

*Backgrounder #34*

## **The Maliki Government Confronts Diyala**

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### **Introduction**

With Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) negotiations taking place in Baghdad and Provincial Elections on the horizon, Iraqi politicians, political parties and factions are jockeying for position and control in the central government and the electorate; perhaps none more so than Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. The security operations over the last six months have improved Maliki's legitimacy and position in the Iraqi government. Political efforts in Baghdad by Maliki to consolidate power are often impeded by competing political factions and as a result, he is seeking to solidify and expand these gains by pursuing his political objectives through military action when necessary. Recent operations and events in Diyala demonstrate this trend.

### **Previous Operations in Diyala**

Diyala Province has long been contested both politically and militarily. The proximity of Diyala to Baghdad, its border with Iran, and its diverse population of Sunni, Kurds and Shia, explain the struggle to control the province both locally and nationally.

Between June 2007 and May 2008, U.S. forces cleared and held Baqubah and Muqdadiyah, but were still engaged in securing the rural areas of Diyala province.<sup>1</sup> During this time, there were not enough U.S. forces to both hold Baqubah and Muqdadiyah and continue offensive operations in areas further from the urban centers. In June 2008, a plan was formulated to surge Iraqi forces into the urban centers to backfill for U.S. forces so that they could pursue the enemy into the more peripheral areas.<sup>2</sup> By July, a

total of two Iraqi Army divisions and 15-20,000 Iraqi Police were located in Diyala, in addition to five U.S. squadrons.<sup>3</sup>

Operations began during the last week of July. Under Operation Iron Pursuit, U.S. Forces pursued enemy fighters into three rural areas: south of Balad Ruz (a longtime al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) safehaven); north and east of Hamrin Lake (an AQI safehaven contested by Kurdish Peshmerga forces); and the area north of Khalis (on the seam between Diyala and Salah ad Din provinces).<sup>4</sup> Iraqi operations under Operation Omens of Prosperity extended across several areas in Diyala, but were centered in Baqubah and smaller urban centers such as Qara Tapa and Jalawla.<sup>5</sup>

In the midst of these security operations two incidents demonstrated Maliki's willingness to pursue his political agenda through military action at provincial levels. The first incident chronicled below describes the provocative arrest of two prominent provincial figures whose localized political agendas were in direct conflict with that of Maliki's national political agenda. It demonstrates Maliki's willingness to ignore provincial interests in favor of his own national interests. The second incident detailed below describes a military altercation between Kurdish Peshmerga and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in the Khanaqin district. This incident illustrates Maliki's willingness to use localized control and security issues to weaken and manipulate a competing faction on the national level. Additionally, it shows the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) willingness to use military means to achieve political ends.

### **The Maliki Government Targets Sons of Iraq in Diyala**

In January 2007 the Director of the Ministry of the Interior (MoI), Jawad Karim al-Bolani, forcibly installed a man named Ghanem al-Qureshi as the Provincial Police Commander in Diyala without confirmation by the Diyala Provincial Council. Since his installation, tension and conflict beset his relationship with the Diyala Governor Ra'ad al-Tamimi and the Provincial Council. Qureshi has ties to both the Badr Corps and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI). Governor Ra'ad is an ISCI member, the Provincial Council's forty-one seats break down as follows: twenty seats are occupied by a ISCI/Da'wa/Badr coalition, fourteen by a Sunni coalition dominated by the Islamic Iraqi Party (IIP), and seven by a Kurd-Turkoman-Arab coalition. While Governor Ra'ad, his staff and the council have been supportive of the Sons of Iraq (Sol) in Diyala over the last year, Qureshi did not support the Sol program and was seen as a sectarian actor.

In the beginning of 2008, Qureshi fired as many as 4,000 police officers believed to be affiliated with the Sol and replaced them with ISCI loyalists. Various charges of torture and other extra-judicial activities were leveled against him and in February several Baqubah Sol members threatened to turn back to AQI and openly demonstrated in the streets for his removal.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, Qureshi is said to have supported Badr forces in targeting Mahdi Army fighters in southern Diyala.<sup>7</sup>

The controversy and tension surrounding Qureshi continued to grow through the first half of 2008, and came to a head in early August when Qureshi refused to provide personal security details to Governor Ra'ad and other members of the Provincial Government. On August 11<sup>th</sup>, the Provincial Council responded by voting unanimously to remove Qureshi from office. PM Maliki and the MoI did not react initially to the recommendation by the Council; moreover, a MoI spokesman said Qureshi would remain in office irrespective of the Council's decision. The following day, however, after Qureshi was taped encouraging a demonstration on his behalf and insulting council members outside the Baqubah Governance Center, Maliki ordered him to Baghdad for a new assignment.<sup>8</sup>

