Iraq in Transition: Competing Actors and Complicated Politics

Continuity and Change in Iraq's Sunni Politics: Sunni Arab Political Trends, Factions, and Personalities Since 2014

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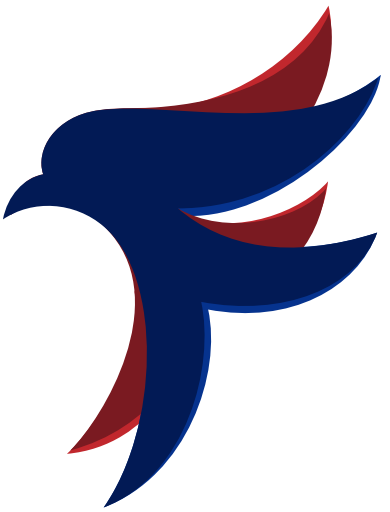

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Introduction

The year 2014 was a horrible one for Iraq. The national election held in April was preceded by two ominous trends: an increasingly strong, armed insurgency from the Sunni Arab population and an increasingly sharp sectarian conflict within the mainstream political system, driven by actions of both the Shia Islamist-dominated government and Sunni Arab political leaders. A divisive election with a disputed result was followed by a strong insurgency, and while both pan-Arab and Iraqi Sunni media tended to frame it as a "revolution" driven by oppressed Sunni tribesmen, the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS), a brutal terrorist group with a globalist Salafi-Jihadist ideology, was its primary driver.

The crucible event of the year was the fall of Mosul, Iraq's most populous Sunni-majority city in the northwest province of Nineveh, to ISIS jihadists on June 10. The city did not fall without resistance, as is sometimes said, as federal police units fought a four-day gun battle for the city, while army divisions, including two garrisoned right outside the city, watched on. Once resistance in the city collapsed, several Iraqi army divisions, weakened by sectarian divisions and riddled with corruption, collapsed almost overnight, and terrorists overran much of northern and western Iraq. These events were a watershed for Iraq, and especially for its Sunni Arab population, and it is Sunni Arab politics since 2014 which is the focus of this chapter.

The first section sets the stage, discussing the state of Sunni politics on the eve of catastrophe. Even now, one might debate whom to blame first: Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's divisive and conspiracy-driven governing style or Sunni leaders' equally divisive identity grievance-driven style of politics—led by Speaker Osama al-Nujayfi—that blamed all problems on Shia leaders and ignored threats from Sunni militants. Either way, they fed on each other, and wiser Sunni leaders would not have simplistically claimed Baghdad was waging a war against Sunnis given that it faced constant terror attacks coming from within Sunni-populated areas.

The second section deals with the period of sectarian conciliation that began with the election of Haider al-Abadi to replace Maliki as head of government and the election of Salim al-Jiburi, a soft-spoken lawyer, as a Sunni Arab to head parliament in place of Nujayfi. Sunni leaders who most strongly voiced Sunni sectarian claims were marginalized and discredited, while the reduction in Sunni participation in the polarized 2014 vote led to an absolute Shia Islamist majority in parliament for the first time. The country faced both a war for existence and a deep fiscal crisis, and most political conflict at the federal level was between rival Shia leaders. The conflict with the Kurdistan Region in late 2017 following a Kurdish independence effort caused many Sunnis to rally around Abadi's leadership, further marginalizing Sunni leaders.

The third section focuses on politics in the Sunni-majority provinces of Anbar, Nineveh, and Salah al-Din. Discredited at the national level and facing a sharp fiscal squeeze, the Sunni establishment might have tried to work together to improve the lot of citizens in their provinces, many of whom were displaced. Instead, they engaged in what can best be described as a bar room brawl, using all means fair and foul against local Sunni rivals to control what such sources of patronage as still existed. Eventually, a single man came to dominate each province, but people living in them, who would have faced hard times even with good governance, saw dysfunction led by one scandal-disgraced leader after another.

The fourth section covers the May 2018 election and the rise of then-Anbar Governor Muhammad al-Halbusi, who was elected speaker of parliament in September of that year. Parliamentarians, once elected, are free to change parties at will without facing reelection, and so many MPs changed alignments—some Shia as well, but especially among Sunnis—that the results of the election

were severely undermined. Furthermore, after parlaying his smashing win as leading candidate in Anbar into elevation to the speakership, Halbusi, one of Iraq's youngest politicians when elected governor of Anbar in 2017, skillfully took advantage of overreach by Sunni figures who had aligned themselves with Iranian-backed parties and formed a new coalition which by late 2019 dominated the Sunni political scene.

The fifth section focuses on the Sunni role in the political crisis that emerged after Prime Minister Adil Abd al-Mahdi, Abadi's successor in 2018, was pushed to resign after hundreds of protesters in Shia-majority protests were killed by security forces, up through the election of Mustafa al-Kathimi in early May 2020. Halbusi's dominance by this point was so great that the Sunni role in the five-month crisis consisted entirely of Halbusi's own actions either as speaker or as head of the largest Sunni coalition. Various Shia and Kurdish leaders played key roles at various points, but no other Sunni leader played a significant role.

The sixth section concludes with the new status quo as of early fall 2020. Halbusi remains the central figure in Sunni politics, although a series of figures who have been his rivals form a second tier of Sunni leaders, most notable among them being Nujayfi and Salah al-Din's Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi. It remains unclear when the next election will be held, but it seems most likely that when it happens voters will at most be able to only shift the balance of seats that exists between Halbusi and his rivals. Post-2014 lack of security, extreme material deprivation, and displacement have made Sunni areas of Iraq poor grounds for the birth of more genuine, non-patronage-based politics, and the extent to which activists have tried to rear their heads over the past couple of years, security forces controlled by the kleptocracy have kept them down.

The 2014-2020 period has been one of both continuity and change for Iraq's Sunni politics. The main point of continuity has been the centrality of individual leadership, with political parties based on individuals rather than an ideology or political program. Halbusi himself has no discernible ideology and no self-expressed political agenda aside from benefitting the citizens of the provinces his coalition represents. Prior to 2014, there was some division between Sunnis who were secular and centralist and others who were "Islamist" and favored the creation of Sunni autonomous regions, but these differences mostly grew out of expressions of sectarian political identity; there were few specific policy differences between Nujayfi and his rivals. The other point of continuity has been the full preservation of Iraq's corrupt system of allocating offices and thus control of patronage on a party and ethno-sectarian basis, one which enfeebled the Iraqi state in 2014 and continues to do so today. This kleptocracy includes leading figures of all backgrounds, Shia, Sunni Arab, and Kurdish, and much of the story below relates to the intra-Sunni struggle for control of their portion of the patronage pie.

There have also been two key changes in how Sunni Arab politics works. One is the dramatic and welcome reduction in inter-sectarian hostility that existed through 2014. While parties still function and allocate offices on a sectarian basis, they no longer engage in incendiary rhetoric against one another, so the country is run by a fully cooperative kleptocracy. And while Shia militias tied to Iran are a serious problem, the main conflict is between these Shia militias, on the one hand, and secular Shia activists, as well as Sunnis, on the other. Furthermore, with Shia dominance of the federal government secure, nationally oriented Shia leaders are locked in conflict with Iranian-aligned political parties, and their cooperation with Sunni parties has prevented the Iranian takeover of Iraqi politics, which some had predicted.

The second major change is the nature of the existential challenge that Iraq faces. While security threats from Sunni militants remain, Iraq faces a far greater threat of fiscal collapse, driven by many years of public sector expansion and private sector weakness, combined with the long-term decline in oil prices. As a result, such policy disputes which exist are not Sunni-Shia, but between the current government, determined to bring structural change to the system, and parliamentarians, both Shia and Sunni alike, overwhelmingly in favor of retaining it.

Setting the Stage: Sunni Politics Before the 2014 Cataclysm

The core dynamic of Sunni politics in the years leading immediately to the 2014 catastrophe was the division between those focused on standing up to Maliki and framing Baghdad as responsible for the country's problems and those taking a conciliatory approach to Baghdad, often for reasons of self-interest, while framing the ambitions of Kurdish leaders as the primary threat.

The Sunni Arab push for an autonomous region, or for provinces to be given autonomous status from Baghdad, similar to that existing in the Kurdistan Region, was the sharpest form of friction during Maliki's second term. While Sunnis had strongly opposed autonomous regions just years earlier, Osama al-Nujayfi, speaker of parliament during the term, began talking the issue up in 2011. Then, later that year, there were votes for autonomy by the provincial councils of Salah al-Din and Diyala to which Maliki responded by illegally imposing martial law.[1] Meanwhile, Osama's younger brother, Uthil al-Nujayfi, elected governor of Nineveh in 2009 when their party won a sweeping majority, spent the entire term engaged in a public struggle for control of security institutions in the province.

Adding to the polarization was the fact that the Nujayfis, previously backers of a strong Arab nationalist line and hostile to Kurdish ambitions, flipped during this period and allied with Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). This was in line with a policy change in Turkey, which went from opposing Kurdish autonomy in Iraq to attempting to turn it into a commercial colony and source of oil and gas imports. That the Nujayfis appeared to many to be open instruments of Turkish policy, and now accommodating to the Kurds, was controversial among Sunni Arabs and enraged officials in Baghdad.

In contrast to the Nujayfi line, there was another current in Sunni politics, which was centralist and pro-Baghdad. Salih al-Mutlak of Anbar, deputy prime minister during this term, symbolized this group, and the landmark 2013 budget first prohibiting independent Kurdish oil exports was passed only with his support.[2] Then-Governor of Anbar Qasim al-Fahdawi was also pro-Baghdad, and Salah al-Din Governor Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi, like Fahdawi elected in 2009, initially supported the autonomy effort, but started tilting toward Baghdad as well.

The Sunni protest movement of 2013 was central to the events of 2014, even though it seems clear that many Sunnis involved did not want armed conflict. The movement was based on a range of grievances, some such as illegal arrests and debaathification were fairly reasonable, and others about Sunni representation not so much (as Sunnis had their share of ministers and the budget in the government). Broadly speaking, it had two main wings. One was the "mainstream" wing, which was already part of the political process, represented by the Nujayfis, who backed a major protest camp in Nineveh, autonomists and Islamists in Anbar and Salah al-Din, and mainstream clerics in each province. The other wing was much more militant and consisted mainly of front groups for insurgent forces. The most important of these was a front group for the Ba'th Party called the Intifada Ahrar al-Iraq.[3]

Between these two groups and Sunni leaders closer to Baghdad there existed a negative three-way feedback loop that ensured collective

1 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 30, 5-11, January 3, 2012.

