June 2016

Warring Brothers: Power Struggle and the Fate of Reforms in Iraq

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The multilayered negotiations among Iraqi political forces to form a new cabinet, and the paralysis of state institutions, conceal the multifaceted power struggle between the various Iraqi political blocs and in particular within the Shiite bloc. Three types of protagonists can be identified: those trying to dominate the political scene, those fearing marginalisation and thus adopting a defensive position, and those strengthening their position as key actors. Only the pressure from external powers (the U.S. and Iran) and the harsh conditions of international monetary institutions can push the warring political blocs to reach an agreement over the cabinet overhaul and overcome the current impasse. However, reducing reforms to a meager cabinet reshuffle is far from satisfying popular demands and could provide only an ad-hoc way out of the ongoing crisis. Moreover, the Iraqi government's violent reaction toward the second Green Zone breach does not bode well for the coming period. The tone is set: there is no longer room for popular grievances. The liberation of Iraqi territories under the control of the Islamic State seems to be the top priority of the Iraqi prime minister and the foreign/regional powers supporting him.

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On 20 May 2016, Iraqi protesters breached the fortified Green Zone – housing government's buildings and foreign embassies – for the second time in a period of less than a month. Unlike the first Green Zone breach that took place on 30 April, Iraqi security forces and their allied militias this time used tear gas and live bullets to stop protesters, leaving 90 wounded and at least four dead among the demonstrators.[1] The tone is set: there is no longer room for popular grievances. The liberation of Iraqi territories under the control of the so-called Islamic State (IS) seems to be the top priority of the Iraqi prime minister and the foreign/regional powers supporting him. Meanwhile, the multilayered negotiations among Iraqi political forces to form a new cabinet, along with the paralysis of the state institutions, continue. The current political crisis conceals the multifaceted power struggle between the various Iraqi political blocs and in particular within the Shiite bloc. It is a struggle between those who are trying to dominate the political game or at least to reposition themselves as key actors and those fearing marginalisation.

Prime Minister Haider al-ʿAbadi's initiative to nominate a "technocratic" government in which, it is claimed, qualified and politically independent personalities would replace officials recruited according to a flawed ethno-sectarian quota system, was originally urged by him on 9 February. Political forces have generally resisted al-ʿAbadi's efforts to reshuffle his cabinet as it would threaten their patronage networks – and consequently their source of power and wealth – and the granting of ministerial posts as well as by rank-and-file positions at each ministry. The prime minister submitted his first list of candidates, called the "sealed envelope list," to fill cabinet positions on 31 March. The latter failed to acquire parliamentary approval and was rejected by most of the political blocs, allegedly on the basis that the list was suggested by al-ʿAbadi without prior consultation of the political forces. The prime minister had to concede to the political blocs' pressure and tried to reach a compromise between a technocratic and a party-affiliated cabinet by submitting a second list of nominations on 12 April. After weeks of political blockade, the parliament approved a handful of ministers on 26 April. However, the lawmakers' vote seemed to be based more on al-ʿAbadi's 31 March list of candidates rather than on his second one. The parliament has failed to reach quorum since 30 April – the day when it was supposed to complete

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[1] *Reuters*, 21 May 2016. Available at: http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-iraq-protests-idUSKCN0YC07M

voting on the cabinet reshuffle – and its sessions have been regularly postponed since then. This was also the day of the first breach of the Green Zone by protesters to voice their dissatisfaction with the slow pace of reforms.

The backdrop of this cabinet reshuffle and the negotiations over its potential candidates perfectly depicts the power struggle between the Iraqi political blocs and especially within *al-bayt al-shi'i* (Shiite house), an expression used after 2003 to designate the Shiite political forces which have since then dominated the political scene. Through a closer look at the Iraqi political forces' power struggle, we can identify three types of protagonists: those trying to dominate the political scene, those fearing marginalization and thus adopting a defensive position, and those strengthening their position as key actors.

