



 REPORT ARAB POLITICS BEYOND THE UPRISINGS

# How Washington Learned to Love Haider al-Abadi

MARCH 29, 2018 — ARON LUND

Iraqi prime minister Haider al-Abadi might seem an unlikely love interest for the U.S. government, given his decades-long membership in a Shia religious party that once received strong Iranian backing. But since taking office in the summer of 2014, the avuncular Iraqi prime minister has made himself everybody's darling—and his reelection has come to be seen as an important objective for U.S. Middle East policy.

With Washington's attention drifting from Syria to President Donald Trump's grand project of rolling back Iranian influence in the broader Middle East, the situation in Iraq is coming into focus—and no one matters as much to Iraq's future as Haider al-Abadi. Known, so far, as a pragmatist with a record of working with both the United States and Iran, Abadi is widely seen as the best hope for Iraq's stability and autonomy, which remains at risk from Sunni jihadi insurgents as well as from the attempts of Iran-backed Shia hardliners to dominate the security apparatus. But much about Abadi, his policies, and his chances of success remains unclear—and Iraq's future is still up for grabs.

This Century Foundation report, which is part of "Arab Politics beyond the Uprisings: Experiments in an Era of Resurgent Authoritarianism," a multi-year TCF project supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, will look at why the United States has lined up behind Abadi as Iraq moves toward elections on May 12, and will survey some of the challenges that await Iraq as the country moves toward post-conflict reconstruction buffeted by rival regional and international interests.

## The Centrality of Iraq

The United States remains by far the most powerful international actor in the Middle East, but the region is changing and so is the nature of U.S. involvement there.<sup>1</sup> America's post-Cold War influence over this complex region has been tested by numerous challenges since the revolts of 2011, including the cruel civil wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen; rapid changes in the posture of America's Turkish ally;<sup>2</sup> surging Russian and Iranian regional ambitions; and the inward turn of American politics, seen already under President Barack Obama (2008–2016) but most clearly on display in the rhetoric of current president Donald Trump.<sup>3</sup>

Trump's sparsely furnished Middle East policy seems to rest on two main pillars: fighting the so-called Islamic State, also known as ISIS or Daesh, and taking a hard line on Iran. In both cases, Iraq is emerging as a central front.

Over the past several years, American Middle East policy has been trapped in a bitter argument over Syria, rehashing endless internal debates over Obama's 2013 "red line" and the merits of intervention against President Bashar al-Assad's forces.<sup>4</sup>

That period is now coming to an end, with U.S. attention beginning to shift to other issues. The Syrian war is by no means over, but it has entered a sorting-out phase in which Assad's government remains (barring unforeseen surprises, which cannot be excluded) in uncontested control over Damascus and most of Syria.<sup>5</sup> Having long signaled that he wanted the United States to get out of the Syrian "quicksand," Trump cut support for anti-Assad insurgents in 2017.<sup>6</sup> Although Washington will remain intimately involved in that conflict, including by tangling with Turkey over the role of U.S.-backed Kurdish groups and by working with Israel and other nations to push back against Iranian influence, there are now some fairly hard limits to what the United States can achieve in Syria.

But while the United States may be low on leverage in Syria, and also seems to have resigned itself to a growing Iranian role in Lebanon, Washington still enjoys strong influence over Iraq.<sup>7</sup> Having built most of the Iraqi government from the ground up during its 2003–2011 occupation, the United States remains a major supporter of the Iraqi government—which, among other things, is the third-largest global recipient of U.S. security assistance—and continues to exert powerful influence over politics both in Baghdad and in the Iraqi Kurdish autonomous region's capital, Erbil.<sup>8</sup>

To the U.S. political establishment, walking away from Iraq seems out of the question. As a major oil producer that also borders Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, and Turkey, Iraq is indisputably more central to U.S. interests in the Middle East than Syria could ever be. In addition, the legacy of the 2003 war still weighs heavily on U.S. political thinking, as do hundreds of billions in sunk costs.

Then, too, there's the fact that President Trump seems to be itching for a fight with Iran, in which case the U.S. government must hurry to cover its flanks in Iraq. Trump has long said he wants to scrap the 2015 international agreement over Iran's nuclear program, and recently warned that he may do so on May 12, which is also the day of Iraq's elections.<sup>9</sup> His recent firing of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who had argued against destroying the Iran deal, in favor of CIA director Mike Pompeo, who is hawkishly anti-Iranian, and the March 23 appointment of hardliner John Bolton as national security adviser, are widely thought to have made it more likely that Trump will follow through on his threat.<sup>10</sup> Should May 12 mark the start of a new round of escalation in U.S.–Iranian relations, what happens on that same day in the Iraqi elections will suddenly gain added significance, since both nations are uniquely well placed to hurt each other in Iraq.

If Iraq looms high on America's list of priorities, that holds even more true for Iran. To the rulers of Tehran as well as to many ordinary Iranians, Shia-majority Iraq is their own backyard—so close to home that any U.S. presence on Iraqi soil is automatically seen as a national security threat. For Iran, the menacing noises emanating from the White House will seem like all the more reason to seek dominance over its smaller neighbor, in order to preemptively shut down any potential threat from across the border.

History plays a role, too. Forged in the crucible of the devastating Iraqi–Iranian war of 1980–1988, the Shia Islamist government of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei is resolutely determined to never again allow the emergence of a hostile government in Baghdad.

Then there's the regional balance of power. Under Shia-dominated governments after 2003, Iraq's role has flipped from blocking out Iranian influence in the Arab World to instead facilitate its expansion into Syria and Lebanon, swelling Tehran's political clout and improving its leverage vis-à-vis Israel, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and other longtime enemies. If Tehran has in the past decade shown that it is willing to fight hard to protect its interests in Lebanon and Syria, that's nothing compared to how far the Iranian leadership would go to maintain its position in Baghdad.

