

Backgrounder #37

Maliki Makes a Play for the Southern Tribes

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Introduction

In the Shia dominated south of Iraq, a conflict is developing over political dominance in the upcoming provincial elections. Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki has begun a campaign of tribal outreach in an attempt to consolidate his power at the national level. As a result, the Shia constituency in southern Iraq has become the political battlefield for Iraq's three major Shia political entities. These political movements are Dawa, the party of Prime Minister Maliki, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), and the Sadr Movement.

Following the withdrawal of the Sadrists from Maliki's cabinet in late 2006 and early 2007, Dawa and ISCI entered into an alliance in order to marginalize the Sadr Movement, their mutual rival. However, now that the Sadrists have seen their political power wane significantly, signs indicate that the Dawa-ISCI alliance is fracturing. The flashpoint for these tensions is in the south of Iraq, where Prime Minister Maliki has been engaging in a program of tribal outreach. The earliest documentation of this outreach came during Maliki's military offensive in Basra in March 2008. Since then he has continued to seek tribal support for a strong unified central government, presumably with Maliki and his Dawa party at the helm. Speaking to various tribal leaders, Maliki has called for national unity and for the establishment of "tribal support councils," many of which have already been set up in Iraq's southern provinces. However, these councils have met significant resistance from ISCI-affiliated government officials in the provinces and by ISCI leaders in Baghdad.

ISCI has questioned the nature of the tribal support councils, accusing Maliki and Dawa of creating partisan councils to gain political influence. Currently, ISCI controls the majority of provincial governments in the south. The party has long envisioned a decentralized government, with a regionalized Shia south as a key component of this federalized system, perceiving Maliki's efforts to centralize power at the national level as a serious threat to its ability to hold power and its greater ideological agenda. Maliki and tribal leaders have responded that the councils serve to unify the power of local and national authorities. They also promise to disband any council that is, in fact, partisan. Yet, Maliki's outreach, and thus fracturing between the two parties, continues.

This tribal outreach, and its resulting tensions, has become increasingly important in light of upcoming provincial elections. The ability of Maliki and his Dawa party to gain control in the south would be a significant development and would greatly affect the outcome of the elections. Iraq's tribal leaders, who have traditionally been marginalized in the political process, would see a significant increase in their power. Additionally, many are concerned that verbal tensions may escalate into armed confrontation as pressure rises. Attacks on tribal leaders who have responded positively to Maliki's outreach have already been documented, and tensions are only more likely to rise as provincial elections approach.

To better understand the jockeying for political power in the south, this backgrounder documents Prime Minister Maliki's tribal outreach in the summer and fall of 2008, and considers the implications for the Iraqi Shia political landscape. Additionally, it presents ISCI's reaction to this outreach program, documenting statements and actions by party leaders and affiliates to counter Prime Minister Maliki's push for dominance.

Operation Saulat al-Fursan: Maliki Reaches Out to the Southern Iraqi Tribes

On March 25, 2008, Prime Minister Maliki initiated a military offensive known as Operation Saulat al-Fursan (Knight's Charge) in the southern Iraqi city of Basra with the purpose of clearing the city of Sadrist militias. However, due to unexpectedly fierce resistance and insufficient planning, the operation stalled by the end of the first week. Among the many mishaps of the operation, the Iraqi Army suffered a desertion of 1,000 troops.¹ Seeing the danger this posed to the success of his operation, Maliki decided to reach out to the southern Shia tribes in and around Basra, including branches of the Halaf, Bani Assad, and Bani Lam, for political and material support.²

Throughout Operation Saulat al-Fursan, Maliki used various methods in his outreach. He visited tribal leaders and promised their kinsmen jobs in exchange for the political allegiance of their tribe.³ He also issued statements thanking the tribes for their efforts to curb “criminal gangs” in Basra.⁴ Finally, Maliki spoke in support of existing tribal councils, comprised of groups of tribal sheikhs and notables, and praised them for their service to the country.⁵

As an immediate benefit of this outreach, Maliki was able to recruit 10,000 new fighters from these tribes.⁶ Ultimately, the help of these Shia recruits – and emergency reinforcements from Coalition and Iraqi Security Forces– proved instrumental in clearing Basra of insurgents.⁷

Maliki’s outreach, however, was not limited to Basra. In Dhi-Qar province, several tribes pledged support to Maliki on March 30, 2008, along with members of the Dulaim tribe in Wassit province.⁸ A week later, sixty-nine more Wassit clan chiefs issued a document in support of the government.⁹

It is difficult to pinpoint precisely when Maliki’s consolidation of power rather than the success of Operation Saulat al-Fursan became the primary goal of his outreach. Following the success of tribal outreach during the operation, it appears Maliki realized that tribal councils that were allied with the national government meant not only material support for military operations but political support as well. Thus, Maliki took advantage of his existing tribal network for a new broader purpose.

