Maliki and the South:
Intra-group and center-periphery competition, and the logics of power consolidation in Iraq post-2003

“Instead of weak and temporary institutions (...) the factions were single-minded in their efforts to tap the most enduring source of power in the country - that which is drawn from the barrel of a gun.”

“I want a civil state... I want a representative and a minister and a decision-maker who claims to be a son of Iraq, and not a son of his tribe.” – Young Iraqi woman quoted about Iraq’s electoral process in 2014

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I. Introduction

From the vantage point of early 2014, perhaps one of the dominant themes of the past decade in Iraq has been the gradual consolidation of centralized political power in the hands of Nuri al-Maliki, Iraq's Prime Minister since 2006. Fears about the Prime Minister's 'authoritarian' tendencies have figured prominently in national debates for several years. Clearly, concern over Maliki's swift rise to power is understandable given Iraq's recent travails under the regime of Saddam Hussein. Nonetheless, in order to begin to guess what strategies or motives may be driving Maliki's political maneuvers, it is crucial to place these within the specific context of post-conflict state-building in which they are unfolding.

The following essay will explore the logics and strategies of power that have shaped the interactions between competing Shi'a Muslim political actors in Iraq since 2003. More specifically, our analysis will try to shed light on Maliki's attempts to extend his growing power in Baghdad outward to the country's Shi'a-dominated southern regions. By approaching this dimension of Iraqi politics from the specific angle of Maliki's attempts to consolidate his control over the Iraqi state, we will try to show that Maliki's strategies reflect the critical importance of both intra-group and center-periphery power struggles in processes of elite bargaining that drive state-building. Furthermore, the objective is to show that in Iraq the evolution of these complex processes of political competition has been shaped by a framework of opportunities and constraints determined primarily by four factors: 1) the nature of political elites, 2) the specific historical, socio-cultural and economic context of Iraq, 3) the formal legal and institutional framework established by the state-building process, and 4) the role and influence of international actors.

In a first section, we will introduce a brief theoretical discussion on state-building in order to inscribe our analysis into a broader reflection on what implications Maliki's strategies for power consolidation might carry for the longer-term development of Iraq's new political institutions. From there, we will begin by outlining the early stages of political reconstruction in Iraq post-2003, with a focus on Shi'a politics and the processes and events that brought al-Maliki to power as Prime Minister in early 2006. After focusing on these political processes occurring at the center of Iraq's political order, we will turn to explore the nature of center-periphery relations and the dynamics of local governance in southern Iraq post-2003. Finally, the two following sections will then be dedicated to studying two techniques of power consolidation through which Maliki has engaged with power Shi'a groups in Iraq's southern regions, namely his use of state security forces and the empowerment of societal actors (tribes) as strategies to compete for social and political control with other well-established Shi'a groups.

II. Theoretical framework –state-building and political development

A. What does it mean to build a new political order?

State-building refers to the process of re-building a new political system either in post-independence or modernizing state (where a central state may never have existed), or in failed, fragile, or post-conflict states (where a central state may have existed but has either collapsed or stopped functioning.). Today the term mostly applies to countries in the second category, and state-building has become depicted as a tightly-regimented and highly-technical exercise generally dictated by the intrusive stewardship of foreign actors.[1]

As illustrated in the figure in Annex 1, in the vacuum created by the absence of a functioning overarching political order covering the entire 'national territory', affiliation to a primordial group can become the key determinant for an individual's access to security, protection, structures of conflict mediation, and social services. Even in those cases where a central state, and some form of associated national identity, might have previously existed, societies generally react by reactivating the political role of sub-national social structures predicated on primordial identities. Speaking about the non-state actors and dynamics that maintain order in 'stateless' environments, Boege et al. write:

> "Customary law, traditional societal structures (extended families, clans, tribes, religious brotherhoods, village communities), and traditional authorities (such as village elders, headmen, clan chiefs, healers, *bigmen*, religious leaders, etc.) determine the everyday social reality of large parts of the population in developing countries even today, particularly in rural and remote areas." [2]

One of the risks of a political system that primes sub-national identities is a propensity for inter-group conflict, since political discontent and competition also become expressed along identity lines. This risk becomes especially acute during any attempt to establish an overarching central state expected to exert political control over all groups at once. Each segment of society is generally controlled by elites whose power and authority is predicated on the cultural identity that binds the group together. The fate of these elites is therefore closely tied to their capacity to perpetuate a certain 'primordial identity-centric' social dynamic and political culture, and this explains why attempts to integrate multiple groups into a new, overarching political order would generate passionate resistance from pre-existing centers of power.

B. Historical state-building in the West

Historically, processes of political centralization and state formation were generally the result of complex, powerful forces (combinations of external threats and internal advantages) that made the creation of a

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[1] Woodward, 2004: 5-6
[2] 2009: 20

larger political entity with efficient institutions either highly useful or even a pre-requisite for survival. This utility would create incentives for both elites and the masses to gradually – fitfully and non-linearly- transfer their political allegiance from 'traditional' political leaders (as members of a primordial group) to the state (as citizens).[3] Nevertheless, even given those incentives, the "establishment of the 'monopoly over the legitimate use of force' [by a central state] against local resistance was a highly competitive and violent endeavor"[4] – and one that generally required centuries. Clifford Geertz remarks that "the very process of the formation of a sovereign civil state (…) stimulates sentiments of parochialism, communalism, racialism, and so on, because it [introduces] into society a valuable new prize over which to fight and a frightening new force with which to contend."[5] In fact, from a perspective informed by both historical (Western Europe) and contemporary (Afghanistan) processes of state formation, Mukhopadhyay writes: "One of the core elements of the state-building project, then, is the management of competition: from the challenge of peripheral power holders pose to a young ruler to the struggle for control among peripheral power holders themselves, competition manifests in different forms."[6] Indeed, it is also important to note that violent exclusion has been shown to have played a crucial role in the historical political development of most nation-states that are generally seen as having subsequently achieved a certain level of inclusive and democratic citizenship:

> "Nationalism in the core countries of western Europe was built, more or less purposefully or successfully, not only in the context of but also on the back of fanatical religious passion and conflict. Though this contradicts the images of Western 'civic' nationalism, (…) and despite later denials, the reliance on religious identities to bolster secular solidarities was exclusionary, reflecting sectarian passions with nationalism forged by such exclusion."[7]

In their conceptual framework concerning the forces and dynamics that have historically driven social and political orders, North, Wallis and Weingast find that, compared to the rare instances of stable and inclusive democracies, "the much more historically commonplace 'solution' to civil conflict is an elite pact based on a mutually satisfactory allocation of spoils, including property rights, monopoly rights, tax revenues, import licenses, social privileges, political offices and government contracts."[8] These pacts lead to a delicate political configuration that achieves a temporary equilibrium by giving competing elite groups access to just enough privileges to discourage them from employing their capacity for violence in order to capture more. However the stability of such pacts is undermined by the fact that "both sides of the balance – the value of particular privileges *and* the capacity for violence – shift for each segment of