2 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 57, 2, March 20, 2013.

3 Kirk Sowell, "Iraq's Second Sunni Insurgency," Current Trends in Islamist Ideology," Hudson Institute Report, August 9, 2014. https://www.hudson.org/research/10505-iraq-s-second-sunni-insurgency

Iraqi police officers carry posters of Iraq's President Jalal Talabani and Prime Minister al-Maliki in Najaf, 20 December 2006. (army.mil)

failure: the militant wing of the protests made it harder for Baghdad to compromise with the more moderate Nujayfi-Islamist wing, while the "moderate" protest wing rejected any attempt by Sunni ministers in Baghdad, such as Mutlak, to negotiate with Maliki over Sunni complaints. Not only did protest leaders in Anbar hold a major rally to reject compromise, but Nujayfi, acting as speaker, scuttled a compromise deal between Maliki and Mutlak over debaathification on the grounds that it was insufficient. The result was a continued rise in tensions, insurgent groups—including the Ba'th, but also ISIS jihadists—became more active, and by the first quarter of 2014, an armed insurgency was gaining speed.

Sunni parties went into the April 2014 election polarized into two major camps consistent with the framework described above. One was an expanded coalition led by Nujayfi, with the name of the 2010 coalition amended to Mutahidun for Reform after Jamal al-Karbuli's al-Hal joined. Consistent with the general nature of Sunni politics, Mutahidun included a collection of leaders whose parties were the main pro-autonomy party in their area: Nujayfi himself in Nineveh and Karbuli in Anbar, plus Jamal al-Karbuli, Thafir al-Ani, and Ahmad Abu Risha in Anbar; Ahmad al-Masari in Baghdad; Salim al-Jiburi in Diyala; and Ammar Yusuf Humud in Salah al-Din. To these traditional allies, Nujayfi was able to add two more leaders who had been alienated by Maliki: Karbuli in Anbar and Talal al-Zoubi (Baghdad Belt Assembly) in the Baghdad area. While the coalition was highly diverse, most of it consisted of the political wings of the non-insurgency wing of the 2013 protest movement, merging Turkey-backed autonomy supporters with the Qatar-backed Islamic Party (of which both Jiburi and Humud were members). The fact that this was the coalition of the Turkish-Qatari regional axis further increased the polarization.

Karbuli in particular had never supported Nujayfi's political agenda, but he had made a deal with Nujayfi's allies in Anbar to gain the chairmanship of the provincial council in mid-2013. Maliki retaliated by having security forces raid his party's office in Baghdad, seizing their computer equipment; after years of allegations of corruption at the Industry Ministry, Karbuli's brother Ahmad, the minister, found himself under investigation. His quid pro quo with Maliki now a dead letter, Karbuli had nothing to lose by throwing his lot in with the premier's enemies. Ahmad would flee Iraq, and a fire in the contracts office of the ministry would slow the investigation.[4]

4 "Questions About the Spread of Fires to Cover Up Corruption in the Iraqi Ministry of Industry," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, January 22, 2015.

Mutahidun party logo. (Wikimedia Commons)

The other main coalition was Mutlak's Arab Coalition, the core of which was his Dialogue Front faction. As deputy prime minister, Mutlak had a clear vulnerability, and he tried to immunize himself by criticizing Maliki and claiming he had no authority. He nonetheless defended his role in the government with the budget, which again had a strong centrist imprint, which Nujayfi had continued to block in alliance with the Kurds. Iyad Allawi, a secular Shia figure himself, was also a competitor in the Sunni space as the base of his Nationalist Coalition was heavily former Ba'thist and Sunni Arab. Allawi's bloc split the polarization by being strongly critical of Maliki, but without Nujayfi's pro-autonomy stance. These factions competed with some who were Maliki-aligned, such as those of Fahdawi, the former Anbar governor, and Defense Minister Saadun al-Dulaymi, also of Anbar.

The result of the election was a pyrrhic victory for Nujayfi's Mutahidun. Winning a plurality of Sunni seats in a divided field, Muthahidun factions went into the election with 45 seats and came out with 27. This corresponded with a decline in the total number of combined seats held by Sunni Arab or secular Shia (Allawi bloc) parliamentarians, from 101 to 76. Allawi and Mutlak saw smaller declines from 24 to 21 seats and from 15 to 11 seats, respectively; to make matters worse, Allawi failed to expand his Shia vote share, but instead cannibalized part of Nujayfi's Sunni base. This was clear from comparing results in the 2013 provincial elections in Baghdad to the 2014 election. In 2013, the Shia Islamist lists won 73% of the Baghdad vote, with Nujayfi winning a slight majority of the remainder and with Allawi and Mutlak respectively taking 23% and 21% of the remainder. In 2014, the Shia Islamist share increased to 75%, but among the remainder, Allawi's vote surged, and Allawi and Nujayji's respective shares roughly flipped.[5] Nujayfi's weak showing in Baghdad was likely due to Allawi's strong stance against autonomous Sunni provinces as Baghdad Sunnis had reason to fear that Nujayfi's agenda would leave them isolated in an overwhelmingly Shia-dominated state.

5 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 85, 3-4, May 21, 2014.

The Abadi Era: Sectarian Conciliation Amid Sunni Weakness, 2014-2018

The collapse of the Iraqi army and the fall of much of northern and western Iraq to ISIS terrorists in June 2014 destroyed Maliki's credibility, leading to the election of Haider al-Abadi in September. Like Maliki, Abadi was a lifelong member of the Dawa Party, and as an MP and chairman of parliament's Finance Committee, he had been a strong supporter of Maliki's centralist policies, especially on issues related to the Kurdistan Region. Yet, he had no history of involvement in sectarian conflicts with Sunnis. Abadi spent his exile period in Britain rather than Iran and Syria, as Maliki had, and yet despite supporting Maliki's reelection prior to Mosul's fall, his personality could not have been more different. Iraq, and Iraq's Sunnis especially, were fortunate to have a prime minister with Abadi's calm, conciliatory manner during this period.

The cataclysm of June 2014 and related tragedies in the months that followed had an even stronger impact on Sunnis. Thus having suffered one blow during the April elections, the collapse of resistance to the Islamic State takeover in most Sunni areas dealt a further blow to the credibility of the Sunni elite. And this was true more for Nujayfi and his Mutahidun, closely associated with the 2013 Sunni protest movement, than for others. Furthermore, the Nujayfi properties and personal residence outside of Mosul fell into the jihadists' hands, and his brother, Uthil al-Nujayfi, still governor of Nineveh, was publicly visible during the attack on Mosul, at one point being photographed walking grandly with a shotgun in his hand. After fleeing the city, he set up a temporary administration in Talkayf, in the part of northern Nineveh, which had always been controlled by KDP Peshmerga. Declaring that he was forming "popular committees" of armed local citizens who would take back Mosul, Nujayfi insisted on an all-Sunni chain-of-command for a force which would be armed either nationally or internationally, a demand that Baghdad could never accept, especially as it was blaming him for conspiring against the army. Nujayfi also unrealistically talked up working with secular elements of the insurgency, including the Ba'thist Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandiya (JRGN), but even had the other side possessed the desire or capability to fight the Islamic State, Shia leaders interpreted Nujayfi's statements on working with Ba'thists as just confirming their suspicions about him.

Another key Sunni figure to suffer a blow to his credibility was Khamis Khanjar. Khanjar, who is from Anbar but had long been based outside Iraq, was an influential figure in Sunni politics, but mainly behind the scenes as a funnel for money from Sunni Arab states. For example, he was widely believed to be a key financer of the predominately Sunni "Iraqiya" coalition in 2010.[6] By 2014, Khanjar moved more directly into the spotlight, sponsoring a coalition called "Kirama," which ran a vast number of ads on Sunni-oriented TV channels. (Khanjar was still not a candidate himself, but he was much more visible.) The first blow Khanjar took was a loss in the elections, as Kirama only won a single seat, in Salah al-Din. But then, after the fall of Mosul to ISIS, Khanjar made his standing quite a bit worse by giving a highly enthused interview on al-Arabiya on June 28 in which he all but endorsed the terrorist group. He praised the "liberation of Mosul" and declared that "the revolutionaries are at the gates of Baghdad" at a time when it was clear that the Islamic State was the dominant element in this "revolution."

6 "Al-Hal Movement: Khamis al-Khanjar Supports Iraqiya Financially but He Does Not Control its Decision-Making," *Buratha News*, September 18, 2011. http://ftp.burathanews.com/arabic/news/136467

Haider al-Abadi at a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin. (kremlin.ru)

At a time when most Iraqis—and much of the world—were horrified by the group's crimes and what it might do after the army's collapse, Khanjar declared: "We support this revolution. . . . I call all tribal leaders, businessmen and people of good will to support this revolution."[7]

Then, in early August, both Sunni Arabs and Kurdish leaders suffered another black mark, one that seems destined to be remembered more historically, with ISIS' genocide against the Yezidi religious minority in Sinjar, a district in west Nineveh, and simultaneous mass enslavement of thousands of Yezidi women and girls. Local Sunni Arab tribes participated in these crimes, and KDP Peshmerga that controlled the area simply fled and ran, leaving the Yezidis defenseless.

The weakening of rhetorically aggressive Sunni leaders coincided with the rise of Salim al-Jiburi, who became the country's most important Sunni figure on July 15 when he was elected speaker of parliament, replacing the elder Nujayfi. Jiburi was a relatively young, soft-spoken lawyer and MP from Diyala who chaired the Human Rights Committee in the previous term. Jiburi was a long-time member of the Islamic Party, but the party had long given up any real Islamist agenda in favor of Machiavellian political maneuvering. Jiburi was, as noted above, part of Nujayfi's 2014 electoral coalition, but nonetheless the change from the combative Nujayfi to the mild-mannered Jiburi complemented the similar personality change from Maliki to Abadi.

At the national level, the collapse of the federal army was turning the entire country into a militia state, as existing Shia militias ramped up recruitment, and Shia leaders without personal militias—including Prime Minister Maliki—rushed to form them.[8] They were broadly referred to as the "Popular Mobilization," or Hashd, but individual military units were controlled by specific political figures. The trend reached the absurd level to the extent that Shia politicians would turn up on political talk shows wearing military fatigues.[9]

7 "Interview with Khamis Khanjar," *al-Arabiya*, June 28, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=47kuL0VnOC8

8 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 111, 5-10, July 20, 2015. Pages 6-8 have a full listing of militias by political affiliation.

9 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 88, July 3, 2014.

