



CRS Report for Congress

Iraq: Reconciliation and Benchmarks

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Summary

Iraq's political system, the result of a U.S.-supported election process, continues to be riven by sectarianism and ethnic and factional infighting. The Administration asserts that the passage of key laws in 2008 will help heal remaining rifts and continue to reduce violence. Others see the schisms widening as Iraqi leaders wrangle over unresolved issues that are complicating the holding of provincial elections. See CRS Report RL31339, *Iraq: Post-Saddam Governance and Security*, by Kenneth Katzman.

Elections and Constitutional Referendum in 2005

After about one year of occupation, the United States handed sovereignty to an appointed Iraqi government on June 28, 2004. In line with a March 8, 2004, "Transitional Administrative Law" (TAL), the first election (January 30, 2005) was for a 275-seat transitional National Assembly (which formed an executive), provincial councils in all 18 provinces (41 seats per council; 51 for Baghdad), and a Kurdistan regional assembly (111 seats). The election system was proportional representation (closed list): voters chose among "political entities" (a party, a coalition of parties, or persons); 111 entities were on the national ballot, of which nine were multi-party coalitions. Sunni Arabs (20% of the overall population) boycotted, winning only 17 Assembly seats, and only one seat on Baghdad's council. Radical Shiite cleric Moqtada Al Sadr, then at odds with U.S. forces, also boycotted, leaving his faction under-represented on provincial councils in the Shiite south and in Baghdad. The resulting government placed Shiites and Kurds in the most senior positions, although Sunnis were Assembly speaker, deputy president, a deputy prime minister, and six ministers, including defense. Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) leader Jalal Talabani became President and Da'wa (Shiite party) leader Ibrahim al-Jafari became Prime Minister.

Permanent Constitution. The elected Assembly was to draft a constitution by August 15, 2005, to be put to a referendum by October 15, 2005, subject to veto by a two-thirds majority of voters in any three provinces. On May 10, 2005, a 55-member drafting committee was appointed, but with only two Sunni Arabs (15 Sunnis were later added as

full members and 10 as advisors). In August 2005, the talks produced a draft, providing for: a December 31, 2007, deadline to hold a referendum on whether Kirkuk (Tamim province) will join the Kurdish region (Article 140); designation of Islam “a main source” of legislation;¹ setting a 25% electoral goal for women (Article 47); allowing families to choose which courts to use for family issues (Article 41); making only primary education mandatory (Article 34); and including Islamic law experts and civil law judges on the federal supreme court (Article 89). Many women opposed the two latter provisions as giving too much discretion to males of their families. It made all orders of the U.S.-led occupation authority (Coalition Provisional Authority, CPA), applicable until amended (Article 126), and established a “Federation Council” (Article 62), a second chamber with its size and powers to be determined by subsequent law (not passed to date).

The major disputes — still unresolved — centered on regional versus centralized power. The draft permitted two or more provinces together to form new autonomous “regions” — reaffirmed in passage of an October 2006 law on formation of regions. Article 117 allows each “region” to organize internal security forces, legitimizing the fielding the Kurds’ *peshmerga* militia (allowed by the TAL). Article 109 requires the central government to distribute oil and gas revenues from “current fields” in proportion to population, and gives regions a role in allocating revenues from new energy discoveries. Disputes over these concepts continue to hold up passage of national hydrocarbons legislation — Sunnis dominated areas of Iraq have few proven oil or gas deposits, and favor centralized control of oil revenues. The Kurds want to maintain maximum regional control of their own burgeoning oil sector.

With contentious provisions unresolved, Sunnis registered in large numbers (70%-85%) to try to defeat the constitution, prompting a U.S.-mediated agreement (October 11, 2005) providing for a panel to propose amendments within four months after a post-December 15 election government took office (Article 137), to be voted on within another two months (under the same rules as the October 15 referendum.) The Sunni provinces of Anbar and Salahuddin had a 97% and 82% “no” vote, respectively, but the constitution was adopted because Nineveh province only voted 55% “no,” missing the threshold for a “no” vote by a two-thirds majority in three provinces.

December 15, 2005 Elections. In the December 15, 2005, elections for a four year government, each province contributed a predetermined number of seats to a “Council of Representatives” (COR) – a formula adopted to attract Sunni participation. Of the 275-seat body, 230 seats were allocated this way, with 45 “compensatory” seats for entities that would have won additional seats had the constituency been the whole nation. 361 political “entities” registered, of which 19 were multi-party coalitions. As shown in the table below, voters chose lists representing their sects and regions, and the UIA and the Kurds again dominated the elected COR. The COR was inaugurated on March 16, 2006, but wrangling ensued and Kurdish and other opposition caused the UIA to agree to another Da’wa figure, Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, as Prime Minister. On April 22, the COR approved Talabani to continue as president. His two deputies are Adel Abd al-Mahdi (incumbent) of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and Tariq al-Hashimi, leader of the Consensus Front (Iraqi Islamic Party). Another Consensus figure, the hardline Mahmoud Mashhadani (National Dialogue Council party), is COR speaker.