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[3] Marx, 2005: 5 and Michael Mann (1988)
[4] Boege et al, 2009: 20
[5] 1963: 113
[6] 2014: 320
[7] Marx, 2005: 193-194
[8] Durant and Weingast (2014: 3) citing North DC., Wallis JJ., and Weingast BR., *Violence and Social Orders: A conceptual framework for interpreting recorded human history*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2009)

elites"[9] – and the significant challenges that make it very difficult of social systems to adequately re-negotiate the terms of their pact. Nevertheless, North et al. also find that these kinds of pacts, by creating stability between elites, can also serve as a prerequisite for the emergence of 'open access orders' governed by a widespread and indiscriminate commitment to the 'rule of law'. The authors observe that the gradual extension of the 'rule of law' to include all members of society has historically required that it first be restricted to a small number of political elites – "if the rule of law does *not* cascade in this way, then executives can encroach on the standards meant to protect those below them, and those below them can encroach on one another by bypassing the standards by appealing up the hierarchy to a patron with latitude to act outside the law."[10]

C. Implications for state-building in practice

To the extent that contemporary state-building projects attempt to replicate political models found in these 'core countries of western Europe', one would expect that these projects would pay very close attention to the processes through which the original political orders arose. Unfortunately, despite the steady rise in evidence that the 'liberal democracies' of the West were built through centuries-long processes that included significant levels of violence and exclusion along the way, and despite a rising awareness of the fact that these political systems reflect the outcome of a very specific set of cultural and historical circumstances, these crucially important considerations are still largely not reflected in the design and implementation of international state-building projects.[11] These projects continue to pursue the goal of transforming fragmented, culturally distinct societies, often decimated by recent internal conflict, directly into a cohesive whole neatly governed by a stable and inclusive political order. The underlying assumption seems to be that, given the right institutions and governance structures, these divided societies should be able to transition swiftly, smoothly and peacefully to a new political order where free political and economic competition coexists simply with universal rule of law and indiscriminate, citizenship-based access to protection and services for all.

This ahistorical and limited understanding of state-building can be very problematic if the whole process is approached as a one-step as oppose to multi-step process. Many state-building (and institutional reform) projects try to immediately build exactly the kind of state found today in countries whose developmental trajectories have been completely different (Annex 2). For instance, these projects never allow for the process of building the kind of centralized, exclusionary elite pact that has been found

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[9] Durant and Weingast, 2014: 3
[10] Durant and Weingast, 2014: 7
[11] "Dominant approaches to state-building today rest on a narrow understanding of the sources of our own political and social order." Boege et al, 2009: 27

to have been a crucial step in the development of other political orders. Instead, emphasis is immediately placed on "the creation of an institutional architecture incorporating neoliberal democratic governance structures and values."[12] However the implementation of neoliberal reforms such as privatization and de-centralization since the 1980's has proven to have dramatic consequences on political systems that were not ready for such reforms. Writing about efforts to include de-centralization as a key characteristic in the architecture of the new Afghan state post-2001, Mukhopadhyay writes: "The foreign intervention, while propping up a young state center, simultaneously invigorated that regime's competition, laying the groundwork for a series of bargains to unfold between a weak center and a periphery. The international community may have advanced a project of state construction with the hope of bypassing the messy struggle over politics and power that is endemic to state formation, but that was a fantastical hope."[13]

In an evaluation of the U.S's state-building project over the past decade, Cravens and Brinkerhoff write: "although debates about de-centralization are conducted ostensibly around constitutional, legal, and administrative issues, the underlying dynamic is contestation for political power and control."[14]

As the following essay will show, while it seems that a similar approach to state-building was adopted in Iraq by the international community, it also appears that the reality of power struggles and bargaining between elites, and the consolidation of political power by a ruling coalition, has come to dictate the country's political development.

III. <u>State-building in Iraq</u>

The chronic violence and instability witnessed in Iraq over the course of the past decade bears testimony to the tremendous difficulty and complexity of post-conflict reconstruction and state-building efforts in divided societies.

Following the American-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, and the subsequent dismantling of the existing state, a broad array of actors stepped forward to participate in the reconstruction of the country's new political system. From an international perspective, the ensuing process has been labeled 'state-building', and framed as a concerted effort to construct a stable and inclusive political order governed by legitimate and efficient state institutions. For instance,

> Britain's "Vision for Iraq and the Iraqi People," launched at the Azores summit on March 17, 2003, outlined British hopes that Iraq would become "a stable, united and law-abiding state within its present

[12] Brinkerhoff and Cravens, 2013: 17
[13] 2014: 321
[14] Brinkerhoff and Cravens, 2013: 18

> borders, cooperating with the international community, no longer posing a threat to its neighbors or to international security, abiding by all its international obligations and providing effective representative government to its own people." Britain's campaign objectives focused on the disarmament of Iraq and the removal of the Baath regime as well as the security of essential economic infrastructure, "the creation of a secure environment so that normal life can be restored," and the transition to a "transitional civilian administration" to enable British forces to "withdraw as soon as practicable."[15]

This perspective, however, with all that it implies about benevolent actors desperately trying to correct a divided society's deep dysfunctions, may prove of limited help when trying to really understand the forces and dynamics behind Iraq's turbulent political developments since 2003.

Iraq is a resource-rich country, with deep-rooted symbolic and strategic importance in a polarized geopolitical context. Altogether, these factors combine to make the Iraqi central state an extremely valuable target for many internal and external actors. As a result, in the vacuum caused by the collapse of Saddam Hussein's oppressive regime following the American invasion in 2003, the country became a crucible for intense power struggles between competing actors. All of these actors, whether internal or external to Iraq, were intent on shaping the development of new political institutions and structures in a way that would serve their interests and guarantee their control over any new emerging equilibrium.

Looking back at state-building process over the past decade, it is therefore imperative to consider how this process has been influenced by the strategies of competing actors seeking to assert some form of control over the nascent institutions of the country's central state.

IV. Politics at the Center: Early cohesion and socio-political successes for Shi'a elites

To an important extent, the configuration of conflict in Iraq over the past decade has been dictated by the actions of political elites seeking to accumulate power by exploiting social divisions based on primordial identities, primarily ethnic (Arab/Kurdish) and sectarian (Sunni/Shi'a) affiliation. As a result, Iraq's political landscape – while remaining very fragmented and volatile – has been structured around a tripartite dialectic between, Kurdish, Shi'a Arab and Sunni Arab actors. Throughout the early stages of state-building, evidence indicates that Shi'a actors were able to amass a considerable amount of social and political power, and that one of the key factors behind this was their capacity to maintain a degree of political cohesion despite significant internal tensions.

