

Turkey threatens intervention into Iraq

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Relations between the Turkish and Iraqi governments have deteriorated sharply. In a speech to parliament on Monday, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan, the head of a Sunni Islam-based religious party, accused his Iraqi counterpart, Nouri al-Maliki, the leader of a Shiite-coalition, of promoting sectarian violence against the Sunni minority in Iraq.

Erdogan warned: “Maliki should know that if you start a conflict in Iraq in the form of sectarian clashes it will be impossible for us to remain silent. Those who stand by with folded arms watching brothers massacre each other are accomplices to murder.”

Erdogan was responding to complaints by Maliki that Turkey has been interfering in Iraqi domestic politics through its support for the largely Sunni-based Iraqiya coalition, which is engaged in a fierce power struggle with the government in Baghdad.

The implications of Erdogan’s statement are unmistakable. They amount to a direct threat that Turkey will support an intervention into Iraq on the same pretext of “defending civilians” used to justify the NATO-led intervention to oust Gaddafi regime in Libya. In the case of Iraq, intervention would be justified with the allegation that Maliki is persecuting the country’s Sunnis.

The Turkish stance toward Maliki is inseparable from the broader US-backed drive to refashion geopolitical relations in the Middle East and, above all, to shatter the regional influence of Iran. US allies such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the other Gulf state monarchies—all dominated by Sunni elites—have lined up with Washington against Shiite-ruled Iran. They are using inflammatory sectarian language to try to galvanise support for a policy that threatens to trigger a

regional war.

The Syrian regime, which is a longstanding Iranian ally and based on an Alawite Shiite ruling stratum, has been targeted for “regime change.” The current Iraqi government, while it is the direct creation of the American invasion and occupation of Iraq, is also viewed as unacceptable by the regional US allies. The Shiite factions forming the Maliki government have longstanding ties with the Iranian religious establishment. Maliki has refused to support an ongoing US military presence in Iraq or economic sanctions, let alone military aggression, against Syria and Iran.

Iraqiya, which was part of the ruling coalition, campaigned aggressively to weaken the political dominance of the Shiite parties in the lead-up to the withdrawal of US combat troops in December. Sunni leaders accused Maliki of reneging on an agreement to preside over a “national unity” government and pressured him to place the main security ministries under the direction of Iraqiya head Ayad Allawi.

Allawi, a secular Shiite, had been a long-time American collaborator before the US invasion and was installed by the US in 2004 as the “interim” prime minister of Iraq. He sanctioned the military repression of the Sunni population and atrocities such as the destruction of the largely Sunni city of Fallujah. Despite this history, he was adopted by the Sunni elites as their main representative after the effective collapse of the anti-occupation insurgency. His qualifications are his hostility to the Shiite religious parties, his anti-Iranian Arab nationalism and his close connections to Washington.

Attempts to elevate Allawi, with clear support from

the US, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, have suffered something of a shipwreck. Maliki and his Shiite-based Da'wa Party, which was repressed by the Sunni-dominated Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein, responded with a pre-emptive strike against the challenge to their grip on power.

Hundreds of ex-Baath Party members, particularly former senior military officers, have been rounded up and detained. Allawi alleged this month that more than 1,000 members of his and other parties opposed to Maliki had been arrested in recent months. He claimed they had been subjected to torture to extract false confessions of committing "terrorism." There has been a growing number of indiscriminate bombings of civilian areas and religious events by suspected Sunni extremists. Last week, 34 men accused of terrorism were executed in a single day.

In the most high-profile case of alleged Sunni "terrorism," the bodyguards of Iraqiya Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi—one of the country's highest ranking politicians—were detained and allegedly tortured. They were paraded on national television in late December to accuse the Sunni leader of personally directing a sectarian death squad.

Hashemi has only escaped arrest by taking refuge in the autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq. He has been charged with crimes that carry a death sentence.

Maliki responded to a walkout of Iraqiya ministers from his cabinet by having their offices locked and stripping them of their political responsibilities. The Iraqi parliament has continued to sit despite a boycott by most Iraqiya members.

Last Friday, the Iraqiya deputy governor of the majority Sunni province of Diyala, who agitated last year for regional autonomy, was seized by secret police operating under Maliki's command. He has been charged with "terrorist activities."

The present crisis could rapidly lead to the eruption of civil war and potentially fracture Iraq along sectarian lines, drawing in other regional powers such as Turkey and Iran. The majority of the 300,000-strong Iraqi

military are Shiites. While poorly trained and equipped, they have a degree of allegiance to Maliki's government.

A confrontation is looming between the Maliki government and the autonomous Kurdish region in the north. Last week, a Shiite politician advocated an economic blockade of the Kurdish region unless Vice President Hashemi was handed over for trial. The Kurdish government has its own 200,000-strong armed forces.

Following the 2003 invasion, the US fostered sectarian divisions as a means of undermining the previous Baathist elite and blocking a unified resistance by ordinary working people against the occupation and collapse of living standards. Now the US is encouraging its regional allies to back the Sunni and Kurdish elites against the Maliki government, with reckless indifference for the rapidly escalating violence.



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