

Helping Iraq's Next Prime Minister Seize the Moment

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

As Abadi's ratification approaches, Washington should encourage him to swiftly signal his commitment to decentralization, security reform for the Sunnis, and a revenue-sharing deal with the Kurds.

On August 14, outgoing prime minister Nouri al-Maliki officially withdrew his candidacy for reappointment to a third term in order to "to safeguard the unity and stability of Iraq." This gesture cleared the way for prime minister-designate Haider al-Abadi to begin building a new cabinet that must be ratified by an absolute majority in parliament (165 of 328 seats) by September 10. Although haggling over ministerial portfolios will throw up its fair share of speed bumps, the central issue -- Abadi's nomination -- is largely settled, allowing the United States and other parties to intensify their support to the incoming leader.

Abadi's selection is one of a number of recent developments that could materially improve the strategic situation of the Iraqi state and its people, including:

- *The Kurdish war against ISIS.* The Kurdistan Regional Government is fully engaged in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS, or "the Islamic State," as it has taken to calling itself since June). Prior to KRG president Masoud Barzani's August 4 declaration of war "until the last breath," the Iraqi Kurds were sitting on the sidelines; had they remained there, relations with Baghdad would have become even more strained as federal Iraq fought for its life against ISIS. Now all of the unity government's actors share a common enemy and are increasingly collaborating against the terrorists.
- [\(/uploads/Documents/infographics/Iraq-Assistance-Aug7-Aug19.png\)](#)
As of Aug. 19, 2014 International intervention. The United States and the international community are becoming more involved in the fight against ISIS through provision of military and humanitarian support to the KRG and northern Iraqi minorities. Selective U.S. airstrikes were decisive in protecting Yazidis in Sinjar and hopefully will continue to be a major factor in protecting minorities and boosting the chances of Iraqi and KRG counteroffensives.
- *Peaceful transition of power.* The world received clear confirmation that Maliki would be replaced with a new candidate who appears to have strong domestic and international backing. The promise of a peaceful and relatively swift transition of power should open the floodgates for dealmaking at home and broader international support in the country's hour of need.

If the next government can maintain the momentum, this concatenation of positive developments could be the turning point in Iraq's 2014 state of crisis. The leadership provided by a new premier will be vital, and there

are encouraging signs that the United States will find a capable partner in Abadi. ([/uploads/Documents/infographics/Iraq-Assistance-Aug7-Aug19.png](#)) ([/uploads/Documents/infographics/Iraq-Assistance-Aug7-Aug19.png](#))

KEY DIFFERENCES FROM MALIKI

Without rehashing Abadi's biography, it is clear that this Baghdad-born engineer and veteran Dawa Party politician is a very different animal from Maliki. Notable differences include:

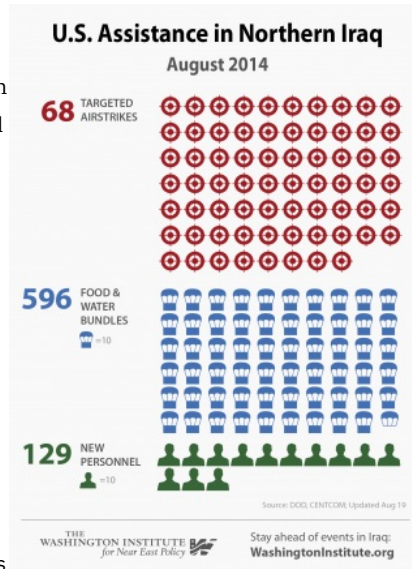
- *Limited Iranian contact.* Unlike Maliki and other senior Dawa oppositionists, Abadi spent his decades in exile almost exclusively in the United Kingdom rather than Iran, Syria, or Lebanon. Whereas many Shiite oppositionists fled to Iran in the early 1980s, al-Abadi went directly to Britain in 1977. His ties to Iran are reputedly very limited, and he has not visited the Islamic Republic in the years since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion.
- *Openness to Sunnis.* Although Abadi lost two brothers to Saddam Hussein's regime, he has displayed relative openness toward Iraq's Sunnis. Having skirted around the rougher aspects of opposition politics, he now has an outlook that is less dour and brutal than Maliki's. He shares common ideological ground with many Sunni Arab nationalists but also understands the Shiite and Kurdish tolerance levels for rehabilitating former Baathist elements.
- *Broader focus beyond security.* Abadi spent more than twenty years in Britain's private sector, running successful consultancies and engineering projects. He is interested in practically every facet of Iraq's economic and human development but has no track record in security. This makes him the polar opposite of Maliki, who was uninterested in most aspects of governance and myopically focused too much of his time on security affairs. Under Abadi, security will shift from a one-man show to a team effort -- with all the positives and negatives that entails.
- *Approachable English speaker.* It has been eight years since Iraq was led by a prime minister able to converse in English. Maliki's particularly Arab brand of charisma came through in his words, and he was famous for his love of conversation. The language barrier therefore distanced him from U.S. leaders and made him personally inscrutable in a way that Abadi will never be. Iraq may now get a premier who can form relationships with senior U.S. and world leaders.