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[15] Knights and Williams, 2007: 6

A. Rapid and efficient social mobilization

The notable rise to power of Shi'a actors, "the ascendancy of Shi'a dominated parties to the top of the political pyramid"[16], can be attributed to a number of factors. As with many of Iraq's new political elites, many new Shi'a leaders in 2003 has just returned to Iraq after years of exile. In many cases, these Shi'a former exiles were "traumatized by what [they] regarded as [the] sectarian discrimination"[17] of Saddam Hussein's Baath regime. Some Shi'a exiles [mostly two groups, Ahmed Chalabi's *Iraqi National Congress* (INC) and the *Supreme Council for Islamic Republic in Iraq* (SCIRI) led by the prominent al-Hakim family] were very politically active abroad prior to 2003, and therefore benefited from high levels of trust and support from the U.S and/or Iran upon their return to Iraq after 2003.[18] Upon their return, these well-connected leaders used foreign backing to rapidly establish patronage networks along sectarian lines in order to build up political influence in Iraq. However these immediate influence and power did not necessarily reflect anything beyond superficial co-option or coercion: "What they lacked in popularity they made up in resources, military organization and patronage."[19] Another group, *al-Da'wa al-Islamiya* (Da'wa), also returned to Iraq after years of political activism abroad. Even though Da'wa did not enjoy close relations with the U.S or Iran and therefore found itself at a disadvantage immediately post-2003, circumstances would allow the group to provide Iraq's two first Prime Ministers, first Ibrahim al-Jaafari in 2005, followed by Nuri al-Maliki in 2006.[20] Finally, another important actor was the Sadrist movement; this was a largely domestic movement led by the young Muqtada al-Sadr, whose prominent social status stemmed from the symbolic legacy of the al-Sadr family. Crucially, "the Sadrs and the Hakims [of the previously mentioned SCIRI] are prominent clerical families who have long been intense rivals for the spiritual leadership of Iraq's Shi'as."[21]

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[16] Haddad, 2011: 144
[17] Haddad, 2011: 148
[18] al-Ali, 2014: 41-42; Knights and Williams write about Iran's support to the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and its armed militia Badr Organization: "Funding and logistical support from Iran initially included water trucks and other vital supplies to support Badr "hearts and minds" operations in spring 2003, supported by access to Iranian-established radio stations to provide SCIRI with direct communications with the Iraqi people. Iran later added to SCIRI's financial coffers to begin a massive program of land, property, and economic infrastructure purchases. In the first wave of privatizations of state-owned assets, SCIRI bought controlling shares in electricity companies, flour mills, and oil services companies, as well as farms, commercial businesses, and factories." (2007: 15)
[19] ICG, 2006: 17
[20] Al-Ali, 2014: 43
[21] Dawisha, 2010: 30 The rivalry between these two families can be traced back to 1980, when Hussein's Baath regime outlawed the prominent Shi'ite political party al-Da'wa al-Islamiyya and executed one of its founders, the very famous cleric and intellectual Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr. Following these events, the Da'wa movement split, with one group led by Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr al-Hakim seeking exile in Iran (where SCIRI was created), and another group staying in Iraq, from which Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr (Sadr II) would emerge as a very influential clear and leader. Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr himself would then also be assassinated by the same regime

Despite their different origins, another factor that worked to the advantage of all these Shi'a groups was the rapid social and political mobilization of Shi'ite networks, which enjoy considerable symbolic and infrastructural power in Iraq. In an environment where "religious identity was the prime organizing principle of politics, they seized upon the mosque (...) as their main vehicle for assembly, propagation and recruitment."[22] The Shi'ite sect has often been associated with a particularly strong capacity for effective social mobilization and resistance to institutionalized authority due to more developed and effective social structures and networks, building on a history of resistance to centralized power, and powerful symbols drawn for a rich 'ethnohistory' of 'chosen traumas.'[23]

B. Capturing central state institutions

In the political sphere, while these actors did not necessarily represent a wholly unified or homogenous front, they achieved critical political victories early on by competing on a common platform through which various Shi'a parties joined forces to gain power.[24] One figure that played a crucial role in the cohesion of Shi'a actors, as well as the wave of mobilization that supported them, was Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's highest Shi'a authority. Although al-Sistani is generally by principle strictly committed to remaining outside the political sphere, after 2003, "fearing that intra-Shia divisions would give the Sunnis a path back to power, he enjoined all Shia parties to close ranks in a grand alliance."[25] Heeding this advice, in Iraq's first nation-wide parliamentary elections after the U.S invasion, the main Shi'a parties ran together on one party list, the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA).

These first elections were held on January 30th 2005 to elect a transitional National Assembly with a 1-year mandate. The UIA confirmed its role as a political heavyweight by receiving 48% of votes, which allowed it to secure 140 out of 275 seats in the National Assembly.[26] Crucially, the extent of the UIA's victory in this first round of elections was exaggerated by the Sunni groups' decision to boycott the elections.[27] The same pattern of Shi'a domination was repeated in the following elections in December

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in 1999, along with his two eldest sons, and the Shi'a communities that revered him would transfer that reverence onto his surviving son, Muqtada al-Sadr. (Knights and Williams, 2007: 3-4)

[22] ICG, 2006: 22

[23] A discussion and tentative explanation for this phenomenon can be found pages 26-27 in Cole and Keddie (1986), as well as on page 148 in Haddad (2011).

[24] While the initial Interim Governing Council appointed by the U.S (July 2003-June 2004) was headed by Iyyad al-Allawi and therefore closer to secular nationalist dynamics, it achieved little as it remained "a powerless body established by the CPA to give a local face to the U.S occupation" and was widely perceived as corrupt and ineffective. (ICG, 2012: 5)

[25] Dawisha, 2010: 34

[26] Dawisha, 2005: 37-38; al-Ali, 2014: 85

[27] Voter turnout was very low in Sunni-dominated provinces such as Anbar (2%), Ninewa (17%) and Salah al-Din (29%), compared to much higher voting rates above 60-70% across the South (Basra, Najaf, Babil, Wast). See Toensing, 2005: 8

2005, right after the culmination of a short and highly-contested constitution-drafting process (which was itself dominated by Shi'ite interests) led to the adoption of Iraq's new constitution in October 2005.[28] In this second round of parliamentary elections, the UIA, described as "a coalition defined solely by Shi'a solidarity", again won a large plurality with 46.5% of the vote.[29] For each election,

> the UIA message was a simple appeal to Shiite identity, its political campaign was well-organized and exploited the name of Grand Ayatollah Sistani, and its success was thus assured. In effect, the elections and subsequent division of ministerial portfolios was a stage-managed poll that concealed a broadly egalitarian negotiated settlement between the main Shiite factions.[30]

Nevertheless, some conflict did arise in negotiations over the position of Prime Minister in particular. The incapacity of the two main Shiite contenders, SCIRI and the Sadrist movement, to reach an agreement led to a compromise whereby the position was given to the secretary general of a third party, Da'wa.[31] As mentioned already, it is as a result of this decision that al-Maliki was appointed Prime Minister in early 2006.

By the time Maliki came to power then, in the Spring of 2006, these electoral victories had given the new Shi'a elites privileged access to positions of political power, resulting in a domination over key state institutions that would prove critical during a period of "institution-building by ethno-sectarian logic."[32] In the context of a developing state and its malleable institutions, new political leaders and their sectarian outlook weighed heavily on key state-building processes such as the drafting of the new constitution and staffing and structuring of nascent institutions. For instance, reports have shown that starting in 2005, then leading Shi'a group SCIRI and its military-wing, the Badr Corps, worked to "re-shape dramatically the police and paramilitary forces established (...) under the 2004 Allawi government."[33] Very quickly, and ever since, government security forces became tainted by sectarianism, facing recurring accusations of running secret detention facilities and conducting assassinations, abductions, arbitrary detainments, torture.[34]

V. Politics at periphery: center-periphery gaps and local governance in the South

The previous section was focused on a small number of Shi'a political groups and their leaders. We have seen that their efforts to gain control over the central institutions of Iraq's new state required, up until 2006, that they maintain a certain level of cohesion and cooperation between them. In the following

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[28] ICG, 2005: 3-4; al-Istrabadi, 2009: 1639-40; 1642
[29] Dawisha,2010: 26
[30] Knights and Williams, 2007: 22
[31] al-Ali, 2014: 110-111
[32] ICG 2006: 12
[33] ICG, 2006: 17
[34] ICG, 2006: 19

sections we turn to look at the ties that bound this rising political center to the periphery of Iraq's political order. Given that this periphery corresponds to the country's 17 other governorates, where a majority of Iraq's population lives, it is crucial to understand the nature of political dynamics in these governorates. The power struggles that played out between competing Shi'a factions and elites at the center of the political order were necessarily closely tied to the intense competition and conflict playing out between these groups at the periphery.

