

Political Triage in Iraq

Can a Leaders' Summit Heal the Nation's Festering Wounds?



The political crisis in Iraq has deepened over the past several weeks, driven by several important new developments. Below is Ergo's analysis of these rapidly unfolding events. Note: Ergo's commentary from December 2011 provides background and context for the analysis below. To access our December commentary, please [click here](#).

What's new? [The political chasm is growing.](#)

Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi appears to be planning for an extended stay in Kurdistan, as he

has reportedly established offices in Suleymaniyah. The terrorism charges against him remain, and the Iraqi judiciary denied Hashemi's request that the trial be conducted in Erbil or Kirkuk. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's office has said it will soon release additional incriminating confessions from Hashemi's bodyguards, while a group of independent lawyers has brought a lawsuit against Maliki for not having acted on the terrorism information despite having it for three years.

The specific undercurrent of political tensions from which the Hashemi charges emerged has come increasingly to the surface. The Iraqiyya coalition led by Ayad Allawi maintains its boycott of parliamentary sessions and its vocal criticism of Maliki's strong-arm tactics, but the group has been weakened as several MPs and ministers have defected to form their own political organizations. Despite the boycott, parliament has enough deputies—just barely—to function and is reviewing the 2012 budget. As long as this legislation is passed, Maliki can continue to govern whether or not the boycott continues.

Meanwhile, Al Qaeda in Iraq and other terrorist elements continue to wage lethal attacks across the country, targeting pilgrims taking part in the Arbaeen Shi'a religious holiday in Basra, Nasiriyah, and other southern cities, as well as police and government facilities in Anbar province and its capital, Ramadi.

What attempts are being made at reconciliation? A summit is scheduled for later this month, but expectations are currently low.

Iraqi President Jalal Talabani has called for a national dialogue at the end of January among the nation's political leaders to discuss the current political impasse. The location, agenda, and attendees are all issues of contention.

Maliki wants the meeting in Baghdad, but Kurdistan Region President Massoud Barzani has said that he will not attend if the conference is held there. Iraqiyya has expressed no preference but will not attend without Barzani. Meanwhile, the bloc led by Shi'a cleric Muqtada al Sadr says it will only attend if the conference is held in Baghdad.

The conference will likely address the so-called "Erbil Agreement" of 2010, a power-sharing arrangement that finally permitted the formation of a government after eight months of deadlock following the 2010 elections. Iraqiyya and the Kurds accuse Maliki of not adhering to the agreement. A key question will be whether the actions against Hashemi and Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al Mutlak (against whom Maliki has requested a vote of no confidence) will be addressed. Maliki's State of Law coalition has said it will not attend the meeting if Hashemi and Mutlak are on the agenda.

Of particular concern to many would-be participants is the warm reception Maliki has given to Asaib Ahl al Haq ("AAH"), a Shi'a militant group that has recently decided to enter politics. Critics are skeptical of the group's intentions, and it has explicitly not declared it will disarm. AAH broke off from the Sadrist movement in 2008, and relations between the two groups are bad enough that Shi'a tribal sheikhs recently asked the religious authorities to attempt to mediate between them. No doubt Maliki is cozying up to AAH as leverage against al Sadr, one of his strongest potential opponents among Shi'a political groups.

How have key regional players responded? Iran and Turkey both have national interests at stake.

Iran has publicly stated its support for the political process in Iraq but has not pursued active mediation, nor would it likely be successful if it were to attempt to do so. Hashemi has openly accused Iran of orchestrating his arrest warrant, and Iran is widely believed to have actively fomented sectarian violence in Iraq over the past several years. Furthermore, a weak, divided Iraq that continues to trade with Iran but does not threaten it serves Iranian interests well.

Turkey has been the most active regional player. Turkish government officials have said that they cannot accept a return to sectarian violence in Iraq, and Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu recently visited Iranian officials as well as Muqtada al Sadr in Tehran, reportedly seeking a sustainable resolution to the crisis. Over the last ten years Turkey has increasingly become a regional power and mediator, a role that has been sharpened during the Iraq war. Turkey is already Iraq's largest trading partner (with Iran a close second); increased Turkish diplomacy could help counter Iranian influence and promote a quicker political settlement.

What important issues are the media missing? Several important trends are being overlooked.

Critics of Maliki's action see in them a disturbing tendency to manipulate state institutions in order to achieve political goals, and Western media have focused on this issue of state capture. But it is important to note that all actors in the current crisis still demonstrate a faith in the rule of law and the ability of the system to provide redress for their grievances. They refer to the constitution, build coalitions in parliament, and file lawsuits, rather than taking arms. This is a novel phenomenon for Iraq, where the system was for years merely a tool of repression, and it warrants optimism about Iraq's stability in the long term despite turbulence in the short term.

Additionally, media coverage of the current impasse has focused on a supposedly sharpening sectarian divide in Iraq. These fears are overblown. Although the number of attacks has increased as compared to previous months, an uptick in violence often coincides with Shi'a religious holidays. A similar increase in attacks occurred in January 2011, and did not lead to broader violence.

There is little evidence that sectarian tensions are increasing among the broader Iraqi population. For example, the regionalist movements in predominantly Sunni Arab areas are taking place at the governorate level and do not seek to create some sort of Sunni Arab "super-region." Sectarian divisions among ordinary Iraqis are in cases becoming less pronounced. Last week, two Sunni Arab army officers from Diyala and Kirkuk on duty in the Shi'a governorate of Dhi Qar saved many lives by tackling a suicide bomber just before he detonated his vest amid a crowd of Shi'a pilgrims traveling for Arbaeen. Local Shi'a officials have praised the officers' courage and selflessness. Streets have been named after them, and statues will be erected at the blast site.

The threat of a Kurdish-Arab confrontation over the status of the Hurriyah air base outside of Kirkuk, which the U.S. military handed over to the Iraqi army last fall, appears to have been defused. Kurdish leadership adamantly opposed the base remaining a military facility for fear that a concentration of central government forces on its doorstep could jeopardize their security in the future. Last week the Kirkuk governor's office reported that the base will be transformed into a civilian facility later this year.

Finally, there was an attack on the Najmah oil field, operated by Sonangol (Angola's national oil company), in northern Iraq, the first successfully executed on a foreign oil company working in the country. The attackers managed to overpower security guards and blow up some equipment used for seismic analysis. Details are not yet clear, and the security guards are being questioned. The event is likely not connected to the recent political impasse, and although foreign oil companies always face certain security risks in Iraq, Ergo does not believe that this attack represents an elevated or renewed specific threat on the oil sector.

What is the bottom line?

Maliki looks increasingly able to marginalize Iraqiyya, his primary political rival from the March 2010 elections, as the group continues to suffer defections. This does not signal a return to sectarian conflict so much as it exposes the underlying inherent weakness of the Iraqiyya coalition. All sides continue to demonstrate a commitment to using legal and political means to achieve their goals.

Despite Maliki's increased power, he may need to make significant concessions to regionalist advocates and Kurds to ensure their support in Parliament. He will also face a challenge if rival Shi'a political groups currently allied with him in parliament—for example, the Sadrists, whose decision to support Maliki after the 2010 election was tentative—suspect they can best the State of Law coalition in elections. However, this would require them to agree on viable alternative candidates for the premiership, something that stymied attempts at coalition-forming in March 2010.

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