

Turmoil Reveals Iraqi Reliance on US

Author: [Abeer Mohammed](#)

Week of explosions and fraught negotiations shows Iraq struggling to emerge from America's shadow.

Iraq's extended dependence on American influence was laid bare this week by massive bombings and by a breakthrough in a political battle over planned elections.

Both events cast doubt on the ambition – voiced by governments in Baghdad and Washington – for Iraq to manage its own affairs in order for America to withdraw its troops.

They also uncovered cracks in Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's re-election campaign, which has cast him as a strongman leader capable of securing and unifying Iraq.

On December 8, five car bombs detonated near government offices in Baghdad, killing more than 120 people and injuring some 500. The previous day, the Iraqi parliament concluded months of convoluted debate with an eleventh-hour deal paving the way for elections to be held in March.

The United States welcomed the election breakthrough, reportedly brokered by its officials. It condemned the bombings that followed the deal – the latest in a series of spectacular attacks that have gutted ministries and government offices in the capital.

Among Iraqis, the blasts prompted renewed condemnation of the officials who took control of the city after the US military formally withdrew from its streets this summer.

Though Washington is intent on extracting the bulk of its troops from Iraq by mid-2010, Iraqi analysts and politicians interviewed by IWPR said US forces were still needed to plug gaps left by corruption and disloyalty among the country's military and police.

They also said the US was required as a mediator on Iraq's fractious political scene, as demonstrated during the long deadlock over the election law.

"The American role is necessary now in Iraq, not only to maintain security but to maintain political stability," said Hameed Fadhel, a political sciences professor at Baghdad University. "The Iraqi people no longer trust their politicians."

He added that ridding the security forces of insurgent collaborators was "a difficult, long-term task" that would require political consensus. "Maliki cannot carry out that mission alone," he said.

Abdullah Jafar, a retired professor of political sciences, said the debate over the election law had helped cast the Americans as mediators, "People read in the news that the American president or envoy had urged Iraqi politicians to approve the election law, to get out of the bottleneck."

Meanwhile, he said, "Iraqi politicians have shown people they cannot run this country alone".

AMERICAN INFLUENCE

Iraq's first nationwide parliamentary elections since 2005 were originally scheduled for January 2010. But strenuous objections, first by the Kurds and then by Sunni Arabs, held up passage of a bill approving the vote.

Disagreement initially focused on the ethnically mixed, oil-rich city of Kirkuk, claimed by Kurds, Arabs and Turkoman. Sunni Arab and Kurdish leaders also fought hard for a greater share of new seats in the expanded parliament, with the Sunni Arab leader Tareq al-Hashemi using his vice-presidential veto to block the election bill.

The law was finally passed late on December 6 and the election is now expected to be held in early March. Several sources confirmed to IWPR that the Americans had played a critical role in the negotiations.

"The political process would be in a stalemate and the election law would still be blocked without American advice," said Tariq Harb, a member of Maliki's State of Law alliance.

He insisted, however, that the Americans had not imposed any terms. "The Americans advised Iraqi politicians - but their advice is not binding," he said.

Andy Laine, a press officer at the US State Department, told IWPR, "Credit for the passage of the revised election law goes to the Iraqis.... The United States offered advice and encouragement but it was the Iraqis that made the difficult decisions."

Claims of American involvement in Iraqi politics are likely to prove especially contentious as elections approach.

The Kurdistan Islamic Union, KIU, a small Islamist party, accused the Kurdish region's dominant parties, whom it intends to challenge in the election, of sidelining it and bowing to American demands in the talks.

"I wonder why US pressure didn't work on Vice President Hashemi when he vetoed the law, but unfortunately it has worked on the Kurds," Mohammed Ahmed, a top KIU official told IWPR. "I think the Kurds are vulnerable to US pressure."

Sadi Pira, a politburo member of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK, one of the two dominant Kurdish parties, rejected the claim, saying the Americans had been closely involved in the negotiations but had not applied any pressure.

"I heard from some Iraqi officials that this was an act of interference in an internal issue. It was not; it was advice," he said.

Asked whether the US still had a military role to play in Iraq, Pira said the latest bombings in Baghdad, along with unrest in Mosul and Kirkuk, “proves that the Iraqi forces are not able to control the cities or the borders.

“If the US position is to extend the [stay] of the remaining coalition forces, it is not bad for Iraq.”

MALIKI UNDER PRESSURE

Several Iraqis interviewed by IWPR this week also seemed to support continued American engagement. The recent bombings and the bickering over the election law appeared to confirm to them that an already weakened Iraq would fare worse if the Americans withdrew.

“A timely US pullout will give neighbouring countries a free rein to interfere, because Iraq itself lacks military capabilities,” said Ali Mahdi, a businessman in Tikrit, a Sunni Arab town once regarded as a base for the insurgency.

Adel Abdul-Karim, an unemployed man in the largely Shia city of Basra, said he believed rising violence in the run-up to the elections would delay the American withdrawal, “I expect more problems and I can’t rule out the return of sectarian violence.”

Nonetheless, the US presence remains deeply divisive. Many politicians across the sectarian spectrum can still count on intense anti-American sentiment in their constituency.

Nasser al-Rubaie, a legislator allied to the anti-American Shia cleric, Moqtada al-Sadr, said the US was best excluded from the spheres of politics and security.

“The American forces are the reason behind the bombs,” he said. “It is not true that security will get worse if they pull back. We have tried their presence; we have not tested their absence, so we cannot judge it.”

As it shifts focus to the fight in Afghanistan, the US has given no indication that it will extend its stay in Iraq beyond the end of 2011, the date when all combat forces are expected to leave the country. Doing so would prove unpopular at home, as well among the many Iraqis suspicious of US motives in the region.

So far, there has been no formal call for US forces to take a more active role in policing Baghdad.

Maliki accused Iraq’s Arab neighbours of abetting the latest attacks. Past bombings have been linked to al-Qaeda and to members of Saddam Hussein’s outlawed Baath party, now living in exile in Syria.

The prime minister also dismissed the most senior commander in charge of security in the capital, mindful perhaps that many in the public had accused the security forces of complicity or negligence over the explosions.

Maliki cautioned his opponents against seeking political advantage from the attacks. His image as a powerful leader, burnished after quashing Shia militias and overseeing a huge fall in violence, has been threatened by the bombings.

Some say the postponement of the election - from January to March - gives the bombers a bigger window to operate.

“The delay will encourage terrorists to commit attacks, so the Iraqi people will blame Maliki for bad security,” said Harb, of the State of Law alliance.

“The election was delayed with a view to showing that Maliki’s government has failed,” he said.

Hashemi, the vice-president whose veto helped delay the election law, said the authorities’ casting of blame was misleading, as they were mainly at fault for the lapse in security.

IWPR local editor Abeer Mohammed and Iraq editor Neil Arun produced this report from Baghdad and Erbil. Iraq editor Charles McDermid and local editor Hemin Lihony contributed to this report from Sulaimaniyah.

Location: [Syria](#)
[Iraqi Kurdistan](#)
[Iraq](#)
[Afghanistan](#)

Topic: [Special Report](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/turmoil-reveals-iraqi-reliance-us>