



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

SITUATION ASSESSEMENT

Adil Abdul-Mahdi charged with forming a new Iraqi government

Policy Analysis Unit | October 2018

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Series: Situation Assessment

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Table of Contents

Adil Abdul-Mahdi charged with forming a new government	1
Why Abdul-Mahdi?	1
Who is Abdul-Mahdi?	2
Challenges ahead	3

Adil Abdul-Mahdi charged with forming a new government

No sooner had Barham Salih been elected President on 2 October 2018 than he tasked Shi'i politician Adil Abdul-Mahdi with forming a new Iraqi government. The new government will replace the outgoing cabinet of Prime Minister Haydar Abadi, which has governed Iraq for the last four years, most of which have been marred by war with ISIL.

Why Abdul-Mahdi?

Contrary to the way in which Prime Ministers have been nominated in Iraq since the American occupation in 2003, and likewise to Article 76 of the Permanent Iraqi Constitution of 2005, which stipulates that 'the President shall task the bloc with the largest number of seats with the formation of the Cabinet', the elected President Barham Salih charged the Shi'i Islamist Adil Abdul-Mahdi with forming a government. The Iraqi Parliament overlooked the bloc with the largest number of seats and leapt straight to naming the new Prime Minister through universal consensus. In spite of the struggle between the two winning coalitions, Sairoon (54 seats) and Fateh (48 seats), over which of them could form the largest single block through an alliance capable of forming a government, neither side and no Parliamentary alliance nominated the Prime Minister in waiting. Unaffiliated and nominated by no one side, Salih was in fact recruited from outside the existing parliamentary camps.

The Basra protests (July-September 2018) put paid to Haydar Abadi's chances of staying on as Prime Minister, in spite of the support he enjoyed from America (and Saudi Arabia), and in spite of the fact that he was Sairoon's first choice for the position. The sustained failure to provide public services demonstrated by these protests and violent reactions of the security forces resulting in 14 deaths among the protesters eliminated any chance of his nomination. Sairoon opted to withdraw their support from him, and matters reached a head when the alliance tabled an official statement to Parliament demanding the resignation of Abadi and his government.¹

There is still no agreement on which is the largest parliamentary bloc, and the Sairoon alliance has not been able to present an acceptable alternative to Abadi. Most of Fateh's nominees, meanwhile, are close to Iran, in a country still closely linked militarily, politically and economically to the USA. Adil Abdul-Mahdi's name was thus put forward as a consensus solution from outside the Shi'i political divide between Sairoon, led by Sadr and his allies, and the Rule

¹ "Sairoon Alliance and Fateh Alliance Demand Resignation of Abadi and his Government." Russia Today Online, 08/09/2018, accessed on 09/10/2018. <https://bit.ly/2MaDdO0>

of Law Coalition (*I'tilaf Dawlat al-Qanun*) built around an alliance of popular Mobilisation militia leaders like Hadi al-Amiri and former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. It seems that the Najaf clerical establishment, the Marja'iyya, has also decided not to nominate Abadi and to put forward Abdul-Mahdi instead in order to overcome the prevailing climate of polarization and find a way out of what is almost five months of post-election deadlock.²

Who is Abdul-Mahdi?

Abdul-Mahdi (born 1942) comes from an established Shi'i political family. He is the son of Abdul-Mahdi al-Muntafaji, the 'long-lasting' minister of the Kingdom period, who was one of the most prominent representatives of Shi'i demands at that time. He began his political life at a young age, first joining the Ba'th Party before leaving it after the February 1963 coup and adopting the Maoist communism ascendant in Iraq in the second half of the 1960s in a context of 'armed struggle'. During this stage Abdul-Mahdi was intellectually active in writing and translating certain Marxist texts. At the beginning of the 1980s, however, he decided to leave the left and join the Shi'i Islamist opposition, becoming a member of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) after its establishment in Iran. He specialized in political economy at a French university, and his doctoral dissertation was in this field although he was not able to complete the oral presentation. He has produced studies on this subject, in particular rentier economics, as well as writings on Islamic thought.

