Update on the current situation in Iraq

By Fanar Haddad

Key points

- Iraqi forces struggling to contain rise in violence
- Election results expected in coming ten days but government formation may take months
- Maliki’s State of Law expected to capture the largest share of the vote but will still fall short of a majority
- Unclear whether Maliki will be able to secure a third term

Detail

Security continues to deteriorate in Iraq. Iraqi security forces (ISF) have had mixed results in their ongoing operations in western Iraq and around the Baghdad belt. Violence against civilian targets has also increased with 15 car bombs in one day striking Baghdad alone last week. Worryingly, there is no doubt that some Shi’a militias, notably Asaib Ahl al Haq have been fighting alongside ISF around the Baghdad belt and in Diyala. This further accentuates the sectarian aspect of the ongoing violence and does not bode well for reconciliation in the near future. It can also be taken as an indication that ISF are stretched. Violence looks set to continue on its current course through 2014.

The most immediate issue is the pending announcement of Iraq’s legislative elections (held on the 30th of April). The results have yet to be announced but it is expected that Nuri al Maliki’s State of Law Coalition (SoL) will secure the largest share of the vote but will nevertheless fall well short of securing a majority (various forecasts place SoL and their allies at over 100 seats). Negotiations have already begun to determine what kind of a governing coalition emerges over the coming months. In the previous legislative elections it took upwards of 35 weeks to form a government and there is no reason to expect anything less lengthy this time around.

All the major ethno-sectarian constituencies are divided. Ultimately it is the Shi’a vote and the parties campaigning for the Shi’a vote who will decide the shape of the future government. Shi’a parties are bitterly divided not least over the issue of a third term for
Prime Minister Maliki. The Sunni and Kurdish votes have been equally divided; in theory this division may help Maliki secure support from some Kurdish and Sunni parties eager for a place in the forthcoming government; however he will need the support of one of the two remaining Shi’a parties to be able to form a government.

It is highly likely that SoL will form the next government; however, this does not necessarily mean a third Maliki term as SoL may be forced to nominate a different candidate, if resistance to a Maliki’s third term proves to be more than just electoral rhetoric. Some names that have been mentioned in that regard are Tariq Najm (Maliki’s former office director), Falah al Fayyad who is also a Maliki ally and Deputy Prime Minister for Energy Affairs Hussein al Shahristani. The next government will certainly include SoL and may well be led by SoL. It is highly unlikely that Maliki, or anyone else, will be able to form a majority government and we could see a repeat of 2010 when a ‘national-unity’ government was formed (meaning one that includes every major political entity and no meaningful opposition). It will be some time before we know for certain.

**Update on the current situation in the Westbank and Gaza**

*By Joshua Rickard*

**Key points**

- Reconcilliation between Hamas and Fatah
- Netanyahu warns of the end of peace negotiations
- Rapidly increasing expansion od Israeli settlements

**Detail**

The Hamas government of Gaza and Fatah controlled Palestinian Authority (PA) announced on the 23rd of April a reconciliation agreement that would see the formation of a new unity government within five weeks. Despite Israeli scepticism and harsh warnings from Israeli PM Netanyahu that such steps would signify the end of peace negotiations with the PA, Palestinians have little to lose after two decades of peace negotiations which have yet to produce anything remotely resembling a sovereign state. That being said, after seven years division, complete devastation in Gaza and deteriorating conditions in the West Bank, the damage that the Palestinian political divide has already caused Palestinian society is unlikely to be reversed easily.

**Risk**

As supporters of Hamas are frequently jailed and brutalised by PA security forces in the West Bank, and equivalent treatment of Fatah affiliates exists under the Hamas government in Gaza, uncertainty is widespread among Palestinians. Having dealt with near-total siege since 2007, Palestinians living in Gaza are weary and in little position to negotiate anything while Abbas’s Fatah movement is desperate to regain legitimacy among the West Bank population where it is widely viewed as collaborating with Israeli
occupation through security arrangements. Each political movement has a base of support in both of the Palestinian enclaves however there is much division among the general population and many Palestinians have become all together disillusioned with the political process viewing both governments as being corrupt and unable to represent their interests. Peace negotiations which have been marked by repeated attempts by the US to encourage peace through conditioned aid to the PA government offering limited development in only specific areas of the West Bank has only succeeded in creating a Palestinian elite which rules over an increasingly impoverished society dwelling in increasingly isolated conditions. As the most recent round of US sponsored negotiations have advanced, the West Bank population has experience rapidly increasing expansion of Israeli settlements and demolition of Palestinian property as well as an increase in violent incidents at the hands of the Israeli military and settlers.

In conclusion while the long awaited reconciliation is a welcome change for Palestinians, significant improvement in the conditions of life for the populations living in Gaza or the West Bank are unlikely in the near future. What may however amount to a progressive change is an end to a charade of negotiations which have led nowhere and Palestinians taking their situation, limited as their options may be, into their own hands. Consensus among Palestinian leaders is vital to potential progress in any form, given the recent status quo almost any change in policy, particularly one that would seek to mend divisions that have been mutually destructive, would constitute as a positive development.