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# Foreign Minister Zebari

## 'Iraq Is Facing a Mortal Threat'

*Interview Conducted By [Bernhard Zand](#)*

**In an interview, Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari, a Kurd, warns that his country is threatened with collapse under the pressure posed by ISIS terrorists. But, he says, it isn't a civil war yet.**

You have to cross a total of four checkpoints before you reach the Iraqi Foreign Ministry in Baghdad. Such security measures are necessary. An attack in 2009 resulted in the deaths of a hundred people. For its latest issue, SPIEGEL traveled to the Iraqi capital to meet with Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari to discuss the current developments in the country. Zebari, 61, has extensive experience with political violence. During the 1980s, he fought as a member of the Kurdish Peshmerga against dictator Saddam Hussein. He has served as foreign minister of Iraq since 2003.

**SPIEGEL:** Mr. Minister, are we witnessing the end of the state of Iraq?

**Zebari:** I don't think that Iraq will disappear as a nation, simply because the communities of this country need a sort of federation to keep living together. Even before this latest crisis, we heard voices from Basra to Mosul to Ramadi calling for federal regions empowered to develop and recover their resources without intervention from the dominant, even authoritarian, centralized state. Five or ten years ago, it was taboo even to mention the word "federalism" in my talks with some Iraqi leaders and with my Arab League colleagues. Today federalism is accepted: Yemen has declared itself a federation, the United Arab Emirates are a federation.

**SPIEGEL:** Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has several titles. He is Iraq's premier but also runs the Interior Ministry and the Ministry for National Security. Yet, the Iraqi military and police forces have been powerless to stop the terror group Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in recent weeks. Has Maliki failed politically?

**Zebari:** I have always been very frank in criticizing Maliki. But I am a member of his government. And if you ask about our collective achievements, there's a whole list: We freed Iraq from (obligations under) Chapter Seven (*Eds. Note: Chapter Seven refers to the UN sanctions regime imposed on Iraq following its 1990 invasion of Kuwait*), the country is now free to operate on the international markets. Iraq was isolated under Saddam from the Arab world and the international community. Now it is back and hosted an Arab Summit. Saddam made the critical, dreadful mistake of invading Kuwait. We, however, went and solved all the remaining issues with Kuwait. We have renewed industry and agriculture; we have brought back oil production.

**SPIEGEL:** It's only slightly higher than it was 11 years ago.

**Zebari:** But under the threat of frequent bombings. Have there been failures? Of course. In security, with public services and in bringing people together to reconcile.

**SPIEGEL:** When you see the borders being overrun, it looks as though Iraq is facing a decisive moment in its history.

**Zebari:** Iraq is facing a mortal threat to its existence as a nation and as a political system. These forces of terrorism and extremism are trying to establish themselves. Should ISIS ever control the west of our country and the east of Syria with all the region's resources -- who would then be safe in this region? Let alone the consequences this would have for Europe. As long as these terrorists are active in the deserts of Iraq and Syria, it may seem remote from

the West. But that is also how people perceived Afghanistan before. And then the terrorists hit New York.

**SPIEGEL:** Kirkuk is now in the hands of the Kurdish Peshmerga. Do you think they'll ever give it back?

**Zebari:** The areas where the Kurds moved in are defined in our constitution as "internally disputed". The Kurds went there because the Iraqi security forces collapsed and a vacuum ensued. They moved in there to prevent these areas from falling into the hands of the wrong people. For example, the Peshmerga have moved to the Mosul dam, which has been seriously damaged for several years. If it breaks, there is a serious danger that it might flood not only Mosul but Baghdad as well. These operations are not a landgrab. They have been executed to prevent worse things from happening.

**SPIEGEL:** Meanwhile, fear and tensions are growing in Baghdad. Might the ISIS offensive trigger another civil war, as the Samarra attack did in 2006?

**Zebari:** I am a fighter and I have seen terrible things. But we can speak of a civil war only when everything collapses. The Iraqi state has not collapsed yet. Yes, there are militias and there are semi-independent regions. But it has not come to open warfare.

**SPIEGEL:** Many Sunnis in Iraq are worried about Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's latest fatwa, in which he called for Shiites to take up arms.

**Zebari:** Sistani didn't call for jihad against anybody. He called for the protection of the state, the land and the Holy Shrines. You have to go back to the original words of his statement.

**SPIEGEL:** Since when have people in the Middle East paid close attention to the exact wording of such declarations? Iranian politicians have already promised to send thousands to defend the Shiite shrines in Iraq.

**Zebari:** I agree, there are certain passions. This is the reason why I am personally engaged in establishing some rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

**SPIEGEL:** Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Hosseini Khamenei has accused the US of bringing its "stooges" to power in Iraq. Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal has warned Iran not to "intervene" in Iraq. This doesn't exactly look like rapprochement.

**Zebari:** I can tell you what Khamenei and Saud al-Faisal mean: There is an ongoing conflict about the new government. Everybody wants Iraq to go in a new direction and everybody wants to see new faces. I have told Saud al-Faisal: We have a democratic system and a political process. Sixty-two percent of Iraqis voted on April 30. We are going to have a parliament and a new government according to the results of this election. We don't have princes who can appoint people by royal decree. We change our leaders according to our own rules. Khamenei, for his part, thinks that -- according to his interpretation -- the Americans are trying to influence this process and install their own supporters into government.

**SPIEGEL:** Is he right?

**Zebari:** I am not going to judge him and will not be drawn into such a discussion.

**SPIEGEL:** US Senator Dianne Feinstein has said that Maliki "has to go." Obama hasn't shown much sympathy for the prime minister either. Can Iraq continue with Maliki as its leader?

**Zebari:** Listen, I am a member of this government. We will decide this according to our own timetable and not according to the wishes of anyone else. And only the Shiites can decide who is going to be the next prime minister. The Sunni or the Kurds will not be able to dictate that decision to them. Sistani has set very clear markers: The new government must not repeat its past mistakes; it

has to be acceptable to all communities and has to be a national unity government.

**SPIEGEL:** Do you still believe in national unity?

**Zebari:** Of course. We have debated this with Maliki for many months. A political majority is not enough in Iraq. You can win but you cannot govern with it. It is not "winner take all" in Iraq. There has to be a compromise.

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