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From Maliki to Abadi: The Challenge of Being Iraq's Prime Minister

Harith Hasan Al-Qarawee

On April 30 and May 20, 2016, protesters, including supporters of Muqtada al-Sadr, breached the heavily fortified Green Zone in Baghdad that houses Iraq's Parliament as well as the prime minister's office. Challenging the Iraqi prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, and demanding reforms, the protesters were eventually confronted by security forces, leaving several dead.[1]

Haider al-Abadi headed the new government that was voted into power by the parliament in September 2014. This new government was hailed by the United States; by Iraq's most powerful Shia cleric, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani; by the prominent cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, and by most Kurdish and Sunni parties. The only voiced objections came from the former prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, and his associates. Ending Maliki's prime ministership became a necessity for all those parties, who saw him as a divisive figure with a legacy of exclusivist and authoritarian policies. The United States had played an important role in forcing Maliki out of office despite his sweeping victory in the April 2014 general election.[2] U.S. officials, including President Obama, had criticized Maliki for following policies that undermined the achievements of 2008, when cooperation between U.S. forces, the Iraqi government, and local Sunni fighters helped create a proper framework to undercut al-Qaeda in Iraq. Likewise, Iraqi parties that had been critical of Maliki's authoritarian tendencies hoped that Abadi would abide by power-sharing agreements and govern in a more inclusive mode. The new prime minister promised to do so in his governmental program, announcing ambitious plans for national reconciliation, for improving relations between Iraqi communities, and for reforming state institutions.

This Brief reviews Abadi's premiership so far and seeks to answer the following questions: How much has Abadi's governance differed from—or resembled—Maliki's? And has the transition from Maliki to Abadi led to any significant change in Iraq's political dynamics? The Brief argues that, despite improvements in his style of governing, Abadi could not make a significant alteration regarding major political issues, especially those pertaining to relations with the Kurish and the Sunni groups, constitutional reforms and political and security arrangements in the war against ISIS. The necessary conclusion is that Iraq's main problems are systemic and related to the way the whole political system is structured. A Shia prime minister like Abadi needs to command a broad constituency that is loyal to and supportive of him in order to make the concessions and compromises that a new political compact would require. Abadi, although armed with good intentions and the desire to make a difference, lacks such a constituency and, as a result, has not been able to make those changes.

The Da'wa Party and Intra-Shia Rivalries

To understand why Abadi has not yet been able to deliver the changes he promised, one needs first to look at the dynamics shaping intra-Shia politics. As a result of those dynamics, Abadi lost the support of his electoral bloc, State of Law (SOL), without securing genuine support from alternative Shia forces. Consequently, the main challenge to his prime ministership came from within his Shia base, leaving him in a weak position from which he was unlikely to be able to institute essential reforms at the national level.

Since the formation of Iraq's transitional government led by Ibrahim al-Jaafari in 2005, Da'wa, a Shia party, has occupied the prime ministership. The early decision to award this position to Da'wa was a compromise between the then two largest Shia groups, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), led by the Hakim family, and the Muqtada al-Sadr movement. The two groups and their leading families had fiercely competed and clashed both politically and militarily. This led various Shia groups to conclude that selecting a Da'wa member as prime minister was the minimum requirement for securing unity in the Shia alliance, given that the party was the smallest among the three groups contesting for power in Iraq. Similar calculations led to the appointment of Maliki to the position in 2006, especially after the Kurdish alliance refused to agree to a new full term for Ibrahim al-Jaafari, who was accused of having engaged in a unilateral style of leadership.

During his first two years in office, Maliki appeared to be very weak and was largely ineffective. His constituency in the parliament comprised only a handful of Da'wa MPs. He was constantly complaining that he had no real power over his government and that ministers and other state officials followed the instructions of their parties rather than *his* directives. In this context, Maliki seems to have concluded that his survival required a loyal political bloc rather than a deal between ISCI, Sadrists, the Kurdish alliance, and the Sunni coalition, none of whom had any interest in empowering him.

The political scene began to change significantly in 2008, especially following the Maliki-led military operation in Basra, which forced Sadr's militia to withdraw from Iraq's only port city and the source of about 70 percent of its oil production.

Dr. Harith Hasan Al-Qarawee is a Junior Research Fellow at the Crown Center where he is working on a book titled "Shiism and State in Iraq: Authority, Identity and Politics."

