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Assyrians join Sunnis in opposition to Iraq's Draft Constitution

Assyrian International News Agency (24.08.2005) / HRWF Int. (25.08.2005) Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The draft of Iraq's constitution was submitted three minutes before the midnight deadline on Monday, August 22nd.

It is a historic document for Iraq and may - if ratified - become the most influential document produced in the Middle East in the last one hundred years; it will have a profound influence on the development of democracy and human rights in the area and may well become the Magna Carta of the Middle East.

However, viz-a-viz Assyrians and other non-Muslim minorities, it did not go far enough and takes more than it gives, and it remains to be seen how it will be interpreted and applied by jurists in protecting the minorities of Iraq, such as the Assyrians (also known as Chaldeans and Syriacs), Mandaeans, Yezidiz, Turkomen and Shabaks.

The draft mentions Assyrians in three places:

Article 2, Section 4:

a. Arabic and Kurdish are the two official languages, and Iraqis have the right to teach their sons their mother language like the Turkomen and Assyrian in the government educational institutes.

Article 4

The Turkomen and Assyrian languages are the official languages in the Turkomen and Assyrian areas, and each territory or province has the right to use its own official language if residents have approved in a general referendum vote.

Article 135

This constitution guarantees the administrative, political, cultural and educational rights of different ethnic groups such as Turkomen, Chaldean, Assyrians and other groups.

These three items legally recognize the Assyrians, their language, their right of self administration and their areas. However, article 135 divides the Assyrians into Chaldeans and Assyrians. Chaldeans are Roman Catholic Assyrians and this wording will potentially be used by Kurds to divide the Assyrians and expropriate their lands and villages in North Iraq.

The Kurdish expropriation of Assyrian lands is codified in article 152 of the draft, which states:

Commencing the new Iraqi government, the Iraqi interim law (TAL, [English](#), [Arabic](#)) will be nullified, excluding article 53 (A) and article 58.

Article 53 (A) of the Iraqi interim law states:

The Kurdistan Regional Government is recognized as the official government of the territories that were administered by the government on 19 March 2003 in the governorates of Dohuk, Arbil, Sulaimaniya, Kirkuk, Diyala and Neneveh. The term "Kurdistan Regional Government" shall refer to the Kurdistan National Assembly, the Kurdistan Council of Ministers, and the regional judicial authority in the Kurdistan region.

Depending on its interpretation, this can be viewed as a contradiction to Article 135, which guarantees Assyrians the right of self-administration in their lands. To date, the policies of the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Kurdistan Regional Government towards Assyrians and other minorities have been to Kurdify the people and their villages. The constitution should guarantee that legal license is not available for the continuation of that process.

The constitution addresses the role of Islam in Article Two:

1. *Islam is a main source for legislation.*
2.
 - a. *No law may contradict Islamic standards.*
 - b. *No law may contradict democratic standards.*
 - c. *No law may contradict the essential rights and freedoms mentioned in this constitution.*

These seem to put checks and balances against Shari'a (Islamic Law). Because "democratic standards" are necessarily defined by other sources, and article C (in conjunction with other parts of the constitution) effectively does away with the Dhimmi system (where separate and oppressive laws exist for non-Muslims). Also Article A says "Islamic standards", not Islamic law, and "standards" are much more open to interpretation.

This constitution addresses the needs of Assyrians in many key areas, such as the protection of their language, their right of self-administration and the implicit recognition of their territories, but it potentially cedes control of these territories to the Kurdistan Regional Government. If Federalism, which is enshrined in this constitution, is to be applied uniformly then Assyrians must have their own regional government-- under their control or the central government but not under Kurdish control -- as well as Sunnis, Shiites, Turkomen, Mandeans and all other groups.

