

# Pressure mounts on Iraqi government as Sunni bloc threatens to pull out

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The largest Sunni Arab bloc—the Iraqi Accordance Front—has threatened to pull out of the fragile government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Baghdad. Coming on the eve of the May 3-4 international conference on Iraqi security, to be held in Egypt, the announcement reflects not only the bitter sectarian divide inside Iraq, but the increasingly open hostility of neighbouring Sunni countries to Maliki’s ruling Shiite coalition—the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA).

In comments to the Jordanian media on Sunday, Khalaf al-Ilyan, one of the leaders of the three parties in the Sunni alliance, the Iraqi Accordance Front (IAF), called on the bloc to pull out of the government unless it guaranteed to end the mass killings and “stop threatening lawmakers”. “I call on the Accordance Front, its leaders, cabinet ministers and lawmakers, to rise to their responsibilities and clearly state their position on the deteriorating situation in Iraq,” he said.

In a bid to prevent the IAF leaving the government, US President Bush issued an invitation to Tariq al-Hashimi, one of Iraq’s two vice-presidents and an IAF leader, to visit Washington. A statement issued by Hashimi’s office on Monday declared that the bloc had “lost hope in rectifying the situation despite all of its sincere and serious efforts to do so”. In a phone call with Bush, the statement explained, Hashimi “talked frankly about the faltering political process”.

The IAF is demanding a better share of the country’s oil revenues for the Sunni population and a reversal of the so-called de-Baathification process, to allow Sunni officials and officers who served Saddam Hussein to resume their posts or receive pensions. The bloc also voices the anger and resentment of Sunnis over the lack of basic services—including food rations, electricity and hospitals—in their areas of Baghdad.

IAF member Nasir al-Ani told the *New York Times*: “The problem is not just sectarian practices, but with the

government’s ineffectiveness. We see a lot of problems in Karkh on the western side of Baghdad, where the government is invisible. People are suffering and the government cannot solve the problems.” He pointed to a sharp internal debate in the bloc over whether or not to quit the government immediately.

The Maliki government is already under siege from all sides. On March 7, the Shiite-based Al Fadilah Party withdrew from the UIA, complaining about the domination of sectarian blocs in the parliament. Radical Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr ordered six ministers loyal to his movement to pull out of the government on April 16, following a mass demonstration in Karbala demanding US withdrawal from Iraq. The departure of the Sadrists, who have a substantial base among the urban Shiite poor, was a significant blow to Maliki.

Maliki still retains the support of the UIA and the Kurdish nationalist parties, but the Bush administration’s ultimatums to his government will only heighten political tensions. The “surge” by US troops in Baghdad, targetting Sadr’s Mahdi Army militia in particular, is further alienating Maliki’s base of support among Shiites. According to an article in the *Washington Post* on Monday, the US military is criticising Maliki for removing Iraqi army and police commanders who have pursued the Mahdi Army.

Maliki is under pressure from Washington and Sunni parties to reverse de-Baathification, but any step in that direction is opposed by Shiites. Another of the Bush administration’s key “benchmarks” for its puppet government is the passage of an oil law to open up the country’s huge reserves to American corporations. The Kurdish parties have indicated they would vote against the legislation, which undermines their efforts to control exploitation of reserves in northern Iraq.

The Bush administration, which relied on these Shiite fundamentalist and Kurdish nationalist parties prior to and

after its invasion of Iraq, is directly responsible for the country's bitter sectarian divide and escalating Sunni-Shiite civil war. Increasingly, the US has demanded that the government include Sunni parties in the name of "national reconciliation," in order to divide Sunni-based insurgents. At the same time, Maliki's Shiite coalition, which has strong links to Tehran, is regarded as a potential obstacle as Washington boosts its naval forces in the Persian Gulf and threatens a military strike on Iran.

The "benchmarks" laid down by the US for the Maliki government have the character of ultimatums. Waiting in the wings is former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, a long-time CIA asset. In the name of promoting secularism and reconciliation, he has been manoeuvring for months to form a bloc and bring down Maliki. According to the Saudi newspaper *Al Watan*, Allawi reportedly sounded out Moqtada al-Sadr in a meeting in Najaf on April 22. This would be an awkward alliance given Allawi's role in 2004 in giving the green light to the US military to crush Sadr's militia forces.

Allawi has been touring neighbouring Arab states to garner support and will attend the international conference due to start tomorrow in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh. His presence underscores the fact that one of the main purposes of the gathering is to pressure Maliki into meeting the US benchmarks. As the Bush administration has heightened the confrontation with Iran, it has attempted to enlist the support of so-called Sunni states—including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf states—which regarded the previous Baathist regime in Iraq as a convenient bulwark against rival Shiite Iran and now regard Maliki as nothing but a stalking horse for Tehran.

At a meeting in Cairo a fortnight ago, the hostility was barely concealed. Maliki bluntly rejected the demands of the Arab states for a greater role for Sunnis in Iraq in return for substantial aid. "We welcome consultation but we won't accept conditions or dictation," he declared. Maliki accused "some Arab countries" of aiding Sunni insurgents, saying: "Some are sheltering the terrorists and others are not stopping their funding." According to Associated Press, in private, Maliki had a bitter row with Syria's representative, accusing Damascus of "supporting killers" in Iraq.

The tensions have only festered. The *Washington Post* reported on Sunday that Saudi King Abdullah refused to receive Maliki prior to the Sharm el-Sheikh meeting, ostensibly because no free date could be found. The calculated snub was obviously designed to pressure

Maliki to agree to Saudi demands in return for debt relief for Iraq. Egypt has proposed that the conference call on all sides—the Iraqi security forces and insurgents—to agree to a three-month ceasefire. The Iraqi government has rejected the proposal out of hand as giving legitimacy to "terrorists".

The international conference, which is at the foreign minister level, will include all Iraq's neighbours, as well as Egypt and other Middle East states. The US and the other four permanent members of the UN Security Council will be present. Iran had threatened to pull out over the continued US detention of five Iranian officials in the northern Iraqi city of Irbil, but agreed at the last minute to attend after discussions with Maliki. Despite considerable media speculation, it is not clear that US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will hold informal discussions with Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki.

Washington is pressing for agreement on a five-year compact in which Iraq would agree to US demands for an oil law, an end to de-Baathification, and other measures to give a greater role to Sunnis in return for substantial debt relief. For Washington, such a deal would be a win-win—the US would not only pin down the Maliki government to meet its conditions, but also ease the financial burdens of the US occupation. According to an article in yesterday's *Wall Street Journal*, the Arab states remain "leery" of supporting the Maliki government. "Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are expected to announce some debt relief... but Kuwait and several other Persian Gulf states are withholding any firm action," the report stated.

The threat by the Sunni bloc to pull out of the Maliki government is one more lever in the campaign to refashion its puppet regime in Baghdad to meet Washington's requirements—or remove it altogether.



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