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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

The New Abadi Government: A Preemptive Measure against the Disintegration of the Iraqi State?

Policy Analysis Unit- ACRPS| Oct2014

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Introduction

Circumstances in the wake of the fall of Mosul to the forces of the Islamic State (IS) on June 9, were decisive in the emergence of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's government. This is amply reflected in the new Iraqi government's composition, its leaders and political factions, as well as its political orientations. Were it not for the fall of Mosul, it is likely that former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki would have been able to remain in his post for a third term, despite the growing opposition to his rule. For almost a decade, the "Carrot and Stick" style of governance used by Maliki with opponents and supporters alike, and his mobilization of Iraq's Shia via an exclusivist sectarian discourse, enabled him to balance the many powers and interests that came to converge around his person. Mosul's fall may well have hastened his departure, and there is widespread consensus that the exclusivist policies that came to symbolize his turbulent eight year tenure, particularly his second term, are what brought Iraq to its present crisis.

President Barack Obama expressed this clearly in the days following the fall of Mosul, when he observed that sectarian differences had created a fragile situation in Iraq, noting that in the absence of political efforts military action would be futile. "Without achieving internal stability in Iraq" said Obama, "there will be no lasting impact to any support."¹ For the US administration, the departure of al-Maliki, along with the formation of a more representative and inclusive Iraqi government that addresses Sunni grievances and integrates Sunnis into the ruling establishment, stood as a prerequisite to the fight against the Islamic State. Political reform needed to precede military confrontation, so as to rebuild Arab Sunnis' confidence in Iraq's political institutions.

A Road Map to Prevent Breakdown

Given the above, the chief task of Abadi's government is broader and more far-reaching than tackling the complex accumulated structural problems that have plagued the Iraqi state since 2003, namely: the failure to provide basic services; the rampant corruption; an overweening leader, a rentier-state economy that sanctifies the subordination of

¹ See "Obama: The USA will never be embroiled in military action in Iraq in the absence of a political plan for its leadership", *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, June 14, 2014

<http://classic.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=775605&issueno=12982#.VCqBPU0cRjp>

society to the state; a log-jammed democratic transition with stalled political institutions; a sagging public sector, not to mention the lack of a legislative framework governing state structure that guarantees the basic rights of citizenship.

Above all, the task of Abadi's new government now consists of securing and maintaining Iraqi national unity. The fall of Mosul constituted a powerful symbol of the breakdown of the state, and the disintegration of a nation long deprived of uniting policies. The new government is expected to enshrine the notion that a political system must provide for the effective participation of all, rather than for opportunistic sectarian competition that poses an existential threat to the state.

The Abadi government now faces two critical challenges. The first is to launch long-term reform to deal with the political crisis that has developed after the 2003 US invasion, which brought Iraq's political system, with its allocations of quotas of power, to the brink of collapse. Iraq never became the "nation-state" envisioned, nor did it provide equitable participation in state institutions for all Iraqi constituents. Imbalances in the political system gave rise to extremist forces within each constituency, enabling them to move along social and political fault lines to occupy large swathes of political space.

Speaking to parliament on September 8, on the occasion of the vote of confidence on his government, Abadi announced the key planks of his reform agenda, as stipulated in a political document that was agreed upon by all political blocs in parliament. Yet, drawn from the same Shiite and Sunni parties that have dominated the political scene in the eleven years following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, the political line-up announced by the new Prime Minister might not be up to the tasks of political reform. The Sunni representative factions in particular seem to have a serious problem with their own communities.

Reform is not simply a matter of government formation, nor is it a matter of just redefining and rehabilitating the existing Sunni elite, or of launching a transitional phase for the construction of an alternative Sunni elite. First and foremost, reform entails a restructuring of the political system through re-formulation of the relationship between components of the community, political institutions and forces, and the relationship of these with both the center and the regions and provinces, thus defining modalities of partnership in the management of security and military institutions, and in the management of wealth.

The second challenge for the Abadi government is to confront the Islamic State – in policy and in practice. The reform agenda is a start, and can play a role in dismantling the IS support cells that resigned themselves to the fact that the Islamic State provided the only means of crushing an overweening central government. Undoubtedly, the Islamic State emerged in an atmosphere of increasing resentment that accompanied the formation of the second al-Maliki government in 2010, thus any response to the Islamic State must essentially address, absorb and drain this resentment.

This concern has dominated all of the international arrangements undertaken to confront IS, and especially those of the Americans. Noticeably, the schedule for confronting IS was clearly dependent on the announcement of Iraq's new government, as evident with the timing of the Paris Conference on Iraq, and President Obama's speech on how he plans to deal with IS. The Americans exerted enormous pressure for a speedy announcement of the new government, and its presentation to the cabinet for a vote of confidence, before taking any action to strike the Islamic State.

