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## Iraq: patience and time<sup>(\*)</sup>

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Iraqi rival political politicians, through six long months of unfruitful talks to form the new government, are not only testing each other patience, but also pushing the Iraqi people patience to its limits. However, we should not forget that the people of Iraq voted against an over-concentration of power in any one political entity. Therefore, the formation of a Government that reflects the will of the people has taken time. Casual observers give many other reasons as to why government formation process is so slow and difficult. I think that the dynamics of this process can only be understood if we shed light on the fast and deep social, political and economic changes in Iraq following Saddam's regime collapse in 2003. Islamic political parties, both Shia and Sunni were public and in the lead of the government for the first time in Iraq's modern history. Pan Arab nationalists and secular parties were in the rear, largely undermined by 'new' popular tide. Beneficiaries of the Baath regime were greatly undermined and suppressed. The Sadrists, who in a way, resemble a suppressed social, and poor economical class, fought their way to the government leaders table. New class of Sunni politicians (Sons of Iraq), found their way in the political life. These major political changes brought economical and social changes. Such changes raise sorrows, hopes, and fears to different social and political factions.

They manifest themselves in very tough positions of political parties when competing over the distribution or re-distribution of power: a struggle between the pre-2003 and post-2003 power holders, and competition among diverse post-2003 parties themselves. There is lack of confidence in each other, and fears of losing power or of the abuse of power by others, exaggerated by concerns about the robustness of maturity of the new democratic institutions and its ability to survive if one political party decided to illegally manipulate power. These changes and struggles are often colored by sect and ethnic divides, and further complicated by politics of fear that is driven by Iraq's political history of oppression and cruelty, making compromise even more difficult. Such an environment need a time to settle, maybe a decade or so. Until that happens, Iraq needs painfully long times to form representative multi-party governments that addresses the interests and fears of the different factions. Meanwhile Iraq has to bear the burden of such inherently weak governments. The good thing, however, is that so far all the political parties are referring to the constitution and the courts in their disputes and not falling back on violence.

From another perspective, it is interesting to note that during this process, despite all the accusations and counter accusations, the foreign influence on Iraq politics proved to be limited. The two most influential countries on the Iraqi affairs, the United States and Iran failed to push their vision of the coming Iraqi government. The National Iraqi coalition (al-Hakeem NIA, and al-Malike SoL alliance) was not activated as the Iranians hoped, and the Maliki-Alawi agreement did not happen as the Americans hoped.

Security wise, in the wake of the march elections, many observers thought that if an Iraqi government does not form fairly quickly enough, Iraq's political scene may worsen, including an increased risk for violence. During the last two years, Qaida in Iraq and other insurgent groups have received severe blows, yet, they can still strike in many parts of the country. In addition, some of the politicians, do not

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(\*)The opinions expressed herein are strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the position of ISPI.

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have a long history of 'peaceful political' practice, which raise fears that they would return to violence if there is a stagnant situation. These concerns were elevated by the fact that the withdrawal of American combat troops comes before the formation of the government. The good news is that the current government has proven that it can deal effectively with the security challenges and continue ongoing programs in all areas. The Iraqi security forces have proved to be capable of independently defeating terrorists, insurgents, and criminals throughout Iraq. Their daily activities demonstrate growing success in combat despite the recent stagnation in the political process. The probability of a renewed insurgency is low: the ISF is too strong for the fragmented insurgents and Iraqis are too tired of war to support them. Yes, the terrorists can do some high profile attacks, may be for years to come, but today's Iraq level of stability can absorb them.

Furthermore, the withdrawal operation of American combat forces, though may encourage insurgents to do more attacks on the short term, it has positive impact on Iraqi security in the medium and long terms. It meets Iraqi people concerns about sovereignty, enhances the legitimacy of the Iraqi government and creates the right climate for Iraq to engage neighbors who assist militant groups. More importantly, it prevents militant groups from using the occupation to justify their crimes, thus isolating them from the public and providing the Iraqi government with a great advantage in its counter-insurgency efforts. Also, the withdrawal allows normalization of a solid strategic relationship between Iraq and the US according to the Strategic Framework Agreement of 2008. This relationship will cover all areas including economic, social, cultural, educational, scientific, and defense which may present a model for long-term relationship between Arab and western countries.

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