While ISCI supported Maliki’s military offensive against the Sadrists, evidence suggests that they quickly became concerned with Maliki’s political rise. Additionally, the idea of local councils who answered to the central government in Baghdad likely raised concern among the ISCI-affiliated governors in the southern provinces.

In an April 7, 2008 interview with Dubai Al-Sharqiyah television, the head of the Southern Iraq Tribal Council, Sheikh Kazim Unayzan, responded to these accusations. He highlighting the council’s positive role in Operation Saulat al-Fursan, and reiterated the non-partisan nature of the council.¹⁰ However, Maliki’s outreach – and accusations of partisan maneuvering continued.

Summer 2008: Tribal Outreach Increases

Between April and June of 2008, the Sadrist Movement experienced a continuous series of setbacks at the hands of the Maliki government. On April 6, 2008, the Iraqi National Security Council

prohibited all parties with militias from participating in upcoming elections, in a move seen as a direct affront to the Sadrists.¹¹ One month later, Iraqi forces conducted a raid on the headquarters of a Sadrist splinter group in Basra called the National Group of Iraq.¹² Most significantly, on May 12, Prime Minister Maliki ordered a crackdown on the Sadrists in Maysan province in an operation named Bashaar al-Salaam (Promise of Peace) that was to begin in June 2008. Before military operations even had begun, the Sadr office in the provincial capital Amara had been abandoned without a fight.¹³ The precariousness of the Sadrist Movement's political situation was clear when they announced on June 15, 2008 that they would run as independent candidates on other parties' tickets during the upcoming provincial elections.¹⁴

While the operations against Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi militias were a positive development for Iraq's security, a clearly weakened and marginalized Sadrist Movement meant that Dawa and ISCI no longer had a mutual threat against which an alliance was necessary. Additionally, Dawa and ISCI had always been at odds over the south, with Dawa preferring a strong central government, and ISCI preferring a more localized federal power structure. Prioritizing his own party over the alliance, Maliki attended several tribal conferences throughout the summer of 2008 and announced the establishment of support councils throughout the southern provinces, including seventeen councils in Maysan province alone.¹⁵

What distinguishes the conferences at which Maliki spoke during the Basra offensive from the conferences of summer 2008 is the central theme of Maliki's remarks. In his outreach during Operation Saulat al-Fursan, Maliki's message to the tribes centered primarily on cooperation with the government and the imposition of law.¹⁶ The tribes reinforced this theme by signing allegiance documents to the central government, or announcing their support of the government, as documented above.

However, a June 28, 2008 meeting between Maliki and a member of the Ibadah tribe reveals a significant shift in message. While he began his remarks by praising Iraqi solidarity, Maliki later announced, "Neither this government nor future governments will interfere in the affairs of the tribe. You have taken the step of meeting and deciding things as a tribe. This is the right option and method."¹⁷ This message is mirrored in statements Maliki made the following day to the Al-Jabour tribe and to the Al-Maqasis Al-Musawiyah tribe on August 1, 2008.¹⁸ Contrary to his March 2008 meetings, Maliki offered the tribes limited autonomy in return for deference to Maliki's national government. The focus was no longer primarily on crime and reducing violence, but on this power-sharing bargain struck between Maliki and the tribes.¹⁹

Throughout the month of August, Maliki reiterated this message in a series of meetings with tribal leaders in Baghdad. The frequency of these meetings, which had tapered since Operation Saulat al-Fursan, was again increased. Between August 9 and August 28, 2008, Maliki met with the Tay, Albu Darraj, Al-Sudan, Bani Lam, and Bani Ka'b tribes.²⁰ Also during this time period, both the General Federation of Iraqi Tribes, and the Southern Iraq Tribal Council issued statements in support of the government.²¹

Interestingly, most of the tribes with whom Maliki met do not have populations exclusively in the south, but in fact throughout Iraq. This may indicate that Maliki was trying to widen his tribal network even further at the same time that he was courting the tribes in the south. Another possible explanation is that reaching out to an entire tribe instead of just its southern component lent legitimacy to Maliki's claim that his outreach in the south was for the sake of national unity.

