

Shiite faction pushes for control over southern Iraq and its oil

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The main Shiite fundamentalist party based on the clerical and propertied elite in Iraq's south is stepping up its agitation for the formal division of the country into federal states with sweeping autonomy from the Baghdad central government. In doing so, it is fuelling the sectarian and ethnic violence that is already claiming the lives of more than 2,000 Iraqis a month.

Last Thursday the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) attempted to present legislation to the Iraqi parliament that will codify the means for combining two or more provinces into a "region". But the assembly broke up in uproar as its opponents denounced the laws. SCIRI, which has strong ties to the Iranian Shiite regime, has been centrally involved in all the pro-US occupation governments formed since the 2003 invasion.

The following day, SCIRI leader Abdel Aziz Hakim made clear that his party intended to proceed. He told Shiite congregations in the city of Karbala that the nine predominantly Shiite-populated provinces of southern Iraq—which encompass more than half the country's territory and population, and 60 percent of its oil industry—should emulate the northern Kurdish provinces and combine into a single political entity.

"Whoever accepts the Kurdistan region must accept the region of the Middle Euphrates and the South... The example of federalism in Kurdistan, which is witnessing a great renaissance, is proof of the success of this form of government," Hakim declared.

SCIRI is backed by other southern-based Shiite factions, including the Da'awa Party of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, as well as the Kurdish nationalist parties, which already rule northern Iraq through their own Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). Combined, the advocates of federalism claim to have more than half the seats in parliament and therefore the ability to

push through the legislation.

The attempt to partition the country is being opposed by the Sunni Islamic party, ex-Baathists, the pro-occupation secular coalition headed by former Interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi and, most significantly, by the largely Baghdad-based Shiite movement headed by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. On Sunday, legislators belonging to these organisations boycotted the rescheduled parliamentary session, denying SCIRI the necessary quorum to call for a vote. Debate on the federal legislation has been postponed until September 19.

The opponents of federalism are in most cases bitterly hostile toward one another. They all, however, represent sections of the Iraqi elite whose wealth and privileges are rooted in the central and western areas of Iraq and, to a great extent, are entwined with the maintenance of a centralised Iraqi state.

Within Iraq, SCIRI's federalist ambitions are understood for what they are: a grab by the Shiite establishment to strip the Baghdad government of revenue from the country's vast untapped reserves of oil and gas and establish a de facto Shiite theocratic regime in the south. The new Iraq constitution, drawn up in the consultation with the US embassy and adopted after a referendum in October 2005, sanctions the establishment of regional governments with significant powers.

To gain the support of the Kurdish parties, the constitution only gave the central government control over "existing" oil and gas fields. The regions and provinces wield all powers not explicitly assigned to Baghdad. This enabled the Kurdish regional government to declare its exclusive rights over all new oil and gas projects within its territory. Transnational energy conglomerates have signed lucrative production

agreements and begun drilling untapped fields. The central government has been denied any say or share of the revenue.

Amid opposition to any broader federal partition, the constitution did not define the process by which other regions could be established outside of Kurdistan. Instead, it stipulated that the parliament had to do so within six months of sitting, ostensibly to provide time for the issue to be debated and the powers of new regions to be modified.

The southern region advocated by Hakim would have the same powers as the KRG and appropriate to itself the development rights of some of the largest untapped oilfields in the world. Iraq has an estimated 112 billion barrels of reserve oil—the second largest after Saudi Arabia. In population, size and revenue, any Shiite federal region would inevitably eclipse the central Iraqi government. Moreover, it would have the constitutional right to assemble its own security forces, similar to the 80,000 *peshmerga* force that the KRG maintains independently of the Iraqi military.

SCIRI has foreshadowed its intention to table the legislation on September 19 even if it causes an open rift with the Sadrist movement in Baghdad. Shiite deputy parliamentary speaker Khalid al-Atiya declared on Monday night: “We will go with them or without them.”

SCIRI’s push for a southern region poses the danger of ethnic cleansing on a vast scale. It would inevitably be accompanied by communal persecution of the Sunni minority in the south, as well as the likely imposition of Iranian-style *sharia* law against women and non-Muslims by a Shiite fundamentalist regional government.

Communal tension is also rising in the north as Kurdish parties seek to expand the Kurdistan region. The final draft of the “Petroleum Act” published this month by the KRG claims rights over not only all future oil and gas production within its existing borders, but also in the “disputed territories” in the province of Tamin and its oil-rich capital of Kirkuk, which has a large Kurdish population.

Under the constitution, a referendum must be held by December 2007 in Kirkuk to decide whether it joins with the KRG. In advance of the vote, there are widespread reports that Kurdish militia are carrying out terror campaigns to drive out Arabs and Turkomen who

would be likely to vote no.

The de facto partitioning of the country would economically marginalise the large Sunni population in central and western Iraq, along with the millions of Shiites who live in that area. An Associated Press journalist aptly wrote last week that they would be “left with little more than date groves and sand”.

In Baghdad, with its mixed population of six million, the potential implications are horrifying. It can only intensify the murderous campaign underway by rival sectarian factions to establish homogenous Sunni and Shiite districts. Much of the killing taking place in Baghdad can be interpreted as an attempt to divide the city along the Tigris River, with Sunni enclaves on the west bank and Shiite enclaves on the east.

White House and Pentagon officials continually insist that the Bush administration is committed to the creation of non-sectarian democracy in Iraq. Ever since the 2003 invasion, however, US policy has deliberately aggravated the country’s regional, ethnic and sectarian divisions in order to prevent the emergence of a unified movement against the occupation. Shiite and Kurdish parties were elevated into power and the constitution was written to advance their interests at the expense of the Sunni elite that dominated under the Baathist regime. The ensuing sectarian carnage is continually used to justify the indefinite presence of US forces, supposedly to prevent an all-out civil war.

In the US, a growing number of figures are openly advocating the partition of Iraq along communal lines as the means of securing American interests. As their critics point out, however, such a plan may well compound the problems facing the US occupation in Iraq. A strong Shiite regional government in the south of Iraq, with close links to Tehran, could cut across the Bush administration’s ambitions for regime change in Iran.

Whether Washington supports SCIRI’s proposed legislation or not, the move underscores the nightmare of communal and sectarian divisions that the Bush administration has created in Iraq.



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