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Qatari: U.S. intervention in Iraq would be seen as war on Sunni Arabs

By Mohamed Salman

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A former Qatari ambassador to the United States offered up a warning to the Obama administration Monday that any military intervention on behalf of the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki would be seen as an act of “war” on the entire community of Sunni Arabs.

Sheikh Nasser bin Hamad al Khalifa also warned against the United States working with Iran to repulse the advance by the radical Sunni group the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, something that Secretary of State John Kerry said Monday the United States would be willing to consider.

“For the West or Iran or the two working together to fight beside Maliki against Sunni Arabs will be seen as another conspiracy against Sunni,” Khalifa tweeted.

Khalifa’s comments via Twitter (@NasserIbnHamad) show the complicated calculations the Obama administration faces as it considers whether to come to Maliki’s aid while insurgents from ISIS consolidate their gains over much of northern and central Iraq and menace the Iraqi capital, Baghdad.

Maliki's Shiite Muslim government has angered Sunnis across the Arab world for being close to Shiite-ruled Iran and for what Sunnis describe as widespread mistreatment of their co-religionists in Iraq.

Khalifa retired from Qatar's diplomatic service in 2007, but he remains an influential voice in Qatari foreign-policy circles.

The sentiments behind his warning were reflected in remarks that Qatar's foreign minister, Khalid bin Mohammed al Attiyah, made Sunday in Bolivia and that were distributed Monday by Qatar's official news service.

Attiyah stopped far short of Khalifa's suggestion that airstrikes would be seen as an act of war by Sunnis outside Iraq, and he didn't mention Sunnis specifically in the comments released Monday. But he laid blame for the rapid advance of ISIS squarely on Maliki's rule. He said Maliki had deliberately excluded "large groups of Iraqis" from sharing in power.

"While we strongly condemn terrorism and violence in all its forms and manifests," Attiyah said, "we must, however, take into account the fact that injustice, exclusion, marginalization and use of security and military solutions exclusively to suppress popular demands can . . . fuel violence and contribute to its expansion."

He added, "We swiftly urge those concerned to pay attention to the demands of large segments of the population who only seek equality and participation, away from all forms of sectarian or denominational discrimination."

President Barack Obama made similar demands Friday, saying he'd asked the Pentagon to draw up a list of possible options to stop the ISIS advance but that the United States would consider taking those steps only if Iraq's feuding politicians could resolve their differences — something few observers believe is possible.

Khalifa's warning about how Sunnis elsewhere in the Arab world would view American military intervention draws attention to other concerns that might influence U.S. actions on Maliki's behalf.

The split between the Sunni and Shiite interpretations of Islam date to the seventh century, but it drives modern rivalries between Shiite-led Iran and Sunni-led Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf monarchies. Qatar has been a close collaborator with the United States in Syria and elsewhere and it's home to the U.S. Central Command's forward Air Force detachment at al Udeid Air Base outside Doha.

In his comments, Khalifa noted that Maliki has ruled Iraq for more than eight years, longer than Obama has been the U.S. president, and that in that time Maliki had squandered "any chance" to build a nonsectarian, stable and all-inclusive country.

"Gulf states should inform the West any intervention in Iraq or military cooperation with Iran to prop up al Maliki will be considered unfriendly," he tweeted.

“Any intervention in Iraq by the West to prop up criminal al Maliki in Iraq will be seen by the whole Sunni Arabs and Muslims as war against them.”

The Qatari diplomat accused Maliki of going on a “crusade against Iraqi Sunni Arabs, killing them and bombing their cities.”

He called the ISIS advance the “logical outcome” and said it was “no surprise to any observer of Iraq’s politics.”

“ISIS is a tiny element in the bigger revolt by Iraq’s Arab Sunni tribes who suffered so much under Maliki sectarian regime. . . . Maliki has been bombing&destroying Sunni Arabs cities and killing them for the past six month,” he said.