

Iraq PM warns of Syria crisis spillover
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Iraq's prime minister has warned that a victory for rebels in the Syrian civil war will create a new extremist haven and destabilise the wider Middle East, sparking a sectarian war in his own country, a civil war in Lebanon and a division in Jordan.

Nouri al-Maliki stopped short of voicing outright support for Syrian President Bashar Assad's embattled regime.

But his comments in a wide-ranging interview with The Associated Press on Wednesday marked one of his strongest warnings yet about the turmoil that the collapse of the Syrian government could create.

"If the world does not agree to support a peaceful solution through dialogue ... then I see no light at the end of the tunnel," al-Maliki said.

"Neither the opposition nor the regime can finish each other off," he continued. "The most dangerous thing in this process is that if the opposition is victorious, there will be a civil war in Lebanon, divisions in Jordan and a sectarian war in Iraq."

Iraq has tried to maintain a neutral stance toward the civil war in Syria, saying that the aspirations of the Syrian people should be met through peaceful means.

Washington has criticised Baghdad, however, for doing too little to stop flights suspected of carrying Iranian arms to Syria from transiting Iraqi airspace.

Al-Maliki emphatically denied aiding the arms transfers: "Not to the regime and not to the opposition. No weapon is being transferred through Iraqi skies, territories or waters," he said.

The Iraqi leader's comments come as his government confronts growing tensions of its own between the Shia majority and an increasingly restive Sunni minority nearly a decade after the US-led invasion of Iraq.

'Sunni-Shia strife'

The war in Syria has sharp sectarian overtones, with predominantly Sunni rebels fighting a regime dominated by Alawites, an offshoot of Shia Islam.

Assad's main allies are Shia Iran and the Shia group Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah also warned on Wednesday against sectarian infighting in Lebanon related to the Syrian civil war.

"There are some who are working night and day and pushing the country toward civil and religious strife, and specifically Sunni-Shia strife," Nasrallah said on the group's Al-Manar TV.

If this were to happen, he said, it would "destroy everyone and burn down the entire country."

Nasrallah denied accusations by the Syrian opposition that members of the group were fighting alongside forces loyal to the Assad regime, and reiterated that some Shia in villages along the Lebanese-Syrian border, including Hezbollah members, have taken up arms in self-defense against Sunni gunmen.