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## IRAQI SUNNISTAN?

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Foreign Affairs, January 23, 2013 The surge of U.S. troops into Iraq helped decrease violence and set the stage for the eventual U.S. withdrawal. But the country still has a long way to go before it becomes sovereign and self-reliant. To stabilize itself and realize its democratic aspirations, Iraq needs Washington's continued support. Debates about the possibility of containing a nuclear Iran often hinge on judgments of whether the regime there is rational. But as a wealth of recently released Iraqi documents about Saddam Hussein's tumultuous reign in Iraq show, even an arguably rational leader can be unreasonable -- and very hard to deter. It's not easy being a prominent Sunni in Iraq these days. This past December, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki ordered the arrest of several bodyguards of Rafi al-Issawi, the minister of finance and one of the most influential and respected Sunni leaders in Iraq. In response, tens of thousands of Sunnis took to the streets of Anbar, Mosul, and other predominantly Sunni cities, demanding the end of what they consider government persecution. Issawi has accused Maliki of targeting him as part of a systematic campaign against Sunni leaders, which includes the 2011 indictment of Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, a Sunni, on terrorism charges. This is not the first time that Maliki has gone after Issawi, either. In 2010, during tense negotiations over the makeup of the government, Maliki accused Issawi of leading a terrorist group -- a claim that the U.S. military investigated and found baseless. Not coincidentally, this most recent incident occurred days after President Jalal Talabani, always a dependable moderator in Iraqi politics, was incapacitated by a stroke. The scale of the ongoing demonstrations reveals the widespread sense of alienation that Sunnis feel in the new Iraq. Prior to 2003, Sunnis rarely identified as members of a religious sect and instead called themselves Iraqi or Arab nationalists. It was the country's Shia population that claimed to be victims, on account of their persecution by Saddam Hussein. Today, the roles are reversed. Shia Islamists consolidated power in Baghdad after the toppling of Saddam's regime, and some -- particularly those who were exiled during Baathist rule -- now view all Sunnis with suspicion. In turn, many Sunnis take issue with the new political system, which was largely shaped by Shia and Kurdish parties. Today, the Sunni population is mobilizing against the status quo and making sect-specific demands, such as the release of Sunni detainees, an end to the torture of Sunni suspects, and humane treatment of Sunni women in jails. Moreover, demonstrators are calling for the overthrow of the regime, using slogans made popular during the Arab Spring. Meanwhile, Kurdish leaders identify Maliki as the main problem facing Iraq, and some delegations of Kurds and Shia have travelled to Issawi's native province of Anbar to express their own distrust of the regime. The top Iraqi Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Sistani, has voiced disappointment with Maliki's government and has called for it to respond to the concerns of the protestors. Muqtada al-Sadr, the leader of Iraq's most authentic grassroots Shia movement, the Sadrist Trend, has accused Maliki of provoking the current discontent. Although fear of Maliki's creeping authoritarianism is pushing his rivals together, growing sectarian tensions may yet rip Iraq apart. As with other protests in the Arab world, which were initially driven by legitimate local grievances, there is a risk that the

