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LETTER FROM IRAQ

WHAT WE LEFT BEHIND

An increasingly authoritarian leader, a return of sectarian violence, and a nation worried for its future.

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On Christmas Day last year, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki appeared on Iraqi television to wish his country’s Christian minority—which has been fleeing by the thousand since the American invasion, in 2003—a happy holiday. Maliki, who is sixty-three, wore a dark-blue suit and a purple tie, and stood almost perfectly still at a lectern flanked by Iraqi flags. His long face conveyed, as it almost always does, a look of utter joylessness. Having spent much of his life hunted by assassins, Maliki gives the impression of a man who learned long ago to ruthlessly suppress his feelings. “He never smiles, he never says thank you, and I’ve never seen him say, ‘I’m sorry,’ ” a longtime associate of Maliki’s told me. For Maliki, the holiday greetings were a pretext. What he really wanted to talk about was protests unfolding in Anbar Province, west of



Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki is seeking a third term. Many Iraqis fear another civil war, and think that Maliki is to blame. Photograph by Moises Saman.

Baghdad. “Thank God, the truth has been revealed,” he said.

When the last American soldiers left Iraq, at the end of 2011, the bloody civil war between the country’s Sunni and Shiite sects had been stifled but not resolved. Now the sectarian violence had returned, with terrifying intensity. For more than a year, thousands of Iraqis, nearly all of them members of the Sunni Arab minority, had been gathering to rail against Maliki’s Shiite-dominated government. Although the protests were mostly peaceful, security forces responded harshly, detaining thousands of Sunni men without charges and, in one encampment, touching off a spasm of violence that left hundreds of civilians dead. Across the Sunni heartland, north and west of Baghdad, the town squares filled with angry crowds, and the rhetoric grew more extreme. In Ramadi, protesters raised black jihadi flags, representing the extremist Al Qaeda offshoot that had dominated the city during the American occupation. “We are a group called Al Qaeda!” a man shouted from a stage in the protesters’ camp. “We will cut off heads and bring justice!” The crowd cheered.

Speaking into the television cameras on Christmas, Maliki ordered the protesters to disband. Largely ignoring his own men’s excesses, he claimed that the protests were dominated by extremists. “This site has become a base for Al Qaeda,” he said, filled with “killers and criminals.” Maliki ended his speech with what for him was a flourish of emotion, lifting a hand from the lectern. “There will be no negotiations while the square is still standing.”

In the protests at Ramadi, a Sunni member of parliament named Ahmed al-Alwani had inflamed the crowds, accusing Maliki of being in league with the Iranian regime, the region’s great Shiite power. “My message is for the snake Iran!” Alwani shouted into a microphone, jabbing his finger into the air. Referring to Maliki and those around him as “Safavids” and “Zoroastrians,” terms that denote Iranian invaders, he said, “Let them listen up and know that those gathered here will return Iraq to its people!”

Three days after Maliki’s speech, security forces surrounded Alwani’s compound. Officials claimed that they had gone not to arrest him—as a member of parliament, he had immunity—but to capture his brother, who was wanted on vague charges of “terrorism.” Gunfire broke out. The troops killed six people and took Alwani away. A photograph apparently smuggled from jail showed him in an orange jumpsuit with bruises on his face. His brother had fared far worse: he was shot to death in the fighting.

Soon afterward, troops cleared the Ramadi camp, on a day when it was sparsely occupied. Anbar Province erupted, along with the rest of Sunni Iraq, and the violence has not ceased. A wave of car bombers and suicide bombers struck Baghdad; in January, more than a thousand Iraqi civilians died, the overwhelming majority of them Shiites, making it one of the bloodiest months since the height of the American war. In the effort to put down the upheaval, Maliki ringed the province’s two largest cities, Falluja and Ramadi, with artillery and began shelling.

Forty-four Sunni members of parliament resigned. In Falluja and Ramadi, Sunni police abandoned their posts.

Maliki, apparently realizing that he had miscalculated, ordered the Army to leave both cities. Within hours, dozens of armed men, their trucks flying black flags, swept into the downtowns, declaring that they were from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, an Al Qaeda splinter group. Locals said that it was made up of men who had fought the Americans. “They are sleeper cells—local people,” a Falluja resident, who watched the rebels come into the streets, told me. “Al Qaeda was here all along, lying low. And now they control Falluja.”

The capture of Iraqi territory by Islamic extremists, barely two years since the last American soldiers left, prompted an extraordinary wave of soul-searching in Iraq and the United States, which lost more than thirteen hundred men and women in Anbar Province. Much of that reflection, in both countries, centered on Maliki, the man in whom the United States invested so much of its hopes and resources. Among many Iraqis, the concern is that their country is falling again into civil war, and that it is Maliki who has driven it to the edge. On April 30th, Iraqi voters will go to the polls to choose a parliament and ultimately a Prime Minister; after eight years in office, Maliki is seeking a third term. Many fear that victory would allow him to tighten his hold on the state. “If he wins this time, he will never leave,” the longtime Maliki associate told me.

I saw Maliki in his office in February, and he appeared as stiff and colorless as he did during his televised speech—an apparatchik become the boss. Wearing the same navy-blue suit and purple tie, he spoke in a monotone, his face blank, his body seemingly fixed to his chair. The office, a sterile room without a trace of warmth, had no windows, presumably because windows could be shattered by bombs.

When I asked Maliki about Anbar, he offered muddled explanations for why his forces had apprehended the Sunni parliamentarian. “Nobody could deny it—he and his brother were carrying guns against the Iraqi government,” he said. He brightened when I asked him about his reelection prospects. He told me he had earned the right to keep his job because, among other things, he had pursued policies that treated Iraqis equally, regardless of sect, and he had resisted the forces that were pulling his country apart. “First of all, we have kept Iraq united,” he said.

As Maliki spoke, a low-pitched rumble shook his office. Our tea glasses rattled. It was a car bomb—a few hundred yards from the fortified compound where Maliki lives. It was one of eight explosions that struck Baghdad that day, leaving thirty-four people dead. For a moment, everyone sat in silence. Then Maliki turned to an aide. “Go see what that was,” he said.

At the nadir of the American occupation, in 2007, Baghdad resembled a medieval city under siege. U.S. soldiers stood guard on every block, part of a force of a hundred and sixty-five thousand throughout the country, along with about thirty thousand contractors and five thousand British soldiers. Entire neighborhoods were sealed off by concrete blast walls, to protect residents from the sectarian killers who roamed the city. Nevertheless, every morning dozens of new corpses appeared in the streets, many of them frozen in their final moments: hands bound, heads bagged, burned with acid, drilled with holes.

Two years after the last American soldiers departed, it's hard to find any evidence that they were ever there. Blast walls still stand outside office buildings, but only a handful of Americans remain, shuttling around the capital to help Iraqis use U.S. military equipment, and to drill for oil. Iraq has become one of the world's largest oil producers, but little of the profit reaches ordinary citizens; Baghdad is as drab and trash-strewn as before, its skyline mostly unbroken by new construction. It's as though the residents were still too exhausted to celebrate the calm that descended in late 2008, not entirely trusting that it would last.

