

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2555
July 21, 2009

The Obama-Maliki Meeting: Security in Iraq Should Be the Priority

James Phillips

When Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki meets with President Barack Obama at the White House tomorrow several issues will be high on the agenda, including the need to accelerate Iraq's lagging political reconciliation efforts. But despite the importance of this long-term process, one topic deserves even more urgent attention: How to immediately strengthen bilateral security cooperation.

Prime Minister al-Maliki's government, in a hurry to demonstrate its independence from Washington, has imposed dangerous restrictions on the movement and operations of U.S. troops. President Obama must personally press Prime Minister al-Maliki to ease these politically motivated constraints before they jeopardize the safety of American troops, undermine the security of Iraqi civilians, and damage the prospects for political progress in Iraq.

Between Iraq and a Hard Place. Recent press reports have documented rising tensions between U.S. military commanders and Iraq's Ministry of Defense. This friction is the result of restrictions placed on American military forces in cities that hinder the ability of U.S. troops to respond to attacks and protect themselves. The Iraqi government surprised American military leaders by sharply restricting the movement and activities of U.S. troops in a new interpretation of the six-month-old security agreement that authorizes continued U.S. military activity in Iraq.

The Status of Forces Agreement, which came into effect on January 1, called for the redeployment of U.S. combat forces from Iraqi cities by June 30,

although U.S. troops are still empowered to actively support Iraqi forces in these cities. Under the agreement, U.S. combat forces are not allowed to enter Iraqi cities unless specifically requested to do so by Iraqi authorities, except in cases of self-defense. The Iraqi authorities reportedly have adopted a very narrow interpretation of "self-defense," which has greatly frustrated American military commanders.

The extremely strict interpretation of the agreement, pronounced in a terse July 2 communication from Iraq's military leadership, comes during an upsurge of attacks on U.S. troops launched by renegade Shia militias controlled by Iran. The new Iraqi policy stopped all joint patrols in Baghdad, specified that all American supply convoys should travel only at night, and limited the ability of U.S. troops to respond to terrorist threats without first seeking Iraqi approval. American commanders are justifiably concerned that the new restrictions will impede their ability to take timely action against hostile forces, defend American military and civilian personnel, and protect Iraqi civilians.

Iraq's government apparently sees the June 30 transition as an opportunity to show its citizens that it is now unequivocally in charge and is no longer

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/MiddleEast/wm2555.cfm

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting
the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to
aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

dependent on the U.S. military. It has placed a high priority on reducing the visibility of U.S. troops despite continuing security threats. Furthermore, Iraq's emerging security forces remain dependent on U.S. forces for logistics support, air support, intelligence gathering, training, and specialized activities, such as mine removal. One Iraqi military commander went so far as to say that "Now the American soldiers are in prison-like bases as if they are under house-arrest."¹

This new Iraqi policy is unacceptable. Iraqi leaders, zealously trying to establish their independence from the United States, are in danger of sacrificing the security and well-being not only of American soldiers, but of Iraqi civilians as well. Prime Minister al-Maliki, once regarded as a weak leader, has grown in the job and has confidently asserted his primacy within Iraq. While his growing confidence is a welcome sign of Iraq's progress, it has outstripped the growing competence of Iraq's security forces. For instance, last year al-Maliki boldly ordered the Iraqi army to attack Iranian-supported militias in the southern city of Basra, without consulting American military commanders. When the offensive stalled in a cloud of confusion, American and British forces went to the rescue to salvage an important victory. The prime minister desires to distance himself from Washington ahead of Iraq's January election. If the U.S. allows him to do so, Iraq's fragile security situation would be undermined.

Security First. During their White House meeting, President Obama should press Prime Minister al-Maliki for greater flexibility in interpreting the vaguely worded Status of Forces Agreement. U.S. troops must be allowed to take action to defend themselves against attacks and stage counter-attacks to remove possible threats from insurgent groups, Shia militias, and terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda in Iraq. President Obama must make it clear to al-Maliki that U.S. troops must have the necessary latitude to defend themselves. The two should clarify the terms of the security agreement to avoid

future misunderstandings that could lead to avoidable losses of American and Iraqi lives. This message must be strongly communicated at the highest level to avert a possible security meltdown.

In addition, the President should urge the Prime Minister to take stronger action to reach out to moderate Sunni leaders and include them in his ruling coalition wherever possible. Many Iraqi Sunnis are increasingly nervous about the future of the Sons of Iraq militia, which the U.S. military helped to create after a Sunni backlash against ruthless insurgent groups. President Obama should urge the Prime Minister to continue funding these predominantly Sunni groups while integrating them into the government's security forces—or at least find them jobs.

Finally, the President should offer al-Maliki close American cooperation in trying to defuse the conflict brewing in northern Iraq between the Kurdish Regional Government and Iraq's central government. U.S. mediation has averted clashes between Kurdish militias and the Iraqi army over disputed territory claimed by Kurds, Arabs, and Turkomans, particularly near the oil-rich city of Kirkuk. More high-level American involvement may be needed to help broker a durable Iraqi consensus on power-sharing on this and other issues.

The Bottom Line. Prime Minister al-Maliki arrives in Washington at a critical time in Iraqi-American relations. The two leaders must cooperate closely to assure that the hard-won security gains of the surge are not squandered by endless squabbling among rival Iraqi political factions. As a candidate, Barack Obama promised to "end" the Iraq war regardless of the consequences. But as President, he must do everything he can to leave behind a stable Iraqi democracy that is an ally against terrorism.

—James Phillips is Senior Research Fellow for Middle Eastern Affairs in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.

1. Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "Iraq Colonel: U.S. Troops Now in 'Prison-like Bases,'" Associated Press, July 20, 2009, at http://www.breitbart.com/article.php?id=D99I7C1G0&show_article=1&catnum=0 (July 21, 2009).