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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WSJ.com

MIDDLE EAST NEWS | DECEMBER 28, 2010

Iraq Wants the U.S. Out

Prime Minister, in Interview, Says Troops Must Leave Next Year as Planned

By **SAM DAGHER**

BAGHDAD—Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki ruled out the presence of any U.S. troops in Iraq after the end of 2011, saying his new government and the country's security forces were capable of confronting any remaining threats to Iraq's security, sovereignty and unity.



In his first media interview since the Iraqi Parliament confirmed his new cabinet in December, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki sat down for an exclusive conversation with The Wall Street Journal's Sam Dagher. Here are some excerpts.

Mr. Maliki spoke with The Wall Street Journal in a two-hour interview, his first since Iraq ended nine months of stalemate and seated a new government after an inconclusive election, allowing Mr. Maliki to begin a second term as premier.

A majority of Iraqis—and some Iraqi and U.S. officials—have assumed the U.S. troop presence would eventually be extended, especially after the long government limbo. But Mr. Maliki was eager to draw a line in his most definitive remarks on the subject. "The last American soldier will leave Iraq" as agreed, he said, speaking at his office in a leafy section of Baghdad's protected Green Zone. "This agreement is not subject to extension, not subject to alteration. It is sealed."

He also said that even as Iraq bids farewell to U.S. troops, he wouldn't allow his nation to be pulled into alignment with Iran, despite voices supporting such an alliance within his government.

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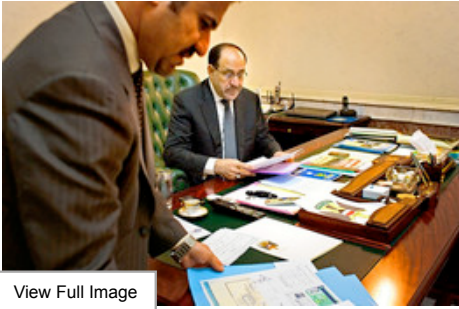
[Obama Speech Marks New Focus in Iraq, at Home](#)

"For Iraq to be dragged into an axis or an orbit, that's impossible, and we reject it whether this comes from Iran, Turkey or the Arabs," he said.

He added that a kind of "paranoia" about a Tehran-Baghdad alliance in the U.S. is matched by a fear in Iran about U.S. influence: "An Iranian official visited me in the past and told me, 'I thought the Americans were standing at the door of your

office,' " he said.

In an interview in Washington, Vice President Joe Biden also said Iran had failed to buy influence during the election or to co-opt Mr. Maliki, who was among the members of the current Iraqi government who briefly took refuge in Iran during the reign of Saddam Hussein.



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Max Becherer for The Wall Street Journal

Nouri al-Maliki seated in his office. In an interview, he said Iraq would assume responsibility for all its own security by the end of 2011, and would not fall into alignment with Iran.

Mr. Maliki's new majority depends partly on followers of anti-American cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. But Mr. Biden credited Mr. Maliki for denying Mr. Sadr's bloc any control of Iraqi security, while forming a government with full buy-in from Iraq's main factions of Sunnis, Shiites and Kurds.

U.S. military commanders still accuse Iran of funding, training and providing sanctuary to Shiite militias, like Mr. Sadr's Promised Day Brigades, which they say are responsible for attacks against U.S. forces and gangster-style assassinations that continue to plague Baghdad and other areas.



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Max Becherer for The Wall Street Journal

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki talking with The Wall Street Journal.

Maliki on Iraq's Future

"Our country has the liberal, secular, Islamist, conservative, Christian, Muslim, tribal. This is our country. ... Now listen, all those that you meet among the officials are referred to by their tribe. I am al-Maliki attributed to Bani Malik, a large tribe present in Iraq and extending to the Hijaz and Yemen. So denying reality will produce nothing."

-- [More from the interview](#)

[Baghdad to Tackle Oil Issues, PM Vows](#)

Mr. Maliki suggested his government had co-opted militias like the one associated with Mr. Sadr. "The militias are now part of the government and have entered the political process," said Mr. Maliki. The Sadr contingent, he added, "is moving in a satisfactory direction of taking part in the

government, renouncing violence and abandoning military activity, and that's why we welcome it."