The signature sound of the American war was the blast from a bomb—thousands of them, delivered by car or vest, or buried under the street. The bombs are back, sometimes a half-dozen a day, nearly always deployed by Sunnis to kill Shiites. In January, in a Shiite neighborhood called Kasra, a man parked his sedan in front of a tea shop, turned off the ignition, and walked away. A few moments later, the sedan exploded, obliterating a row of shops and five people unlucky enough to have been close. Twenty-seven others were wounded. One of the dead, a nineteen-year-old taxi-driver named Abdul Karim Latif, was engaged to be married. A few hours later, I watched mourners lift his coffin atop a minibus, draped in a fluorescent-pink bedsheet, to carry it to a cemetery. A group of women wailed. One of the survivors told me, “May God take vengeance on the people who did this.”

The fantastic bloodletting of the civil war, when thousands of Iraqis were dying a month, turned neighborhoods that for centuries had harbored both Sunni and Shiite Muslims into confessionally pure enclaves. Roughly speaking, Sunnis moved to the west of Baghdad and Shiites to the east. These days, whatever security can be found in the city is owed in part to the relentless segregation that took place during the civil war; as Matthew Sherman, a former civilian adviser to the U.S. Army, told me, “There was no one left to kill.” Against the odds, some Baghdad neighborhoods have regained their diversity, passing through an inferno first. In 2006, Adel, a mixed neighborhood in western Baghdad, fell to Sunni insurgents, who murdered dozens of Shiites and forced others from their homes. Today, Adel is mixed again; many of the Shiite families who fled have followed the calm back to their houses. On a recent afternoon, Shiite prayer flags fluttered in the midday breeze.

The resurgence of Iraq's Shiites is the greatest legacy of the American invasion, which overthrew Sunni rule and replaced it with a government led by Shiites—the first since the eighteenth century. Eight years after Maliki took power, Iraqis are sorting through the consequences. The Green Zone—still known by its English name—has the same otherworldly feel that it did during the American war: a placid, manicured outpost in a jungle of trouble. Now, though, it is essentially a bastion of Shiite power, in a country shot through with angry Sunni citizens. Politicians hustle from meeting to meeting, rarely venturing past the gates. When I asked Yasin Majid, a member of parliament, to meet me for coffee, he said, “I don't want to come out of the Green Zone.”

This month's election will be the first without American supervision. The recent violence, along with Maliki's growing authoritarianism, has prompted many to imagine the future in the darkest terms. Hanaa Edwar, who runs a nonprofit called Al-Amal (Hope), told me over tea at her home that she had opposed the American invasion, even though she loathed Saddam Hussein. “I thought it was an Iraqi issue, not an American one,” she said. Still, the Americans could not have dreamed of a better friend. Threatened by insurgents and harassed by the government, Edwar built an organization that, among other things, trains women to campaign for elected office. She is proud of her work but ashamed of the Iraq that Maliki and his American sponsors have made. She recited a list of woes: “Divisions among people. The failure of public services. The corruption. The human-rights abuses. The judicial system? There is no judicial system, really. We are losing everything.”

Three years ago, four pro-democracy demonstrators were arrested in Baghdad, and Maliki publicly described them as “criminals and killers.” Edwar strode up to him at a conference and unfurled a large photograph of the group. “Criminals and killers?” she said. “We have sacrificed thousands of people.”

“*Wakhrooha*,” Maliki barked to his aides: Take her away.

I asked Edwar about the elections, whether change might save the country. She looked at me with tired eyes. “We are going into—how do you say it?” she said.

“The abyss?” a colleague offered.

“Yes—the abyss,” Edwar said. “Yes, yes, yes.”

3.

The new Iraqi constitution, drafted with considerable American input, begins with a kind of creation story of democracy in Iraq: “We, the people of Mesopotamia, the homeland of the apostles and prophets . . . marched for the first time in our history toward the ballot boxes by the million.” In reality, the formation of the government—and the rise of Maliki—owes much more

to what the writer Rebecca West, describing the inevitable difficulties of international politics, called “clumsy gestures based on imperfect knowledge.”

Early in 2006, as the civil war grew fiercer, the American Ambassador in Baghdad, Zalmay Khalilzad, was summoned to a videoconference with President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair, of the U.K. In parliamentary elections the previous December, a coalition of Shiite parties had won the most votes. But their nominee for Prime Minister, the incumbent, Ibrahim al-Jaafari, was struggling to form a government. An avuncular, bookish figure, Jaafari had infuriated Bush with his indecisiveness, amiably presiding over the sectarian bloodbath that had followed the recent bombing of a major Shiite shrine.

During the videoconference, Bush asked Khalilzad, “Can you get rid of Jaafari?”

“Yes,” Khalilzad replied, “but it will be difficult.”

For several days, Khalilzad told me, he worked to block Jaafari from securing a parliamentary majority, and finally he succeeded. But, as a condition for withdrawing quietly, Jaafari insisted that Iraq’s next Prime Minister come from his party, the Islamist group known as Dawa, which for five decades had fought tenaciously for Shiite interests. Ali al-Adeeb, a well-liked party official, seemed to be a logical candidate. But Khalilzad was troubled by Adeeb; his father was Iranian, and many Iraqis were already convinced that Iran secretly controlled their country. “He’s of Persian blood,” Khalilzad said. “This is what they believe.”

Frustrated, Khalilzad turned to the C.I.A. analyst assigned to his office, a fluent Arabic speaker whose job was to know Iraq’s leaders. “Can it be that, in this country of thirty million people, the choice of Prime Minister is either Jaafari, who is incompetent, or Ali Adeeb, who is Iranian? Isn’t there anyone else?”

“I have a name for you,” the C.I.A. officer said. “Maliki.”

Among the Americans, Maliki was largely unknown, though he served on the committee charged with purging the Iraqi government of former members of Saddam Hussein’s Baath Party. “He’s clean,” the C.I.A. officer said; he wasn’t corrupt, and he had no apparent connection to terrorist activities. “We haven’t got any evidence on him.” And, unlike Jaafari, Maliki was “a tough guy,” seemingly able to defy the Iranian regime.

“Let me meet him,” Khalilzad said.

That night, during a long dinner at the American Embassy, Khalilzad asked Maliki if he’d considered becoming Prime Minister. Khalilzad recalled, laughing, that Maliki gave a startled jump. But, as the two men talked, Maliki said that he could indeed secure the votes, and so, as the dinner broke up, well past midnight, Khalilzad told an aide to get the White House on the phone. “We let Washington know there was a change of plans,” Khalilzad said. Sunni and Kurdish politicians endorsed his candidacy. Within three months, Maliki had become Iraq’s Prime Minister.

Khalilzad emphasized that he did not choose Maliki; he had merely exerted American leverage to maximum effect. “We were trying to bring Iraqis together,” he said. Maliki has said repeatedly, and often angrily, that he did not need American support to get what he wanted from Iraqis. For him, the Americans were just one more overweening foreign power.

Since Maliki’s youth, he has styled himself as a soldier in the Shiites’ struggle to rise from oppression. That meant confronting Iraq’s entrenched Sunni minority, which supplied the leaders of Hussein’s brutal dictatorship. For Maliki, the result has been decades of strife, plotting, and clandestine war.