Abdul-Mahdi does not come from outside Shi'i political circles. He was a leading member of ISCI, and has been its nominee for a number of important ministerial positions since 2003, including the Finance Ministry in Iyad Alawi's government (2004-2005), the Ministry of Oil in Abadi's government (2014-2016). He has also been one of Iraq's most prominent economic planners in the post-2003 period. However, after his resignation from the Ministry of Oil (2016) he decided to retire, and did not join either of the two sides after the defection crisis in ISCI and its leader Ammar Hakim's departure to form the National Wisdom Movement in 2017. This makes him an independent nominee, despite his having been a leader in the ISCI until only two years ago.

² "The Iraqi Marja'iyya Does Not Support PMs From Previous Years." Al-Mayadeen Online, 10/09/2018, accessed on 09/10/2018. <https://bit.ly/2QDtqLL>

Challenges ahead

Many believe that Abdul-Mahdi has been selected for his economic background, which means that a gamble on his government will be a gamble on economic reform, reconstruction and improvement of services. These are major challenges for a state that has not yet fully emerged from a war with ISIL which has left behind it swathes of destruction across large parts of the country. Likewise, fluctuations in oil prices and the politicization of the oil market threaten the country in its primary source of income.

However, the manner in which Abdul-Mahdi has been selected as Prime Minister does not represent reform of the Iraqi political system – a system suffering from structural crises, which numbered among the factors leading to the failure of the Iraqi state – so much as it is likely to cause more problems for the new Prime Minister to confront. He will be a Prime Minister without an electoral base, since he is not a member of any political current and was not the nominee of any specific coalition. Likewise, given that he had decided to retire before being nominated for the premiership, he is not expected to attempt to form a political bloc around himself either within or outside the Parliament on the basis that he is the main executive official in the country. Countries with a political culture like Iraq's always see polarization around power-holders who depend on a broad network of clients, particularly in rentier states that depend on oil. This happened in the case of the former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who built a strong coalition around himself that still exists today.

From another perspective, since a Prime Minister was appointed from outside the winning political blocs in a compromise solution, these blocs are expected to be rewarded during their competition for ministries, especially the most important ones. This may challenge the Prime Minister's jurisdiction and weaken his authority. For similar reasons these blocs are expected to reject calls to form a technocrat government that can dismantle the quota system, and the new government is thus likely to reproduce the 'traditions' of the current political system.

The only opportunity in this regard will come if Sairoon holds fast to its desire to not concede any ministerial positions, in line with its leader Muqtada al-Sadr's call to establish a government of technocrats. This may force other political actors to assent to a limited distribution of ministries in accordance with the plans made by the Sairoon alliance as the group that took first place in the elections.

Abdul-Mahdi is expected to benefit in the challenges awaiting him from his long political experience. As a man of compromise rather than confrontation, he has good relations with most Iraqi political entities, and stands outside local, regional and international polarisations. He also enjoys good relationships with most Sunni political forces, and a historical connection

with Kurdish leaders, which may help him to improve relations between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government. These relations have been openly tense during the eras of Maliki and Abadi, for reasons that are certainly not only the fault of Baghdad, especially after the crisis triggered by the independence referendum and subsequent repercussions such as the return of the Iraqi army to Kirkuk and other contested areas (September-October 2017).

On both the regional and local levels Abdul-Mahdi is considered to be a consensus-builder. It is no coincidence that his name is being put forward for the premiership for the second time, having been put forward previously during the 2010 crisis after Alawi's Iraqi List took first place in the elections but Maliki nonetheless became Prime Minister. In a context of intense regional competition and conflict, as far as is known no particular regional party objects to him. He is not considered to toe the Iranian line (unlike Maliki and Amiri), but at the same time does not pursue policies contrary to Iranian interests. He is also acceptable to the Americans, even if he was not the USA's choice for the premiership. Moreover, he has strong connections to international organisations established when he took on the Finance and Oil briefs, and when in 2004 he made the case for restructuring of Iraq's debt at the Paris Club. He may be the ideal choice to head the government in a period expected to witness an escalation in the America-Iran conflict, especially in Iraq.