

A window of opportunity has just opened in Iraq. Will the U.S. act? By Bilal Wahab *

After more than 15 years of American military entanglement in Iraq, the sense of idealism that characterized the original U.S. intervention has long since dissipated. Rather than dreaming of midwifing a model democracy in Baghdad, Washington's aims there have become more modest and realist: preventing a resurgence of the Islamic State and balancing Iranian power.

So it is ironic that — even as the American foreign policy establishment has grown averse to a values-based approach to the Middle East — Iraqi democracy is on the verge of a breakthrough.

This week, the Iraqi parliament approved a new technocrat-dominated [cabinet](#) led by Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi, a Sorbonne-trained economist. His ministers boast an impressive set of graduate degrees and professional expertise. Together with the selection of Barham Salih as Iraq's president and Mohammed al-Halbousi as speaker of parliament, this means that the triumvirate of leaders to emerge from the elections this year are strongly associated with non-sectarian, pragmatic government.

In this shift, Iraqi politics is reflecting the explicit demand for change from voters. Despite the military success of the previous government in presiding over the battlefield defeat of the Islamic State, what mattered even more to Iraqis who went to the polls in May was anger over endemic corruption and abysmal public services.

Iraqis' sense of grievance is thoroughly justified. Despite [more than \\$700 billion](#) in oil revenue since 2005, Iraq ranks among the worst places in the world to live. Basra, in the heart of Iraqi oil production, lacks potable water and sufficient electricity, making the city unbearable during scorching summers. Angry [public protests](#) have become routine.

Iraqis feeling fed up with their government is nothing new. What's strikingly different now, however, is the extent to which the process of forming the government has responded to signals from the street. Unlike in the past, when cabinets were formed through backroom deals among bloc leaders, the current triumvirate owes its existence in large part to the willingness of individual lawmakers to defy party bosses and vote independently.

The question now is whether the new team can succeed in driving a reform agenda. The challenges are daunting.

The problems of Iraqi governance are deeply entrenched — rooted in institutions as well as personalities. For the past 15 years, governments have placed a premium on ethnic and sectarian representation rather than good governance. In each case, a government of all proved to be the government of none. With accountability elusive, each party in government has run ministries as political fiefdoms rather than institutions of public service. [Sectarian militias](#) continue to wield outsize influence.

The public's yearning for better, effective governance depends on the success of this government, which needs to take ownership of the reform agenda. But U.S. support is also critical. Washington should make clear that it is aligning its goals with those of the Iraqi public in its demands for cleaner and more accountable government. Having the right people in power is not enough; also vital are reforming Iraq's economy and improving

service delivery and security. As the Islamic State morphs into an insurgency, U.S. security assistance (especially the training of Iraqi forces) remains crucial. Even help with such mundane issues as water and electricity supplies can have crucial impacts. Washington should also back Iraq's fight against corruption by providing information technology to boost transparency of oil revenue and government finances. Baghdad's relationship with Iraqi Kurdistan remains **strained** — but this is one area where the United States is perfectly positioned to play the honest broker. All these measures entail modest investments that offer potentially high yields. Targeted support of this kind is also the most effective way of curbing Iran's nefarious influence, which exploits the weak rule of law and institutions to bolster its status as a powerful arbiter (and bullying enforcer) in Iraq's highly transactional and personal politics. Unlike the United States, Iran has little to offer Iraqis — neither a political or economic model, nor the prospect of improved services, jobs or reform. Washington should seize the moment and refresh its Iraq policy accordingly.

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