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Iraq

On the Sunni vote in the Constitutional Referendum

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The major difference between the October 15 vote and the January 30 election as is now confirmed has been the - uneven but nevertheless important - Sunni participation. It is interesting to have a close look at this development.

A summary of the official positions:

The Islamic Party: As is well-known, the only major Sunni political force to have called for casting a YES vote in the referendum is the Islamic Party. This is the Iraqi branch of the Muslim Brotherhood (though the Association of Muslim Scholars is also close to the international MB).

Among Iraqi Sunni groups, the IP is one of the most susceptible to pressure from the Saudi Kingdom and Jordan, and has for long collaborated with the US along with the bulk of Iraqi opposition in exile before the fall of Saddam Hussein.

[https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Iraq_Referendum.jpg]

They reversed their position on the constitution after an agreement with the Shiite and Kurdish coalitions, brokered by US Ambassador Khalilzad, according to which there will be a procedure to amend the constitution after the election of a new Parliament in December (by majority vote in the new Assembly, which, if secured, is to be followed by a popular referendum with the same rule as in the October 15 referendum: two-thirds voting NO in three provinces would defeat the amendments).

The reversal in the IP's attitude led to splits within its ranks, and even violent attacks on some of its offices and members, but the attacks were condemned by most other Sunni forces.

Boycotters: The first Sunni-based forces that have defined an attitude toward the constitutional referendum were, of course, for its boycott as a matter of "principle." They were two: 1) the Ba'ath Party (communiqué of the pan-Arab leadership dated September 9 and communiqué of the Iraqi leadership the same month) calling for a boycott of the referendum to deprive it from any legitimacy (political groups serving as legal facades for the Ba'ath, like the "Supreme Committee of Patriotic Forces-Wahj al-Iraq," followed suit); and 2) Zarqawi's al-Qaida branch in Iraq, which did not only warn against any participation in the referendum-from both a "principled" ultra-fundamentalist attitude against any human-made constitution and an anti-occupation stance-but also accompanied its threats with violent actions against those calling for the participation.

"No" Voters: Four major armed groups called on their followers to cast a NO vote in the referendum in order to defeat the draft by gathering the required two-thirds majority in three provinces: these are The Islamic Army in Iraq, The Army of Mujahideen, The Movement of Islamic Resistance (Hamas-Brigades of the 1920 Revolution) and The Islamic Front of the Islamic Resistance.

These groups, which initially were calling for a boycott, explained the reversal in their position in a communiqué released on the day of the referendum with the following basic arguments: they do not want to be accused one more time of preventing fellow Sunnis from acting politically; the recently defined rule that made the rejection pending on two-thirds of actual voters in three provinces instead of registered voters; they got guarantees that the Sunnis would supervise their voting areas so that no falsification of the results would be possible; there is a big part of the Iraqi people, Sunnis and Shiites, opposed to the draft, and therefore there is a great hope to defeat it.

On the Sunni vote in the Constitutional Referendum

The groups added accusations to the US of trying to prevent the Sunni regions from taking part in the vote for fear of a defeat of the draft, referring to the recent onslaught by US forces that started in Tal Afar and extended to Samara, Ramadi, etc.

The only remaining major Sunni armed group is the Army of Ansar al-Sunna. They simply did not issue a position, probably torn between their inclination to boycott and the desire not to stand against what has become the dominant trend among Sunnis.

Coalition of Sunni Political Groups

Several Sunni political groups called similarly for casting a NO vote in the referendum. However the official statement of the coalition gathered around the Association of Muslim Scholars, the Council of Iraqi National Dialogue, acting as a the political counterpart of the armed groups, both Fundamentalists and Ba'athists, left the matter open between boycott and NO vote, just calling for a rejection of the draft by all "legal" means, i.e. avoiding violence.

Explaining that they were not convinced of reversing their rejection of the draft after the last-minute agreement between the Islamic Party and the Shiite and Kurdish coalitions, their spokesperson, Saleh al-Mutlak (or Mutlaq: there are different spellings of his name in Arabic sources), used the following argument to reject the agreement, which is a striking and amazing illustration of the double standard applied by Iraqi factions in their political reasoning: he said that the rule of two-thirds in three provinces (that would be enough to defeat future amendments) is unfair because it would allow majorities in three provinces to defeat what 80% of the Iraqi people would have adopted!

Here are excerpts from an analysis of the referendum in the Sunni provinces by an insider Sunni source, published on the evening of Saturday October 15 after the end of the vote. It sheds an interesting light on the dissensions among Sunni forces and their motivations.

The Votes of Sunnis were lost between the Islamic Party's Conspiracy and Zarqawi's Fanatism

Mufakkirat al-Islam, Oct. 15

Although four of the major and most influent resistance groups on the Iraqi scene called Sunni Iraqis yesterday to go to the polling centers and cast a NO vote on the constitution, reality was contrary to what was expected from all Sunni circles, as our correspondents have reported that the regions falling under the control of al-Qaida's organization in Iraq have seen almost nil or insignificant rates of votes in the referendum.

This has incited Sunni Iraqis against the position of al-Qaida's organization because it contradicted the rest of jihadist combatant groups in Iraq that requested from the Sunnis to vote in order to abort the constitution.

Mufakkirat al-Islam's correspondent in Ramadi reported that four Sunni citizens were killed this morning in the early hours of the referendum by elements of al-Qaida's organization, as they were coming out of one of the polling stations after voting NO, according to their relatives. This has created a state of fear among city residents and prevented them from taking part in the vote although the number of registered voters in Ramadi reached 347,000 ...

Sheikh Abdul-Sattar Muhammad, one of the imams and preachers of Fallujah, said that al-Qaida's organization made a huge error in preventing the people by threats and intimidations to take part in the vote, adding that al-Qaida contributed with other groups to the marginalization of the Sunnis and their impotence in the face of Shiites, Kurds and secular parties... He said also that if al-Qaida's elements had let the people vote, the constitution would have

On the Sunni vote in the Constitutional Referendum

been rejected by 100% of Sunnis and would have been aborted, while it would have been proved that Sunnis are not a minority in Iraq...

Whereas the Islamic Party has deliberately contributed in splitting the votes of the Sunnis in calling for a "yes" vote, Zarqawi has also given a gift to the occupation and the Safawi [a pejorative formula used in Sunni circles to designate the Shiites deemed to be "Iranian agents"] followers of Sistani by contributing unknowingly, through their threats to the voters, to the neutralization of the Sunni votes opposed to this constitution, under which the Iraqis may have to live miserably for a long period. It would have been better if it had behaved like the Army of Ansar al-Sunna, as said one of the mosque imams in Mosul...

The question now in Iraq is when will al-Qaida's organization stop allowing the assassination of Muslims under various pretexts, after the murder of some Sunnis in Ramadi today because they took part in the vote, and, before that, the authorization to kill members of the Islamic Party.

Before that also al-Qaida's followers turned their weapons against members of other armed groups during the second siege of Fallujah under the pretext that they ought to accept Zarqawi's leadership after Usama bin Laden's appeal to this end. This attitude weakened the ranks of the resistance and allowed US occupation forces to execute their well-known offensive in the southern part of Fallujah...

Through their political facades and their jihadist groups, the Sunnis wanted by voting to impede the Safawi dream, supported by the occupation and Iran, and this by harassing the occupation and its agents politically, while the resistance is carrying on its steadfast action in combating the occupier.