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Iraq: New Alliance Takes Shape Against Maliki-Sadr Bloc

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One week after Iraq's Prime Minister Maliki announced an alliance with Muqtada al-Sadr, the fiercely anti-American cleric who leads the Mahdi Army militia, a new coalition is taking shape to undermine the Maliki-Sadr bloc. The new alliance may have the backing of Turkey, Syria and Saudi Arabia, and the tacit support of the United States.

The new alliance comes as the United States is expressing something close to panic [1] about the idea of Sadr having an important role in the next Iraqi government.

In a meeting on Tuesday, the Iraqiya bloc, the Sunni-secular party led by former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, held a tumultuous meeting at which Iraqiya decided to throw its support behind a rival candidate for prime minister, Adel Abdul Mahdi, according to an Iraqi source who took part in the Iraqiya deliberations. More than seven months after the March 7 election, Abdul Mahdi and Allawi hope to establish a coalition to govern Iraq, toppling Maliki, isolating Sadr and bringing the Kurds into their alignment. Allawi and Abdul Mahdi will travel to the Iraq's Kurdish region to meet with Masoud Barzani, the Kurdish leader and most important power broker for the Kurds, to get his support.

In the March 7 vote, Allawi's Iraqiya won a plurality, securing ninety-one seats in the 325-member parliament. Maliki's party won eighty-nine. But a fractious Shiite alliance and the Kurds hold the balance of power. The Iraqi National Alliance, the Shiite bloc, seems to be falling apart at the seams, with one component—Sadr's forty votes—joining

with Maliki and the rest, including the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), which includes Abdul Mahdi, now seeming to have cast its lot with Allawi's movement.

Syria is playing a critical outside role. Earlier this month, President Assad of Syria consulted with Allawi, privately, in Damascus, and asked Allawi if he could accept a second term for Maliki. According to Iraqi sources, Allawi told Assad no. Assad then traveled to Tehran, Iran, which has great influence with many of Iraq's Shiite players, to see if Tehran would accommodate Allawi, but Iran—which strongly opposes Allawi, in part because of his base among Iraqi Sunnis—flatly refused. Simultaneously, Sadr—who lives in Iran, and who has become increasingly dependent on Iran for support—announced his alliance with Maliki. Assad, discouraged, returned to Damascus empty-handed, and he now seems to have thrown his support to the anti-Maliki bloc. Yesterday, Assad visited Turkey, which favors Iraq's Sunni parties, and the two neighbors of Iraq declared their intent to work together to solve Iraq's post-election crisis.

The alliance between Assad and Prime Minister Erdogan of Turkey is getting widespread coverage in the Middle East [2], as both leaders say that they intend to mediate in the Iraqi political crisis. Said Erdogan [3]: “Turkey is in close cooperation with the groups in Iraq and their leaders as it was a country sharing agony and happiness with Iraq. We will try to help if they ask us to. The failure in the establishment of a new government in Iraq and continuation of uncertainties make not only Iraqi people but also surrounding countries uneasy.”

And Assad added [3]: “To discuss this topic does not mean that we, as Iraq's neighboring countries, Syria, Turkey or others, are speaking on behalf of the Iraqis. The work and decision remain for the Iraqis.”

Maliki, determined to hold on to his job as prime minister, has scheduled a visit to Damascus himself to Wednesday. Maliki is trying to portray his trip to Syria as a routine one. But it's clear that Maliki is aiming to persuade Assad not to support the Allawi-ISCI coalition. Maliki's visit is unusual because only last year, when a series of huge bomb attacks struck Baghdad, Maliki blamed Syria for orchestrating the bombings in concern with elements of the former Baath Party.

1] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/11/AR2010101105784.html>

[2] <http://www.thenational.ae/news/worldwide/middle-east/turkey-and-syria-unite-over-iraq>

[3] [http://www.allheadlinenews.com/articles/7020188984?Syria, Turkey Voice Concern Over Extended Iraqi Political Deadlock](http://www.allheadlinenews.com/articles/7020188984?Syria,%20Turkey%20Voice%20Concern%20Over%20Extended%20Iraqi%20Political%20Deadlock)