Maliki was born in 1950 in Junaja, a village along the Euphrates in southern Iraq, just as the Shiites were beginning to cast off the legacy of British occupation. His grandfather Mohammed Abu al-Mahasin was a famous rebel, known for his political poetry. “He was a real revolutionary and wasn’t into material things,” Maliki told an interviewer for the Iraq Media Network, in 2012. After the British left, Maliki’s father worked to undermine the new dominant force, the Baath Party, a secular Arab nationalist movement that emphasized Sunni power. Both father and grandfather were jailed by their oppressors.

When Maliki was a teen-ager, the politics of the region began a profound shift. In 1967, Israel humiliated the combined armies of the Arab world in the Six-Day War—a defeat that prompted many young Arabs to turn to political Islam. It was around this time that Maliki joined Dawa (the Call), a secret organization dedicated to building an Islamic state in Iraq. Then, in 1979, a popular uprising in Iran overthrew the Shah, a staunch ally of the United States, and installed a revolutionary Shiite theocracy. The region’s downtrodden Shiites were galvanized. In the Iraqi television interview, Maliki said that he reacted with such “maniacal” enthusiasm that colleagues cautioned him not to attract the attention of the police. “All my reservations were gone,” he said.

That year, Saddam ascended to the Presidency and launched a sweeping crackdown on Shiite dissidents, executing and imprisoning thousands. Maliki was marginalized. He had attended an Islamist college in Baghdad, earning degrees in theology and in Arabic literature, and he wanted to become a teacher, but, he said, his refusal to join the Baath Party made it impossible. So he found work as an accountant in the education department in the city of Hillah, where he was the head of the local Dawa Party cell. One day, Baath officers burst into his office, where a number of Dawa members worked undercover, and began detaining his comrades. “They arrested everyone who was connected to me,” Maliki told me. “They executed them within two or three days.” A few days later, officers came to his house. “They arrested my two brothers and my cousin and they broke and destroyed everything,” Maliki said. “But they didn’t find me.” In his village, Maliki said, sixty-seven people were executed.

In September, 1980*, Saddam invaded Iran, and, suspecting that Shiite sympathizers were betraying him at home, he began to harass them more viciously. Maliki and a comrade were detained by Baath Party agents, blindfolded, and interrogated. “This is the end of our lives,” he told his friend—but the agents released him. Maliki fled Iraq, and, except for forays into areas held by Kurdish rebels, he did not return until the Americans invaded, in 2003. The years of his exile were difficult for Shiites in Iraq. In 1980, Dawa’s leader, Mohammed Bakir al-Sadr, was arrested and executed. A decade later, after the Gulf War, the U.S. encouraged an enormous Shiite uprising, in which Dawa operatives played a central role. Saddam’s ruthless counter-offensive killed as many as a hundred and fifty thousand Iraqis, the overwhelming majority of them Shiites; the U.S. stood by, which Shiites see as a monstrous betrayal.

Abroad, Maliki kept up the fight against Saddam, accepting aid from whoever would offer it. In Damascus, working under the nom de guerre Jawad, he planned military operations inside and outside Iraq. The high point came in July, 1982, when a Dawa gunman in the mostly Shiite town of Dujail opened fire on Saddam’s motorcade, killing two of his bodyguards. In response, Saddam’s men arrested some eight hundred residents, including women and children. Dozens were imprisoned and tortured to death; ultimately, more than a hundred were executed, and much of the town was razed. Maliki told me that he was not directly involved in the operation, though he knew people who were. “We tried many times to assassinate Saddam,” he said. “But we failed.”

That period of Maliki’s life was a time of ferment in Shia Islam. As the Iranians tried to spread their revolution, they trained proxies across the Middle East, and a loose web of Shiite militants began gathering in secret to trade information and sometimes to collaborate on attacks. The Dawa Party was one of several organizations that struck against Saddam and his Western supporters. In 1981, Dawa operatives, with Iranian help, launched a suicide attack on the Iraqi Embassy in Beirut, killing the Ambassador and sixty other people. Maliki told me that he wasn’t involved, but, according to his longtime associate, Maliki was responsible for all Dawa military activities in Syria and Lebanon. “He was definitely involved in the bombing,” the associate said, adding that Maliki knew the bomber, Abu Mariam. Though the attack killed fellow-Iraqis, many of them civilians, Dawa leaders thought of it as a success. “We were very happy,” the associate told me. “The Embassy was considered a nest of spies.”

The next year, Maliki moved to Iran, where he commanded a camp, in a border town called Ahvaz, to train Iraqi fighters for missions against Saddam’s invading Army. The operation was financed and directed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, Maliki’s associate said: “Nobody could move in that camp without Iranian permission.” Maliki stayed in Iran for seven years, fighting against his own country, only to have the war end in stalemate. In the interview with

Iraqi television, he said that he lost sixty-three fighters. “Some died inside Iraq and others in Iran,” he said. “Their graves are still there.”

A former senior C.I.A. officer, who served in Iraq during the war, told me that U.S. officials were given specific reports about the darkest aspects of Maliki’s past. But American diplomats who served in Iraq after the invasion said that they were unaware of any hard evidence that he had engaged in terrorism. “Getting a detailed sketch of Maliki was very difficult,” one told me. “All we knew was that he was not a super-duper bad guy, like some of the others.” When Maliki met with American officials, he denied being involved in terrorist attacks, and distanced himself from his patrons in Iran. “You can’t know what arrogance is until you are an Iraqi Arab forced to take refuge with the Iranians,” he told Ryan Crocker, at that time the American Ambassador to Iraq. He said that he had never learned Farsi, and used a translator whenever he met with Iranian officials. But his associate, who said that he was present at meetings with Iranians, told me, “Maliki can speak Farsi very easily.” And though Maliki insisted that Hezbollah, the Iranian-sponsored militia and political party, was an object of loathing in the Dawa Party, the associate told me that Maliki was very close to Hezbollah.

U.S. officials took many of the reports about Maliki and his associates to be rumor. At one point, Maliki and Crocker discussed a series of attacks in 1983, in which Dawa operatives in Kuwait bombed the embassies of the U.S. and France, evidently to retaliate for their support of Saddam. Maliki acknowledged that the bombers had belonged to Dawa, Crocker told me, but said that they were working exclusively for Iran. “Is that true?” Crocker said. “We decided that it was plausible enough.”

Jeffrey Beals, a former American diplomat, said that the U.S. knew Dawa had carried out attacks but didn’t think that Maliki’s potential involvement precluded his candidacy; most of the new Iraqi leaders had engaged in such activities. In the eighties, according to Crocker, the Iraqi President, Jalal Talabani, ran a “revolutionary consulate” in Damascus, where, under the auspices of Syrian intelligence, he issued false passports to militants active in the region. As Beals explained it, the Americans decided that waiting for an untainted partner was impractical: “A history of armed covert struggle against Saddam wasn’t a disqualifying factor.”

By the time Maliki returned to Baghdad, in April, 2003, he had come to regard the United States with profound animosity, friends and associates say. Over the years, the U.S. government had supported nearly all of his enemies—most notably Saddam—and opposed his friends, especially the revolutionary regime in Iran. “Maliki was known as an anti-American,” Dia al-Shakarchi, a Dawa activist in the eighties, said. “Even after 2003, his stance was very aggressive toward Americans.”