Iran's perennial rivals among the Gulf Arab States appear to have concluded, like much of Washington, that Syria is probably a lost cause for them, but that Iraq still hangs in the balance. In the view of the Gulf Arab rulers, Iraq could either stabilize as an independent nation with friendly but non-submissive ties to Tehran, which might be bad enough from their point of view, or turn into a proxy that radiates Iranian influence across the Arab World for decades to come, which would be a nightmare scenario for Riyadh and its allies.

Accurate or not, those are the impressions that shape regional stratagems in time for the double deadline on May 12: Trump's ruling on the Iranian nuclear deal, and the Iraqi elections in which Haider al-Abadi has emerged as the U.S. and Gulf Arab favorite—the man who will help them beat Iran. But will he?

## The Centrality of Abadi

Having overseen his country's triumphant return from near-collapse in 2014 to winning the war over the Islamic State, Abadi is now firmly ensconced at the center of Iraqi politics, and although he is in many ways a weak prime minister, he seems to be finding a role in every regional power's planning for Iraq.

Western officials portray Abadi as a centrist, stabilizing figure who is by no means hostile to Tehran, but who also will not simply obey its diktat. A pragmatist whose power flows from the institutions of the Iraqi state, he remains, in this view, the best bet for a strong central government that can help Iraq recover and limit Iranian proxy interference down the line.

On the other side of the divide, Iran appears to view Abadi as an unthreatening and often cooperative leader, but not an ideal one. His ties to the United States do not (at least not yet) present much of an obstacle to Iran's allies in Iraq and can often be complementary to their efforts, even providing cover for them. But Iran has long supported Shia Islamist rivals

of Abadi who work both inside and outside of the government, undermining Abadi's influence and taking pot shots at his cabinet through parliament. U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis recently accused Iran of "mucking around" in the Iraqi elections, trying to sway votes with money.<sup>11</sup> Should election results permit it, Tehran may push for Abadi's replacement with a more pliable candidate come May. If not, the Iranians may settle for working both with and around Abadi, limiting his ability to intervene against Iranian clients in Iraq while also drawing him toward deeper dependence on them.

Part of the American interest in seeing Abadi succeed is due to the ongoing threat from the Islamic State, which continues to launch attacks in the hope of rekindling sectarian mayhem. Even if Abadi portrays the jihadis as a spent force and says the Iraqi Army is "hunting them down in the deserts," more than 1,000 Iraqis were reportedly killed in the two first months of 2018, and the U.S. intelligence community warns that the Islamic State will pursue underground resistance.<sup>12</sup> Paradoxically, if the Islamic State manages to keep Iraq unstable and polarized, the main beneficiaries are likely to be the pro-Iranian Shia hardliners who benefit from weak governance and whose political pitch is to portray Abadi as soft on Sunni rebels.

"There's no question that some sort of insurgency will try to regroup and carry out revenge attacks against Iraqi forces and civilians, be it ISIS or al-Qaeda," says Rasha al-Aqeedi, a Mosul-born researcher at the Al Mesbar Studies and Research Center in Dubai. "The security vacuum will continue to be exploited by different actors."<sup>13</sup>

The other part of the equation, of course, relates to Iran itself, and Iraq's future relationship with its powerful eastern neighbor. Abadi has made clear that he views Iran as a cherished ally, not an enemy, and that he will not be goaded into joining any sort of anti-Iranian front. "This conflict between the U.S. and Iran goes back years. It has got nothing to do with us," he recently told *Time*, adding, "We need the support of both of you. Keep your differences away from Iraq."<sup>14</sup>

While that may not be music to American ears, it is par for the course in Iraqi Shia politics, where the main line of dissent is rather to call for a stronger pro-Tehran line. U.S. policymakers seem to recognize that this type of awkward balancing is the best they can hope for, and that Abadi's pragmatism and his commitment to a middle-ground policy represents Iraq's safest path back toward stability and regional reintegration.

"I don't think he is more beholden to Iran than any Shia prime minister would be in similar structural circumstances," says Colin Kahl, an associate professor at Georgetown University who served as U.S. President Barack Obama's deputy assistant secretary of defense for the Middle East in 2009–2011. "The key now will be to see the kind of political coalition he can cobble together ahead of the election. If it is fairly broad and he wins re-election, and the United States sticks with him—all big ifs—he is probably the best hope."<sup>15</sup>

## Abadi as the Anti-Maliki

Haider al-Abadi may come across as a bland figure to some, but in American and Gulf Arab eyes, at least, he possesses one very striking feature: he isn't Nouri al-Maliki, Iraq's former prime minister whose controversial 2006–2014 rule continues to shape outside views of Iraqi governance for good and bad.

A fellow Dawa Party member, Maliki was first brought to power on the urging of then-U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, who saw him as a pragmatic, hands-on leader not unduly close to Iran.<sup>16</sup> American hopes for centrist strongman rule were swiftly dashed, however, and by 2007, Maliki's government was seen to evince a "virulent and seemingly intractable sectarianism."<sup>17</sup>

Still, after two hapless, flailing years, Maliki did briefly begin to settle into the role intended for him.

In 2008, he led troops into Basra and eastern Baghdad to crush an unruly Shia militia led by Moqtada al-Sadr.<sup>18</sup> It was a risky gamble, but it ultimately turned out well for Maliki, leaving both Iraqis and Americans pleased at his apparent even-handedness and enthusiastic over the central state's reassertion of authority.

Having thus established his strongman credentials and won some broader popularity, Maliki continued to hoard power, using increasingly authoritarian means. When he lost the popular vote in Iraq's March 2010 elections, he did not gracefully step aside. Instead, he dug in for a record-breaking 249-day impasse over cabinet-formation, eliciting dubious legal rulings from friendly judges and hailing Iran to cobble together a majority of Shia votes for a second term. With the United States on track to withdraw from Iraq, Washington chose—despite considerable internal controversy—not to try to block Maliki's reappointment.<sup>19</sup>

By the time that Maliki took office for a second term in December 2010, whatever cross-sectarian legitimacy he had assembled after 2008 had frayed and he depended heavily on Iran-backed Islamists and militia chiefs.<sup>20</sup> Unnerved by revolts sweeping the region and egged on by Tehran, Maliki then nixed Obama's half-hearted request to keep U.S. troops in Iraq after December 2011, only to prove incapable of managing the security situation on his own.<sup>21</sup> By 2013, his divisive policies had contributed to the rise of a new Sunni protest movement, which, in turn, facilitated the Islamic State's attempts to rekindle an insurgency from bases in civil-war Syria.