current movement will become increasingly sectarian. At political events, some Iraqi Sunni clerics use conciliatory language and emphasize Iraqi fraternity. Others, however, speak passionately about the suffering of the Sunni community at the hands of Maliki's Shia administration and condemn his ties with Iran. Since 2008, when Maliki led a harsh crackdown on the Mahdi Army, a Shia militia, the prime minister has tried to present himself as a nationalist leader seeking to unify his country and evenly enforce the rule of law. The rise of Maliki and the popularity he gained with Shia, however, reveal the flaws of Iraq's new political system, which made state institutions fiefdoms of patronage for sectarian political parties rather than channels for delivering public services. Maliki tried to earn legitimacy beyond just the Shia community, in particular seeking the support of Sunni voters. His confrontation with Massoud Barzani, the president of the semi-independent Iraqi Kurdistan region, over security issues along the disputed border was primarily a move to win the support of the Sunni population there, which is resentful of Kurdish encroachment. But Maliki has squandered his ability to appeal to the country's other sects and communities because of his paranoia and ideological bias as a leader of Dawa, the Shia Islamist party. He blames external interference for the current tensions, exploiting images of divisive symbols such as flags of the Saddam era, the Free Syrian Army, and Kurdistan, as well as photos of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. And Maliki's record -- his targeting of Sunni politicians, his selective use of law, his influence over the judiciary to ensure rulings in his favor, and his close ties with Iran -- confirms that he is prepared to use all means necessary to consolidate power. Maliki could cling to power by presenting himself as the defender of the Shia in an increasingly tumultuous environment, turning his fear of a regional sectarian conflict into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Al-Qaeda attacks in Iraq are on the rise, provoked by discontent with Maliki and inspired by the Syrian civil war next door. So far this month, al-Qaeda has killed Shia pilgrims in Karbala, a Sunni lawmaker in Anbar, and Kurds in Kirkuk. Meanwhile, other leaders are struggling to remain relevant. The credibility of Sunni government officials is declining, due to their inability to prevent discrimination against their constituents while participating in a system that brings them personal benefits. In the Shia camp, Sadr is moving to the center, positioning himself as a nationalist leader. If Sadr is able to create an alliance with anti-Maliki Sunnis and Kurds -- presenting a credible and unifying alternative government -- sectarianism could be curbed. However, Maliki might be provoked by such a challenge and clamp down on his rivals even more aggressively. Politics in Iraq and the surrounding region are increasingly sectarian. Inspired by the rebellion in Syria and supported by the Sunni leaders of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, Iraq's Sunnis may seek greater autonomy from the Shia-dominated central government in years to come. This need not be the case: in the 2010 national elections, most Sunnis voted for the Iraqiya electoral list, a coalition that defined itself as nonsectarian and was led by a secular Shia politician. But, given the sectarian turn of Iraqi politics, Sunni leaders seem likely to run on one list with a platform built around Sunni grievances in the 2014 national elections. In addition, more hardline Sunni leaders may emerge if the current politicians prove unable to achieve meaningful gains for their communities. Sunni leaders may also, if they manage to overcome their internal divisions, propose an independent Sunni region, similar to the one enjoyed by the Kurds. This would mark the end of Iraqi nationalism and put the survival of the state in question. Maliki's efforts to destroy his rivals have drawn him closer to Shia Iran, which has in turn affected regional power dynamics. To counter Iran's influence, Turkey is now posing as the defender not only of Iraq's Sunnis but also of its Kurds, even though Turkey has long feared Kurdish nationalism within its own borders. Saudi Arabia, despite its usual counterrevolutionary attitude, is supporting the rebels in Syria in hopes of replacing the Shia-Alawite regime with a Sunni government and undoing the pro-Shia axis that now runs through Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. It is up to Iraq's politicians, then, to overcome

their differences and construct a national platform that addresses the country's challenges. Any such settlement will require making concessions regarding regional autonomy, internal border disputes, the management and distribution of oil profits, and Baghdad's foreign policy orientation. Unfortunately, given mutual distrust, the personalization of disputes, and the upcoming electoral season, such compromises do not seem likely -- particularly if Maliki insists on remaining in power indefinitely. The American public is no doubt fatigued by the recent decades of involvement in the country and the region. But to avoid disaster, the United States urgently needs to review its Iraq policy. Washington needs to show the Iraqi people that its intent is not to divide Iraq and keep it weak -- even if that appears to have been a main outcome of the U.S. intervention. U.S. President Barack Obama succeeded in keeping his campaign promise of withdrawing U.S. forces from Iraq. In its second term, the Obama administration should stop supporting a status quo that is driving Iraq toward both authoritarianism and fragmentation. The United States should make clear that it neither condones nor supports the prime minister's consolidation of power and blatant use of the Iraqi Security Forces -- which the United States helped train and equip -- to crack down on political opposition. Washington should make its aid to Maliki -- or any other Iraqi leader -- conditional on his behaving within democratic norms. In addition, Washington should support Iraqi Shia's attempts to select a new prime minister and should help facilitate a pact among the country's elites in order to turn Iraq into a buffer rather than a battlefield state in the volatile region. U.S. engagement in the Middle East should seek to restrain external actors from interfering in Iraq and waging a proxy war there. Washington needs to contain Iran, but should make clear that it is not aligned with Sunnis in a regional sectarian war against Shia. This will require pushing back on Iranian influence in Iraq and simultaneously putting greater pressure on Sunni allies in the region to respect and protect their Shia populations. The United States has invested too much in Iraq to simply ignore these warning signs. Washington should use its diplomatic clout to help prevent further bloodshed.

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