A. Disconnected Elites

The high-level political positions that new Shi'a elites were able to secure in the central state often did not necessarily reflect any kind of real connection to, or support within, the broader Iraqi population.[35] First, we have already mentioned that most of Iraq's new political elites returned in 2003 after long periods of exile – as a result, "although the former exiles spoke the language, their knowledge of Iraq, its institutions and its culture was either shaky or desperately out of date. (…) The fact that they no longer identified with, or even understood, the local culture made the exiles' transition into government all the more difficult."[36] In addition to this initial disconnect, the electoral system in place for both parliamentary elections in 2005 was such that individual candidates actually did not need specific support from the Iraqi electorate. The elections followed a party-list proportional representation (PLPR) method with 'closed lists.' This electoral method means that only party names appeared on the ballot, and "each party received a number of seats proportionate to its vote share, but the decision as to who would actually fill those seats belonged not to the voters but to the party leaders alone."[37] There were important reasons for adopting such an electoral system, not least being security conditions that made it very dangerous for individual political candidates to campaign.[38] Nonetheless, this type of election process also had the unfortunately consequence of "encouraging more highly centralized power" which benefited heads of the main identity-based political parties, and also kept them from having to meaningfully engage with the Iraqi electorate as individual politicians.[39] Furthermore, this disconnect between political elites and the masses was also exacerbated by the exaggerated importance of external actors in determining political outcomes, a reality

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[35] Neither did it necessarily reflect any real capacity to actual manage a government administration or bureaucracy for that matter. Zaid al-Ali writes, "Many of those who expected to occupy senior positions had never worked for the state at all – not even prior to their exile. They would often have to learn everything from scratch, including how the institutions that they were administering functioned, what the operational procedures were, and why officials were behaving in a particular way; and they would be confounded when their decisions reduced efficiency and increased waste." (2014: 53)

[36] al-Ali, 2014: 53
[37] Dawisha, 2010: 31
[38] Dawisha, 2005: 37; USAID, 2011: 6 (fn.22)
[39] Dawisha, 2005: 37

that forced aspiring political leaders to cultivate ties with external backers more than internal constituencies.

> After 2003, the US and the UK would be the gatekeepers to the upper echelons of power. Only the actors that they allowed would have any role in government – at least in the period of the occupation. Being part of the new ruling order from the start would guarantee a high public profile, which would almost certainly translate into votes.[40]

While the U.S. as an occupying power did have an overwhelming influence over the early developments of Iraqi politics, other foreign powers (Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey) also quickly came to play a prominent role.

B. Dynamics of local governance in the Iraqi South

1. *Local governance under Saddam Hussein*

Prior to 2003, structures of local governance existed under Saddam Hussein's regime. The country was already divided into 18 governorates,[41] and in each governorate (outside of the already autonomous federal region of Kurdistan) "a publicly elected provincial governor theoretically supervised an administrative system of district (*qadaa*) and local (*nahiya*) offices responsible for rural areas, as well as municipal councils within urban centers, in order to ensure order and efficiency of public services."[42] However, in actuality these entities were never used as decentralized structures to which the central government devolved powers and authorities such as election of representatives, autonomous resource mobilization and reinvestment, or locally-driven policy design and implementation.[43] Rather, in keeping with the extremely high degree of centralized control that characterized Saddam Hussein's authoritarian regime, the system of local governance was reduced to formal, empty structures of control, at best functioning as channels through which the government could punish or reward local communities according to their loyalty to the regime.[44] Staffed by hand-picked central government appointees, the councils "existed purely to execute plans developed by the Baghdad ministries with little or no consultation with local representatives (…) [while] the Baath party acted in parallel with the formal local government structures, as did other military and intelligence organizations."[45]

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[40] al-Ali, 2014: 45

[41] In the context of Iraq, the terms governorate and province can be used interchangeably.

[42] Knights and McCarthy, 2008: 1

[43] Ibid.

[44] Kinghts and McCarthy, 2008: 2. Also, for instance, "Throughout the 1990s, the provinces of the deep south suffered from a deliberate and systematic policy of neglect. Distrusted by the Baath government, the southern provinces were milked for their oil wealth but starved of provincial and municipal funding." (Knights and Williams, 2007: 2)

[45] Ibid.

2. *Local governance under occupation (2003-2005)*

With the U.S.-led invasion of 2003, the abrupt end of Saddam's regime led to the collapse of all its intricate structures of control throughout the country – formal as well as informal (there were numerous shadow or parallel structures, each designed to supervise the other and report back to the center.) As a result, local communities around the country suddenly faced a complete security and political vacuum after decades under very tight government control.[46] Under these conditions, beyond the instability and chaos that wracked many areas, two parallel processes emerged as communities and social groups tried to adjust to the new environment. "Under [one] model, power initially devolved to those with muscle and then increasingly to those who displayed not only the military power to restore a measure of local security but also the organization and resources to meet local economic needs – in other words a Mafioso-type establishment."[47] In this vein, the Southern regions saw a rapid and forceful emergence of informal actors derived their power from a combination of coercive capacity, social and symbolic capital, and organizational capacity. Some of these actors defined themselves primarily through their Shi'ite identity. The most important included the Organization of the Martyr Sadr (named in reference to Mohammed Sadi al-Sadr, cf. footnote 6), the Supreme Council for Islamic Resistance in Iraq (SCIRI), and the Fadhila movement, but in fact there were also countless other organizations and movements situated at varying points on the spectrum between criminal groups at one end, and more formal groups such as those sanctioned and supported by the coalition or by the *hawza* (the traditional Shi'ite establishment) at the other.

It is important to note the stark differences that initially existed between the two most prominent Shi'a movements, the Sadrist trend and SCIRI. The Sadrist trend was mostly an amalgamation of grass-roots domestic movements, all pledging allegiance to the symbolic leadership of Muqtada al-Sadr, while attracting disaffected and unemployed Iraqis with protests against the failures of the coalition or other established groups. To give a sense of how they were perceived, the Sadrists were described by some as the "mob" and "unemployed illiterates who like to riot".[48] Meanwhile, SCIRI for the most part arrived to southern Iraq from its previous base in Iran. Despite its capacity to exploit Shi'ite symbols and narratives, the group was therefore perceived as very much foreign, and faced much antagonism from the local population due to the legacy of the violent Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). Nevertheless, the movement distinguished itself for having well-established organizational structures, a very strong internal discipline,

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[46] Knights and Williams cited Anthony Cordesman on the impact of Saddam's totalitarian regime on the Iraqi population: "Iraq had evolved in both a well-policed and a 'self-policing' society, in which the populace internalized 'correct' patterns of conformity and norms of behavior. The slightest sign of discontent was dealt with ruthlessly and effectively." (2007: 4-5)

[47] Knights and McCarthy, 2008: 5

[48] Knights and Williams, 2007: 13-14

and "an educated middle-class leadershir (…) [that] proved to be a much slicker and infinitely more palatable partner for the coalition and the Shiite establishment than the Sadrists."[49]

Despite this difference between them, as they rapidly gained power both groups contributed to bringing about radical changes in the Southern society and politics:

> Although it was one of the more liberal and cosmopolitan areas in Iraq during the 1980s, Basra [was] transformed into a bastion of Islamist groups and their associated militias, afflicted with high levels of insurgent and criminal activity. From being the heart of Iraq's oil industry, Basra increasingly [became] a kleptocracy used by Islamist militias to fill their war chests.[50]

This description is important, because it challenges the idea that maybe Basra's was a deeply conservative and pious society the true nature of which was finally allowed to manifest itself through the rise of strict and often violent Islamist groups after 2003.