Additionally, the formation of the Awakening Groups, which helped downgrade al-Qaeda in Sunni areas and reduced sectarian violence in Baghdad, had further strengthened Maliki and reconstructed his image as a strong and determined leader.

Building on those successes, Maliki formed State of Law (SOL), a Da'wa-led coalition which emerged as the largest and most popular Shia coalition in both the provincial election of 2009 and the general election of 2010. He subsequently became more confident in making his own decisions, pursuing a more aggressive approach, and acting in a more authoritarian way, in particular seeking to consolidate his personal power over state institutions. Although he could not acquire full control, he was heading in that direction, especially after his sweeping victory in the general election of April 2014.

This explains why the Muqtada al-Sadr movement and ISCI decided to overcome their history of hostility and work together to counter the threat caused by Maliki's increasing popularity and his consolidation of power. But it was only when Mosul, the second largest Iraqi city, fell to ISIS, and several units of the Iraqi army collapsed, that new conditions for challenging Maliki began to materialize. The United States blamed Maliki and his policies for intensifying the sectarian divide that had created a suitable environment for ISIS to recruit and mobilize and to acquire territory. U.S. officials concluded that it was necessary to have a less divisive prime minister in order to advance the war against ISIS.[3]

The most powerful Shia cleric in Iraq, Ali al-Sistani, also favored removing Maliki. Additionally, several senior Da'wa members, including Abadi, thought that Maliki's insistence on staying in office for a third term would jeopardize the party's chances of maintaining the prime ministership. At the end, Maliki was left with only one major backer: Iran. Despite Iran's backing, however, the party could not ignore Sistani's will. In the end, Sistani's position and the United States' desire to see a new prime minister put enough pressure on Iran so that it withdrew its support for Maliki.[4]

Shia religious authorities and major groups, particularly the Sadr movement and ISCI, hoped that Abadi would be less authoritarian and more willing to share power. Their long-term objective was to undermine Maliki's influence within state institutions and the military, which, as prime minister and commander-in-chief, he had managed to solidify by appointing his loyalists to key senior positions. In the end, Da'wa and other State of Law (SOL) leaders were emboldened to propose a new candidate for the position.

In August 2014, the Shia Alliance accepted the nomination of Abadi to be the new prime minister, and the Iraqi president, Fuad Masum, asked him to form a new government, notwithstanding Maliki's objections.

Abadi's Prime Ministership: Undoing Maliki

Despite the broad support that existed for replacing Maliki, Iraqi political parties have been less interested in installing an effective prime minister and enabling him to succeed. Undoing Maliki was the main objective, even if the price was to move back to the 2006 conditions, with a weak prime minister amidst a chaotic political scene. Abadi had to choose between fighting the influential networks that Maliki had embedded within state institutions, or allying with the latter in order to secure the support of SOL, which was still led by the previous prime minister. The conflict between Abadi's need to be different from Maliki and his desire not to be at the mercy of other political groups helps explain his hesitation and indecisiveness, as well as some of his political ventures.

When Abadi came to office, the main challenge he faced was to prove that he was different from Maliki. He spent his first months in office trying to distance himself from the latter's legacy by adopting a more institutionally based and inclusive style of leadership, building better relations with Parliament and exhibiting a higher level of administrative professionalism. Specifically, Abadi took three significant steps toward reversing Maliki's leadership style. The first was to eliminate the position of commander in chief, which Maliki had used to circumvent the Ministry of Defense and make military decisions in isolation from the formal chain of command. This was seen as a necessary step toward restructuring the Iraqi army according to professional standards, especially as it was followed by replacing most of the military commanders that had served under Maliki with new ones.[5]

Secondly, Abadi's government agreed on the "cabinet by-law:" a set of rules governing the meetings of the Council of Ministers in such a way as to organize its decision-making process. Non-Da'wa parties had often argued that the absence of this by-law had helped Maliki concentrate the government's powers in his office. This measure was intended, at least theoretically, to make the operations of the government a collective responsibility, rather than concentrating it in Abadi's own person.[6]

Thirdly, Abadi reversed his predecessor's policies by accepting more decentralization. He withdrew Maliki's objection to a parliamentary amendment that transferred some of the federal government's authority to the provinces.[7] He further extended this policy when he declared his first reforms package on August 9, 2015, abolishing four ministries and transferring their authority either to other ministries or to the provinces.[8]

What Abadi could not significantly change, however, was the dysfunctionality of Iraqi institutions in addressing major political issues. It is important to note that Abadi's government was established as a national unity government, based on a political agreement among major Iraqi parties. The agreement stipulated that the government should be based on a "real partnership" and should seek to achieve national reconciliation. Accordingly, the government was to work within six months to propose an amnesty law, to reform the de-Baathification law (officially called the Accountability and Justice Law), to amend Iraq's anti-terrorism law, and to expedite the processing of detainees' cases. (These were mostly Sunni demands.)

