



Is it really coming right?

BAGHDAD, ERBIL AND MOSUL

In most of Iraq, violence has plummeted and the Americans under a new president look set gradually to withdraw. But will the battered country hold together?

IT SHOULD be momentous. In Baghdad in the middle of this week, after fierce debate, an overnight delay and protests on the streets, Iraq's fractious parliament at last voted to approve a withdrawal agreement with the United States, under which all American troops will leave the country by the end of 2011. And yet the mood of this exhausted country is far from jubilant.

In Mosul, 320km (200 miles) north of Baghdad up the Tigris river, the governor of Nineveh province, Doraid Kashmoula, furrows his brow, fiddles with his worry-beads in one hand, stubs out yet another cigarette with the other and reels off a litany of woe in his dankly curtained office. The scion of a prominent Sunni Arab family, he took the job two years ago after his predecessor, his cousin, was assassinated.

Since then he has survived half a dozen murder attempts. His son, a brother and four cousins have been killed by insurgents. His house has been burnt down. He is protected both by the Kurdish guerrillas, who control the eastern half of the city and a clutch of fortified government buildings

in the western half, and by the Iraqi army and police, with American forces at their shoulder, when he ventures farther afield.

"Security is slowly getting better," he says, without much conviction. At present the insurgents carry out about ten attacks a day in his province, including car bombs and ambushes, mostly in the vicinity of Mosul. In each of the past four months, more than 100 civilians and about a score of army and police have been killed, according to official figures.

The provincial council's chairman, another Sunni Arab, tells a similar tale. From a drawer in his desk he takes a sheet of paper displaying 12 coloured photographs of "martyrs": four brothers and eight cousins, all murdered because of their kinship to himself. A councillor representing the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), a long-established Sunni outfit which heads the main Sunni block in the national parliament and is led by one of the country's two vice-presidents, Tariq al-Hashemi, says that 420 of his party members in Mosul have been killed in the past two years. Nineveh's deputy go-

vernor, a Kurd, says that 1,600 of his people in Mosul have died at the hands of insurgents since the American invasion—as have "many more Arabs".

Nobody knows how many insurgents operate in the area. Maybe 5,000, says the council chairman, describing a spectrum from al-Oaeda fanatics to secular Baathists. "Plus a million supporters," he adds, with a mirthless laugh. As the Americans and their Iraqi army allies successfully hunt them down elsewhere in Iraq, many have gravitated to Mosul. It is close to Syria, from which foreign jihadists still infiltrate. The city has a history of Baathist loyalty to Saddam Hussein and hostility to the Shias, who count for barely 5% of its people.

Iraq's multiple fault-lines are especially visible—and occasionally bloody—in Nineveh and Mosul. Some towns in the province have a record of Shia-Sunni enmity. Nineveh has Iraq's largest minority of Christians, themselves divided into various sects, some speaking Aramaic, the language of Christ. In a northern arc dwell the Yazidis, more than 500,000—strong they claim, who follow an ancient religion that reveres a Peacock Angel; many Muslims damn them as devil-worshippers. Then there are the Shabaks, who claim descent from Persians and follow various brands of religion, including Islam. There are also the Turkomens, stay-behinds from the days when Mosul was the capital of one of the three Ottoman vilayets (administrative regions) that were crudely lump-

> ed together to form Iraq when the Turkish empire collapsed after the first world war.

Perhaps the biggest and currently the scratchiest division is between Arabs and Kurds, who control most of the east and north of Nineveh, and account for about one-third of its population. Most of the Sunni Arabs, the province's largest group, boycotted the last elections in 2005, so the Kurds ended up with a disproportionately large chunk of the provincial government (31 out of 41 seats in the council) and hold sway over the hapless Mr Kashmoula and the council chairman, whom the insurgents curse as puppets and traitors.

