

Iraqis struggle over map for a federal state

But federal system expected to remain unstable

Parliamentarians attend the raising of the new Iraqi flag at Cabinet headquarters in Baghdad in February. Two months later, provinces gained the right to become federal regions – or to merge into larger regions.



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BY REIDAR VISSER

BASRA COULD BECOME A second Dubai, according to some Iraqi politicians.

How the militia-dominated southern Iraqi city could become the second New York of the Middle East seems at first glance beyond belief.

Tired of being caught in the crossfire, some civilians opposed to the U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq have started to turn against militiamen of all stripes. Yet opposing the insurgents is one thing. Deciding what the new federal map of Iraq should look like is a more difficult question.

In one vision of the future, the

The dispute over Iraq's federal regions

New visions of Iraq's federal map began to emerge in April 2008. That was when Iraq's 18 provinces gained the right to apply to the central government to become federal regions. These new regions get funding and powers, including the right to establish local paramilitary forces.

However, because a group of provinces would be allowed to merge to form one federal region, Sunni politicians in central Iraq saw red. They

feared there would be an oil-rich Kurdistan in the north and an oil-rich "Shia-stan" in the south, with the Sunni provinces in the centre left with no resources.

The spectre of three warring provinces seems less likely in 2008 than in 2003. Iraqis are beginning to think along economic rather than sectarian lines. There are suggestions for five federal regions or more. Politicians are also talking about funding regions by giving them a percentage of all oil revenues on the basis of population.

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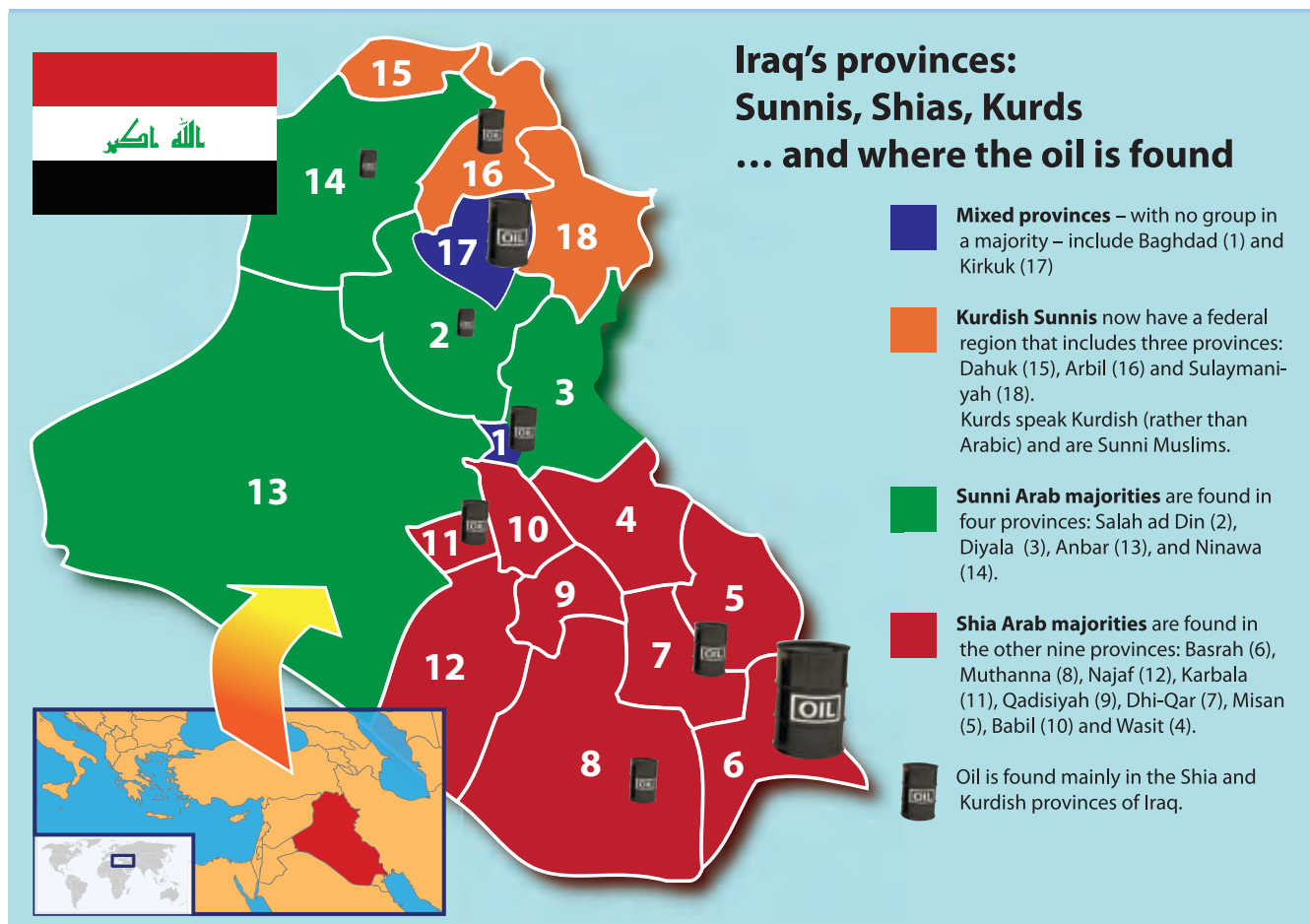