Although Abadi will be surrounded by strong factional leaders, chief executives typically amass more influence and control than their partners intend. In that case, his personal and professional characteristics are broadly encouraging. If ratified by parliament and provided with strong support from international partners, Abadi probably has the best inherent leadership potential of Iraq's post-Saddam prime ministers.

PRIORITIES FOR U.S. ENGAGEMENT

Given the likelihood of Abadi's ratification, the United States should undertake as much preparatory diplomatic work as possible with him. Tangible initiatives need to be set in motion to signal the Shiite-led government's good intent toward the Kurds and Sunni Arabs:

- *Building the new cabinet.* Abadi is not yet prime minister, so supporting him now could help avoid political pitfalls. For example, his effort to pull together 165 votes could fail (potentially leaving Maliki as an indefinite caretaker), or it could take so long that ISIS further consolidates its hold on northern Iraq. Even if ratified quickly, the new government could be so riven with flaws that it subsequently underperforms or collapses. The United States should therefore help Abadi seize the moment and build toward rapid cabinet formation in the spirit of a national effort against ISIS.
- *A Baghdad-KRG revenue-sharing deal.* If Abadi has a weakness as a candidate, it is that his relations with the Kurds have been strained on the issue of revenue sharing. This is unsettling because the new government's first priority will be that very issue -- namely, reaching agreement on restoring the KRG's monthly payments from Baghdad, which have been withheld for most of this year due to disputes over managing revenue from KRG oil exports. In March, Baghdad and the Kurds were very close to implementing a U.S.-brokered revenue-sharing deal that could have substantially reduced tensions. That deal is still on the table and represents a win-win solution for all parties -- Baghdad, the KRG, oil companies, and the international community. Forming a unity government and a joint war effort is unthinkable while Baghdad is starving the Kurds of money and suing buyers of their oil, so striking a deal is a must. Washington should actively lobby Abadi to resurrect revenue sharing as a top priority.
- *Security reform.* The United States has publicly supported the reorganization of Iraq's security sector to give local players primacy in the recruitment and operational control of security forces, with the federal government providing financial resources and support when required. This formula -- keeping the Iraqi army largely out of Sunni Arab communities -- provides the best chance to roll back ISIS. It also clears the way for greater federal Iraqi and international support to KRG forces. Moreover, Abadi should be encouraged to draw on lessons learned about security reform during the latter years of the U.S. military presence; for example, he could support a meritocratic restaffing of the senior and mid-level military command structure, as well as integration of Sunnis into local security structures.
- *Judicial reform.* The various judicial and security reforms demanded by the Sunnis will take time to implement, so Abadi should send early signals



that his government will break from Baghdad's past political targeting of this constituency. Perhaps the most heinous example of this policy was the December 2012 indictment of Sunni finance minister Rafi al-Issawi on terrorism charges. The United States publicly contested the charges at the time and should do so again. In addition to being one of the most popular Sunni politicians in Iraq and an iconic victim of the Maliki government, Issawi has strong support from Turkey, Jordan, and Persian Gulf states. By quashing his indictment and returning him to a prominent cabinet position, Baghdad would send a strong signal to Sunnis in Iraq and elsewhere. This could in turn help rebuild their trust in the government and boost their involvement in the fight against ISIS.

Michael Knights is a Boston-based Lafer Fellow with The Washington Institute. ❖

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