Abadi announces reforms aimed at “decentralization” of Iraq

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Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi announced proposed reforms to the structure of Iraq’s central state over the weekend, including the elimination of several key government offices. The offices of vice president and deputy prime minister listed for termination have been divided along sectarian lines since 2004.

Two Sunni offices, three Shi’ite offices and one Kurdish office face the chopping block under the reforms. Among those to lose their positions under Abadi’s plan are two prominent Shi’ite leaders, former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and Ayad Allawi.

Abadi’s proposals also include removal of restrictions on foreign direct investment and new initiatives to train security forces for the fight against ISIS. Iraq’s parliament will consider the proposed reforms beginning on Tuesday.

Presented in US media as “anti-corruption” measures, the reform proposals actually represent a major step toward the dissolution of the unified Iraqi state and the breakup of Iraqi society into several autonomous statelets.

During official visits to Washington this year, Abadi has sought to assure his American backers that this program is necessary to counter the Iranian-backed Shia forces vying for control over Iraq and its oil resources. His government has backed the efforts of Washington to build up new proxy forces in Iraq, pledging $1 billion in military aid to the Kurdistan Regional Government’s Peshmerga forces during 2015 and overseeing the creation of the Sunni National Mobilization Forces.

In an April speech at the Washington DC think tank the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Abadi outlined a program of privatization of state-owned property and effective political autonomy at the local level, saying such measures were necessary to reverse the efforts of the previous Maliki government to centralize power in Baghdad. “If we don’t decentralize, the country will disintegrate,” Abadi said.

“To me, there are no limitations to decentralization,” he continued. “In a major government reform, we are decentralizing decision-making from Baghdad to the local administration and local governments. The National Guard will take the responsibility to defend the provinces from any threat, and they will be accountable to the governors.”

Abadi’s proposals found a ready audience in the Obama administration. Already in 2006, then-Senator Joseph Biden advanced a “five point alternative plan,” proposing the breakup of Iraq into three mini-states, one Sunni Arab, one Shiite Arab, and one Kurd.

In the wake of Abadi’s visit, Vice President Biden told an audience at the National Defense University that “Iraq needs a much greater functioning federalism.”

“Prime Minster Abadi kept true to his commitment to reach out to them [Kurds and Sunnis], and to respond to their concerns, and make sure that power is not solely concentrated within Baghdad,” President Barack Obama said after emerging from meetings in May with the Iraqi leader.

Leading figures in the administration and military have reiterated this line over the summer. Aggressive calls for arming the Kurds in the north and Sunni forces in Iraq’s western provinces have emanated from senior lawmakers and ruling class think tanks in recent months.

“What if a multi-sectarian Iraq turns out not be possible?” Defense Secretary Ashton Carter asked rhetorically during congressional testimony in June. “That is an important part of our strategy now on the ground. If the government can’t do what it’s supposed to do, then we will still try to enable local ground

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forces, if they're willing to partner with us, to keep stability in Iraq--but there will not be a single state of Iraq."

Carter went on to announce that the US will directly arm and supply the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), demanding that Baghdad accept an arrangement allowing regional forces "to maintain security within their own territory, govern themselves, and share in the oil wealth of the country."

While the Obama administration may prefer the controlled process of decentralization envisioned by Abadi, voices in the US establishment are demanding a more aggressive policy, arguing for the complete withdrawal of US support for Baghdad and arming of the KRG and Sunni tribal forces.

In a study published earlier this month, "An Intensified Approach to Combating the Islamic State," the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) called for US pressure "to press Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to build a more inclusive central government that represents and serves all Iraqis--Shia, Sunni and Kurd--and devolves more authority and resources to the provinces."

As part of an "an integrated political-military plan for Iraq," the CNAS called for "greater Sunni inclusion, devolution of authority and resources to provinces such as Anbar, as well as the establishment of a national guard as a vehicle for Sunni tribal militias to become part of the Iraqi security forces."

"The United States should speed the supply of arms and equipment directly to local tribal militia and Peshmerga units, while holding out the prospect that arms will flow through Baghdad if and when the central government establishes a reliable process for their transfer and passes legislation to include these fighters in the Iraqi security forces," the CNAS wrote.

The Democratic-leaning think tank argued that direct arming of Sunni and Kurdish militants would "incentivize Shia politicians in Baghdad, who have thus far been reluctant to pass legislation establishing an Iraqi National Guard, to support the new law in order to ensure these local forces ultimately fall under the control of the Iraqi security forces."

In the absence of measures to empower US-aligned Sunni elements, including "more autonomy and resources to govern themselves at the provincial level," the only alternative would be the "dissolution of Iraq as a unitary state," the CNAS argued.

Washington must "raise the costs for Iran both in Syria and across the region through more aggressive use of military and intelligence tools--jointly with Arab partner militaries--to counter Iran's surrogates and proxies," the CNAS concluded.

It is increasingly clear that the "solution" to the Iraq-Syria war envisioned by the US political-military elite is one that involves the partition of both countries.

The head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, General Vincent Stewart, told a conference of intelligence personnel at the end of July that Iraq "may indeed be irreparably fractured and may not come back as an intact state."

He added, "You also see a lot of fracturing in Syria, where you could end up with an Alawite-stan in the middle and something to the north and something to the south."

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