

## Iraq's Problems and Fears for the Future

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Iraq's political and security situation has lately become more complicated and dangerous. Larger and larger numbers of demonstrators and protesters gather weekly in mainly Sunni provinces to voice opposition to PM Nouri al-Maliki's



government; terrorist attacks have lately claimed the lives of a parliamentary deputy and scores of innocent people in the north and in Baghdad; and peaceful relations between the capital and the Kurdistan Regional Government are threatened by competing claims to the strategic Kirkuk region. An anti-Maliki coalition has been formed, comprising the secular "Iraqiyya Bloc," headed by secular-Shiite former PM Ayad Allawi, the Shiite "Sadrist Current," led by Sayyid Moqtada al-Sadr, and the leader of the Kurdistan region, Masoud al-Barazani, indicating that Iraq's divisions are

not quite sectarian but yet have possibly devastating consequences for the country.

Indeed, the continuing protests, increasing violence, and the dispute between the center and the Kurdish periphery are different expressions of a real crisis in the Iraqi polity, where Sunni-Shiite tensions intermingle with political elite divisions and concerns about the future of the Kurdish question. In the absence of a moderating middle, a positive external influence from the Arab world and the United States, and the ever-present Iranian interference in elite formations, this crisis can develop into open warfare on many fronts that threatens the prospects of a unified Iraq.

At the heart of the crisis of the Iraqi state is the polarization between the two largest components of Arab Iraq. Sunni leaders and society have almost totally lost confidence in the Shiite-dominated government of Nouri al-Maliki, which they consider to have forsaken them and lumped them all in the category of past and present terrorist collaborators, especially now that some Iraqi jihadists have been found to participate in Syria's crisis. They see the arrest of the security detail of the Minister of Finance, Sunni Rafea al-Issawi, on terrorism charges, and the earlier death sentence against Vice-President Tareq al-Hashemi on similar grounds as examples of a sectarian agenda pursued by al-Maliki. On their part, Shiite influential politicians see the present government as representative of current sectarian realities in the country and, more importantly, as redress of old grievances of

neglect and oppression practiced by Baathist governments for decades.

Another kind of polarization besetting Iraqi politics is that between a coalition of political, secular, and sectarian entities coalescing to serve the national interest and avoid sectarian polarization, and mainly-Shiite political parties deriving their support from Shiite areas and led by Mr. al-Maliki's "Rule of Law Coalition." This polarization began after the 2010 parliamentary elections in which Allawi's "al-Iraqiyya List" received a plurality of the votes and the largest number of seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Allawi, however, lost the Premiership to a coalition of disparate Shiite parties and the Kurdish delegation in the Chamber who gave al-Maliki their vote, a deal later discovered to have had the support of Iran and the United States.



The partial sectarian polarization and the broader political elite division threaten dire consequences inside the country and in the surrounding region. And the polarization and division cannot be separated from Iraq's strategic posture, containing at its core the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Arab world, especially the Gulf Cooperation Council,

and the Syrian ongoing crisis with its impact on Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan. Perhaps what is most troubling in the Syrian crisis is the fact that it is the result of a popular revolution against a tyrant whose main supporter is Shiite Iran, a fact that Mr. al-Maliki should heed in order to find the right political formula and compromise that would help to de-escalate domestic tensions. Although not immanently threatening a military conflict, the dispute between the central government in Baghdad and Iraqi Kurdistan over the Kirkuk region has not yet found a satisfactory solution. Both sides have different interpretations of Article 140 of the Constitution dealing with Kirkuk, and the presence of opposing military forces betrays a mutual insistence on previous positions. What further complicates the situation is the central government's depriving Kurdistan of federal budget allocations in retaliation for the latter's deals with foreign oil companies to explore for oil and exploit existing oil fields in Kurdistan. Mr. al-Barazani also behaves as a power broker in Baghdad, by siding with the anti-Maliki coalition, and as the head of an independent state, lately playing the Syrian Kurds' card in deft maneuverings with Damascus and Ankara, all while the other Kurdish chieftain, President Jalal Talabani, who is on general good terms with al-Maliki, recuperates in Germany but may never return.

The current tensions, polarizations, and anxieties may cause unwarranted consequences if not quickly and decisively addressed. First, escalating tensions and



acute polarization gives Iran easier access and influence in the domestic Iraqi scene, especially now that Tehran sees its control over Syria slipping with the weakening of the Syrian regime. Second, the absence of political compromise and Maliki's insistence on his agenda may allow extremists, especially on the Sunni side, to escalate tensions to the point of a civil war that may be very difficult to arrest. Third, the continuing dispute between Baghdad and the Kurdish periphery will most certainly increase the possibilities of territorial struggles that may put unified Iraq in jeopardy and may have negative consequences for the neighboring countries.

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*Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International*

Images Accessed: 20/01/2013

**Iraqi PM, Nouri Al-Maliki:**

<http://americancontractor.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/PM-Nuri-al-Maliki.jpg>

**Bombing of a Shiite pilgrimage in Iraq, January 2013 image:**

<http://jafrianeews.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/bomb-attack-on-shiite-pilgrims-in-iraq-jan-2013.jpg?w=593&h=423>

**Sunni Iraqi protesters image:**

<http://www.lignet.com/CMSPages/GetFile.aspx?guid=68ba444c-a672-4697-b38e-b83eaf57a936>