The following week, a special forces/counterterrorism unit (SF/CT) with ties to the MoI, and a separate chain of command, raided the Baqubah Governance Center. The raid targeted Hussein al-Zubaydi, head of the security committee in the provincial council. Zubaydi is an IIP member who, along with Governor Ra'ad and the Provincial Council, has strongly supported and lobbied for the Diyala Sol. Zubaydi was Qureshi's biggest opponent in Diyala and claimed that Qureshi tried to have him assassinated several months before. As they left the Governance Center with Zubaydi in custody, the SF/CT force was confronted by regular Diyala police units. A major firefight ensued in which several police officers and civilians were injured, indicating this raid was not coordinated with any local security forces.<sup>9</sup> Following the firefight, the SF/CT element continued to the house of Nazar al-Khafaji, head of Diyala University, and arrested him.<sup>10</sup> Both men are being held under questionable charges of aiding AQI and being involved in sectarian killings.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time that Qureshi was fired and Zubaydi detained, a widespread effort by the ISF operating throughout Diyala was underway to undermine the Sol. Throughout the ISF operation, Omens of Prosperity, hundreds of arrests took place based on a list of 5,000 wanted individuals which included several hundred Sol members.<sup>12</sup> By the end of August, at least five senior Sol leaders were detained along with hundreds of Sol foot soldiers; others were reportedly in hiding.<sup>13</sup> The ISF forcibly removed Sol groups from their local offices throughout the province, and declared a weapons ban in all of Diyala.<sup>14</sup> This ban includes AK-47s, one of which each Iraqi household is entitled to own under Iraqi law.

Hence, the ban violated the basic rights of Iraqi citizens, while giving the ISF legal grounds to arrest any member of the Sol.<sup>15</sup> The operation sought to intimidate the Sol in Diyala in order to begin the process of disbanding the groups. All of this occurred amidst calls in Baghdad and efforts in Abu Ghraib to dismantle other Sol groups.<sup>16</sup>

### **Khanaqin**

Khanaqin, like Kirkuk, is a disputed oil-rich region, and was the target of "Arabization" efforts by Saddam Hussein's regime.<sup>17</sup> The district makes up the northeastern part of Diyala province and is home to oil refineries and the only legal border crossing between Iraq and Iran in the northern half of Diyala. This region has diverse population made up of Sunni, Kurds, and Shia. Since as early as 2003, Kurdish Peshmerga Forces have operated in and occupied the Khanaqin region, first at the request of the Coalition Forces and later, in 2005, at the request of the Government of Iraq (GoI).<sup>18 19</sup> The KRG wants to annex the Khanaqin District, along with the Tameem Province and several other districts claiming the areas consist of a population that is predominantly Kurdish in a traditionally Kurdish territory. The GoI refuses to cede control of these districts of mixed ethnicity claiming many of them have large Arab and Turkmen populations. While the Stephan de Mistura of the United Nations, is addressing this conflict district by district, the dispute caused GoI President Talabani to veto the election law passed in the Parliament in late July 2008. Below is description of the events that have unfolded in this region over the past several weeks.

In mid-August (roughly August 11 2008), forces from the Iraqi Army's 1<sup>st</sup> Division entered the towns of Qara Tapa, Jalawla, and Sadiyah in the southwestern portion of the Khanaqin District. This move was part of the broader ISF operation, Omens of Prosperity.<sup>20</sup> When Iraqi Forces entered the southern towns of the Khanaqin District, there was no coordination with the Peshmerga forces that occupied those areas. Furthermore, a delegation made up of provincial ISF leaders issued orders from Prime Minister Maliki demanding that the Peshmerga withdraw within twenty-four hours and turn over all government buildings in the Khanaqin District to ISF and GoI control.<sup>21</sup> Though the delegation included a spokesman from the Ministry of Defense, the Iraqi Army Chief of Staff in Baghdad, Babakir Zebari (a Kurd), claims he had no knowledge of the ISF move into the Khanaqin District.<sup>22</sup> This suggests coordination with specific elements of the ISF and MoD and intentional exclusion of others.

The Commander of the 34<sup>th</sup> Peshmerga Brigade, Gen. Nazim Kirkuki refused to withdraw stating he had orders from his chain of command in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to remain in place. The

situation resulted in a stand-off between Iraqi and Kurdish forces. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, the KRG Deputy President Kosrat Rasul headed a delegation in Baghdad to negotiate a solution with PM Maliki.<sup>23</sup> During the meeting an agreement was reached between Kurdish authorities and Maliki that the Peshmerga forces would withdraw from the districts of Qara Tapa and Jalawla, leaving Coalition forces and ISF in control of the area.<sup>24</sup> The KRG appeared to have ceded Qara Tapa and Jalawla to maintain control over the city of Khanaqin.

