

**Calm at the Center of the Storm**

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Here in the hometown of Iraq's prime minister-designate, Nuri al-Maliki, people are understandably excited. And not just because a local boy has done well. Rather, they hope Mr. Maliki's ascension is a sign that Iraq as a whole may emulate their province's remarkable success in combating Iraq's two main security threats: Sunni Arab terrorism and the infiltration of Shiite militias into the state security forces.

Hilla is the capital of Babil Province, 900 square miles just south of Baghdad that could well turn out to be the country's crucial province. Babil's population of 1.6 million, like that of Arab Iraq in general, is mostly Shiite with a Sunni minority. The province borders not only the capital but also the Sunni heartland, Anbar Province, to the west and the Shiite holy places Najaf and Karbala to the south. In the east, Babil's neighboring provinces stretch to Iran and feel its influence heavily.

Babil's date palm plantations, flat alluvial landscape and almost infinitely divided lattice of irrigation canals give the place a timeless and emblematic feeling. It was home to Babylon — and the Tower of Babel. Thus it was here that Iraq gave the world the "confusion of languages": what should be the blessing of diversity, now cast as the curse of identity politics.

If everything goes to pieces in Iraq, we will not hear much more about Babil. In that case it will be Anbar, Basra, Kirkuk, Sadr City and the Green Zone in Baghdad that will symbolize pessimism and disaster. But if things go well, or at least better — if Iraq still exists five years from now, and continues to be more free than all of its neighbors except Turkey and less of a threat to them than it used to be — then Babil will have been a major reason for the success.

What Iraqis care about above all else these days is security, and Babil — apart from the so-called Death Triangle around the towns of Latifiya, Mahmudiya and Yusufiya in the Sunni north — is a safe place. In the December national elections, voter turnout in Babil was nearly 70 percent without a single serious incident of violence.

During the Shiite festival of Ashura this year, marked by 10 days of pilgrimage to Najaf and Karbala, some half a million pilgrims walked and drove through the province without reports of a single insurgent attack. Of the 81 civil reconstruction projects undertaken in Babil outside the Death Triangle in the last year — most related to water and electricity — not one has been attacked by Sunni insurgents or Shiite militias, according to the executive officer of the American troops here, the First Squadron of the 10th Cavalry. He told me that his troops had experienced only eight cases of

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hostile contact, and not a single casualty, since arriving in December. (They are vacating the base now and will not be replaced.)

Order here is not of the same magnitude as that in the Kurdish north, where 15 years of freedom have allowed the development of a highly efficient police state. Nor is it the false quiet of the south, where the allied forces' ceding of the streets to Shiites militias has masked a situation in which Basra is more frightening to liberal Iraqis and to foreigners than is Baghdad. Order in Babil is real order, not gangster order.

What really makes Babil special is that it is a largely Shiite province in which the Shiite militias — the Mahdi Army and the Badr Brigades — have almost no foothold. But they are trying. All Iraq's police answer to the Interior Ministry, which is held by the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq, the main Iranian organ in the country. And the interior minister, Bayan Jabr, has repeatedly tried to replace Babil's independent-minded provincial police chief, Gen. Qais Hamza al-Maamony. Under heavy pressure from the Americans, however, the minister agreed in January to a moratorium on the replacement of senior police officers until after the formation of the new government.

Nonetheless, according to American officials in the province, General Maamony was recently forced to accept 700 candidates recommended by the ministry — that is, by the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution — for the incoming class of the provincial police academy. The police chief, I'm told, plans to spread these recruits as thinly as possible around the province upon their graduation to lessen their impact on the force.

General Maamony and his 8,000 men — especially the provincial SWAT teams, which supply the muscle that the relatively poorly trained and lightly armed regular police often cannot or will not provide — are understandably unpopular with the council and its military wing, the Badr Brigades. And they are equally feared by the Mahdi Army of the rebel Shiite cleric Moktada al-Sadr. A member of one local SWAT team often wears a baseball hat with "Mahdi Militia Killer" inscribed on it.

One Iraqi-American living here told me that he saw an operation in which the SWAT team drove up to a Mahdi checkpoint in civilian cars and clothes one night last year and killed 38 of the militiamen. While this number may be an exaggeration, unquestionably the local police forces are taking on the militias.

Of course, the Shiite militias are not the only danger. Up in the Sunni north, the province's police commandos mount 40-man daylight patrols in support

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of the overwhelmed local police officers, bouncing down rural byways, swerving around holes in the main roads created by homemade bombs, pointing out to me the places where in recent weeks they have fought in gun battles that often lasted several hours.

AT night they conduct more focused missions, often in the company of American Special Forces operatives, to apprehend suspected insurgents. One Special Forces commander told me he had worked with local policemen in just about every hot spot around the world since 1980, and that the Iraqi commandos in Babil are "the best any of us have ever seen."

They are also worried, as are their colleagues among the regular police. When the current moratorium on firing nonpartisan police officials expires with the formation of the new government (Mr. Maliki has about three weeks to finish that task), a momentous drama will break out inside the Interior Ministry in Baghdad. If the ministry stays in the hands of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution, then the people of Babil might find their streets and markets patrolled by men with greater allegiance to the council than to the legitimate Iraqi government and the country's best interests.

Should this happen, the assault commander of the provincial police commandos told me, he and his men might have to retire together to a rural compound where they would be out of jobs and out of uniform, but they could try to keep one another safe.

Can the new government prevent this success story at the heart of Arab Iraq from becoming yet another stronghold of theocrats, thugs and meddling neighbors? Handicapping Iraqi politics is a fool's game, of course, but if anyone can, it might well be Mr. Maliki. While he spent some years of his exile in Iran, he was the leader of the pro-Arab, rather than the pro-Iranian, wing of his party, Dawa. He has a strongly Shiite identity, yet his acceptance in his new post by Kurdish and Sunni politicians has been on surprisingly warm terms.

Undoubtedly, Mr. Maliki is less of an Iranian stooge and a far more forceful character than his predecessor, Ibrahim al-Jaafari. He also has solid anti-insurgent credentials. As chairman of the Parliament's national security committee, he was the architect of the popular new law that, among other things, attacks the economic basis of domestic insurgent support by going after the property and wealth of those convicted of abetting terrorists.

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The key for the incoming government will be to apply this law vigorously in the knowledge that nonsectarian and nonpartisan control of local security forces is the key to domestic order and, ultimately, reconstruction.

Babil shows that such a thing is possible. But if this province is to continue to provide an island of relative order in the heart of Arab Iraq, people like General Maamony need to keep their jobs. For now, in the blast-walled compounds of the Hilla police forces and commandos, the real sense of siege is not from the insurgents and militias they fight almost every day, but from the politicians in Baghdad.