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Iraq: The Da'wa Party's Eventful Past and Tentative Future

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Founded by Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr and inspired by his ideas of *wilayat al-ummah* (rule of the community), the Iraqi Da'wa party has evolved from an underground movement espousing Islamic revolution to a major player in an Iraqi democratic government. The party has undergone tectonic ideological shifts but still faces major challenges in mobilizing support if it hopes to remain relevant.

Following Saddam Hussein's crackdown on Da'wa in the 1970s, most of its leadership fled to Iran. While given a safe haven, Da'wa's leaders came under pressure after the 1979 Iranian revolution to adopt Iran's brand of Islamic government, *wilayat al-faqih* (rule of the jurist). The strain started to show with the emergence of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), an umbrella organization formed to bring all Iraqi Islamic opposition groups under one banner. Fearing the undue influence of Tehran, many Da'wa members left for exile elsewhere (ending up in the United Kingdom, Europe, or the United States) while others remained in Iran and adopted *wilayat al-faqih*. The fragmentation of the party both ideologically and geographically made it difficult to forge a coherent vision for a new Iraq, although some Da'wa members managed to publish in London *Barnamajunah* (Our Program) after the failed 1991 Shi'i uprising. This program represented a significant break from their previous stance of calling for an Islamic state in Iraq and focused on the need for a democratic framework reflecting the will of the people.

Following the removal of Saddam's regime in 2003, the major question Da'wa faced was whether disparate party factions could find common ground and if so which of them would emerge as dominant. Another question was how much support they still had inside Iraq, where a new player—Moqtada al-Sadr—had a following that seemed to dwarf those of Da'wa and SCIRI. The mainstay of Da'wa's original support lay in the Shi'i middle class, many of whom now resided in exile.

Da'wa members' early experiences in the post-2003 governing council and interim government had a profound impact on the party. Dealing with the practical affairs of state was a world away from opposition politics in exile and it quickly became clear that a more pragmatic outlook was needed for the party. Da'wa members from London gained the upper hand and successfully marginalized

those from Iran who still advocated *wilayat al-faqih*. The party remained troubled, however, by a lack of consensus on how to reconcile its Islamist roots with a new democratic framework, leading to curious episodes such as Da'wa's conspicuous absence from the ceremonial signing of the Temporary Administrative Law that its members had helped draft.

Da'wa's position in post-Saddam Iraqi politics was a delicate one. While the party could rely on a solid reputation, it was clear that it did not have the mass following of Moqtada al-Sadr or the resources of SCIRI, which was busy building its party infrastructure in the south. The idea of joining the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), a national list composed of all the Shi'i Islamic parties, was an attractive option that promised significant leverage without the uncertainty of standing alone in 2005 elections. Furthermore through the UIA, Da'wa has managed to provide two Iraqi prime ministers (including current Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki) so far, much to the chagrin of SCIRI.

Having successfully passed the critical junctures of drafting the constitution and contesting national elections, the pressing need for Shi'i Islamic parties to keep a united front has diminished and the UIA's future is uncertain. Many parties are re-evaluating their interests and there has been speculation about possible alliances based on pivotal issues such as federalism rather than sectarian identity. The Da'wa party has belatedly begun to address the question of differentiating itself based on issues and policies rather than sectarian and ethnic identity; its first party conference held in Baghdad in April seemed to take a step in that direction.

While Da'wa has played its hand shrewdly in post-Saddam Iraq, it will be the party's ability to attract support based on a coherent political philosophy and robust public policy that will ultimately decide its fate in the coming years. Previous questions about Da'wa's commitment to democracy have largely disappeared but concern about the level of grass-roots support it can muster raises doubts about its future. Da'wa leaders are aware of this vulnerability. Their political maneuvering to placate the supporters of Moqtada al-Sadr might well stem from a plan to adopt the Sadrists eventually under their wing, thus casting a Da'wa “head” onto a Sadrist “body.”

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