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The US and Iran Concur: Maliki Had to Go

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Introduction

Nouri al-Maliki caved in to domestic and international pressure, and announced his abdication as prime minister. By stepping aside, Maliki has paved the way for the huge task now facing Iraq's new prime minister – to form a government that unifies all the components of the Iraqi political spectrum. The new leader will be expected to end the political and security chaos that has characterized Maliki's rule. The rapidity with which the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has captured wide swathes of territory in the North and West of Iraq proved to be the death knell of Maliki's political fortunes, prompting Iran and the US to agree on the need to remove Maliki from power.

Washington had come to realize that ISIS would have never been able to secure the advances it did were it not for Maliki's divisive sectarian policies, ones that have compelled Iraq's marginalized Sunnis to take up arms and support extremist groups fighting the Iraqi military and police forces, which they accused of sectarianism. Tehran reached similar conclusions once it became apparent that several Shiite groups in Iraq had become opposed to Maliki. With ISIS forces increasingly threatening an established US ally in Kurdistan, the Obama administration led a global effort to drive Maliki out of office. Following the recent escalation of chaos in Iraq, it did not take long before the Obama administration was able to persuade Iraq's Shiite political groups, as well as their patron in Iran, that Maliki was no longer fit for the job.

Iraq: From Success Story to a Symbol of Failure

Most assessments suggest that American involvement in the Iraqi quagmire, and the economic downturn that ensued, were the most prominent factors leading Barack Obama to win the 2008 presidential election. One of very few senators opposed to the invasion of Iraq from the outset, Obama had promised in his first presidential campaign to withdraw all American troops from Iraq by 2011. He also promised to revitalize the US economy and to curb militarization, which had by then become both costly for the US and damaging to its foreign relations. At the forefront of Obama's policy objectives was the withdrawal of US combat troops from Iraq on schedule. This would evidence the credibility of the Obama doctrine, which would only approve the use of force if US vital interests were threatened. In cases where America's vital interests were not in clear and present danger, the Obama administration would respond with the use of agile, unconventional forces, exemplified by the operation in which Osama Bin Laden was liquidated in Pakistan and the widespread use of drones. Obama's new approach is

also reflected in the provision of training and support to the military forces of the countries in question, such as in Afghanistan.

Yet, the eruption of a string of successive crises – in Libya, Syria, Iraq, Palestine, the Crimean Peninsula and the South China Sea – brought the President's doctrine under sharp scrutiny. Against this grim backdrop, the downward spiral in Iraq turned the country from being Obama's greatest success story to a prime example of his foreign policy failures. Obama critics argue that his arbitrary withdrawal from Iraq left the stage open for America's enemies to wreak havoc in the country; or, at the very least, cost the US a lot of influence on the progress of events in Iraq. Observers suggest a similar scenario might repeat itself in Afghanistan, where American forces are expected to withdraw later this year. The possibility of the Taliban and Al Qaeda filling the power vacuum resulting from the withdrawal of American forces is by no means farfetched.

Maliki Had to Go

With the focus on the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, and efforts to distance itself from the legacy of the Bush years, the Obama administration for years chose to turn a blind eye to the rampant corruption and sectarian policies characterizing Maliki's leadership. The US supported Maliki's cling to power even after the controversial March 2010 elections, which saw former Iraqi interim Prime Minister Ayyad Allawi being sidelined despite his win, with the excuse that he would not have been able to form a majority coalition. Even as the Sunni Arabs of the Anbar Province rebelled at the end of 2012, the US administration continued to support Maliki and to turn the other way to his exclusionist policies.

It was the US administration's refusal to back moderate rebels in the uprising against Bashar al Assad which gave rise to the extremist Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its spread throughout Syria. In a late attempt to prevent its spread to Iraqi territory, Washington decided to back Maliki and Iraq's military and security forces. A victory for Maliki against ISIS would have given the much needed boost to the US administration, and deal a blow to its detractors, adding credence to the Obama doctrine and its stipulation of providing material and training support to allies in lieu of sending direct combat forces. In return for the provision of military support, the Obama administration requested that Maliki be more open to his political opponents, not only Sunni Arabs and Kurds, but also those within his own ruling Shiite coalition – requests Maliki ignored.

No doubt, a number of factors played into America's calculus in entering yet another military campaign in Iraq, the most important of which, was the rapid advance of ISIS forces and their allied Sunni tribes last June. Their swift defeat of Iraqi military forces, their control of large territory spanning both sides of the Iraqi-Syrian border, and their further expansion to the frontiers of Jordan and Saudi Arabia set alarm bells ringing. Washington, previously reluctant to being dragged into renewed involvement in Iraq, found itself in a position where it could no longer ignore the expansion of ISIS and the threat it posed to important American allies in the region—including Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the Kurdish regional government in Iraq. The failure of the Obama doctrine provided domestic critics with the opportunity to label his foreign policy as a fiasco, leading to chaos on the world stage as well as to undercutting American leadership worldwide.