In a climate of surging violence and state dysfunction, Maliki leveraged Shia support and state resources to win reelection in May 2014, but before he had managed to form his new cabinet, the Islamic State seized Mosul and several other cities.<sup>22</sup> This proved to be his undoing, as Obama ordered U.S. forces to return to Iraq and mobilized America's Iraqi allies to block a third term for Maliki. Iran, too, thought Maliki unsuited to lead Iraq's restoration and pressured



NOURI AL MALIKI AND HAIDER AL ABADI FEB 2015. SOURCE: IRAQI PRIME MINISTERS OFFICE.

him to step aside. By September 2014, Maliki was out and the Iraqi parliament had appointed Haider al-Abadi as Iraq's new prime minister.<sup>23</sup>

The job description was clear enough: Abadi had been tapped to provide Iraq with a symbolic fresh start and new, untainted, and unifying leadership—in other words, to be the Anti-Maliki.

At first glance, however, the two men were strikingly similar. Both had been members of the Dawa Party for decades and both came to power almost by accident, pulled out of relative obscurity by the United States and Iran. But there were differences, too, in their backgrounds, as well as in their style of politics. Maliki's twenty-three years in exile from Saddam Hussein's Iraq were spent running clandestine Dawa Party cells in Syria and Iran, while Abadi worked as an engineer in the United Kingdom. People who have dealt with both men say they are temperamentally very different.

"In my experience, Abadi has nothing like the sectarian impulses Maliki had," says Colin Kahl, who was closely involved in shaping U.S. Iraq policy between 2009 and 2011. He describes Abadi as "a technocrat who understands that only a cross-sectarian government can hold the country together."<sup>24</sup>

Taking a page from Maliki's 2008–2010 playbook, Abadi has indeed tried to find a style of leadership that transcends religious politics in favor of a nonsectarian, albeit sometimes crude and jingoistic, state-centric Iraqi nationalism.

"From an American perspective Abadi certainly ticks the boxes," says Fanar Haddad, an Iraq expert and senior research fellow at the Middle East Institute of the National University of Singapore. "He is committed to forging productive relations with all of Iraq's neighbors, with the United States and other major stakeholders—and there have been great

achievements on that front. He is committed to the idea of the Iraqi nation state and to bolstering the role of the traditional institutions of the state.”<sup>25</sup>

But it has been an uphill struggle. Abadi has been forced to battle the Islamic State even as he juggled the budgetary shortfalls caused by a sharp drop in oil prices in 2014–2015 and quarreled with independence-minded Kurdish authorities in northern Iraq. Struggling to impose himself on Iraq’s dysfunctional state, his battlefield victories have not translated into much success in parliament, where important pieces of legislation continue to be delayed or swatted down by political forces inside and outside his government.<sup>26</sup> Rivals have taken every chance to trip Abadi up, with Maliki (who remains head of the Dawa Party and commands a significant parliamentary bloc) acting as obstructionist-in-chief in the hope of a 2018 comeback.<sup>27</sup>

## TABLE 1



<b>Political Leaders in Iraq Since 2004</b>			
<b><i>Presidents</i></b>			
Ghazi al-Yawar	Independent	Sunni	2005-2005 (interim)
Jalal Talabani	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan	Kurd	2005-2014
Fouad Masoum	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan	Kurd	2014-
<b><i>Prime Ministers</i></b>			
Iyad Allawi	Iraqi National Accord	Shia	2004-2005 (interim)
Ibrahim al-Jaafari	Dawa Party	Shia	2005 (transitional)
Nouri al-Maliki	Dawa Party	Shia	2006-2014
Haider al-Abadi	Dawa Party	Shia	2014-
<b><i>Speakers</i></b>			
Hajeem al-Hassani	Iraqi Islamic Party/Independent	Sunni	2005-2006 (transitional)
Mahmoud al-Mashhadani	Iraqi Accord Front	Sunni	2006-2008
Iyad al-Samarrai	Iraqi Islamic Party	Sunni	2009-2010
Fouad Masoum	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan	Kurd	2010 (acting)
Osama al-Nujeifi	Muttahidoun	Sunni	2010-2014
Salim al-Jibouri	Iraqi Islamic Party/Muttahidoun	Sunni	2014-

**TABLE 2**

<b>Major Shia Arab Electoral Coalitions</b>		
<b>Victory</b>	Haider al-Abadi	Incumbent prime minister
<b>Conquest</b>	Hadi al-Ameri	Hashd-based, pro-Iran
<b>Marching for Reform</b>	Moqtada al-Sadr	Anti-Maliki, anti-Ameri
<b>Wisdom</b>	Ammar al-Hakim	Abadi-curious
<b>State of Law</b>	Nouri al-Maliki	Anti-Abadi, close to Hashd

## The Hashd Dilemma

If the first reason for America’s love affair with Haider al-Abadi is the fact that he isn’t Nouri al-Maliki, the second is that he is seen as the only credible counterweight to al-Hashd al-Shaabi, a sprawling network of mostly Shia militias created in 2014 and also known as the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) or Forces (PMF).<sup>28</sup>

The Hashd emerged after the Islamic State’s capture of Mosul in summer 2014, as Shia fighters streamed to the front to plug the gaps left by the defeat or breakup of entire divisions of Iraq’s regular army.<sup>29</sup>

Variouly estimated at between 60,000 and 140,000 fighters, with Iraqi officials noting that 122,000 members were registered with the government in mid-2017, the Hashd is far from a monolithic movement, with fighters spread across several dozen factions.<sup>30</sup> Still, both detractors and supporters tend to speak of the Hashd as a single entity, with critics castigating the coalition as an Iranian fifth column, while supporters lionize the Hashd as a representative of the “selfless impoverished youths of Baghdad and southern Iraq who answered the call to defend and avenge the homeland.”<sup>31</sup>

The truth is perhaps a little of both. The vast majority of the Hashd’s fighters are Shia Muslims, many of whom responded to a June 2014 fatwa from Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani calling on citizens to join the security forces.<sup>32</sup> But although these “mainstream” Hashd factions provide manpower and help define the movement in the eyes of many Iraqis, its internal military–political balance is disproportionately slanted toward a handful of large, hardline factions that follow the ideology of the Iranian theocracy’s founding father Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–1989).



