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Subject: [iraqcampaign] [iraqsolidaritycampaign] confidence in Maliki government grows

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Nancy A. Youssef, McClatchy Newspapers



In the five months since Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki became Iraq's leader, the parliament and his ministries have formed hundreds of committees to address problems on everything from how to disarm militias to whether tainted meat caused a group of police officers to fall ill last week.

No one knows precisely how many committees have been formed - one estimate puts the number at 400. Yet only one committee has brought its findings to the parliament.

That lack of action is eroding Iraqi citizens' and U.S. officials' confidence that Maliki's government will be able to address the problems that plague this country, a development that would leave the U.S. with virtually no policy alternative.

U.S. strategy in Iraq currently revolves around the idea that given enough time and the proper security environment, Maliki's government will take control of the country and calm the sectarian tensions that threaten to dismember it.

Yet since Iraq's first permanent government was elected, security has eroded by nearly every measure, despite the U.S. training of more than 300,000 Iraqi police and soldiers. When the government came into power, 65 bodies on average were appearing on Iraq's streets a day; today, 100 are killed daily.

According to the interior minister, the government is issuing 15,000 passports a week, many to residents who say they're desperate to flee; school populations have dropped; and some Iraqi neighborhoods have become so sectarian that

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some areas are divided up street by street. Services, such as electricity, haven't improved.

Now there's a growing chorus that Maliki's government is unlikely to ever come to terms with the country's problems, a complaint reflected in Iraqi Web logs, newspaper columns, and, U.S. civilian and military officials say, in private conversations.

"I think Maliki is trying to convince the American people that he is serious about fixing things, and he is not serious," said Saad Assim al Janabi, a former member of government loyal to Ayad Allawi, whom the United States appointed interim prime minister of Iraq in 2004. "Maliki believes he is a Shiite Muslim first and that he belongs to the Dawa Party (a mostly Shiite party). We need someone to say he belongs to all of Iraq."

Top U.S. military and civilian officials here have been raising the tenor of their complaints about the government's inaction over the past month, warning that the government has only about two months to make major changes - though they don't say what might happen if it doesn't.

U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, in an interview this week, also sounded that alarm, saying the government must tackle such broad issues as de-Baathification, needed changes to the constitution, distribution of oil and strengthening the security forces.

But when pressed on how he expects the government to respond, he couldn't offer an answer.

The government "has committed themselves to making those decisions. And we will see how much progress they are making. But we will work with them. And if there are adjustments that need to be made to those tactics, we will consider them," Khalilzad said. "We had said the (first) six months are critical. They still have a couple of months."

Some members of the parliament, such as revered leader Humam Hamoodi, said American pressure is only making their task more difficult and that they need time.

Maliki took office on May 20 and within days announced a 24-point national reconciliation plan. It was the first of many plans that so far have had little beneficial effect on Iraq's conditions but came with a host of committees, each of which is given \$13,333 a month to operate.

Under the national reconciliation plan, various committees were appointed to address a number of issues: prevention of human right violations, dissemination of a message of reconciliation, the removal of obstacles that hinder Iraqis from wanting to work.

But after a highly celebrated news conference, immortalized in the next day's newspapers by a photo of Maliki and the Sunni Muslim speaker of the house

seemingly glaring at each other, there were no visible signs of changes in how the Iraqi government functioned.

Maliki's next initiative was a plan to bring peace to Basra, the predominantly Shiite city in southern Iraq that had been racked by growing violence between rival Shiite militias. That plan was to last 30 days and involved the creation of several committees. But at the end of 30 days, there was no lessening of violence. Basra residents reported that promised checkpoints aimed at curbing violence disappeared within days of the plan's inception. The second phase of the plan began this month, which included promises of more committees to rebuild Basra and hand the security apparatus to Iraqis.

The government's next peace initiative was the Baghdad security plan, or Operation Together Forward, a house-by-house sweep through the capital's most troubled neighborhoods by the Iraqi army, with the help of American forces. While crime dropped when U.S. troops blocked all entrances into the neighborhoods, when they began pulling out, criminal elements started moving back in.

Attacks in Baghdad rose from an average of 25.3 daily before the operation, to 36.1, according to the U.S. military.

"The Americans used to set up a checkpoint for a few days, especially when the security plan started, but now the Iraqi commando forces are responsible for the checkpoints. And they don't know how to deal with the people. They are really sectarian. I feel that the whole security plan had failed," said Abu Amer, 35, of the mostly Sunni Baghdad neighborhood of Dora, one of the areas swept by the American forces.

Finally, last week, Maliki and top Sunni leaders signed a four-point pact vowing to create several committees to end sectarian violence, including one to curb the media from showing graphic images of bombings and assassinations. It took them two days to hammer out the deal, and in a prime-time broadcast, they swore that either the Shiite-dominated militias or the government would survive, but not both.

Khalilzad and Gen. George Casey, the top U.S. general in Iraq, issued a statement that evening calling the pact a significant step in the right direction showing that the Iraqi leaders wanted their country to succeed and were responding to their people's wishes for security.

But Grand Ayatollah Ali al Sistani, the top Shiite religious leader, issued a statement through his representative a few days later saying the pact lacked details - a statement echoed last week at a news conference in Washington by Sen. John Warner, R-Va., who had just returned from Iraq.

Brandishing a copy of Maliki's speech, Warner told reporters he would share it with them. "But I have to tell you, folks, it's five pages long, and you're hard put to figure out how this represents a plan that was so carefully described to us," Warner said. "That, I think, symbolizes the difficulty we have in dealing

with this situation."

Most recently, Maliki has met with leaders in Anbar province and promised to create two non-sectarian army brigades in Baghdad. It remains unclear when the brigades will hit the streets, and government officials couldn't explain how they would form a non-sectarian force in the current political climate.

Ali Debaugh, a spokesman for Maliki, said the administration's greatest success is that there is dialogue among the sects."I think the most important accomplishment is not the reconciliation project itself as the dissemination of the reconciliation spirit," Debaugh said.

But dissemination of spirit isn't what Iraq needs, say the government's critics."None of the plans have reached the Iraqi street," Janabi said. "They say everything. They do nothing."

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