It was within this context, as it was clear that ISIS was going to control Mosul for some period, that Osama al-Nujayfi reacted to the failure of his brother's initial gambit to get back into Mosul by going full warlord: In early August, he established a local militia called the "Mosul Battalions," which he said the "people of Mosul" had chosen him to lead.[10] Nujayfi was not alone in doing this among Sunnis, given what Shia leaders were doing, with members of parliament forming their own militias. In Nineveh, MPs Ahmad al-Jiburi and Abd al-Rahman al-Shamari were the most prominent, and MP Mishaan al-Jiburi set up a Sunni militia in Salah al-Din. But these other Sunni figures were setting up militias in coordination with the Iranian-dominated national Hashd administration, formally known by late 2014 as the "Hashd Commission." Nujayfi, by contrast, set himself up as a defender of Sunni rights in opposition to Iranian domination.

Still, among Sunni leaders associated with the 2013 protests, Nujayfi, who supported the new Abadi government when he replaced Maliki in September, was a relative realist. Others drove themselves into complete irrelevance by their denialism over the nature of ISIS and the crimes it was committing. Abd al-Malik al-Saadi, a deeply respected Sunni cleric long in exile in Jordan who had boosted the protest movement in Anbar, backed the "revolution" while criticizing some of ISIS' crimes for damaging the revolutionaries' image. The Gathering of Nineveh Scholars and Preachers (GNSP), Nujayfi's clerical ally in his home province, was silent. The Muslim Scholars Association (MSA), a group prominent in pan-Arab media whose armed wing, the 1920s Brigades, participated in the previous war (2003-2009) and in 2014 was backing the new insurgency, rejected both ISIS' expulsion of Christians from Mosul and its announcement of the caliphate that June, but still supported the insurgency.[11]

As late as October 2016, as the operation to liberate Mosul began, MSA leader Muthanna al-Dhari, appearing on al-Jazeera, framed the effort to retake the city from the Islamic State as being part of Iran's historical drive to dominate Iraq. While Dhari did not expressly endorse ISIS, he compared the American-led international coalition to a "crusade" and said talk of "terrorism" in Iraq was just a pretext.[12] Indeed, al-Jazeera and other pan-Arab media outlets played a vital role in providing the Islamic State with propaganda, usually framing the uprising as a "tribal revolution" by oppressed Sunnis.[13]

Incidentally, Dhari mentioned an idea that though usually unspoken underlay much Sunni-Shia conflict through 2014: that Sunnis were the demographic majority in Iraq. This idea was fostered by the Ba'th regime, including a spurious census in the 1980s that purported to show Sunni Arabs as a plurality and, including the Kurds, Sunnis as a clear majority. In 2013, Nujayfi raised eyebrows with a comment on al-Jazeera that Sunnis were "either about the same number as Shia, or there may be a Sunni majority."[14] When asked about this post-2014, Nujayfi demmured on commenting on the issue, and no mainstream Sunni politician would assert this today, but the ferocity with which Sunnis fought in the two sectarian conflict periods (post-2003 and in 2013-2014) is hard to imagine without the prevelance of this belief.[15]

That Nineveh was entirely outside of federal control meant that political conflict focused around the Nujayfis' continuing efforts to form an autonomous Sunni-led force. As referenced

10 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 90, 3, August 5, 2014.

11 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 90, 6-7, August 5, 2014.

12 "Without Borders: The Fate of Iraq's Sunnis after the Battles of Mosul with Muthanna al-Dhari," *Al-Jazeera Arabic*, October 26, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9LskfLO2uM

13 Kirk Sowell, "The Islamic State's Eastern Frontier: Ramadi and Fallujah as Theaters of Sectarian Conflict," Perspectives on Terrorism, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2015). http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/449

14 Interview with Osama Najafi, *Al-Jazeera Arabic*, Feb. 19, 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyKG7lwLR6o

15 In historical fact, Iraq was a Sunni-majority country until roughly a century ago, when the conversion of Sunni tribes in south-central Iraq beginning in the late 19th century created a Shia majority. Using election results as a proxy, Shia were probably a bare majority of just over 50% post-2003, but the displacement of Sunnis in conflicts through 2014 created the last two parliaments, which are about 60% Shia or more.

Ninevah Guards (Facebook)

above, this included former police from Mosul under Uthil's command and another group to be formed as part of the "Mosul Battalions" renamed as the "Nineveh Guard." With government formation in September 2014, Osama had "failed upwards," going from being speaker to one of three vice presidents, along with former Prime Ministers Nuri al-Maliki and Iyad Allawi. In January 2015, Nujayfi made a high-profile visit to the ethnically Kurdish federal Army 5th Division headquarters in Makhmur. Nujayfi claimed to have authority over the new Sunni force in formation from President Fuad Masum, but this claim was rather awkward since the prime minister is commander-in-chief and Iraq's constitution gives the presidency no such authority.

Highlighting Baghdad's weakness—to add insult to injury in a sense—in December 2015 Turkey established a military base in Bashiqa, a town in northeast Nineveh controlled by Kurdish Peshmerga. The primary purpose of the base—Turkey has long had other bases farther north focused on the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)—was for Turkish troops to train Nujayfi's forces. Especially given Turkey's role facilitating the growth of Islamist armed groups in Syria, this caused outrage in Iraq, bringing universal condemnation from Shia as well as many Sunni Arab leaders. The fact that Kurdish leader Masud Barzani had traveled to Ankara and negotiated the deployment as if the Kurdistan Region were a sovereign authority in Nineveh made it all the more controversial.[16]

Nujayfi's renaming of his force to the "Nineveh Guard" was an attempt to bandwagon off of an effort backed by the United States to legislatively establish a new "National Guard," and the debate over and ultimate failure of this effort was the key "Sunni" political issue from late 2014 through 2015 and 2016. The Abadi cabinet approved the idea in principle on January 27, 2015[17] and published a draft of it in early February.[18] The draft was disappointing to Sunni autonomists on two grounds. One, it contained a clause saying that

16 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 121, 2, December 3, 2015.

17 "Decisions of the Council of Ministers from Hearing Number 4 on 1/27/2015," Republic of Iraq General Secretariat for the Council of Ministers, January 27, 2015. http://www.cabinet.iq/ArticleShow.aspx?ID=5728

18 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 102, 14, March 4, 2015.

members of each guard would be recruited from those "residing" in each province, raising the prospect that Shia militia members who by this point were present in Sunni-majority provinces would be recruited into them. Two, the clause dealing with command posts gave the prime minister rather than the governor the power of appointment, with the only concession to autonomy being that the provincial council would be able to choose one among three commanders nominated by the premier.

Yet, the kind of provincial countrol Nujayfi and others demanded could never pass parliament for the precise reason that Shia parties would not fund military units that might be controlled by Sunni leaders like Nujayfi who were backed by regional Sunni states. While a cynical desire for domination by Shia parties with militia wings was part of this dynamic, the concern was not without basis given that Sunni leaders, such as Nujayfi and Khanjar, were backed by regional states that were viewed as backing Sunni insurgents in the ongoing war. (At a minimum, Turkey was allowing a wide range of Sunni armed groups to use its territory to gain access to Syria and Iraq, and funding was coming from Arab states.) This debate was carried on intermittently for two years, during which time the Shia-dominated Hashd factions, along with Sunni factions tied to them, continued to grow in numbers and strength.[19] The Hashd itself existed without statutory basis, as an extension of executive orders first by Maliki and then by Abadi.

Finally, in November 2016, the Shia majority in parliament settled the issue by passing the "Popular Mobilization Commission Law of 2016" based on Abadi's executive order from February of the same year. The law was passed by the Shia majority over Sunni opposition,[20] and Shia leaders simply declared it to be an alternative to the putative "National Guard" law, which was now a dead letter.

Thus, in Iraqi politics, Shia dominance during this period was so thorough that national-level conflicts were largely intra-Shia. This was illustrated during the primary parliamentary crisis of Jiburi's tenure, in March-June 2016, when a self-proclaimed "Reform Front" was formed in parliament to challenge the Abadi government. Jiburi nearly lost his post, but this was mainly due to the fact that he was viewed as being allied with Abadi, not for pushing any Sunni-specific agenda. This new front was dominated by Shia MPs tied either with Maliki or Muqtada al-Sadr, and whether Shia or Sunni, were individuals involved in corrupt parties and militias which formed under Maliki.[21] While the front quickly collapsed due to the rivalry between Sadr and Maliki, the central dynamic of national politics between 2014 and 2017 was an intra-Shia struggle for power.

Another key conflict in national politics in 2016 was the impeachment of two of Abadi's lead ministers, Defense Minister Khalid al-Obaydi, a Sunni Arab, and Finance Minister Hoshyar Zebari, a Kurd. While both were ostensibly removed over corruption allegations, both efforts were highly political. What Obaydi and Zebari had in common is that they were the leading ministers who were tied to what might be called at that time the "Barzani-Nujayfi Axis"—i.e., the political alliance between Barzani's KDP and Nujayfi's Mutahidun, which both backed ethno-sectarian autonomy agendas and were close to Turkey. (Obaydi had been a military advisor to Nujayfi before taking office, although he worked closely with Abadi, and Zebari is a Barzani family member.) While Iran-aligned Shia factions were hostile to Obaydi both for his former ties to Nujayfi and then-close ties to Abadi, there was a strong intra-Sunni element to the effort as the corruption allegations were driven by Speaker Jiburi and Anbar MP Muhammad al-Karbuli of al-Hal. According to Obaydi, Karbuli had offered him an alliance in exchange for corrupt actions, but when he refused, Karbuli tried to extort him by accusing him of corruption, followed by the impeachment effort. During a fiery parliament session on August 7, 2016, Obaydi defended himself while attacking Jiburi and Karbuli, but the balance of forces was against him, and he was

19 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 111, July 20, 2015.

20 "Iraqi Parliament Session in which the PMF Bill was Approved in the Absence of Sunni Representatives," *Al-Jazeera Arabic*, Nov. 26, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RbmkmryppVo.

21 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 129, April 20, 2016.

removed from office.[22] This episode needs to be remembered when, as discussed below, Obaydi would run for parliament in May 2018, allied with Abadi. He came in first by a wide margin, a result showing how little regard Sunni voters have for parliament.