ABADI MEETING HASHD LEADERS IN FEBRUARY 2015. SOURCE: IRAQI PRIME MINISTERS OFFICE.

backing for many years (or in some cases decades). Chief among them is the Badr Organization, led by Hadi al-Ameri, but there is also the Hezbollah al-Nujaba Movement of Akram al-Kaabi, Qais Khazali's Asaeb Ahl al-Haqq, Shibli al-

Unlike the broader Hashd movement, the Khomeinist militias tend to operate as an extension of Iran's intelligence and security apparatus, and they look to Khomeini's successor, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, as their chief authority in religious matters. Some of these factions also work in Syria, where thousands of Iraqi Shia fighters have joined a Tehran-orchestrated effort to salvage President Assad's government.

Of course, the influence of the Khomeinist camp in Iraq is not new, and its influence and popularity among Iraq's Shia majority is not simply a function of Hashd-branded militia networks. Many of these groups have long been represented in parliament and are also influential inside Iraq's regular security forces. In particular, the Ministry of the Interior is known as a Badr Organization fiefdom (the current minister, Qasem al-Araji, is a member of the group) and units of the U.S.-backed national army are also reported to have fallen under Khomeinist influence, such as the 5th Infantry Division in Diyala.<sup>34</sup>

How to handle the Hashd has been a thorny issue for Abadi. He relied on the militias to defeat the Islamic State but also faced near-constant political pressure from Hadi al-Ameri and his allies, who linked up with Maliki to undermine him. Pushing back against the political forays of the Khomeinist bloc, Abadi could often count on support from rival Shia

authorities like Sadr and Sistani, as well as from Sunni politicians who, unsurprisingly, tend to take a very dim view of the Hashd hardliners.<sup>35</sup>

While Abadi seems to consider the burgeoning power of pro-Iranian militia leaders as an obstacle to governing Iraq, the Hashd remains wildly popular among Shia Iraqis. Trying to roll back the influence of the Khomeinist clique is difficult as long as they are conflated with the broader Hashd movement, and would likely result in a backlash. Even Sistani has denounced calls to demobilize the Hashd, and Iran has warned Abadi that he must resist American calls to weaken or dissolve the militias.<sup>36</sup>

Trying to muddle through this dilemma, Abadi has praised and supported the Hashd as a whole while maintaining a working relationship with the more troublesome Iran-linked factions, even as he tangled with their representatives in parliament.<sup>37</sup> Hashd fighters have received state salaries since 2015, and in 2016 Abadi decided to legitimize the militias as a part of the Iraqi Armed Forces, formally placing them under his authority as supreme commander.<sup>38</sup> In March 2018, the prime minister finally decreed the formal induction of Hashd members into the security forces, providing them with salaries and personnel benefits equivalent to those of their counterparts in the Ministry of Defense, while stating that the Hashd will retain “its own identity” instead of simply being merged into existing military formations.<sup>39</sup> Though the Hashd issue is far from settled, and Abadi can potentially press for demobilization or purges later, this would seem to go some way toward Iran’s ambition of institutionalizing its influence inside the Iraqi security apparatus.

Debate over the Hashd’s role in Iraq has been marred by exaggeration on all sides. Anti-Hashd arguments tend to paint an alarmist picture of a “Shia ISIS” trying to overrun the central state, when, in fact, the militias work with the permission of the Baghdad government and have paid in blood to secure its continued existence. And though Shia-chauvinist Hashd fighters have committed brutal murders and other sectarian abuses during the war, they are not—as the Islamic State is—a genocidal movement seeking the physical extermination of other religious sects.<sup>40</sup>

Still, there is no denying that the Hashd phenomenon has empowered Iran-backed extremists in Iraq’s Shia community. The willingness of the Khomeinist hardliners to operate within the confines of the Iraqi state’s institutional system does not extend to surrendering control of their armed followings. Tehran loyalists like Hadi al-Ameri and Abul-Mahdi al-Mohandis have instead been able to turn the institutional superstructure created by Abadi to their own advantage, working inside it to bend state salary schemes for the Hashd in favor of Iran’s clients.<sup>41</sup> Next, they will try to use the Hashd as a stepping stone to expanded parliamentary power, hoping to further cement their influence over Iraq’s security forces and over its politics.

For more on al-Hashd al-Shaabi from The Century Foundation, see Renad Mansour’s report “After Mosul, Will Iraq’s Paramilitaries Set the State’s Agenda?” and Fanar Haddad’s “Understanding Iraq’s Hashd al-Sha’bi: State and Power in

Post-2014 Iraq.”

### **More Information**

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## **Four More Years, Say Washington and Riyadh—and Maybe Iran?**

Though the United States won’t officially endorse a candidate in the May 12 parliamentary elections, the results of which will determine the choice of president and prime minister, Washington is clearly rooting for a second term for Abadi.<sup>42</sup> As a leading, pragmatic incumbent who is also more friendly to America and its allies than are other credible candidates, U.S. officials appear to see him as both the best and the safest bet.

Abadi also has other foreign cheerleaders, benefiting from international opposition to Iran and from his own efforts to expand ties with Sunni states in the region.