¹ [<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/12/AR2005101201450.html>].

Maliki won a COR vote for a 37-member cabinet (including himself and two deputy prime ministers) on May 20, 2006. Three key slots (Defense, Interior, and National Security) were not filled permanently until June 2006, due to infighting. Of the 37 posts, there were 19 Shiites; 9 Sunnis; 8 Kurds; and 1 Christian. Four were women.

Iraqi Performance on Benchmarks and Reconciliation

The elections did not resolve the grievances among Iraq's communities over their new positions in the post-Saddam power structure. In August 2006, the Administration and Iraq agreed on a series of "benchmarks" that, if adopted and implemented, might achieve political reconciliation. Under Section 1314 of a FY2007 supplemental appropriation (P.L. 110-28), "progress" on eighteen political and security benchmarks — as assessed in Administration reports due by July 15, 2007 and then September 15, 2007 — were required for the United States to provide \$1.5 billion in Economic Support Funds (ESF) to Iraq. The President used the waiver provision. The law also mandated an assessment by the GAO, by September 1, 2007, of the degree to which the benchmarks have been met, as well as an assessment of the Iraqi security forces (ISF) by an outside commission (headed by ret. Gen James Jones). Results, as well as subsequent actions and implementation, are shown in the chart below.

The Administration, as expressed in the April 8 and 9, 2008, testimony of U.S. Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker and a May 2008 informal, non-mandated Administration update on progress on the benchmarks, sees movement toward reconciliation, facilitated by a reduction in violence attributed largely to the U.S. "troop surge." The February 13, 2008 passage (unanimously, with 206 members voting) of two significant laws (amnesty law and provincial powers law) and the 2008 national budget represented breakthroughs, although U.S. officials say that the effects will depend on implementation. However, other assessments, including a June 2008 study by the Government Accountability Office (GAO-08-837) say that these legislative moves have had limited effect in healing the rifts in Iraqi politics.

Continuing divisions include that between Iraq Kurds and Iraq's Arabs (both Sunni and Shiite), and within both the Shiite and Sunni communities, although not all of these splits are violent. The Kurds are increasingly restive over the continued postponement of the referendum that they hope will integrate Kirkuk into the Kurdish controlled region. The Kirkuk dispute also caused a presidential veto of the July 22, 2008 COR vote on the needed election law; the draft law provided for equal division of power in Kirkuk (between Kurds, Arabs, and Turkomans) until its status is finally resolved, prompting Kurdish opposition and subsequent communal strife in Kirkuk city.

The Administration is counting on the provincial elections to continue the progress it believes the Maliki government has made in 2008. He was weakened in 2007 by the pullout of the cabinet by the Consensus Front, the Sadr faction, and the bloc of former Prime Minister Iyad al-Allawi. Those withdrawals left the cabinet with about 13 vacant seats out of a 37 seat cabinet. With the return of the Consensus Front to the cabinet in July 2008, and the simultaneous filling of former Sadrist cabinet seats with independent Shiites, the cabinet now only has one vacancy (ministry of Justice). All blocs are participating in the COR. The provincial elections are partly intended to narrow the growing split within the Sunni community between the established political parties and the tribal leaders ("Awakening Councils") who are cooperating with U.S. forces to expel

the tribal leaders' former allies, Al Qaeda in Iraq, from Sunni areas. With no election law yet finalized, despite special COR meetings following August 1, 2008 adjournment, provincial elections (planned for October 1, 2008) will not likely be held until early 2009.

A key factor in Maliki's recent political rise was his confrontation of fellow Shiites, in this case the Sadr faction. In late March 2008, Maliki sent about 30,000 Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to Basra to defeat Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi, or JAM, militia, as well as militias from the Fadhila Party, and Tharallah, in the oil export hub. Major fighting ended with a reported Iran-brokered ceasefire announced by Sadr on March 30, 2008, which did not require the JAM to surrender or disarm, and in which 1,300 ISF deserted the fight. Critics viewed the action as Maliki's attempts to defeat Sadr in advance of the provincial elections. Maliki fears Sadr's movement will do well in the elections, even though Sadr has announced he will not field a separate election list but instead support Sadrists on other lists. Sunni and Kurdish leaders saw the move as an indicator of increased sectarian even-handedness. Subsequently, the ISF has slowly gained control over formerly JAM controlled areas of Basra, as well as of the Sadr City region of Baghdad. In May and June 2008, Maliki followed up his successes with offensives against Al Qaeda in Iraq in Mosul and against pro-Sadr militiamen in Amarah.