Regardless of motivation, the heightened tribal outreach did not go unnoticed. By fall 2008, with provincial elections only months away, ISCI felt increasingly threatened by what it saw as a systematic power play for the Shia political constituency of the Iraqi south.

Fall 2008: ISCI Accuses Maliki of Partisanship. Maliki Responds.

From September to October 2008, ISCI increased its criticism of the tribal support councils, accusing Maliki and Dawa of making a political power grab. The Prime Minister's office eventually responded with statements, but facts do not suggest very much was done in practice to assuage ISCI's concerns.

On September 17, 2008, ISCI leader Taqi al-Din al-Moula accused the Dawa party of creating the tribal support councils with a partisan agenda. He argued that the councils could eventually turn into militias, which would be harmful to security.²² In addition to this pressure from ISCI party leadership in Baghdad, members of the provincial councils in southern and central Iraq, many of whom were ISCI-affiliated, also played a role. Days later, on September 22, 2008, the ISCI-dominated Wassit Provincial council categorically refused to establish a tribal council in the province.²³ On September 28, 2008, the governor of Dhi-Qar, also affiliated with ISCI, followed suit and called the establishment of tribal support councils a "violation of laws."²⁴

Two days later, tribal chieftain Faris al-Habib claimed that while twenty councils would, in fact, be established in Dhi-Qar, these councils would not be partisan in nature.²⁵ On October 8, Prime Minister Maliki himself called for the cancellation of any support council affiliated with a political party, a situation which Maliki called “illegal.” ISCI responded with a statement that they “welcomed this decision.”²⁶

Since then tribal outreach has continued. On October 13, 2008, a meeting took place between Iraqi vice president Tariq al-Hashimi and tribal chieftains from Wassit, Maysan, and Muthanna provinces.²⁷ Significantly, Hashimi represents the Sunni IIP, and not the Shia Dawa party. While yet unclear, this may be an attempt by Maliki to “diversify” those conducting his outreach and make it appear less partisan and more in the interest of national unity. However, it appears at least for the short-term that ISCI continues to struggle against Maliki’s outreach and the establishment of support councils.²⁸

Conclusion

Maliki’s tribal outreach campaign represents a complicated power play with significant implications. While tribal outreach is clearly a risky move by Maliki, it has shown great benefits, and Maliki’s overtures can hardly be called reckless. A strengthened Dawa party would enhance the role of the central government in southern Iraq. A broader Dawa constituency would also provide Maliki with solid political ground to manipulate alliances with other political factions, including Sunni parties such as the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) or the Sunni Sons of Iraq (SOI).

Regardless of these benefits, the risk remains that such political wrangling could lead to violence from ISCI, Badr, or Sadrist affiliates. Such outbreaks threaten recent gains in stability and could have disastrous implications for the people of Iraq.

Already, Basra's tribal sheikhs have been targeted by gunmen or militiamen of unknown affiliation. On July 16 Sayyid Aqeel Fahdi Jamal al-Din, a prominent leader in the Al-Ikhbaria Shia sect, was the target of an assassination attempt.²⁹ On September 19, the brother of Sheikh Mohammed al-Agrash, the leader of the Al-Agrash and Al-Daghaghila tribes was assassinated in Basra.³⁰ On October 22, gunmen tried, unsuccessfully, to kidnap Sheikh Abdul Wahab al-Rubaei, head of the Southern Iraq Tribal

Council.³¹ These examples indicate the lengths to which various groups are willing to go to advance their agendas in the Iraqi south.

In light of these developments, it is also worthwhile to consider the role of Iran and its campaign for influence in Iraq, which often includes support for militant groups who carry out assassinations or kidnappings.³² Iran is apprehensive about the creation of a strong central government in Iraq. Seeking a weak central Iraqi government which is easy to manipulate, it is possible that Iran will support ISCI or other groups in its attempts to weaken Maliki, including his influence over the Shia south.