Dominating without Sharing

In August 2015 Haider al-'Abadi announced a set of reforms in an attempt to satisfy popular demands following a cycle of protests which erupted in July 2015. Half a year later, in February 2016, the prime minister claimed the necessity to overhaul and downsize his cabinet and to form a "technocratic" government in order to improve its performance, remove party interests, and reassert his own control. Despite the fact that all reforms announced were officially intended to combat graft and incompetence, the lack of support for these measures from al-'Abadi's Shiite rivals conveyed their belief that the prime minister used the popular uprising as an opportunity rid himself of his political rivals and to undermine their political role within state institutions. This was particularly the stance of former prime minister and current leader of the State of Law Coalition (SLC)[2], Nouri al-Maliki, and his allies, namely the head of Badr Organisation, Hadi al-'Amiri, known for his close ties with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

 The rivalry between al-Maliki and al-'Abadi – who both belong to al-Da'wa party and to the same ruling coalition – has been obvious since the latter's first day in office in September 2014. Al-Maliki's authoritarian drift and his exclusionary policy during his second term in office were

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[2] The SLC includes different Shiite political entities, namely al-Da'wa party, the Badr Organisation, the National Reform Trend, the Independent Bloc, and the Islamic Virtue party.

held responsible for the aggravation of the sectarian rift in Iraq and for paving the way for the expansion of IS and its control of large swathes of the Iraqi territory. As such, his third term in office was opposed by many of Iraq's major domestic players. The nomination of al-'Abadi as prime minister was the result of a compromise between one of the wings of al-Da'wa party (that opposed to al-Maliki's wing) and other Shiite forces, namely the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), headed by 'Ammar al-Hakim, Muqtada al-Sadr, the leader of the Sadrist Movement, and with the tacit support of Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani (one of the main Shiite sources of emulation in Iraq).[3]

Yet despite al-Maliki's failure to extend his premiership for a third term in 2014, he has considered it his constitutional right. He has continuously obstructed al-'Abadi's efforts to reform and rehabilitate the Iraqi security sector, as well as efforts to cut back costs and streamline the cabinet. Al-Maliki has been turning the political forces opposing the cabinet reshuffle against al-'Abadi in order to prevent a parliamentary vote on the nominated candidates. In a conspiratorial ambiance, he has attempted to benefit from the current crisis over the cabinet overhaul and to oust al-'Abadi. On 30 March, the SLC's political committee met in Baghdad and voted for an overall change in government, which included al-'Abadi himself. Al-Maliki was willing to replace the prime minister, who had not been invited to this meeting, by a non-Da'wa party member.[4] Prime Minister al-'Abadi stood firm, boosted by the U.S. administration's support, and submitted the "sealed envelope list" to the parliament on 31 March. It included 14 new technocrat ministers out of a total of 16. Only the Defense and Interior ministers (respectively Khaled al-'Obaidi and Mohamed al-Ghabban) kept their positions, as removing them could prove counterproductive during the ongoing fight against IS.[5]

Lacking domestic and external support, Al-Maliki is perfectly aware that his return to office as prime minister is not foreseeable. Both the American and Iranian administrations – in an unlikely tacit alliance – have been supportive of Haidar al-'Abadi and have put pressure on their

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[3] Harith Hasan, "Al-Islah fi Dhil Sira'a Siyasi. Azmat al-Taghyyir al-Hokumi fil 'Iraq" (Reform in the Shadow of Political Struggle: Government Reshuffling Crisis in Iraq), *Al-Jazeera Centre for Studies*, 21 April 2016. Available at : http://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/reports/2016/04/160421080952356.html
[4] *Reuters*, 6 April 2016. Available at: www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-politics-insight-idUSKCN0X22NB
[5] Ali Mamouri, "Will Shiite Alliance in Iraq Continue to Survive," *Al-Monitor*, 6 April 2016. Available at: http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/04/iraqi-national-alliance-divisions-demands-street-unity.html

respective local allies in Iraq to keep him in power. For both administrations, Iraq's political stability is primordial to focus on the military campaign against IS. However, through his maneuvers, al-Maliki tries to dominate the political scene and to prove he cannot be circumvented in either determining the cabinet's composition or designating the prime minister himself.

Fears of Marginalisation

The attempt at cabinet reshuffling left some political forces feeling alienated, driving them to adopt fence-sitting positions. This clearly describes the stance of ISCI and of the Kurdistan Alliance[6] as both felt the reshuffling could empower other political blocs at their own expense. ISCI leader 'Ammar al-Hakim feared his political bloc al-Muwatin[7] would be the big loser of the cabinet overhaul by increasing the control of al-Da'wa party and more broadly of SLC's members over the cabinet. Furthermore, he suspected that a potential alliance between al-'Abadi and al-Sadr – who has positioned himself since February as the leader of a popular pro-reform movement[8] – would weaken the position of ISCI in the political scene.[9] In a speech given in early April, he insisted that Iraqi political forces should be involved in the nomination of the technocratic cabinet's candidates. Otherwise, a fully independent technocratic cabinet should be formed, implying the resignation of al-'Abadi either from al-Da'wa party or from the premiership.[10]

