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Iraqi Prime Minister Accused of Plot to Frame Opposition Leader as Terrorist

By Ben Van Heuvelen

Ayad Allawi says a member of his party is being detained by the notoriously brutal security forces loyal to Nouri al-Maliki, whose grip on power is tightening



Najim al-Harbi, then the mayor of Muqtadiya, walks with General David Petraeus in this July 2008 photo. Damir Sagolj/Reuters

Former Iraqi Prime Minister Ayad Allawi has accused Iraqi security forces of imprisoning and torturing a political opponent of current Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, part of an alleged effort to frame Allawi as a sponsor of terrorism. Allawi, in an interview with TheAtlantic.com, presented as evidence a letter that he said was from Najim al-Harbi, a member of his own political party. The letter describes months of detention and brutal mistreatment by government forces, who told Harbi they would relent if he accused Allawi of organizing terrorist attacks against the Iraqi government. Though allegations of abuse have swirled around Maliki's tightly controlled security forces for years, Allawi's charge of a political conspiracy is unprecedented.

Allawi and Maliki were on opposing sides of a months-long political crisis in Iraq after their respective political parties nearly tied the March 2010 national elections. Though the stalemate ended in November with Maliki retaining the Prime Minister's office, the split has raised tension and distrust in Baghdad politics. Allawi's allegations and Harbi's letter are impossible to verify, but the former Prime Minister's accusations against his own government reveal the level of animosity and suspicion that remain in Iraqi politics.

Last fall, after losing the premiership to Maliki in a post-election contest of back-room coalition building, Allawi stood aloof from the gritty politics of government formation, preferring to spend time in London and other foreign capitals in a sort of self-imposed exile reminiscent of Al Gore's bearded soul-searching following the 2000 elections. Allawi felt he had been robbed. A power-sharing agreement was supposed to give him a high-level post in Maliki's administration. Instead, Maliki had cherry-picked allies from Allawi's coalition, sidelined Allawi himself, and consolidated power.

Allawi finally returned to Baghdad shortly after I had left. I had written him several weeks earlier requesting an interview, and he agreed to a phone call. Our conversation, part of Allawi's entrance back onto the political stage, consisted mostly of accusations against the prime minister. But when I asked Allawi about his exclusion from the government, he brushed the topic aside. Instead, the former prime minister accused Maliki of using his control of the armed forces to intimidate, arrest, and even torture his political opponents.

"The Parliament is being terrorized," Allawi told me.

I had heard such charges before. For the past four years, Maliki's opponents have decried his growing control of Iraq's security forces. In the capital, both the army and the police now answer to the Baghdad Operations Command, which is led by a general who receives his orders not through the Ministry of Defense or Interior but from the office of the Prime Minister. Maliki's office also directly funds and commands U.S.-trained counter-terrorism forces, which many Iraqis have nicknamed the "dirty brigades." With so much power in Maliki's hands, critics often accuse him of using it to intimidate and coerce his political rivals. But in the past, when I asked Members of Parliament for evidence, they retreated into generalities. Not so with Allawi.

He had just received a letter, he said, from Najim al-Harbi, an alleged victim of Maliki's abuse. Harbi had run for Parliament in Allawi's coalition, campaigning as a vocal critic of Maliki. Then, on February 7, 2010, he was arrested. Harbi [won the March election](#) anyway, despite being imprisoned for the last month of the campaign. But instead of taking a seat in Iraq's Parliament, he has been detained in a secret location, with no public charges listed against him. Nobody has heard from him for over a year. Harbi was allegedly able to get his message out to Allawi while being transferred from one prison to another. Allawi had his staff fax me a copy of the handwritten letter, which he insists is authentic. Dated March 24, 2011, it tells a horrific tale.

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The story of Harbi's arrest was [widely reported](#) when it happened. He had seemed like a paragon of hope for Iraqi democracy. A member of Iraq's Sunni minority living in the insurgent hotbed of Diyala province, he had given up a life on the farm to join the political process at a time when Sunnis were boycotting elections. Harbi became the mayor of his town, Muqtadiya, and then a leader in the provincial government. He gained popularity among his constituents for fighting terrorism, working with both Iraqi and U.S. forces to coordinate counter-insurgency operations.

Harbi was a collaborator and a traitor in the eyes of insurgents, who tried to kill him again and again. Many of his brothers and cousins served as his bodyguards; in all, more than 20 of his relatives died in bombings and attacks. In September 2009, terrorists kidnapped his young son and dumped his body in a stream. Despite the intimidation, and amid constant grief, Harbi continued his work. At the age of 41, he decided to run for Parliament as a member of Allawi's electoral coalition, which is avowedly secular but represents many Sunnis. In the campaign, Harbi spoke out forcefully against both the abusive practices of the security forces and the controversial de-Baathification commission -- a committee that had already disqualified dozens of parliamentary candidates, disproportionately from Allawi's bloc, for their alleged loyalty to Saddam Hussein's Baath Party.

After his arrest, Harbi wrote, his captors tortured him for 97 days, in sessions that lasted 16 hours, "almost to death." They had a specific demand: "They wanted me to confess that Dr. Ayad [Allawi] and Dr. Salah [al-Mutlaq, a prominent Sunni political leader] have supported me with money to carry out suicide attacks to foil the government, and to film the confession to be broadcast on satellite channels before the election." The 14-week torture corresponds roughly to the time between Harbi's capture and the final certification of the election results. During this period, Maliki was dedicating much of his energy to challenging a vote that had given him two fewer parliamentary seats than Allawi.