But Maliki had never known any Americans. His time in Iran and the Middle East set him apart from other exiles—people like Ahmed Chalabi and Ayad Allawi, members of the Iraqi

aristocracy who fled to London or New York or Chicago, where they became fluent in English and conversant in Western culture. Some of those exiles, still vying with Maliki for power, refer to him disparagingly as a *ma'adan*: a kind of Iraqi redneck. “Saddam was a Sunni *ma'adan*—low class,” the associate told me. “Maliki is the *ma'adan* of the Shiites.” Maliki, who has a master’s degree in Arab literature from Baghdad University, is acutely sensitive to the slights, his friends say. “He has a big chip on his shoulder,” a senior Iraqi lawmaker told me.

Beals met Maliki in 2004, when Maliki was the deputy speaker of the interim council that the U.S. had set up before the first elections. Beals recalled Maliki as intensely serious and committed, even though he knew that the Americans had given the council little real power. More than a year into the American occupation, Maliki still went by his nom de guerre, Jawad. Operating out of a shabby office, with worn-out carpet and doors that were missing hinges, he worked constantly, rarely indulging in pleasantries. “Watching him at work across the parliament hall, I remember thinking how he was the only person whose attitude and work habits were, in a way, American,” Beals said. At one point, Beals asked Maliki to tell a little about his past. “His eyes welled up with tears—he became emotional and distraught,” Beals said. “I think he saw the gulf between my life and the life of constant terror and intrigue he was living.”

The fall of Saddam marked a shift in Maliki’s struggle, but not the end of it. “There was no detachment, no attitude of triumph,” Beals said. “It was clear in his opinion that the war was not over at all. At any moment, whatever had been built could be gone, and the Baath could be back. There were explosions outside then, as there still are now. The lights were flickering on and off then, as they still are now. It was hard to disagree with him.”

When Maliki became Prime Minister, some Iraqis hoped that he might help unify the country. He brought members of parliament into his coalition by promising to reach out to Sunnis and Kurds. But, far more often, Maliki used his position to continue the war for the Shiites, fighting what he sees as an irreconcilable group of Sunni revanchists. Sami al-Askari, a member of parliament who worked with Maliki on the de-Baathification committee, described the Shiites’ persistent rage at their old oppressors: “You bring the criminal and the victim together and you say, ‘Forgive him.’ The criminal, until that moment, says, ‘I didn’t commit any crime.’ Don’t expect me to say I forgive you.” Maliki surrounded himself with trusted friends and family, who had been hardened by the long guerrilla war and, in some cases, by years in prison or by torture at the hands of Saddam’s henchmen. Hussein al-Shahristani, the Deputy Prime Minister, was imprisoned and tortured in Abu Ghraib, where he spent ten years in solitary confinement.

Maliki has provided a safe harbor for former foot soldiers. In the mid-eighties, a Kuwaiti court convicted a Dawa member named Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis for the embassy attacks of

1983, as well as for attempting to assassinate the Emir of Kuwait. During the American occupation, he led a militia that was responsible for dozens of attacks on coalition forces. Muhandis now lives comfortably in the Green Zone, not far from Maliki's house. When I asked Maliki why he allowed Muhandis to stay, he told me that he rejected the verdict of the Kuwaiti court, and that the other charges were unproved. "If we get some evidence against him, we will arrest him now," he said.

4.

In early 2007, when Ryan Crocker became the Ambassador to Iraq, he decided to pay a visit to Maliki alone, without aides or agenda. The civil war was killing two thousand civilians a month, and the insurgents were stronger than ever. President Bush, in a desperate gamble, had decided to send a "surge" of twenty thousand additional troops to bring the country under control.

Crocker had been a young political officer in the American Embassy in Baghdad in 1980, when Dawa's leader, Mohammed Bakir al-Sadr, was executed. That night, Dawa activists slipped into the streets and tacked up posters of Sadr across Baghdad. Crocker had ventured out and grabbed one; he mentioned it to Maliki. "I thought it would give me street cred," Crocker told me. As the two men talked, Maliki reflected on his thousands of dead colleagues, and told Crocker that under different circumstances he would have preferred a life outside politics—as a professor of Arabic literature. "He can quote the classical Arabic poets, the pre-Islamic poets, at great length," Crocker said.

As Maliki spoke of the difficulty of navigating Iraqi politics, he mentioned Abd al-Karim Qasim, the Iraqi general who, in 1958, helped overthrow the British-backed monarchy of Faisal II and execute the members of the royal family. After seizing power, Qasim implemented progressive land reforms and an expansion of women's rights. Maliki admired Qasim's programs, and especially the skills he deployed to stay in power. "Qasim was masterful at the double and triple cross," Crocker said, recalling his conversation with Maliki. "He'd back one faction against another, and when the dirty work was done he'd turn on the faction he had backed so they didn't get too powerful. Intimidate, pressure, bribe, cajole, and then reverse course." But Qasim's example went only so far; in 1963, he was overthrown and executed by the Baathists. To avoid the same fate, Maliki told Crocker, "I have to keep dancing all the time."

From the beginning, Maliki was fixated on conspiracies being hatched against him—by his Iraqi rivals, by the Baathists he imagined were still in the Iraqi Army, even by the Americans. A former American diplomat described it as "Nixonian paranoia," adding, "We had a hundred and fifty thousand troops in the country, and he was obsessed that a few dozen former Baathists

were going to try to overthrow him.” The longtime associate told me that Maliki’s basic assumption was “everyone is plotting against us.” But, he argued, fanatical caution had served him well. “His secret? He is a very intelligent tactician—all politics is short term. He doesn’t have any vision for the state.”

No matter how much Maliki admired political cunning, his first years as Prime Minister were marked by impotence and indecision. Some people who worked closely with him were convinced that he got the job because he was unlikely to demand his own way. Emma Sky, a civilian adviser to the American military, explained the reasoning: “If we put a nobody in power, he’s no threat to anybody.”

By the time Maliki took office, the police and the Army were overwhelmingly Shiite, packed with former militiamen bent on cleansing Baghdad of Sunni Arabs. In the summer of 2006, each morning brought new reports of sectarian atrocities. Maliki did very little to stop them, according to Matthew Sherman, the civilian adviser to the U.S. Army. “We’d go into his office, we’d tell him about a massacre that had been carried out by his men,” Sherman told me. “And Maliki would just sit there and say, ‘I’m sure they were terrorists.’ We could never get him to act against the death squads.” (Maliki says that he never received any evidence that his soldiers or police had acted improperly.)

Maliki’s rivals in Baghdad began plotting to unseat him, and he occasionally made a display of strength. In 2006, after months of pushing the Americans to turn over Saddam, he took custody of the former President and hastily ordered an execution—carried out in an ill-lit basement, by men in masks, on the first day of Eid al Adha, the Muslim holiday.

As grainy cell-phone videos of the event sparked worldwide consternation, Maliki said that he’d rushed the execution because he was worried that Baathists would try to free Saddam—though he never produced any evidence. Criticism by human-rights groups left him unapologetic: “Where were they during the mass graves and the executions and the massacres that killed hundreds of thousands of Iraqis?” American officials were appalled, believing that the hurried execution undercut the legitimacy of the Iraqi legal process. In videos, Saddam’s executioners chanted, “Moqtada, Moqtada, Moqtada!,” a reference to Moqtada al-Sadr, the Iranian-backed guerrilla commander. Even the U.S. officials who had handed Saddam over said that the execution was a disaster for the country, both internally and abroad. “It was a lynching,” the former diplomat told me. “They basically martyred him.”