The announcement of the formation of a National Guard, included in Abadi's plan of action, came about in a similar fashion. The proposal to shift from national to local security provision – that is, to limit the army's role in protecting the borders, and rely instead on locally recruited National Guard forces to protect the provinces – was first proposed following the invasion of Mosul. In theory, the National Guard will be composed of fighters hailing from the concerned province, under the supervision of the local government, although it will remain part of the official security establishment. In this sense, it differs from the *al-Sahwa* militia forces created by the Americans in 2007. The National Guard will, however, be tasked with implementation of the last part of the plan to confront the Islamic State – namely, recovery of IS-controlled territory, and maintaining control over it. This means that these forces will be periodically and transitionally subject to American rehabilitation and training, if not American supervision, notwithstanding repeated American declarations that they will not deploy ground forces.

Shaping Abadi's Government: Decisive Factors

In principle, Abadi's government will work in an entirely different context than that of the two previous Maliki governments, and one may surmise that the political actors involved will also perform differently than they have done in the past. Four overlapping factors, however, will shape the conduct of Abadi's government:

A. The Spread of the Islamic State

The Islamic State has posed the greatest challenge to Baghdad's existing political system, having seized control of nearly one-third of the area of Iraq. Needless to say, the spread of the Islamic State in Iraq is fundamental in determining the structure and goals of Iraq's new government and its institutions.

B. The Change in American Strategy toward Iraq

Since coming to power in 2009, President Obama has refrained from foreign military engagements, save in Libya in 2011, coaxed by the decision of the UN Security Council to intervene through NATO to protect civilians, prompting Washington to advocate "leading from behind". The on-going transformations of the Arab Spring revolutions has placed the United States in an awkward position, particularly with respect to the situation in Syria, which has seen the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians, and the use of chemical weapons in August 2013. Given that Obama himself had deemed the use of such weapons to be a "red line," his decision to refrain from military intervention was met with widespread criticism from within the United States, from quarters that saw in the events in the Arab world, and in the expansion of Russia's influence in Ukraine, ample evidence of a weakening America; a weakness that adversaries were more likely to dare exploit.

The Islamic State's assault on Mount Sinjar, its capture of large swathes of the Nineveh Plain home to large Iraqi Christian populations, the forced exodus of the Yazidis, and the Islamic State's forces nearing Erbil, prompted the US to proceed with aerial bombardments of IS positions on August 8. Despite military intervention coming in large part as a response to internal pressures, it also signaled a shift in Obama's foreign strategy. The rise of the Islamic State and the disintegration of the Iraqi army at its first encounter with it, effectively did away with the Obama doctrine of reliance on local proxies rather than direct military intervention to counter threats. Obama seemed to lack convincing counter-arguments when he was accused of rushing the withdrawal from Iraq and relying excessively on fundamentally unreliable local partners. Equally problematic was his long silence regarding the exclusionary and retaliatory sectarian policies pursued by former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki against the Sunni Arabs.

The rise of IS not only forced America to redefine the sources of danger threatening US national security, it also obliged it to pursue military measures to combat these threats

– the same measures that Obama had contended were instrumental in generating the crises inherited from his predecessor George W. Bush.

Iraq represents the central arena for the implementation of the new American strategy – not because it is the Islamic State's arena, but because the United States is acting according to a sense that it has a historical responsibility to "do something", given that it is the US that brought Iraq to its current plight of destruction and chaos, after having previously embarked upon regime change and occupation in 2003.

C. The Gulf Drawing Closer to Iraq

The expansion of the Islamic State has led to a new Arab approach to Iraq. There is a general feeling in Arab circles that the failure of the Iraqi state and the expansion of the Islamic State is not something that will remain confined to Iraq's borders, but that this radical group represents a threat to all. Saudi Arabia, in particular, has embarked upon a set of measures to cope with these developments. These include monitoring *fatwas* that support *takfiri* incitements and restraining the parties issuing them, surveillance of the flow of jihadist elements to Iraq and Syria, and controlling the non-official sources of funding for the Islamic State. But most important of these strategies is perhaps the spirit of Saudi Arabia's new approach to Iraq – especially after the departure of al-Maliki – in its unprecedented support of the Iraqi ruling establishment, thus enabling it to restore its strength and its representative capacity. Iraq is, after all, the primary threshold in confronting IS.

D. Turning the Shia Opposition to al-Maliki into the Primary Component of the Abadi government

The Shia opposition front feels that the so-called "experience of Shia rule" has reached crisis point and must be addressed. The major political parties in this front, particularly the Supreme Council and the Sadrists, have over the past years expressed their rejection of the monopolistic formulas espoused by al-Maliki, and have called for reform of the ruling establishment and opening it up to all Iraqi constituents.

In any event, these factors all serve to open up space for the Abadi government to save Iraq from the specters of breakdown, division, or civil war. The exploitation of this situation will test the resilience of announced intentions to override sectarian rule, particularly given that conditions are favorable for this. It is specifically a test of sectarian Shiite political forces that have close relations with Iran, which currently controls the scene. There is no doubt that any attempt to override sectarian governance

(assuming the intentions are true) will face resistance from extremists. These would include, in addition to the Islamic State, Shiite militias and extremist political forces aligned with al-Maliki – who belongs to the same political faction as al-Abadi – and his ilk, down to the League of the Righteous, the Badr Organization, and others.