

One Down, Two to Go: Iraq's New Government Shaping Up

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Brief Analysis

An abrupt realignment of partners has moved the government formation process forward, but the next step could be messy, given intra-Kurdish feuding.

On September 15, the Iraqi Council of Representatives cast secret ballots to elect a new speaker of parliament and two deputy speakers. Sunni politician and former governor of Anbar province Mohammed al-Halbousi secured 169 out of 298 votes, beating his better-known rival, former defense minister Khalid al-Obeidi.

With the vote, Iraq's constitutional clock began ticking on a ninety-day deadline to form the next government. Parliament must now elect a president by the end of September. The new president will then call on the largest parliamentary bloc to name a prime minister and form a cabinet. All of these pieces should be in place by mid-November if all goes as planned, but various complications are already brewing.

ALLIANCE SHAKE-UP

The parliamentary leadership vote came after yet another abrupt shift in political alliances, bringing two unlikely partners together after an election that left no one with a commanding victory. Muqtada al-Sadr's Sairoon coalition (54 seats) and Hadi al-Ameri's Fatah Alliance (47 seats) were first and second in the May polls and had been vying against each other to form the largest parliamentary bloc, actively wooing Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's

Nasr list (42 seats), the two main Kurdish parties (44 seats total), and various Sunni groups. Both coalitions also knew they had the capacity to disrupt any government they were not party to, since Iraqi politicians have not yet learned the art of playing the loyal opposition.

Into the midst of this furious backroom dealing spilt the political fallout of mass protests and violence in Basra. This provoked a rare intervention by top Shia cleric Ali al-Sistani, whose private and public warnings about the leadership of the next government apparently ended Abadi's chances at securing another term. That thunderbolt from the blue propelled Sadr and Ameri to join forces rather than compete. Sairoon, Fatah, the Sunni-led National Axis coalition, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) agreed on Halbousi as speaker, Sairoon nominee Hassan Karim al-Kaabi as first deputy, and KDP nominee Bashir al-Haddad as second deputy (traditionally a Kurdish position). The team-up sidelined Sairoon and Fatah's common rival, the Islamic Dawa Party, which produced the past two prime ministers. It also scored a perceived victory for Tehran, which lobbied for Halbousi and holds major influence over the many Shia militia figures and other proxies within Fatah's ranks.

NOW THE MESSY PART—CHOOSING A PRESIDENT

Although Sunni parties have been eying the presidency, Iraqi political tradition persists: the country will once again be led by a Sunni speaker, a Kurdish president, and a Shia prime minister. The middle step will be complicated, however, because the Kurds are deeply divided. Iraq's two former Kurdish presidents came from the PUK, which wants to keep the position. Yet the rival KDP is claiming the presidency for a yet-to-be-named nominee of its own, arguing that it won more seats (26 to the PUK's 18) and deserves a fair chance because the PUK has held the position since 2006.

Is Barzani bluffing with such arguments, or is this an unexpectedly serious play to have his man in the thick of national politics despite remaining aloof from Baghdad for years? Odds are that he is serious, and that the presidential decision is headed toward an unprecedented PUK-KDP showdown. The PUK candidate, Barham Salih, is a formidable figure who has long cultivated relationships in Baghdad and formerly served as deputy prime minister. To win, the KDP will not only have to field a strong candidate, but also expend significant political capital with Sunni and Shia parties.

Such open division among the Kurds will almost certainly place new pressure on the political accord that enabled Arab parties to coalesce around a slate of parliamentary leaders. New parliamentarians will face the choice of voting as they wish or remaining disciplined enough to follow their bloc leaders and the deals they have struck. The legislature's internal vote for president will likely require two rounds—neither Kurdish party is currently capable of securing the two-thirds vote needed to win in the first round, but round two can be won by simply prevailing in a runoff between the top two candidates. Alternatively, the KDP might accept the PUK's presidential nominee in return for other key positions (e.g., the governorship of Kirkuk; various federal positions that the Kurds are entitled to).

Kurdish opposition parties might also have a role to play in subsequent rounds, potentially disrupting KDP/PUK efforts in Baghdad and further splintering Kurdish unity. One such party—the tiny Kurdistan Islamic Group, which holds two seats in parliament—already forced the voting for second deputy speaker into an additional round, scooping up 53 votes to the KDP candidate's 185. Meanwhile, opposition factions called for postponement of the Kurdistan Regional Government's upcoming internal elections. Although Barzani had the final word there as well (they will take place on September 30), the resultant political maneuvering will further compromise Kurdish unity in Baghdad for the near term (not to mention the uncertainty created by the [recent Iranian missile attack](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-missile-attack-in-iraqi-kurdistan-could-backfire) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-missile-attack-in-iraqi-kurdistan-could-backfire>) on an Iranian Kurdish opposition meeting inside the KRG).

TEHRAN BEATS WASHINGTON?

Whereas various foreign players were actively involved in the formation of previous Iraqi governments, only two have waded in this time around: Iran and the United States. The heated contest for influence remains lopsided at the moment, tilted to Tehran's benefit given its coercive toolset, its proximity, and its willingness to play the enforcer in Iraq's transactional politics. U.S. interests in Iraq are unchanged: an independent, stable country, reintegrated into its neighborhood, able to defend itself from resurgent extremism and other threats, and willing to maintain friendly military and economic relations with America. Yet Washington may need to rethink its approach—or, at least, alter how its approach is perceived—in order to meet these objectives.

In the eyes of Iraqi politicians, the United States has persisted in lobbying for a second Abadi government even after Sistani's admonition, leading them to conclude that Iran won the first round. At this point in Iraq's post-2003 political evolution, focusing on a specific candidate would indeed be shortsighted, placing Washington in the middle of a no-rules influence game that is heavily weighted in Iran's favor.

For its part, Tehran has methodically sought to keep Iraq in a relatively weak and isolated state so that it may never again pose the threat Saddam Hussein did. This policy focuses on process goals, using financial inducements and coercion on Iraqi politicians to ensure that Tehran's loyalists are placed in positions of power, thereby averting efforts to isolate and pressure Iran.

Politicians in Baghdad and Kurdistan will remain vulnerable to such influence in the coming weeks. They are far enough away from the unrest in Basra to maintain a "what's in it for me?" mindset toward coalition building, which is ideally suited to Tehran's style. Even so, the latest political results may prove deceptive. The torching and sacking of the Iranian consulate and militia offices in Basra seemed like a warning from a populace that is fed up with lousy governance, with Iraqi politicians acting beholden to a predatory neighbor, and with the continued dominance of Iranian-created militias. Such uncertainty and surprises may well continue as government formation steams ahead.

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