



~MIDDLE EAST MEDIA MONITOR~

THE ARAB SUMMIT THAT WASN'T
AND THE DETERIORATION OF IRAQI POLITICS

By Samuel Helfont

Middle East Media Monitor is an FPRI E-Note series, designed to review once a month a current topic from the perspective of the foreign language press in such countries as Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, and Turkey. These articles will focus on providing FPRI's readership with an inside view on how some of the most important countries in the Middle East are covering issues of importance to the American foreign policy community.

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Though Iraq has faded from the prominent place it held only a few years ago in American foreign policy circles, the current Iraqi political scene is extremely tense. Violence and corruption have not subsided as much as some had hoped and the Prime Minister is now struggling to hold his coalition together. Nothing demonstrates the present situation better than the failure of Arab League Summit, which was scheduled to take place in Baghdad this past May. The following is an analysis of the Arabic press coverage surrounding the cancelation of the Baghdad summit as well as the general political instability in Iraq.

However, first it is necessary to note that Iraq's current situation is much different than it was only seven months ago. As 2010 turned to 2011, Iraqis had ample reason to be optimistic about the future of their country. Violence was down dramatically, Iraq enjoyed good relations with all its neighbors for the first time in decades, and there were signs of economic development and increased trade. To top it off, after eight long months of political maneuvering, the main political blocs had agreed on a compromise, allowing Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to form a new government. It appeared to many that democracy was finally taking hold. In fact, Maliki felt secure enough in his position to ignore the forceful calls for renegotiating the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the United States, which stipulated a complete withdrawal of American troops by the end of 2011. The Obama Administration and the U.S. Department of Defense doubted Iraq's ability to defend itself from external threats or to maintain internal stability. Thus, with the formation of a new Iraqi government in December 2010, American officials expected that renegotiating the SOFA would be a top priority. Yet Maliki rebuffed considerable American pressure and high profile visits from the Admiral Mullen, the American Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Vice President Biden, meant to convince him of the need to extend the American military presence in Iraq past the December 2011 deadline. As late as April, Maliki dismissed any calls for extending American military operations in Iraq, claiming Iraqi forces were "able to take the responsibility, to maintain the security and to work with professionalism and patriotism."¹

Nevertheless, over the past several months, the optimism of the new year has given way to a heavy dose of pessimism and even despair. Corruption remains endemic, Iraqi politics have returned to the sectarianism that has marred the country since the U.S. invasion in 2003, most of the political goals that Maliki set for his government have not been achieved, and Iraq's relations with its neighbors are steadily deteriorating. Moreover, Maliki's government has been forced to recognize that it is unable to defend Iraq from external threats or maintain internal stability and that it will need to ask U.S. forces to remain in the country past the December 2011 deadline.²

¹"Iraq PM tells Mullen Iraqi troops can take over" *USA Today*. April 22, 2011. <http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2011-04-22-iraq-troops.htm>

² For a good overview of the current situation in Iraq see: Nimrod Raphaeli, "Iraqi Government in Crisis – Sectarianism, Corruption and Dissent," *MEMRI Inquiry and Analysis Series Report*, No.683. April 12, 2011; For statements in late June 2010 by Maliki's government on extending the U.S. military presence in Iraq see: "*dawla al-qanun yu'akid 'an bqa' 'aw insihab al-qawat al-'amirkiyah lisa bi-yad al-Maliki wa-'inama bi-yad majlis al-wuzara'*" (The State of Law Party emphasizes that weather American forces remain

Nothing better demonstrated the fading Iraqi optimism than the failure of the Arab League Summit that was scheduled to be held in Baghdad this past May. The annual Arab Summit is the main forum for inter-Arab politics, and though they have often been mired by bickering and discord, at times they have been instrumental for setting the tone of regional politics.³ Thus, while the Arab Summit is not a major event in the Western press, in the Iraqi and pan-Arab press, its failure garnered considerable coverage and was indicative of the precarious political situation both domestically and regionally, in which Iraq now finds itself.