Whatever doubts remained about Maliki’s assertiveness evaporated on the night of March 22, 2008, when Maliki told General David Petraeus, the American military commander, that he had ordered the Iraqi Army into the southern city of Basra, where Sadr’s militia, the Mahdi Army, was entrenched. Sadr was an old rival; his party competed with Dawa for the loyalty of Iraq’s vast Shiite underclass, drawing power from the Mahdi Army’s reputation for

protecting against attacks by Sunni extremists. Maliki loathed Sadr, whom he regarded as coarse and uneducated, and was furious when the militia took over large parts of Baghdad and southern Iraq. Still, when Maliki announced the offensive in Basra, the Americans were stunned; they had warned that preparations for such an operation would take six months. Crocker told me that they had no choice: “We had to support him.”

The operation, called the Charge of the Knights, nearly ended in disaster. The Iraqi Army was underequipped and underprepared, and its ranks started to fall apart soon after the fighting began. Maliki flew into downtown Basra, landing at an old palace, which was surrounded by Sadr’s militiamen. The mortar fire was relentless; Maliki’s chief of security, whom he had known since childhood, was killed. In Washington, Brett McGurk, a national-security aide, walked into the Oval Office and put a map of Basra in front of President Bush. The map showed Sadr’s forces everywhere. “Maliki was this little red dot in the middle,” McGurk recalled. Bush, unfazed, said, “Make sure he wins.”

As the fighting raged, Crocker and Petraeus telephoned Maliki. “We could hear the mortar fire landing all around him,” Crocker said. “We suggested to the Prime Minister that he’d made his point, that perhaps it was time to declare victory and come home.” Maliki rebuffed them. “The Americans didn’t like the whole situation,” he told me. “I told them, ‘This is not your job. This is my job.’ I told them I would stay until we saw the battle to the end.”

Within a month, the Iraqi Army—with enormous American support—had routed the Mahdi Army. When the militia’s backers in Iran asked for a ceasefire, Maliki refused. It was a political turning point: he had shown that he was willing to take on a Shiite armed group as readily as a Sunni one, and even to defy the Iranians. His opponents in Baghdad put away their plans for deposing him. “We thought this was the moment when he finally grew into the job,” Crocker said.

Not everyone was so sanguine. Adil Abd al-Mahdi, a former Vice-President under Maliki, said that the victory in Basra brought out a more belligerent side of the Prime Minister, which Iraqis have contended with ever since: “After the campaign against the Mahdi Army, Maliki went to an individual—a monopolizing—way of governing. He started to play it separately, without his partners, whether Sunni, Shiite, or Kurd.”

5.

In September, 2010, with the Iraqi government stalled by inconclusive parliamentary elections, a group of political leaders was invited to the Iranian holy city of Qom for a celebration of the Eid al Fitr holiday. Once there, they were quietly summoned to a meeting of another sort. Their host was Qassem Suleimani, the head of the Quds Force, the Iranian paramilitary corps. For nearly a decade, Suleimani had loomed over Iraq as a powerful,

shadowy influence: he had flooded the country with agents, brokered political deals, and smuggled in sophisticated bombs to kill American soldiers. Iran's goals in Iraq were twofold: to bleed the Americans and to bolster the power of its Shiite clients.

In parliamentary elections the previous March, Maliki's Shiite Islamist alliance, the State of Law, had suffered an embarrassing loss. The greatest share of votes went to a secular, pro-Western coalition called Iraqiya, led by Ayad Allawi, a persistent enemy of the Iranians. "These were election results we could only have dreamed of," a former American diplomat told me. "The surge had worked. The war was winding down. And, for the first time in the history of the Arab world, a secular, Western-leaning alliance won a free and fair election."

But even though Allawi's group had won the most votes, it had not captured a majority, leaving both him and Maliki scrambling for coalition partners. And despite the gratifying election results, American officials said, the Obama Administration concluded that backing Allawi would be too difficult if he was opposed by Shiites and by their supporters in Iran. "There was no way that the Shia were not going to provide the next Prime Minister," James Jeffrey, the American Ambassador at the time, told me. "Iraq will not work if they don't. Allawi was a goner."

Shortly after the elections, an Iraqi judge, under pressure from the Prime Minister, awarded Maliki the first chance to form a government. The ruling directly contradicted the Iraqi constitution, but American officials did not contest it. "The intent of the constitution was clear, and we had the notes of the people who drafted it," Sky, the civilian adviser, said. "The Americans had already weighed in for Maliki."

But it was the meeting with Suleimani that was ultimately decisive. According to American officials, he broke the Iraqi deadlock by leaning on Sadr to support Maliki, in exchange for control of several government ministries. Suleimani's conditions for the new government were sweeping. Maliki agreed to make Jalal Talabani, the pro-Iranian Kurdish leader, the new President, and to neutralize the Iraqi National Intelligence Service, which was backed by the C.I.A. Most dramatic, he agreed to expel all American forces from the country by the end of 2011.

The U.S. obtained a transcript of the meeting, and knew the exact terms of the agreement. Yet it decided not to contest Iran's interference. At a meeting of the National Security Council a month later, the White House signed off on the new regime. Officials who had spent much of the previous decade trying to secure American interests in the country were outraged. "We lost four thousand five hundred Americans only to let the Iranians dictate the outcome of the war? To result in strategic defeat?" the former American diplomat told me. "Fuck that." At least one U.S. diplomat in Baghdad resigned in protest. And Ayad Allawi, the secular Iraqi leader who captured the most votes, was deeply embittered. "I needed American support," he told me last

summer. “But they wanted to leave, and they handed the country to the Iranians. Iraq is a failed state now, an Iranian colony.”

American diplomats made one last effort to preserve their influence. In a meeting, Jeffrey asked Maliki to commit to several goals in his second term: granting amnesty to thousands of Sunnis who had been detained without charges; dismantling prisons where American officials believed that Iraqis were being tortured; and signing an agreement that would allow American troops to stay in the country. Later that year, the U.S. brokered a deal to bring Allawi and other members of his coalition into the government. In time, Maliki either ignored or jettisoned every promise. “He looked us straight in the eyes and lied,” the former diplomat told me.

The consequences became clear when negotiations began over the crucial question of withdrawing American troops after 2011. The leaders of all the major Iraqi parties had privately told American commanders that they wanted several thousand military personnel to remain, to train Iraqi forces and to help track down insurgents. The commanders told me that Maliki, too, said that he wanted to keep troops in Iraq. But he argued that the long-standing agreement that gave American soldiers immunity from Iraqi courts was increasingly unpopular; parliament would forbid the troops to stay unless they were subject to local law.