The Assyrian Democratic Movement's (ADM) center in Bakhdeda, Nineveh also rallied the locals in a public demonstration against the use of Assyrian and Chaldean in the constitution as if the two are distinct ethnic groups when in fact they are one. The demonstration was held in the Bakhdeda area near the church of Sargis and Bakus with participants from Karimlesh and Bartillah as well. A second demonstration was held in the northern half of the Assyrian region (Telkaif, Telsqof, Baqopeh, and Alqosh). This draft constitution did away with the common name ChaldoAssyrian which the community's leadership had worked tirelessly to include in the TAL.

As it stands the draft constitution poses a legitimate threat to the territorial integrity of Iraq because it is not an impartial document, and it sows the seeds of division and strife. A foundational document such as a constitution must transparently guarantee the rights of and accommodate all of the disparate groups within the country. Sadly, this draft constitution fails to do that.

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U.S. 'concessions' on Islam said to turn Iraq talks

Reuters (20.08. 2005) / HRWF Int. (25.08.2005) Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - U.S. concessions to Islamists on the role of religion in Iraqi law marked a turn in talks on a constitution, negotiators said on Saturday as they raced to meet a 48-hour deadline under intense U.S. pressure to clinch a deal.

U.S. diplomats, who have insisted the constitution must enshrine ideals of equal rights and democracy, declined comment.

Shi'ite, Sunni and Kurdish negotiators all said there was accord on a bigger role for Islamic law than Iraq had before.

But a secular Kurdish politician said Kurds opposed making Islam not "a" but "the" main source of law -- a reversal of interim legal arrangements -- and subjecting all legislation to a religious test.

"We understand the Americans have sided with the Shi'ites," he said. "It's shocking. It doesn't fit American values. They have spent so much blood and money here, only to back the creation of an Islamist state ... I can't believe that's what the Americans really want or what the American people want."

Washington, with 140,000 troops still in Iraq, has insisted Iraqis are free to govern themselves but yet made clear it will not approve the kind of clerical rule seen in Shi'ite Iran, a state President Bush describes as "evil."

U.S. ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad has been shepherding intensive meetings since parliament averted its own dissolution on Monday by giving constitution drafters another week to resolve crucial differences over regional autonomy and division of oil revenues.

Failing to finish by midnight on August 22 could provoke new elections and, effectively, a return to the drawing board for the entire constitutional process. But a further extension may be more likely, as Washington insists the charter is key to its strategy to undermine the Sunni revolt and leave a new Iraqi government largely to fend for itself after U.S. troops go home.

An official of one of the main Shi'ite Islamist parties in the interim government confirmed the deal on law and Islam.

It was unclear what concessions the Shi'ites may have made, but it seemed possible their demands for Shi'ite autonomy in the oil-rich south, pressed this month by Islamist leader Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, may be watered down in the face of Sunni opposition.

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Iraq faith minorities fear being left out under law

by Julia Duin

WWRN (14.07.2005) / HRWF Int. (18.07.2005) - Website <http://www.hrwf.org> - Email - info@hrwf.net - A month before the debuting of a new Iraqi constitution, the country's religious minorities are worried the document may leave out any meaningful provisions for religious freedom.

A panel representing three of those minorities called on the United States to ensure the constitution, to be revealed Aug. 15, benefits them as well as the Shi'ites, Sunnis and Kurds.

"If Iraq was invaded by a despotic or authoritarian country, we wouldn't expect any justice or democracy," said Orhan Keten, the U.S. representative of the Iraqi Turkmen Front.

"But being invaded by the United States of America, who promised to bring equality, justice, democracy and pluralism to Iraq, we expect the fulfillment of those promises."

The panel, speaking yesterday at the National Press Club, was a rare gathering of spokesmen for Iraq's Chaldo/Assyrian Catholics, whose 800,000 adherents in northern Iraq are rapidly dwindling; Iraqi Turkmen Muslims; and Mandaean, who follow John the Baptist as God's chief prophet.

They were joined by Nina Shea, a member of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, who said a draft of the religious freedom provisions in the new constitution may be available this week.

"Religious freedom is not being red-lined by the U.S. government," she said.