Moreover, the agreement stated that likewise within six months, the government would ban any military formations outside the state (this was referring particularly to the powerful Shia militias); restructure Iraqi military forces by making them more professional and inclusive; regulate the operation of anti-terrorism units and intelligence bodies; and establish new security frameworks for the provinces. Additionally, within three months, the government would complete the formation of the "National Guards:" an arrangement initially proposed by the U.S. to integrate Sunni tribal and local fighters in the security apparatus and give them more responsibility for defending their areas. The agreement also included other provisions instructing the government to reform the administration, activate anti-corruption measures, decentralize governance, and resolve disputes with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).[9]

None of these deadlines have been met, however; once in office, Abadi lacked the leverage to establish the consensus needed to legislate and implement them. The Shia alliance itself was deeply divided. Maliki and his allies, mostly Iranian-backed groups such as the Badr organization and Asaib Ahl al-Hak (AAH), did not trust Abadi, thereby depriving him of the support of his own coalition, SOL. Sadr, Hakim, and other groups that had supported removing Maliki wanted Abadi to focus on dismantling Maliki's network of influence within state institutions and were less interested in enabling him to be an effective leader.

Meanwhile, the Da'wa Party was split between Abadi's and Maliki's allies and was therefore not in a position to develop an active approach to confronting all these challenges.

The Difficulty of Making a Difference

Politicians in a weak position cannot make strong and sustainable deals—and this is an important lesson that can be learned from the Iraqi experience. Lacking a broad and committed constituency, Abadi could not reform relations with other communities, nor set forth a clear vision for post-ISIS Iraq.

The Kurds

Relations with the Kurds have continued to be problematic since Maliki's second term and seem headed in the direction of more tension. Baghdad and Erbil, "the capital of Kurdistan," disagreed on the share of the Iraqi budget and on how to manage Iraq's and Kurdistan's oil resources. The KRG has been complaining since the rise of tension with Maliki's government, particularly during his second term (2010-2014), that it has not been receiving the stipulated 17 percent of the federal budget, including expenditures on the region's security forces, the Peshmerga.[10] This percentage was established by the interim government of Ayad Allawi and was meant to reflect the population of areas under the KRG, although many Arab politicians questioned the accuracy of this percentage, given that Iraq had not conducted a reliable census since 1987 and that a considerable number of Kurds live outside such areas controlled by the KRG, including Kirkuk and Diyala. For its part, Baghdad protested against the contracts that the KRG had unilaterally signed with international oil companies (IOCs) to invest in its oil fields and export production without the approval of the federal government. The two sides offered different interpretations of the constitutional provisions addressing the management and exportation of oil and whether that was an exclusive authority of the federal government or one shared with—or that could be unilaterally assumed by—the region.[11]

Abadi and his minister of oil, Adil Abd al-Mahdi, tried to negotiate a new deal to resolve those disputes with the KRG. In November 2014, the two sides reached a temporary agreement, albeit one that could not stand for a long time, especially once oil prices plummeted and the two sides started to look for ways to compensate for their shrinking resources. Currently, there is no functional arrangement governing relations between Baghdad and Erbil.

The KRG keeps accusing Baghdad of penalizing its population by delaying stipend payments to Kurdish government employees. The region continued exporting oil from its fields and from Kirkuk, which had been subjected to the de facto control of Kurdish forces; but the resources generated from those exports are still less than what the region secures from its share of the federal budget.[12]

Expressing disappointment with Baghdad's attitude, KRG president Masoud Barzani threatened to organize a referendum on the independence of Kurdistan. Conversely, Baghdad accused the KRG of acting as an independent state with its own autonomous foreign, security, and economic policies. The federal government argued that it was within its exclusive powers to export oil and to make agreements with foreign countries and companies. According to a senior Iraqi official, "if Kurdistan wants to split from Iraq, nobody will prevent it from doing so."[13]

Sunni Arabs

Another important issue that Abadi failed to resolve was relations with Sunni Arabs. Abadi was aware that his predecessor had been repeatedly accused of pursuing exclusivist sectarian policies, and he tried to avoid such accusations. Indeed, the political agreement that established the government made it a requirement to pass new laws and measures to address sectarian tensions. For example, the National Guards law was suggested as a mechanism whereby security apparatuses would be decentralized and local Sunni fighters motivated to secure their areas by giving them governmental guarantees and adding them to a sustainable formal payroll system.