In 2017, the frosty Iraqi–Saudi relationship began to thaw at baffling speed.<sup>43</sup> The shift was likely prompted by the ascent to power of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Saudi Arabia, although Abadi certainly played his part. That year, Adel Jubeir became the first Saudi foreign minister to visit Baghdad in decades, and Abadi went to Riyadh twice.<sup>44</sup> Mohammed bin Salman even hosted a visit by Moqtada al-Sadr, and so did the United Arab Emirates.<sup>45</sup>

Renewed Saudi–Iraqi contacts have resulted in a series of deals over trade and communications, including the reopening of their border crossing after a twenty-seven-year closure.<sup>46</sup> Early 2018 also saw a successful foray into football diplomacy through a heavily publicized friendly match in Basra (the first such game in nearly four decades, it ended 4–1 to Iraq) and King Salman’s promise to build a gigantic football stadium in Baghdad. The Saudis have also offered \$1.5 billion in reconstruction loans for Iraq.<sup>47</sup>

“I believe Riyadh has changed its course in Iraq for many reasons,” says Rasha al-Aqeedi, who has written for TCF on Iraq’s Sunni Arab political landscape.<sup>48</sup> “Abadi’s calm, non-sectarian approach to Sunni Arabs and American pressure being a few, but also an acknowledgment of Iranian influence and their own limited leverage in Baghdad.”<sup>49</sup>

Indeed, Saudi Arabia now seems to be pursuing a soft-power strategy to purchase goodwill among Iraqi Shia politicians

so inclined, after concluding that its past policy of trying to ostracize Baghdad while working with Sunni minority figures delivered few benefits.<sup>50</sup> “Having failed to outfight Iran, the Saudis now want to outspend it,” a much-pleased Iraqi official told *The Economist*.<sup>51</sup>

As much as Abadi benefits from American–Saudi–Emirati pressure on Tehran, he is careful not to endorse it and warns that he “will not permit Iraqi territory to be used against Iran.”<sup>52</sup> When then-U.S. secretary of state Rex Tillerson called on Iran’s military advisers and militias to stay out of Iraq, the prime minister’s office shot back immediately: “No party has the right to interfere in Iraqi affairs.”<sup>53</sup>

Indeed, Abadi’s preferred role seems to be that of everybody’s friendly neighbor, and he publicly urges Saudis, Americans, and Iranians to take their disputes elsewhere.<sup>54</sup> Characteristically, his two trips to Saudi Arabia in June and October 2017 were immediately followed by visits to Tehran.<sup>55</sup>

“Abadi has balanced Iraq’s interests relatively well,” concludes Aqeedi, noting that the prime minister has managed to work constructively with the United States, Iran, and Saudi Arabia without provoking a backlash from either side.<sup>56</sup> It has been no easy feat, but Abadi’s no-enemies approach could be richly rewarded when time comes for him to seek a second term.

## The Kurdistan Crisis

Iraq’s Kurds, who make up about a fifth of the population, learned of Abadi’s new centrality to American plans the hard way. The Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq has long been a trusted American ally, but U.S. diplomats have consistently rejected Kurdish aspirations for full independence.

When Kurdish president Masoud Barzani declared a referendum on independence in September 2017, Americans and Europeans didn’t just object to the plan itself—they also worried that it would undermine Abadi.<sup>57</sup> Though he failed to win any support abroad, and Iraq, Iran, and Turkey warned that they would retaliate collectively if the referendum went ahead, Barzani was too caught up in domestic intrigue and flag-waving nationalism to care. When referendum results came back overwhelmingly in favor of independence, fireworks went up over Erbil—but the Kurdish euphoria would be short-lived.<sup>58</sup>

With a united international community at his back, Abadi joined forces with Turkey and Iran to place the Kurdish region under economic blockade; he then sent the Iraqi Army and the Hashd to retake disputed areas from the Kurdish Peshmerga forces. For decades, Kurdish officials had portrayed oil-rich Kirkuk as the Kurdish Jerusalem, a city built for

passionate last stands—but when Baghdad’s troops approached, the Peshmerga folded and fled almost immediately, leaving rival Kurdish leaders to squabble over who was to blame.<sup>59</sup>

U.S. policymakers seem to have been unhappy about the resulting destabilization of Iraqi Kurdistan, but they preferred it to a Kurdish separatist bid and did nothing to restrain Baghdad.

Washington also saw a silver lining to this crisis: by taking a hard line on Kurdish separatism, Abadi was able to rack up another victory just in time for the elections—one that would be broadly appreciated by Iraqi Arabs, whether Shia or Sunni.

Though Iraqi Kurds chafe at their misfortune, the retaking of Kirkuk gave Abadi a chance to have his own “Basra moment,” reminiscent of how Maliki’s crackdown on Sadrist militiamen in 2008 burnished his nationalist strongman credentials. Indeed, sensing that he has found a historic opportunity to curb Kurdistan’s far-ranging autonomy and win support among Sunni and Shia Arabs alike, Abadi has continued to put pressure on the Kurds ever since, including by tearing up Erbil’s formerly fixed share of Iraq’s state budget.<sup>60</sup>

## The January Surprise

However, for all of Abadi’s battlefield victories and diplomatic rewards, he lacked one important prerequisite for a second term: well-organized supporters. To become prime minister, he will have to secure the endorsement of the largest political bloc in parliament, and by early 2018 he had nothing of the sort.