Because most of the Arab world strongly opposed the American invasion of Iraq, many Arab leaders have been hesitant to work with an Iraqi government that was established under the U.S. military occupation. Moreover, almost all Arab governments are Sunni and had thus supported Iraq's Sunnis in the sectarian clashes over the past eight years. These Arab regimes (especially the Gulf Arab States, which feared the ascendance of Shi'i Iran) were ill at ease with Iraq's new Shi'a-dominated government. However, at the end of 2010, with the seemingly imminent withdrawal of American forces and a political agreement between Iraq's main Sunni and Shi'i blocs, Arab regimes began to repair and strengthen ties with Iraq. An Arab Summit in Baghdad in May 2011 was supposed to signal Iraq's return to regional politics after years of conflict and isolation. In January 2011, *Al-Jazeera* dedicated a thirty minute segment of its show *al-Mashid al-Iraqi* (The Iraqi Scene) to the importance of the summit for Iraq. The host emphasized that Iraqi officials were "betting on their success in hosting the summit for solidifying the return of Iraq to its natural place and its place within the Arab [political] sphere."⁴

These sentiments were expressed by Iraq's foreign ministry as well, and in an April meeting with ambassadors from Russia, Turkey, and the European Union, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani emphasized that Iraq had made "all preparations for the upcoming Arab Summit" as a way of highlighting Iraq's newfound stability. Talabani assured them the summit would be held "on its planned dates."⁵

Despite these assurances, when Iraq's political situation began to deteriorate in the spring and tensions increased between Maliki and his main rival Ayad Alawi, Alawi and his allies attempted to undermine the Maliki-led government by proclaiming that Iraq was not ready to host the Arab Summit. As one of Alawi's advisors argued, "The political crisis in Arab countries and the failure of Iraq to form a real partnership government will grow into lack of confidence in Iraq's feasibility to hold the Arab Summit."⁶ Initially, these critiques seemed politically motivated and not very reliable. The Iraqi government continued to insist that it was prepared to host the summit and several prominent Arab states reaffirmed their commitment to attend. For example, just days after the above statement by Alawi's advisor, the Iraqi press reported "Egypt and the U.A.E. have assured their participation in the Baghdad summit."⁷

However, with the deterioration of the internal security situation in Iraq (especially with regard to the recurrence of terrorist attacks), and the regional instability that accompanied the Arab Spring, doubts about Iraq's ability to hold the summit began to gain traction. In particular, the uprising in the small island nation of Bahrain was especially troublesome for Iraq. The regime in Bahrain depicted the protest in its country as a sectarian conflict between the ruling Sunnis and the Shi'i majority (which the regime claims had been infiltrated by Iranian agents). Iraqi Shi'is, having been oppressed by a Sunni minority for decades, were naturally inclined to support Bahrain's Shi'is and demanded that the Shi'i-dominated Iraqi government sanction Bahrain. These demands caused considerable headaches for Iraqi leaders both domestically and regionally. Domestically, Iraq's Sunni Arabs responded by insisting that if Iraq sanctioned Bahrain, it could not remain silent about the Iranian regime, which had also brutally suppressed a domestic uprising. This was unacceptable to Iraq's Shi'is, many of whom had close economic and/or political ties to Iran.

Nevertheless, the protests of Iraq's Shi'is both outside and within the government were enough to cause a backlash in Bahrain. In mid-April, the pan-Arab press reported that Bahrain wished to cancel the Arab Summit in Baghdad "because of the sectarian politics and the irresponsibility of the current Iraqi government which adopted, sponsored, and supported [...]"

or withdrawal is not in the hands of Maliki but rather in the hands of the council of ministers." *Al-Sumaria TV*, (in Arabic) June 20, 2011. http://www.alsumaria.tv/translate_news.php?lng=ar&nc_id=1&n_id=65493

³ To give just one example, following the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the Arab Summit in Khartoum released the famous "Three No's": No peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, and no negotiations with Israel. This became a hallmark of Arab politics for the following decades, and in some circles remains in force.