Despite the agreement of the previous week, ISF entered the city of Khanaqin early in the week of August 24<sup>th</sup>. They set up checkpoints and issued an ultimatum from Maliki that required all Kurdish forces to vacate government buildings and cede control of Khanaqin to ISF.<sup>25</sup> Immediately following the ISF entry into Khanaqin, large scale demonstrations protesting ISF presence took place and the local Kurdish Government refused to withdraw from government buildings.<sup>26</sup> In yet another escalation of this ethnic conflict, only days after ISF entered Khanaqin, Maliki made a public statement warning that any Kurdish forces deployed outside the borders of Kurdistan would face legal consequences.<sup>27</sup> On August 30<sup>th</sup>, KRG President Barzani, made a rare trip to Baghdad to meet privately with PM Maliki, making clear the severity of the situation.<sup>28</sup>

There ensued a week of negotiations involving the following individuals: on the Kurdish side, the KRG Cabinet Secretary, Muhammad Qora Daghi, the Deputy Secretary General of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), Burham Saleh, a member of the PUK politburo, Fouad Maasoum, and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) members Hoshyar Zebari and Roznouri Shawis;<sup>29</sup> and on the GoI side PM Maliki, the head of the center for the regional protection forces, Mustafa Jawersh, members of the Diyala provincial council, and representatives from the MoI and MoD. The negotiations resulted in a tenuous solution.<sup>30</sup> The ISF and the Peshmerga will withdraw from the city of Khanaqin leaving the local security forces and Iraqi Police in control. Neither side will be permitted to enter without the invitation from those local security forces. It is unclear whether the Peshmerga will completely withdraw from the Khanaqin or what if any ISF presence will remain in the city.<sup>31</sup>

## **Conclusion**

These chronologies illustrate a willingness on Maliki's part to use the ISF as a means to his desired political ends. In recent weeks, Maliki and his staff have made clear their intentions to dismantle Sol groups, suggesting that many are still affiliated with al Qaida and actually pose a threat to security in some areas rather than the boost to security often referred to by Coalition Forces.<sup>32</sup> The raid on the

Governance center in Diyala appears to be the product of Maliki's pursuing his political agenda at the provincial level. The same can be said of the ISF actions in Khanaqin. Maliki's frustration with the Kurds in Baghdad, led him to threaten Kurdish power and influence in Khanaqin through ISF action. The town of Khanaqin presented an extremely limited security threat, and while Maliki has a legal right to deploy forces in the area, the national agenda is the only explanation for entering the area at this time, in this manner.

The split in the politics around Qureshi in Diyala demonstrates the conflict between Maliki's national political agenda and that of the local government. Qureshi has had strong backing from Baghdad and was appointed without any local support. He also maintained his position despite repeated accusations by Provincial leadership and attempts to have him removed. This indicates Qureshi was in Diyala implementing national objectives that ultimately were at odds with the best interest of the province and its leadership. The support for Qureshi and targeting of Zubaydi reflects a decision made by Maliki to move against the Sol. The targeting of Sol during operations in the area furthers this argument. The Sol have significantly bolstered security in an area AQI once dominated. It is not in the interest of the population of Diyala to target or dismantle the Sol at this juncture.

On its surface, the situation in Khanaqin appears as a local conflict resulting from a lack of ISF and Kurdish coordination; however, the high-level individuals involved in the negotiations for a resolution of this situation make it obvious that this is a national level clash between the KRG and the Maliki. Moreover, Maliki's recent decision to supplant the predominantly Kurdish SOFA negotiation team with close loyalists makes it that much harder to disassociate the Khanaqin crisis from national politics. For this reason, it is more probable that Maliki's confrontation of the Kurds in Khanaqin is in fact part-and-parcel of a greater strategy aiming to inhibit their proven ability to spoil his designs at the national level.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, this incident illustrates the continued willingness of the Kurds to pursue political ends through military means.

It is clear that Maliki and willing to use force to achieve electoral and other political objectives. Given the major reduction of Coalition Troops in Diyala Province since January 2008, and the potential for further reductions in the coming months, it will only become easier for him to pursue his political agenda in the manner he chooses. Coalition Forces play a crucial role in limiting Maliki's political pursuits through military action along with those of the Kurds and other political entities within Iraq. Hence, recent events in Diyala demonstrate the continuing need for Coalition presence to solidify the achievements of The Surge.

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## Endnotes

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