

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

More Signs of Trouble in Iraq

April 3, 2012

Ted Galen Carpenter



Three developments in just the past week confirm that the high hopes Washington once had for post-Saddam Iraq were illusory. The Arab-Kurd and Sunni-Shia fissures in that society are as bitter and intractable as ever. And the government of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki is increasingly unresponsive—if not outright hostile—to U.S. policy goals in the Middle East.

One development was the decision by the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) to [cut back oil exports](#). That move marked a sharp escalation in the ongoing feud between the KRG and Baghdad over the sharing of oil revenues and other matters. Just a few weeks ago, KRG president Masoud Barzani charged that the Maliki government owed Kurdistan more than \$1 billion for oil shipments in 2011 and warned of unspecified actions if the money was not paid promptly.

But revenue sharing is merely one of several contentious issues between Erbil and Baghdad. The KRG is furious that the central government repeatedly refuses to recognize contracts that Erbil has concluded with international oil companies and other corporations. KRG officials believe, with some justification, that Baghdad's obstructionism is a needless drag on Kurdistan's economic growth. And then there is the festering issue over the political status of the oil-rich city of Kirkuk and its environs. Kurds have been pressing for years for Baghdad to hold a promised referendum on the city's status—which, given the demographics, would probably lead to Kirkuk becoming part of Kurdistan, something that Iraq's majority Arab population vehemently opposes. The KRG's patience is rapidly dissipating, and the Kirkuk quarrel could lead to big trouble.

The second development was the move by Iraq's Sunni vice president, Tariq al-Hashimi, to [seek assistance from Qatar](#) and other Sunni Gulf states for his feud with the Maliki government. Maliki has accused Hashimi of directing Sunni death squads, and the Shia-dominated regime seeks to put him on trial for treason. He, in turn, accuses the Maliki government of framing him as part of a power play to establish a Shiite dictatorship. Hashimi originally fled to Kurdistan for refuge, and then went on to Qatar. Both Erbil and the government of Qatar scorned Baghdad's extradition requests. The Hashimi episode underscores the depth of the continuing Sunni-Shia animosity in Iraq.

And finally, there is the matter of Baghdad's response to Western proposals to fund or arm Syrian rebel forces trying to overthrow the government of Bashar al-Assad. That is a priority for the United States—in part because Assad is a close ally of the Iranian government. But Iraq's foreign minister announced that Baghdad [strongly opposed](#) international involvement in Syria's civil strife—especially intervention on the side of the largely Sunni rebels. And Maliki this weekend [argued against](#) Arab countries arming and materially supporting the Syrian opposition. Once again, the Maliki government is siding with the Shiite regime in Tehran rather than with Washington. If U.S. leaders expected

gratitude from Iraq's Shia for overthrowing Saddam Hussein, they should have learned by now that such gratitude is in short supply. It certainly does not extend to supporting U.S. objectives against Iran and its Syrian ally.

U.S. leaders believed that post-Saddam Iraq would be a united, secular, democratic model for the rest of the Middle East and that it would be a loyal supporter of U.S. aims. Instead, it has turned out to be a corrupt autocracy with bitter ethnic and religious divisions that show no signs of easing. And Baghdad is closer to being an Iranian ally than it is a U.S. ally. That's not much of a reward for nearly a trillion U.S. tax dollars and 4,400 dead American soldiers. It should be a stark lesson for Americans the next time that an administration wants to launch a military crusade in the Middle East.