

Haider al-Abadi Is Succeeding at the World's Hardest Job.. BY SAJAD JIYAD *



Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi gives a press conference at the Elysee Palace in Paris on Oct. 5. (Ludovic Marin/AFP/Getty Images)

The Iraqi prime minister has held his country together amid war and financial crisis. His next battle is to win re-election.

BAGHDAD — On a hot July afternoon in Mosul's city center, a crowd gathered to celebrate the liberation of the city. The sun was starting to set, and children were dancing and waving Iraqi flags as young men posed for selfies and looked across the Tigris River, where vicious fighting was drawing to a close in the Old City.

A convoy of armored cars began to drive past them and then suddenly came to a halt. A white SUV with blacked-out windows neared the sidewalk, and in an instant it was surrounded by bodyguards with automatic weapons. The crowd was hushed and looked on with curiosity; some hesitated and motioned to move away while others stood on their toes to get a better look. The last such convoy they had seen was when

the so-called Islamic State swept into Mosul three years earlier — but these cars carried the Iraqi flag and not the black banner of the militant group.

Then Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi emerged from the crowd of dozens of burly guards, wearing black fatigues and a baseball cap. The crowd surged toward him, his security struggling to hold them back, shouting a chant of welcome as he waved to them. The bodyguards looked around nervously; gunfire and explosions were still echoing across the river, and they had no way of assessing the multiple potential threats they faced. Their frantic faces contrasted with the relaxed appearance of the prime minister. No other Iraqi politician in post-2003 Iraq has been greeted by the people of Mosul the same way as Haider al-Abadi.

It was one sign, among a growing number, that Abadi is succeeding in a job that may be the hardest in the world. On Sunday, the Iraqi prime minister ordered the federal armed forces to redeploy to military bases and oil facilities in Kirkuk, which were vacated in June 2014 and subsequently controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government in the face of the Islamic State onslaught. This was a bold move in response to the controversial referendum held by Erbil calling for residents to approve independence. Despite isolated clashes, the situation ended with the federal government's restoration of control over Kirkuk, cementing Abadi's reputation as a decisive and successful leader, in the face of exceedingly difficult odds.

Being Iraq's prime minister involves fighting a war against the Islamic State, preventing the country from being used as a space for proxy wars by regional and international powers, scrambling to keep salaries and pensions paid, stopping corruption from eating away at infrastructure and finances, and fending off an array of politicians jockeying to control parts of the state as personal or party fiefdoms. The fact that Abadi has managed so well since 2014 — even that he has survived this long — has been a pleasant surprise for many Iraqis. Abadi's challenge now is to leverage this goodwill to win re-election next year, so that he can continue his fight to reform Iraqi politics.

He will surely, and justifiably, campaign as the wartime leader who pulled his country back from the brink. This month, the prime minister declared victory in Hawija, the last town in northern Iraq that was still held by the Islamic State. The battlefield successes have led to an improvement in security across the country, with places like Baghdad witnessing the lowest rate of terrorist attacks since 2003. Security in the western

province of Anbar has improved enough to allow the reopening of the Baghdad-Amman Highway and the border crossing with Jordan. The Iraqi government's expectation is that by the end of this year the Islamic State will be defeated

Abadi can also point to the successes of his foreign policy. He has deftly positioned Iraq on the international stage, insisting on the country's neutrality in the region's geopolitical feuds. His visit to Saudi Arabia this year was a milestone in Iraqi-Saudi relations: No Iraqi leader had visited for decades, and relations between the two nations had long been hostile, with the Iraqis recently accusing the Saudis of sponsoring al Qaeda terrorism in Iraq. Now, the two sides have reached a modus vivendi: The Saudis accept that Iraq will remain allies with Iran, and the Iraqi side is prepared to open up to its Arab neighbor. Abadi has also managed to limit Iran's influence in Iraq by ensuring military operations are led by the Iraqi Army and units are trained by the U.S.-led coalition, such as the Counter Terrorism Service, rather than pro-Iran paramilitary groups. He also has kept Iraq out of the war in Syria and has stated repeatedly that Iraq will not join any axis or side in the Middle East. This balancing act has been a difficult one for a prime minister, but Abadi has pulled it off.

The prime minister can also take credit for steering Iraq through a major financial crisis brought about by the collapse of oil prices. A mix of spending cuts, increased oil exports, **bond sales**, and **financing from the International Monetary Fund** have tamped down inflation and kept the government running even as it fought a costly war. This stability is now **encouraging optimism** about the future, with oil production expected to continue to break record levels and GDP growth poised to return. The reset in Iraq-Saudi ties looks set to attract sizable foreign investment, and companies from Europe, the United States, China, and South Korea are already increasing their operations in Iraq. This year, Britain began an export finance program worth \$13 billion over 10 years, and bodies such as the United Nations and World Bank continue to offer billions of dollars per year in assistance and financing.