Security is the new government's top priority, Mr. Maliki said, as in his previous term. Sectarian violence and suicide bombings continue to plague the country as the full withdrawal of U.S. soldiers nears. Almost a dozen people were killed in double suicide bombings on Monday outside provincial government offices in the city of Ramadi, west of Baghdad, according to security officials.

A resumption of more extreme violence, of course, could alter the thinking in Baghdad and Washington about the U.S. timetable.

But Mr. Maliki said the only way for any of the remaining 50,000 or so American soldiers to stay beyond 2011 would be for the two nations to negotiate—with the approval of Iraq's Parliament—a new Status of Forces Agreement, or SOFA, similar to the one concluded in 2008.

That deal took a year of protracted negotiations in the face of vehement opposition from many among Mr. Maliki's own Shiite constituency, and no repeat is expected.

Mr. Maliki and U.S. officials have refrained for the most part from raising the issue publicly during the months

of political wrangling in Baghdad, as Mr. Maliki negotiated with potential coalition partners, many of whom have adamantly opposed an extended U.S. stay.

A senior official in President Barack Obama's administration said Washington was "on track" to withdraw all its remaining soldiers in Iraq by the end of next year. That's the final milestone in the security agreement, following the reduction in American troop levels to below 50,000 in August and the pullout of U.S. soldiers from most Iraqi inner cities in June 2009. "The prime minister is exactly right," said the senior official.

During the interview, Mr. Maliki said he was heartened by America's "commitment" to honoring the agreements it reached with Iraq, and he laughed approvingly when told that U.S. Ambassador James F. Jeffrey keeps a frayed copy of the so-called Strategic Framework Agreement in his leather briefcase. That document calls, in broad terms, for long-term cooperation in security, defense, economy, energy and culture, among other areas.

In a briefing for Western reporters last week, Mr. Jeffrey said that despite the requirement to pull out all American troops at the end of 2011, the framework document and other agreements between Baghdad and Washington contain "a very robust security agenda."

The U.S. Embassy in Baghdad will house a "significantly sized" office aimed at security cooperation, Mr. Jeffrey said, made up of about 80 to 90 military personnel that would take over most of the current functions of the U.S. military in advising, assisting, training and equipping Iraqi forces. That's similar to arrangements with other countries in the region, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. The embassy would also oversee a major Iraqi police-training program.

Mr. Maliki played down Iraq's need for any major help from the U.S. military, even while acknowledging serious deficiencies in areas including control of airspace and borders. He said the days when ethnic or sectarian-based militias roamed the streets of Iraq and operated above the law were over.

"Not a single militia or gang can confront Iraqi forces and take over a street or a house," said Mr. Maliki. "This is finished; we are comfortable about that."

He said full withdrawal of U.S. troops also will remove a prime motivator of insurgents—both the Shiite fighters tied to militia groups and Iran, and Sunnis linked to Mr. Hussein's ousted Baath party.

Mr. Maliki defended his political horse trading with rival factions, many of which are seen as far apart on several substantial policy issues. He called the post-election process—in which he managed to prevail despite his own party bloc failing to gain the most votes—"very arduous."

He acknowledged that he expanded the number of cabinet seats just to placate the squabbling parties that he eventually cobbled together into his governing coalition, arguably the broadest since the fall of Mr. Hussein.

"I mean seven to eight ministries are, allow me to say, ministries for appeasement purposes," he said.

Mr. Maliki said he agreed to several Kurdish demands, including a referendum in contested northern regions, though he didn't think it was feasible without a constitutional amendment to accompany it.

Washington is so concerned about the standoff in the north—where Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen and smaller ethnic groups have faced off—that a large contingent of U.S. soldiers continues to staff joint security checkpoints there, as diplomats work on political solutions.

The referendum was one of 19 demands made by Kurdish President Masoud Barzani in exchange for a power-sharing deal that ended the gridlock that followed the March elections. The resulting unity government headed by Mr. Maliki, a Shiite, includes Kurds and a Sunni-dominated bloc headed by the secular Shiite and former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi.

Mr. Allawi, whose bloc won the most seats in the election but couldn't form a majority, will chair a new National

Council for Higher Policies, but won't be able to implement policies without broad government support.

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