

## **Rising Strife Threatens Tenuous Iraqi Stability**

**Time.com**

**January 22, 2012**

**By Michael S. Schmidt**

BAGHDAD — Violence and political instability have escalated across Iraq since the withdrawal of American forces, as political and sectarian factions have fought for power and influence in a struggle that, within weeks, has threatened to undo the stability that allowed the pullout in the first place.

The most recent turbulence came over the weekend when a Shiite governor threatened to blockade an important commercial arterial road from Baghdad to the semi-autonomous Kurdish region in the north if Kurdish officials did not hand over Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi to government authorities. The Shiite-led national government has accused Mr. Hashimi, a Sunni, of running a sectarian death squad.

On Sunday, the advocacy group Human Rights Watch said the Americans had left behind a “budding police state,” with the country’s Shiite leadership increasingly ruling by force and fear. Insurgent attacks have surged across the country, and as security forces loyal to the Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, a Shiite, have pressed a campaign against Sunni politicians, arresting several in the past week.

The turmoil has come at a time when Iraqis had hoped their leaders would be emboldened by their new independence to tackle the nation’s multitude of problems — finally confronting the social, economic and religious divisions that were papered over by the presence of American troops.

But while there remains hope that Iraqis can still unite, the country is far from the “sovereign, stable and self-reliant” place President Obama described it as last month.

“Before the United States withdrew, our politicians were saying that we are a government of national unity, and that we are a democracy, and that is all they talked about,” said Dr. Basam Edis, 45, a physician from the northern city of Mosul. “Now people are wondering if militias will take control of the cities again. It is all happening because our politicians are now fighting for a bigger piece of the pie.”

He added, “Our politicians have become vampires who do not care about us.”

The worst break came when Mr. Maliki ordered Mr. Hashimi’s arrest last month. In response, Sunni politicians boycotted Parliament and cabinet meetings, bringing an already unproductive political process to a halt. Sunni-majority provinces began talking about greater autonomy or even breaking away from the central government.

Amid the paralysis, Mr. Maliki publicly threatened to release secret information that he said would implicate politicians in terrorist plots. Then, last week, Mr. Maliki stripped the boycotting Sunni ministers of their posts. Sunni politicians responded by calling him a dictator.

The political dysfunction has become so acute that it is considered a positive sign that Shiite and Sunni leaders are at least arguing about who will attend meetings to discuss where a next round of meetings will be held. Those meetings would then aim to resolve the political crisis.

"All these years, the United States stayed here trying to polish the political process so they would have an excuse to leave Iraq victorious," said William Warda, an analyst in Baghdad. "But the fact is, they left a very shaky political structure, one that has a very weak foundation. It is like a building standing on a match. What has happened since the withdrawal has proved this even more."

The criticisms from Human Rights Watch were released in their annual report on human rights in various countries. The group said that the Iraqi government had significantly restricted freedom of expression in the nation over the past year and that security forces had intimidated, beaten and detained activists, demonstrators and journalists.

"After the formal withdrawal last month, the political clampdown has intensified, and Maliki has threatened his political opponents with jail," the group's Middle East director, Sarah Leah Whitson, said in an interview.

At the same time, Al Qaeda has increased its attacks while shifting its focus toward Iran's influence in Iraq. On three different days in the past month, the daily death toll rose past 60, and on more than a dozen days the toll was more than 10. Without the help of American Special Operations forces, the Iraqi military and police forces have appeared unable to curb attacks on religious pilgrims, civilians and security officers.

"The United States withdrew rapidly after being repeatedly attacked by our mujahedeen in order to save their military from a quagmire," Al Qaeda in Iraq said in a recent posting on its Web site. "The American military withdrawal is a defeat in every sense of the word, but the war is not over because Iran is trying to establish a Shiite buffer zone in Iraq and extend its Islamic revolution to Medina and Mecca," it said, referring to Muslim holy sites in Saudi Arabia

Al Qaeda said the Iranian government, which trained and financed militias in Iraq involved in sectarian violence and attacks on American troops, had helped destroy Iraq by "killing the best families, the elite, the educated."

As problems have persisted inside Iraq, its leaders have struggled to deal with neighbors, including Turkey, one of the largest foreign investors.

According to members of Mr. Maliki's bloc, the Turkish prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, called Iraqi politicians about 10 days ago and told them that they should peacefully deal with one another as they try to resolve their differences.

Around the same time, Mr. Erdogan called Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. to express his concern about the tensions between Shiites and Sunnis in Iraq, warning that the crisis could lead to a sectarian war.

The calls angered Mr. Maliki because he felt that Mr. Erdogan, a Sunni, was criticizing how he was dealing with the country's affairs. In a television interview, Mr. Maliki said that Mr. Erdogan was acting as though he controlled Iraq, and said that Mr. Erdogan should stop meddling.

The issue has lingered. Last week, the head of Iran's Quds Force was reported to have said that Iraq and southern Lebanon were under Iranian control. In response, top Kurdish, Sunni and Shiite politicians in Iraq called on Mr. Maliki to reprimand the Iranians as he had the Turks.

"I expected a lot of wisdom and a sense of calm between the Iraqi officials, especially after the United States troops withdrew," said Abdul Baqi Abboud, 59, a teacher from

Basra. "But the contrary has happened, and they have acted recklessly and without a sense of responsibility. They have proved that they are teenagers, and we will now expect more problems."

Reporting was contributed by Yasir Ghazi, Duraid Adnan and Omar al-Jawshy from Baghdad, and an Iraqi employee of The New York Times from Mosul.

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Source: : <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/23/world/middleeast/stability-in-iraq-threatened-amid-power-struggle.html>