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COMMENTARY

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Iraq's Tensions Heightened by Syria Conflict

Paul Salem

Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut

Almost ten years after the fall of Saddam Hussein and one year after the withdrawal of American forces, Iraq is still struggling to build political stability and bolster its national security. Differences over federalism, the management of oil and gas resources, and control of the armed forces are strong, and tensions along Kurdish-Arab and Sunni-Shiite lines are high. Furthermore, the Syrian uprising against the Assad regime has made the Iraqi crisis worse.

The government of Nouri al-Maliki has no love for the Assad regime, but it fears that the rise of a Sunni-dominated government in Damascus will strengthen the Sunnis in Iraq's western provinces, which could lead to a renewed struggle for control of Baghdad. The Maliki government has not been as publicly supportive of Assad as Iran and Hezbollah have been: Maliki has met with members of the Syrian opposition and has accepted the need for constitutional change in Syria; but Iraq abstained from the Arab League vote in 2011 to suspend Syria's membership and has opposed overthrowing the Syrian regime by force.

More importantly, Baghdad has been an important source of material support for the Assad regime. Iraq has opened its airspace for use by Iranian planes ferrying support to the Assad regime, and has granted trucks bound for Syria carrying supplies from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards passage through Iraqi territory. Moreover, the Iraqi government has signed a deal to provide Syria with much needed diesel fuel.

These policies have been a source of tension between Baghdad and Washington, as well as between Baghdad and both Ankara and the GCC. They have also driven Baghdad closer to Iran. This is an uncomfortable position for Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Maliki knows that he is

not Iran's favourite Iraqi Shiite political leader—in the 2010 elections he formed a list separate from the mainly Shiite list backed by Tehran. He fears that as the Assad regime weakens, Tehran will intensify its efforts to dominate Iraq, which would undermine his domestic political position.

Baghdad has signed military deals with the United States and is exploring buying military equipment from Russia, and Maliki now dominates an army of more than 350,000 soldiers. The prime minister has, furthermore, become politically dominant within state ministries and institutions. He has, however, failed to build a national political coalition that would include Iraq's Arab Sunnis and Kurds—and the Syrian crisis is further increasing tension with these communities.

Public opinion in the western Sunni-majority provinces of Iraq has been greatly supportive of the Syrian uprising against the Assad regime. Fighters and supplies have been crossing from Anbar province into Syria, and armed groups inside Iraq have declared the establishment of a Free Iraqi Army in emulation of the Free Syrian Army. Many Arab Sunnis feel marginalized by the Maliki government and resent what they see as a Shiite monopolization of power in Baghdad. They wager that the fall of the Assad regime and the empowerment of a new Sunni-led government in Syria will greatly strengthen their hand in Iraq and allow them to make a renewed bid for a much greater share of power in the years to come.

The Syrian crisis has also increased the ambitions of Iraq's Kurds. As the Assad regime weakens, the Kurds in Syria have established control over their own regions, which are now effectively autonomous. This has been achieved partly with help from the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party as well as with support from the Kurdistan Regional Government in Irbil, under President Massoud Barzani. For the first time, Iraqi Kurds now have another autonomous Kurdish region to look to. This strengthens their hand because it means that the model of Kurdish regional autonomy is not specific to Iraq but can be replicated in Syria, and maybe one day in Turkey and Iran as well. It certainly fuels the ambitions of those who still consider full Kurdish national independence as their long-term goal.

The Syrian Kurdish enclave could be particularly important for Irbil, because Syrian Kurds—in cooperation with Turkmen groups in northern Syria—have been fighting westward to secure an outlet to the Mediterranean Sea in a corridor that passes between the northern part of the Alawi region and the Syrian border with Turkey. Access to the sea is strategically important for Irbil—and any future Kurdish entity.

These rising Kurdish ambitions cause concern in Ankara, but Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government has fostered very strong economic and political relations with Irbil, and Turkey is beginning to consider the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq

an ally against Maliki's government, with which Erdogan has very bad relations. In other words, Irbil is feeling greatly strengthened by developments in Syria as well as by its good relations with Turkey and this has raised its negotiating position vis-à-vis the Maliki government in Baghdad. Indeed, tension between Baghdad and Irbil recently broke out into open clashes and required an urgent security agreement on November 26 between federal and Kurdish military officials to establish joint security committees and avert further fighting.

The overall situation is not made easier by the return to Iraq of tens of thousands of Iraqi refugees who had fled to Syria in previous years or by the influx of over 50,000 Syrian refugees. The Maliki government has organized flights to help Iraqis return home but has tried to close the border to further Syrian refugee flows, fearing that most of them would be Sunni supporters of the rebels and potentially hostile to the Baghdad government.

Indeed the conflict in Syria has made the resolution of Iraq's internal disputes even more unlikely in the near future. The level of trust between the various parties was already at a minimum; and the conflict in Syria has only hardened positions. The Maliki government is responding to worries about Syria by towing a harder line. Meanwhile, most Sunni and Kurdish leaders feel that their hand will be strengthened by the outcome of the conflict in Syria. They prefer to await that outcome before returning to the negotiating table with Baghdad—or more ominously, the battlefield.

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Dr. Paul Salem is the Director of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, Lebanon.
Email: psalem@carnegie-mec.org