

Gulf States Woo Iraq

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They hope their backing for Baghdad will help stabilise the country and curb Tehran. Improved security, a grudging belief in the credibility of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and a desire to counter growing Iranian influence has led Iraq's Sunni Arab neighbours in recent weeks to increase their diplomatic and economic support for the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad.

Until recently, the Gulf Arab states – which include Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, UAE – as well as Jordan and Egypt have resisted calls by Iraqi and United States officials to engage more with Baghdad, citing security concerns and a distrust of the country's government.

While Shia-dominated Iran, by contrast, has had an active embassy in Baghdad since the US-led invasion in 2003, there has not been a permanent Arab ambassador stationed in Iraq since Egypt's envoy was murdered there in 2005.

“In the past, there's been a huge concern about the security situation inside Iraq,” said Christian Koch, director of International Studies at the Gulf Research Centre in Dubai. “With the situation becoming a little bit better, there's also a greater willingness to send ambassadors back to Iraq.”

Sectarian fighting between the Shia Arab majority and the Sunni Arab minority erupted in 2006, and the drop-off in violence has been attributed to the deployment of 30,000 additional American troops, as well as crackdowns against armed Shia and Sunni militants by the Iraqi government in the southern city of Basra, the northern city of Mosul and Baghdad's Sadr City district.

“It's hard to overstate the animosity felt toward the government in Baghdad,” said Tony Dodge, a senior fellow for the Middle East at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. “The Gulf states felt [Maliki's government] was at least complicit in the civil war that was raging between the [Shia] and the Sunni, but as the surge kicked in and the violence went down in 2007, that anger kind of dissipated.”

This week, the UAE appointed its new ambassador to Baghdad during a visit to Abu Dhabi by Maliki.

The country withdrew its top envoy in May 2006 after one of its diplomats was kidnapped and held for nearly two weeks by Islamist militants.

The UAE also became the first Gulf Arab country to forgive all of Iraq's debt, cancelling almost seven billion US dollars, including interest owed by Baghdad.

Earlier this month, Jordan appointed its first ambassador to Iraq since the August 2003 bombing of its embassy in Baghdad, which killed 17 and left 40 others injured.

Jordan's King Abdullah II has announced plans to visit Iraq soon – the first trip by an Arab head of state since Saddam was toppled.

Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have also promised to send ambassadors to Iraq.

“I suspect that [other Gulf Arab countries] will take similar steps within the next few months,” said Marina Ottaway, the director of the Middle East programme at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington DC. “What is striking on the part of these countries is that they’re really trying to follow a very careful policy of not siding with the US but trying to be the peacemakers and go-betweens.”

This has become easier as leaders in the Gulf Arab states have come to regard Prime Minister Maliki, a Shia Arab, who took office in May 2006, as his own man rather than a US or Iranian crony, and as someone who has shunned sectarianism.

Maliki has quietened critics in recent months by going after the Mahdi Army militia of radical Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, and pushing ahead with a new amnesty programme for former insurgents – the majority being Sunni, a substantial number of whom have never been charged.

The Iraqi legislature passed the General Amnesty Law in February as part of Maliki's effort to draw more Sunnis into the political process.

“These Arab countries are beginning to realise that Maliki has somewhat of a spine after all,” said Steven A. Cook, a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations in Washington. “He started to prove himself first in the operations [against Sadr’s militia] in Basra – even if that wasn’t totally successful – and then by standing up to the US on the Status of Forces Agreement.”

Washington has been trying to negotiate a new agreement that would provide a legal basis for its troops to remain in the country into next year, after its United Nations mandate expires.

Bush administration officials had hoped to wrap up talks by the end of the month, but Iraqi leaders have held off because of numerous disagreements on various aspects of the deal, including whether to include a timetable for a US withdrawal. Maliki, who supports the inclusion of a timetable, believes an interim deal may be the most realistic option.

“The more Maliki stands up to the Americans on the issue of the security agreement, the easier it becomes for Gulf Arab countries to become more involved,” said Ottaway.

While the Maliki government fights off the perception of being too close to the Americans, it has also had to contend with being viewed as too cosy with Iran.

“There has not been much faith in Maliki as a credible leader and of course this is the first time in 500 years that there’s been a [Shia] dominated [Arab] country in the Middle East,” said Christopher Pang, the head of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at the Royal United Services Institute in London. “For this reason, a lot of those Arab states have seen the Maliki government as beholden to Iranian [Shia] interest.”

This perception only intensified in March when Iraq pulled out all the stops for an elaborate state visit by

Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The image of Ahmadinejad and Maliki strolling hand-in-hand through Baghdad provided a sharp symbolic statement for two countries which had been bitter enemies when Saddam Hussein's Sunni government was in power.

Political analysts say that Arab states, which once funded Iraq's 1980-88 war against Iran, have become increasingly interested in launching a diplomatic counter-offensive, with a particular eye toward the outcome of the 2008 provincial elections.

"Now that [the Arab countries] see there's a chance for Sunni groups to regroup and gain influence in the elections, they are becoming more involved," said Pang.

The polls are scheduled for October 1, but analysts caution that legislators may not be able to pass an electoral law soon enough to allow preparations for a vote by that date.

The UN special representative to Baghdad, Staffan de Mistura, told the Associated Press there would be time to hold the local elections before the end of the year if parliament passed the law this month.

There is hope that the ballot, whenever it is held, will bolster Sunni Arabs and improve their prospects of doing well in national elections – scheduled for the end of 2009 – and their overall participation in Iraq's new democratic political process.

Analysts note, though, that Sunni Arabs will not be voting as one bloc.

"There will be two kinds of Sunni groups vying for power," said Ottaway. "The first group is made up of the old parties – those represented in parliament – who have withdrawn from the government but are negotiating with the government to come back in. They are the current lawmakers.

"The second group is made up of members of new organisations that are being formed like the Awakening Councils and the Sons of Iraq and so on. And those two kinds of parties are going to be competing with each other. There will be a very different outcome depending on who takes power."

The Sons of Iraq and Awakening Council forces are paramilitaries drawn from Sunni tribal groups that have turned against al-Qaeda militants and have begun working with US forces. These fighters, many of whom are believed to have been insurgents themselves, fell out with the Islamic radicals because of their extremist ideology and crimes against ordinary Iraqi people.

"The tribal groups have become increasingly popular in Sunni-dominated areas like the Anbar province in the west because they are seen as more legitimate representatives than the political parties in [parliament] now," said Dodge. "The political parties are viewed as not having acted in the best interest of the Sunni people."

If the tribal groups do not prevail, there is concern that the government in Baghdad will continue to face

questions of legitimacy from the Sunni community and even that some tribal leaders may return to insurgent activities.

“There is a very real fear that if the newer groups do not do well in the elections, they will take things into their own hands and not respect the provincial councils,” said Ottaway.

Gulf Arab states appear to hope that increasing engagement with Iraq may help bring about credible Sunni representation in parliament and government. They seem to be calculating that this will contribute to stabilisation in the country, which will in turn bring greater stability to the region as a whole.

A more secure Iraq is seen by its neighbours as the key to countering the influence of an increasingly powerful Iran.

“In the past, Iran was kept in check by Iraq. But Iraq is a collapsed state at this point,” said Ottaway. “There is a real worry not just in the Gulf, but in Jordan and Egypt about the unchecked power of Iran.”

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