⁴ "*al-mustaqbal al-'alaqat al-'arabiah al-'iraqiya*" (The future of Arab-Iraqi relations) *Al-Mashid al-Iraqi*, *Al-Jazeera*, (in Arabic) January 16, 2011. <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/646B6185-CA5B-451A-BD98-E354C38F6E9A.htm>

⁵ "*Talabani yabhath al-tatawarat al-siyasiyah m'a sufara' al-'urubi*" (Talabani discusses political developments with European Ambassadors) *al-Mada* (in Arabic), April 12, 2012. <http://www.almadapaper.net/news.php?action=view&id=38693>

⁶ "Iraqiya doubts Arab Summit in Iraq" *al-Sumaria TV* (in Arabic), April 4, 2011.

⁷ "*masr wa al-Imarat yuakidan musharikatahuma fi qimat baghdad*" (Egypt and the Emirates assure their participation in the Baghdad summit) *al-Sumaria TV* (in Arabic), April 5th, 2011.

divisive sectarian tendencies that are detrimental to the work of the Arab nation.” And furthermore that Iraq was nothing more than “an Arab version of Iran.”⁸

Iraq tried to reassure the Arab world that Baghdad was a safe and suitable location for the summit, but at Bahrain’s urging, the rest of the Gulf States (which, as mentioned above, were particularly concerned about Iran and the rise of the Arab Shi’is) united in opposition to the summit being held in Iraq. Acting together, the Gulf States proved too powerful for Iraq. After spending millions of dollars and considerable political will, and with only a few weeks remaining, Iraq saw its hopes of hosting the Arab League Summit dashed.

Reactions in the Arab press to the cancellation of the summit were predictable. The Gulf papers, such as the Saudi daily, *al-Watan*, showed their support for canceling the summit by highlighting Alawi’s speech blaming the Maliki’s government for not handling the situation adequately. The Kuwaiti Times ran the jubilant headline: “No Arab summit in Iraq!”⁹ Within Iraq, government sources tried to play down the implications and argued that the summit had not been canceled, but only postponed. The Sunni opposition focused on Alawi’s critiques, and the militant Shi’is in the Iranian-backed Sadrist movement pointed to “the existence of hidden hands within and outside of Iraq” that do not want Iraq to regain a prominent role in regional affairs. The Sadrists were alluding to a supposed conspiracy among Sunnis both in Iraq and throughout the region that will do everything possible to subvert Shi’i control of Iraq.¹⁰

Iraqi politics remain highly volatile, and the wounds exposed by the failure of the Arab Summit will be difficult to heal. As for now, the Arab Summit is scheduled for next May in Baghdad. Whether or not it takes place will be indicative of the progress (or lack thereof) that Iraq is making towards inclusive democratic governance, as well as internal and regional stability.

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⁸ Daud Basri, “*al-bahrain... al-makan al-munasib lil-qimah al-‘arabiyah al-muqbilah*” (Bahrain... A Suitable Place for the Coming Arab Summit), *Elaph*, (in Arabic), April 16, 2011. <http://www.elaph.com/Web/opinion/2011/4/647309.html?entry=homepagearaa>

⁹ Hasan, ‘Ala’, and Ayman ‘Iysa. “‘*alawi la*’*al-watan*”: *al-hukumah al-‘iraqiyah diy’at fursah in ‘iqad al-qimah al-‘arabiyah fi Baghdad*” (Alawi to “al-Watan”: The Iraqi government missed its chance to hold the Arab Summit in Baghdad. *Al-Watan*, (in Arabic), April 15, 2011. http://www.alwatan.com.sa/Politics/News_Detail.aspx?ArticleID=50006&CategoryID=1; And: Alfuzai, Muna. “No Arab Summit in Iraq,” *Kuwait Time*, April 14, 2011.

http://www.gulfinthemedia.com/index.php?m=opinions&id=559515&lim=15&lang=en&tblpost=2011_04&PHPSESSID=062

¹⁰ “*al-tiyar al-sadri: hunak ‘ayad khafiya la turid ‘awdat al-‘iraq lil-saf al-‘arabi wa musta’ dun lil-dhihab lil-bahrain*,” (The Sadrist Movement: There are hidden hands that do not want to see Iraq return to the Arab fold and they call for sending a delegation to Bahrain), *al-Bawwab* (in Arabic), April 18, 2011. <http://www.albawwaba.net/news/21513/>