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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

Al-Maliki's Government: A Trusted Proxy for Washington or Tehran?

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | May 2014

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The US has announced its intention to sell weapons to Iraq worth one billion US dollars. The deal includes modern fighter jets, unmanned surveillance drones, air-to-surface missiles, 200 armored Humvees equipped with heavy machine-guns, and other military hardware. According to the Pentagon Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) notice, "The proposed sale of these aircraft, equipment and support will enhance the ability of the Iraqi forces to sustain themselves in their efforts to bring stability to Iraq and to prevent overflow of unrest into neighboring countries."¹ In addition, at the end of last year, Iraq signed a contract to purchase 36 US F-16 fighters that are due to be delivered this fall.

US approval for these deals demonstrates that the Obama administration's priority in its approach toward Iraq is to fight terror and prevent al-Qaeda and associated groups, particularly the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), from regrouping and threatening vital US interests and the security of its regional allies. The arms deals are also an expression of US fears that unrest in Iraq and Syria might spread to other neighboring states. Al-Maliki, however, has other objectives. He makes use of American weapons to strengthen his position in the Iraqi political arena so as to ensure he remains in power for a third term while continuing to marginalize his political rivals and opponents. Some warn that al-Maliki and his government are under the sway of Iran; therefore, strengthening his position is ultimately synonymous with strengthening Iranian influence. Despite these criticisms from within the US and beyond, the Obama administration continues to back al-Maliki, who, it would seem, represents a confluence of US and Iranian interests, and his government.

The Bush Administration and al-Maliki: The Illusion of the Trusted Proxy

The Iraqi constitution was declared on October 15, 2005, and parliamentary elections were held two months later. The Iraqi National Alliance—representing Shiite religious parties with the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, the Islamic Dawa Party, and the followers of Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr—won the election. Although the Alliance won the most seats, it did not have the majority needed to form its own government, forcing it to enter into alliances with other lists representing the Kurds and

¹ US Government, *Federal Register*, vol. 79, no. 97, May 20, 2014, <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2014-05-20/pdf/2014-11621.pdf>, page 28912.

Sunni Arabs. Then prime minister and leader of the Dawa Party, Ibrahim al-Jaafari, tried to form a coalition government, but the Kurdish and Sunni parties refused to do so under his leadership. Similar reservations were also held by elements within the Iraqi National Alliance itself. The dispute between the various sides continued until Nouri al-Maliki was chosen as the Dawa Party's candidate for the premiership instead of al-Jaafari. Parliament appointed al-Maliki as prime minister in May 2006.

At that time, Iraq was under US occupation and witnessing widespread unrest. For some Iraqi forces, armed resistance had come to constitute the main option available to use against the occupation and Iraq's new political reality, with al-Maliki at the fore. Additionally, sectarian strife was worsening, reaching its apex after the bombing of the al-Askari Mosque in Samarra. As a result, the US occupation authority exerted intense pressure on all disputing political players in Iraq to resolve their differences and form a government grounded in parliamentary legitimacy. Al-Maliki was chosen as head of the government, though Iran also played an important role in creating a Shiite consensus for al-Maliki, particularly since his Dawa Party is often referred to as the Shiite Muslim Brotherhood. Once he was in place, the administration of George W. Bush, which was looking for solutions to its embroilment in Iraq, began to rely on al-Maliki as its "trusted proxy," giving him direct backing to rule Iraq. However, in due course, al-Maliki proved that he was a sectarian politician, like his party, and that his links with Iran were more important than his being a prime minister for all Iraqis.

Relations between al-Maliki and the Bush administration were often strained as a result of al-Maliki's implicit refusal to open his government to Sunni Iraqis and the Kurds and his attempts to obstruct US military action against the Mahdi Army of Muqtada al-Sadr in late 2006 and mid-2007. The US also wanted al-Maliki's government to end its policy of purging former Baathist state institutions from Saddam Hussein's time and to legislate for the equitable distribution of Iraq's oil wealth. Tensions worsened and in July 2007, al-Maliki expressed his displeasure with former commander of US forces in Iraq General David Petraeus's decision to arm fighters from the Sunni tribes, known as the Awakening, enabling them to participate in the battle against al-Qaeda-affiliated groups. Bush simultaneously sent 30,000 additional US troops to Iraq; combined with the political crisis in parliament in August 2007, caused by al-Maliki's one-man style of rule and his refusal to include the Sunni Arabs in his decision-making circles, these events caused tensions to peak.