“Despite his success in leading Iraq through the war against the Islamic State, Prime Minister Abadi is nervous about his capacity to outperform his rivals in the Iraqi elections,” says Dr. Nussaibah Younis, an Iraq expert and an associate fellow with Chatham House. “His leadership style is relatively insular, he has a small inner circle, and has been unable to build a supportive party machinery around himself. He was always going to struggle to win over the Dawa Party, given the internal opposition from the pro-Maliki bloc within the party, but he hasn’t had the confidence to leave the party and to establish an alternative.”<sup>61</sup>

Indeed, Maliki, who is still Dawa’s secretary-general, was determined to run ahead of the party ticket.<sup>62</sup> To avoid a split, the Dawa leadership decided in January 2018 not to run in the elections at all, thereby permitting Abadi and Maliki to organize separate campaigns and initiate their own alliances with other parties.<sup>63</sup>

When the deadline to declare political alliances ran out on January 11, Abadi unveiled an electoral vehicle called the Victory Coalition (“Nasr”), which he promised would “transcend sectarianism, division, and discrimination.”<sup>64</sup> Assembled from a mostly Shia patchwork of independents and smaller parties, it was by no means a weak coalition, but also not the sort of big-tent powerhouse that can pluck the premiership by itself.<sup>65</sup>

Several intra-Shia challengers presented themselves. The most powerful rival coalition was Hadi al-Ameri’s Conquest (“*Fateh*”<sup>66</sup>), a vehicle for Hashd commanders and other friends of Tehran. But to some surprise, Nouri al-Maliki had been left out. The former prime minister was relegated to the role of second-tier candidate, running for the State of Law (“*Dawlat al-Qanoun*”) coalition that he had successfully led in 2010 and 2014 but which had now been gutted by defections to Abadi’s Victory and Ameri’s Conquest. For his part, Moqtada al-Sadr formed a feisty populist alliance that hung up the Iraqi Communist Party as window-dressing to conceal Sadrism dominance, naming it Marching for Reform (“*Sairoun Nahwa al-Islah*”), while Ammar al-Hakim, who is the scion of another influential Shia family, gathered his followers in a smaller coalition called Wisdom (“*Hikma*”).<sup>67</sup>

Then came a surprise: having bashed each other in the press just days earlier, Abadi and Ameri suddenly announced a joint list on January 14, to which Hakim added his name.<sup>68</sup>

The resulting Shia-Islamist behemoth seemed guaranteed to clinch the first chance at government formation—but at what cost? Many of Abadi’s supporters were stunned at his embrace of the Hashd’s Khomeinist hardliners, and his ofttime-ally Moqtada al-Sadr slammed the news as “abhorrent.”<sup>69</sup>

Time for the next surprise, as Abadi and Ameri immediately split again.<sup>70</sup> Reasons cited included tactical differences, Hakim’s role, and Ameri’s insistence on fielding active militia leaders as candidates, but foreign intimations are hardly out of the question. Soon after, Hakim also politely stepped away from his alliance with Abadi, though all three have said they will keep the door open for cooperation after the elections.<sup>71</sup>

The January circus tarnished Abadi’s reputation, alienating non-Shia supporters and casting the prime minister as at once amateurish and cynical. There has been much speculation about what kind of intricate political chess games may have been behind the move, but many seem to put it down to Abadi simply overreaching and outsmarting himself. “Without a party machine, he is going to struggle to perform as well as expected, and this insecurity gave rise to the short-lived coalition with the Hashd,” says Younis.<sup>72</sup>

Even so, Abadi remains the frontrunner in Iraq’s elections, not least because his opponents are divided amongst themselves, including the main Shia candidates.<sup>73</sup> “Barring any sudden reversal of fortunes or unexpected blunders, the elections are Abadi’s to win,” says Fanar Haddad.<sup>74</sup> Kirk Sowell, an Iraq expert and head of the Jordan-based



consultancy Utica Risk, also puts Abadi in the lead: “The fact that Maliki and Ameri are heading competing lists significantly increases the chance [that Abadi] will get a plurality among the Shia caucus,” Sowell said, speaking in January before the coalition-building process had been completed. But, he added, “that doesn’t guarantee reelection.”<sup>75</sup>

## Government Formation, Iraq’s “Second Election”

A peculiar feature of Iraq’s political system is that much of the jostling over who should rule actually takes place after the elections.<sup>76</sup> Iraq’s 2005 constitution was designed to prevent an authoritarian relapse by requiring broad coalitions to form a government, but that is a mixed blessing: cabinet formation after each new election can be debilitatingly slow, and in 2010, the country lacked a proper government for more than eight months. It also tends to invite backroom haggling and foreign interference.

Describing Iraqi politics as “a balancing act” rather than “a zero-sum winner and loser dichotomy based on the winner of an election,” Cambridge scholar Renad Mansour points to the curious fact that the winner of Iraq’s post-Saddam elections has in fact *never* managed to become prime minister.<sup>77</sup>

The 2005 election was won by a Shia-majority coalition that nominated incumbent transitional prime minister Ibrahim Jaafari, who is now Iraq’s foreign minister—but when Jaafari failed to secure a majority, he was succeeded by a new U.S. favorite, Maliki. In 2010, Iyad Allawi’s multi-sectarian alliance beat Maliki in the popular vote, but the prime minister still managed to clinch a second term through hard-nosed coalition-building and Iranian pressure on Shia parliamentarians. Although Maliki then won the 2014 elections, the fall of Mosul swung the new parliament in favor of Abadi, who was endorsed by both Washington and Tehran.

In other words, while January’s electoral alliances do matter, it is no less important how the newly elected parliamentarians decide to align once installed. Experts on Iraqi politics seem to agree that the strongest blocs running for the premiership are Abadi’s Victory and Ameri’s Conquest, while Maliki’s once-formidable State of Law has slipped far behind. After the election, Maliki seems likely to link up with the Hashd groups in Conquest, with whom he claims to have a “deep understanding.”<sup>78</sup> However, Abadi also has supporters. For all its pious protest about government corruption, the Sadrist bloc is more likely to back Abadi, and so is Hakim’s Wisdom coalition.

If Shia parliamentarians are too divided to produce a single strong candidate, Sunni and Kurdish parliamentarians may emerge as kingmakers—but intra-Shia maneuvering is likely to be decisive.<sup>79</sup> So far, therefore, the odds may favor Abadi, but he would likely have to co-opt Hashd votes one way or another to pass muster. And that’s where some of Abadi’s backers start to worry.

