

Iraq's New Government

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On September 8, 2014 Iraqi Prime Minister Haydar al-'Abadi presented his newly formed cabinet to the parliament. The chamber hastily approved it, with a significant number of absentees.¹ During the month of negotiations leading up to the cabinet's establishment, 'Abadi had faced pressure and demands from various quarters. The resulting patchwork cabinet proves that the numerous fractious and contending sectors in Iraq are still capable of conducting negotiations with one another, and even compromising to reach solutions. The relatively swift conclusion of the negotiations was evidence of the powerful external and internal pressures currently facing Iraq. In contrast, it took Nuri al-Maliki eight months to form a cabinet in 2010.

Thus far, 'Abadi appears to be a different kind of Iraqi leader than Maliki, projecting a modest and unassuming image. He has forbidden the use of the honorific "His Excellency the Prime Minister" (*Dawlat Ra'is al-Wuzara'a*), in his presence or in connection with him, in contrast to Maliki's practice.² Maliki appears to have abandoned his opposition to 'Abadi's nomination, but he has not given up on his political career. Maliki has been traveling across the Shi'i areas of Iraq delivering fiery sectarian speeches. He recently visited the Shi'i Turcoman town of Amerli, in the Salah al-Din province, which had been recaptured by the Iraqi military forces, Shi'i militias, and the Kurdish Regional Government's (KRG)'s *peshmerga* following a summer-long siege by Islamic State (IS) forces.³ However, 'Abadi's modest personality might not serve him well as a prime minister, because some Iraqis view his cabinet as an "Ammar al-Hakim

¹ Mustafa Habib, "[amid boycotts, chaos and constitutional violations, a new iraqi government is born](#)," *Niqash*, September 11, 2014.

² Al Hurra TV, September 11, 2014.

³ Shalaw Mohammed, "[inside amerli: the day after iran-iraq-kurdish-us forces break extremist siege](#)," *Niqash*, September 4, 2014.

government,” referring to the leader of a rival Shi‘i religious party, “Citizen” (*Muwatin*), that controls important ministries such as oil and transportation.⁴

The new cabinet has 34 members. Since 2006, the ministry of interior has been led by Shi‘i politicians, who filled the rank and file of the Iraqi police force and security services with Shi‘i militiamen. Consequently, the ministry has become a Shi‘i stronghold. The ministry of defense was headed by a Sunni minister. He was either a professional officer in the army or, in the case of the previous minister Sa’dun al-Dulaymi, an academic, but these Sunni officials did not have the support of the Sunni population in Iraq or a base of power in the army. Following a delay, on October 18, the parliament approved the nomination of a Shi‘a, Muhammad al-Ghabban, as minister of interior and a Sunni, Khalid al-‘Ubaydi, as minister of defense. This appears to be an indication that ‘Abadi is preserving the existing arrangement.⁵ Ghabban was nominated despite his senior position in the Badr militia,⁶ and perhaps as a substitute for Hadi al-‘Amiri, the militia’s leader, whose candidacy was opposed by the Sunnis. ‘Ubaydi’s nomination appears to have a symbolic function. He is a former army general from Mosul and a close associate of senior Sunni politician Osama al-Nujayfi, also from Mosul. ‘Ubaydi, the new defense minister, is expected to be able to persuade the residents of Mosul to rise up against the Islamic State (IS) forces, which have controlled the city since June. Yet no one seriously expects him to send a modified version of the Iraqi army to Mosul to directly confront the IS.

The selection of ministers reflects the key issues raised during the negotiations. The Kurds appear to have ceded the ministry of foreign affairs in exchange for the ministry of finance. One of the main sources of tension between the KRG and Baghdad is an outstanding \$8 billion payment that the KRG believes it is owed by the central government. To resolve the issue, the Kurds decided controlling the ministry of finance would work in their favor. As the KRG authorities in Irbil essentially conduct an independent foreign policy, the ministry of foreign affairs in Baghdad has become redundant for the Kurds. The new cabinet initially had three Kurdish ministers, in contrast to four in the previous cabinet. On October 18, three additional Kurdish ministers were added to the cabinet’s ranks. Additionally, the outgoing minister of foreign affairs, Hoshiyar Zibari, exchanged roles with Roz Nuri Shawish and became minister of finance. The Kurds also gave up a vice-presidential position (the president Fu‘ad Ma’sum, is a Kurd). Of the three vice-presidents, two (Maliki and Iyad al-‘Allawi) are Shi‘is and one (Nujayfi) is a Sunni. This is the only minor change to the accepted

⁴ Personal communication with an Iraqi intellectual based in Baghdad.

⁵ “[Iraq in Crisis: MPs complete anti-IS government](#),” *BBC News*, October 18, 2014.