If the constitution names Shariah as the main source of Iraqi civil law, she said, non-Muslims will be relegated to second-class status at best and at worst, be driven out of the country, slain or forced to convert.

"Another Trojan horse," she added, "is a 'repugnancy law,' which is a provision that would say no law can be passed that is 'repugnant' to Islam."

She said the constitution also could give power to unelected clerics, as is the case in Iran, or institute Pakistani-style "blasphemy laws" against anyone presumed to have criticized Islam.

"There's a long history in this region of suppression of non-dominant Muslim groups," she said.

Panelists said their situation in Iraq is already grim; that religious persecution has only worsened since the Americans arrived in the spring of 2003 and that "tens of thousands" of their adherents have fled to neighboring countries.

Not only is the United States refusing to intervene in turf wars between various groups, they said, but it is diverting development funds to these minorities' traditional enemies.

"U.S. funding in northern Iraq is not being directed by the authentic Christian Chaldo/Assyrian leadership," said Michael Youash, project director for the Iraq Sustainable Democracy Project and a spokesman for the Aramaic-speaking Chaldo/Assyrian Catholics.

Instead, he contended, Kurdish political parties have been entrusted with millions of dollars in funds that mainly benefits their causes.

Kani Xulam of the American Kurdish Information Network said Kurdish leaders do work with some Assyrians, who are apparently satisfied.

"Others do not work with them and they are the ones complaining," he said. But there is room for dissent in any society."

Source: WWRN

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Assyrians prevented by Kurds from voting in North Iraq

HRWF Int. (31.01.2005) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Following Iraq's elections, the Assyrian International News Agency (AINA) reported that the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) headed by Masoud Barzani has prevented voting by Assyrian (also known as Chaldean and Syriac) Christians of the Nineveh Plain in northern Iraq.

According to a series of reports from inside Iraq, the KDP effectively blocked the delivery of ballot boxes to six major Assyrian towns and villages in the Plains around Mosul including Baghdeda, Bartilla, Karemlash, Shekhan, Ain Sifne and Bahzan.

The Nineveh Plain contains the last remaining stronghold of predominantly Assyrian towns and villages in the immediate environs of the ruins of Nineveh, the ancient Assyrian capital.

Thousands of would be voters were left stranded outside polling places waiting an opportunity to cast their ballots. Inquiries to voting authorities brought frequent promises that the ballot boxes were en route only to result in a series of disappointments throughout the day.

Infuriated Assyrians filled the streets of Baghdeda - the largest Assyrian town in the Nineveh Plain-and demonstrated against the KDP's overt disenfranchisement of Assyrians, AINA reported.

According to Iraq sources, the ballot boxes had been stored in Arbil, the stronghold of the KDP. The resulting unavailability of ballot boxes affected up to 100,000 Assyrian voters eliminating any possible Assyrian representation from the Nineveh Plain in the upcoming National Assembly.

Other communities including Turkmans, Yezidis, and Shabak were also prevented from voting, AINA reported.

Source: AINA

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Former Anglican head warns of abuses against Assyrians in Iraq

AFP (24.01.2005) / HRWF Int. (20.01.2005) – Website <http://www.hrwf.org> – Email – info@hrwf.net - Iraq's long-repressed Assyrian population faces "systematic violence" in post-Saddam Iraq and needs better protection, the former head of the worldwide Anglican Church said.

Lord George Carey, who stepped down as Archbishop of Canterbury in 2002, joined members of London's Assyrian community to warn that ethnic cleansing of Assyrians in Iraq had worsened since the fall of Saddam Hussein.

The mainly Christian Assyrians, who speak Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke, have been brutally repressed for many decades in largely Muslim Iraq.

Things have not been better since the March 2003 US-led war to unseat Saddam, Carey said.

"In recent months and years churches and monasteries have been attacked and people have been killed," he said.

"In one case a young man was kidnapped and beheaded. We are talking about terrible atrocities which would undermine any community.