The elevation of Abadi and Jiburi as the country's leading Shia and Sunni leaders, respectively, the discrediting of the Sunni establishment concurrent with total Shia dominance in Baghdad, and the empowerment of the "Hashd" Shia militia movement all led to something unimaginable under Maliki: a dramatic decline in sectarian conflict in federal politics. While Sunni politicians would frequently complain of a lack of monetary support for liberated areas or displaced persons from Sunni provinces, all Sunni leaders, including Nujayfi, stressed their support for the Abadi government. The presence of Shia militias backed by Iran in Sunni-majority provinces was a constant source of tension, but as Abadi was correctly viewed as being in political contention with the militias' political wings—such as Hadi al-Amiri's Badr Organization—this made the Iranian role a cross-sectarian concern, a trend which only increased with time.

Each of the two episodes mentioned above, the "Reform Front" gambit and the Obaydi-Zebari impeachments, were examples of this reduction in sectarian conflict. Both involved Shia and Sunni MPs allied against their respective intra-sectarian rivals—Abadi and Jiburi in the first case, and Abadi and Obaydi in the second. The second episode also contained an intra-Kurdish element, as the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), acting in a way unimaginable in years past, refrained from opposing the impeachment of a leading Kurdish minister, as he belonged to the KDP. The KDP and the PUK had fought a civil war in the 1990s, but had successfully unified under the umbrella of the Kurdistan Alliance in federal politics post-2003. This impacted Sunni politics indirectly because it meant that Nujayfi's alliance with "the Kurds" was really just an alliance with Barzani and the KDP. Just as Sunni Arab politics evolved post-2014 from Sunni-Shia conflict to intra-Sunni conflict, Kurdish politics during this period increasingly became intra-Kurdish.

Abadi did preside over a major conflict with the Kurdistan Region after Kurdish leaders overreached in a September 2017 independence referendum that attempted to unilaterally seize control of ethnically mixed territories. But Abadi's centralist policy—which followed from his record on budget issues while in parliament—was widely supported by Sunni Arabs, and this further sidelined Sunni leaders at the national level. Indeed, Abadi's nationalist, non-sectarian leadership during the war paved the way for cross-sectarian electoral lists with Shia leaders in the May 2018 election, including one Abadi led himself.

22 "Dr. Hanan Alfatlawi's Interrogation Session for Defense Minister," Dr. Hanan Alfatlawi YouTube Channel, Aug. 7, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1R__NqR8wE

The Fight for the Provinces

Having less to fight for nationally freed Sunni parties to focus on power struggles at the provincial level. In this regard, it is important to note that there is a fundamental difference between provincial politics between Kurdish and federal provinces and, among the latter, between Shia and Sunni-majority provinces. Provincial intrigue is minimal in the Kurdistan Region because the two dominant Kurdish parties are better able to dictate local dynamics, and this is especially true in Kurdistan Democratic Party-dominated Erbil and Duhok. But in federal provinces, the multi-party fights over the governorships and council chairmanships are intense. Yet, between Sunni and Shia, there is another difference: since Shia are the majority and dominate leading posts, Shia leaders are nationally focused, allowing second-tier figures from their parties to fight over local posts. For Sunnis, by contrast, provincial posts are more important, as they are the primary levers of patronage for their supporters.

The three key Sunni-majority provinces are Nineveh, Salah al-Din, and Anbar. While Sunni Arabs were perhaps half the population in Diyala before the displacements, they were on the defensive, and in 2016, the governorship shifted to the Shia when Muthanna al-Tamimi of Badr was elected. Sunni Arabs are also probably close to 40% of Kirkuk's population, but until October 2017, Kirkuk city was Kurdish-controlled. After the federal takeover that month, Abadi appointed Rakan al-Jiburi, the province's deputy governor, as "acting" governor, a post he has retained to this day. Sunnis were an even more distinct minority in Baghdad, and in each case, these proportions shape the dynamics of provincial politics.

In Nineveh, Uthil al-Nujayfi, while residing in Kurdish-controlled areas, initially held on as governor even as Iraq itself no longer had control of it, but quickly came under attack from rivals who blamed him for its fall. Indeed, the blame game over the fall of Mosul became something of a national pastime. Maliki, who as prime minister was commander-in-chief of the armed forces, attributed the collapse of several divisions to a "conspiracy" that he said was driven by the Kurds[23] (or sometimes the United States, or Sunnis, or some combination). Another line of attack was against Uthil himself, and a August 2015 "report" produced by parliament's Security & Defense Committee framed him as primarily responsible; it also criticized Maliki.[24] This report was produced by the committee's chairman, Hakim al-Zamili, a Sadrist who is notorious as a former militiaman and is not credible. Zamili's report concluded that Nujayfi was complicit with the terrorist takeover of Mosul, and the primary evidence of Nujayfi's support for terrorism was his public statements critical of the Iraqi army (for local abuses).[25]

Widespread corruption (the purchase of positions) and demoralization in the Iraqi army is a better explanation. But the fall of Mosul was too useful a political weapon to admit that the problems were systemic. Given that Maliki had appointed every senior officer in the military for eight years, he merited primary responsibility.

The Nujayfis' failure to get the kind of National Guard bill they wanted coincided with a more direct defeat in Nineveh—or to be more precise, over control of the Nineveh Government-in-Exile, as Mosul remained in enemy hands. On May 28, 2015, parliament exercised its authority under the

23 Maliki has given variations on this conspiracy on a wide range of occasions. For an example focused on the Kurds, see: Interview with Nouri al-Maliki, *al-Sharqiya*, Oct. 19, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28B8YeQo-fQ

24 "In Pictures… the Findings of the Final Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Fall of Mosul," *Rudaw Arabic*, August 17, 2015. https://www.rudaw.net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/1708201511

25 Ibid. See p. 2 of the embedded document.

Atheel al-Nujaifi, former governor of Ninevah. (Wikimedia Commons)

2008 Provincial Powers Law to remove Uthil al-Nujayfi as governor upon motion by Prime Minister Abadi (the law stipulates that the prime minister must initiate the motion).[26] This led to a months-long period in which the council-in-exile, meeting at times in the Kurdish-controlled Nineveh town of Alqosh, north of Mosul, struggled over a replacement. The contest was narrowed down to a Nujayfi-backed candidate, Amin Ibrahim al-Fanash, against Councilman Nufal Hamadi al-Akub, resulting in a two-vote victory in the 39-seat council for Akub on October 5 of that same year. Akub himself was elected in 2013 on a list called Fidelity to Nineveh, which aside from his seat won only one other seat, and then merged into the Arab Nahda coalition, which, along with the Kurds, reelected Nujayfi in 2013. Nahda subsequently fell apart; the defection of Akub's two-seat faction turned the tide, and Akub was rewarded with the governorship.[27] Kurdish council members were not happy, but they accepted the result and vowed to work with him, and Akub visited Erbil to mend ties.

Akub's election was a clear rebuke to the Nujayfis, but of course not a final defeat, as they continued to maintain public visibility as leaders of their Mosul Brigades militia. Yet, they were further disadvantaged by Abadi's nomination of General Najm al-Jiburi as commander of a new Nineveh Operations Command, as Jiburi signaled his intention to recruit tribal allies to the army from rural areas of Nineveh. The rural/urban divide is an important aspect of Nineveh politics, as Akub represented the rural Sunni vote, while the Nujayfis' base was in Mosul proper, and this created the potential for rival Sunni armies recruited from different parts of Nineveh.[28]

Much of the remainder of Akub's term, which ran through March 2019 when he was removed, was taken up with petty squabbles with rival council members. After the liberation of Mosul in May 2017, a key low point came when Akub was first impeached in November of that year. By this point, the Nineveh government was split in two, with Akub governing from Mosul, while opposing council members resorted to meeting in Alqosh because Akub was threatening to use local police to arrest them for terrorism. By the following month, a local court had issued arrest warrants for three opposing council members allied with Nujayfi.[29] One Kurdish councilman also claimed Akub threatened to kill him, though there was dirt on both sides, as about this time a tape recording was released which a Nujayfi ally on the council was heard offering a Toyota Land Cruiser to two fellow councilmen in exchange for turning against Akub.[30]

26 Hamza Mustafa and Dilshad Abdullah, "The Iraqi Parliament Fires al-Nujairi and the Judiciary Revokes the Decision to Terminate al-Jiburi's Membership," *Asharq al-Awsat*, May 29, 2015.

27 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 117, 8-10, October 19, 2015.

28 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 162, 8-9, September 8, 2017.

29 Rezan Ahmad, "Arrest Warrants on 'Terrorism' Charges Against Supporters of the Governor of Nineveh's Dismissal from the Provincial Council," *Bas News*, December 17, 2017. https://www.basnews.com/ar/babat/400675

30 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 166, 6, November 8, 2017.

Nonetheless, Akub held on, and following a legal appeal, the federal Administrative Court invalidated the vote impeaching him.[31] In a sense, Akub had a valid defense, but not one which cleared him publicly: The 2008 law governing the removal of governors requires that the council follow certain procedures, including an in-person questioning of the governor, but this was impossible with the governor threatening to arrest them. To prevent the situation from deteriorating further, in December, Prime Minister Abadi issued an executive order suspending Akub from exercising executive authority in response to Akub's blatant use of police authority.[32]

This led to a period in which two people claimed to be governor, as First Deputy Governor Abd al-Qadir Sinjari, a member of the KDP, claimed to be "acting governor" with the support of what appeared to be a majority of the council.[33] Bear in mind that large portions of Mosul had been destroyed during the seven-month military campaign to liberate it from the Islamic State, so by early 2018, the province was not only in ruins, but also without unified administration, with large parts of the population displaced from their homes.[34]

Akub nonetheless managed to make it through 2018, aided by the fact that the federal political class was absorbed in the campaign for the May parliamentary elections, a voting fraud scandal that engulfed it, and the process of forming a new government that was only resolved in the last week of October. Given the widespread destruction in Mosul and very limited amount of funds provided for reconstruction, even a set of politicians more competent and public-spirited than those who governed Nineveh would have struggled. Observers have generally found that reconstruction has been limited, with the exception of a few small projects conducted by local civil society groups and foreign non-governmental organizations.

Anbar, like Nineveh, also moved in a direction of conciliation toward Baghdad post-2014, but with much less internecine conflict. Following the 2013 provincial elections, Nujayfi's Mutahidun was able to take over the province's governorship from Qasim al-Fahdawi, a former subordinate of Ahmad Abu Risha who struck out on his own and focused on cooperation instead of confrontation with Baghdad. He was replaced that year by Ahmad Khalaf al-Dhiyabi (al-Dulaymi), an active figure in the 2013 Sunni protests. Dhiyabi's repeated conflicts with Maliki, especially over control of the police, were a central part of the breakdown of order in the province during 2014.[35] He spent a period incapacitated after a mortar attack in September, and then on December 23, 2014, Mutahudun-aligned factions replaced him with Suhayb al-Rawi of the Islamic Party, which had governed the province from 2005 to 2009.

