

# Vote on Iraqi government sets stage for expanded US war

Peter Symonds  
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The Iraqi parliament last night voted to approve a new government headed by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, just two days before his mandate to form a cabinet expired. The establishment of a so-called unity government sets the stage for an acceleration of the US-led war against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) militias.

The Obama administration insisted on the formation of such a government, inclusive of Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish parties and political figures, as the precondition for a greater military intervention against ISIS. The White House exerted enormous pressure on Nouri al-Maliki, the previous prime minister, who stepped aside last month in favour of Abadi. Both men belong to the Shiite-based Dawa party.

Washington sought to make Maliki the scapegoat for the bitter sectarian divisions that the US deliberately fomented following its illegal 2003 invasion of Iraq in order to divide the anti-occupation opposition. The emergence of Al Qaeda in Iraq, which in turn spawned ISIS, was one of the by-products of the Shiite-Sunni sectarian violence.

The fractured and tenuous character of the new government is already obvious. The key positions of defence minister and interior minister that control the country's security forces are so contentious that they remain unfilled. Abadi gave parliament a week to agree on the posts, or he will fill them with his own nominees.

Abadi's contrived unity almost came unstuck after Kurdish parties refused to participate, only changing their minds at the last minute. Even then, their participation is conditional. The Kurdish delegation gave Abadi three months to resolve outstanding disputes between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq. The Maliki

government stopped paying the salaries of KRG civil servants earlier this year in protest against the KRG's independent export of oil.

The allocation of cabinet posts involved an attempt to balance Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish political leaders. Each position was voted on separately and many were approved only by small majorities.

Deep divisions lie behind the façade of unity. Maliki has been appointed as one of three vice-presidents, along with his arch-rival Iyad Allawi, a former prime minister with connections to Saudi Arabia and the CIA, and the previous parliamentary speaker, Sunni politician Usama Nujaifi. Former Foreign Minister Hosiyar Zebari, who quit the Maliki government this year, has been named as a deputy prime minister, together with Baha Arraji, a follower of militant Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, and Sunni politician Saleh Mutlaq.

President Obama immediately phoned Abadi to congratulate him and "expressed support for a strong, strategic partnership" with Iraq. US Secretary of State John Kerry was just as effusive, declaring the new government "a major milestone" and pledging to stand "shoulder-to-shoulder" with Baghdad. Kerry is due to head to the Middle East today to enlist support for a stepped-up US intervention in Iraq and Syria.

Obama is scheduled to announce a major military escalation in the Middle East via a national address tomorrow night. At last week's NATO summit, the US forged an alliance, including Britain, France, Italy, Canada, Australia and Turkey, to ramp up military operations in Iraq. US Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel was flying to Turkey yesterday to concretise that country's involvement.

Turkey has been a key staging post, along with Jordan, for the protracted US-backed, regime-change

operation inside Syria that has nourished ISIS and other Islamist militias. Now that ISIS threatens US interests in Iraq, Washington is seeking assistance from Turkey to block the entry of foreign fighters into Syria, and asking Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States to cut off the supply of funds and arms to ISIS.

Washington's demand for a "unity" government in Iraq is not only a bid to establish a more pliable puppet regime in Baghdad, but a desperate effort to resolve the contradictions of its own reckless foreign policy. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States were bitterly hostile to the Maliki government, which they branded as a stooge of regional rival Iran.

Citing senior Obama administration officials, the *New York Times* reported on Sunday that the formation of "an all inclusive government" would mark the "next phase" of American operations inside Iraq. So far, the US has carried out nearly 150 air strikes, including in support of Iraqi forces seeking to drive ISIS militias from areas near the Haditha dam in Anbar province.

The *Times* said the "next phase" would include "an intensified effort to train, advise or equip the Iraqi military, Kurdish fighters and possibly members of Sunni tribes." These plans have already been initiated: Australian and Canadian military aircraft have ferried arms and ammunition to Kurdish forces; Canada plans to send 100 military advisers to northern Iraq; and Germany is to supply assault rifles, heavy anti-tank weapons, vehicles and other arms to the Kurdish peshmerga militia.

"The final, toughest and most politically controversial phase of the operation—destroying the terrorist army in its sanctuary inside Syria—might not be completed until the next administration," the *Times* article stated.

Indeed, the Obama administration is flagging an open-ended war that will last years. Speaking last week at the NATO summit, Secretary of State Kerry declared: "It may take a year, it may take two years, it may take three years. But we're determined it has to happen."

While Obama and his top officials have repeatedly stated that US ground troops will not be sent to Iraq, more than 1,000 military personnel are already inside the country, including inside joint command centres in Baghdad and the Kurdish city of Erbil.

US military operations have gone well beyond the limited objectives outlined by Obama in early

August—to prevent the "genocide" of the Yazidi minority and protect US personnel in Iraq. The Haditha dam in western Iraq is nowhere near any embattled minority or American facility, but it is central to plans to drive ISIS out of Sunni tribal heartlands.



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