

Asharq Al-Awsat Talks to Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari

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Cairo, Asharq Al-Awsat- Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari, who accompanied Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki on his tour of the region, has disclosed details about the alliances being shaped regarding the formation of the government and the results of Al-Maliki's current tour. He stressed that a final decision has not yet been made on installing Al-Maliki as prime minister but that Al-Maliki stands a better chance than others in view of the cohesion of his bloc. Zebari added that the many developments will take place in the next two weeks. He talked about the role of the Kurdistan Alliance to which he belongs and its terms for forming an alliance with the Al-Iraqiya List headed by former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi or with the State of Law Coalition [SLC] headed by Al-Maliki. Zebari referred to Iran's role in unifying the Shias alongside Al-Maliki. He also referred to an expected visit by Al-Maliki to Turkey and Kuwait. Zebari emphasized that Iraq insists on hosting the Arab summit to be held in March 2011 under the chairmanship of Iraq.

Asharq Al-Awsat met with the Iraqi foreign minister and conducted the following interview:

[Asharq Al-Awsat] What is your opinion concerning the critical statements that the Al-Iraqiya List is making against outgoing Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's visit to Iran, particularly its criticism that Al-Maliki sold Iraq to neighboring countries in return for a second term in office?

[Zebari] The aim of Al-Maliki's tour of the region is to clarify the political situation and developments as well as the stands of the political blocs, including the bloc to which he belongs. All the other leaders are making shuttle visits to various capitals. Thus, Al-Maliki has the right as well to clarify his position to the Arab leaders and to the Arab and regional capitals. The aim is to reassure these countries on the role of the Iraqi government if he forms it because so far, final decisions have not been made and the discussions and negotiations are becoming more serious. In other words, all the blocs have reached the stage of making a decision. We can see that all or most of the countries in the region are meeting with all the Iraqi leaders and they have their own visions. Some of them have specific agendas and so on. However, we always say that the decision to form the Iraqi government should be an Iraqi decision and that it should be made inside Iraq and not in the regional capitals. Secondly, the government should express the ambitions of the Iraqi people. It should respect the will of the voters and it should be representative. This is especially true since the results of the election showed that all the blocs have a limited influence and even the regional and external influences are limited.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] What do you mean by "the stage of making a decision"? Has a deadline been set to proclaim the formation of the government by the end of December, as has been reported?

[Zebari] I will not set a time ceiling. In my opinion, however, and as a negotiator with the blocs, I can say in the next two weeks. Everyone has become convinced that it is time to make a final decision; the alliances and the balances of forces have become clear to everyone following seven months of negotiations.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] What is clear so far regarding the formation of the government?

[Zebari] Al-Maliki has a strong position to form the government because things are still undecided.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] Is the wait for the Al-Iraqiya List's approval on the three senior posts the reason behind the indecision? What is the reason for the indecision?

[Zebari] The indecision is due to the fact that it is necessary to form a partnership and national unity government that represents all the essential components in order to include everyone. It is hard to exclude others. At present, and due to the alliances that were made in the arena, the coalition of Kurdish blocs now enjoys the position of a crucial and decisive position. This will take place in the coming two weeks. A decision will be made supported by everyone and in a reassuring consensus that will include all the blocs.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] What has the SLC offered the coalition of Kurdish blocs to finalize the agreement?

[Zebari] You mean what have we offered them?

[Asharq Al-Awsat] What have you offered Al-Maliki and what have you offered Iyad Allawi?

[Zebari] The discussions had been going on until last Monday. We held a meeting with the Al-Iraqiya List to know what its response is to the ideas and principles outlined in the Kurdish paper. This paper consists of about 19 points and most of them cannot be considered as Kurdish demands. They are Iraqi demands since they insist on abidance by the constitution and commitment to a federal democratic Iraq. The points emphasize national partnership; respect for the principle of national consensus; bylaws for the Council of Ministers; a review of the elections law; a population census; and implementation of the constitutional articles related to the oil law, the disputed areas, and other issues. Thus, the Kurdish paper is not one that is concerned only with the interests of the Kurdish parties and blocs. It is basically an Iraqi paper. We are perhaps the only side that negotiated with the others on the basis of a system and official papers because we know what we want.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] What is the degree of response to your demands and your presence inside the new government?

