



Iraq: Will Al-Maliki's Peace Plan Work?

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Without saying so in public Iraq's new Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki has given himself 100 days to achieve what his entourage describe as "the beginnings of a turnaround" in the newly liberated country. His success could determine the course of events in Iraq for months, if not years, to come.

Al-Maliki's plan, presented under the slogan "Together, Forward", has three key objectives.

The first is to get the institutions of government, starting with the newly elected parliament and the Council of Ministers, working. This might seem odd to those who take a functioning government for granted. In post-liberation Iraq, however, everything must be built from scratch.

Al-Maliki realises that building a new army and police force cannot take place in isolation, and that a working bureaucracy provides the backbone of law and order in any society. This has been illustrated by episodes in which newly trained army and police units did not receive their wages on time because the civilian bureaucracy had ground to a halt.

At present, only a handful of government ministries are be working at an acceptable level. Some, such as the Interior, Petroleum, and Justice ministries are in particularly bad shape.

Al-Maliki's second objective is to throw a cordon sanitaire around greater Baghdad, thus depriving the terrorists of much of the "oxygen of publicity" they draw from attacks in

the capital. The plan is to treat Baghdad as a huge no-go area protected by systems used in any major international airport. In theory, this should not be difficult. The number of people coming to or leaving Baghdad each day is lower than that of those who visit London's Heathrow Airport. In practice, however, cordoning off Baghdad might require greater resources if only because, unlike Heathrow, the Iraqi capital is deliberately targeted by determined terrorist groups, often recruited from among the security services of the fallen regime, with intimate knowledge of the terrain.

The third objective of al-Maliki's plan is to persuade as many of the insurgents as possible to abandon the armed struggle and join the political process.

Here, al-Maliki has already had some success in the form of declarations by seven insurgent groups that they are prepared to enter talks with the government. Two of these groups, all of them Arab Sunni-based, are among the largest insurgent forces in and around Baghdad. At least one, the Army of Muhammad, is one of the deadliest.

The plan, however, faces a number of big hurdles.

One such is the fact that al-Maliki cannot ask Arab Sunni insurgents to disarm while allowing Shiites and Kurds to keep their heavily armed militias. At the same time, any attempt by the al-Maliki government to disarm and disband those militias could lead to fighting within each

community and between communities.

Some Kurdish and Shiite leaders do not trust the newly created police and army to protect them from the insurgents and terrorists. Instead, they rely on their own militias. Also, depriving some 150,000 Kurdish and Shiite professional fighters of their employment could mean creating as many enemies for the new regime. One reason for part of Iraq's current problems is the decision to disband the regular army soon after liberation. That sent a signal to some 200,000 men, including tens of thousands of retired officers and NCOs, that they had no place in new Iraq.

Disbanding the militias now could have a similar effect.

One formula for dealing with the militias is to reorganise them into a national guard whose members could be called up by the government when and if needed. In the meantime, members would remain on government payroll until they find civilian jobs. (A similar formula was used with success in Kosovo where the United Nations, in effect, financed the reintegration of the Kosovo Liberation Army fighters into civilian life.)

Another hurdle that al-Maliki faces is the refusal of powerful blocs within his coalition to endorse the kind of amnesty he has hinted at for insurgents. Some insurgents are responsible for the deaths of large numbers of Shiites and Kurds, including many prominent political and religious figures of both communi-

ties. It is hard to see a parliament, in which Kurds and Shiites hold some 70 per cent of the seats, endorsing a blanket amnesty. One way out of the impasse may be the creation of a truth and reconciliation commission that, while establishing responsibility for what has happened, would try to break the cycle of violence and revenge.

To complicate matters further, the United States and its coalition allies are unlikely to welcome any scheme that allows those responsible for the murder of their soldiers and civilian citizens to go unpunished. One way out would be for al-Maliki to set up a commission to investigate cases presented by the US and its allies, with a commitment to prosecute those charged under Iraqi law. Such a measure would also enable the government to isolate the terrorists, especially those who came to Iraq from other Arab countries, from those Iraqis who, misguided though they were, believed that they were resisting foreign invasion and occupation.

To improve the prospects of his plan, al-Maliki needs to do much more. He should ignore shrill voices within his coalition and allow hundreds of professional Arab Sunni army and police officers, tainted by their positions within the fallen regime, to return to service. These "purged" officers are in no position to undermine the new Iraq. But the fact that they have been deprived of their livelihood for no reason other than their obligatory membership of the Ba'ath Party under Saddam Hussein is seen by many Arab Sun-

nis as a signal that they are regarded as pariahs.

As some of us pointed out before the war, banning the Ba'ath was a mistake. To be sure, the Ba'ath was a fascist outfit with a deadly ideology and a murderous history. But, the new democratic Iraq should and could defeat the Ba'ath, and other anti-democratic parties, in the political battlefield. While there is no danger of large numbers of Iraqis rushing to join the revived Ba'ath, lifting the ban on the Ba'ath today will be seen as sign of new Iraq's self confidence.

By all accounts, al-Maliki has made a good start.

Those who wish Iraq to fail- for reasons that have nothing to do with Iraq and everything to do with their hatred of America and/or George W Bush- have already dismissed the al-Maliki plan as " too little, too late". The truth, however, is that the new Iraqi government has seized the initiative in a way that its predecessors since liberation were unable to do.

Al-Maliki's performance should not be judged solely with reference to continued terrorism, although that remains a key factor. If the experience of other Arab countries is a measure, Iraq is likely to suffer from terrorism for years to come. The real measure of al-Maliki's success, therefore, is whether he manages to retain the initiative and use it to build democratic institutions in the context of a new policy of national reconciliation and revival.

The fight in Iraq is no longer a military contest; it is a political duel between the forces of progress and

democracy on the one hand and those of terror and reaction on the other.