Table 1. Election Results (January and December 2005)

Bloc/Party	Seats (Jan. 05)	Seats (Dec. 05)
United Iraqi Alliance (UIA, Shiite Islamist). Now 85 seats after departure of Fadilah (15 seats) and Sadr faction (28 seats) in 2007. Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq of Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim has 30; Da'wa Party (25 total: Maliki faction, 12, and Anizi faction, 13); independents (30).	140	128
Kurdistan Alliance - KDP (24); PUK (22); independents (7)	75	53
Iraqis List (secular, Allawi); added Communist and other mostly Sunni parties for Dec. vote.	40	25
Iraq Consensus Front. Main Sunni bloc; not in Jan. vote. Consists of Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP, Tariq al-Hashimi, 26 seats); National Dialogue Council of Khalaf Ulayyan (7); General People's Congress of Adnan al-Dulaymi (7); independents (4).	—	44
National Iraqi Dialogue Front (Sunni, led by former Baathist Saleh al-Mutlak) Not in Jan. 2005 vote.	—	11
Kurdistan Islamic Group (Islamist Kurd) (votes with Kurdistan Alliance)	2	5
Iraqi National Congress (Chalabi). Was part of UIA list in Jan. 05 vote	—	0
Iraqis Party (Yawar, Sunni); Part of Allawi list in Dec. vote	5	—
Iraqi Turkomen Front (Turkomen, Kirkuk-based, pro-Turkey)	3	1
National Independent and Elites (Jan)/Risalyun (Message, Dec) pro-Sadr	3	2
People's Union (Communist, non-sectarian); on Allawi list in Dec. vote	2	—
Islamic Action (Shiite Islamist, Karbala)	2	0
National Democratic Alliance (non-sectarian, secular)	1	—
Rafidain National List (Assyrian Christian)	1	1
Liberation and Reconciliation Gathering (Umar al-Jabburi, Sunni, secular)	1	3
Ummah (Nation) Party. (Secular, Mithal al-Alusi, former INC activist)	0	1
Yazidi list (small Kurdish, heterodox religious minority in northern Iraq)	—	1

Number of polling places: January: 5,200; December: 6,200; Eligible voters: 14 million in January election; 15 million in October referendum and December; Turnout: January: 58% (8.5 million votes)/ October: 66% (10 million)/ December: 75% (12 million).

Table 2. Assessments of the Benchmarks

Benchmark	July 12 Admin. Report	GAO (Sept. 07)	Sept. 14 Admin. Report	Subsequent Actions (May 2008 Administration report, June 2008 GAO report, and International Compact with Iraq Review in June 2008)
1. Forming Constitutional Review Committee (CRC) and completing review	(S) satisfactory	unmet	S	CRC continues debating 50 amendments regarding federal vs. regional powers and presidential powers; Kurds want Kirkuk issue settled before finalizing amendments. Sunnis want presidential council to have enhanced powers relative to prime minister. Some progress on technical, judicial issues. Deadlines for final recommendations repeatedly extended, now beyond latest May 2008 deadline.
2. Enacting and implementing laws on De-Baathification	(U) unsatisfact.	unmet	S	“Justice and Accountability Law” passed Jan. 12 unanimously by 143 in COR present. Allows about 30,000 fourth ranking Baathists to regain their jobs, and 3,500 Baathists in top three party ranks would receive pensions. But, could allow for judicial prosecution of all ex-Baathists and to firing of about 7,000 ex-Baathists in post-Saddam security services, and bars ex-Saddam security personnel from regaining jobs. No appointments yet to the seven-seat High Commission that will implement the law.
3. Enacting and implementing oil laws that ensure equitable distribution of resources	U.	unmet	U	Framework and three implementing laws stalled over Kurd-Arab disputes; only framework law has reached COR to date. Revenue being distributed equitably, and 2008 budget adopted February 13, 2008 maintains 17% revenue for KRG. Kurds and central government setting up commission to resolve remaining disputes.
4. Enacting and implementing laws to form semi-autonomous regions	S	partly met	S	Regions law passed October 2006, with relatively low threshold to form new regions, but main blocs agreed that law would take effect April 2008. No active movement to form new regions yet evident.
5. Enacting and implementing: (a) a law to establish a higher electoral commission, (b) provincial elections law; (c) a law to specify authorities of provincial bodies, and (d) set a date for provincial elections	S on (a) and U on the others	overall unmet; (a) met	S on (a) and (c)	Draft law stipulating powers of provincial governments (and elections by October 1, 2008) adopted February 13, 2008, took effect April 2008 after dropping of presidential council objection to Baghdad’s ability to remove provincial governors. Election law required to implement elections not yet adopted due to Kurdish opposition to proposed interim arrangements for Kirkuk power sharing, as well as Arab attempt to replace <i>peshmerga</i> in Kirkuk with ISF. Agreement apparently reached to use “open list” (vote for candidates) voting system, favored by Sadrists. About 4 months preparation (registration, candidate vetting, ballot printing) needed after law is passed. Some of the nine Higher Election Commission (IHEC) members to be replaced by UNAMI due to “non-transparent” selection process, despite passage of IHEC law in May 2007.
6. Enacting and implementing legislation addressing amnesty for former insurgents	conditions do not allow a rating	unmet	Same as July	Law to amnesty “non-terrorists” among 25,000 detainees held by Iraq, passed on February 13, 2008. Of 17,000 approved for release (mostly Sunnis and Sadrist Shiites), only about 1,600 released to date due to slow judicial process. Does not affect 25,000 detainees held by U.S.
7. Enacting and implementing laws on militia disarmament	conditions do not allow rating	unmet	Same as July	Basra operation, discussed above, viewed by Bush Administration as move against militias. On April 9, 2008, Maliki demanded all militias disband as condition for their parties to participate in October 2008 provincial elections. Law on disarmament and demobilization stalled.