[Zebari] This paper will determine our support for and trust in this or that side. I mean that an alliance with the Al-Iraqiya or the SLC will depend on the degree of the response of these two sides to the principles drawn up by the Kurdish list. These principles are not conditions but bases and principles that respond to Iraq's needs and

bolster stability.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] Which h of the two blocs - the Al-Iraqiya List or the SLC - responded to your principles?

[Zebari] The response of the SLC was bigger. Until last Monday, we held a meeting with the Al-Iraqiya List and its stand was more advanced than its past stands. We noted a readiness. However, we asked the essential blocs to give us their response in writing and not orally and we asked that these principles should be an essential part of the next government's program. In my opinion, these issues will be resolved in the next two weeks.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] It is said that concessions may be made by the principal blocs on the three senior posts. In other words, it is said that Allawi may be appointed president of the republic.

[Zebari] We have not yet reached such details; we know everything that is being said. At present, agreements are being reached on frameworks, which is more important. We mean the functions of the new government, its tasks, its plan of action, and its legal and constitutional obligations. We are still at this stage. When we reach the other stage - that of the three leadership posts, namely, the post of prime minister, which is the most important in our constitution, the presidency of the republic, and the post of parliament speaker - these posts should be part of one deal, they cannot be divided. I mean, that according to the constitution, the first step after the Chamber of Deputies meets will be for this parliament to elect its speaker. The speaker will then designate the largest parliamentary bloc to form the government. Prior to that, the parliament is authorized to elect the president of the republic. From the very first round, the president of the republic should win two-thirds of the votes, which is a very high rate. However, if he does not succeed in the first round, agreement can be reached on the president by simple majority during a second parliamentary round. After that, the president of the republic designates the leader of the largest parliamentary list to form the government.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] But this round that you are talking about regarding the three leadership posts will take time beyond the expected deadline set for the formation of the government.

[Zebari] The steps can be expedited; in other words, parliament can be called to convene if agreement is reached among a number of blocs on the formation of the government. Everyone knows that the participation of everyone is necessary. In other words, no side can be marginalized or excluded. We cannot proceed forward without the Al-Iraqiya List that has a huge presence among the people. It should participate in one way or another. In view of the current alliances that were recently formed, the Kurdish List or the coalition of Kurdish blocs have a very important position in reaching a decision on any candidate that will form the government. This is the latest on the formation of the Iraqi government.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] If the matter has not yet been finally settled with Al-Maliki, on what basis did the Iranian blessing and, before that, the US blessing take place to form

the government? What is the effect of this on the Iraqi decision?

[Zebari] There was no agreement between the United States and Iran and they do not have the intention to conspire. This is not on the table. The main US concern is the formation of the government as soon as possible because there are commitments and it has a withdrawal plan of the rest of its forces by the end of 2011. The United States is also concerned about the absence of a government and about a political or security vacuum that may help the terrorism and violence to return. Such a situation would double its problems in Afghanistan, Iraq, and so on. They also have the mid-term elections in November. Therefore, the US Administration is very interested in the formation of the government as soon as possible.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] But Washington supports Al-Maliki because he has most of the files related to ending the US military presence and they do not wish to have problems during the scheduled withdrawal of their forces. How true is this?

[Zebari] He also contributed to this, but Washington maintains that Al-Maliki's electoral bloc is cohesive and that he won the biggest number of votes. However, they always insist that it is important to distribute the powers and that the power should not rest in one specific bloc. As for the Iranian side, it believes that Al-Maliki's bloc is large and cohesive. They played a role in unifying the Shi'ite ranks. They succeeded with the followers of the Al-Sadr Trend but failed with others, like the Islamic Supreme Council [IISC] and the Al-Fadilah Party. The new alliance that took place between the SLC and the Al-Sadrists activated the process. We believe that the presence of the Al-Sadrists inside the political process is better than if they were outside it. We are convinced of this. Moreover, Iran's statements in this regard were clear and frank. However, it led to fears about Iranian interference and control. Nevertheless, we stress the fact that the new government should be formed inside Iraq without any dictates or pressures from any neighboring country.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] Is there a deal with Iran or Washington to select Al-Maliki?

