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# Weapons Sales to Iraq Move Ahead Despite U.S. Worries

By **MICHAEL S. SCHMIDT** and **ERIC SCHMITT**

BAGHDAD — The Obama administration is moving ahead with the sale of nearly \$11 billion worth of arms and training for the Iraqi military despite concerns that Prime Minister **Nuri Kamal al-Maliki** is seeking to consolidate authority, create a one-party Shiite-dominated state and abandon the American-backed power-sharing government.

The military aid, including advanced fighter jets and battle tanks, is meant to help the Iraqi government protect its borders and rebuild a military that before the 1991 Persian Gulf war was one of the largest in the world; it was disbanded in 2003 after the United States invasion.

But the sales of the weapons — some of which have already been delivered — are moving ahead even though Mr. Maliki has failed to carry out an agreement that would have limited his ability to marginalize the Sunnis and turn the military into a sectarian force. While the United States is eager to beef up Iraq's military, at least in part as a hedge against Iranian influence, there are also fears that the move could backfire if the Baghdad government ultimately aligns more closely with the Shiite theocracy in Tehran than with Washington.

United States diplomats, including Ambassador James F. Jeffrey, have expressed concern about the military relationship with Iraq. Some have even said it could have political ramifications for the Obama administration if not properly managed. There is also growing concern that **Mr. Maliki's apparent efforts** to marginalize the country's Sunni minority could set off a civil war.

"The optics of this are terrible," said Kenneth M. Pollack, an expert on national security issues at the Brookings Institution in Washington and a critic of the administration's Iraq policy.

The program to arm the military is being led by the United States Embassy here, which through its Office of Security Cooperation serves as a broker between the Iraqi government and defense contractors like Lockheed Martin and Raytheon. Among the big-ticket items

being sold to Iraq are F-16 fighter jets, M1A1 Abrams main battle tanks, cannons and armored personnel carriers. The Iraqis have also received body armor, helmets, ammunition trailers and sport utility vehicles, which critics say can be used by domestic security services to help Mr. Maliki consolidate power.

“The purpose of these arrangements is to assist the Iraqis’ ability to defend their sovereignty against foreign security threats,” said Capt. John Kirby, a Pentagon spokesman in Washington.

But Iraqi politicians and analysts, while acknowledging that the American military withdrawal had left Iraq’s borders, and airspace, vulnerable, said there were many reasons for concern.

Despite pronouncements from American and Iraqi officials that the Iraqi military is a nonsectarian force, they said, it had evolved into a hodgepodge of Shiite militias more interested in marginalizing the Sunnis than in protecting the country’s sovereignty. Across the country, they said, Shiite flags — not Iraq’s national flag — fluttered from tanks and military vehicles, evidence, many said, of the troops’ sectarian allegiances.

“It is very risky to arm a sectarian army,” said Rafe al-Essawi, the country’s finance minister and a [leading Sunni politician](#). “It is very risky with all the sacrifices we’ve made, with all the budget to be spent, with all the support of America — at the end of the day, the result will be a formal militia army.”

Mr. Essawi said that he was concerned about how the weapons would be used if political tension led to a renewed tide of sectarian violence. Some Iraqis and analysts said they believed that the weapons could give Mr. Maliki a significant advantage in preventing several [Sunni provinces from declaring autonomy](#) from the central government.

“Washington took the decision to build up Iraq as a counterweight to Iran through close military cooperation and the sale of major weapon systems,” said Joost Hiltermann, the International Crisis Group’s deputy program director for the Middle East. “Maliki has shown a troubling inclination toward enhancing his control over the country’s institutions without accepting any significant checks and balances.”

Uncertainty over Mr. Maliki’s intentions, and with that the wisdom of the weapons sale, began to emerge even before the last American combat forces withdrew 11 days ago. Mr. Maliki moved against his Sunni rivals, arresting hundreds of former Baath Party members on charges that they were involved in a coup plot. Then security forces under Mr. Maliki’s control sought to arrest the country’s Sunni vice president, who fled to the semiautonomous

Kurdish region in the north. In addition, Mr. Maliki threatened to release damning information on other politicians.

With these actions plunging the country into a political crisis, a few days later, Mr. Maliki said the country would be turned into “rivers of blood” if the predominantly Sunni provinces sought more autonomy.

This was not a completely unforeseen turn of events. Over the summer, the Americans told high-ranking Iraqi officials that the United States did not want an ongoing military relationship with a country that marginalized its minorities and ruled by force.

The Americans warned Iraqi officials that if they wanted to continue receiving military aid, Mr. Maliki had to fulfill an agreement from 2010 that required the Sunni bloc in Parliament to have a say in who ran the Defense and Interior Ministries. But despite a pledge to do so, the ministries remain under Mr. Maliki’s control, angering many Sunnis.

Corruption, too, continues to pervade the security forces. American military advisers have said that many low- and midlevel command positions in the armed forces and the police are sold, despite American efforts to emphasize training and merit, said Anthony Cordesman, an analyst at the Center for Security and International Studies in Washington.

Pentagon and State Department officials say that weapons sales agreements have conditions built in to allow American inspectors to monitor how the arms are used, to ensure that the sales terms are not violated.

“Washington still has considerable leverage in Iraq by freezing or withdrawing its security assistance packages, issuing travel advisories in more stark terms that will have a direct impact on direct foreign investment, and reassessing diplomatic relations and trade agreements,” said Matthew Sherman, a former State Department official who spent more than three years in Iraq. “Now is the time to exercise some of that leverage by publicly putting Maliki on notice.”

Lt. Gen. Robert L. Caslen, the head of the American Embassy office that is selling the weapons, said he was optimistic that Mr. Maliki and the other Iraqi politicians would work together and that the United States would not end up selling weapons to an authoritarian government.

“If it was a doomsday scenario, at some point I’m sure there will be plenty of guidance coming my way,” he said in a recent interview.

A spokesman for the United States Embassy declined to comment, as did the National Security Council in Washington.

As the American economy continues to sputter, some analysts believe that Mr. Maliki and the Iraqis may hold the ultimate leverage over the Americans.

“I think he would like to get the weapons from the U.S.,” Mr. Pollack said. “But he believes that an economically challenged American administration cannot afford to jeopardize \$10 billion worth of jobs.”

If the United States stops the sales, Mr. Pollack said, Mr. Maliki “would simply get his weapons elsewhere.”

*Michael S. Schmidt reported from Baghdad, and Eric Schmitt from Washington.*