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Benchmark	July 12 Admin. Report	GAO (Sept. 07)	Sept. 14 Admin. Report	Subsequent Actions (May 2008 Administration report, June 2008 GAO report, and International Compact with Iraq Review in June 2008)
8. Establishing political, media, economic, and services committee to support U.S. "surge"	S	met	met	No change. "Executive Steering Committee" works with U.S.-led forces.
9. Providing three trained and ready brigades to support U.S. surge	S	partial	S	No change. Eight brigades were assigned to assist the surge.
10. Providing Iraqi commanders with authorities to make decisions, without political intervention, to pursue all extremists, including Sunni insurgents and Shiite militias	U	unmet	Mixed: S to pursue extremists U on political interference	No significant change. Still some, although diminished, concern over the Office of the Commander in Chief (part of Maliki's office) control over appointments to the ISF - favoring Shiites and excluding many Sunnis. Still, some politically-motivated leaders remain in ISF. In the past year, the commander of the National Police has fired over 5,000 officers for sectarian or politically-motivated behavior, and Ministry of Interior said to have been purged of sectarian administrators and their bodyguards.
11. Ensuring Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) providing even-handed enforcement of law	U.	unmet	Mixed. S on military, U on police	Administration interpreted Basra operation as effort by Maliki to enforce law even-handedly, but acknowledges continued militia influence and infiltration in some units.
12. Ensuring that the surge plan in Baghdad will not provide a safe haven for any outlaw, regardless of sectarian affiliation	S	partial	S	No change. Administration sees ISF acting against JAM in Sadr City, and ethno-sectarian violence has fallen sharply in Baghdad.
13. (a) Reducing sectarian violence and (b) eliminating militia control of local security	Mixed. S on (a); U on (b)	unmet	same as July 12	Sectarian violence continues to drop, but militias still armed, despite Basra operation. 103,000 Sunni "Sons of Iraq" combating Al Qaeda, but still distrusted as potential Sunni militia forces. Only 20,000 allowed to join ISF to date.
14. Establishing Baghdad joint security stations	S	met	S	No change. Over 50 joint security stations operating, more than the 33 planned.
15. Increasing ISF units capable of operating independently	U.	unmet	U	Continuing but slow progress training ISF. U.S. officials say ISF likely unable to secure Iraq internally until 2009-2012; and against external threats not for several years thereafter. Basra operation initially exposed continued factionalism and poor leadership in ISF, but also ability to rapidly deploy.
16. Ensuring protection of minority parties in COR	S	met	S	No change. Rights of minority parties protected by Article 37 of constitution.
17. Allocating and spending \$10 billion in 2007 capital budget for reconstruction projects.	S	partial.	S	An estimated 63% of the \$10 billion 2007 allocation for capital projects was spent. Another \$18 billion is in 2008 Iraqi budget adopted February 13, 2008, and significant additional capital funds in \$22 billion supplemental budget of July 2008.
18. Ensuring that Iraqi authorities not making false accusations against ISF members	U	unmet	U.	Some governmental interference in ISF operations still observed.