[Zebari] There are no deals. I merely mentioned the US and Iranian premises in supporting Al-Maliki, no more and no less. Everyone - whether in the United States or Europe or Iran or Turkey - aspires to have good relations with the new rulers in Iraq. Everyone is interested in Iraq. Moreover, the political leaders in Iraq are trying to consolidate their positions through such contacts. It is not true that the Iraqi government is isolated.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] Will Al-Maliki visit other capitals or stations after Egypt?

[Zebari] I believe Al-Maliki is scheduled to visit Turkey and perhaps Kuwait.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] Will your visit to Kuwait discuss pending issues?

[Zebari] We will discuss the strengthening and consolidation of bilateral relations and the important issues for the two countries, such as the implementation of international legitimacy resolutions imposed on Iraq in Chapter VII, including the resolutions pertaining to the situation between Iraq and Kuwait. There are obligations on Iraq that

it should implement.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] What about your visit to Egypt after Iran?

[Zebari] The visit to Egypt is important because it is the only state in the region that does not have its special agenda in Iraq. Egypt has asserted and demonstrated all along during the crisis related to the formation of the government that it respects all the Iraqi forces and that it is equidistant from all the forces without any discrimination against or bias toward any side. Thus, the visit will be related to many issues on which we agree with Egypt, such as developments in Iraq, the formation of the government, bilateral relations, and the resolution of pending issues, such as the rights of the Egyptian workers in Iraq and the debts owed to public and private firms. But the issue of "yellow hawalat" [transfers] were discussed before visiting Egypt at a cabinet meeting. I raised this issue and emphasized that certain issues have to be resolved and should not be restricted to protocol visits and courtesies. Such things do not build relations. Therefore, a decision was reached in the 2011 budget to settle these debts that are owed to the Egyptian workers in Iraq.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] Has the amount of this debt been determined?

[Zebari] We asked cabinet officials in Egypt to calculate the debt and to inform us of its amount.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] How do you explain the opening of Egyptian consulates in Basra and Arbil? Does this help in better promoting relations with Iraq?

[Zebari] It is an important and great step; Iraq can provide investment and cooperation opportunities. A plot of land has been allocated to build the Egyptian consulate in Arbil and construction work is going full speed ahead. The same thing applies to Basra. The relationship with Egypt is constantly developing. We have set up a higher ministerial committee that should have met in Baghdad but it did not due to the delay in the formation of the government. I thought of holding this meeting in Cairo during our visit but the position is to wait for the formation of the new government.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] What about the visit to the Arab League and the meeting that Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki held with [Arab League Secretary General] Amr Musa?

[Zebari] We discussed the issue of the convocation of the Arab summit as well as all the above-mentioned issues related to the formation of the government. Iraq will insist on its right to host the next Arab summit. Iraqi security and protocol delegations recently visited the Arab League. Work is in full swing in Baghdad to complete the establishments, the infrastructure, the palaces, hotels, and guest houses. Construction companies are working round the clock to complete the work in preparation for Iraq's hosting of the Arab summit in March 2011.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] But some Arab countries doubt that Iraq would be able to host the summit in view of the security situation.

[Zebari] So far, we have not heard from any Arab capital that it has doubts. Even when we were in the Sirte summit and met with the Arab heads of states and leaders, we did not hear of any doubts in this regard. However, all expressed concern for the delay in the formation of the government that would have expedited the preparations for the convocation of the summit in Baghdad. We believe that any delay in the formation of the government adversely affects the stands of the Arab countries.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] Have any countries offered to host the Iraq summit?

[Zebari] Just by words; we are waiting to see what the situation will be. Iraq is fully prepared to host the summit and ensure its success.

[Asharq Al-Awsat] How are relations with Saudi Arabia?

[Zebari] Saudi Arabia's stands in support of Iraq are great. It is a role that we highly appreciate and value. Relations between the two countries are always good. All the Iraqi people highly respect and appreciate King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz, the custodian of the two holy shrines. I always meet with [Saudi Foreign Minister] Prince Saud al-Faisal, my friend, colleague, and older brother, during Arab League meetings and in international conferences. We are in constant contact. Everyone is waiting for the formation of the government, its structure, and its representation. In my opinion, this will be the test in dealing with the new government.