



Al-Maliki Raises Hopes For A More Stable Iraq

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Give Nouri al-Maliki credit. Since assuming his post in May 2006, Iraq's embattled prime minister has been written off by more than a few observers as an agent of Iranian influence or a cat's paw of the US-led Coalition.

However, since early this year, Al-Maliki has definitively proven that he is neither. In the process, he has moved his country considerably closer to lasting stability.

In late March, with little advance warning to Coalition forces, the Iraqi military launched a campaign against Shia militias in the country's turbulent southern port city of Basra. The main target was the feared Mahdi Army (Jaish al-Mahdi) of anti-American cleric Moqtada al-Sadr: an Iranian-supported force of an estimated 40,000 to 60,000 Shia militants. The media were quick to condemn the initiative, warning that Al-Maliki had bitten off more than he could chew. They turned out to be wrong. It was Al-Sadr who blinked first, reining in his militia and giving up the fight after just a few days of hostilities.

In the process, he handed Al-Maliki a crucial ideological victory. The battle for Basra, after all, was more than a simple contest of wills. It was also a larger struggle for legitimacy between the radical vision of expanded Iranian regional power, championed by Al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, and Al-Maliki's more nationalistic brand of Shiism. In the aftermath of the battle of Basra the latter has emerged the clear victor.

Since then, the Iraqi government has been pressing the initiative. In early June Al-Maliki authorised Operation 'Peace', sending some 10,000 troops into Baghdad's notorious Sadr City slum. Given the neighbourhood's rough-and-tumble reputation, pundits and analysts alike predicted a bloodbath, but Iraqi troops took control of the neighbourhood without major incident. Since then they have been doing what the Coalition could not - maintaining order at the epicenter of Shia militancy in the former Ba'athist state.

Nor is there any let-up in sight. Stronghold by stronghold, through political ultimatums and co-ordinated military action, the Iraqi Army has systematically pushed back against the Mahdi Army throughout Iraq in recent weeks as part of what appears to be a larger campaign by Al-Maliki to permanently trim the sails of Al-Sadr's Shia militia.

The results have been as striking as they have been under-reported. "More than 2,000 cadres from the Mahdi Army leaders were killed recently," a recent study by the Intelligence Directorate of the Iraqi Army, carried out in the aftermath of the military campaigns in Basra and Sadr City, has concluded. "This led to the almost complete collapse of the army," it said.

These setbacks increasingly have forced Al-Sadr to rethink his strategy. In a mid-June communiqué to his followers, the firebrand cleric made clear that while his "resistance" to the Coalition will continue, it will increasingly be carried out only by a small group of selected followers. "The other part of Jaysh al-Mahdi," Al-Sadr outlined, will be relegated to waging a generalised non-violent "struggle against Western secular ideology". These forces, Al-Sadr made clear, "will be under a cultural, religious and social title and will be prohibited from carrying and using weapons". The message is unmistakable: the Mahdi Army, at least in its current form, is going out of business.

Al-Sadr's loss has been Al-Maliki's gain. The central government's strengthening grip on once-unruly hotspots such as Amara and Mosul, local authorities say, has paved the way for political normalisation and proper provincial elections: a key goal of the Iraqi leadership. It has also gone a long way towards solidifying the legitimacy of Al-Maliki's rule. As one provincial official has put it, in the aftermath of the governmental offensive, "people are looking to him as an honest and nationalist man". Al-Sadr and the Mahdi Army, meanwhile, are increasingly seen as being "beyond the law."

Notably, this credibility has come not from Maliki's partnership with the Coalition, but from his growing independence from it. On 8 July, after weeks of wrangling with Washington, Iraq's government rejected a Status of Forces Agreement that would have enshrined a long-term US security presence there. Al-Maliki government's assertiveness on the issue - a stance supported by a broad cross-section of Iraqi politicians - suggests a newfound confidence in its ability to provide lasting security on its own in the near future.

The significance has not been lost on the other Shia players on Iraq's fractious political scene. Ayatollah Abdel Aziz al-Hakim's powerful Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC), for one, appears to be drifting away from its sometime sponsor, Iran, and toward Al-Maliki's particular brand of religious nationalism. In a 30 June video broadcast on the organisation's dedicated television channel, Al-Furat, the SIIC even obliquely pinned the blame for continuing violence and sectarian bloodshed in Iraq on the Iranian government.

The reorientation now underway in Iraqi politics is undoubtedly good news for long-term stability there, but it is also a development with regional consequences. At a time when the United States and the international community are grappling with Iran's persistent nuclear ambitions and the effects of its growing regional power in the Middle East, Al-Maliki's successes suggest that Tehran's pervasive influence in his country might not be so irreversible after all.