"These are issues of human rights and abuse of people which we have to be aware of. It is systematic violence against Assyrian people, driving them out of their homes and pillaging them.

"It is putting pressure upon them to get them to leave."

Mark Seddon, who is organising a campaign to raise awareness of the Assyrians' situation, called for their rights to be enshrined in a new Iraqi constitution.

"There does appear to be a degree of ethnic cleansing going on now," he said.

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Kidnapped Iraq Bishop freed says no ransom paid

by Philip Pullella

Reuters (18.01.2005) / HRWF Int. (20.01.2005) – Website <http://www.hrwf.org> – Email – info@hrwf.net - The Iraqi Catholic archbishop of Mosul who was kidnapped at gunpoint Monday was freed Tuesday and said no ransom had been paid.

Archbishop Basile Georges Casmoussa, 66, said he hoped his ordeal would not be seen as an attack on the Church in the predominantly Muslim nation.

The Vatican, which had condemned the abduction as an "act of terrorism," welcomed his release and said Pope John Paul "thanked God for the happy ending."

Casmoussa told Vatican Radio he had been treated well during his one day in captivity.

"As soon as they found out I was a bishop, their attitude changed ... I think that my abduction was a coincidence. In recent times, there have been numerous kidnappings around here," Casmoussa said.

"Based on the conversations I had with them (the kidnappers), it didn't appear to me that they wanted to strike at the Church as such."

Misna, a Rome-based Catholic missionary news agency with extensive contacts in the developing world, earlier reported the kidnappers had demanded a ransom of \$200,000.

The Vatican, which Monday night demanded the immediate release of the archbishop, confirmed no ransom had been paid.

Casmoussa was kidnapped by gunmen in two cars in the northern al-Majmoua al-Thaqafiya district of Iraq's third largest city Tuesday afternoon while he was on his way to visit some families in his congregation.

Navarro-Valls, the Vatican spokesman, said the kidnapping had "prompted great surprise" because Casmoussa was "very much loved" by both the Christian and Muslim community.

Casmoussa was believed to have been the highest ranking Catholic prelate to be abducted in Iraq, where the local church has been the target of a bombing campaign aimed at intimidating the tiny Christian minority.

Most of Iraq's Christians, who make up some 3 percent of the 25 million populations, belong to the early Assyrian and Chaldean Catholic churches. The Vatican strongly opposed the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq.

While Christians had little political power under Saddam Hussein, they were free to worship and did not feel threatened by sectarian violence.

But Iraq's 650,000 or so Christians have been trickling out of their ancient homeland since the U.S.-led invasion in 2003 as insurgents step up attacks against both Muslim and Christian holy places in an apparent bid to inflame sectarian tension.

On Aug. 1 five churches in Baghdad and the northern city of Mosul were bombed in coordinated attacks that killed 12 people. Five Baghdad churches were bombed on the Oct. 16 start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Eight were killed in two church bombings on Nov. 8.

Midnight Mass was cancelled last Christmas, as several cities were under curfew and Iraq's Christian religious leaders feared renewed attacks.

Last month the Vatican's foreign minister warned that anti-Christian feeling was spreading in Iraq and other Muslim countries because of the war on terrorism.

Archbishop Giovanni Lajolo, the Vatican's second-ranking diplomat, said anti-Christian feeling existed where political strategies of Western countries were believed to be driven by Christianity.

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Vatican demands release of abducted archbishop

CNN (18.01.2005) / HRWF Int. (18.01.2005) – Website <http://www.hrwf.org> – Email – info@hrwf.net - The Vatican is demanding the immediate release of a Catholic archbishop who was kidnapped in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul.

Basil George Casmoussa, 66, was outside a private residence on a main road in al-Muhendisin, in Mosul, when he was abducted Monday, said Kahr Goran, deputy governor of Nineveh province.

Iraqi officials said the kidnappers used two cars.