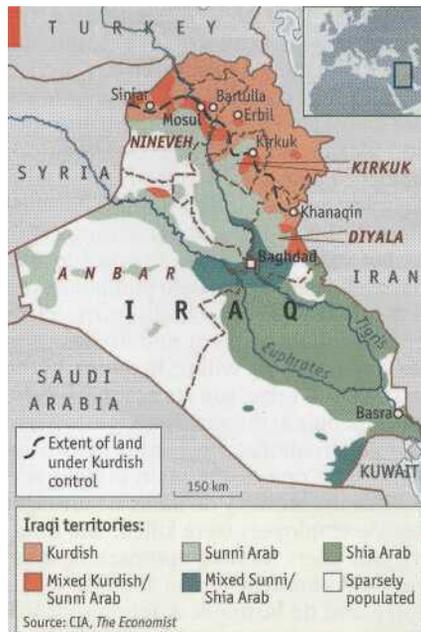
But this may soon change dramatically because the Sunnis are set to contest provincial elections due on January 31st, when they may well oust the Kurds from local power. To minimise their expected losses, the Kurds are bent on ensuring that all the non-Sunni minorities, such as the Christians, Yazidis and Shabaks, vote for a Kurdish-led list of candidates.

Many people from these small minorities, together perhaps more than a tenth of the province's people, say that the Kurds, who control the territory where most of them live, are trying to intimidate them into voting their way. The Kurds, they say, are even attempting to frighten them into fleeing east into areas more firmly controlled by the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) from its headquarters in Erbil, capital of the Kurdistan Regional Government.

In Sinjar, west of Mosul, some Yazidis, who predominate there, say the Kurds want to force them to vote for the Kurdish list. Not only would that mean increasing the Kurds' chances of holding on to the provincial council. It would also strengthen their case to have such places as Sinjar, which are technically part of Nineveh, eventually transferred formally to Iraq's Kurdistan region, whose area the Kurds seek to widen as much as possible.

The Christians have been hammered, in Nineveh as in the rest of Iraq: their numbers throughout the country are said to be down from 800,000 in 2003 to around 250,000 today. Earlier this year the archbishop of the ancient Chaldean church was abducted in Mosul and murdered. In October, some 10,000 Christians fled into Kurdish-held areas from close to Mosul after a dozen of them had been killed. No one is certain who the culprits were.

In any event, tension is rising across the ethno-sectarian board: between Kurds and Arabs; between Sunnis who have co-operated with government and the larger number who have not; between Kurds and minorities; and within the minorities themselves. "If we [Christians] had guns we'd kill each other too," says a prominent Chaldean Christian. "If Mosul was peaceful, we'd want to stay in Nineveh," says a leading Christian businessman in the town of Bartulla, just east of Mosul. "But if



it isn't, we'd like to be part of Kurdistan."

But there is a gleam of hope that in Nineveh, as elsewhere in Iraq, the coming provincial elections may shift the dynamic of Iraqi politics, pave the way for more genuinely representative government and make it harder for the insurgents to hold the loyalty of the disgruntled. The key is that, unlike last time, the Sunni Arabs are expected to vote en masse. If Nineveh's council took on a Sunni nationalist hue, the insurgents might be in trouble.

Shaking the political kaleidoscope

Nuri al-Maliki, Iraq's Shia prime minister, is said to be reaching out to Sunni politicians, military men and tribal leaders in the hope of widening his narrow base in the Islamic Dawa party. But Iraq is entering an even more frenetic political phase than usual. The provincial elections should point, for the first time in three years, to whom the Iraqis want to run their country.

The poll will also serve as a dry run for a general election due at the end of next year. Moreover, under the tutelage of an energetic UN team in Baghdad, the system for the provincial elections provides for open lists, whereas last time they were closed. This time parties will win representation on a proportional basis in each of the 18 provinces (bar the three Kurdish ones and the disputed Kirkuk province, where elections will not take place), but voters will also be able to mark their order of preference for individual candidates on their chosen party list. Some 400-plus parties have been registered, more than 150 in Baghdad alone, with more than 14,600 candidates and 36-odd coalitions.

The main shift will be towards much stronger representation for Sunni Arabs, who have been sorely under-represented since Saddam's demise. A battle is brewing

between the established Sunni parties and an array of groups emerging out of the tribal councils that have played so crucial a part in beating back the insurgency, including al-Qaeda, especially in the western province of Anbar and along the Euphrates valley north-west of Baghdad.

A fight for supremacy within the new Shia establishment has also begun. A striking development is the emergence of Mr Maliki as a would-be strongman. Despite his wooden persona on the dais and on television, he has surprised everyone by his increasingly ruthless determination to tighten his grip. He was boosted by his success, earlier this year, when he personally directed the Iraqi army to sweep the Shia militias loyal to Muqtada al-Sadr, a radical cleric, out of Iraq's then chaotic second city, Basra. The army promptly replicated that success in the hitherto lawless Shia slums of Baghdad, known as Sadr City. Mr Maliki is also interfering with senior appointments in the armed forces: the new divisional army commander in Mosul, for instance, is said to be a brother-in-law.