President Obama, too, was ambivalent about retaining even a small force in Iraq. For several months, American officials told me, they were unable to answer basic questions in meetings with Iraqis—like how many troops they wanted to leave behind—because the Administration had not decided. “We got no guidance from the White House,” Jeffrey told me. “We didn’t know where the President was. Maliki kept saying, ‘I don’t know what I have to sell.’ ” At one meeting, Maliki said that he was willing to sign an executive agreement granting the soldiers permission to stay, if he didn’t have to persuade the parliament to accept immunity. The Obama Administration quickly rejected the idea. “The American attitude was: Let’s get out of here as quickly as possible,” Sami al-Askari, the Iraqi member of parliament, said.

The last American combat troops departed Iraq on December 18, 2011. Some U.S. officials believe that Maliki never intended to allow soldiers to remain; in a recent e-mail, he denied ever supporting such a plan, saying, “I am the owner of the idea of withdrawing the U.S. troops.” Many Iraqi and American officials are convinced that even a modest force would have been able to prevent chaos—not by fighting but by providing training, signals intelligence, and a symbolic presence. “If you had a few hundred here, not even a few thousand, they would be cooperating with you, and they would become your partners,” Askari told me. “But, when they left, all of them left. There’s no one to talk to about anything.”

Ben Rhodes, the U.S. deputy national-security adviser, told me that Obama believes a full withdrawal was the right decision. “There is a risk of overstating the difference that American troops could make in the internal politics of Iraq,” he said. “Having troops there did not allow

us to dictate sectarian alliances. Iraqis are going to respond to their own political imperatives.” But U.S. diplomats and commanders argue that they played a crucial role, acting as interlocutors among the factions—and curtailing Maliki’s sectarian tendencies.

“We used to restrain Maliki all the time,” Lieutenant General Michael Barbero, the deputy commander in Iraq until January, 2011, told me. “If Maliki was getting ready to send tanks to confront the Kurds, we would tell him and his officials, ‘We will physically block you from moving if you try to do that.’ ” Barbero was angry at the White House for not pushing harder for an agreement. “You just had this policy vacuum and this apathy,” he said. “Now we have no leverage in Iraq. Without any troops there, we’re just another group of guys.” There is no longer anyone who can serve as a referee, he said, adding, “Everything that has happened there was not just predictable—we predicted it.”

Indeed, months before the election, American diplomats in Iraq sent a rare dissenting cable to Washington, complaining that the U.S., with its combination of support and indifference, was encouraging Maliki’s authoritarian tendencies. “We thought we were creating a dictator,” one person who signed the memo told me.

6.

Less than twenty-four hours after the last convoy of American fighters left, Maliki’s government ordered the arrest of Vice-President Tariq al-Hashemi, the highest-ranking Sunni Arab. Prosecutors accused Hashemi of having run a death squad that assassinated police officers and government officials. The practice was not uncommon at the time. “During the civil war, many political leaders in Iraq had death squads,” a former Western diplomat said. “Maliki started using the security forces to go after his rivals.” In moving against Hashemi, Maliki was signalling that he intended to depose his sectarian rivals.

Hashemi flew to the Kurdish region, in northern Iraq, where officials offered to protect him. Seven of his bodyguards were arrested, the first of sixty. Only a few days earlier, in a press conference at the White House to mark the end of the American war, President Obama had praised Maliki as “the elected leader of a sovereign, self-reliant, and democratic Iraq.” When Hashemi fled, American officials did not publicly protest. Three months later, he was convicted in absentia and sentenced to death; he remains in exile.

With the expulsion of Hashemi, Maliki began an aggressive campaign to crack down on dissent—especially Sunni dissent—and to centralize authority in his office. In the following months, he forced out a number of senior officials, notably Sinan al-Shabibi, the governor of the Central Bank, who had tried to stop him from diverting Iraq’s foreign reserves into the government’s operating budget. After the inconclusive 2010 election, the chairman of the Independent Election Commission was arrested. When the Integrity Commission uncovered a

network in Maliki's cabinet that was issuing government contracts to fake companies, he blocked the prosecutions; soon afterward, the commission's director was replaced with a Maliki ally. In addition, Maliki created the Office of the Commander-in-Chief, which gave him personal control over the country's million-man Army and police force, often requiring local commanders to report directly to him.

As Maliki gathered power, he set out to banish every trace of Sunni influence from the bureaucracy. One of the places he began was the Iraqi National Intelligence Service. The director was an imposing former general named Mohammed Shawani, a Sunni whose three sons had been tortured to death by Saddam's men. In August, 2009, Shawani told me, he went to Maliki with an intelligence report that detailed insurgents' plans for attacks on several government offices. The Prime Minister brushed off his warnings, he said. (Maliki denied this, saying, "It is impossible to believe Shawani.") Two days later, a wave of car bombs struck the Finance Ministry, the Foreign Ministry, and other government targets, killing a hundred Iraqis and wounding more than five hundred. Shawani fled to the United States. "I knew I had to leave," he told me. "I thought I was next." In the following several months, according to Shawani and former American officials, Maliki purged the service of nearly all its Sunni agents and analysts, some five hundred in total. "It's essentially a Shiite organization now," Shawani said.

To prevent parliament from passing laws against his interests, Maliki secured a decision from the Iraqi High Court that gave him the exclusive right to draft legislation. Indeed, Maliki has refused to appear before the parliament, or to submit his appointees for approval. "Maliki could have been a historic figure," Adil Abd al-Mahdi, the former Vice-President, said. "The Shiites supported him; he had the support of the Sunnis and the Kurds. But he needed a real partnership. He needed to give some of his power to others." Mahdi added, "We have a saying in Arabic: When you want everything, you lose everything."

7.

In the summer of 2012, a mysterious man walked into the office of Rafe al-Essawi, then the finance minister, and handed him a sheaf of documents. The man, who identified himself as Mohammed Abdullah, said that they were government contracts, totalling seven billion dollars, along with instructions to wire payments to a series of Iraqi bank accounts. They appeared to have been approved by Maliki's cabinet and signed by four of his ministers. Essawi examined the documents, and quickly determined that they were fraudulent: the contracts, the companies, the approvals, the signatures. "Everything was fake—everything," Essawi told me.

Essawi ordered his men to block the exits and arrest the man, but he managed to get away. Soon afterward, Essawi said, he visited Maliki and handed him the file and a photograph of the

man, captured by the ministry's security cameras. He told Maliki he believed that Abdullah was probably working with people close to Maliki. "I asked the Prime Minister to use the intelligence agencies to investigate," Essawi said.

Essawi never heard back. A few months later, Iraqi troops stormed the Ministry of Finance, setting fire to Essawi's office and several others, and destroying the cameras that had recorded Abdullah's photo. The soldiers carted away dozens of Essawi's bodyguards.

Essawi publicly denounced Maliki, calling the raid on his office "deliberate and premeditated." When I spoke to him in Abu Dhabi, he was more cautious, saying that he didn't know who was behind the phony contracts or the raid. "Iraq is filled with gangs, filled with militias, filled with corrupt people," he said. But he believed that the raid was ordered in retaliation for his attempt to block the theft. "I am being punished because I refused to work with the other side," he said. Several American and Iraqi officials told me that Maliki must have ordered the raid. "The only troops that can move inside the Green Zone are under Maliki's control," the former senior C.I.A. official told me.