A couple of days later, al-Hakim submitted the so-called *Wathiqa al-Islah al-Watani* (National Reform Document)[11], which laid out ISCI's vision for the cabinet reshuffle process and formed the basis for the Political Reform Agreement signed by some of the Iraqi political figures – including al-'Abadi – on 11 April. Known as *Wathiqa al-Sharaf* (the Honor Document), this controversial agreement was also signed by some pro-Iranian figures, such as Hadi al-'Amiri (of

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[6] The Kurdistan Alliance includes some of the main Kurdish parties, namely the Kurdistan Democratic Party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the Kurdistan Communist Party, and the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan.
[7] An alliance of various political entities formed before the 2014 parliamentary elections and led by 'Ammar al-Hakim.
[8] Al-Sadr's position will be discussed in details below.
[9] Harith Hasan, *op.cit.*
[10] *Al-Ghad Press*, 2 April 2016. Available at: http://bit.ly/22r2UNi
[11] *Al-Sumaria*, 4 April 2016. Available at : http://bit.ly/1TOely4

the Badr Organisation) and the chairman of al-Hashd al-Shaʿabi[12] (the Popular Mobilisation Committee) Faleh al-Fayadh. However, it was boycotted by Nouri al-Maliki, Iyad ʿAllawi,[13] Muqtada al-Sadr, and the Kurdish forces. The agreement essentially stipulated that the different political blocs should submit their nominations to the prime minister, who would then choose the new cabinet among the suggested candidates; that an advisory council composed of representatives of the political blocs would meet monthly to discuss the country's strategic matters; and that a committee of experts composed of "political forces supporting the government"[14] would advise the prime minister on the candidates to fill high positions in the ministries and in independent bodies (such as the High Electoral Commission or the Integrity Commission).[15]

The day after, al-ʿAbadi submitted to the parliament his second list of candidates for the new cabinet, which was a step back compared to his first list. The new list largely split the parliament: more than one hundred lawmakers barricaded themselves and staged a sit-in in the parliament to reject the *Wathiqa al-Sharaf*, considered as confirmation of the flawed political quota system. They voted for a new speaker of parliament, and called for al-ʿAbadi to stick to the 31 March list and to conduct genuine reforms. ISCI's initiative and the Political Reform Agreement effectively recommended a cross-party power-sharing agreement, put constraints on al-ʿAbadi's powers, and divided the parliament. By trying to re-position itself as a powerful force, ISCI added further complications to the ongoing political crisis and paralysed the parliament.

Like ISCI, the Kurdistan Alliance adopted a defensive position, strongly opposing the idea of a cabinet reshuffle. It threatened to boycott the parliament's sessions and to withdraw from the government if the Kurdish ministers did not remain in their current positions as ministers of Finance and Culture. In an attempt to soften the Kurdistan Alliance's position and win its vote on the new cabinet, al-ʿAbadi included in his 31 March list two independent Kurds as nominees for the Oil, and Housing and Construction ministries. However, the Kurdistan Alliance insisted that

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[12] It is a group of militias (mainly Shiite) fighting IS in Iraq.
[13] ʿAllawi is a former Iraqi prime minister and leader of the secular al-Wataniya political bloc (the National Coalition).
[14] The list provided excludes mainly the Sadrists.
[15] Its main points were published by *All Iraq News* on 11 April 2016 :
http://www.alliraqnews.com/modules/news/article.php?storyid=35294

the Kurdish bloc be consulted before any Kurd was nominated. It then apparently intimated the Kurdish technocrats to withdraw their nominations and to impose the current status quo on al-'Abadi.[16] The Alliance also opposed the nomination of Sharif 'Ali bin al-Hussein as Iraq's minister of Foreign Affairs to replace Shiite politician Ibrahim al-Ja'fari (SLC). It seems that the prime minister had to partially concede to the Kurdistan Alliance's blackmail by keeping Hoshyar Zebari – the highly experienced Kurdish politician and member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party – as Finance minister. However, it is unclear whether the Culture minister, Faryad Rawanduzi (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan), kept his position or not.[17] The Kurdistan Alliance's very rigid position towards cabinet reshuffling or streamlining, and its fears of marginalization, rendered it quite inflexible and with a tendency either to impose its conditions or withdraw its support in zero-sum logic.