Abadi could not get major parties to agree on a single version of this law, however. Most Shia parties, including his own SOL, were suspicious that the law would end up creating a Sunni military force that would be paid by the government but whose loyalty would lie somewhere else. Accordingly, those parties proposed formalizing the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMFs), which were predominantly irregular Shia forces, and integrating Sunni fighters into its formations. Pressure from the Shia alliance forced Abadi to go with this option.

Initially, Maliki attempted to use his leverage within powerful groups in the PMFs, such as Badr and AAH, to weaken Abadi's authority. Before leaving office, he issued a decree turning the PMFs into a formal body organized and funded by the state. Confronting that reality and in order not to antagonize the PMFs, Abadi instructed his ministers to deal with the PMFs as an official body under his authority as commander in chief.[14]

Currently, the government plans to integrate some thirty to forty thousand Sunni fighters in the PMFs, and intends to propose a law organizing them as a military body composed of about one hundred twenty thousand members and affiliated with the Ministry of Defense.[15] There is a common belief, however, that the PMFs still largely function as an autonomous force and that Abadi's control over their actions is limited if not nominal, his ability to act as an effective commander in chief thereby compromised by the presence of these powerful armed forces on the ground. In addition, many Sunni politicians accused PMFs of acting as a sectarian organization and committing crimes against Sunni civilians.[16]

Abadi also failed to coordinate more effectively with Sunni tribal and local forces fighting against ISIS, which was seen as a necessary step for defeating the terrorist groups and preparing for post-ISIS challenges. But his hands were tied by the pressure exerted by Shia parties and militias not to transfer significant military responsibilities to untrusted Sunni fighters. If we add to this the deep divisions *within* Sunni communities, it becomes clear that the conditions for establishing unified and inclusive security arrangements are not yet in place. Abadi's lack of leverage here has prevented him from making a big difference even if he had the will to do so.

Abadi's "Reforming" Agenda, and His Lack of a Constituency

Abadi's government, like the previous governments of Iraq, is a "national unity" government. Positions are distributed between different parties based on the number of each party's parliamentary seats. Ministers follow their party's instructions even when it comes to micro-management issues such as appointments and contracting.

This power-sharing arrangement is usually referred to by Iraqis as *muhassessa* (apportionment). Its downside is that the prime minister cannot fully control his government or make sure that it is united behind a specific agenda. Maliki dealt with this problem by creating parallel bodies and staffing them with his loyalists, and by issuing directives to appoint under-ministerial senior staff in an acting capacity. He thereby created a kind of shadow state that circumvented constitutional limitations.[17] Abadi has sometimes resorted to similar methods in order to give himself more leeway in making decisions, but this has infuriated other parties, who then see him as "another Maliki." "We are not consulted, and we know about his decisions through media," noted one Shia official.[18]

The circle of blame that characterized Maliki's terms has been repeated: The prime minister blames parties for focusing on their narrow interests and thereby placing hurdles in his way; the parties, in turn, criticize him for attempting to pursue a unilateral and exclusivist policy— or, alternatively, for being uncertain about what he wants. In the words of a senior Shia politician, "Abadi does not know exactly what he wants... in the morning we agree with him on something, just to hear that he changed his mind in the evening."[19]

Complicating things further for Abadi is that the organizing doctrine behind the Iraqi polity today is one based on communal representation: Politicians are largely seen as representatives of their communities rather than as constituting a broader national base. They are expected to remain loyal to their sub-national constituencies, which extends to adopting uncompromising and unrealistic positions with respect to relations with *other* communities. The prime minister is constrained both by the need to secure the support of his own community and by the inflexibility shown by leaders of other communities.

Abadi was not as lucky as Maliki, who ruled Iraq at a time when oil prices (which account for 95 percent of the governmental budget) reached unprecedented heights. Oil prices started to fall dramatically a few months after Abadi's inauguration as prime minister, and the resulting shrinking resources placed unprecedented pressure on him. In a political culture whose alliances are largely shaped by patronage, Abadi found it difficult to expand his political and popular base. Maliki effectively employed patronage to attract allies and neutralize some of his opponents; Abadi seemed to lack both the skills and the resources to act similarly.