Essawi's story is one of dozens I heard in Iraq and neighboring countries about corrupt members of Maliki's government, ranging from a circle around the Prime Minister to the lowest functionary. Most of the allegations are unproved, but they are persistent; Iraqi and U.S. officials, both current and former, tell tales of extortion, bribery, kickbacks, and theft. Many involve the siphoning of Iraq's oil revenues, which last year exceeded ninety billion dollars. Others describe the corrupt use of Iraqi banks to tap the black market in dollars. In the past few years, several government contracts have turned out to be entirely fake. In 2011, the government cancelled a \$1.2-billion contract to build ten power plants, and announced that the Canadian company hired to do the work existed only on paper. "The corruption is Olympian," the former senior C.I.A. official told me.

Mahdi, the former Vice-President, told me that almost two hundred and twenty billion dollars had been allocated to some six thousand projects for which little or no work has been done. About seventy billion dollars had been handed out in government loans that have not been repaid. Maliki maintained that these were "statements refuted by reality," and insisted that the government's Board of Supreme Audit enforces fiscal regulations. But Mahdi noted that the Essawi anecdote accords with budgetary records, pointing out seven billion dollars that was allocated without any work being performed. "It's not a 'story,' " he told me. "Look at the budget." Mahdi, a moderate Islamist and an American favorite, resigned as Vice-President in 2011, along with the rest of his party, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq. "We don't think this government will succeed," Mahdi said. "That is why we withdrew from everything—the Vice-Presidency, the ministries, everything."

Many of the allegations of corruption center on Ahmed Maliki, the Prime Minister's son. According to several Iraqis and Americans, Ahmed often demands a percentage of government contracts awarded to private companies. Maliki calls these accusations "fabrications by enemies and opponents." But he has acknowledged giving Ahmed unusual legal authority. In 2011, Ahmed led raids on U.S. government contractors in the Green Zone, forcing them out of their offices and confiscating property. And, in a television interview last fall, Maliki said that he had dispatched his son, along with a police squad, to arrest an Iraqi construction mogul named Namir al-Akabi, on tax-evasion and embezzlement charges. "When an arrest warrant was issued, everyone was afraid to go near him," Maliki said, citing Akabi's connections in the media. "But Ahmed said, 'Give me the arrest warrant and I will bring him in.'" He added, "Ahmed is tough." Many Iraqis were outraged that the Prime Minister's son had been given such power, and saw it as a troubling sign that he is being groomed as a dynastic successor. The Iraqi official worried that, if Maliki wins the upcoming elections, "he will pass power to his son."

For Sunnis, the government's pursuit of Essawi was transparently sectarian, and they reacted with furious protests. "Democracy is new in Iraq," Essawi told me. "Everything is fragile. It is very easy to slide back into dictatorship." For years, Sunni leaders have asked for checks on the government's power to punish its citizens. Counterterrorism laws allow any Iraqi to be held indefinitely without charges, and human-rights groups estimate that tens of thousands of Sunni men have been detained, many of them for years, and often incommunicado; female suspects, they say, are tortured and often raped in detention. Sunnis have demanded that the laws be repealed, and the imprisoned women released. They also call for withdrawing the Army from Sunni cities, and relaxing de-Baathification strictures, which have been used to exclude Sunnis from government jobs and election ballots.

Maliki has ignored these demands, and his government responded savagely to the new round of protests. In April, after a soldier was killed in the Sunni town of Hawija, troops attacked an encampment of protesters there, killing at least forty-four people. In a televised speech, Maliki warned of a "sectarian war," and blamed the violence on "remnants of the Baath Party." Hundreds of Iraqis, most of them Sunni civilians, were killed as the crackdown continued.

Maliki has grown steadily more imperious, reacting violently to the slightest criticism. He often claims to have files on his rivals, filled with evidence of corruption and killings. "I swear to God, if the parliament wants to summon me, I will go, but I will turn the world upside down," he said on Iraqi television last year. "I will take a list of names with me and call them out one by one, and tell everyone what they have been doing." Maliki has even resurrected a Saddam-era law that makes it a criminal offense to criticize the head of the government. He has

filed defamation suits against scores of journalists, judges, and members of parliament, demanding that they spend time in prison and pay damages. “For any political difference, any rivalry, he makes a case,” a senior Iraqi politician told me.

Maliki is relatively restrained in his display of wealth—his sole apparent indulgence is a Patek Philippe watch—but he lives in an area in the Green Zone known as Little Venice, for its many fountains and canals. The area once housed Saddam’s family and senior members of his regime; today, black Mercedes sedans purr down its manicured streets. Maliki does not live in Saddam’s Presidential Palace—that’s set aside for state occasions—but in a villa that was once one of his guesthouses.

Across a square live two notorious Maliki associates. The first is Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the Dawa activist convicted of bombing the U.S. Embassy in Kuwait in 1983. Muhandis founded the Party of God Brigade, an Iranian-backed militia that attacked American soldiers during the occupation and has been declared a terrorist organization by the Treasury Department. When American forces were still in Iraq, Ryan Crocker said, “We told Maliki that if Muhandis wanted to stay healthy he needed to stay in Iran.” After they withdrew, according to Iraqi and American officials, Muhandis was given a guesthouse on the property of Falah al-Fayyad, Maliki’s national-security adviser.

Just down the road lives Qais al-Khazali, the leader of Asa’ib Ah al-Haq, an Iranian-directed militia that launched hundreds of attacks on American forces. U.S. officials say that Khazali was one of the principal plotters in the kidnapping and execution of four American soldiers in Karbala, in 2007, an operation performed at Iran’s behest. The U.S. captured Khazali but turned him over to Iraqi authorities; after the troops left, he was promptly released.

According to Iraqi and American officials, Maliki has begun to deploy both militias against his opponents, mainly the followers of Sadr. “Maliki is using Asa’ib to take out his enemies,” the senior Iraqi lawmaker told me. Maliki denies this, saying, “Within the framework of national reconciliation, all armed groups are welcome in the political process if they abandon their weapons, but terrorists are not welcome.” He did not deny his relationship with Khazali, though; he pointed out, shrugging, “It was the Americans who released him.”

Several American and Iraqi officials told me that Muhandis is Maliki’s principal connection to the Iranian regime, acting as the personal representative of Suleimani, the head of the Quds Force. (Maliki responded, “I do have a good relationship with Iran, but I do not have any links with Muhandis.”) Maliki’s defenders, including some American officials, say that he routinely defies the Iranian regime. But most indications are that it exercises great influence over Maliki’s government. A conspicuous example is the airlift of guns and fighters to the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, another Iranian ally. Transport planes flying to Damascus pass unmolested through Iraqi airspace. Maliki insisted that his officials regularly inspect the flights, and that

they carry only humanitarian supplies. American officials say that inspections are rare. The senior Iraqi lawmaker told me that only four flights have been checked. Maliki claimed that he had no love for Assad, but that he was the only choice in a war against Al Qaeda. “There is no more moderate opposition in Syria,” Maliki told me.

Izzat Shahbandar, an old friend and a former ally of Maliki’s, suggested that the Prime Minister’s sectarianism was at least partly pragmatic. When Maliki and the other exiles returned to Iraq in 2003, they quickly concluded that they couldn’t establish an Islamic state, because the two sects had fundamental differences over the nature of Islam. “So these guys who had been working on, planning on, an Islamic state all those years, suddenly they came to a halt,” Shahbandar said.

