

Everyone and No One: Iraq Heads toward a Unity Government

by [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#), [Ahmed Ali \(/experts/ahmed-ali\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



[Ahmed Ali \(/experts/ahmed-ali\)](#)

Ahmed Ali is a program officer at the National Endowment for Democracy.



Brief Analysis

Even weeks after the March 7, 2010, elections, Iraq appears to be headed toward a sprawling "unity" government that values stability and inclusiveness over efficiency or decisiveness. Despite being an arguably safer bet for Iraq at a delicate and dangerous moment, this approach will pose several challenges for U.S. policy in both the country and the region.

Inclusiveness, but at What Cost?

In the broad-based government currently emerging, almost everyone is a participant to some extent, but no one has signed onto an agreed manifesto that outlines how the government will operate. If the situation continues on this course, the new government will not be a meeting of equals. Rather, a subset of three political coalitions would form the government's core and hold the balance of votes in the cabinet.

Several indicators point to this conclusion. The possibility of a bilateral 180-seat alliance between Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and Iraqiya leader Ayad Allawi is dimming, despite alleged behind-the-scenes U.S. efforts to facilitate a meeting between the two. Personality, ideological differences, alliance dynamics, and insistent prodding from Tehran make it unlikely that a perceived nationalist "supercoalition" will emerge. It is equally unlikely that Allawi's primarily Sunni Arab bloc will be excluded from government completely. The United States, Shiite leader Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and the Iraqi Kurds have all been vocal on the need for inclusiveness.

Slicing Up the Cabinet

Prime Minister al-Maliki appears to be buying into the idea of a broad-based government. In a May 23 interview with the Washington Post, he asked, "How could the government be formed without Iraqiya whether as a bloc or as Sunnis?" He added a further inducement to Allawi's bloc members, noting that "the Iraqiya list and the Sunni component...must be in the sovereign posts, not in secondary posts."

These comments indicate that al-Maliki retains a clearheaded appreciation of Allawi's weaknesses, correctly divining that Iraqiya is struggling to hold together and may be easy to fragment. As he noted in the Post interview, "I read the real situation and I see Allawi's path as difficult, he has many problems ahead of him. I don't say that I have no problems but mine are less. I have a coherent list unlike the others. So, imagine the problems for Allawi and the others." Al-Maliki has consistently rebuffed the possibility that Allawi will lead a new government, and the Sunday meeting between Allawi and al-Sistani failed to generate any political advantage for the Iraqiya leader.

Al-Maliki's remaining challenge is to reassure Iraqi Shiite, Kurdish, and Sunni partners that he can be trusted to take a less-authoritarian stance during a second term. For example, Sadrist elements within his current allied party, the pan-Shiite Iraqi National Alliance (INA), will require significant inducements to accept him as prime minister, including control over service ministries such as health, labor, and transport. Additionally, the INA is insisting that certain restrictive measures be placed on the next premier's decisionmaking abilities. The Kurdish and Sunni Arab factions also have a strong bias against al-Maliki.

Although al-Maliki can offer many tempting payoffs to allies in the form of ministry posts, the emerging undercurrent of antipathy suggests that he could be shunted aside at a late stage of the process, replaced by a more acceptable (and weaker) prime minister atop a bloated unity government. His previous administration showed that the premiership can transform its occupant into a dominant player, regardless of initial political weakness or dependence. Therefore, the factions might take their time in choosing the new prime minister in order to prevent a recurrence of the al-Maliki experience.

Implications for U.S. Policy

Whether al-Maliki remains in place or is removed, the new government may not emerge before the beginning of Ramadan in mid-August. Although pressure from the U.S. government and the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq has been useful in maintaining a sense of urgency, it may be difficult to expedite negotiations if a broad unity government coalesces (whether due to intentional alliance-making or factions simply jumping on the bandwagon). Iraqi leaders may use procedural gambits to keep near-term deadlines at bay, while simultaneously front-loading the government formation process so that the various milestones eventually fall in rapid succession once deals have been finalized.

The withdrawal of U.S. combat brigades is scheduled to end in the middle of Ramadan -- August 31, to be exact -- leaving a two-week period in which Iraq may lack both a government and a major American military presence. Yet only marginally more U.S. forces will be in place immediately before Ramadan than immediately after. Accordingly, it may be better to let the government formation process unfold naturally rather than rushing it to fit largely symbolic U.S. deadlines.

Once the government is finalized, the ministries will likely see significant turnover, with most or all of the portfolios redistributed during negotiations. The sovereign ministries -- finance, interior, oil, defense, and foreign affairs -- may be split between appointees representing as many as five main factions. This could result in some favorable results for investors, such as Iraqiya or al-Maliki pragmatists in the Ministry of Oil, or Kurds in the Ministry of Finance.

The shuffle could also implant unsavory characters in key positions, however. Washington should begin to prepare for the prospect of Iranian-influenced and anti-American politicians assuming security or diplomatic roles as U.S. forces withdraw and a new security agreement is negotiated. In the lottery of government formation, many existing U.S.-Iraqi relationships will be rendered null and void, requiring new contact-building efforts to begin afresh. For its part, the new government of Iraq should aspire to a more balanced posture in its relations with Iran. Long-term relations with the United States could be harmed if Baghdad seeks a closer relationship with the Islamic Republic.

For many policymakers in Washington and the Arab world, the ideal solution would be an exclusive alliance between al-Maliki and Allawi. In theory, this would ensure a strong federal state, a more favorable investment climate, cross-sectarian balance, and curtailed Iranian influence. Such a narrow majority government could pose a significant threat to the Kurds, however, given that it would be comprised largely of Arab nationalists with a record of opposing Kurdish interests. It would also likely lead to political paralysis, since the excluded factions would resort to no-confidence measures as a counterstrategy -- only one-fifth of parliament (sixty-five members) is required to initiate a vote of no confidence. In addition, an Allawi-Maliki government would be difficult to form and potentially brittle once in place, due to rivalries and political differences between the two very different nationalist wings.

In short, although the prospect of al-Maliki and Allawi teaming up could change Iraqi politics in favorable ways, it is a risky play at this moment in terms of the country's development. A sprawling unity arrangement would in some ways represent a step backward to the chaotic Iraqi Governing Council of 2003-2004 and the Iraqi Transitional Government of 2005. Yet this option -- a government of everyone and no one -- might be the only safe course for Iraq's first true post-Saddam government.

Michael Knights is a Lafer fellow and interim director of the [Military and Security Studies Program \(/templateI02.php?SID=2&newActiveSubNav=Military%20and%20Security%20Studies%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D2&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](#) at the Institute. Ahmed Ali, a native of Iraq, is a Marcia Robbins-Wilf research associate. ❖

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