Moreover, besides needing to decrease unnecessary expenditures, the government had to deal with a wave of popular protests that began during the summer of 2015. Reacting to these challenges, Abadi tried to reposition himself as a reformer. He announced three reform packages, including one that abolished the positions of his deputies and vice-presidents.[20] Abadi may have thought that he could exploit the pressure coming from the increasingly discontented public to build a support base and force other parties to give him more freedom. Initially, he did manage to gain some concessions from the parties: Stunned by the unexpected wave of protests, the parliament gave him full support to implement his reforms, on condition that those reforms did not violate the constitution.[21]

Lacking a clear vision, though, on how to proceed with his reforms after having raised public expectations, Abadi again started clashing with other parties. He did not have full support even from his own coalition and therefore found it difficult to promote his brand as a reformer while having to deal with a parliament in which he had almost no constituency. This is what impelled Abadi to declare that he would form a government of technocrats to proceed with his reforms and stop parties from hindering his agenda.[22]

This was a dangerous gamble, however, because Abadi was intent on depriving parties of their leverage in state institutions without possessing the tools to do so constitutionally. Unable to achieve his goal, Abadi paved the way for a more powerful figure, Muqtada al-Sadr, to jump in, assume the leadership of the protest movement, and demand an *independent* government of technocrats. Abadi might have thought that he could make use of Sadr's ability to organize massive protests in order to place more pressure on other parties—but this also meant that he himself would become a captive of Sadr's ambition to dominate Shia politics.

Abadi's gamble led to further instability, especially after the storming of the Iraqi parliament by Sadrist protesters in an attempt to force MPs to approve the technocrats' government.[23] The political process seemed to be heading toward a more dangerous path, with radical tendencies growing among the public and institutions crumbling on account of political tension. In his risky attempts to create a constituency, he destabilized his government, lost the support of most parties and jeopardized his political career.

Conclusions

Abadi's experience as Iraq's prime minister teaches us an important lesson: Changing the prime minister without changing the paradigm of and formula for governance in Iraq has not yielded significant results. The ethno-sectarian paradigm now prevailing in Iraq will keep limiting the prime minister's room for maneuver, while depriving him of the leverage necessary to initiate major reforms. The prime minister's political effectiveness depends on his ability to create a consensus around his policies, or else to impose his own options if a consensus cannot be achieved. This is why both Maliki and Abadi sought ways to build autonomous political constituencies. Maliki did this by exploiting sectarianism and patronage to consolidate his support base within his Shia community, which in the end further polarized Iraqi politics and made it difficult to bridge the gap between communities.

He became the most powerful and popular Shia politician, but the price was losing credibility among Sunnis and Kurds, while alarming his Shia rivals. Abadi tried to create a constituency by trying to be a reformer. The April 30 protesters focused their criticism on *muhassessa*: power-sharing agreements that made state institutions resemble the fiefdoms of powerful parties. Abadi hoped that the pressure from the street might ease the parties' grip over ministries and governmental bodies, which in turn could help him pursue his agenda more smoothly. Lacking a parliamentary bloc that supported him, however, Abadi relied on that pressure, and on extra-constitutional forces, such as the Shia religious authority and Sadr's movement, to compel parties to accept reforms that limited their powers. This put him in the awkward position of needing the support of the very forces that he sought to undermine. The outcome was contradictory policies, and choices that lacked clarity and decisiveness.

What Abadi wanted was to be a more effective prime minister, but the means of achieving this became as problematic as those adopted by his predecessor. As the country faces the difficult economic challenge resulting from the decline in oil prices, along with a fierce and costly war against ISIS, Abadi's indecisiveness and lack of leverage could cost him his office, or at least keep him as an ineffectual leader waiting to be replaced after the next election. In the end, the prime minister has managed neither to assert his image as a reformer, nor to keep the support of major political groups, which he needs to facilitate his effective performance. Additionally, the storming of Parliament by Sadrist protesters left Abadi in the awkward position of not deciding where to stand. In the increasingly polarized Iraqi political climate, Abadi, indecisive and lacking the tools to implement solutions to Iraq's problems, might be the next victim of the country's dysfunctional system.

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