Casmoussa, an Iraqi, lives in a neighborhood east of Mosul called Qaraqos, Goran said.

Christians are a minority in Iraq, which is 97 percent Muslim. But thousands of Christians live in the Mosul area.

The statement from the Vatican said: "The Holy See deplores in the firmest way such a terrorist act and demands the archbishop be freed immediately."

There have been several recent attacks on Christian targets in Iraq, including the bombings of several churches. Archbishop Casmoussa, seen in this undated photo, was kidnapped in Mosul Monday.

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Kurdish attacks on Assyrians in Iraq intensify as election nears

AINA (17.01.2005) / HRWF Int. (18.01.2005) – Website <http://www.hrwf.org> – Email – info@hrwf.net - In a January 13, 2005 report from Al-Hamdaniya (Bakhdeda), a strategic district capital located between the Kurdish controlled city of Arbil and the Iraqi controlled Mosul in North Iraq, and one of the largest, most homogenous Assyrian towns in the world, Assyrian (also known as Chaldean and Syriac) sources have detailed an intensified wave of attacks by Kurdish paramilitaries tied to Kurdish warlord Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

The heightened terror wave is widely believed timed to coincide with the upcoming Iraqi National Assembly elections on January 30.

According to the report, during Christmas mass, an armed group from the KDP militia attacked Mar Yohana (St. John's) Church in Bakhdeda. Previous attacks against Churches throughout Iraq had prompted some local volunteers to guard the Church during mass. The Assyrian guards were fired upon by KDP assailants leading to two serious injuries.

A Church council committee convened to file formal a police complaint demanding an investigation and punishment of the attackers. As no action was forthcoming from the KDP, the Church council committee again inquired with the KDP personnel who had filed the original complaint but was told that any formal complaint had ever been filed and warned that further pursuit of such a complaint might invite further reprisals.

To date, no investigation has been carried out and no suspects have been apprehended. Recently, Kurdish attackers have grown emboldened. In the past, attackers had strained to remain anonymous. The series of beheadings, mutilations, burnings, and shootings of innocent civilians in Mosul and the surrounding Nineveh Plain were usually carried out in isolated areas or under cover of darkness in order to conceal the identity of the perpetrators. In the most recent attacks, the assailants have been clearly identified as KDP members from nearby surrounding areas. As one Assyrian villager noted "They seemed to want us to know they were with the KDP in order to cause greater fear." Another noted that the "KDP now seemed to be advertising their involvement in the attacks."

In another incident, armed thugs claiming to be KDP forcibly entered several homes in Bakhdeda, gathered the residents, verbally assaulted and beat them. Several of the men were taken away for interrogation and remain unaccounted for.

Another group of KDP militiamen attacked a Bakhdeda Assyrian family and confiscated the home for use by other KDP forces. The attackers asserted that a female relative of the family was married to a KDP member and that that entitled them to take over the home. Later, several KDP armed paramilitaries took up residence in the home.

In another attack, the county government land deeds office in Bakhdeda was ransacked by the KDP. The Assyrian director of the office was repeatedly beaten resulting in severe head trauma. Other employees were similarly attacked and threatened. The county offices have remained closed since the attack.

KDP paramilitaries have also systematically and regularly stolen fuel shipments destined to Bakhdeda's fuel distribution center. The stolen fuel is often sold on the black market by the KDP members.

Almost routinely, a new fuel shipment is spotted by KDP scouts who shoot bullets into the air signaling their compatriots to attack the shipment.

Repeated calls to KDP leadership to reign in their thugs and Coalition forces to enforce law and order have gone unheeded. One villager lamented "these thieves actually flaunt their close ties to the US military as if to say 'there's nothing you can do to stop us.'"

The attackers often enter Bakhdeda and civilian homes with ready excuses. According to one observer, "Some days they say they are looking for Baathists. Other times they say they are looking for PKK (Kurdistan Worker's Party)." Alluding to KDP tribal ties to Kurdish Islamic fundamentalist groups, he added "And, still other times, they say they are looking for Ansar Al Islam -- their own cousins. The pretexts and excuses are as plentiful as their appetite for terror."

