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A New Government in Baghdad: Background and Prospects

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On August 12, after four months of negotiations, Iraq's newly elected Kurdish president, Fu'ad Ma'sum, asked Dr. Haydar al-'Abadi, a former first deputy speaker of parliament, to select a new cabinet within 30 days and form a coalition government. All of Iraq's main political groups (Sunnis, Kurds, Shi'a) reacted favorably to the prospect of 'Abadi assuming the post of prime minister, as did the U.S, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. The acting prime minister and incumbent, Nuri al-Maliki, condemned the act and claimed that the move was "a violation of the constitution," which stipulates that the president must first summon the leader of the largest party to form a government, and Maliki is the leader of the State of Law bloc, which is the largest in parliament. However, Maliki said he would not resort to using the army and the security services to challenge the decision. Maliki will likely pursue his challenge in federal court and organize popular demonstrations, but his chances of returning to power or destabilizing the capital appear to be slim. Regardless of 'Abadi's success in forming a cabinet and a stable coalition, the episode leading to his appointment reveals a dysfunctional element in Iraq's political system. 'Abadi was not popularly elected, neither by the people nor the parliament. Instead, he was selected because he was acceptable to both the Americans and Iranians. Ironically, this was similar to how Maliki came to power in June 2006. And while many Iraqis see 'Abadi's candidacy as a step in the right direction, Iraqi leadership in the "Green Zone" has never been so disconnected from the rest of Iraq.

In April 2014, Nuri al-Maliki and his party won the largest number of seats in the general elections. With 92 seats and a convincing victory in all of the Shi'i provinces, including Baghdad, Maliki seemed to be well-positioned to retain the premiership. Iraq was expecting a prolonged negotiation for the formation of a coalition government, similar to the post-electoral negotiations in 2010, which

lasted eight months. Maliki's opponents (Sunnis, Kurds, independents, and other Shi'i parties) insisted that Maliki would not serve as prime minister for a third term, but failed to produce a strong alternative. Further complicating the issue was a unique political deadlock that was referred to as "The Crisis of the Presidents" (*Azmat al-Ru'asa'a*). The parliament had to elect three leaders: a president of Iraq to replace the ailing Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, in line with post-2003 Iraqi political norms; a Sunni speaker of parliament (president of the assembly); and a Shi'i prime minister. The president, whose position is mainly symbolic and ceremonial, is the official charged with designating a candidate to form a governing coalition and serve as prime minister, which was why the nomination of Fu'ad Ma'sum as president on July 17 was so important. It came a day after the parliament approved the nomination of Salim al-Jaburi as speaker of parliament.

One month earlier, on June 15, Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, was occupied by ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and *al-Sham*/Greater Syria) which routed Iraqi government forces, expanded its control over large areas in the north and west of the country, and for a time even appeared to be headed towards Baghdad. This disrupted the "normal" pattern of Iraqi politics. Maliki's opponents received unexpected support from Iran, and, even more significantly, from the U.S. The Obama administration did not hide its unhappiness with Maliki and blamed him for the fall of Mosul and the deterioration of Iraqi security. The U.S. administration correctly believed that Maliki's sectarian policies and authoritarian rule alienated Iraq's Sunnis and contributed to their uprising against the Iraqi government. The Americans consistently drew a connection between the performance of the Iraqi forces on the ground and the political crisis in the "Green Zone" (Baghdad's heavily secured government compound). In mid-August, American military aircraft began attacking ISIS troops in order to halt an ISIS massacre of the Yezidi minority, assist the Kurdish *peshmerga* forces, and protect the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The Americans also conditioned any further military aid to Iraq on an end to the political deadlock in the Green Zone.

The external pressure appears to have worked. The Iraqi independent media began discussing the names of Shi'i politicians who might replace Maliki. Some of them, like Tariq al-Najm and 'Ali al-Adib, were close associates of Maliki and members of his bloc.¹ This suggests that the idea of replacing Maliki was supported by members of his own State of Law bloc. Haydar al-'Abadi was not one of the alternatives mentioned in the media, which reported that former Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Ja'fari played an important role in convincing

¹ *Al Hurra TV*, August 8, 2014.

members of State of Law to oust Maliki.² The Shi'i religious establishment of Iraq, headed by Grand Ayatollah 'Ali Sistani, opposed another term for Maliki, and may have also played a behind the scenes role in convincing him to leave office without a violent struggle.³

Typical of Green Zone politics and diplomacy, 'Abadi's nomination and Maliki's ouster were part of a quiet arrangement between the U.S. and Iran. Apparently, there was an American agreement with Iran over the identity of the candidate to replace Maliki.⁴ Both sides were extremely unhappy with Maliki and feared Iraq might collapse. The appointment of Ma'sum as president, who expressed the Kurdish desire to remove Maliki, was the last link in the plan. Consequently, 126 Shi'i MPs, including many from Maliki's own party, recommended 'Abadi's candidacy to Ma'sum.⁵ 'Abadi was chosen as the compromise candidate because he is a member of the State of Law bloc, which reduces the prospect of a constitutional challenge, and because he enjoys good relations with both Washington and Tehran.⁶