At the same time, in this same context the second source of emerging socio-political order came from reconstruction and early state-building efforts undertaken by the coalition forces. Through its Local Governance Program (LGP), which lasted until the transfer of sovereignty in June 2004, the coalition "sought to institute a more formal system of decentralization (…) [with] local power bases built on legitimacy and accountability, and underpinned by formal powers and authorities enshrined by law."[51] A USAID contractor "facilitated the formation of 445 neighborhood, 194 sub-district, 90 district, and 16 provincial councils in just one year."[52] However, despite the best efforts of the local coalition teams, this initiative achieved very limited successes. As a whole, the projects were consistently undermined by a lack of centralized planning and coordination, a lack of resources, as well as the huge obstacles associated with gaining local legitimacy in such a complex, unstable and often very violent socio-political environment. In the end, "the councils remained externally imposed with relatively limited caucuses of Iraqis (…) the power shift in 2003-2005 favored informal actors – the militia-backed political parties and other local powerbrokers – at the expense of the weak governorate councils (…) [and] to the extent that anyone in Iraq provided basic government services (…) the militias often filled these roles, both to raise revenues for their coffers and to generate local support for themselves."[53] Crucially, national-level Iraqi politicians in Baghdad (at that time represented by the Interim Governing Council) were also a source of active resistance against coalition efforts to strengthen formal decentralization in provinces around the country.

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[49] Ibid.
[50] Knights and Williams, 2007: 1
[51] Knights and McCarthy, 2008: 5
[52] Knights and McCarthy, 2008: 3
[53] Knights and McCarthy, 2008: 5-6

3. *Provincial governance post-2005*

In January 2005, elections were held for provincial councils by taking advantage of the national parliamentary elections already organized for the transitional National Assembly. While the existence and status of provincial councils would subsequently be officially recognized by the new constitution adopted later that year (October 2005), that same constitution offered nothing in terms of defining the exact legal authorities and responsibilities of these provincial councils. In fact, it would take the national parliament three years to draft and adopt a Law of Governorates (Law 21), which was finally adopted in February 2008.[54] This time lapse reflects the political sensitivity of issues related to decentralization at the national level; many of the provisions of the 2008 law have not been adhered to by the government since the law was adopted, and further attempts since then by the national legislative to pass additional provincial powers laws have been faced with staunch opposition from the executive and its allies.[55] In the meantime, between 2005 and 2008, the councils continued to function under the foreign Coalition Provisional Authority's (CPA) order 71 of 2004, which "formalized the structure and role of the governorate council, granting provincial councils both the funding required to maintain administrative staffs and the legal authority to contribute to the election and removal of governors, deputies, and provincial police chiefs, and the directors-general of provincial ministry branch offices."[56]

The provincial elections held in 2005 adopted a similar electoral method to that chosen for the parliamentary elections (party-list proportional representation with closed lists) – and this electoral design had roughly the same effect as at the national level: "loosening the ties of accountability between constituents and their representatives, it accentuated the power of political parties, (…) [and] therefore laid the groundwork for the inexorable rise of Islamist political parties since 2003."[57]

In the southern Shi'a-dominated provinces, the two main contenders were again SCIRI and the Sadrist trend. Of these two movements, the Sadrist trend had adopted a much more oppositional stance, and its various factions therefore decided to undertake a "partial boycott" of the elections, a decision which "gave SCIRI a plurality of the provincial council seats and thus the governorships of seven Iraqi provinces including Baghdad."[58] Because of distortions caused by elections, the allocation of power between rival Shi'a groups within the provincial councils often did not reflect actual relative power levels – for instance, compared to SCIRI's influence over the provincial councils, "the Sadrists were massively

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[54] Knights and McCarthy, 2008: 5
[55] USAID, 2011: fn 27-28, on the legal struggles at the national level in 2010 over whether provincial councils should be allowed to have legislative powers, or if this right should be limited to national level actors.
[56] Knights and McCarthy, 2008: 3
[57] Knights and McCarthy, 2008: 7
[58] Ibid.

under-represented in relation to their street presence."[59] But given that the next round of provincial elections would not be held before early 2009, the un-balanced distribution of power in these formal structures would remain fixed for as long as four years.

VI. Extending central power to the periphery: Maliki and the South (2006-2009)

A. Nuri al-Maliki

Before returning in 2003 Maliki had been in exile since 1979.[60] In the interim he had spent many years as an operative contributing to Da'wa's resistance operations against Saddam Hussein's regime. This time left him with "very little in terms of genuine accomplishments"[61], but it did contributed to making him into a very cautious, calculative and almost paranoid politician – "Maliki's basic assumption was 'everyone is plotting against us.' (...) 'His secret? He is a very intelligent tactician – all politics is short term. He doesn't have any vision for the state."[62] Moreover, "some [other Iraqi] elites, still vying with Maliki for power, refer to him disparagingly as a *ma'adan*: a kind of Iraqi redneck", and he has been said to be "acutely sensitive to slights" about his background and experiences.[63]

As we have noted earlier, when he came to power as Prime Minister in early 2006, Maliki was selected mostly as a compromise figure. A third party was necessary due to the incapacity of the two most powerful Shi'ite parties to reach an agreement between themselves, and potentially also due to an American decision to oppose the continuation of the previous Prime Minister, Ibrahim al-Jaafari.[64] Maliki, who belonged to the same party as Jaafari (Da'wa), was seen as weak and expected to be easily controlled and malleable if installed as Prime Minister. He was "named [PM] precisely because his Da'wa party had no militia and thin popular support."[65]

Despite this initial position of weakness, it is now widely accepted that over the course of his two terms in office (2006-2010; 2010-2014), Maliki has successfully gained a tremendous amount of control over state institutions. A detailed discussion of Maliki's maneuvering to consolidate power over national institutions would go beyond the scope of his paper. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the Prime Minister is said to have "filled vacant positions in the military and administration with his loyalists and augmented the powers of his office and of networks related to him personally, thereby creating a kind of

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[59] Ibid.
[60] al-Ali, 2014: 53
[61] Al-Ali, 2014: 54
[62] Filkins, 2014
[63] Filkins, 2014
[64] Filkins, 2014
[65] Gordon, 2008

'shadow state' within the government."[66] Through what seems to be a combination of alliance-building, intimidation and co-option, Maliki has able to subvert the checks and balances built in to the state's new constitutional and legal framework.[67] For instance, "the judiciary has been an accomplice to the centralization of power by Prime Minister Maliki through a series of rulings that have empowered the executive and restrained or removed his political rivals."[68]

Our focus is not on how Maliki has strengthened his grip over the central state, but rather how he has built up his power base in Iraq's other governorates, and especially those in the south, between 2006 and 2009. Our analysis in the previous sections has shown that, up until 2006, two other Shi'a political actors, SCIRI and the Sadrist movement, had established themselves as the two most powerful political actors - both in the central state and in governorates across the South. Given that the Shi'a parties had accumulated significant power by working as a coalition on the national level, and that as a group they faced pressing challenges from the country's other main socio-political groups (Sunnis and Kurds), why is it that Maliki, as a member of the broader Shi'a coalition himself, decided to actively compete against SCIRI and the Sadrists?