It became blatantly apparent that years of Sunni marginalization created an environment receptive to ISIS and its ilk, if only as a lever against the sectarian regime put in place by Maliki and the military supporting him. Maliki, who had previously opposed any US forces remaining on Iraqi soil at the end of 2011, was now left begging America for military support to face the onslaught of ISIS. The embattled prime minister went as far as granting legal immunity to US forces operating in Iraq, years after he had first refused it. These measures, however, came too late. The situation could no longer be solved by American military support; Maliki's style of governance and exclusionist, sectarian policies needed to change. Maliki had to go.

Tightening the Noose on Maliki

In dealing with the threat emanating from Iraq, Obama's initial approach was to tighten the noose on Maliki. This meant making it clear that there could be no military solution to the conflict without bringing the Kurds and Sunni Arabs into the ruling coalition alongside the Shiite parties. The aim was to confront the risk posed by ISIS but also to discuss the potential federalization of Iraq into three separate states for its Kurdish, Sunni Arab and Shiite Arab communities. At first, only 300 military advisers were deployed last June to help coordinate the military effort against ISIS. Later, that number rose to 1,000. Obama then approved the use of unmanned airplanes (drones) and F-18 fighter jets for reconnaissance in Iraqi airspace, but only in cases where the targets had been pre-determined by intelligence agencies, and where the aim of the operation was to protect US personnel on the ground in Iraq. The American president waited until August 8, nearly two months after ISIS swept through Mosul and other

cities in the north and west of Iraq, to order the use of forces against ISIS. By that stage, ISIS had targeted the Kurdish regional capital of Erbil and both the Christian and Yazidi communities in the country.

The delay in American military intervention was meant to pressure Maliki into accepting wider participation in his government, or, prompt his departure from politics paving the way for another, less polarizing, candidate drawn from within the ruling Shiite coalition. The Shiite-led National Iraqi Alliance—led by Maliki’s State of Law Coalition—won a slim majority in the 2014 general elections, and was thus unable to form a government on its own. Given his exclusionist policies against them, both the Sunnis and the Kurds refused to take part in a government formed by Maliki. Yet, despite this, the incumbent prime minister did not withdraw his bid for the premiership position until he was forced to do so.

The belief that Maliki’s departure from power was vital to a resolution to the Iraqi crisis was reaffirmed once it transpired that the bulk of the rebels fighting against Maliki’s government were not ISIS-affiliated fighters, but drawn from the Sunni tribes resentful of Maliki’s exclusionist and sectarian policies. It turns out many of these rebels are former members of the Awakening Councils which aided the US in defeating Al Qaeda between 2006 and 2007, and who were prevented by Maliki from being integrated into the Iraqi military and security forces. In light of this, any US support for Maliki would have been viewed as American intervention on the side of Shiite Iraqis and their Iranian backers. Moreover, it would also have angered the US’s regional allies, primarily, Saudi Arabia, already disenchanted with Maliki and his Iranian backers. This explains the statement given by US President Obama during an interview with the *New York Times*, in which he stated that he would not allow US fighter planes be turned into the Shiite government’s Air Force, adding that Iran needed to understand that attempts to dominate the Middle East through its Shiite allies in Iraq were doomed to fail¹.

Faced with mounting criticism, Maliki was compelled to step down following persistent pressures exerted on him from all sides, primarily the Shiite religious authorities, the United States and Iran, all of whom concurred to support Haidar al-Abadi.²

¹ Thomas L. Friedman, “Obama on the World,” *The New York Times*, August 8, 2014, at: <http://nyti.ms/1oquBzF>

² Michael Gregory, “Fearing Iraq’s downfall, power brokers chose safe bet Abbadi,” *Reuters News Agency*, August 12, 2014: <http://reut.rs/1oquFzg>

For the United States, Maliki's removal provides the opportunity to defeat ISIS before the group becomes a much larger regional threat, spanning beyond Iraq and Syria. Furthermore, the formation of a consociational government in Iraq might reduce the likelihood of US ground forces becoming militarily involved again in Iraq. Obama, still hopeful that his presidential legacy will be determined in large part by his withdrawal of US forces from Iraq, is keen not to be pulled back to the battered country. Notably, American fighter planes began to expand their list of targets to include ISIS positions near Mosul on August 16: exactly one day after Maliki stepped down from power and gave up on a third term as prime minister.

Meanwhile, Iran's primary objective is to maintain its influence over Iraq by ensuring that its allies continue to hold the reins of power there. With Maliki increasingly becoming a liability, and failing to control Iraq, the Iranians chose to exercise their influence through yet another Shiite politician, allegedly less polarizing than the former prime minister.

At this point, the question that poses itself is: what will change if, ultimately, one Iranian - backed politician is replaced with another? Would it not be necessary, instead, to implement a much deeper change to the political system of sectarian-based power-sharing, which the Americans put in place in the first place?