



The New Nuri al-Maliki

U.S. officials used to worry that Iraq's prime minister was too weak. That was then.

BY SAM PARKER | JULY 21, 2009



The circumstances surrounding Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's visit to Washington this week could not be more different from the last time he was in town. In July 2006, Maliki was largely unknown, both in Iraq and in the West, and lacked a constituency. Today, he is the dominant force in Iraqi politics, has consolidated much of the emerging Iraqi state into his own hands, and has won a measure of democratic legitimacy after January's provincial elections. In 2006, with Iraq on the verge of state failure, it was Maliki's indecisiveness that troubled Washington. Today, with his country emerging as a sovereign power, his assertiveness is what's worrying.

Three months before his last visit, Maliki had been chosen as prime minister precisely because he seemed weak. Iraq's first elections under the new constitutional order were held in December 2005, yet the negotiations to form a government stretched on for months. The United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), the majority coalition of Shiite parties, was unable to agree on a candidate for prime minister.

The face-off between the two dominant blocs in the coalition -- the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and the Sadrists -- produced gridlock, each group refusing to accept the other's preferred candidate. Maliki was chosen as a compromise candidate to resolve the impasse. A career Dawa Party operative who had spent decades in exile, Maliki was viewed as a threat to no one, without a popular base, lacking a militia, and unable to exert control even over UIA members.

In 2006, Iraq's new political order was bankrupt. Violence raged following the bombing of the Askariya shrine in Samarra in February 2006. There was no "state" to which Iraqis could be loyal, nor one they could be confident would even be around a month or a year later. Shiite militias, often wearing government uniforms, ran amok, driving Sunni families from their homes, and murdering and extorting the Iraqi people. Al Qaeda operated with ease and near impunity.

U.S. officials, most notably National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley in an internal memo leaked to the press in November 2006, complained that Maliki was weak and indecisive and could not stand up to violent actors, even those to which he was politically connected such as the Sadrists and other Shiite militants. But that was only half of the story. The state Maliki commanded faced a profound crisis of legitimacy and was no match for the maelstrom of violence.

What changed the equation were primarily the U.S. troop surge and the accompanying shift in U.S. policy. Although much has been made of the United States' improved counterinsurgency approach, the most meaningful change was more elemental: The United States shifted its primary goal from transitioning

control of Iraq to the Iraqis to taking the lead in establishing security itself. The United States decimated Maliki's enemies, the insurgents and militias who were tearing Iraq apart. The Iraqi Army, trained and constructed by the United States, improved in confidence, capability, and cohesion.

Iraq's new political order gradually gained legitimacy as those who rejected it and sought to bring it down with violence were killed, co-opted, or otherwise coerced into accepting it. This process was also enabled by the Sunni "awakening" against al Qaeda, which preceded the surge, as well as by the fact that the violence had to some extent burned itself out by the beginning of 2007. But the surge was the key, as it decisively tipped the balance in favor of one side -- the Iraqi state -- in a many-sided conflict.

As Maliki's enemies were defeated, the state he commanded gained legitimacy, and as his own army became more powerful, his confidence grew. Starting in late 2006 and continuing through 2007, Maliki distanced himself politically from the Sadrists, first tolerating and then encouraging U.S. strikes against them. Eventually, starting with the Basra operation in March 2008 and continuing in Sadr City, Maysan, Mosul, Diyala, and beyond, Maliki took the initiative away from the United States and began to set security priorities on his own.

Over the course of 2008, Maliki began pushing away the members of his own governing coalition, the Kurds and ISCI. He not only challenged them rhetorically and sought to claim the credit for Iraq's security improvement, but also began to centralize more control of the government into his own hands. For example, he subverted the civilian ministries responsible for security and intervened directly in security matters himself, while working to secure the appointment of officers loyal to him in the security forces. Moreover, he used the resources available to his office to cultivate the indigenous support base he had previously lacked. He used state funds for "reconciliation" efforts, most notably the formation of "tribal support councils" whose ostensible purpose was to bring Iraqi tribes into the government fold but also were a means of giving funds to political supporters. The man who in 2006 had been derided for his weakness by late 2008 was being called a "strongman" in the international press, and Maliki's political opponents and some foreign analysts began to express concerns about a return to authoritarian government in Iraq.