He has also gained ground, even among Sunnis, by his increasingly acerbic attitude towards the Kurds, who many Arabs think have overreached themselves in the past few years. In August he sent Iraqi army units into Khanaqin, a mainly Kurdish district that is controlled by the Kurdish authorities but falls within Diyala province. He and Massoud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan Regional Government, who heads the KDP, one of two rival parties that jointly run Iraqi Kurdistan, are increasingly rude to each other. Mr Barzani is said to have recently told Mr Maliki to his face: "You smell like a dictator."

And he is rattling a lot of fellow Shias with his powers of patronage and purse. His own Dawa party has split, with his predecessor as prime minister, Ibrahim al-Jaafari, promoting himself as a stalking horse for the Sadrist, whose party has been barred from the lists. The other leading Shia party, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, led by the ailing Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, is equally worried by what it sees as the prime minister's authoritarian bent. In particular, Mr Maliki's assorted rivals have complained about his setting up of "support councils" among various tribes, both Sunni and Shia, to help his party get out the vote—by means of bribery and intimidation, according to his detractors.

Competition among the Sunnis is no less fierce, especially in the tribal movement known as the Sahwa (Awakening) and the Salvation Front, which are bidding to oust candidates tied to the largest Sunni block in parliament, the National Accord Front, or *Tawafuq*, whose leading party is the IIP. Here too Mr Maliki has been weaving controversial alliances, backing one group against another. The political emergence of the tribes, many of which had pre-

> viously supported the insurgents, is part of a new dynamic that has seen al-Oaeda and other rebel groups beaten back if not completely defeated. Mr Maliki has also been accused of having hundreds of IIP members arrested, especially in the mixed-sect Diyala province.

No one knows what the new electoral picture will be like. Some say that Mr Maliki's Dawa will do badly, whatever the advantages of incumbency. The Sadrist movement, internally divided like so many others, is widely thought to have lost ground yet still commands the sympathy of hordes of poor Shias in such places as Sadr City and in the southern provinces. The tribal parties have never been tested.

Back to independence

Mr Maliki will naturally take as much credit as he can from the withdrawal agreement with the Americans. He, or so it will be claimed, has nailed down the occupiers and made them promise to leave within three years. Under the agreement, American forces, now about 146,000-strong in Iraq, will withdraw from the cities by the middle of next year. All military operations will require the assent of Iraqis. Americans will be barred from using Iraq as a launch pad to attack other countries.

There is, in fact, considerable wiggle-room in the agreement. The timing can be extended by mutual consent. Even the requirement for American troops to withdraw from city centres may be open to an elastic interpretation. The Joint Security Stations, where American troops are entrenched in mini-forts scattered across the cities, have been an essential part of the military surge which, since early last year, has stanchied the terrible sectarian blood-letting, especially in Baghdad. Already they are jointly manned by Americans and Iraqis. Iraq's generals may well be loth to remove the Americans, perhaps relabelling them as "advisers".

The Iraqi army and national police (a kind of gendarmerie) have improved out of all recognition in the past two years and at last count numbered 266,000, alongside 257,000 local police, 36,000 border guards and more than 100,000 "Sons of Iraq", the militias formed by the mainly Sunni tribal councils. But even their best units still rely heavily on the Americans for air support, not least the helicopters that are crucial in counter-insurgency, and for other technical skills, including communications, intelligence and logistics.

Despite the continuing horrors in Nineveh, bitter fighting in parts of Diyala, rising tension between Arabs and Kurds, and a continuing if less frequent cycle of bombs in Baghdad, the violence overall has greatly subsided from its level of two years ago. In the second half of 2006, violent civilian deaths, mostly in Baghdad, amounted to around 20,000, counted in morgues and

hospitals. The latest estimates put the monthly figure at under 500 a month, still a shocking number, but an eighth of what it was. Fewer than 50 Iraqi soldiers and police were killed in October compared with 300-plus in April last year. The American military death toll has dived from 126 in May last year to 14 last month; the total since the invasion in 2003 is nearing 4,200.