At that time, the Bush administration thought that cooperating with the Awakening fighters might help the US achieve major results on the ground in al-Anbar province,

the stronghold of the Iraqi resistance. Accordingly, Sunni resentment within the political realm needed to be dealt with; however, al-Maliki, who felt that the standing of his Shiite alliance had improved with the weakening of Sunni fighters in 2007, seemed uninterested in the US's position. When the Democrats took control of both the Senate and Congress at the end of 2006 because of popular disapproval of the Iraq war and the appearance of symptoms of the coming collapse of the US economy, al-Maliki used the Bush administration's weakened domestic position to reinforce the sectarian politics he represents and strengthen Iranian influence, rather than unify the nation.

Obama and al-Maliki: United by the War on Terror

Together, the Iraqi quagmire and the nation's domestic recession formed the basis for the election of Barack Obama in 2008. Upon his election, Obama made firm promises to withdraw US forces from Iraq by the end of 2011; to achieve that end, his administration supported al-Maliki's position as prime minister following the March 2010 elections, even though the Iraqi National Movement, led by former prime minister Ayyad Allawi, had gained ground on al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition. Obama's administration justified its position on the grounds that Allawi was unable to form a majority government, implicitly admitting that Iranian influence in Iraq could no longer be ignored.

Although Obama insisted on sticking to the timetable for withdrawal from Iraq, he called for a small-scale deployment of forces to remain behind and provide support, negotiating details with al-Maliki in this regard. Al-Maliki, however, refused to grant such forces immunity before the Iraqi courts, though this was merely al-Maliki's excuse for achieving Iran's objective of seeing an American evacuation from Iraq, thereby enabling Iran to have unilateral control. This situation is indeed what materialized when the US finally decided to withdraw all its forces.

Although Obama tried to convince the Iraqi leader of the need for a security, military, and strategic partnership with the US, al-Maliki, who was fully backed by Iran, did not heed the American invitation. In December 2011, as soon as the US troop withdrawal was complete, al-Maliki issued an arrest warrant for Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi. Since then, al-Maliki has pursued policies that discriminate against and marginalize Sunni citizens in Iraq, and tightened his grip on power, provoking an angry response from his Shiite allies and Kurdish partners in government institutions.

Al-Maliki targeted his former minister of finance, Rafi al-Issawi, and detained dozens of al-Issawi's aides and personal security guards in December 2012, demonstrating the extent of his authoritarian policies. This proved too much for the Sunni population, especially those in al-Anbar province, who were already enraged by al-Maliki's persistent efforts to marginalize them, detain their women, and torture their men and women in prison. The cities of al-Anbar have been on general strike since 2012 in a revolt against the repression of the Maliki government.

Only with the uprising in al-Anbar did al-Maliki feel the need for US political and military support, so he exploited American fears of ISIS, who had an increasing influence in a Syria that was in the throws of its own revolution. In return, given his pride in having achieved the US withdrawal, Obama saw backing al-Maliki as a better option in taking on ISIS than redeploying US troops to Iraq. Providing military and political support for al-Maliki also weakened republican arguments against Obama that the withdrawal of all troops from Iraq had permitted extremist groups to flourish and given al-Maliki the room to establish a new dictatorship and marginalize his opponents, especially the Sunni population.

In dealing with the US, al-Maliki has been consistently unprincipled, pleading with the US to form an alliance and provide weapons when necessary, and reverting to unremittingly-sectarian policies once he has obtained what he needs. In its dealings, Obama's administration has asked al-Maliki to ensure that the political arena be opened to his opponents and the discrimination against Sunni citizens ceased. Based on verbal assurances, given during al-Maliki's visit to Washington in early November 2013, the US agreed to sell Iraq large quantities of advanced weapons on the pretext of fighting terror, halting internal unrest at its borders, and hoping to avoid the spread of any unrest from Syria into Iraq.

Although al-Maliki was not the US's preferred choice as Iraq's leader, particularly given his questionable relationship with, if not allegiance to, Iran, US Presidents Bush and Obama have had to deal with him due to their own disastrous mistakes during the occupation of Iraq. In addition to the sectarian partitioning of the country, the dissolution of state institutions, the army, and the police have caused a power vacuum that brought down the state and allowed Iran and its allies inside Iraq to fill the vacuum under the eyes and ears of both administrations.

Since there is no US military presence to speak of in Iraq today, the US administration is unable to exert much influence over the formation of the new Iraqi government. The

results of the recent parliamentary elections gave al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition the most seats among the party lists, but without a sufficient majority to form the government on its own. Furthermore, the US seems more concerned with fighting terror than it does with ensuring fair representation for the various Iraqi political forces within the new government. In doing so, the US implicitly continues to back al-Maliki, who fights terrorism by proxy, or at least claims to be doing so, and continues to be Iran's preferred choice for ruling Iraq.