Although Rawi made a comment about the autonomy agenda after his election, changes in political environment—the abject failure of Sunni establishment figures in the face of the jihadist takeover and the change in Baghdad from Maliki to Abadi—required a change in tactics. Fallujah, Anbar's second city, had fallen to insurgents immediately, and government forces were barely hanging on in Ramadi, the provincial capital, and so talk of forming an autonomous region in Anbar was out of place. Rawi dropped talk of autonomy completely.

Rawi mirrored Abadi in having a more low-key personality than his predecessors, and the two worked together closely through Anbar's liberation from ISIS. There was a disastrous military retreat from Ramadi in May 2015, but by December of that year, federal forces had retaken central Ramadi, and on December 30, Abadi issued an executive decree creating an inter-ministerial committee to rebuild Anbar, and he put Rawi in charge of it.[36]

31 "Member of the Nineveh Council: The Reply to the Council's Decision Regarding the Dismissal of the Governor is an Administrative Procedure," *al-Sumariya*, Nov. 29, 2017.

32 "Inside the Document: al-Abadi Freezes the Powers of the Nineveh Governor for 60 Days," *al-Aalem*, December 28, 2017.

33 "Nineveh Council Seeks to Prove 52 Charges Against the 'Frozen' Governor," *Sotaliraq*, December 12, 2017.

34 "Two Governors Compete to Administer the Destroyed Nineveh," *Asharq al-Awsat*, January 12, 2018.

35 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 76, 4-8, January 8, 2014.

36 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 122, 2, January 7, 2016.

Ninevah (Wikimedia Commons)

There was a temporary political armistice, and efforts to remove Rawi only began after Ramadi was back under federal control. The second strongest faction in the council was Karbuli's al-Hal, and it led an effort to successfully impeach him in June 2016, but the vote was overturned by the Administrative Court in Baghdad.[37] The council tried again and impeached Rawi a second time in August, but that vote was also overturned by the court in November.[38]

Neither Rawi nor Karbuli's parties had a majority in the council, and following the defection of other council members from Rawi's side, a third successful impeachment vote passed in May 2017.[39] This time, the court let the vote stand, and on August 29, MP Muhammad al-Halbusi was elected governor.[40] Rawi's tenure was further darkened by the revelation in November, after he was out of office, that he had been convicted of corruption and under an amnesty law had been allowed to pay 650 million dinars (about $550,000) to avoid jail.[41]

While Rawi's term in office was much quieter than that of Nujayfi or Akub in Nineveh, it marked a major turn in the political cycle in which power alternated between the Islamic Party and a secularist pro-Baghdad alternative. Then, Ahmad Abu Risha hit his high point with the 2009 election, leading to the governorship of Qasim al-Fahdawi, followed by a return to Islamic Party and its allies and now Karbuli dominance through Halbusi's election. The latter would prove to be a pivotal moment in Sunni politics given Halbusi's success the following year.

In Salah al-Din, provincial politics during the parliamentary term of 2014-2018 had its twists and turns, they were within a much narrower range of possibilities than in Nineveh—whereas Nineveh politics was polarized between the Nujayfi group tied to Turkey and Kurdistan against mostly rural Sunni Arabs who were more pro-Baghdad—in Salah al-Din all leading Sunni figures were Baghdad-aligned, and differed more in tactics than ideology. Furthermore, while Tikrit and most of northern Salah al-Din fell to ISIS, the southern shrine city of Samarra—protected

37 The Administrative Court is part of the Justice Ministry, and the author's observation is that when it comes to the impeachment of governors, those on good terms with the prime minister tend to get a good result.

38 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 143, 5, November 21, 2016.

39 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 161, 7, August 24, 2017.

40 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 163, 10-11, September 23, 2017.

41 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 169, 11, January 6, 2018.

by Shia militias, most notably Muqtada al-Sadr's "Peace Companies" (the new name for the Mahdi Army)—kept the city in federal control. Meanwhile, the large Jibur tribe was divided, but a very large portion of Sunni Jiburis held the government line. Thus, rural areas were contested, but large portions of the province were never dominated by ISIS.

The broader element of continuity was the political dominance of Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi, the strongman of Salah al-Din. First elected governor in 2009, Jiburi has never had an absolute majority, as Uthil al-Nujayfi obtained that same year, but his coalition won a plurality in every election, both provincial and federal. Part of Jiburi's staying power has been his ability to steer a middle course between excessive opposition to Baghdad and sycophancy. In dealing with Shia militia dominance post-2014, Jiburi would work with them, balancing pragmatism with criticism and the claim that he could more effectively work for the return of citizens displaced during the war than others.[42]

When Abadi's government was formed, Jiburi, who had been elected a member of parliament, took a ministerial position as State Minister for Provincial Affairs, and resigned the governorship in favor of a nephew, Raed Ahmad al-Jiburi. Raed maintained the existing policy of holding firm to Baghdad and worked more openly with Shia militias than governors in Nineveh or Anbar.[43] Yet, the Raed al-Jiburi interregnum was limited—Abadi's "reforms" in response to protests in August 2015 included a reduction in the size of his government, including the elimination of Ahmad Abdullah's provincial affairs post. Thus, in April 2016, Raed resigned, and the council reelected Ahmad Abdullah to the post. During his first year back, Jiburi's governance remained unchallenged, and he claimed slow but steady progress in the return of displaced residents while continuing his balancing act toward Shia militias.[44]

Jiburi naturally made enemies in Sunni politics, and throughout this period, he was variously accused of life-long criminality[45] and subjected to attempts on his life (although Jiburi's claim to have survived a total of 84 assassination attempts[46] strains credulity). His enemies struck their first successful blow against him on the legal front in June 2017 when he was sentenced to two years in prison for corruption.[47] Yet, this barely slowed him down, and he was reported to have initially continued signing papers in prison before being moved to a more secure facility. Whether legitimately or not, his legal appeal was accepted within two months, and by September, he was a free man. As the council had not in the interim elected anyone to replace him, Jiburi went strait from jail back to the governor's office.[48] And he held on, without significant challenge, through the May 2018 elections.

42 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 161, 6.; Inside Iraqi Politics 169, 8-9, August 24, 2017.

43 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 103, 6-7, March 19, 2015.

44 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 145, 8-9, December 22, 2016.

45 "In Documents… Governor of Salahaddin Ahmad al-Jiburi Sentenced to Life Imprisonment in 1993 (Episode Three)," *al-Masalah*, March 10, 2016.

46 Ahmad al-Dalimi, "Governor of Salahaddin Dr. Ahmad al-Jiburi Announces He Has Been Subject to 84 Assassination Attempts Since 2005," *West News Agency*. https://westnewsiq.com/?p=5139

47 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 161, 6, August 24, 2017.

48 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 169, 8-9, January 6, 2018.

2018: The Rise of Muhammad al-Halbusi

The central story of Sunni politics from parliamentary elections in May 2018 to the present has been the centrality of Muhammad al-Halbusi. The son of a tribal sheikh from eastern Anbar and currently speaker of parliament, Halbusi came into politics with al-Hal as a protégé of Jamal al-Karbuli's younger brother, Muhammad al-Halbusi, who was also an MP. Born in 1981 and one of Iraq's youngest senior politicians, Halbusi was first elected as an MP during the 2014-2018 term, when al-Hal was part of Nujayfi's electoral coalition, then became chairman of the Finance Committee in 2016 before being elected governor of Anbar in August 2017. Halbusi has been publicly vague about what kind of business he was in before entering politics, but it is believed that he got started doing sub-contracting for the U.S. military.[49] The story of Halbusi's rise would continue with his smashing success in the 2018 election itself, followed by his election as speaker of parliament, the leading national post reserved for a Sunni Arab, then to the formation of his own political coalition and his pivotal role in the crisis surrounding the selection of a new prime minister in late 2019 and early 2020.

There were three main Sunni Arab currents in the election of May 12, 2018. The most high-profile was the contest between Nujayfi and Khalid al-Obaydi, the impeached former defense minister, in Nineveh. Nationally, Nujayfi was running with Khamis Khanjar as part of the Iraqi Decision Alliance coalition, and Nujayfi's failure to strongly defend him during his impeachment drove Obaydi closer to Abadi. Part of what made the Nineveh race so high-profile was not only Obaydi's status, but also the fact that Nujayfi built his campaign around the claim that candidates such as Obaydi were illegitimate because they were running on Shia-led lists and that they be used to elect Shia leaders to senior posts in Baghdad.[50] (What he meant was Abadi's effort to be reelected to another term.) While Nujayfi was trying to reestablish a dominant position he had lost, the campaigns in the other two Sunni-majority provinces involved dominant factions—the Karbuli faction in Anbar and Ahmad Abdullah al-Jubiri's party, Coalition of the Forces of the Patriotic Masses, in Salah al-Din—defending a status quo.

In Nineveh, Obaydi crushed Nujayfi in their head-to-head match. While Nujayfi was reelected, Obaydi led the province with 72,690 votes, the second most of any candidate nationwide (after Nuri al-Maliki in Baghdad) and the most of any Sunni.[51] Nujayfi's 11,650 votes were sufficient to meet the threshold for a seat, but due to Obaydi's result, the Nasr Coalition received seven seats in Nineveh and Nujayfi's coalition only three. This would result in Nujayfi complaining that the election was fraudulent.

Halbusi's results on election day dominated the Anbar election, and the Karbuli-led list, Anbar is Our Identity, had three of the four top candidates. Halbusi received 43,432 votes and Muhammad al-Karbuli, the second-place candidate, received 12,028. Further highlighting Halbusi's standing was that the judicially supervised recount stripped Karbuli of so many of his votes that he no longer made the threshold. He was able to get into parliament as a replacement MP by giving the party's third candidate, Ali Farhan al-Dulaymi, the governorship when Halbusi resigned later to

49 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 163, 10-11, September 23, 2017.

50 "Number One with Dr. Hamid Abdullah: Featuring Osama al-Nujayfi, Head of the Iraqi Decision Alliance," *Fallujah TV*, May 3, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oExz-1W1do

51 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 178, June 2, 2018, contains all of the election results.