As Maliki's power grew, his relationship with the United States became increasingly contradictory. Just as his rise was enabled by U.S. support, his government's dependence on U.S. help -- particularly in the security field -- continues to this day. The Iraqi Army, for instance, still depends on U.S. air support, communications, procurement, and logistics in order to function. But Maliki has never really acknowledged this fact. Instead, he has become more nationalistic and anti-American in his public rhetoric. Although it seemed paradoxical to many observers at the time, during the negotiations surrounding the U.S.-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), Maliki was aggressive in asserting Iraq's sovereign rights. He forced the Bush administration to accept an unconditional timeline for the withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Iraq by the end of 2011 and stated his willingness to accept immediate withdrawal if the United States did not accede to his terms. Since the signing of the agreement, Maliki has touted it as a heroically won expulsion of foreign forces from Iraqi soil. His nationalist stance continues today, as shown by the ostentatious celebrations he organized for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraqi cities on June 30.

Up to a point, the United States has welcomed Maliki's tough stance. One of the main reasons insurgents and violent actors are no longer able to find support among the Iraqi population is that most Iraqis think that the state has returned for good. Maintaining the public image of a strengthening, self-sufficient Iraqi government is thus a security priority for the United States and will be essential for the planned withdrawal of troops over the coming years. Most U.S. policymakers also accept Iraqi political realities, particularly as Iraq heads into January 2010's parliamentary elections, which will be critical for the long-term political future of Iraq. Indeed, the idea that the United States could invade an Arab country, topple its government, and establish a new one that would earn democratic legitimacy and be an ally of the United States was always unlikely given regional political dynamics and Iraq's history, which require some degree of distance from Washington.

Still, behind closed doors, many Iraqi leaders, including the prime minister's advisors, express their desire for a close long-term relationship with the United States. They think Iraq will need U.S. military support well beyond 2011 (requiring a negotiation of a new agreement superseding the SOFA) and would like the very favorable terms on which Uncle Sam provides this support to continue. Moreover, every Iraqi who comes through Washington these days, or who catches the ear of an American in Baghdad, stresses the importance of implementing the strategic framework agreement (SFA), a document committing the United States to support Iraq in economic, diplomatic, cultural, and even security fields. Maliki himself on his current trip to Washington will co-chair, along with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, a meeting of the higher coordinating committee for SFA implementation.

But of course, the other important difference between Maliki's current visit and the last one is the occupant of the White House. To a great extent, Maliki owes his current dominance to the Bush administration's recommitment to Iraq through the surge. More broadly, Bush made the U.S. effort in Iraq the centerpiece of his administration. There was no question that Bush viewed the long-term U.S. relationship with Iraq as strategically critical to U.S. interests.

Iraq is further down on President Barack Obama's list of priorities, coming after Afghanistan, Iran, the global economic crisis, and a range of domestic initiatives. Although Obama has wisely allowed the Iraq policy he inherited from Bush to continue for the near term, he lacks Bush's enthusiasm for the war and his belief in the strategic importance of the long-term U.S.-Iraq relationship. As for Maliki himself, Obama's advisors have made clear their belief that Bush was too close to the prime minister as an individual and that U.S. support is for Iraqi institutions rather than particular leaders.

This week, Maliki will meet a president whose support for a democratic Iraq is genuine, but not guaranteed. U.S. officials are annoyed at what they regard as Maliki's overconfidence, demonstrated in particular by his celebratory handling of the recent withdrawal and the strict implementation of new rules

restraining U.S. forces. Obama and his administration want a strong alliance with Iraq, but also a more balanced one that involves responsibilities and obligations on both sides. For the new president, Iraq is important for U.S. interests but not critical, and he casts a more skeptical eye on the benefits the United States receives in return for its massive support. The burden is on Maliki to make his case that both he and the U.S.-Iraq relationship more generally are still worth America's time and trouble.

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