'Abadi was born in Baghdad in 1952. An electrical engineer by profession, he left Iraq in the late 1970s and settled in the United Kingdom. He returned to Iraq in 2003 after the U.S. invasion and served as minister of communication in the transitional government established by the Americans. During his period as minister, the Iraqi communications sector expanded. 'Abadi earned popular support when he demanded that the agents of "Blackwater," a private American security contractor, whose guards killed 17 Iraqi civilians in a 2007 shooting, should not enjoy immunity from prosecution and should be brought to justice.⁷ In 2009-2010, he joined Maliki, who split both the Shi'i coalition and the *Da'wa* party and founded the State of Law bloc. Socially, he belongs to the same class of politicians who have ruled Iraq since 2003: an expatriate who lived in exile throughout Saddam's presidency (1979-2003). In the post-Saddam era of Iraqi politics there has been a glass ceiling that prevents Iraqis who lived in Iraq throughout the Ba'th period from attaining senior positions in "The New Iraq."

'Abadi's first task will be to form a cabinet and a parliamentary coalition. Anything but a cabinet of "national unity," in which Sunnis, Kurds, and Shi'is from other parties would receive significant ministries, is out of the question. A battle

² Mustafa Habib, "[confrontation, reconciliation and cooked books: the new iraqi prime minister's biggest challenges](#)," *niqash*, August 14, 2014.

³ Ali Mamouri, "[How did Sistani succeed in ousting Maliki?](#)," *Al Monitor – Iraq Pulse*, August 20, 2014.

⁴ Mustafa Habib, "[confrontation, reconciliation and cooked books: the new iraqi prime minister's biggest challenges](#)," *niqash*, August 14, 2014; and personal communication with undisclosed sources.

⁵ *Al Hurra TV*, August 12, 2014.

⁶ Personal communication with undisclosed sources.

⁷ Susan Webb, "[Iraq sues Blackwater over killing spree](#)," *People's World*, January 5, 2010.

is expected over the ministries of the interior and oil, currently controlled by Maliki loyalists. In the meantime, political activists have established a campaign to change the organizing principle of the cabinet, which has been based on ethno-sectarian affiliation rather than merit and qualifications. This campaign enjoys widespread support among Iraqis and is officially backed by the new president and 'Iyyad 'Allawi, a former interim prime minister and head of the 2010'Iraqiyya bloc. If 'Abadi accepts this proposal, he would be challenging the existing political system, which distributes cabinet offices along ethno-sectarian lines, in a practice referred to as "*Muhasasa*" ("apportionment"), which serves as the basis for Iraq's political alignments today. It will also be interesting to see whether 'Abadi will follow Maliki and appoint politically loyal senior officers to the army and the security services, a move that could affect Iraq's fighting capability.

To be sure, it would be naïve to expect this reshuffle to dramatically affect the fighting taking place against ISIS in the Sunni countryside. It could negatively affect the motivation of Iraqi Shi'is to volunteer for military service and undermine cooperation between the Iraqi military and Shi'i paramilitary forces, such as the *'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* (League of the Righteous), which have already expressed their support for 'Abadi. Before his ouster, Maliki was the most popular Shi'i politician. He used this popularity to inspire a large number of volunteers who were sent to the front lines. There is some danger that Maliki loyalists would exercise little restraint in the field and massacre Sunni civilians. A massacre of this sort, carried out by unknown Shi'i militiamen, appears to have already taken place on August 22 near Ba'quba. On the other hand, cooperation between the Iraqi military, the Kurds and the U.S. may improve, as the latter two viewed Maliki unfavorably. With Maliki gone, the Kurds felt free to battle ISIS beyond the KRG's borders with the goal of recapturing Mosul. Maliki's departure may also set in motion a process of reconciliation with Sunni politicians that may include a change in the government's policy of deba'thification, which Maliki opposed. In particular, Sunni politicians are lobbying for the release of senior military officers from Saddam's army (including his former defense minister Sultan Hashim, who happens to be from Mosul), and use them to fight ISIS.⁸

The new government's ability to convince the Sunni tribes who have been siding with ISIS to support the new government will depend on more than just the identity of the Shi'i prime minister in the Green Zone. U.S. aid in reviving the tribal militias that participated in the 2005-2008 *Sahwa* ("Awakening"), exploiting emerging differences between ISIS and its allies, and mounting hostility toward ISIS from important tribes in areas that ISIS has conquered and

⁸ Interview with Fawzi 'Abdal-Rahim, *Al Hurra TV*, August 24, 2014.

controls, may prove more important to the new government than ‘Abadi’s role. Nevertheless, ‘Abadi’s selection and Maliki’s departure may help facilitate these developments. Finally, ‘Abadi used to support a centralized Iraqi state, much like his ex-patron, Maliki. For now, fighting ISIS appears to be the government’s priority. In the long run, ‘Abadi may find himself dealing with many of the same problems that Maliki faced, particularly as the Kurds seek greater autonomy.

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