

Turkey's policy in Iraq aims for broad-based government

"[US President Barack Obama] is leaving Iraq to the wolves," Tariq Aziz, the man who once served as Saddam Hussein's leading lieutenant, said, slamming the planned withdrawal of US forces from his country.

It is still unclear who he was implying to be "wolves," but it is certain that many neighboring countries have already started to show off their political power in Iraq's political scene, trying to get as much as they can in the five-month-long political standstill after the four largest blocs failed to form a coalition government.

Aziz has appealed to the United States to extend its presence in Iraq, saying that President Obama is abandoning the country, according to a Guardian interview published on Friday.

Obama on Monday hailed this month's planned withdrawal of all US combat troops -- "as promised and on schedule" -- as a major success.

"Because Iraq is a weak and divided country (essentially a power vacuum in the region) all of its neighbors, including Turkey, maneuver to influence developments there," Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president of Defense and Foreign Policy Studies from the Cato Institute, said.

Roughly 20 days ago, Iraqi Foreign Minister Hosham Zebari, an ethnic Kurd representing the most anti-Saddam political and social force in the country, said as he spoke to a group of Washington Post reporters during his Washington visit, that one big reason that Iraq has not managed to form a new government in over four months [now five] after its parliamentary election is heavy and conflicting interventions by its neighbors. "Every country is a player on a different side," he is reported to have said.

The Iraqi foreign minister said Iran and Turkey have emerged as the biggest players and as rivals inside Iraq.

As both Saddam's former aide and Zebari say, the US drawdown from Iraq is "immoral" and a "mistake," and this particular case displays how complicated Iraq's political platform is.

Turkey is supporting Iyad Allawi, the leader of the Iraqi election-winning al-Iraqiyya bloc, by only a small margin, as Sunni groups are mostly represented in his cross-sectarian alliance. Iran is backing current Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who trailed Allawi in the March 7 parliamentary elections, and many observers believe the Islamic republic also stands by anti-Western Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr.

But it seems al-Sadr is slowly weaning himself from Iran's sphere of influence thanks to Turkish mediation among Iraqi political parties. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, Sadr and Allawi held talks in the Syrian capital of Damascus on July 20, and initial signs from the talks carry promise of untangling Iraq's coalition government knot. "There are positive developments," Davutoğlu said after his three-way talks with the two major Iraqi political leaders.

Zebari's claim that Turkey and Iran are to blame for the failure to form a government can be dismissed, said Marina Ottaway, one of the most recognized experts on Iraq from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, claiming that the main problems are domestic.

Turkey says it maintains dialogue with all Iraqi groups but says the new Iraqi government should be broad based, meaning the Sunnis, who have no representation in Maliki's coalition, should also be represented in the government. Turkey also coaxed Sunnis to participate in political processes in the 2005 elections, and coalition forces were adamant then to Turkey's efforts, claiming that Turkey is reviving former pro-Saddam forces. "Turkey is trying not to take sides either between Sunnis, Shias, Kurds or Arabs. Time will tell if it will succeed," she argued.

Speaking about possible Turkish-Iranian competition in Iraq, Ottaway claimed that Turkey has no interest in antagonizing Iran by playing the Sunni card [in Iraq], and Turkey has shown by voting against the sanctions at the United Nations that it wants good relations with Iran.

Carpenter thinks the struggle for dominance along the Sunni-Shiite divide is more between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and Turkey's goals are more focused.

Ankara's primary objective, the expert notes, is to help preserve Iraq's unity -- at least what is left of it.

Another contentious issue for Turkey is Iraq's Kurds, who are not truly represented in any coalition forces and who want the US to remain as a guarantor for their regional government, which Turkey prefers to ignore.

"Turkey's main worry is that Iraq will fragment further and lead to the emergence of a fully independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq," Carpenter said. Turkey has repeatedly rejected any idea that northern Iraq will be split into an independent state, worrying that a spillover of irredentist moves among Kurds might accelerate in Turkey's southeastern region, predominantly populated by ethnic Kurds who primarily vote for parties sympathizing with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) terrorist organization.

Carpenter argues that that development would pose obvious problems for Turkey and indeed, even the current situation (with a highly autonomous Kurdish regional government) has led to security headaches for Ankara, with PKK fighters using Iraqi territory as a sanctuary from which to launch attacks on Turkey.

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