One answer might be that, in a deeply divided political environment like Iraq, it is often a strategic priority for any political actor to secure intra-group domination before looking to take on inter-group competition and bargaining. If the political actor fails to do this, then he will constantly be vulnerable to challenges from competitors within his own group.[69] Therefore, Maliki needed to secure his domination over the Shi'a constituencies before looking to address divides with the country's other main political groups (Sunnis and Kurds).

Once again, despite his initial lack of any social base in the Southern governorates and therefore his weakness vis-a-vis SCIRI and the Sadrists, by 2009 Maliki was able to separate himself from the larger

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[66] al-Qarawee, 2014: 6

[67] In a 2011 report entitled '*Failing Oversight: Iraq's Unchecked Government*' the International Crisis Group reported: "the state's failing oversight framework (...) has allowed successive governments to operate un-checked. The 2005 constitution and the existing legal framework require a number of institutions – the Board of Supreme Audit, the Integrity Commission, the Inspectors General, parliament and the courts – to monitor government operations. Yet, none of these institutions has been able to assert itself in the face of government interference, intransigence and manipulation, a deficient legal framework and ongoing threats of violence" (2011: i)

[68] Sullivan, 2013: 19

[69] For instance, a recent article in the press noted: "Few analysts are optimistic that Mr. Maliki is intent on pursuing a durable reconciliation with the Sunnis, especially before elections in April, when he will seek a third term. He has privately told American officials that he believes that were he to offer political compromises to Sunnis now it would weaken him politically among Shiites." Arango and Fahminjan, 2014. Furthermore, an example of how this dynamic works can be found in Donald Horowitz's analysis of Sri Lankan politics, where he shows that "inter-ethnic compromise was strictly limited by intra-ethnic competition (...)the dynamics of intra-ethnic competition (...) have pushed the parties towards meeting ethnic demands and have limited their leeway to make concessions across ethnic lines." (1989: 22)

Shi'a alliance, to run with his own list, State of Law, and to "achieve a momentous victory in provincial elections."[70] In the following two sections, we will offer brief insights into two strategies that allowed Maliki to achieve this feat.

B. Security Take-over in Basra

Most accounts of Maliki's rise to power point to the March 2008 offensive he led against Sadrist militias in Basra as a key turning point, marking the end of a period where Maliki remained weak, indecisive and passive.[71] However, by pointing to March 2008 as a starting point of sorts, these accounts fail to show that Maliki had in fact been strategically preparing this move since 2006 by gradually reinforcing the central government's grasp over Basra's previously autonomous security apparatus.

Throughout the years that followed 2003, in the absence of a powerful government with the capacity to monopolize violence, security was arguably the most important concern for competing socio-political groups across Iraq. "Out of the chaos came a multitude of local war bans, ranging from well-organized 'emergency brigades' under local leaders to criminal gangs led by former prisoners."[72] In the South, these many groups rapidly began collaborating, in one way or another, with coalition forces.[73] Moreover, after the 2005 provincial elections, many informal actors and groups became even more tied and integrated into formal institutions – whether as politicians entering the new provincial councils, or as militias and insurgents being officially or unofficially integrated into the re-constructed state security apparatus.[74] As mentioned earlier, provincial councils were still operating under the terms of CPA order 71, and this order had given the councils an important amount of discretion and autonomy to manage provincial-level security-sector decision making. The provincial councils had the authority to appoint the Provincial Directors of Police (PDoPs), who were "'responsible for overseeing all civil law enforcement activities within the Governorate'" and who "tended to use their powers – i.e., the practically unsupervised ability to spend the budget allocation from the Ministry of Interior – to placate local factions."[75] As a result, "the

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[70] al-Qarawee, 2014: 6
[71] Al-Qarawee, 2014: 6 and Filkins, 2014,
[72] Kinghts and McCarthy, 2008: 20
[73] Knights and Williams, 2007: 8
[74] Knights and McCarthy, 2008: 5; 26-27. As an example, "The *tharallah* movement in southern Iraq (...) started in the chaos of liberation as a gang of criminals led by a local strongman Sayid Yousuf al-Musawi, then morphed into an organization that local people could turn to for protection and tough justice. *Tharallah* is openly recognized as a movement that undertakes political and criminal assassinations as well as Iranian-sponsored attacks on coalition forces. At the time of writing [2008], al- Musawi is a prominent and feared member of Basra's provincial council and security committee, and head of a fully-fledged political party." (5)
[75] Knights and McCarthy, 2008: 20-21

security committee of each provincial council became a point where government and nongovernment (e.g., militia) security providers met."[76]

In Basra, following the 2005 provincial elections, the provincial council had fallen under the control of three Shi'ite groups – SCIRI, the Sadrists, and the Fadhila movement. Despite the tensions and divisions that existed between these groups, the competing factions came to rely on the provincial council's security committee as a point of contact and a space for conflict resolution to allow them to minimize conflict and thereby better control the province. As a result, "the Iraqi government and the coalition were increasingly shut out of security decisionmaking in Basra."[77]

Starting in 2006, Maliki undertook a succession of measures that sought to dislocate the militias and establish the federal government's tighter political and military control over Basra. For example, in 2007 Maliki created an Operations Command in Basra.[78]Operations Commands are supposed to be "ad hoc structures set up to direct the operations of the army divisions assigned within a given territory."[79] However, these structures have ended up being more permanent than ad hoc.[80] Because they are directly under control of the Prime Minister, they have served as a crucial tool for the federal government's push to gain control over provincial affairs – "provinces that saw their authority over their security dossier decrease have lost authority altogether, from budget allocation and project implementation to investment decisions."[81] In Basra throughout 2007, after creating the Operations Command, Maliki forced a change in the policy chief, putting an ally in his place, and he began re-locating more army brigades, national police battalions and Iraq Special Operations Forces (ISOF) into the governorate.[82] All of these gradual steps finally culminated in the full-out military operation called the "Charge of the Knights" and mentioned at the opening of this section. With the help of significant support from coalition forces, this military operation successfully suppressed the Sadrist militia, the Mahdi Army, which had previously wielded a lot of power in the province, and therefore allowed the federal government to re-affirm its growing monopoly of violence and security in Basra.[83] Moreover, this first offensive would be followed by a succession of targeted operations against Shi'a militias across the South and in Baghdad.

