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## Looking back at Washington, Baghdad wants to revive coop with Moscow

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The first official visit of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to Moscow is not likely to be easy but it may become a breakthrough. The goal of the visit is to discuss economic and military cooperation with the Russian leaders.

On April 10, he will meet President Dmitry Medvedev and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin for talks on a broad range of issues. The Iraqi Government's official spokesman Ali ad-Dabbag reported that during this visit the prime minister will be accompanied by foreign, defense, and electric power industry ministers, as well as a delegation of the national oil ministry.

After the talks, on April 11, al-Maliki will hold a RIA Novosti-organized news conference in the President Hotel.

The overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime in April 2003 set the beginning of Iraq's new history and new relations with Russia. It is no secret that many Russian politicians and political scientists from the Old Guards, especially from the communist and liberal democratic parties, vigorously opposed the new Iraqi leaders, calling them George W. Bush's puppets. As distinct from them, the Kremlin did not stick labels but expressed its desire to cooperate with the new Iraqi authorities. Receiving in the Kremlin head of the Temporary Governing Council of Iraq Abdel-Aziz al-Hakim in December 2003, President Vladimir Putin promised him to write off 80% of Iraq's ten billion debt and carried out his promise.

The debt was written off in 2006, but in response Moscow did not get the preferences it had expected. This became clear during the visit of Iraqi oil minister Hussein al-Shahristani in August 2007. After the talks with Minister of Industry and Energy Viktor Khristenko, he declared that the decision to write off the debt would not be linked with other issues, and that Russian companies, including LUKoil, will not have any preferences in Iraq, but will t ontests on a common ground.

In March 1977, LUKoil signed an agreement with the Iraqi government to develop the Western Kurna-2 deposit, but in 2002 Saddam Hussein unilaterally severed the contract, referring to Russia's failure to abide by its commitments. The new Iraqi authorities declared their refusal to recognize the agreements signed under Saddam Hussein. They specified that the deposit's future will be decided by a tender, in which Russian companies can take part on a par with others. During his visit to Moscow, the Iraqi oil minister met LUKoil President Vagit Alekperov but the results of the meeting were not made public.

The Iraqi prime minister is not going to Moscow empty-handed. As RIA Novosti was told by a source in the Iraqi government, Al-Maliki will bring proposals on cooperation in trade and the economy, and also in the military sphere. "It is not ruled out that a revision of the contracts signed by Russian companies under the previous regime will be the result of the Iraqi prime minister's talks in Moscow," he said. Incidentally, Russian specialists worked in Iraq during the war of 2003, and are still working there now, for instance power engineers at the Dora and Yusifiya electric power stations near Baghdad.

Military cooperation is a special issue. Under Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi army was armed with Soviet weapons by 80%. Iraq was supplied with Soviet weapons up to 1991 when the troops of the international coalition launched their Desert Storm Operation in response to Iraq's occupation of Kuwait. After this war, Russia joined UN sanctions, which included an embargo on military supplies to Iraq.

Today, the Iraqi army and police are being taught by American and British instructors but Iraqi soldiers and officers are much more confident with the Kalashnikov rifle than the American M-16 rifle. They have been taught to handle Russian (Soviet) weapons. Baghdad may ask Moscow to equip its army with new Russian military hardware. It is very interested in new aircraft, tanks, and air defense weapons train its military specialists in Russia as it used to do before.

However, there are no reasons to be too tempted by the prospects of cooperation with Baghdad. As distinct from Saddam's Iraq, where the Soviet Union and Russia had very strong positions, today's Iraq is giving priority to U.S. and other Western companies. Therefore, in building new relations with Russia, the al-Maliki government will always look back at Washington. The only question is to what extent. The opinions expressed in this article are the author's and do not necessarily represent those of RIA Novosti.

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