Abadi's government is also making major strides in overcoming the country's ongoing humanitarian crisis. More than 2 million internally displaced people have so far returned home, offering hope to the remaining 2 million IDPs.

The recent military victories hold the possibility of reorienting Iraqi politics and preventing groups like the Islamic State from ever reappearing in the future. In the liberated areas, where successive Iraqi governments and

American military might struggled with insurgencies, the largely Sunni populations have welcomed the Iraqi security forces. Cities such as Fallujah and Mosul are being rebuilt and resettled with local, national, and international support. More than 1,000 rehabilitation projects in 23 liberated areas are **underway** as a result of this cooperation.

Abadi's approval ratings in Sunni-majority areas are at **historically high levels** for a prime minister, and he is perhaps the only politician who is able to visit every Iraqi city and receive a warm welcome. He has seen the emergence of a base of supporters who support his nationalist, anti-sectarian stance and are willing to back an ethnosectarian alliance over the traditional identity-based ones.

For all the progress Iraq has made, Abadi faces very serious challenges in the weeks and months ahead. First, as the confrontation over Kirkuk shows, the Kurdistan Regional Government's referendum on independence has the potential to spark conflict over control of disputed territories. There is a serious threat of intervention by Turkey and Iran, so Abadi **must work to defend federal authority** over the region, show that the country is not breaking up, and protect Kurdish citizens from conflict. A second looming challenge is that Iraq continues to rely on oil exports for the vast majority of its revenue; another drop in oil prices could damage the nascent economic recovery. Iraq needs to quicken the pace of economic and fiscal reforms to keep up with its growing population and growth in petroleum demand. Third, the Islamic State's underground cells may be preparing to launch a wave of terrorist attacks — a development that could lead to a deterioration in security and stoke anger at government failures.

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, which continues to ravage Iraq and reverse any gains that are made. Anyone elected president, prime minister, or speaker in Iraq's parliamentary system must rely on a myriad of parties for the necessary votes. Each party, in exchange, expects ministerial and senior positions to be allocated to it, and then those in power are expected to support their parties through further appointments, graft, and whatever other means of corruption they can get away with. This erodes trust in government and diverts valuable funds and economic gains into the pockets of the ruling elite and their supporters.

Mending these problems would be a formidable task for the strongest governments, but it appears nearly insurmountable given the treacherous state of Iraqi politics. The Iraqi government operates through coalitions made up of enemies and rivals, a recipe that makes progress notoriously slow. There are calls for a technocratic government with Abadi at its head, freeing him to push through reforms, but these are opposed by the major parties.

While he retains much popular and international support, Abadi's rivals have shown that they will stop at nothing to prevent him from succeeding, going so far as to paralyze parliament and physically occupy it. Iraq's media spaces, both traditional and digital, give platforms to opponents who spin a mix of conspiracy theories, fake news, and inflammatory rhetoric, portraying Iraq's ills as caused by a weak prime minister. Even those who are nominally his political allies from the ruling bloc in parliament have harassed his government, purged ministers, and reversed reforms in an attempt to weaken his position. Massive demonstrations in the summer of 2015 called on Abadi to challenge vested political interests, and Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani demanded that he strike corruption "with an iron fist" — but such moves have been met with unified opposition from the political class, who wish to maintain the status quo.

Iraq's next local and national elections, which are due to be held in April 2018, could bring about a sea change in the country's electoral landscape. The results could shock the political system, as voters turn to candidates who took part in the campaign against the Islamic State. Abadi will reap some of the rewards from this mood, but so will leaders of the Popular Mobilization Forces, a paramilitary grouping of mostly Shiite volunteers who are largely credited with halting the onslaught of the Islamic State toward Baghdad and the southern provinces in 2014.

Abadi's greatest advantage in his bid to remain prime minister for another term will be his reputation as a safe pair of hands — and not just with Iraqis. The international community is certainly keen to see the stability he has brought extended for a number of years. As one Western diplomat told me: "We want Abadi to stay on and will do our best to support him."

But he needs international support, most notably to ease Iraq's financial distress and improve governance. There is already good progress on the economic front, but more can be done with regards to encouraging foreign investment, debt relief, and increasing trade. The international community should also offer more help to Iraqis to develop their

institutions and agencies and most importantly combat and prevent corruption. They can also help promote efficient, democratic local governance in Iraq's provinces, including the Kurdistan region, and ensure Iraq's resources are properly distributed and accounted for. This will help defuse tensions over Kirkuk and build more trust in negotiations between federal and local government.

As recent military victories have shown, Iraq can make enormous progress with the right leadership and with international support. The countries that have helped Iraq make great strides in defeating the Islamic State can now help keep the country, and the region, on a path to stability and reconstruction by supporting Abadi's re-election bid. If Abadi succeeds, Iraq will have a greater chance of succeeding. And that would be the best way of proving that democracy can work in the Middle East.

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