Iraq’s new leaders were faced with two options. One was to build a state that united the country’s sects and religions around a democratic idea. But this was a foreign concept, Shahbandar said. “Before 2003, certain ideas were *haram*”—forbidden—“to the Islamists: ideas like democracy, nationalism, and citizenship. These people could not embark on a national project. They didn’t know how.” Shahbandar went on, “The Islamists were left with only one option that would keep them as Iraq’s leaders: to step away from the Islamist project, and go for the sectarian project.” The cost of their political survival was growing fear and animosity, he said: “For Sunni leaders, their job is to frighten people about the Shiites. And, for the Shiite leaders, it is to do the opposite. In this way, the existence of one justifies the existence of the other.”

By this calculus, the events in Falluja, coming just before national elections, are well timed. Al Qaeda militants are manning positions in the middle of Falluja, and the Sunni tribes, which once fought Al Qaeda, are ringed around the city. But, in a measure of Iraq’s sectarian division, this terrible situation may buy Maliki a third term. “Falluja,” Shahbandar said, “is good for Maliki.”

8.

Two hundred miles north of Baghdad, in Iraq’s Kurdish region, the legacy of American engagement looks very different. In Erbil, the capital, the night clubs stay open until dawn. There’s a Jaguar dealership, a Divan hotel with a sushi restaurant and a rooftop bar, and a gleaming new international airport. Women walk around in jeans, with their hair flowing freely; construction cranes are spread across the horizon, and hundreds of Westerners live and work there. Up the road, in Suleimaniya, the American University attracts scholars from all over the world. “The Americans should be proud of what has been accomplished here,” Fuad Hussein, the chief of staff to the Prime Minister of the Kurdish regional government, said. A decade after the occupation, Iraq’s Kurdish-speaking area is peaceful, largely democratic, secular, and pro-

Western. Indeed, the region, though nominally still part of Iraq, functions as an independent state. The Kurds have their own army, their own parliament. Arabic is barely spoken—and, by the young, not even understood.

Iraq's vast oil reserves were expected to hold the country together. Instead, they seem to be driving it apart. Under the American-brokered constitution, the national budget—which is made up almost entirely of oil revenues—is divided according to population, with seventeen per cent allotted to the Kurds. The overwhelming majority of the oil comes from the south, at the opposite end of the country. For all the recent conflict, oil production has risen steadily in the south, to three and a half million barrels a day, making Iraq the sixth-largest producer in the world.

But the balance is changing. With the help of foreign companies, the Kurdish regional government has been preparing to exploit the huge oil reserves that are believed to exist there. In October, the Kurds switched on a pipeline that carries locally extracted oil through Turkey to the Mediterranean, at the rate of a hundred thousand barrels a day. By 2017, officials say, that number will reach a million barrels.

Under the constitution, the government in Baghdad handles oil from existing wells, while newly discovered oil is supposed to be exploited in cooperation with regional authorities. Maliki has accused the Kurds of acting unilaterally; the Kurds say that they are only doing what the constitution allows—and point out that Maliki's government has consistently failed to give them a fair share of oil revenues. The dispute has driven a deep wedge between the two regions. Finally, in March, Maliki entirely withdrew the Kurds' portion of the national budget, insisting that they had been secretly trucking oil to buyers in Turkey. "This is a step toward independence," Maliki told me angrily. Falah Mustafa Bakir, Kurdistan's de-facto foreign minister, put it more bluntly: "The divorce is inevitable."

Experts say that the Kurds don't produce enough oil to supplant the revenues from Baghdad, but that may change as production rises. "Right now, it pays the Kurds to stay in Iraq," Nat Kern, who publishes a newsletter on the region's oil economy, said. "Five years from now, it will pay them to leave." Ironically, the one thing that could keep the Kurds from seceding is rising oil production in the south; Iraqi officials forecast that it will increase almost threefold in the next six years, far outstripping any likely revenues from the Kurdish region.

The dispute over oil is only part of the problem; the Kurds feel that they have little in common with the Arabic-speaking regions of Iraq, except a legacy of massacres overseen by Saddam. (As many as two hundred thousand Kurds were killed in the eighties and nineties, a period they call the War of Annihilation.) Erbil has been transformed by the new oil money and bears almost no resemblance to Baghdad. "In Kurdistan, the leaders steal about twenty per cent, but eighty per cent makes it to the people," a Kurdish friend told me in Erbil. "In Baghdad, the

percentages are reversed.” With the south in perpetual conflict, and the Kurdish region developing rapidly, the psychological distance grows by the day. “We are talking about a culture of life,” Fuad Hussein told me. “They are busy with a culture of death.”

9.

In November, with violence in Iraq exploding, Maliki travelled to Washington to ask President Obama for help. It made for a curious scene: Maliki, the cantankerous nationalist who’d ushered the Americans out of Iraq, back in Washington less than two years later. White House officials, worried that the Iraqi state was in danger of collapse, agreed to quickly dispatch a hundred and fifty-two Hellfire missiles and more than two dozen Apache attack helicopters.

The officials set aside concerns that Maliki’s policies had driven Iraq to conflict. Instead, they blamed the civil war in Syria, which is incubating violent extremists at an alarming rate. The long, deserted border between the two countries has effectively disappeared, and jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq are working together. “The area between Aleppo and Anbar has got to be one of the scariest places,” a senior Administration official told me.

Emma Sky, the civilian adviser during the occupation, saw Maliki’s parlous situation as the result of the White House’s own policies: Bush and Obama had invested so heavily in Maliki, and made him so powerful, that his authoritarian behavior became inevitable. “Did we just get it wrong with Maliki and Karzai—were we that unlucky?” Sky asked. “No. Maliki wasn’t like that in the beginning. The whole point of these places—of Iraq especially—is that the leaders need to do political deals. We make them so strong that they no longer need to do political deals. So we undermine any chance at stability. It’s destroying Iraq. We’re strengthening the guy who is creating the problem.”

Crocker saw in Iraq one final unintended consequence of America’s long war: the state that we created doesn’t work without us. The Americans bequeathed the Iraqis a constitution, regular elections, and a two-hundred-and-seventy-five-member parliament, with a quarter of the seats occupied by women. Jeffrey, the former Ambassador, told me optimistically, “Maliki is worried about his reelection. How many countries in the Arab world can you say that about?” And yet, in an accurate reflection of the country itself, the parliament is locked in a seemingly permanent stalemate.

After nine years of brokering agreements, the Americans had made themselves indispensable. “We were hardwired into the Iraqi political system,” Crocker told me. “From the very first days, they were all deeply suspicious of each other. Concession and compromise meant betrayal and death. What we could do is make them listen to us. It required constant engagement: we’d go to Maliki and explain our views, and ask him if he’d consider something.

Maybe we would finally get him to say that he would, provided the Sunni leadership would do a series of things first. So we'd go back to the Sunnis. That's the way it had to work.

“We are not doing that anymore,” Crocker said, “and the system is still too underdeveloped, and there's too much suspicion, for their leaders to do it on their own. That trusted middleman is still us. And we are not there.” ♦

*An earlier version of this article misstated the year in which Saddam Hussein invaded Iran.

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