

Meeting Maliki: A Chance to Reset U.S. Policy on Iraq

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Brief Analysis

There is no muting Iraq, so the best way to get the troubled country on the path to stability is through high-level engagement on electoral transparency, sectarian reconciliation, arms transfers to Syria, oil revenue sharing, and other key issues.

When President Obama meets with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki on November 1, he will have a rare chance to transmit strong messages to both the Iraqi leader and his people. Many Iraqis will be listening closely for a sign that the U.S. government is still a force for moderation in their country and a counterbalance to perceived meddling by Shiite Iran, Sunni Gulf states, and Turkey. If no strong U.S. voice is heard, the message will be clear: that other, less impartial states and transnational militant groups stand to become the principal external influences on Iraq, as is gradually becoming the case already.

FOSTERING STABILITY

On Friday and beyond, some U.S.-Iraqi discussions will no doubt continue to focus on low-profile intelligence and counterterrorism cooperation. This is vital because Iraq seems to be the one place in the region where a member of a major al-Qaeda affiliate group can walk the streets or empty desert tracts secure in the knowledge that he will not be killed by a U.S. drone strike.

But even if President Obama offers greater U.S. assistance to Iraq's overstretched special forces and intelligence services, he should emphasize to Maliki that Baghdad cannot kill its way out of the current security crisis. Nor can the Shiite-led government's security forces wall off the problem by ghettoizing the Sunnis, as is slowly occurring. Only gradual, population-focused counterinsurgency efforts -- something the United States is uniquely qualified to retrain the Iraqi military -- can turn the security situation around, and only then if backed by a real sectarian reconciliation effort shaped by Iraqis and strongly aided by the international community.

For example, one of the most salient local al-Qaeda threats is the resurgent Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), an affiliate group whose jihadist activities in Syria continue to have spillover effects in Iraq. While the United States has every interest in stemming this radical Sunni group, any such efforts must be accompanied by other U.S. measures, since Turkey and the Sunni Gulf states would view isolated action against ISIS as another U.S. step "toward" Bashar al-Assad, Iran, and the "Shiite side" of the region's sectarian struggle. President Obama should therefore link security assistance to demonstrable Iraqi government outreach to the Sunnis (e.g., reversing the aforementioned ghettoization). The administration should also take a more active role in supporting nonradical Syrian rebels and blocking Iran's regional ambitions, all while making it clear that the United States will not get caught up in any Sunni-Shiite struggle. In return, Maliki must do more to stem Iranian weapons transfers to Syria, which are currently conducted through Iraqi territory with little interference. Aside from their negative regional implications, such transfers violate UN Security Council resolutions.

On the political front, Iraq's 2014 national elections will represent either a big step on the road back from meltdown or an aggravating factor that hastens the country's deterioration. Here too, Washington has another rare opportunity to exert positive influence in Iraq, but only if President Obama clearly signals that America stands behind the democratic process rather than any particular outcome. Absent this explicit message, many Iraqis will view Friday's White House visit as a pre-election endorsement of Maliki, exactly as the Iraqi leader intends it to appear. Now is the time to begin emphasizing -- consistently and publicly -- that the next elections be free, fair, and punctual. President Obama has little to lose in stating that the United States looks forward to working with the Iraqi government after the elections, whoever leads it and however it is composed.

The president could further emphasize U.S. evenhandedness and Iraqi unity by mentioning the importance of holding the delayed Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) provincial elections, which have been suspended because major parties fear they will not like the results. Showing that Washington devotes high-level attention to such details could help ameliorate negative developments in Iraq. Last December, for example, U.S. intervention convinced Baghdad not to arrest leading Sunni politician Rafi al-Issawi, a move that could have deepened the longstanding security crisis. This modest exercise of American influence should not be forgotten.

THE IRAQ-KRG-TURKEY TRIANGLE

Oil production is probably the clearest direct U.S. interest in Iraq, for both economic and strategic reasons. Despite miles of red tape and chronically overstretched project management capacity, the Iraqi government is slowly increasing its oil exports, a vital factor in offsetting the global impact of the nuclear sanctions that have helped bring Iran to the negotiating table. Washington should continue expanding its support (technical and otherwise) to this sector.

The United States has long taken the position that all Iraqi oil must be sold by the State Oil Marketing Organization of Iraq, with receipts trickling down via the federal treasury. This has thrown Washington into conflict with the KRG, which interprets the constitution differently. The Kurds believe that independent marketing and monetization of KRG-produced oil should be acceptable to Baghdad and Washington as long as the northern region ends up receiving funds roughly equivalent to those it would have gained from customary federal revenue-sharing practices. Turkey has indicated de facto support for the KRG's view, and the region's required export infrastructure is almost complete, making it highly likely that Iraqi Kurdistan will move forward with independent, high-volume foreign oil sales next year with or without Washington's distant blessing.

Accordingly, President Obama should urge Maliki to implement the agreement he reached with KRG president Masoud Barzani in April (particularly with regard to compensating oil companies for production costs using the federal budget) in order to allow the Kurds to renew exports with Baghdad's approval. The president should also point out that Washington is not inimically opposed to KRG exports unless it is clear that the Kurds are rejecting a

reasonable Iraqi government approach.

Meanwhile, U.S. officials should focus on assisting with the auditing of federal-KRG oil production and revenue-related claims, since Washington is seen as more objective in these areas. The administration should also improve working relations with the KRG, making clear to Maliki that despite the U.S. desire for Kurdish coordination with Baghdad, the north will produce and export oil (and, eventually, natural gas) one way or another.

As for Ankara, although some level of KRG-Turkish hydrocarbons cooperation is inevitable at this point, U.S. officials can still guide both parties back toward partnership with the Iraqi government. Washington should be able to help Baghdad find a face-saving compromise and lay some groundwork for a major deal on revenue-sharing and oil contract authorizations midway through the 2014-2018 government. The president's meeting with Maliki is an opportunity to formally revise the outdated U.S. position on this issue: after all, Maliki himself has largely backed away from threatening the KRG over exports. Washington should not be the last man standing in this game of musical chairs, opposing something to which Baghdad has largely acquiesced in practical terms. And Washington cannot afford to lose any more influence or goodwill in the KRG, where both stand at an all-time low.

REBOOTING THE U.S. APPROACH

Iraq currently holds a unique and unfortunate status in U.S. regional policymaking. Any other country with the same strategic resources and challenges would receive significantly more direct assistance, most obviously in terms of counterterrorism support. But the stigma of the former military occupation has prevented Washington from viewing Iraq with fresh eyes, based on its strategic merits. Even as the administration's focus shifts to Asia, countries like China and India are shifting their focus to Iraq, recognizing its importance and investing heavily there. In short, there is no muting Iraq. The only way to get this troubled country off of America's television screen is to expand U.S. engagement in the near term, particularly during next year's pivotal elections -- the first national polls since the U.S. military withdrawal and a milestone against which to judge Washington's commitment to a democratic and prosperous Iraq.

Michael Knights is a Boston-based Lafer Fellow with The Washington Institute. ❖

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