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[76] Ibid.
[77] Knights and McCarthy, 2008: 27
[78] Sullivan, 2013: 14
[79] Fantappie, 2013: fn 11
[80] Sullivan, 2013: 12
[81] Fantappie, 2013: 8
[82] Knights and McCarthy, 2008: 27
[83] Filkins, 2014

C. Tribal networks for socio-political control

Evidence seems to show that in 2008 Maliki also adopted another strategy which has proven crucial to allowing him to compete with SCIRI and the Sadrist movement for control over the South. In gaining influence over the South, Maliki was constrained by his lack a connection with the 'social bases'. By reaching out to, creating ties with and empowering a vast network of Southern tribes that had previously been sidelined from the post-2003 socio-political process, Maliki was able to overcome this weakness and to challenge the grasp that the two Shi'a religious parties had previously maintained over the Southern electorate.

1. Tribes in Iraq

The salience, importance and perception of tribal affiliation and tribal culture in Iraq is a complex and contested topic. On the one hand, tribal structures permeate Iraqi society and are deeply rooted in the country's history, stretching back to pre-Islamic times.[84] At the same time, this dimension of Iraqi society has been consistently challenged and undermined by processes of social change and modernization over the course of the 20th century. Two key themes stand out about the role of tribes in socio-political processes during this latest period.

On the one hand, the relationship between tribes and successive political regimes has varied significantly.[85] For instance, after they showed their importance with their participation in the revolt against British rule in 1920, tribal leaders were "embraced by the new regime as part of aristocratic feudal class (...) became absentee landholders and joined the circle of the political elite."[86] But by the time of the revolution against the monarchy in 1958, "most of them were purged from their high government posts and lost their land and privileges."[87] Then the Baath regime which came to power in the 1960s adopted a dual stance towards tribal affiliation – on the surface it tried to suppressed this form of social solidarity by "[banning] the usage of *laqab* (tribal title) or *nisba* (lineage title), in the name of revolutionary policy, and [advocating] the eradication of aristocratic factors such as 'nobility of origin' based on tribes, status groups or notable families."[88] But at the same time, the new rulers relied heavily on these informal social ties to construct their regime and close networks of power – "Saddam Hussein did his best to deploy and recruit members of his own clan and extended family to coercive agencies, such as security and intelligence services and the military."[89] Therefore on the surface the presence and visibility of social

[84] Sakai, 2003: 138
[85] Hussein, 2008
[86] Sakai, 2003: 139
[87] Ibid.
[88] Sakai, 2003: 141
[89] Sakai, 2003: 141

markers of tribal affiliation receded from Iraqi politics, while *de facto* remaining a crucial tool for power consolidation for Saddam Hussein's regime. However, this regime became increasingly weak throughout the 1980's, and by the early 1990s Saddam Hussein resorted to giving tribes increasing influence and privileges, and relying on them to govern certain regions and maintain security – even if this meant using tribal customs and conflict resolution practices rather than the state and civil law.[90]

This period illustrates another important aspect of state-tribe relations in Iraq. When Saddam Hussein decided that he needed a new source of social control, he did not so much re-empower 'traditional' tribal leaders, but rather he sought to empower newer tribal leaders that might not come from lineages with as much 'traditional' importance, but that he could more easily control.[91] In reference to this tactic, the resurgence of this customary form of authority was called the phenomenon of the '*Sheikhs* of the nineties.'[92] Around this time, as the state no longer sought to suppress the presence of markers of tribal affiliation in political processes, and this form of affiliation became once again a key channel for access to state largess, there was a "tremendous increase in users of tribal *laqab* or *nisba* among candidates" in national elections.[93]

2. Maliki and the southern Tribal Support Councils

In recent decades, the topic of tribal influence in Iraq has mostly concentrated on Sunni tribes due to their proximity with the previous ruler, Saddam Hussein, as well as the prominent role these tribes played post-2003 through their collaboration with the U.S. army as the 'Awakening' movement. Nevertheless, "historical facts show that tribal formation in Iraq is not only concentrated in the Sunni or North-western area, but rather is stronger in the southern and Kurdish part of Iraq."[94]

Prior to 2008, tribes in the South had had a fraught and often conflictive relationship with coalition forces, as well as with the Shi'a religious movements by which they had largely been overpowered.[95] These tensions reflected a "contest between urbanized Shiites, who lean more toward the religious parties and Sadr's movement, and agrarian Iraqis, whose loyalties lie more in tribal society."[96] Within the complex environment of Iraqi politics at the time, in 2008 "the tug of war among the religious parties and the Shi'ite tribes [had] emerged as one of the most significant but also least-understood aspects of Iraq's political scene."[97]

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[90] Hussein, 2008
[91] al-Hajami, 2012 and al-Jafal, 2014
[92] Hussein, 2008
[93] Sakai, 2003: 149
[94] Sakai, 2003: 151
[95] Knights and Williams, 2007: 11-12
[96] Gordon, 2008
[97] Ibid.

Following the success of the U.S.-supported tribal 'Awakening' movement that fought against Al-Qaeda in the Sunni-dominated areas starting in 2007,[98] southern tribes reached out to the U.S. army and asked them for similar support to help fight militias in their region.[99] The expansion of this model was firmly blocked by the Iraqi federal government.[100] However, it is roughly around the same time that Maliki himself mimicked the initiative and began the process of creating 'Tribal Support Councils' across the governorates of the south. By October 2008, the Prime Minister had openly created a network of Tribal Support Councils in an effort to "form Iraq's Shiite tribes into 200 tribal councils that answer directly to the prime minister and receive millions of dollars each month."[101] Each tribe was said to receive an initial payment of $21,000 and then subsequently $10,000 each month.[102] In the context of a "tug of war (...) [that] pits leaders from the Shiite core of Maliki's coalition, (...) party officials who spent the Saddam years in exile, mostly in Iran, [against] tribal leaders who endured his rule at home", it seems that Maliki saw an opportunity to under-cut the members of his Shi'ite coalition by siding with the tribes.

This initiative caused a lot of tension between Maliki and other Shi'a groups – not only did Maliki's growing support from the tribes offer him support in his effort to compete with the militias controlled by his competitors SCIRI and the Sadrist movement, but it was also clearly a tactic to guarantee electoral support in the upcoming provincial elections that were expected to be held in early 2009.[103] While the government claimed that the Tribal Support Councils were only meant to improve security conditions, it was publicly known that the empowered tribal leaders would be able to secure votes for Maliki in his bid to take over control of the provincial councils the following year.[104] A report published by the Iraqi parliament in 2010 indicated that the government had created 242 "tribal militias" including as many as 6,480 *sheikhs* and heads of tribes.[105]

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[98] Benraad, 2011
[99] Gordon, 2008
[100] Ibid.
[101] Levinson and Nabhan, 2008
[102] Wing, 2008
[103] Wing, 2008
[104] al-Akhbar, 2010
[105] al-Hajami, 2012

VII. Conclusion

There is reason to believe that the two strategies described above part paid off. In early 2009, Maliki was able to break off from the larger Shi'a coalition and create his own list, State of Law, which then won sweeping victories in provincial elections, particularly in southern governorates.[106] Happening only 3 years after he was selected as Prime Minister precisely because of his perceived weakness, this was a remarkable feat for Maliki - and a vindication of his strategic move to wrest control of the southern regions away from powerful 'intra-group' competitors.

