

Deadlock Delays Vote on New U.S.-Iraq Security Agreement

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Brief Analysis

Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki is taking his time consolidating power and is in no rush to forge a new security agreement with the United States.

As the December 2011 deadline for U.S. military withdrawal draws closer, observers are unsure whether the deadlock in Iraqi politics can be broken, even temporarily, in order to facilitate a parliamentary vote on a new U.S.-Iraq security agreement. In all likelihood, Prime Minister Maliki will wait until his position has strengthened, assuming he can then secure broad legislative consensus for the measure.

Incomplete Implementation of the Irbil Agreement

In November 2010, Maliki's State of Law Alliance (SLA), Ayad Allawi's Iraqiyah bloc, and other groups decided to form a government after brokering an agreement in Irbil under the auspices of Massoud Barzani, president of Iraqi Kurdistan. Although the formal text of the agreement's nine articles has not been made public, some details have emerged. For example, the articles called for:

- forming a national partnership government;
- creating a new position (head of the National Council for Strategic Policies, or NCSP) for Allawi;
- amending the de-Baathification laws that had barred some individuals from holding political positions;
- drafting the bylaws for the Council of Ministers;
- balancing the government's ethnic and factional makeup; and
- allocating control over the Defense Ministry to Allawi's Wifaq Movement, part of Iraqiyah.

Many of these provisions were simultaneously intended to decrease the prime minister's powers and placate Maliki's opponents, chiefly Allawi, whose bloc had won the most seats and votes in the March 2010 national elections.

Some of the articles have been implemented, including reversal of the de-Baathification order against Salih al-Mutlaq, who was subsequently appointed deputy prime minister. But the NCSP, which was envisioned as a check on

Maliki's growing power, has yet to be formed. Under Allawi's leadership, the council was supposed to comprise the prime minister, his deputies, the president, the vice presidents, the judicial authorities, and the leaders of the main political blocs. Currently, Iraqiyah seeks to boost the provision's legitimacy by calling for a parliamentary vote on the council's formation. Yet the SLA wants a weak NCSP, claiming that a strong council would form a shadow government in violation of the constitution. In any case, the delay has led Allawi to indicate that he is no longer interested in chairing the body.

The article concerning control of the Defense Ministry has gone unimplemented as well. Iraqiyah insists that the ministry be run by one of its candidates, and that Allawi be permitted to nominate someone close to him. Maliki has so far rejected that interpretation, however, suggesting that the ministry be run not necessarily by an Iraqiyah candidate, but by an Arab Sunni. Accordingly, he has presented two names of his own.

One of Maliki's candidates is former defense minister Saadun al-Dulaimi. The other -- Khalid al-Obeidi -- is reportedly close to Deputy Prime Minister Mutlaq's party and was likely presented in an attempt to split Iraqiyah. Maliki's position stems from the fact that the Defense Ministry still plays a major role in providing internal security, and a strong, Allawi-affiliated minister would pose a threat to his authority. At present, Maliki is acting head of both the Defense and Interior Ministries.

Maliki Believes Time Is on His Side

Political crises are not new for Iraq: brinkmanship has become a mainstay of the country's politics since 2003. The timing of the latest crisis finds Maliki well positioned to outlast or outmaneuver his political rivals.

Although he has some concerns about Iraqiyah, Maliki is more focused on internal challengers. These include his Sadrist backers -- although they currently enjoy good relations with Maliki, they could still cause him trouble during any negotiations regarding a new U.S.-Iraq security agreement. This may explain why Sadrists were permitted to parade in Baghdad on May 26 despite Maliki's growing and misplaced concerns about the threat posed by street protests. The prime minister is also offering goodwill gestures to the Iraqi Kurds, such as payments for oil exports to ensure their future support. Overall, he is relying on his opponents' inability to pose a unified front.

Given these conciliatory efforts, Maliki seems confident that his government will not fall. Mustering the 163 parliamentary votes needed to dissolve it would take a long time, as would any effort to dissolve parliament itself and call for early elections (which would require a two-thirds majority, or 217 votes). Moreover, Maliki realizes that many Iraqiyah leaders are not inclined to leave their government posts. In other words, he is betting that they would not support Allawi if he called on party members to withdraw from the government.

Efforts to mediate between the SLA and Iraqiyah have added further wrinkles to the deadlock. The mediation initiative led by President Jalal Talabani may favor Maliki given the close relationship between the two leaders and the lack of direct involvement by Barzani. Yet the Sadrists have also positioned themselves as mediators by offering their own initiative. In the end, though, Maliki and the SLA seem to have concluded that they have little reason to seek cooperation with Allawi: whenever they take a hard stance, Allawi reacts by refusing to engage, which is fine by the SLA given the bloc's current standing. This dynamic was evidenced by Allawi's absence from Talabani's first mediation meeting.

Although Maliki is concerned about dissent in parliament and within his government, he sees street protests as his main threat -- hence his reported mobilization of tribal elements known as "Support Councils" to emphasize his popularity and counter hostile demonstrations. For now, he believes he has weathered the storm by providing free gasoline to private neighborhood electricity generators. Yet his reaction to demonstrations raises questions about his commitment to human rights and freedom of assembly.

Implications for U.S. Policy

Maliki appears to be outlasting Allawi -- he is not in a hurry, and the process of exhausting his opponents will likely take until late autumn. In time, he will probably turn his attention to his Iraqi Shiite rivals while seeking to retain U.S. support as a counterbalance to Iranian influence.

For now, Washington should not expect Maliki to move quickly toward a new security agreement. Parliament passed the current agreement with a simple majority vote in 2008, and a new one could theoretically be pushed through with 163 votes. Yet Maliki has indicated that broad political consensus should be permitted to form before he asks parliament to vote. This will require the active support of SLA, the Kurdish parties, and Iraqiyah.

If such consensus forms at all, it will probably happen at the last possible moment, and only if the prime minister has developed a firmer set of tactical alliances with Iraqiyah elements. Although Iraq's fluid politics may yet threaten Maliki's political survival, for the moment he feels untouchable.

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