U.S. Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo meets with Iraq's Council of Representatives Speaker Muhammad Halbusi and members of the Council of Representatives Foreign-Relations Committee, in Baghdad, Iraq, on January 9, 2019. (U.S. State Department)

become speaker.[52]

In Salah al-Din, Jiburi's list duplicated his success going back to 2009 of winning a narrow plurality in a divided field. Jiburi's personal total of 20,405 votes was nearly double the next most successful Sunni candidate, Muthanna al-Samarrai, but this was only enough to win his list three seats with four other competing lists winning two seats each. Samarrai, running on Iyad Allawi's Nationalist Coalition list, would later split with him and join Halbusi's new coalition in 2019. The second candidate overall was Shia Turkmen, the Badr Organization's Muhammad Taqi al-Amerli, for whom the area around Tuz Khurmato in northeast Salah al-Din is largely a captive base.

What separated Halbusi from Obaydi was that only Halbusi was positioned to capitalize on his electoral success and make himself an independent coalition leader. While the Obaydi-affiliated Bayariq al-Khayr won a couple of seats separately from him, Obaydi himself ran under the banner of Abadi's Nasr Coalition in Nineveh, and while he has usually acted on his own rather than as a surrogate for Abadi, Obaydi has remained a member of the Nasr Coalition to this day. Similarly, Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi and Muhammad al-Karbuli, both more established than Halbusi, would end up playing second-fiddle to the younger man during the term.

The weeks following the election saw major shifts in Sunni alignments. The main prize was the speakership, the most important post reserved by custom for a Sunni, and as Halbusi became a favorite, reports appeared of his willingness to break with his patrons, the Karbulis, to get the post.[53] Ultimately, the Karbulis, with Halbusi coming along, brought al-Hal into a broader Sunni coalition that included Jiburi called the "Axis Alliance,"[54] which then joined the Bina Bloc led by Hadi al-Amiri and his Iran-aligned Fatah Alliance, an electoral collection of the political wings of militias backed by Iran.

The move toward Iran was a major shift from Karbuli's historical stances, which were critical of Iranian influence in Iraq, but it was a less radical shift than Khanjar's decision to join Bina. Khanjar's

52 "Source Reveals Details of 'Deal' Allowing Muhammad Karbuli to Take Seat in Parliament," *Buratha News*, August 18, 2018. http://burathanews.com/arabic/news/336684 "Source: Karbuli Gains Parliamentary Seat After the Withdrawal of a Winning Candidate from His Bloc," *Hathalyoum*, August 16, 2018.

53 "Sources Confirm: Al-Halbusi is Willing to Negotiate Independently of Karbuli After he is Elected," *al-Noor News*, May 15, 2018.

54 "National Axis Shakes Up Bifurcated Sunni Scene," *al-Sharqiya*, August 18, 2018.https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1OFZ0xjRGU

"Arab Project" party—as its name suggested—was the most radical supporter of Sunni Arabism, one which constantly railed against Iran and its proxies. But Khanjar's cheerleading for the "tribal revolutionaries" of 2014 had come back to haunt him, creating not only potential legal risks, but also a risk of militia abduction were he to travel to Baghdad (Khanjar, who is from Anbar, conducted every event of his electoral campaign in Kurdistan and Kurdish-controlled areas of Nineveh). Khanjar had run on a joint list with Nujayfi at the national level, and Nujayfi accused Khanjar of selling out to resolve his legal problems.[55]

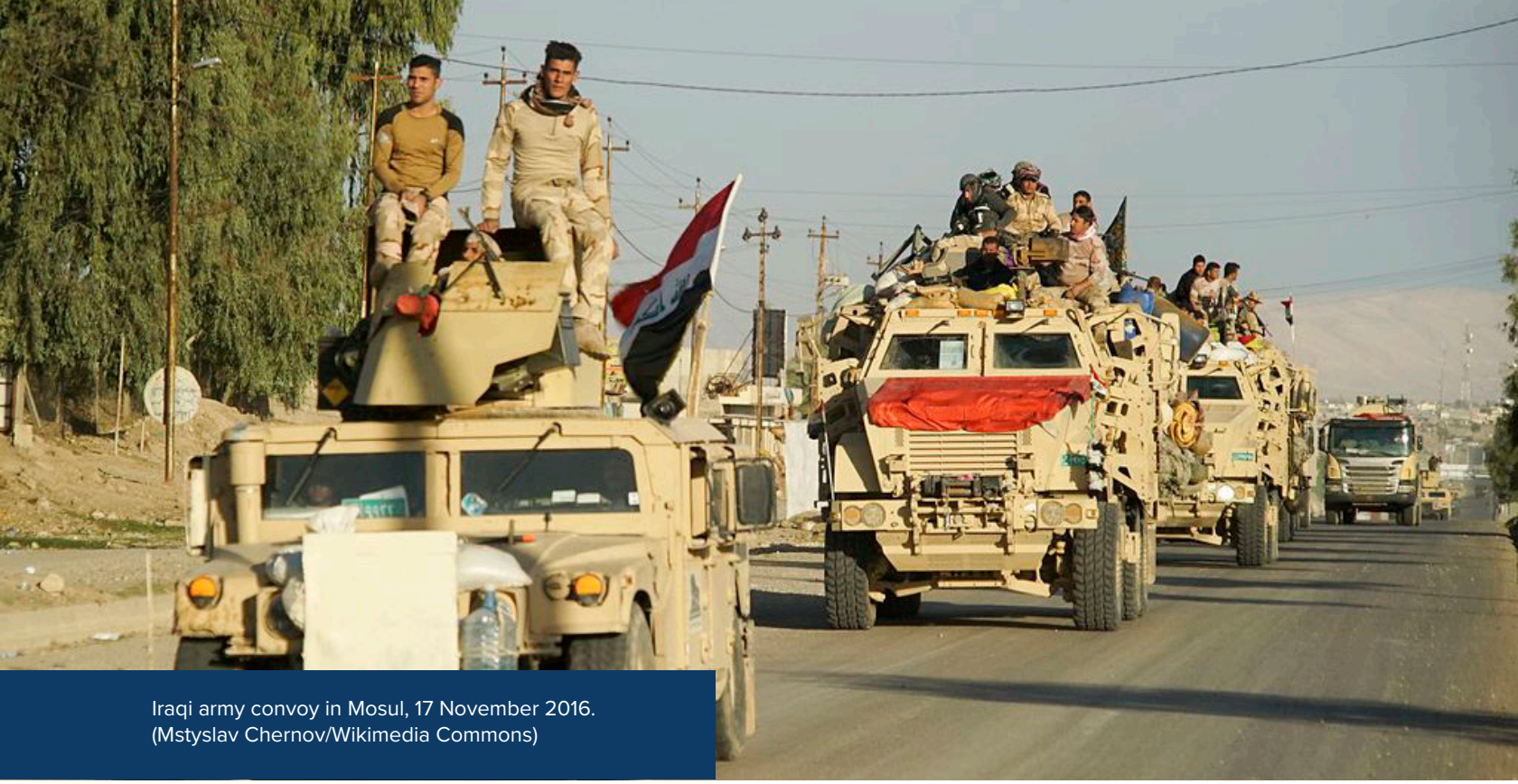
These Sunni realignments played a role in creating a national bifurcation between the Bina Bloc and an opposing Islah Bloc. Nujayfi thus joined Amiri's Shia rivals, and he formed "Islah" along with former Prime Minister Abadi, Muqtada al-Sadr, Iyad Allawi, and Ammar al-Hakim, who all became the pillars of the opposing side. Abadi was still holding out hope for a second term when this group formed the "seeds of the largest bloc," but then morphed into a rival coalition against Bina once Abadi gave up hope of a new term in August.[56] The tenuousness of Halbusi's ties to the opposition coalition is shown by the fact that he initially signed up to join Abadi's group before switching sides.[57]

The climax of the contest between the two groups to form the largest bloc came on September 15 when Halbusi was narrowly elected speaker, by a four-vote margin, with Bina's support. Multiple Sunnis from both sides ran, and part of the process involved Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi, the former Salah al-Din governor, standing down after making a deal to support Halbusi in which Jiburi himself would become the Axis Alliance's leader in parliament. The ultimate vote tally was 169 votes for Halbusi, 89 for Khalid al-Obaydi, 19 for Osama al-Nujayfi, four for Muhammad al-Khalidi, and one vote each for Talal al-Zoubai and Raed al-Dahlaki. As a concession to the Sadrists, who had opposed Halbusi, Sadr City Mayor Hassan al-Kaabi became first deputy speaker in the same vote. This vote also included a deal with the Kurdistan Democratic Party in which Bashir al-Haddad was elected as the second (Kurdish) deputy speaker. It would be the last time Bina—the "largest bloc"—would win a majority vote in this parliament.[58]

Halbusi and his allies also found success in the formation of the government of Adil Abd al-Mahdi, formed in the early hours of October 25, 2018. This included the election of Industry Minster Salah al-Jiburi and Sports Minister Ahmad Talib al-Obaydi. Jiburi, of Salah al-Din, was a member of Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi's party, which dominates that province, and Obaydi was a cousin of the Karbuli brothers. Given that al-Hal already had the speakership, and that another Karbuli brother, Ahmad al-Karbuli, was in exile over corruption allegations from his stint as industry minister (2010-2014), this was a very good result. (Karbuli was sentenced in absentia to four years in prison in 2016.[59]) They also managed to prevent the election of Islamic Party leader Iyad al-Samarrai to head the Planning Ministry, one of the cabinet's most powerful posts because other ministries must coordinate most of their projects with it.[60]

Khanjar was also less successful, and Abd al-Mahdi's promise to give him the Education Ministry would become a black mark on his government. As there were no women in the cabinet, and there was no other ministry the parties want to give to a woman, and also no ministers from Nineveh, so Khanjar's nominees for education were a series of women from Mosul. From his election until the submission of his resignation (following the deaths of protesters in Shia-majority provinces) on November 29, 2019, Abd al-Mahdi spent nearly the entire period nominating one Khanjar candidate after another to the post without success. Saba Khayr al-Din al-Tai was voted down on the day the government was formed. On December 4, 2018, Tai was rejected again,

55 "Iraqi Decision Alliance Announces Split with Khanjar," *al-Mirbad*, June 9, 2018. https://www.almirbad.com/Details/22408
56 "Announcement of Alliance to be the 'Seeds of the Largest Bloc' in Parliament," *Deutsche Welle Arabic*, August 19, 2020.
57 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 184, September 22, 2018.
58 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 184, 13-17, September 22, 2018.
59 "Four Years Imprisonment for the Former Iraqi Minister of Industry in Corruption Cases," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, August 17, 2016.
60 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 186, October 26, 2018.