Allawi believes Harbi has been held in one of Iraq's secret prisons,

run at Maliki's behest. Over the past year, various investigators -- including the International Crisis Group, Human Rights Watch, the Iraqi Human Rights Ministry, and the [Los Angeles Times](#) -- have discovered that the Prime Minister's office has been running two covert detention sites, one on a base in the Green Zone called Camp Honor, another on a base northwest of Baghdad called Camp Justice. According to Human Rights Watch, which conducted interviews with former Camp Honor detainees, "interrogators beat them, hung them upside down for hours at a time, administered electric shocks to various body parts, including the genitals, and asphyxiated them repeatedly with plastic bags put over their heads until they passed out." Harbi does not say where he has been held, only that it was "a place that could not be described, which no man or animal could bear." In January, the [Los Angeles Times](#) reported that a former Camp Honor detainee had identified Harbi as a fellow prisoner there in April and May of 2010. Maliki himself may have alluded to Harbi when, shortly after the election results were released last March, he referred to Allawi's allies as "terrorists held in Iraqi prisons."

The letter states that Harbi's captors have charged him with terrorism in order to keep him imprisoned and to conceal his torture. Iraqi law gives security forces broad authority to detain anyone suspected of terrorism, and a so-called "secret informer law" allows accusers to remain entirely anonymous. Together, these laws undermine two components of due process -- habeas corpus and the right of the accused to face the accuser -- often allowing hearsay great influence in the judicial system. In his letter, Harbi suggests that the testimony against him is coming from prisoners in Diyala, whom he had once helped Iraqi and U.S. forces to capture.

Neither Maliki's office nor his Baghdad security spokesman returned calls asking for comment on Harbi. A U.S. embassy spokesman referred me to the State Department's latest Human Rights Report, released on April 8, which refers obliquely to "an orchestrated political campaign against Sunni politicians from Diyala Province," but also says that such accusations are "hard to assess."

It's true that some of Iraq's politicians have been affiliated with insurgents in ways that probably warrant arrest. A great many more of them are engaged in corruption of some kind. Moreover, Maliki's political opponents have an obvious incentive to say he's abusing his power. It's difficult to distill truth from rumor in a chaotic and opaque post-conflict state. One former senior U.S. diplomat told me, "We've never been able to put our thumb on Maliki trying to run a brigade to settle political scores. If we had, that would be a big deal."

Joost Hiltermann, a Middle East expert with the International Crisis Group who has extensively investigated the Iraqi security forces, said it was difficult to know whether Harbi's qualified as a "big deal" case. "He might well have his connections [to insurgents], I don't know," Hiltermann told me. "There is no way of ascertaining this one way or another, especially because we cannot talk to the man." He emphasized that it was in Maliki's power to pick up a phone, call his military commanders, and give Harbi his day in court. "There is no question that these forces [holding Harbi], these groups report to offices that are directly reporting to Mr. Maliki himself. Nobody else. And that's the problem."

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Allawi and Maliki were supposed to be sharing power. The March 2010 elections had given way to a nine-month stalemate, which ended only after the Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani brokered an American-backed deal to create a national unity government. Under the terms of that agreement, signed last November, Maliki would surrender significant authority to a new high-level policymaking body, which Allawi would chair. This so-called National Council for Strategic Policy was supposed to be created in the first month of the government, but Maliki has stonewalled the initiative. He also agreed to hand control of the counter-terrorism forces to the Ministry of Defense and to allow layers of civilian and military command between himself and certain brigades, neither of which has yet happened. Instead, Maliki has declined to nominate anyone to lead the Defense and Interior ministries, appointing himself the acting head of both. As Maliki absorbs more power, it is increasingly difficult for members of opposition parties to hold him accountable.

"It is ridiculous to call this power-sharing. It is ridiculous to call it a coalition government," Allawi told me. "As long as he's not going to implement [the power-sharing agreement], I'm not going to stay and work for Mr. Maliki."

Allawi isn't the only opposition leader who's growing restless. After recent conversations with Barzani and Shiite political leader Moqtada al-Sadr, Allawi believes Maliki's government "is showing severe cracks, and people are abandoning this coalition." In recent weeks, Sadr has mobilized thousands of followers in demonstrations against the potential extension of Iraq's Status of Forces Agreement with the U.S. -- something that looks [increasingly likely](#) -- and has warned he would turn against Maliki if the prime minister allows U.S. troops to stay beyond the end of the year. Barzani, for his part, is "quite unhappy with the way his initiative has failed," said Allawi, who flew to Erbil on Tuesday to personally appeal to Barzani to help pressure Maliki.

The political conflict has spilled onto the Iraqi streets. Last Friday, an anti-government demonstration at Baghdad's Tahrir Square turned violent when busloads of men suspected of being plainclothes security forces showed up with sticks and clubs and began attacking protesters. Some were reportedly defacing posters of Allawi. Politicians, too, have lost their cool. Beneath the high ceilings of the Parliament building's main atrium on Sunday, Kamal al-Saadi, a leader in Maliki's coalition, began arguing with Haider al-Mulla, a spokesman for Allawi's bloc, who had apparently called him a liar. Saadi reportedly got so angry he started beating Mulla with a cane, until other legislators pulled the two men apart.

Neither Maliki nor Allawi has tried to lower the temperatures of their respective blocs. Maliki recently accused Allawi of sabotaging his initiatives in order to weaken him. Allawi, for his part, seems to be betting that political conflict will play to his advantage, since anything that unsettles Maliki's columns of support in the Parliament will give Allawi an opportunity to build his own power base. "I believe this summer is going to be very hot," Allawi said.

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