⁶ The Badr militia was a major Shi‘i participant in the sectarian civil war of 2006-2007 and is well entrenched in the Iraqi police and security services.

distribution of political power in post-2003 Iraq, according to which the president is a Kurd, the speaker of parliament a Sunni Arab, and the prime minister is the leader of the biggest parliamentary bloc, and presumably a Shi'a. In September, the Kurds were focused more on preserving the KRG's autonomy than they were on expanding their power in the new government in Baghdad. Later, however, the Kurdish bloc bargained hard with 'Abadi over additional ministries, but this may simply have been simply a means to project the image that the Kurds are still firmly invested in the Baghdad government.

Significantly, the number of Sunni Arab ministers in 'Abadi's government was increased from four to nine (of 34), which exceeds their proportion in the Iraqi population (18-20 percent). This is no doubt the result of Sunni political pressure, with support from the U.S., Turkey and Saudi Arabia. The status of the Sunni provinces has been one of the core issues in Iraqi politics in recent years. The minister of state for provincial affairs was, until recently, the governor of the Salah al-Din (Tikrit) Province, a significant part of which was taken by the IS in June 2014. Similarly, the minister of electricity, Qasim al-Fahdawi, was the former governor of Anbar, a province that has recently been overrun by the IS.

Quantitatively and qualitatively, Shi'is still predominate in 'Abadi's government. Eighteen of 34 ministries are in the hands of Shi'is, including most of the important ministries: foreign affairs (Ibrahim al-Ja'fari), oil ('Adil 'Abd al-Mahdi), interior (Ghabban), and transportation (Baqir Jabr Solagh al-Zubaydi). One of the two female cabinet members, the minister of health, 'Adila Hamud, is also an observant Shi'i. Four of the Shi'i ministers – Ja'fari, Zubaydi, Mahdi and, Minister of Higher Education Hussein Shahrastani – are senior politicians and not simply technocrats. Ja'fari is a former prime minister and is widely believed to be responsible for engineering Maliki's ouster. Mahdi, a Baghdadi and a member of 'Ammar al-Hakim's bloc, has excellent connections with Washington and the Americans considered him as a possible alternative to Maliki.⁷ He was nominated to head the ministry of oil despite calls from the oil-rich province of Basra to have a Basrawi minister.⁸

During the negotiations, a grassroots movement emerged calling for the abolition of the ethno-sectarian quota or apportionment (*muhasasa*) that is instrumental in determining the distribution of power in the government. Initiated by student activists, the movement has turned into a broad political movement, and won the open support of the new president, Ma'sum, and the

⁷ Personal communication with an American source.

⁸ Al Hurra TV, September 12, 2014, and Waheed Ghanim, "[oil but no power: basra jockets for a bigger share in new gov't](#)," *Niqash*, August 21, 2014.

head of the “Iraqiyya” parliamentary bloc, Iyad al-‘Allawi. The movement focused on two ministries that have been notoriously affected by the apportionment: the ministry of higher education and the ministry of youth and sports. The movement demanded that the nominees for these ministries should be chosen based on merit and qualifications in these two respective fields.⁹ Despite considerable public support, the movement failed: Shi‘i politicians were nominated for the two ministries, demonstrating once again that the Iraqi cabinet is still very much based on the ethno-sectarian affiliation of its members.¹⁰

The new government faces a long list of challenges. Obviously, fighting the Islamic State is the most urgent issue. The IS is rapidly approaching Baghdad from the west and southwest. Without the threat of the Islamic State to unite against, it is doubtful whether the new government would have any chance of solving the complicated disputes that bedeviled previous governments, such as relations between Baghdad and the KRG, the distribution of natural resources, power sharing between the provinces and the center in Baghdad, disarming countless militias, amendments to the 2005 constitution, and regulating party activities and financial sources. However, the first important test facing ‘Abadi’s government is how to convince the Iraqi public that this is a true “government of national unity.” With the advances of IS in the predominantly Sunni regions of Iraq, the concomitant radicalization of the Sunni-Shi‘i sectarian discourse, and ever-expanding Kurdish aspirations for independence, which include irredentist claims over disputed territories, this will not be an easy task.

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⁹ Mustafa Habib, “[baghdad’s ministries without quotas: new political campaign against sectarian politics](#),” *Niqash*, August 7, 2014, and personal communication with an activist involved in the campaign.

¹⁰ Mustafa Habib, “[amid boycotts, chaos and constitutional violations, a new iraqi government is born](#),” provides a complete list of ministers and their ethnic and sectarian affiliations. For another source in Arabic, see: http://www.iraq2020.org/index.php?p=profile&id_user=294#.VEY4JLccRMw.

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