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province of Basrah can return to its former glory as the Venice of the East, as it was once called, if it plays its cards wisely in Iraq's federalization process.

Basra could choose autonomy as a stand-alone entity within a federal Iraq. Abd al-Latif, a Shia Muslim in his late 50s, is one who is confident about the potential of Iraq's south. He says that it should have no special connections with the other eight Shia-majority provinces south of Baghdad.

Creation of a so-called "Shia-stan" in southern Iraq has been a dream for some Shia leaders since the overthrow of dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003. In the north, the Kurdish provinces have already formed a united federal region, while in the centre, the Sunni Arab provinces have not expressed a desire to move in this direction.

The Shiastan vision is for Najaf in central Iraq to become the capital of a federal mega-region of nine Shia provinces extending from Basra on the Persian Gulf to Baghdad. One proponent of this plan is Osad Abu Gulal, also a Shia and the governor of Najaf province. But unlike al-

Latif, Abu Gulal thinks big. While Abu Gulal is proud of Najaf's holy shrines and the millions of Shia pilgrims they attract, he wants to become part of a larger federal entity that can unite Iraq's Shias.

Until today, clashing visions of Iraq's federal future have been abstract battles of ideas – little more than chess games played by elderly men in tea shops. These abstractions became more concrete in mid-April 2008, when Iraq's federalization process entered its second phase. (Its first phase was the adoption by public referendum of a law by which the region of Kurdistan became a recognized federal region of Iraq.)

New rules for provinces

While Iraq is a federal state under the 2005 constitution, until recently, only Kurdistan has been recognized as a federal entity; the rest of the country was governed as a unitary state, and run from Baghdad. In mid-April, the 15 provinces south of Kurdistan (a *de facto* union of three provinces) became free to decide whether to follow the Kurdistan model.

Iraqis are following an unusual proce-

cedure as they go about delineating their future federal map. Most federations are the product of centuries of historical evolution or negotiations by politicians.

The Iraqi constitution requires that new federal entities be formed "from below," through popular initiatives. One-tenth of each province's voters or one-third of the members of each elected provincial council (in effect, the province's legislature) can demand a referendum for a federal region – involving a single province or several joining together. Such an initiative must first be chosen in preference over other proposals from those who prefer a different configuration of provinces; this is done in a "pre-referendum poll." The proposal drawing the most votes must then win by a simple majority in all provinces that are to be merged together. For a proposal to win, a minimum turnout of half of the registered voters in those provinces is required.