Al-Sadr, a Controversial Figure to be Reckoned With

The leader of the Sadrist Movement has proclaimed himself the *ra'i al-islah* or godfather of the reform and anti-corruption movement since February 2016, in the wake of Ayatollah al-Sistani's withdrawal from Iraq's political scene. Frustrated with the prime minister's failure to take decisive actions and dismayed with the slow pace of reforms, al-Sistani decided to "stop addressing political issues in [his] weekly sermons, except in special circumstances."[18] Since then, al-Sadr has led a protest movement to back al-'Abadi's endeavor to nominate a technocratic government. In order to stick to his new image as *tha'ir dad al-zulm wal fasad* ("in rebellion against injustice and corruption"), al-Sadr decided to start with his own political bloc. By the end of February, he referred two ministers from the al-Ahrar bloc[19] to the Integrity Commission, in charge of investigating corruption cases.[20] Moreover, he ordered the detention of

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[16] Patrick Martin, "Iraq Government Collapse Likely as a Rump Parliament Calls for Resignations," *Institute for the Study of War*, 15 April 2016. Available at: http://post.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/iraq-government-collapse-likely-rump-parliament-calls-resignations
[17] *Al-Mada*, 26 April 2016. Available at : http://bit.ly/1Z95wgE
[18] Al-Sistani's statement was published by his office on 5 February 2016. Available at : http://www.sistani.org/arabic/in-news/25243/
[19] Al-Sadr is the spiritual leader of al-Ahrar bloc. Thus, the latter is considered a part of the Sadrist Movement.
[20] A copy of al-Sadr's statement is available at : http://jawabna.com/index.php/permalink/8755.html?print&output_type=txt&output_type=txt

Baha' al-Araji – the former deputy prime minister and senior official of al-Ahrar bloc – by the Sadrist Movement's committee to fight corruption.[21]

On 18 March, al-Sadr called his followers to a sit-in at the gates of Baghdad's Green Zone, while he himself set his tent inside the Green Zone for five days until al-'Abadi submitted the "sealed envelope list" to the parliament on 31 March. As a culmination of weeks of political turmoil and in an unprecedented show of force, al-Sadr spearheaded and launched the protesters' breach of the Green Zone on 30 April. On one hand this was a tactical movement by Muqtada al-Sadr to put pressure on the Iraqi lawmakers to approve al-'Abadi's allegedly technocratic government. On the other hand, al-Sadr showed his ability to gather and control crowds who respond to his calls, and to hold the Green Zone – the country's centre of power – at his mercy.[22]

Following his return in 2011 from three years of self-exile in Iran, al-Sadr made an effort to improve his earlier image as radical, rebel, and firebrand. While he is still capitalising on the spiritual legacy of his father and uncle,[23] al-Sadr opted for an Iraqi nationalist, populist, non-sectarian (and perhaps even cross-sectarian) discourse. However, his primary audience remains among the modest Shiites who not revere him for the religious heritage he represents but also for his capacity to voice and channel their political resentment and to transform it into political power on the ground.

By distancing himself from the leaders of other political blocs keen on keeping their quotas and preserving their interests in the cabinet, al-Sadr has his own political agenda. He seems willing to give up his bloc's presence in the coming cabinet in exchange for maintaining his role of leader of the anti-corruption and reform movement. In other words, al-Sadr does not seek imminent gains; he is rather willing to bolster his personal status and his movement's position in Iraqi politics.

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[21] A copy of al-Sadr's statement is available at : http://jawabna.com/index.php/permalink/8772.html

[22] Mohammed Salih, "Muqtada al-Sadr, the Most Powerful Man in Iraqi Politics?," *Al-Monitor*, 13 May 2016. Available at: http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/05/iraq-shiite-cleric-muqtada-al-sadr-change-politics.html

[23] Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr and Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr, both senior Shiite clerics executed by Saddam Hussein.

A Way Out?

Only pressure from external powers (the U.S. and Iran) and the harsh conditions of international monetary institutions[24] can push the warring political blocs to reach an agreement over the cabinet overhaul and overcome the current impasse. For the former, political stability is needed in order to prioritise the fight against IS. For the latter, it is a prerequisite to strike a deal over a loan for Iraq, badly hit by the decline in oil prices since 2014. However, reducing reforms to a meager cabinet reshuffle is far from satisfying the popular demands and could provide only an ad-hoc temporary way out of the ongoing crisis. Moreover, the Iraqi government's violent reaction toward the second Green Zone breach does not bode well. Rather, it indicates that opposition will be silenced in the name of national security as "government forces must keep up momentum against Islamist militants,"[25] and that repression will replace dialogue in the coming period.

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[24] *Reuters*, 19 May 2016. Available at: uk.reuters.com/article/uk-iraq-imf-deal-idUKKCN0YA1NI
[25] For more details on al-'Abadi's reaction vis-à-vis the Green Zone breach, please refer to: *Elaph*, 20 May 2016. Available at: http://elaph.com/Web/News/2016/5/1089501.html

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