But 20,000 out of Iraq's 34,000 doctors have left (after 2,000 were murdered) and few of the 2m-plus Iraqis now living abroad (many of them middle-class professionals) are yet willing to return. In the past few weeks, suicide-bombers have killed people at the checkpoints into Baghdad's international zone, on the road to the airport, by one of the main bridges and outside the Ministry of Trade, where eight female employees were killed. The country still offers nothing approaching a secure environment where foreigners can come and do business. A number of foreign companies, especially in the oil sector, have signed big deals. But no major foreign banks or businesses have thought it feasible to set up shop in the open in Baghdad. Though safer than it was, Baghdad is still the most dangerous capital in the world.

In any event, as the recently departed American mastermind of the surge, General David Petraeus, repeatedly said, the gains remain "fragile and reversible". The coming elections at the beginning and end of next year will give a vivid picture of Iraq's political balance of power. But a potentially devastating lack of consensus among the main political groups and their leaders still prevails. Corruption is rife. Many ministries are still fiefs of patronage. Family and tribal ties are what count in getting jobs. Intrigue and deceit seem to dog the management of just about every political party. No culture of tolerance or pluralism has yet emerged.

A fundamental three-way split still prevents Iraq from coming together as a country. Though it is hopeful that the Sunni Arabs, probably some 20% of the population, seem set to be drawn back into the heart of

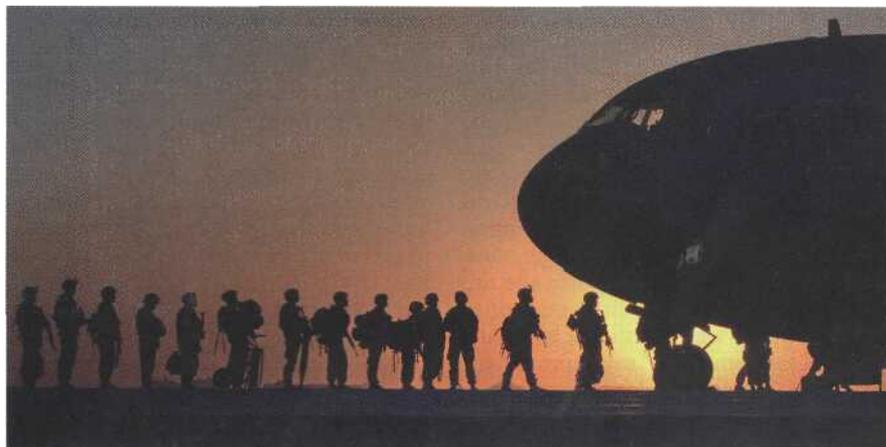
parliamentary and provincial politics next year, few of their leaders seem willing yet to acknowledge that they have lost the power that they had always held.

A former deputy prime minister, a Sunni, insisted last week that his fellow Sunnis represent "at least 50% of Iraqis, by God!" Some of the leading Shias, who by most calculations represent more than 50% of the total population, seem prepared to reach out to the Sunnis, especially the bid-dable tribal sheikhs, provided they accept their new position as second fiddlers. But most Shias still regard the Sunnis with suspicion. "Maliki's worst nightmare is still waking up to find a Sunni general in charge of the country again," says a seasoned Western observer in Baghdad.

No national harmony yet

The Kurds are enjoying a golden age of near-independence that they have never had before. Their region still feels the perk-iest and safest in Iraq, though its leaders have yet to acquire truly democratic instincts. But the Kurds remain loth to make the sort of compromise over the bitterly disputed mixed Arab-Kurdish-Turkomen city of Kirkuk and the surrounding province which might in turn allow them to have more say over the oil in the area they control. Both Shia and Sunni Arabs habitually refer to the Kurds with ill-disguised contempt. American and UN diplomats fear that the Kurdish leaders, wary of being outflanked by each other on such issues as Kirkuk, are in danger of overplaying their hand at a risk of losing much that they have already achieved.

In short, the new establishment of Shias, Sunnis and Kurds sorely needs to build a sense of nationhood. The withdrawal agreement means that it will soon be for the Iraqis alone to define their destiny. For the next few years the Americans may yet find themselves holding the ring. But once the occupiers have left, the chances that the Iraqis will entrench and cherish a stable, federal, pluralist democracy must still be rated at less than even. •



What happens when they go?