

Implications of the Security Improvement in Iraq

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Articles & Testimony

In the past few months, Iraq has witnessed developments that point to a relative improvement in the security situation and a transformation toward greater regional political openness.

The security improvement manifested itself in the Iraqi army operations against al-Sadr militias, especially the Mahdi army and the so-called Special Groups, which reduced their presence in regions that had previously been strongholds, especially in Basra and Sadr City. The government has stressed on more than one occasion that the Sadr wing as a whole is not targeted, and on the ground the military command was the main target. Later, the military campaign moved to Amara close to the Iranian border, which is considered the most important Iranian entry point to Iraq for smuggling.

It was striking that the halt to fighting came after Iranian mediation, which raises the question of Iran's role and the nature of its alliances with Shiite forces in Iraq. It is well known that all Islamic Shiite parties have relations -- to varying degrees -- with Iran, especially with the Jerusalem Brigade of the Revolutionary Guards that is headed by General Suleimani, Iran's strongman in Iraq. Iranian mediation was decisive in ending the Shiite-Shiite fighting as Iran sees itself as standing to lose the most from such fighting. Shiite-Shiite conflict may force some to choose between the American ally or the Iranian friend and this is something Iran does not want at present.

The initiative of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to act against the Mahdi army came about without complete coordination with the Americans. Only when the campaign faced difficulties did American and British troops intervene -- especially when more than 1,000 soldiers from the Iraqi forces in Basra had to give up their positions to Sadr's forces. American and British intervention played a decisive role when more than 800 soldiers joined the British base near Basra airport and planes and helicopters were deployed to assist government troops. This effective US and British intervention reflected back on Iran, which felt it was not ready for a full confrontation with the US. The end of the fighting thus came as an Iranian necessity.

The measures that were taken in Basra may not have been well planned, according to American sources, but the results benefited the government in surprising ways, contributing to a change of perception of the government on the Iraqi street. After the chaos of the militias, the military victory was welcomed by the masses, showing the government as a non-sectarian party. This in turn had a positive impact on persuading Sunni parties, who supported the government's actions, to re-engage and has led to talk of the return of Sunni parties to government. Meanwhile, the mistakes of the Sadr wing -- which lacks effective control and command -- caused revulsion among its popular base in the same way that the behavior of al-Qaeda has repulsed many Sunni forces, making room for them to join al-Sahwa (the awakening) factions.

The fact that the Iraqi government stands before district council elections next October places the government's military measures in a completely different political context. The Sadr wing is considered real competition to the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (SIIC, formerly SCIRI) headed by Abdul Aziz al-Hakim and the Da'wa Party headed by al-Maliki. It is worth noting that the Sadr wing did not participate in past local elections, handing SIIC complete control, and its decision to contest these elections made the Sadr wing a target. Reducing its influence will serve the

SIIC.

Indeed, all parties in the Iraqi government approved the strikes against the Sadr wing for their own reasons: the Kurds want to get rid of any party that rejects the concept of federation while the Sunni party (al-Tawafuq) suffered from the sectarian cleansing policy of Sadrist.

The crackdown on the Sadr wing and the accompanying public criticism of Iran's role were also welcomed by Arab governments, who have been under US pressure to open up to Baghdad as a reward and to show encouragement. The United Arab Emirates' foreign minister visited Iraq, followed by al-Maliki's visit to the UAE and Jordan. It was also announced that the king of Jordan would visit. Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan and the UAE announced that they would appoint ambassadors to Baghdad. Finally, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan came.

All of this serves to support the Iraqi government, which has suffered isolation from its Arab neighbors. However, there hasn't been a unified strategic Arab change and doubts will remain until additional steps are taken that will clarify the Iraqi government's position vis-a-vis Iran.

Iraqis do not doubt the security improvement but are suspicious about its sustainability. The sectarian split between Shiites and Sunnis is still deep and can explode at any moment, and some of the security improvement is due to the sectarian separation through walls and mutual displacement. Meanwhile, the armed resistance continues. Al-Qaeda is regrouping after it avoided clashes with Iraqi and American troops in Mosul and is settled now in Diala and other areas. The al-Sahwa factions still harbor doubts over the ruling Shiite parties and might act against them. Kurdish fears are mounting as the Iraqi parliament fails to solve any of their outstanding concerns. The local elections law has not been ratified yet, nor have the major issues of oil and Kirkuk been addressed. UN efforts on these matters have not been successful so far in face of the Kurdish resolve regarding the disputed regions.

Still, the Iraqi arena remains preoccupied with the American-Iranian conflict, which has become something of a chess game (a game invented in Iran) with each party trying to score points off the opponent. Thus the reduction in influence of the Mahdi army was balanced by Iran's success in mobilizing Shiite parties against the security agreement with the US.

Iran feels it does not need to rush any decisions on Iraq because it is waiting for the results of the next US presidential elections and will wait to deal with a new president. It is hoping to deal with Barack Obama, who affirmed his commitment to withdraw American troops from Iraq in 16 months and expressed a readiness to hold unconditional negotiations with Iran.

American weariness in Iraq and Afghanistan might help Iran reach an agreement with the US administration whereby Washington's approval of the Iranian role in Iraq is traded for Iranian support for America in Afghanistan.

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