The most recent escalation of violence against Assyrians is widely believed to be aimed at coercing local Assyrians in the Nineveh Plain and Mosul to renounce allegiance to independent Assyrian political party slates in the upcoming elections in favor of the KDP and PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) slate or at least to minimize Assyrian election turnout.

KDP pressure has targeted Assyrian civilians, leaders, and clergy. On January 9, intensified threats and pressure against Fr. Louis Qassab of St. John's Church in Bakhdeda led him to acquiesce to KDP appeals that all able bodied men in Bakhdeda enlist in a KDP sponsored village guard.

The ultimate aim of the KDP guard is to compel the town of Bakhdeda and surrounding towns in the Nineveh Plain to be formally and fully integrated into the Kurduistan Regional Government (KRG) ahead of upcoming elections in order to thwart an independent Assyrian leadership that may demand a self-administered area for Assyrians in the Nineveh Plain.

The Nineveh Plain abuts against the Kurdish occupied historically Assyrian provinces of Arbil and Dohuk in northern Iraq. The area of major Assyrian towns and villages has been proposed as a ChaldoAssyrian self-administered area in Article 53d of the transitional Administrative Law (TAL). The area has also been described as the "The Last Stand" for Assyrian survival in Iraq.

But certain Kurdish groups have eyed the area for future integration into a Kurdish occupied autonomous region. One analyst noted that the KDP "is trying to establish 'facts on the ground' that will de facto annex the region to the Kurdish occupied area."

Alluding to the attempt to establish Kurdish led security forces and village councils, the analyst continued "the KDP hopes that by establishing such institutions directly linked to their government structure, they will enhance the likelihood that the Assyrians' 'Last Stand' will melt into the greater Kurdish area."

However, the systematic degradation of Assyrian aspirations for a self-administered area will be fiercely resisted predicted one scholar. Even Fr. Louis' call for enlistment in the KDP force will be slow and difficult since the KDP motivation is clear.

"First, the KDP foments turmoil and raises the level of terror and fear amongst civilians, then they cynically offer to establish security forces under their command in exchange for abandoning our national aspirations."

The ongoing threats may have been the motivation behind last month's call by Mr. Yonadam Kanna for 1500 armed men to protect the Nineveh Plain. Although Assyrians in Iraq lack the resources to maintain such a force, the announcement was interpreted by one analyst as "code to mobilize support amongst Assyrians within and without Iraq for such an undertaking. We have that many available personnel and more. What we lack is the resources to arm and maintain them."

The call for a 1500 strong police force to safe guard the Nineveh Plain is seen as a challenge to the resourcefulness of diaspora based Assyrians to help enable and maintain such a force. Referring to the close ties between US forces and the KDP, one analyst complained so far, our tax dollars have gone to aiding the KDP in terrorizing our own people."

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Iraq clerics' influence raises concern

by Hamza Hendawi

AP (17.01.2005) / HRWF Int. (18.01.2005) – Website <http://www.hrwf.org> – Email – info@hrwf.net
- A stern-faced Saddam Hussein in a Western suit and hat was the defining image of the dictator's final years in power. Today, an old, white-bearded cleric in a black turban and robe is the face of Iraq.

The phenomenal contrast of those two images speaks volumes about the transformation of this nation since Saddam's ouster 21 months ago. The brutal, secular dictator is gone. Now religion has taken center stage in Iraqi politics, and a landmark election in less than two weeks has brought the country's powerful Shiite clergy to the forefront.

That has meant a volatile mixture of religion and politics and widened the religious and ethnic faultlines in this culturally, ethnically and religiously diverse nation of nearly 26 million — most of them Shiites.

"Religion has entered the Iraqi political system and there will be nothing less than a very bloody war if someone tries to take it out," said Diah Rashwan, a prominent expert on Islamic issues from Egypt's Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies.

