

A Fresh Start to U.S.-Iraqi Relations

by [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](/experts/michael-knights)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](/experts/michael-knights)

Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



Brief Analysis

Washington and Baghdad should begin laying the groundwork for a real strategic relationship that assuages Maliki's insecurities while emphasizing U.S. red lines on Iran, human rights, and other issues.

As the United States completes its military pullout from Iraq, two events this week will offer the opportunity for a clear statement of Washington's postwithdrawal policy toward Baghdad: today, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki met with President Obama at the White House, and on Wednesday, the president will deliver a speech on Iraq at Fort Bragg. Ideally, this fresh start to bilateral relations will focus on establishing red lines concerning the protection of U.S. citizens in Iraq, counterterrorism cooperation, human rights, and the observance of democratic norms. Iraq should not be a place where Iranian-backed militants can threaten U.S. interests, nor where an authoritarian regime can violate the rights of its citizens with impunity.

The White House Visit

Maliki's trip to Washington was not a foregone conclusion -- Muqtada al-Sadr and his supporters have pressed the prime minister to cancel the visit since mid-October. That Maliki decided to come despite these pressures is indicative of his ongoing desire for a strategic relationship with the United States. His recent actions suggest that he feels insecure on a number of fronts. Notwithstanding his paranoia -- a trait seemingly bred into him during long years of exile from Saddam-era Iraq -- Maliki's concerns have some basis in reality:

- *Coup worries.* Intelligence reports provided by either the Libyan or Syrian government (media reporting differs on this issue) appear to have stoked Maliki's fear of a Sunni-led coup backed by Gulf Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.
- *Heightened potential for violence.* The first months of 2012 could witness a significant spike in violence if Sunni insurgents across northern and central Iraq decide to test the government's will and capacity. Similarly, Shiite militant

groups such as Asaib Ahl al-Haqq and Kataib Hizballah might test the government's resolve to maintain its monopoly of force in the south and protect the ongoing U.S. presence.

- *Iranian pressure.* Despite significant backing from Tehran, Maliki has always sought to maximize his independence by retaining the option of calling on American support as a counterbalance. Now that U.S. forces are leaving, he is more exposed than ever to Iranian pressure.
- *Declining political support.* U.S. backing for Maliki has long played an important role in shielding him from a parliamentary no-confidence vote. Since 2010, the impending U.S. pullout -- and Washington's evident desire to avoid anything that would derail it -- may have restrained further calls to remove him through the legislature. Yet the prospects of a move against him are slowly mounting, with Sunni Arab blocs roiling over de-Baathification and the Kurdish parties losing patience over his inability to implement most of their nineteen core demands.

Against this backdrop, the balance of power between Washington and Baghdad has changed in 2011. The Obama administration's coolness toward Baghdad -- most notably its limited effort to negotiate a new security agreement -- sent a strong (and apparently unintentional) message that Iraq needs America more than America needs Iraq. This has increased U.S. leverage.

What Maliki Wants

A public renewal of U.S. support would offer some reassurance to Maliki as he confronts each of the above problems. Although Iran continues to wield clear influence over him, the Islamic Republic is capricious and violently threatening in a way that the United States, as an outside power rather than a neighbor, is not. For Maliki, Washington is "the devil you know": an ally of proven military capacity, a powerful voice among the country's Sunni and Kurdish factions, and a unique potential interlocutor to neighboring Arab states and the international community. Accordingly, Maliki's list of requests for Washington will likely include:

- *Political embrace.* As mentioned above, Maliki continues to seek political cover from Washington to protect him from a no-confidence vote or coup. In Iraq, both the public and some politicians will view the White House visit as an endorsement of his leadership, notwithstanding his use of questionable practices to undermine judiciary independence, sideline the parliament, exercise extraconstitutional control of military appointments, and arrest or harass political opponents using a hodgepodge of shaky legal mechanisms.
- *Good offices.* Maliki needs Washington's support in building or repairing relationships inside Iraq (i.e., with Kurds and Sunnis), as well as with the Gulf Cooperation Council states and international community.
- *Implicit security guarantee.* Maliki will seek to use the bilateral Strategic Framework Agreement and meetings with U.S. leaders to bolster Iraq's basic territorial integrity against aggressive Iranian actions, both along the 900-mile land border and throughout Iraq's airspace and territorial waters.
- *Security assistance.* Although "big ticket" arms sales involving F-16s and M1 tanks are important, the forms of security assistance most valued by Baghdad are near-term U.S. intelligence and Special Forces support, plus longer-term provision of training and equipment to Iraq's intelligence and regime security services.

Striking a Balance

Helping Iraq to complete its stabilization and fostering Baghdad's independence from Tehran remain important tests of American resolve. The United States has much to offer Iraq, including helping to ease tensions with Kuwait, unfreezing relations with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and establishing a more prominent Iraqi role in regional and international discussions on issues of special interest to Baghdad. Such engagement offers fertile ground for a real strategic relationship involving tradeoffs. Although the relationship needs to grow slowly, Washington should draw some firm lines to test both Iraq's commitment and U.S. leverage in this opening phase of

the postwithdrawal era:

- *Protecting the presence.* The treatment of the large U.S. diplomatic and contractor community in Iraq is the first and most important test of Baghdad's commitment to the relationship. In particular, Washington must ensure that the Iraqi government will prevent harassment or attacks on U.S. government and commercial entities. It should also prepare contingency plans for demonstrative cessation of U.S. diplomatic and security assistance should Baghdad fail in this regard.
- *Counterterrorism cooperation.* Both U.S. and Iraqi security needs are served by the ongoing presence of U.S. Special Forces and intelligence collection platforms in Iraq. Accordingly, this presence should be reaffirmed through a new memorandum of understanding negotiated by the bilateral Higher Coordinating Committee. An early test of the intelligence relationship will be Baghdad's decision on whether to extradite Ali Musa Daqduq to the United States. (Daqduq is a Lebanese Hizballah operative who helped plan the abduction and subsequent deaths of five U.S. servicemen in Iraq in January 2007.)
- *Statement of concern on political and human rights.* The United States must establish red lines regarding human rights, holding Iraq to the international commitments it has signed and ending the exceptionally lenient U.S. treatment of Baghdad in this regard since 2003. Monitoring Camp Ashraf -- the controversial holding area for members of Iranian opposition group Mujahedin-e Khalq -- should be one aspect of this policy. Washington should also express its commitment to the rules of the game in Iraqi politics (i.e., respect for constitutional principles) rather than any particular political outcome (i.e., who is in charge). Finally, the United States should make clear that it will be watching Baghdad's actions closely and that future arms sales, training, diplomatic support, and commercial ties will depend on adherence to these rules.

Michael Knights is a Lafer fellow with The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, Libya, Yemen, and the Gulf Arab states. ❖

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