“The United States and other Western partner governments are keen to see Abadi win the elections because he is seen as a moderate in the Shia political landscape, but there are new fears that his pragmatism could lead him into a coalition with Hashd groups after the election,” says Younis. “Electorally, Abadi needs hardline Shia support more than he needs Sunni or Kurdish support, which could mean that Western powers are disappointed with Abadi’s direction of travel after the election.”<sup>80</sup>

## Tough Times Ahead

If Haider al-Abadi manages to build the kind of coalition that can secure a second term for him, he will then face the daunting challenges of rebuilding Iraq and promoting popular and political reconciliation; all of it in a climate of instability and tension where the Islamic State insurgency still simmers and relations with Iraqi Kurdistan remain horribly infected.<sup>81</sup>

Underlying it all, the economic and social situation will remain grim as long as oil prices do not rise. Bombed-out cities like Mosul and Fallujah will require very serious reconstruction efforts if Iraq’s 2.32 million displaced Iraqi civilians are to return home and rebuild their lives. The government has estimated total reconstruction costs at more than \$100 billion.<sup>82</sup>

After winning the war, however, Abadi is starting to find that his international allies are far less forthcoming when it comes to winning the peace.

The United States is a case in point. Having spent nearly \$15 billion battling the Islamic State, the U.S. government has paid out only \$265 million—less than 2 percent of military expenses—to rehabilitate areas retaken from the jihadi group.<sup>83</sup> This imbalance between the military and civilian sides of the war effort existed already under the previous U.S. administration, but it is unlikely to be rectified now: Trump has repeatedly declared his opposition to nation-building and wants to slash foreign aid spending.<sup>84</sup> “We just tell them, no, it’s not going to happen,” a U.S. official told reporters when asked about Iraqi pleas for reconstruction assistance.<sup>85</sup>

A February 13 reconstruction conference in Kuwait saw pledges of about \$30 billion for Iraq’s reconstruction, mostly in the form of loans and export credits.<sup>86</sup> As U.S. secretary of state, Rex Tillerson made no donations but pledged \$3 billion in credits to American companies willing to invest in Iraq, a figure later matched to the dollar by Iranian Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri who announced in March that Iran will open up its own \$3-billion credit line.<sup>87</sup>

\$30 billion is a serious sum, but since most of the support for Iraq’s reconstruction was offered in the form of loans and investment support, it is far from obvious that it will ever materialize.<sup>88</sup> Foreign investments may also end up bypassing Iraq’s war-damaged Sunni regions to focus on less difficult areas where returns may be greater.

The lukewarm response to Abadi’s pleas for reconstruction assistance has done nothing to enhance his standing, and it is a warning sign to many experts. “If the United States are banking on a second Abadi premiership they need to ensure that he has the tools to deliver,” Haddad says, “be it in providing political and diplomatic support for contentious reforms and legislation or building on recent security gains or funding and implementing reconstruction and rehabilitation programs.”<sup>89</sup>

## No Plan B



A GIRL WALKS AWAY FROM AN AID DISTRIBUTION IN EASTERN MOSUL HOLDING A BABY HYGIENE KIT. SOURCE: WATHIQ KHUZAIE, UNICEF.

To Sowell, the May elections seem most likely to reproduce the status quo in the form of another Abadi-led “mishmash government,” cramming incompatible political trends into the same cabinet and handing out state jobs and political favors to secure parliamentary buy-in.<sup>90</sup> Such a government would perhaps succeed in clinging to power, but it would be poorly equipped to deliver on economic reform, militia demobilization, Erbil–Baghdad reconciliation, and other high-stakes issues that Iraq needs to address in order to move forward.

Should an Abadi-led future government remain bogged down in parliamentary obstruction, the prime minister may be tempted to explore extraconstitutional workarounds and other authoritarian tricks to ram legislation past unwilling legislators, similarly to how Maliki sought to side-step his often uncooperative parliaments. Haddad notes that on that count, at least, history does have a tendency to repeat itself: “Iraqi leaders growing attached to power is not exactly a Maliki eccentricity.”<sup>91</sup>

U.S. policymakers seem concerned that a weak second-term premiership for Abadi will spawn new problems, not least in



IRAQI CHILDREN CARRY JARS OF COOKING OIL AT AN IDP CAMP ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF FALLUJAH. SOURCE: MOHAMMED AL BAHBAHANI, WFP.

regard to the Hashd’s Khomeinist clique, whose leaders seem to be driving hard for the institutionalization of a Tehran-linked security structure “independent from the military with political and social power.”<sup>92</sup>

While Tehran’s allies may in the end line up behind a second term for Abadi, they won’t do so before testing his strength by putting forth other candidates. However that process ends up, they will certainly have helped themselves to their pound of flesh before negotiations end—and they will remain watchful against any American-inspired attempts to dilute Iran’s power over the Hashd or otherwise curtail its influence. Tehran would surely prefer an outright loyalist as prime minister, but may also be wary of overreaching. If Abadi is forced to depend on pro-Iranian actors in parliament, it may be enough to lock down the gains that Khomeinist actors have made in the Iraqi security sector since 2014 and to continue building on that foundation.

To be sure, the Hashd “will play a role in the upcoming state re-building process” one way or another, “and in any case they will be part of the state,” says Renad Mansour, who points to the Badr Organization’s longstanding influence over the Ministry of Interior.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, Khomeinist influence over the Iraqi security sector existed before the Hashd was born

in 2014 and would exist without it, though maybe less pervasively or differently configured.

In the end, some mutually unsatisfying compromise is perhaps the likely outcome, whether or not Abadi gets his second term, followed by a continued to-and-fro that reflects the shifting balance of power.<sup>94</sup> It wouldn't be news to Iraq, where much of the post-Saddam era has seen power fluidly diffused among the government, regional authorities, their militia allies-cum-rivals, and meddling foreign nations, with Iran and the United States topping that list.

Indeed, fifteen years after its ill-conceived invasion of Iraq, the U.S. government remains deeply embroiled in Iraq's complicated internal politics. Lacking a clear path forward, Washington has opted to continue backing Abadi as its most credible and reliable partner, in the hope of seeing Iraq find its own footing on terms that are acceptable to the United States and its allies. That may or may not be feasible, but, for now, there seem to be few alternatives, and there are none more palatable to American preferences.

Exhausted by the post-2011 Middle East and eager to chart as quick a course to stability as possible, the United States appears to have no Plan B—only a Plan A, where A stands for Abadi.