Iraqi army convoy in Mosul, 17 November 2016.
(Mstyslav Chernov/Wikimedia Commons)

along with three of six other candidates to fill vacancies. One Sunni rejected that day, Nuri al-Dulaymi, an Anbari loosely associated with the Islamic Party, as candidate for the Planning Ministry, was elected on December 18.[61]

On December 24, Abd al-Mahdi tried to complete his cabinet again, and this time, one of two approved ministers was a Sunni, Shayma al-Hiyali, Khanjar's new candidate to head the Education Ministry. Hiyali's election proved a disaster, though, as within days a controversy exploded after a video appeared in which Hiyali's brother was shown speaking as a member of the Islamic State.[62] Hiyali insisted that her brother had been coerced into joining ISIS. Then, the Nujayfis, who now had an interest in undermining Khanjar, claimed that Hiyali's father had been working as a security guard in parliament when Osama al-Nujayfi was speaker and had quit the job in 2014 to join the terrorist group.[63] Hiyali tendered her "resignation," and Abd al-Mahdi responded by noting that since she had not sworn in, the ministry remained vacant. The fight dragged on, and on October 10, 2019, Abd al-Mahdi was able to confirm Suha Khalil al-Ali, another woman from Mosul nominated by Khanjar, to head the Education Ministry.[64]

The saga over Khanjar's education nominees was concurrent with a lengthy controversy over Sunni ministers already in office, namely those mentioned above tied to Karbuli and Jiburi, Ahmad al-Obaydi and Salah al-Jiburi. At the time, he presented his cabinet on October 24-25, 2018, Abd al-Mahdi had submitted his nominees' CVs to parliament just hours before the vote and, in violation of the constitution and the law, had failed to allow the relevant ministries to screen them for disqualifications (confirming that nominees have the degrees they claim, do not have a criminal record, and are not subject to the debaathification law aimed at excluding former senior members of the Ba'th Party). Abd al-Mahdi pleaded with MPs to approve his slate anyway, saying "the sanction will be severe" if any minister

61 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 189, 11, December 24, 2018.
62 "An Iraqi Minister Resigns Because of a Video," *al-Hurra,* December 30, 2018.
63 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 190, January 12, 2019.
64 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 203, October 24, 2019.

lied to get appointed.[65] Within less than a month, several ministers faced accusations; in Obaydi's case, he along with another minister was subject to debaathification, and Obaydi himself faced an allegation that he committed homicide in 2004. Jiburi, who was dean of the Pharmacy College at the University of Tikrit before election, appears to have had a clear record to that point, but was accused of trying to sell the office of director of prison operations as soon as he took office.[66] (In Iraq, a wide range of state offices are alleged to be sold, with the officeholder making his money back through bribes.)

Efforts to remove both of these Sunni ministers from office were ongoing when Abd al-Mahdi's resignation made the issue moot in November 2019. Yet, their survival in these posts showed the value of holding the speakership. While Halbusi never defended either Salah al-Jiburi or Ahmad al-Obaydi, he controlled parliament's schedule. There were attempts to impeach both these men for nearly their entire tenures, and also to interrogate Abd al-Mahdi, but Halbusi used procedural maneuvers to run out the clock.

Halbusi's increasing ambitions toward national Sunni leadership intersected with the fight for control in the provinces in early 2019. In Nineveh, Nufal al-Akub had never held firmly to office, and his tenure was dominated by the stalemate discussed above. Then, on March 21, a tragic ferry accident on the Tigris River in Mosul leading to the drowning of over 100 people and the appearance of negligent safety regulation provided the occasion for a federal takeover. Acting under the 2008 Provincial Powers Law, Prime Minister Abd al-Mahdi proposed that parliament remove Akub from office, and on March 24, parliament did so unanimously. Since parliament also impeached the province's two deputy governors on the same day, Abd al-Mahdi appointed a triumvirate led by General Najm al-Jiburi, still chief of the Nineveh Operations Command from Abadi's term, to run the province on an interim basis.[67]

The controversial election of MP Mansur al-Mareid as governor of Nineveh on May 13[68] to replace Akub turned out to be the trigger for Halbusi's split from the Bina-allied Axis Alliance. Mareid was a Sunni MP and leader of a Sunni "tribal hashd" armed faction during the war against ISIS who was elected on the "Giving Movement" list of Falih al-Fayyad during the 2018 election.[69] (The Fayyad list, and thus Mareid, ran on Abadi's list, but were among the post-election defections to Bina.) As with other Sunni political figures who formed a Hashd group, Mareid's Hashd was small and inconsequential in the war, and mainly signified political alignment with the Amiri-led wing of the Shia political establishment, which then appeared on the rise. Maried's election was achieved through a deal with the Kurds[70] on the council amid allegations that Sunni council members had been bribed.[71]

The Mareid controversy was the proximate public cause of a break between Halbusi and Amiri-allied Sunnis, such as Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi and Khamis Khanjar who had backed Maried. The main aftershock was the formation of the Alliance of Iraqi Forces (AIF) as the leading Sunni national coalition. (In a sense, this was a reformation since a Sunni alliance of this name headed by Nujayfi appeared near the beginning of Abadi's term, but it did nothing of consequence and was omitted from the narrative above.) Since there had been leaks and rumors of Halbusi's plan to form a new coalition the previous month, it is clear that the fight in Nineveh—and the installation of a Shia

65 The comment quoted from Abd al-Mahdi appears shortly after 1:10:00. "Ninth Session – 25-24 October 2018 – Session for Granting Confidence," Iraqi Parliament YouTube Channel, October 24, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-WpIoFMWQXU&t=4s

66 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 188, 3, November 26, 2018; Inside Iraqi Politics No. 189, December 24, 2018.

67 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 193, March 25, 2019.

68 "The Election of MP Mansour al-Maraid as Governor of Nineveh," *al-Hurra Iraq*, May 13, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtwlBgZDgfU

69 See this post about Maraid's pre-campaign biography, which, among other things, mentions his formation of a Hashd faction: Mansour al-Maraid Facebook Page, April 14, 2018. https://www.facebook.com/141785886506177/posts/162357644449001/

70 "Iraq… Agreement Between the Kurds and the Shia for Control Over the Position of Governor of Nineveh," *al-Khaleej*, April 19, 2019.

71 "Iraq: al-Maraid Chosen as Governor of Nineveh with Support from al-Fayyad and Barzani, Amid Accusations of Bribery," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, May 13, 2019.

militia front-man as governor—was simply an opportune moment to make the break. This led to a nasty public fight between Halbusi and Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi, who was accused of bragging that he could buy the votes of councilmen in Sunni-majority provinces.[72]

The result was a public relations coup for Halbusi, who was quickly able to draw a wide range of Sunni MPs elected on various coalitions to join the AIF. Bearing in mind that Halbusi himself had not run as the head of a coalition in 2018, but just as a leading candidate of the Karbuli-dominated "Anbar is Our Identity" list (the core of which was Karbuli's al-Hal), Halbusi was first able to engineer a split between the Karbuli brothers, with Muhammad and most of al-Hal joining the AIF. In addition, the new coalition was joined by MPs from the Axis Alliance who had been originally elected on the lists of Shia leaders, such as former Prime Ministers Haider al-Abadi and Iyad Allawi. Of the 68 Sunni MPs in parliament, Halbusi had at least 50, leaving only Khanjar and Ahmad Abdullah in the Iran-aligned camp and Osama al-Nujayfi's allies on the anti-Iran side, allowing the AIF to frame itself as the "moderate" coalition representing the broad majority of Iraqi Sunnis. No one had voted for this coalition in May 2018, but as a de facto matter, Halbusi had now added to his authority as speaker the status of having the largest Sunni Arab coalition.[73]

Halbusi enhanced the dominance of his coalition following a legal showdown with Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi in late 2019. At some point in November, rumors began to circulate that the former Salah al-Din governor was in jail, a point which his office felt the need to publicly deny, and to prove he was not in jail, on November 20, Jiburi published a video from a supporter's residence in Erbil. But he was in Erbil to avoid arrest, and he needed to avoid arrest because on November 25, Halbusi had written a letter to the judiciary, marked secret but leaked, to the effect that previous court requests to have Jiburi's parliamentary immunity lifted might now be granted if there were another request.[74] This has happened repeatedly in Iraq over the years: when someone becomes persona non grata in Baghdad, an arrest warrant is prepared, and he is given advanced notice so that he can flee the country or to Kurdistan. The Integrity Commission confirmed on November 25, the day of Halbusi's letter, that an arrest warrant had been issued for Jiburi. Parliament issued a document removing his immunity the next day.[75]

The stalemate lasted about two months. By early February, Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi was back in Baghdad and involved in parliamentary politics, his legal problems resolved, but now speaking as a member of Halbusi's coalition.[76] This left just Nujayfi and Khanjar as the only significant Sunni leaders outside of the Halbusi camp.

It is important to note what has not happened in the years since 2014 is the development of substantial political activity or organization outside of the establishment parties. This is partly because the catastrophe of 2014 left Sunni areas flat on their back, with much of the population either displaced or struggling to survive. Another factor, most clearly in Anbar, has been the determination of the local security services not to allow protest activity along the lines taking place in Shia-majority provinces since late 2019. Of particular mention in this regard has been Anbar Governor Ali Farhan al-Dulaymi, who was hand-picked by Halbusi for the post when he became speaker. A further factor killing off political activity across provinces was parliament's decision to abolish the provincial councils throughout Iraq in November 2019 by statute. (This was on the basis that, having been elected in 2013, they no longer represented the public.) This has deprived oppositionists of a traditional forum for criticism and left the governor in each province the dominant figure.

72 "Ninawa Provincial Council Responding to MP Abu Mazen: Our Province is Not a Commodity for Sale," *Bas News*, June 3, 2019. http://www.basnews.com/ar/babat/524924 "Abu Mazen" is the patronymic used by Ahmad Abdullah.

73 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 195, May 14, 2019; Inside Iraqi Politics No. 196, May 26, 2019.

74 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 206, 10-12, January 7, 2020.

75 "Parliament Publishes a Document Confirming the Lifting of MP Ahmad al-Jiburi's Immunity," *al-Daae*, November 26, 2019.