Interestingly, throughout the run-up to the 2009 elections, as well as most of the run-up to the following year's parliamentary elections (2010), Maliki and his State of Law list moved away from the sharply sectarian rhetoric that had shaped Iraqi politics since 2003, and instead campaigned on more nationalistic themes that emphasized the importance of security and the role of the state.[107] This sudden change in Iraqi politics, which also saw the secular/Sunni Iraqiyya list rise in popularity, was very surprising given the context of dramatic conflict-driven social polarization in which it occurred. Most studies of electoral politics held in deeply divided societies only barely emerging from violent internal conflict tend to point to an exacerbation of inter-group conflict rather than a reduction. However, in light of our analysis, this phenomenon makes more sense – as he focused on competing with powerful Shi'ite groups rather than Sunni or Kurdish groups, Maliki knew their weaknesses and he looked to undermine the very sectarian rhetoric that gave them their power among southern voters. The logic of this approach was reinforced by the fact that one of Maliki's main allies in this struggle, the tribes, are often seen as pious but opposed to sectarianism (possibly since their social structures often span across Sunni/Shi'a divides).[108] Moreover, one could argue that Maliki's strategic moves in security-military affairs had allowed him to already gain *de facto* control over many of the southern provinces, and that this sense of 'intra-group' security allowed him to adopt a more conciliatory stance and a more inclusive rhetoric.

Unfortunately, reaching a stable equilibrium in Iraq has proven elusive. The return of sectarian rhetoric in early 2010 may reflect the fact that Maliki has struggled to maintain his domination over other Shi'ite socio-political actors – quite possibly due to the external support these groups have received from Iran.

The present situation in Iraq raises some very important questions about the process and prospects of state-building. In 2013, commentators noted that "recent upticks in violence have highlighted the fragile nature of the elite pact that supports the tenuous stability in Iraq at present."[109] If some form of centralized

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[106] Chulov, 2009
[107] al-Qarawee, 2014: 6
[108] Gordon, 2008
[109] Cravens and Brinkerhoff, 2013: 28

power consolidation and stabilized elite pact is a necessary condition in the process of state-building, should such a process be supported by the international community? But if so, what costs should external actors be willing to accept, and what compromises should be accepted vis-a-vis what we have come to expect to see in contemporary social and political orders (such as openness, inclusiveness, and respect for basic human rights and minority rights)? For instance, Maliki's alliance with Tribal Support Councils has led to yet another resurgence of tribal culture and affiliation as key factors in Iraqi politics, and in the latest round of elections (provincial in 2013 and parliamentary in 2014) tribal leaders have once again become crucial political actors, serving as mediators for a state increasingly dependent on clientelistic networks.[110] On the one hand, one may argue that such a development may be a necessary step in Iraq's political development. But at the same time, many Iraqis express real impatience and frustration at this situation, and a real desire to see a new kind of politics emerge, based on liberal democratic model.

And even more important – in a strategic country like Iraq, where different external actors may have competing interests, this may imply alliances with competing factions; if each of these external actors have the willingness to intervene to support their allies, how can one expect to see any kind of stabilization? If inclusionary nationalism in western European nations only came off the back of earlier periods of intense exclusionary politics, as is suggested by Anthony Marx (2005), should the international community then interfere with social polarization and conflict in countries like Iraq?

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[110] Al-Atabi, 2014; al-Hajami, 2014; al-Qarishi, 2014

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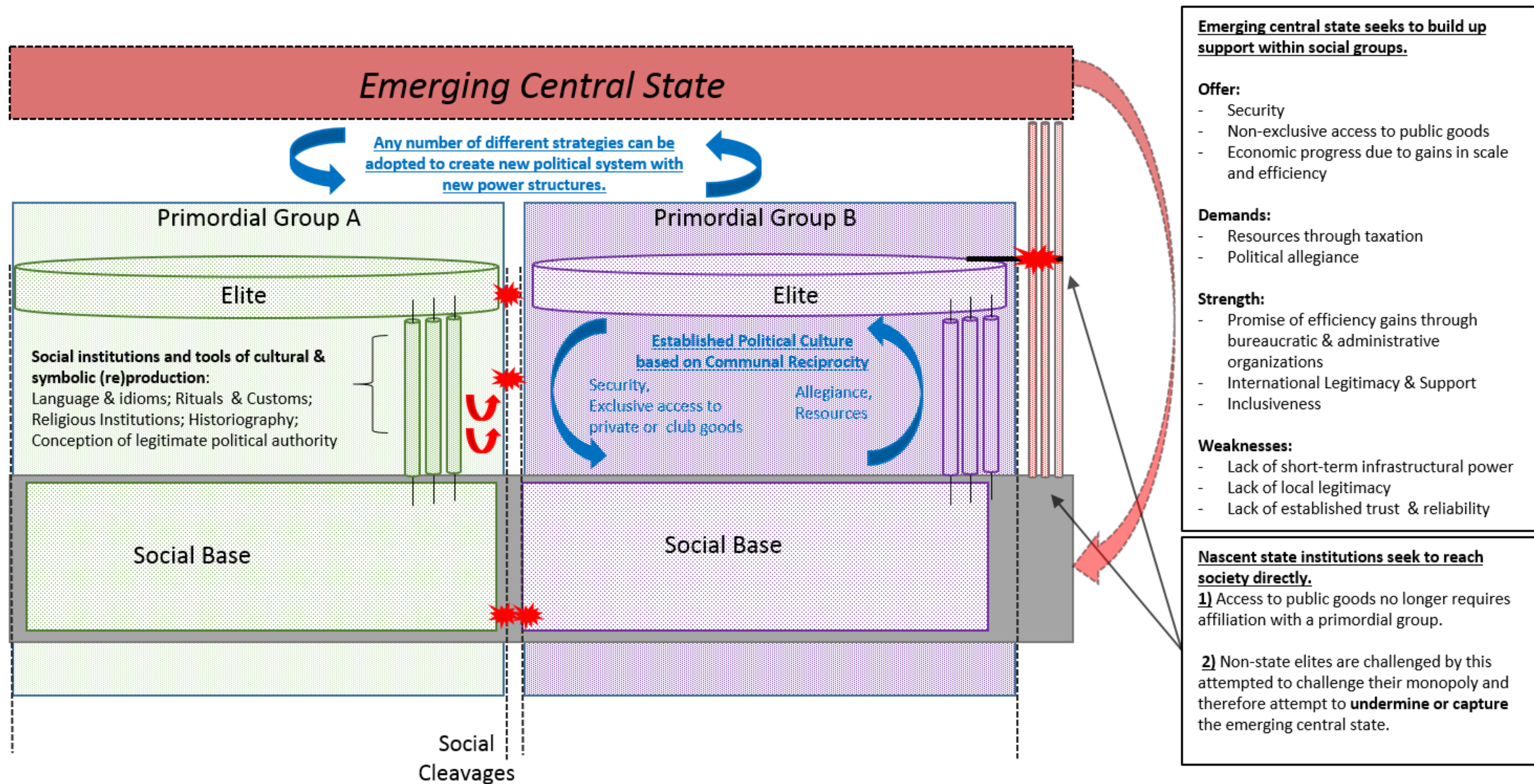
Annex 1. Socio-political dynamics in the context of an absent or emerging central state. **(Author, 2014)**



Annex 2. Socio-political dynamics in the context of liberal democratic state. (Author, 2014)