Maliki's tribal outreach and its opponents' responses are developments which analysts must continue to monitor. The final efficacy of this outreach will have implications not only for Maliki and the Shia political parties, but for the entire Iraqi political system. Even the most optimistic evaluations of the Surge warn that the recent political and military gains are fragile and reversible. Should the political tension in the south intensify, failure to understand the implications would hurt not only Coalition Forces and the democratic process, but the citizens of Iraq as well.

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- 2 "Basra Operation Is Response To 'Serious Threat' - Iraqi Government Spokesman," *BBC Monitoring Middle East – Political*, March 26, 2008. For more tribes with whom Maliki conferred, also see: "Al-Iraqiyah Reports on Al-Maliki's Meetings in Basra; Chieftains Pledge Support," *BBC Monitoring Middle East – Political*, March 27, 2008.
- 3 "Iraqi Prime Minister Gets Political Show of Support But Sadrists Excluded.," Farrell and Glanz.
- 4 "Basra Operation Is Response To 'Serious Threat' - Iraqi Government Spokesman."
- 5 "Iraqi PM Addresses Al-Jubur Tribal Chiefs," *BBC Monitoring Middle East – Political*, June 29, 2008.
- 6 "Iraqi Prime Minister Gets Political Show Of Support But Sadrists Excluded.," Farrell and Glanz.
- 7 For more on Operation Saulat al-Fursan, see: Marisa Cochrane, "The Battle for Basra," Iraq Report #9, Institute for the Study of War, May 31, 2008.
- 8 "BBC Monitoring Headlines, Quotes From Iraqi Press 30 Mar 08," *BBC Monitoring International Reports*, March 30, 2008; "Thi-Qar Tribes Support Security Forces," *Aswat al-Iraq*, March 30, 2008.
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- 10 "Iraqi Chieftains Discuss Role Of Tribes In South - Al-Sharqiyah TV," *BBC Monitoring Middle East – Political*, April 8, 2008.
- 11 "Maliki Warns Sadrists on Poll," *Irish Times*, April 8, 2008.
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- 14 "Sadrists to Back Candidates Outside Their Movement in Iraqi Elections," *Associated Press*, June 15, 2008.
- 15 "Al-Jazeera Airs Conflicting Reports on US Casualties in Iraq Shooting Incident," *BBC Monitoring Middle East – Political*, July 2, 2008.
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- 17 "Iraqi PM Addresses Al-Jubur Tribal Chiefs."
- 18 "Iraqi PM Addresses Al-Jubur Tribal Chiefs.," Sabrina Tavernise, "A Shiite Militia in Baghdad Sees Its Power Wane," *New York Times*, July 27, 2008.
- 19 This being said, Brigadier General Hussein al-Awadi's remarks June 19 and General Habib Taher al-Husseini's remarks August 1 specifically highlight the role of the tribes in Maysan during Operation Saulat al-Fursan, which was Maliki's original message. See: "Official Lauds Chieftains' Role In Missan Offensive," *Aswat al-Iraq*, June 19, 2008; Tavernise.
- 20 "Iraqi PM Meets Tay Tribes Chieftains; Roundup," *BBC Monitoring Middle East – Political*, August 9, 2008; "Iraqi Prime Minister Addresses Albu Darraj Tribal Chiefs, Urges Construction," *BBC Monitoring Middle East – Political*, August 15, 2008; "Iraqi PM's Speech Supports Formation Of Tribal Higher National Council," *BBC Monitoring Middle East – Political*, August 24, 2008; "Iraqi PM Addresses Tribal Conference in Baghdad, Praises Fighting Volunteers," *BBC Monitoring Middle East – Political*, August 25, 2008; "Iraqi PM Denounces Culture Of 'Ignorance, Murder, Terrorism', Update 28 Aug," *BBC Monitoring Middle East – Political*, August 28, 2008.
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- 22 Chaloud Al-'Amari, "Shia Differ on the Formation of Support Councils...'ISCI' accuses Government of Trying to Strengthen Rule of 'Dawa' Party," *Dar al-Hayat*, September 17, 2007 (Translated from Arabic).
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- 25 "Tribal Chieftain Announces Opening 20 Support Councils Offices In Thi-Qar," *Aswat al-Iraq*, September 30, 2007.
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