76 Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi Rejects Proposed Muhammad Allawi Government, February 1, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/Dr.Ahmed.Abdullah.al.Jubouri/posts/2554614681454033/

Halbusi's Role in National Crisis of 2019-2020

Halbusi's centrality was highlighted during the political crisis that followed Abd al-Mahdi's resignation on November 29, 2019. Iraq's constitution does not contain a provision governing the resignation of the prime minister. The cabinet's bylaws, which are published as legal regulations, stipulate that he should submit his resignation to the president. Yet, Abd al-Mahdi submitted his resignation to parliament. Halbusi, claiming that he had "consulted" with leading judges but without a formal legal option, combined Article 75, which says that the president resigns to parliament, with Article 62, which says that the prime minister stays on as "caretaker" for 30 days when he is impeached, to come up with a result that Abd al-Mahdi could resign to parliament and then stay in office.[77]

The need for this imaginative solution was to avoid what would have happened had the constitution been implemented strictly: Article 81 provides that if the prime minister's office "becomes vacant for any reason" (without mentioning resignation), then the president becomes the prime minister, and in case there is no vice president, as was the case here, the speaker of parliament would become president. This would have created two problems. One, it would have meant that President Barham Salih, a Kurd, would have become commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Two, even if Halbusi might have enjoyed being president for a period, he would have known that the Kurds would have wanted the position back once a Shia figure was elected prime minister, and he had no way of being sure he could get his job as speaker back at that point. This is the reason that Abd al-Mahdi stayed on as prime minister for over five months into early May 2020 with the election of Mustafa al-Kathimi.

Halbusi's dual role as parliament speaker and Sunni political leader meant that he played a key role in the stalemate that lasted until early May. First, in December, there was a stand-off between the Iran-aligned Bina Bloc, from which Halbusi had become estranged without formally leaving, and much of the rest of the political class. Iraq's constitution gives the "largest bloc in parliament" the right to nominate the prime minister after an election, and interpreting this to mean it could now nominate Abd al-Mahdi's replacement, Bina informally floated a series of candidates. While the president has the duty of designating the candidate of the largest bloc to form a cabinet, Salih tried to stall in the hope that Bina would nominate someone not associated with the established parties, given the force of protests then taking place and the possibility of public disorder. While Halbusi in his capacity as speaker confirmed, when asked by Salih, that Bina was the largest bloc, his coalition responded to Bina's imminent nomination of Qusay al-Suhayl by declaring that his bloc would not support him.[78] While Suhayl himself is not a controversial figure, he is tied to the coalition of former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, and Sunni Arabs widely blame Maliki for the catastrophe which befell their provinces in 2014.

Bina responded to this rebuke by nominating Basra Governor Asaad al-Idani, a move that immediately brought protesters to the streets. Added to this, the withholding of support by not only Halbusi's coalition, but also other Shia parties, led Salih to conclude that Iraq would go into even deeper crisis if he nominated Idani. Recognizing he lacked the authority to refuse, he

77 "The 20th Session," Iraqi Parliament, December 1, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZiqPwoR5v5o

78 "The Alliance of Iraqi Forces Addresses its Partners in the al-Binaa Alliance Regarding the Nomination of al-Suhail for the Prime Minister Position: Document," *Tasrebat*, December 23, 2019. https://tasrebat.com/archives/149648

Former Prime Minister Abd al-Mahdi in Tehran in 2019 (farsi.khamenei.ir)

wrote a letter to Halbusi offering to resign.[79] As Salih surely expected, parliament held no vote to accept the resignation (as Halbusi had with Abd al-Mahdi). As noted above, Salih's resignation, with no vice president, would have resulted in Halbusi being forced to give up his post in order to become interim president.

This turn of events led to another month of paralysis while there was a short-lived effort, mainly supported by Amiri and Bina, to keep Abd al-Mahdi in office. With the political class unable to agree, Salih threatened to nominate whomever he wanted, and was able to get Amiri and Muqtada al-Sadr to agree to support former Communications Minister Muhammad Tawfiq Allawi to form a government. Allawi (a cousin of Iyad Allawi who had been living in Beirut for several years) promptly alienated the political class by declaring that he would choose his own ministers. While Halbusi initially tried to conciliate with Allawi, he came out strongly against his election after failing to make progress.[80] As a result of opposition from Halbusi, as well as some Shia and Kurdish leaders, Allawi failed to form a government.

Allawi's failed nomination was followed by the failed nomination of former Najaf Governor Adnan al-Zurfi in March and early April. While Halbusi backed Zurfi, opposition to him from Amiri's Bina blocked his election. Zurfi's withdrawal was immediately followed by the nomination of Mustafa al-Kathimi, who had been appointed director of the National Intelligence Service by Abadi in 2016. Exhausted from the months of political paralysis, on May 7 parliament approved about two-thirds of Kathimi's cabinet, allowing him to take office.[81] All the Sunni blocs supported Kathimi, who is perceived to support closer ties with the West. The number of Sunni MPs in parliament is simply too small for them to have an impact if the Shia are united, but when they are divided, Halbusi—and presently only Halbusi among Sunni leaders—can shift the balance.

79 "Barham Salih: I Refuse to Assign al-Aidani and He is Ready to Resign,"*Nas News,* December 26, 2019. https://www.nasnews.com/view.php?oldid=169053

80 Two high-profile interviews with Halbusi in which he explains his opposition to Muhammad Tawfiq Allawi: "A Frank Dialogue with Speaker of Parliament Muhammad al-Halbusi," *al-Sharqiya*, February 25, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YmHJW93LCR0 "Speaker of Parliament Muhammad al-Halbusi – The Maneuver – Episode 80," *Alsumaria*, February 26, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B9ZbF6L8iZE

81 "First Session of the Hearing to Grant Confidence to the Government, Thursday, May 6, 2020," Media Department of the Prime Minister's Office YouTube Channel, May 6, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UrVTNkSpL0Q

The Sunni Scene in 2020 & Beyond

Thus, in May 2020, as the Kathimi government began, Muhammad al-Halbusi stood out as Iraq's preeminent Sunni leader, with Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi now subordinate to the younger man. Long-timers, such as Nujayfi, Khanjar, and Karbuli, retain media presence, but none has exerted any legislative influence during this term, nor is there any reason to think that they will. Nujayfi tried to reboot by announcing the formation of yet another coalition, the National Front for Salvation & Development, last September.[82] While Nujayfi's rhetoric has cooled substantially since the heated election of 2014, it is clear that this new coalition will take up the line as the more anti-Iran of the Sunni blocs, but with no more talk of autonomous regions or ties to Turkey. Furthermore, Nujayfi's main attack line, the role of Shia militias and the idea that Sunnis are marginalized, has lost much of its saliency due to the rise of anti-government protests in Shia-majority provinces over the last year. While Iran-backed militias, such as Kata'ib Hezbollah, remain a serious problem, secular Shia protesters and the Kathimi government itself are openly in conflict with them.

Whether Khanjar has any political future at all is questionable given his flip-flop from Sunni Arab champion to Iranian ally in 2018. Jamal al-Karbuli remains in the public eye mainly because his TV channel, Dijla, is popular with the public. After sparring publicly with Halbusi for months—as recent as May calling him an "adolescent"[83]—Jamal seems to have accepted Halbusi's preeminence. Among other notable figures, Khalid al-Obaydi remained active as a sitting MP without capitalizing on his 2018 electoral success, but, on September 14, he was appointed as deputy director of operations for the Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS), the country's leading intelligence office. And as Prime Minister Kathimi has retained his post as director, this makes Obaydi de facto head of the agency. Obaydi likely has more of a future than the others, although his standing could be impacted by perceptions of the performance of the country's counter-terrorism efforts. Najm al-Jiburi seems secure in his governorship in Nineveh, but does not appear to have broader ambitions, and Kirkuk Governor Rakan al-Jiburi will probably do well just to hold on where he is. Former Speaker Salim al-Jiburi remains active, but holds no office. The governors of Anbar and Salah al-Din remain part of the party machines of Halbusi and Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi, respectively, and have no independent base.

Halbusi's dominance was bound to bring reaction, and recent weeks—in October and November—have seen the emergence of a new challenge to Halbusi, but it faces an uphill struggle. Announced on October 24 by Osama al-Nujayfi who was accompanied by a couple dozen Sunni MPs, a new "Iraqi Front" claimed to be a new parliamentary bloc which would remove Halbusi from office and address problems in Sunni-majority provinces, claiming the support of 35 MPs[84] from a range of factions.[85] The effort was quickly undermined with Khanjar, from whose party the group's opening statement had claimed support, disclaimed the effort. More recently, there are unconfirmed reports that Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi has also abandoned the group,[86] which would definitively undermine the effort. Such an effort was always going to be difficult because even if Nujayfi's claim to have

82 "Speech of Mr. Osama Najafi During the Announcement of the Formation of the National Front for Salvation & Development 9/14/2019," Party for a United Iraq YouTube Channel, September 14, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9GmkRxBx0V4

83 "Al-Karbouli Describes al-Halbusi with 'Event' and Attacks 'Policy Contractors,'" *Iraqi 24,* May 5, 2020.

84 "Osama al-Nujayfi: 35 MPs Have Agreed to Form the Iraqi Front to Relieve Citizens of Their Oppression," Mutahidun Facebook Page, October 24, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3004197996347044

85 "New Sunni Front to Remove Halbusi," al-Ghad, October 2020.

86 "Halbusi Successfully Breaks Open Opposition Group by Neutralizing Khanjar and and Abu Mazen [Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi]," Iraqi 24, November 14, 2020.

35 Sunni Arab MPs could be taken at face value, they would have to convince Shia leaders to replace him, and any effort to increase focus on the Sunni-majority provinces, especially one led by Nujayfi, is inherently implausible.

With provincial elections, last held in 2013, indefinitely postponed, and national elections earlier than 2022 in question, challengers to the status quo will need to bide their time, taking their shots on TV where they can get them. Prime Minister Kathimi has recently called for early elections on June 6, 2021, but he lacks the authority to force the issue and must wait for parliament to dissolve itself. In late October, parliament finally completed the appendix to the new law with district and seat allocations so that a new election could be held, although parliament would still need to vote to dissolve itself within 60 days of the proposed date. As a matter of self-interest, MPs who vote for dissolution will be giving up stable, well-paying jobs that many will not retain, and the fact that they deleted the clause funding the election from a recent bill funding government operations generally provides a strong hint as to their intentions.

With civil society weak in Sunni-majority provinces and even limited protest activity restricted by the security services, the next election, whenever it is held, will likely be dominated by the established parties. Sunni Arabs, now able to vote in a physically stable environment, will likely increase their share of seats, but not enough to fundamentally change the balance of power in the country. While the dramatic reduction in sectarian conflict is welcome, the sectarian polarization of 2003-2014 has been replaced by a system in which posts are still allocated on an ethno-sectarian basis, and Sunni leaders are fully integrated members of a kleptocracy that lurches from crisis to crisis and has done little to actually develop Iraq. Absent a dramatic change at the street level, Sunni voters will be represented in the next parliament by the same figures, and at most will only be able to redistribute the share of seats held by the powers that be.

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