## Notes

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66. The full Arabic name, "al-fateh al-mubin," means approximately Manifest Victory or Clear Conquest, referring to Quran 48:1.

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alliance after the elections. Abadi, too, said he is open for cooperation with the Hashd leaders. Representatives of Hakim and Abadi have made similar announcements. “al-ameri yakshuf asbab insihab tahaluf al-fateh an tahaluf al-nasr,” *al-Forat News*, January 16, 2018, [alforatnews.com/modules/news/article.php?storyid=157926](http://alforatnews.com/modules/news/article.php?storyid=157926); Turki al-Dakhil interviews Haider al-Abadi, *al-Arabiya*, January 29, 2018, <http://ara.tv/p6xrd>; Jawdat Kazem, “al-hakim yansahib min al-tahaluf maa al-abadi,” *al-Hayat*, January 31, 2018, [www.alhayat.com/m/story/27052969](http://www.alhayat.com/m/story/27052969).

72. Email to the author from Nussaibah Younis, January 2018.

73. Perhaps the talks that led up to the aborted Abadi–Ameri coalition had in fact served an unseen purpose—that of preempting an alliance between Maliki and the Hashd?

74. Online message to the author from Fanar Haddad, January 2018.

75. Online message to the author from Kirk H. Sowell, January 2018.

76. Once the results of the May 12 elections have been confirmed, the new Iraqi parliament will appoint a speaker of parliament (currently Salim al-Jibbouri), with a vote that requires absolute majority, and then a president, who is chosen by two-thirds majority. The president (currently Fouad Masoum) will in turn nominate as prime minister the candidate chosen by the largest political bloc in parliament. The nominee proceeds to assemble a cabinet, known as the Council of Ministers. If the cabinet is not approved by the parliament within fifteen days, the president will offer the chance to another candidate of his choice. In practice, every step of the process will be haggled over to ensure that major parliamentary blocs get their slice of the pie and that Iraq’s main ethnic/sectarian groups are reasonably well represented. Though the constitution requires no such thing, a quota system similar to that in Lebanon has emerged, whereby the post of prime minister tends to fall to a Shia Arab, the position as speaker of parliament to a Sunni Arab, and the presidency to a Kurd. However, there is no formal agreement on this point, and the distribution of posts could change. All of these posts exercise some influence, particularly during the government formation process, but most powers are ultimately concentrated with the prime minister, who, among other things, is commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

77. Online message to the author from Fanar Haddad, January 2018.

78. Interview with Nouri al-Maliki on *Afaq TV*, February 1, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nJ-Twx8ZMeM>.

79. On the issue of cohesion and fragmentation among Iraq’s Shia parties, see Erwin van Veen, Flour El Kamouni-Janssen, and Nick Grinstead, “Iraq’s Shi’a: A house divided,” Clingendael Institute, February 13, 2018, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/iraqs-shia-house-divided>.

80. Email to the author from Nussaibah Younis, January 2018. The U.S. State Department did not respond to requests for comment. However, Fanar Haddad argues that the United States is likely to look approvingly on Abadi’s record on the Hashd issue: “His stillborn and ill-advised Hashd electoral alliance notwithstanding, Abadi has shown that, to the extent possible, he is committed to regulating the Hashd’s role and incorporating them into the Iraqi state.” Online message to the author from Fanar Haddad, January 2018.

81. Indeed, American officials and analysts still fear that the Islamic State could bounce back in some form, with U.S. Director of National Intelligence Daniel Coats warning in March 2018 that the Islamic State “has started—and probably will maintain—a robust insurgency in Iraq and Syria.” Michael Knights, “Predicting the Shape of Iraq’s Next Sunni

Insurgencies," *CTC Sentinel*, August 2017, Vol. 10, issue 7 <https://ctc.usma.edu/predicting-the-shape-of-iraqs-next-sunni-insurgencies/>; Hassan Hassan, "Insurgents Again: The Islamic State's Calculated Reversion to Attrition in the Syria-Iraq Border Region and Beyond," *CTC Sentinel*, December 2017, Vol. 10, Issue 11, <https://ctc.usma.edu/insurgents-again-the-islamic-states-calculated-reversion-to-attrition-in-the-syria-iraq-border-region-and-beyond>; Rhys Dubin, "Coalition Analysis Warns of Potential Islamic State Resurgence," *Foreign Policy*, January 10, 2018, [foreignpolicy.com/2018/01/10/coalition-analysis-warns-of-potential-islamic-state-resurgence-iraq-isis-isil-terrorism-military](http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/01/10/coalition-analysis-warns-of-potential-islamic-state-resurgence-iraq-isis-isil-terrorism-military).

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89. Online message to the author from Fanar Haddad, January 2018.

90. Kirk H. Sowell, "Iraq's Status Quo Election," *Sada*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 8, 2018, [carnegieendowment.org/sada/75488](http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/75488).

91. Online message to the author from Fanar Haddad, January 2018.

92. Email to the author from Rasha al-Aqeedi, February 2018.

93. Email to the author from Renad Mansour, January 2018.

94. In a recent policy brief for the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Iraq experts Omar al-Nidawi and Michael Knights wrote that a three-pronged demobilization strategy is currently under consideration in Baghdad, whereby some

Hashd militias would in 2019 be recruited into the army or police forces; others would be kept as a part-time force reserve, a type of national guard; and some would be struck off government payrolls but permitted to continue to operate as independent militias, under some constraints. In practice, the last option would probably be applied to the core of the Iranian militia apparatus. Omar al-Nidawi and Michael Knights, "Militias in Iraq's Security Forces: Historical Context and U.S. Options," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch 2935, February 22, 2018, [www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/militias-in-iraqs-security-forces-historical-context-and-u.s.-options](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/militias-in-iraqs-security-forces-historical-context-and-u.s.-options).

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Aron Lund is a Swedish writer on Middle Eastern affairs and a fellow at The Century Foundation who has published several books and reports on Syrian politics.

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