During 35 bloody years under Saddam's Baath Party, most Iraqis, particularly Shiites, yearned to express their religious identity. The unfettered freedoms that followed Saddam's removal allowed them to do so.

That set in motion an Islamic revival that, in the case of the Shiites, brought laymen and clergy together in an alliance that would be nearly impossible to reverse.

After decades of oppression by the once-dominant Arab Sunni minority, Iraq's Shiites are embracing the Jan. 30 vote that's expected to hand them power. At the same time, Sunni Arabs fear the election will spell the end of their domination.

These conflicting interests have deepened the gap between the two rival communities as an intensifying Sunni insurgency raises fears of a Shiite-Sunni civil war.

Furthermore, by directly involving themselves in politics, Iraq's religious Shiite leaders, with the aging Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani at the forefront, have gone beyond their spiritual mandate. That in turn has given rise to fears among some Iraqis that the country could be headed either toward Iranian-style clerical rule or — at a minimum — to a system where the clergy are a permanent fixture in politics.

Such fears are fed by the fact that al-Sistani has tacitly lent his support to a ticket that includes two of the largest Islamic-oriented parties, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, or SCIRI, and Dawa.

These concerns also are shared by some Arab regimes in a region where most people follow the mainstream rival Sunni sect of Islam.

Shiism has traditionally been associated in the Arab world with Iran, a Shiite nation viewed with suspicion and distrust by many Arab regimes. It fought Iraq for eight years in the 1980s. The thousands of posters bearing the image of al-Sistani and other clerics stir memories of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which overthrew the shah and installed Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Both SCIRI and Dawa maintain close links with Iran, where they had found refuge and support during more than two decades in exile. Top leaders of both parties have repeatedly promised not to impose Iranian-style clerical rule if they win control of the 275-member National Assembly.

Al-Sistani himself was born in Iran but has spent more than 50 years in Iraq. His Iranian origins are often cited by critics who maintain he should stay out of Iraqi politics. Some Shiites point out that the co-founder of the Baath Party, the late Michel Aflaq, was Syrian.

Al-Sistani, however, has enjoyed wide support among Iraq's Shiites since his rise to prominence in the 1990s. By the time of Saddam's ouster in 2003, he was the country's top cleric. His incessant calls for elections and his open challenges to the United States over its political plans for Iraq further raised his standing.

Now, his tacit blessing for an electoral alliance contesting the January vote may be enough to bring victory in the ballot. Tens of thousands of election posters promoting the alliance bear his image, while hundreds of banners bear his words to get out the vote.

Some Shiite preachers say that voting for the United Iraqi Alliance that al-Sistani has endorsed is a religious obligation. Politicians from the alliance, which includes some Sunni Arabs, have repeatedly sought to distance the ayatollah from such statements.

"The interference by religious leaders in this way entails grave dangers that will impact on political life in Iraq and push it to extremism," said Baghdad University political scientist Nabil Salem, who believes politicians and clerics are using each other for their own purposes.

"The clerics are trying to use politicians from their sect to influence events and the politicians are using the power of the clerics on the streets to try and harvest votes."

Al-Sistani is not the only senior Shiite figure involved in the campaign.

Portraits of Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Taqi al-Modaresi, the most senior cleric in the holy city of Karbala, adorn hundreds of election banners and posters put up by a rival Shiite alliance. Posters by another ticket led by interim Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, a secular Shiite, bear a picture of Hussein al-Sadr, a senior Shiite figure from Baghdad.

Muqtada al-Sadr, a radical Shiite cleric whose supporters staged two uprisings against U.S. troops last year, is another religious Shiite figure with a substantial political presence in Iraq. He is openly seeking to establish an Islamic regime in Iraq.

Sunni clerics are playing a big role too. The Association of Muslim Scholars, which rose after Saddam's ouster to speak for the Sunni clerical establishment, is urging an election boycott.

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