

Populism, Authoritarianism, and National Security in al-Maliki's Iraq

by [Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](#)

Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program.



Brief Analysis

An April 26 U.S. raid targeting a Jaish al-Mahdi (JAM) financier in the Iraqi city of Kut, which inadvertently killed a civilian and a policeman, may mark the first of a series of tests for the Security Agreement between the United States and the Iraqi government. Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki's response to the raid -- the detention of the Iraqi Army brigade commander who approved the operation and condemnation of the raid as a "crime" and a breach of the Security Agreement -- demonstrated al-Maliki's abiding desire to assert control over the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). It might also foreshadow his adoption of a more assertive stance toward Washington to bolster his standing in the Dawa party and tap nationalist sentiment in the run-up to parliamentary elections in February 2010. Against the background of a fragile and uncertain security situation, such a trend could pose long-term challenges to stability in Iraq, and to the U.S.-Iraqi security relationship.

Security Challenges

In recent weeks, U.S. forces in Iraq have begun to turn over urban patrol bases and combat outposts to the ISF in accordance with the terms of the December 2008 Security Agreement, which requires U.S. forces to withdraw from Iraqi cities by June 30, 2009. These units are relocating to forward operating bases outside urban areas and assuming a posture of overwatch, while relatively inexperienced ISF units are assuming increasing responsibility for security in the country. Alone, this transition would be challenging enough, but the situation is further complicated by several other factors.

In recent months, the Iraqi government has detained or arrested members of several Sons of Iraq (SOI) tribal militias, whose assistance was instrumental in turning the tide against al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) during the 2007 U.S. military "surge." Meanwhile, the transition of responsibility to the government for the salaries of 94,000 SOI militiamen has gone slowly; thus far, only 5,000 of the 20,000 SOI members promised positions in the ISF have been hired, and it is not clear whether the Iraqi government will have the money to provide contract or civil service jobs to the remainder because of low oil prices. This has produced anxiety and unrest in the ranks of the SOI.

U.S. forces have also been freeing Iraqi detainees, as called for by the Security Agreement. The U.S. military is expected to turn over only 2,500 of its 11,500 detainees to the Iraqi government for trial. The remainder -- detained based on intelligence deemed inadmissible in Iraqi courts -- are being freed. Disgruntled SOI members, freed detainees, and an increase in the number of AQI operatives entering Iraq from Syria may explain a spike in mass casualty suicide bombings in April.

Finally, al-Maliki has shown a willingness to assume risk for political gain. In a bid to gain votes in January's provincial elections, he ordered the removal of key ISF checkpoints and concrete barriers in Baghdad to improve the flow of traffic and provide the population with a sense of normalcy. He has likewise continued to insist on the timely implementation of the Security Agreement, rejecting amendments that would enable U.S. forces to stay in cities where AQI remains active, such as Mosul and Baghdad.

Authoritarian Tendencies

Al-Maliki, once seen as a weak and indecisive leader, has been consolidating his control over the government and its security forces. He has entrenched loyalists in key positions, creating a shadow government that has usurped many of the responsibilities of the cabinet and parliament. He has placed his supporters in the upper ranks of the ISF and the intelligence services. And his office has assumed responsibility for the vetting and promotion of senior officers -- responsibilities that, by law, should be the prerogative of the parliament.

The prime minister also frequently circumvents the formal ISF chain of command, communicating directly with brigade commanders and reserving the right to intervene in tactical matters. Moreover, he has ensured that the National Counterterrorism Force and the Baghdad Brigade (responsible for the security of the International Zone) report directly to him. All these factors have raised concerns that he is creating a politicized military that is loyal to personalities rather than institutions and laws, laying the foundation for the reemergence of an authoritarian style of Iraqi politics.

No Friends, Only Interests

Reviewing al-Maliki's tenure as prime minister, one pattern is clear: he has repeatedly turned on his political allies to ensure his continued grip on power. He has demonstrated both an opportunistic streak and a ruthlessly unsentimental, pragmatic approach to politics, in accordance with the principle of "break and mend" -- temporarily forsaking allies without permanently burning bridges.

First, in a series of military offensives against JAM in Basra and Sadr City in March-June 2008, he turned on the Sadrists, who helped bring him to power. Since then, the Arab media has reported that the al-Maliki government has been trying to further weaken the movement by peeling away members to form a less-militant trend independent of Muqtada al-Sadr, even as members of the prime minister's party continue to work with Sadrists on various provincial councils.

