

# Lessons Learned from Maliki's Iraq

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Marc J. Sievers, a career member of the senior foreign service with the rank of minister-counselor, was the Diplomat-in-Residence at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy in 2014-15. Mr. Sievers is the first person to be appointed to this one-year position, which is a collaborative program with the U.S. Department of State.



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**The most crucial first steps for the new government in Baghdad are to fill the security ministries with competent, broadly accepted officials, address the oil revenue issue with the Kurds, and build on recent gestures toward political rapprochement.**

**T**he formation of an inclusive, multi-sectarian government in Iraq was a key element of the Obama administration's response to the fall of Mosul this past June and the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) as a strategic threat. Iraqi prime minister Haider al-Abadi's new government appears to embody this policy goal. In 2010, the United States was deeply involved in the negotiations to form a similarly representative Iraqi government, which finally emerged in December 2010. The effort was serious and the outcome appeared at the time to represent a significant success. However, understanding Maliki's subsequent failure to stabilize Iraq and especially the collapse of efforts to include Iraq's Sunni and Kurdish communities in the government should yield critically relevant lessons today.

After months of painful negotiations in 2010, Maliki's State of Law Alliance reached a coalition agreement with Ayad Allawi's Iraqiyah, the two principal Kurdish parties, and several smaller Shiite parties to form a majority. Throughout this process, American diplomats told Iraqis that the United States hoped to see an Iraqi government that included everyone except members of the Sadrist Movement, who were implacably opposed to the U.S. role in Iraq, and this is basically what happened. The government formation team at the U.S. embassy in Baghdad celebrated the news, and at a dinner party at the American ambassador's residence, key members of Iraqiyah could barely contain their exuberance, especially over Maliki's acceptance of Sunni leader Salih al-Mutlaq, who had been banned from politics as a former Baath Party member, as a deputy prime minister. Yet it quickly became clear that the failure to reach an agreement between Maliki and Allawi on the key security ministries would not be resolved easily. In addition, the United States tried and failed to secure an important post for Allawi, either as the head of a revamped National

Security Council or to replace Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani as president. Allawi, who already felt that despite his strong showing in the elections, the United States had abandoned him as a candidate for prime minister in favor of Maliki, largely withdrew from the process, leaving Iraqiyah to split into its component factions.

Negotiations between Maliki and Allawi to fill the defense and interior ministries dragged on for months without results; in the meantime, Maliki held both posts himself. The elements of a deal in which a Sunni representative would become defense minister while a Shiite candidate would be interior minister were accepted by all in principle, but repeated discussions of specific candidates went nowhere. In the end, Maliki appointed acting ministers in keeping with this sectarian division of power, but without a formal agreement on the security ministers, the issue remained a source of tension. Sunnis increasingly complained that Maliki's domination of the security forces increased their sense of marginalization and even that they were being "occupied" by Iran, as demonstrated, for example, by the increasingly visible role of sectarian Shiite symbols at Iraqi security forces' check points in and around the entrances to Baghdad's Green Zone.

During the course of these negotiations, Maliki reached a set of agreements with the Kurdish leadership that met virtually all of the Kurds' key demands, including a referendum on the future of Kirkuk, division of oil revenues, and Iraqi government payment of salaries to Kurdish peshmerga forces. Masoud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), emerged as a pivotal figure trusted by both Maliki and Allawi, and the Kurds served briefly as the glue holding together the coalition. But Maliki never implemented the agreement he reached with Barzani, leaving Barzani frustrated and even more than usually reluctant to engage with Baghdad. In retrospect it is clear that as the active Kurdish mediation between Maliki and Allawi receded, so did the prospects for an inclusive, non-sectarian government. Kurdish frustration at the failure to make progress on any of the elements of their agreement with Maliki also gave impetus to separatist tendencies in Kurdistan and active KRG efforts to cut oil production and sales agreements without the approval of the central government in Baghdad.

As repeated attempts to renew dialogue with Allawi failed, Maliki turned on several of the key Sunni leaders, charging both Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi and Finance Minister Rafi al-Issawi with involvement in terrorism and pressing criminal charges that led both men to flee Iraq. Maliki periodically threatened to take similar action against Mutlaq, deputy prime minister, and Usama al-Nujaifi, speaker of parliament. While he did not follow through on these threats, the message for Sunnis seemed clear: just below the surface, Maliki believed all politically powerful Sunnis were actually Baathists and terrorists. By the time ISIS terrorists crossed the Syrian border and moved into Anbar province, many Iraqi Sunnis were open to the idea that ISIS posed less of a threat to their interests than the Shiite-dominated security forces. The possibility of an inclusive, non-sectarian Iraqi government appeared to have vanished.

But now, thanks in part to ISIS's brutality and active U.S. and regional diplomacy, Iraq has a rare second chance at success, and there are critical lessons that policymakers should learn from the experience of the second Maliki government. The first is that filling the key security ministries with competent, broadly accepted ministers and deputy ministers must be a top priority. Nothing undermined the cohesion of Iraq's first inclusive government more than the prolonged failure to reach agreement regarding the defense and interior ministries. Second, the Kurds' mediating role is critical, and addressing the oil revenue issue along the lines of agreements already worked out in the past, but never implemented, should help preserve a sense of mutual interest and common cause between Baghdad and Erbil. Third, Iraq's political class of all backgrounds shows positive signs of recognizing that they must hang together or they will surely hang separately. Last week's photos of a jovial meeting among Iraq's newly installed vice presidents -- Maliki, Allawi, and Nujaifi -- with President Fouad Massoum provided a hopeful indication that Iraq's fractious leaders may finally be ready to work together. The fate of their country hangs in the balance.

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*the U.S. embassy in Baghdad. The views in this article are his own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of State or the U.S. government. This article originally appeared on [Fikra Forum](http://fikraforum.org/?p=5488) (<http://fikraforum.org/?p=5488>). ❖*

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