

JIC Assessment, 5 October 2006

AL-MALIKI'S GOVERNMENT: INTERIM PROGRESS REPORT

This paper was discussed by the JIC and approved on 5 October 2006.

Key Judgements

- I. After almost five months in office, the faction-based Iraqi government is proving ineffective. The dominant Shia political alliance remains divided. [...] Co-ordination between and within government ministries is poor. None of this looks likely to improve in the near future. Meanwhile, sectarian and insurgent violence is at a record high, and fuel, water and electricity shortages persist across much of the country.
- II. On security, Prime Minister al-Maliki's approach is governed by the critical need to maintain Shia support. On the key issue of disbanding militias, he wants a political solution and is deeply sceptical of Multinational Force (MNF) proposals for tough military action against Shia groups: [...].
- III. Maliki launched a national reconciliation plan in June. There has been little success so far: Iraqi and Coalition efforts to engage Sunni insurgent leaders have proved fruitless. Against a backdrop of worsening security, Sunni government ministers are feeling increasingly marginalised and unable to exert influence, while some leading Shia and Kurdish political figures are questioning the Sunnis' commitment to ending violence. Mutual distrust is growing.
- IV. Maliki is unlikely to be forced from office so long as he bridges a critical divide in the Shia alliance. There is no obvious alternative; if he did go, any successor would be subject to the same pressures and constraints.
- V. Security will remain the greatest challenge for the government. Restoring order to Baghdad is a key test of Maliki's leadership and will determine whether his national reconciliation plan has a future. In the medium term, politically divisive issues such as federalism, the review of the constitution and the future of Kirkuk, have the potential to capsize the government; they can be managed or deferred at most for 12 – 18 months.

Assessment Base: [...]

AL-MALIKI'S GOVERNMENT: INTERIM PROGRESS REPORT

This paper was commissioned by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to examine the performance of Iraq's government, its level of popular support, and its prospects over the next year.

Overall performance: is the government making any difference?

1. In February we assessed that a new Iraqi government would be judged largely on its ability to deliver security, fuel, electricity, jobs and a timeline for Multinational Forces (MNF) withdrawal. After almost five months in office, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's government – a product of difficult political compromise [...] Some unpopular but necessary economic measures, notably reducing fuel subsidies, have been forced through. This together with high oil prices has kept the economy stable. But in other key areas there has been no progress. The security situation is deteriorating: reported violence – sectarian and insurgent – is at a record high. Much needed economic growth has been minimal; oil production and exports remain below target; [...] Fuel, water and electricity shortages persist across much of the country. Diplomatic reporting suggests many Iraqis feel let down and there is a growing perception that the government is irrelevant.

Governance capability and capacity

2. The faction-based Iraqi government is proving ineffective. The dominant Shia United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) remains divided. [...] Co-ordination between and within government ministries remains poor. None of this looks likely to improve in the near future. Iraqi administrative capacity and capability remains poor, although the Ministry of Finance and the Central Bank are partially effective. The security ministries are dysfunctional; [...] Previous rivalries between the MoI and the Ministry of Defence persist. The government continues to rely on Coalition or international support to manage complex tasks. Despite transfer of formal security responsibility to Iraqi structures, the MNF still provides the bureaucratic horsepower.

3. Maliki's government has received little support from Iraq's nascent political structures. The effectiveness of the Council of Representatives (CoR) has been hampered by the summer recess, poor attendance (encouraged by intimidation and kidnapping), and periodic boycotts and walkouts by both Shia and Sunni parties. Power struggles between Baghdad and the provincial councils continue, most recently over control of 'Emergency Battalions'¹ [...] The provincial elections in spring 2007 may well exacerbate these tensions.

Security and national reconciliation

4. Maliki's government is more engaged than its predecessor in addressing security problems, particularly in the vital ground of Baghdad but also in Basra. The first Baghdad Security Plan (BSP) initiated in June was designed to be Iraqi-led with MNF support. Its impact was minimal and exposed the limitations of the Iraqi security forces (ISF). The revised operation, launched in August with significant MNF reinforcement, has proved more successful and has had a positive impact on security and reconstruction in those areas so far targeted. But its long-term effect will depend on the ISF being able to sustain improved

¹ Emergency Battalions are ad hoc military protection forces located in some Iraqi provinces.

security; there is a risk that cleared areas will need repeatedly to be re-cleared. Overall violence in Baghdad has increased, suggesting that insurgent operations have been displaced rather than countered, and there is increasing evidence of the city becoming divided along sectarian lines.

5. On security, we judge that Maliki's approach is governed by the critical need to maintain Shia support. In part he is expressing a more assertive Iraqi approach to dealing with the Coalition, but we judge his overriding concern is to shore up the fragile UIA and protect his own position. On the key issue of disbanding militias, he wants a political solution and is deeply sceptical of MNF proposals for tough military action against Shia groups: [...]

6. Maliki launched a National Reconciliation Plan in June. There has been little success so far. Maliki has not been successful in drawing in Sunni Arab insurgents, despite positive public announcements by senior political figures across the sectarian spectrum, the organisation of a well-attended tribal meeting in early August and the formation of various committees. (There has been limited recent reporting of clashes between Al Qaida in Iraq and tribal groups in Anbar province. But there has been periodic fighting before and the scale of the latest friction is unclear.) Maliki's amnesty proposals in June flopped. Iraqi and Coalition efforts to engage insurgent leaders have proved fruitless.

7. In the current political and security climate, key Sunni concerns are not being addressed. There has been no significant change in de-Ba'athification policies, they remain highly suspicious of SCIRI's federalist aspirations, little action has been taken against the Shia militias, and the total number of detainees has not significantly changed. Against a backdrop of worsening security, reporting suggests that the few Sunni government ministers are feeling increasingly marginalised and unable to exert influence. Mutual distrust is growing. For their part, Shia and Kurdish politicians are questioning the Sunnis' commitment to ending violence. [...] some independent Shia within the CoR are suspicious of the National Reconciliation Plan as a US initiative; [...]

Support for Maliki

8. Maliki is feeling the strain. [...]

9. The weakness of the government is eroding broader Shia support. [...] We judge that [...] the maintenance of Shia unity remains an overriding concern for the moment, both for the religious authorities and the main Shia political blocs. [...] the Shia still fear a Ba'athist resurgence and [...]; together with the poor security situation this helps keep the UIA together.

Regional attitudes

10. [...] Other regional attitudes are ambivalent. [...] Most of Iraq's neighbours are playing a waiting game. Even lukewarm regional support for the International Compact for Iraq is due mainly to UN and Coalition lobbying.

Prospects

11. Maliki is unlikely to be forced from office so long as he bridges a critical divide in the Shia alliance. There is no obvious alternative; if he did go, any successor would be subject to the same pressures and constraints. The major Shia blocs – SCIRI and the Sadrists - are not in a position to dominate. [...] Security will remain the greatest challenge for the government: restoring order to Baghdad is a key test of Maliki's leadership and will determine whether his national reconciliation plan has a future. In the medium term, politically divisive issues such as federalism, the review of the constitution and the future of Kirkuk, have the potential to capsize the government; [...] diplomatic reporting suggests that they can be managed or deferred at most for 12 – 18 months.