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ALJAZEERA CENTER FOR STUDIES

Position Paper

The Al-Hashimi Crisis: Position wars between the Iraqi forces



The crisis in Iraq centering around terrorism charges brought against the Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi reflects the distorted balance of power that has emerged since the American withdrawal. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki believes his influence and importance carries greater weight as the U.S. will now be more reliant on him. He believed he could use this opportunistic space to get rid of his political opponents without infuriating the Americans or the Iranians. By ridding himself of his opponents, primarily from the Iraqi List led by al-Hashimi and Dr. Iyad Allawi, who beat Al-Maliki in previous elections, he thought he could attain political gains at home. Thus, the only way for al-Maliki to guarantee staying in office as prime minister would be to destroy the Iraqi List's cohesion and leadership, and their control over the security services.

But Iraqi parties have different agendas. The Iraqi List, for their part, moved from a position of reaction to action. They transferred the battle to al-Maliki's coalition by offering his opponents a settlement that would, in seeing them abandon al-Maliki, ensure that they remain ascendant in the government. The List also pressured al-Maliki by leveraging the support of the disgruntled Kurds. The Kurds' actions could be considered expedient as their interests are mainly limited to obtaining concessions from Baghdad as relates to their region, and they do not consider overthrowing the al-Maliki's leadership as a priority.

International powers, especially the U.S. and Iran, agree that the crisis must be contained and prevented from spiraling out of control and threatening everyone's interests. Those players are currently pushing for a settlement that would maintain the existing balance of power, and it seems they are not willing to let al-Maliki's ambitions spoil the precarious balance of power in Iraq.

The differences: Old and New

The crisis between al-Maliki and al-Hashimi is only one episode in a series of crises that began a long time ago. There have been many differences in views between them since al-Maliki's first term, and they became progressively worse in his second term when both men held views on many unsettled issues that were contradictory to each others. These oppositional views included al-Hashimi's criticism of arbitrary arrests and how the security file was dealt with, as well as his criticism of imprisoning many of those whom he considered to be innocent. The extent of the crisis deepened after al-Maliki – with Iran's support, planning and blessing – deprived the Iraqi List of the right to form a government after the most recent elections. Al-Hashimi's public criticism of how al-Maliki's dealt with protests earlier in 2011 that saw al-Maliki accuse the demonstrators of being affiliated to the Ba'ath party and al-Qaeda, compounded an ever widening gap between the two. Then came al-Hashimi's support for federalism, which dealt a further serious blow to relations between them. Al-Maliki seized the opportunity of the U.S.'s withdrawal and his return from the United States to get rid of al-Hashimi. There appears to be an interconnection between the two tracks and an investment in legal files with the aim of achieving specific political goals. Al-Hashimi's security personnel were accused of terrorism by running hit squads and carrying out bombings in Baghdad. The men confessed their involvement in the alleged terrorist operations on TV, stating the direct responsibility of al-Hashimi, whose arrest was then ordered. This is not an isolated event but part of a political strategy aimed at targeting al-Maliki's opponents. This supposition is supported by al-Maliki's decision to sack his deputy in the cabinet and leader in the Iraqi List, Dr. Saleh al-Mutlaq, thus targeting two of the five leaders in the List. Additionally this attempt to quell his opposition can be seen in the terrorism charges laid against Rafi al-Issawi, Minister of Finance and a leader in the Iraqi List, Dr. Salman Jumaili, head of the bloc in the parliament, and Dr. Saleem al-Jebouri, the leader of the Islamic Party that is affiliated to the Iraqi List. Al-Maliki had already tried to ameliorate the influence of his opponents by offering the post of Deputy Prime Minister to al-Issawi, instead of al-Mutlaq, in so doing hitting two birds with one stone: getting rid of al-Mutlaq, and – if al-Issawi accepted the position - destroying the Iraqi List from within. However al-Issawi rejected the offer, pushing al-Maliki to threaten him with the terrorism charges, in the so-called Hamas of Iraq case.

Al-Maliki is seeking to get rid of the Iraqi List by banishing its leaders, beginning with Iyad Allawi, whose presence in the political scene has been rebuffed and rejected by al-Maliki. He is further trying to split the unity of the List by inducing the parliament speaker, Osama Nujaifi, to stand in for Allawi, and by getting rid of al-Hashimi and al-Mutlaq, who oppose al-Maliki's policies.

On the other hand, the stances of al-Maliki's allies in the National Alliance range from opposition to, or complete support of his decisions and actions against the Iraqi List. The opposition is represented by Ammar al-Hakim, who rejects al-Maliki's policies but is in trouble after the exit of Hadi al-Ameri, commander of the Badr Organisation and its representatives in the council. The Sadrist Movement, on its side, is always hesitant to take a firm position. They have displayed opposition to al-Maliki as prime minister, met with the Iraqi List and hinted at the possibility of aligning with them, but, at the same time, the Sadrist Movement supports al-Maliki, which may be the result of Iranian pressure on Muqtada al-Sadr. Another reason is the gain sought to be achieved by navigating a path between the different political camps. Despite seeing the benefits of aligning themselves to al-Maliki, their aim may be to rather then pressure al-Maliki by threatening to leave him for the Iraqi List. Another ally is the head of National Alliance, Dr. Ibrahim al-Jaafari, leader of the Reform Movement and former prime minister, who appears to be the most prominent beneficiary of the crisis and who is looking to fire back at al-Maliki for taking the premiership from him - as well as dethroning him from the Dawa party presidency. This schism between the two has been exploited by the Iraqi List who hinted that they would accept al-Jaafari as a candidate for premiership instead of al-Maliki.

