

# How Maliki Broke Iraq

by [James Jeffrey \(/experts/james-jeffrey\)](/experts/james-jeffrey)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[James Jeffrey \(/experts/james-jeffrey\)](/experts/james-jeffrey)

Ambassador is a former U.S. special representative for Syria engagement and former U.S. ambassador to Turkey and Iraq; from 2013-2018 he was the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. He currently chairs the Wilson Center's Middle East Program.



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## **Under circumstances analogous to America's Civil War, Iraqis of all stripes are still trying to make their Western liberal constitution work, so Maliki's final duty is to withdraw gracefully.**

**T**he Nuri al-Maliki era in Iraq appears to be over. I say "appears" because, although the Iraqi prime minister has reportedly told his most loyal troops to stand down and accept the results of the constitutional process, his putative replacement, Haider al-Abadi, has but 30 days to put together an inclusive cabinet and platform that can win an absolute majority vote in Iraq's 329-member parliament. So the game is not yet over, and Maliki remains in office until Abadi, or another nominee, wins the parliamentary vote. Still, few are willing to ask him to form a government even if Abadi were to fail -- too much has gone wrong in Maliki's 8-year tenure, and he's alienated too many along the way with his heavy-handed political tactics and his incompetence (especially on military matters), nepotism and corruption.

This is an extraordinary turn of events for a leader who did better than ever in the March 2014 elections, garnering a personal vote tally of 700,000, far more than any rival. What happened? The short answer is Mosul -- the fall of Iraq's second city and almost a third of Iraq's territory, and much of its Sunni Arab minority, to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), with tens of thousands of Iraqi troops melting in the face of a few thousand well-armed but ragtag ISIL fighters. The deeper story involves the morphing of Iraq's al Qaeda remnants into the powerful ISIL fighting force in the Syrian civil war.

But a national disaster this great cannot be blamed solely on an outside force. The Sunni Arabs who joined the ISIL "surge" did so because Maliki had alienated them. The army that collapsed in Mosul was led by generals chosen for their loyalty to Maliki, not for their competence. His micromanaging of military decisions due to fear of a coup, his tolerance of corruption and relative indifference to a residual U.S. military presence to help train and assess the Iraqi military -- all of it contributed to the dramatic failure that we see before us now. But the core reason was Maliki's

inability to trust, to reach out to other groups and share power even within his Shia community. Unlike some of his contemporaries in the Shia Dawa religious party/underground movement, he was never able to overcome his conspiratorial roots, understand other groups or appreciate the Western values America sought to implement in Iraq. Perhaps this is not just his epithet, but that of the whole Iraqi political system he led.

To examine this deepest question, it's necessary to review America's goals in Iraq. As President George W. Bush made exhaustively clear in his January 2005 second Inaugural Address, America's whole moral purpose, and post-9/11 security, rested on bringing democracy to the world, beginning with the Middle East; and there, with its central location and oil riches second only to Saudi Arabia's, Iraq was the prize.

But Iraq, following America's 2003 military triumph, didn't adhere to America's democratic plan, such as it was, even with thousands of American troops patrolling the country's trash-strewn streets. Despite successes such as the 2004 victories over al Qaeda in Fallujah and the radical Shia Mahdi Army in Najaf, and the "purple finger" election in 2005 and adoption of a Western-inspired constitution, by mid-2006, the American project in Iraq was in tatters as Shia and Sunni death squads drove the country to near civil war.

In this desperate situation, new Iraqi elections produced an impasse; all that the U.S. government and Iraqi political leaders could agree on was that Ibrahim al-Jaafari, the hapless prime minister at the time, had to go. As months dragged by and no solid candidate emerged, both Americans and Iraqis turned to Maliki, then a Dawa Party member and parliamentarian. Few knew him well, but he appeared decisive and courageous, and could wield power. By mid-2006 he was elected prime minister.

Maliki didn't start out as a disaster -- his record initially was mixed. He was beloved by no one, and had a Nixonian distrust of all but his closest followers and family. Topping his enemies list were the Sunni Arabs and Kurds, both critical to Iraq's federal system. Still, he supported the American surge and recruitment of 100,000 largely Sunni tribal "Awakening" members, took on the radical Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and his Iranian-backed Mahdi Army in 2008, and then agreed to the extension of the American force presence until December 2011. In his dealings with me and other U.S. officials, he was hard to pressure, but could be convinced if he deemed it in his interest to do business with us. When he did commit to us, he would invariably keep his word, an important trait in diplomacy.

But in the 2010 elections, his authoritarian vein surfaced when Iraqiya, a largely Sunni Arab party led by former Prime Minister Iyad al-Allawi, nosed out Maliki's State of Law Party. Many allege that the Obama administration then threw its weight behind Maliki. Not so. The Shia parties, supported by Iran and the religious establishment, were adamant that one of theirs would be the new prime minister. The Shia held half of the seats in parliament, and with Kurdish parties, with almost 20 percent additional seats, also tilting towards the Shia, Maliki was the all-but-inevitable choice.

In his second term, Maliki's political acumen began slipping. His two rivals, Allawi and Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani, were opportunistic -- Barzani by keeping the independence option in play, Allawi by reneging on commitments -- giving Maliki the excuse to pursue sectarian policies. The al Qaeda insurgency was seemingly on the ropes, Iraq was earning \$100 billion in oil revenues annually, and appeared an island of stability in the "Arab Spring." Seeing little need for an American military presence after 2011, Maliki was lukewarm on a follow-on Status of Forces Agreement, refusing to commit to a parliamentary vote. Left to his own devices after 2011, he struck out repeatedly at Sunni leaders such as Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi and Finance Minister Rafi al-Issawi, and blew up his longtime alliance with the Kurds over oil policy in Kurdistan, aided by the Kurds' own overreaching.

The tale has been told before: An isolated self-absorbed leader abandons his allies and seeks ever more power, succeeding by pure will until an outside force sweeping all before it demonstrates the rot at the core -- here, Maliki's state. But should we blame this all just on Maliki, or even on American leaders who seem to always support "the

wrong man"? What if there are few "right" men and women in the greater Middle East? Perhaps its soil, be it Iraq...or Afghanistan, Egypt or Gaza...is not friendly to Western political seeds?

Perhaps. But under circumstances analogous to the dark days of America's own Civil War, with a third of the country dominated by demons, Iraqis of all stripes are still trying to make their Western liberal constitution work. As long as they try, it's America's duty and interest to stand by them. And Maliki's final duty, if he can withdraw gracefully, would be to demonstrate that rarity -- a Middle Eastern leader who yields power because he failed.

*James F. Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz Distinguished Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute and former U.S. ambassador to Iraq.* ❖

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