Only Spain has done something similar in the past. Many international

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observers admire the Iraqi constitution for its democratic and grassroots-focused approaches to federalism. But there are concerns the country might descend into an endless cycle of failed referendums and constant administrative changes.

With such possibilities for merging provinces, the map of Iraq could change dramatically.

Of the 15 provinces administered from Baghdad, the four with a Sunni Arab majority have shown almost no interest in federalism. Among the nine Shia-majority provinces, only people in Najaf and the far south have expressed enduring enthusiasm for federalism. Baghdad is constitutionally barred from joining another federal region, while the status of the province of Kirkuk in the north is bitterly disputed by Kurdistan's regional government and the central government.

An additional problem for those who support a unified Shia federal region is the apparent absence of support from the top Shia clergy. In 2004, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani blasted the U.S.-sponsored Transitional Administrative Law and its three-person presidency for its "enshrinement of sectarian and ethnic divisions ... which could lead to the fragmentation and partition of Iraq, God forbid."

The executive structure of the Iraqi government includes a president and two vice-presidents – by tradition, one is Shia, one is Sunni Arab and one is Kurdish. This is precisely the dynamic of fragmentation along sectarian lines that critics highlight and object to, including many from the Shia community.

Many are concerned about Basra going it alone. One reason is oil, which

Basrah has far more of than other areas of Iraq. The expression "oil-rich Shia areas" actually means little as more than 80 per cent of Iraq's oil reserves are located in one single province – Basrah.

For many in the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq – known as ISCI – the all-Shia federal super-region would lack its crowning jewel if Basrah chooses separate status instead of joining them.

Centrists say no to super-regions

An increasingly vocal majority in Iraq's parliament, consisting of Sunnis and Shias, is expressing resistance to radical changes to the administrative map south of Kurdistan. This majority includes even some supporters of the powerful Shia chief Muqtada al-Sadr – people like Sadiq al-Hasnawi, who refers to ISCI's federal vision as "the partition project."

This group objects to federal maps drawn along ethnic and sectarian lines. To many Arabs, formal sectarianism is as politically incorrect as institutionalized racism. This is why any federal scheme involving a "Sunnistan" or a "Shiastan" is seen as the equivalent of partition.

This loose coalition of "centrists" recently pressed a law in parliament that focuses on rights of existing provinces and grants them meaningful autonomy without completely emasculating Baghdad of its powers.


The law on non-federated provinces, which includes a provision for holding provincial elections by October 2008, was supported by politicians like Bassam al-Sharif of the Shia Fadila party, who recently cited the need for involving Sunni Arabs in local politics. This joint Shia-Sunni project aims to get Iraq up and working again, without the unpredictability of new federal regions.

The big powers weigh in

As with everything in today's Iraq, this is not about what the majority in parliament thinks. The principal advocate of a Shia super-region, ISCI, enjoys the powerful support of the U.S. and Iran. Even if the Bush administration has yet to publicly embrace ISCI's vision of an Iraq subdivided along ethnic and sectarian lines, in practice, it extends full support to ISCI and continues to give short shrift to the centrist majority in the Iraqi parliament. In a sign that such a position is not just that of the U.S. Republican Party, Democratic Senator Joseph Biden supports ISCI's vision in an even more forceful manner.

Cheney visits Iraq

In a possible change of attitude, U.S. Vice-President Dick Cheney, in a rare trip to Iraq in March, is said to have applied considerable pressure on ISCI to roll back its veto on the provincial law. Days after the visit, the Iraqi presidency council announced the veto had been withdrawn. Aside from this, there is little sign of increased dialogue between Washington and the players that represent Iraq's centrist parliamentary majority, such as the Sadrist, the Fadila party, Shia independents, Sunni Islamists and secular politicians.

Until such engagement occurs and there is closure to Iraq's federalism question, the potential for chronic instability in Iraq's federal structure remains likely. 

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