds a bit. Among the leadership of the government formed after the election in January 2005, the mix shifted somewhat, interestingly, in favor of the Kurds. In that government, Arab Shi'ah constitute less than half (almost 45 percent), Kurds almost 29 percent, and Arab Sunnis 21 percent, with Turkmen and Christians 2.6 percent each. The Kurds have been the biggest winners here, with a proportion of seats in the government higher than their percentage of the population, while Arab Sunnis have seats about commensurate with their numbers in the population. These proportions are expected to change in the forthcoming government, with the percentage of Kurds dropping somewhat and a new Sunni contingent participating. Sunni parties gained about 20 percent of seats in the assembly and are expected to take part in government. (This will not change the ethnic and sectarian balance of the government, only the political affiliation of the Sunnis.)

Insiders versus Outsiders

The government elected in January 2005 has made only modest progress in integrating insiders into the leadership and reducing the number of outsiders. As we can see in table 3, in the IGC, essentially brought in by the coalition, 38 percent of the leaders were outsiders, and some 18 percent were Kurds from the free zone in northern Iraq. Only 28 percent, a little over a quarter, were insiders. In the elected government of January 2005, exiles were nearly 37 percent—still the largest component—and some 29 percent were Kurds or others who had been living in the north. Insiders moved up to 31.6 percent but were still less than a third. Exiles who had lived mostly in the West declined modestly from 26 percent to 21 percent. The problem here is that most "insiders" who might have been tapped for positions had affiliations with Ba'thism, whereas most "outsiders" are oppositionists—a divide that will remain difficult to overcome.

Table 3. Comparison between the IGC (2003) and the Elected Government (2005)

Insiders versus Outsiders	IGC (2003)	Elected Government (January 2005)
Insiders	28% (14)	32% (12)
Insiders in Northern Free Zone	18% (9)	29% (11)
Outsiders (Exiles)	38% (19)	37% (14)
Unknown	16% (8)	3% (1)

Political Parties	IGC (2003)	Elected Government (January 2005)
Membership in Parties	66% (33)	67% (24)
Centrist Parties	30% (15)	3% (1)
Religio-political Parties	22% (11)	36% (13)
Kurdish Parties	14% (7)	28% (10)
Independents	12% (6)	19% (7)
Unknown	22% (11)	14% (5)

Political Party Affiliation

The most telling change in political leadership between the appointed government of 2003 and the elected government of 2005 is political party affiliation. Here the change—and what it portends for Iraq's future orientation—is striking.

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- working on social studies and humanities curricula, in schools and online, which encourage cross-cultural tolerance and differing visions of the future, at all levels from primary school through university;
- encouraging the establishment of an American University in Iraq, in an area accessible to all Iraqis and dedicated to teaching all communities;
- helping to establish "charter" or "model" schools that emphasize a modern, cross-cultural curriculum that will turn out leaders with a new and different vision.

Notes

1. This group of eighteen not only made decisions but controlled the bureaucracy and the military through overlap of personnel and functions. For example, in 1998 the government consisted of a president, two vice presidents, and a cabinet. Of the twenty-three people who held these positions, seven were among the party's top leaders, and four more were high-ranking party officials. In this study a wider group of leaders at the cabinet level has been used in the 1997–98 period for comparison with the post-Saddam period. The cohort group is thirty-six: eighteen top leaders and eighteen cabinet members—a small group compared with the post-2003 cohort.
2. One, Taha Yasin Ramadhan, was of Kurdish origin but was so Arabized that he considered himself an Arab.
3. Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2004), 310.

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