Then, al-Maliki turned on his Kurdish allies. While neutralizing prominent Kurdish officials in Baghdad, he replaced the largely Kurdish 4th Iraqi Army Division in Kirkuk with the predominantly Arab 12th Army Division in July 2008 and sent the Iraqi Army to occupy contested areas held by Kurdish peshmerga paramilitary forces in Khanaqin in August 2008 (although he eventually had to back down). There have also been rumors following the January 2009 provincial elections, which placed control of the Ninawa provincial council in the hands of a coalition of Arab nationalist parties, that he intends to do the same in Mosul. And in the run-up to provincial elections in January 2009, he took a number of public jabs at the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) regarding its stance on a number of issues, such as oil contracts and Kirkuk, to burnish his nationalist credentials and consolidate his support among his Arab constituency.

Prior to the recent provincial elections, al-Maliki also turned on his traditional allies, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), by championing the idea of a strong unitary state south of the Kurdish region contrary to ISCI's preference for a federal arrangement. At the same time, he worked to expand his own power base by establishing tribal

support councils in Sunni areas in the north as well as relatively secure Shiite areas in the south, over the strenuous opposition of ISCI, the Kurds, and even members of his own party.

Finally, al-Maliki has occasionally clashed with Washington. The sectarian purges of the ISF in 2007, a ban on U.S. units entering Sadr City during the "surge," and the terms of the Security Agreement have all demonstrated his willingness to spar with the United States. The recent incident in Kut indicates that he might once again be tempted to challenge the United States to bolster his standing in his party (in light of his problems imposing discipline on local party branches) and to garner public support amid signs of popular unease over the recent spate of suicide bombings.

His critical attitude toward the United States is particularly striking considering he has not condemned recent Iranian artillery strikes against reported Iranian Kurdish military camps in northern Iraq or recent overflights by Iranian unmanned aerial vehicles. By criticizing Washington at such a sensitive time, however, he risks exacerbating an uncertain security situation, should U.S. forces respond by limiting their activities to avoid friction with the central government.

Conclusions

In seeking to preserve, if not bolster, a much-improved security situation as it withdraws from Iraq, the United States will have to carefully balance a number of considerations relating to its relationship with al-Maliki, the Iraqi government, and other key political actors and parties.

Al-Maliki is hardly the first Iraqi politician to seek control over the ISF and bypass constitutional procedures in order to advance personal or party agendas. ISCI's Bayan Jabr transformed several armed units into sectarian party militias during his tenure as minister of interior in 2005-2006. In Jabr's case, the problem was ultimately resolved through democratic elections, the formation of a new government (resulting in Jabr's transfer to another ministry), and quiet but sustained U.S. pressure.

Drawing on this example, future U.S. policy in Iraq should support free and fair elections, while mobilizing quiet but sustained pressure by the international community. Such pressure should come in the form of aid and investment conditionality to ensure that the new government adheres to the rule of law, follows constitutional procedures, pursues noncoercive solutions to the problem of disputed internal boundaries with the Kurdish Regional Government, and remains engaged in the national reconciliation process. The United States should work with the international community and, wherever possible, the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq to achieve these objectives and to maximize its leverage and minimize the credibility of anti-American populist rhetoric.

Furthermore, just as al-Maliki has pursued investment and/or arms deals with other international partners such as France, Russia, and Iran, the United States should likewise quietly indicate it does not have a chosen political partner in Iraq. Washington should signal that it will work with any prime minister and parliamentary party or bloc of parties yielded by free and fair elections, as long as they are committed to the aforementioned principles.

Washington will most likely have to endure occasional anti-American rhetoric from some Iraqi government officials, especially as the U.S. footprint and influence diminishes. The United States, however, should quietly inform the Iraqi government that if such rhetoric persists, legitimizing anti-American political discourse, limiting U.S. military freedom of action, and encouraging provincial governments to threaten reprisals against U.S. forces (as occurred in Tikrit shortly after the incident in Kut), it may also cause the United States to withhold vital intelligence and military support. It would be useful if respected Iraqi Army commanders made this point to al-Maliki, and outlined the potentially dire consequences for Iraq of such a step.

Finally, while trying to juggle numerous international crises, President Obama needs to keep a watchful eye on Iraq. The experiences of 2004 and 2006 show how quickly Iraq's security situation can deteriorate if not tended to -- and this time, there will be no surge to avert disaster.

Michael Eisenstadt is a senior fellow and director of The Washington Institute's [Military and Security Studies Program](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=2&newActiveSubNav=Military%20and%20Security%20Studies%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D2&newActiveNav=researchPrograms) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=2&newActiveSubNav=Military%20and%20Security%20Studies%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D2&newActiveNav=researchPrograms>)

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