As for al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition, they have had problems with two prominent leaders in the Dawa Party: Ali al-Adeeb and Haider al-Abadi, who are opposed to al-Maliki and have threatened to secede from the party, hinting at the possibility of al-Jaafari return as a Secretary General. Al-Adeeb believes that he is number two in the party and that he should have been the prime minister after al-Jaafari. The problem arose when al-Maliki cast both men out and brought in Said Hassan Sanead and Abdul-Halim Zuheiry, who were by no means frontrunners for the positions, to become the two most powerful men in the party and the bloc.

However, al-Maliki now wields and holds important powers. He now controls the security services: the defence and the interior. He has also rejected any candidate from the Iraqi List to take over any of them, and named the Minister of Culture, Dr. Saadoun al-Dulaimi, a loyalist, as acting Minister of Defence. His loyalists also run the Commission of Homeland Security and the Directorate of Intelligence. Independent bodies also came under his control - ostensibly as a means of containing the crisis - when he dismissed the managers of the Communication and Media Commission, the National Commission of Accountability and Justice, the Iraqi Media Network, and the Integrity Commission. Acting directors were appointed from his bloc - all of whom are in his favour. However, he still does not command absolute loyalty from the coalition's other parties.

The parties that oppose al-Maliki tried to emerge from the crisis with the following outcomes:

1. The Iraqi List is trying to get rid of al-Maliki by attempting to cause ruptures in the National Alliance. They have demanded the nomination of al-Jaafari or Adel Abdul Mahdi, both of whom are Shi'a, for premiership. They have further looked to reassure the various leaders that the List was not using the situation to attempt to snag the post of premiership. They have also looked to reassure the Iranians, who oppose the Iraqi List leadership or a Sunni prime minister for the coming period, of this.

2. The Kurds have other goals, and the close ties between the Kurdistan Alliance and al-Maliki weakened in the wake of innumerable tensions that emerged between them. These included the visit of the Jordanian Prime Minister to Kurdistan without Baghdad's

knowledge; the case of Khanaqin; contentious laws around oil and gas; and disputed areas. Then came the biggest of them all: the Kurds receiving of al-Hashimi and refusing to hand him over to Baghdad, but rather looking to use this crisis as a card against al-Maliki to obtain some concessions on issues related to them. They do not accept the List for premiership because of problems with some of the its leaders like Osama Nujaifi and al-Mutlaq, and they also do not accept the al-Jaafari option as an alternative to al-Maliki because they had contributed to his dismissal. However, they would be willing to accept Adel Abdul Mahdi, an important ally, or alternatively look to negotiate with al-Maliki to gain more benefits, especially in the case of oil and gas.

Going back to the overall crisis, the balance of forces does not favour any party due to the fissures and differences both within each bloc and between the blocs. Thus, the Kurdistan Alliance and the Sadrist Movement could be seen as a means of balancing the forces. Both parties often gain more benefits and privileges at the expense of others after each crisis.

The U.S. and Iran

The international players in Iraq have multiple - and very different - roles in terms of power and influence. The U.S.'s role was - and still is - the most powerful in ensuring that a common consensus is reached that does not go against U.S. interests. In light of their withdrawal new battles have emerged between Iran and America and their respective allies in the region. This level is the most crucial factor in the crisis and cannot be confined to a personal feud between al-Maliki and al-Hashimi. The international players are turning Iraq into a stage for their strategies, taking advantage of the lack of confidence among its leaders. One of the most important dynamics at play is the emergence of an American-Iranian conflict, which is also influenced and determined by the possible collapse of the Assad regime in Syria. Iran wants to create an allied regime in Baghdad to compensate for its loss in Damascus. As for America, it is looking to put a strangle-hold on Iran, with the hope that Assad's regime is overthrown, and that the tables are turned in their favour in Baghdad. Al-Maliki earlier sought to establish his authority on areas of harmony between America and Iran, and has so far succeeded - although those areas are unstable. Iran is looking for a fully obedient subordinate - especially as its political allies inside Iraq would weaken any ruler in Baghdad trying to achieve relative independence from Tehran. Iran recently sent envoys to Sulaymaniyah, headed by Sardar Majidi, deputy chief of the Quds Force, to meet with leaders of the Iraqi List and al-Hashimi, offering mediation to resolve the crisis. This was a tacit message in which the Iranians showed that they are allies to all Iraqis post the U.S. withdrawal, and that they do not fully agree with al-Maliki on this issue. It was also a message to al-Maliki that they might abandon him if he goes too far in his alliance with the Americans, but they will not abandon him completely. On the other hand, al-Maliki has garnered the support of the U.S. in many battles with his opponents inside and outside the coalition bloc that appeared unambiguously to confirm his position as prime minister for a second term. However, this equilibrium is unstable and may overturn at any time.

The prospects of the crisis

There are three possible scenarios for the Iraqi parties in dealing with the crisis:

1. Settling the crisis with everyone sitting around the negotiation table and holding a comprehensive national conference, as called for by Kurdistan President, Masoud Barzani. With the U.S. in support of this process, it has appeared to exert pressure on al-Maliki to express his approval for it. However, he may refuse to hold the conference in Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah might be the accepted location for all parties.

2. Forming a government of political majority. This is what al-Maliki wants, but it is difficult to achieve a simple majority with any of the blocs.

3. Dissolving the parliament and calling for new elections. This is a popular demand of the people, but has been rejected by most political blocs because, in light of poor performances since the election, it is difficult to bring the 325 representatives back to parliament. Fears also abound that new powers would arise, taking advantage of the resentment on Iraqi streets over those who are now involved in the political scene.

