Can the new Iraqi Prime Minister save the country from its final disintegration?

After lengthy consultations with all the political blocs and factions within the Iraqi parliament, Iraq’s President, Fuad Masum, appointed Haider al-Abadi as the new Prime Minister on August 11, 2014 and requested that he form a new government. His candidacy was put forward by the National Alliance coalition, meant to unite all Arab-Shiite parties, included among them is the State of Law Coalition, led by the former Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki. Mr. al-Maliki does not agree with this appointment and appealed to the Supreme Court, but the verdict was not in his favor. Nouri al-Maliki then urged his supporters in Baghdad and other cities to take part in demonstrations and protests. There was also a noticeable increase in the level of activity from Iraqi security forces, including new patrols of special forces and the establishment of checkpoints at major intersections and exits from the city, but as of yet the situation hasn’t reached the stage of a military coup. The vast majority of Iraqis, having grown weary of mass terror, civil war and the corruption of the state, are hoping that the change for a new Prime Minister will be for the better.

Haidar Jawad al-Abadi was born in in Baghdad in 1952. His father, Jawad al-Abadi was a well-known physician and hospital director in the capital. He then occupied a post as Chief Inspector of the Iraqi Ministry of Health. Haidar al-Abadi graduated from Baghdad University where he majored in electrical engineering and continued his further education and work in Great Britain. He was awarded his Doctorate of Law from the University of Manchester. He returned home only after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003 and immediately led the Politburo of the Islamic Dawa Party. Later he occupied the post of Minister of Communications in the Coalition Provisional Authority (government) in Iraq. In 2005 he was appointed advisor to the Prime Minister of Iraq in the first official government. In the same year he was elected to the federal parliament and headed the parliamentary committee on the economy, investment and reconstruction. In 2013 he became head of the finance committee and was recently elected to the post of vice-speaker of the parliament.

The new Prime Minister of Iraq is considered to be one of the most respected and well-educated political moderates among the country’s Arab-Shiite majority. Of course, his long residence while in exile in Great Britain suggests that al-Abadi is not at all unfamiliar with Western values. However, judging from the first declarations as the new prime minister, he is open to cooperating with all countries without exception in the fight against international terrorism. Most likely, it is the desire of al-Abadi to demonstrate his political distance from Washington, Tehran and Ankara, but no more than that. It is difficult to imagine how military troops from the United States, Iran and Turkey would interact in Iraq.

His words regarding al-Malaki can be taken as a sign of courtesy and his appreciation for the work of his predecessor, “he has done a lot for Iraq and could still be a benefit for the country...” Obviously, there has been a long partnership between al-Abadi and al-Maliki within Shiite political organizations and the government.

The Arab-Shiite majority will continue to exert its influence on the new prime minister has and his attempts to strike a balance between the competing interests of Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds. Not a single constitutional amendment or new legislation initiative of al-Abadi can be implemented without the agreement of the Arab-Shiite majority in parliament. However, it is becoming increasingly evident that the new prime minister is unlikely to make a 180 degree turn in his domestic policy and will be forced to spend time on what is unpopular among Sunnis and Kurds, limits on their rights and freedoms (federalism and the redistribution of income and power). In this version, the
The disintegration of Iraq will become more complicated.

The leaders of the United States, the EU, Turkey, Iran, and other countries and international organizations, including the UN, have already congratulated Mr. al-Abadi on his appointment to the office of Prime Minister. It seems that his appointment has given rise within foreign governments an interest and hope that Iraq can remain united. Certainly it is going to take a considerable amount of time in order to stabilize the situation within the country and on its borders. After all, as of today eight of Iraq’s eighteen provinces are under the control of Sunni militants and international terrorists, “Islamic State of Iraq and Levant” (ISIL). Tens of thousands of well-armed militants, equipped with all necessary hardware and are currently occupying positions will not quit what they are doing and simply leave the country. The army of al-Maliki with a fighting capacity that was practically nonexistent fled in a panic. Pinpoint bombing raids by the United States Air Force and Great Britain cannot win the fight, as the militants will mingle and blend in with the local population, scattering in densely populated areas; and a ground military offensive by the Obama administration involving U.S. forces is unlikely.

The main task of the new prime minister in these early stages will be to establish dialogue with the leaders of the Sunni tribes and their religious leaders, the rehabilitation of the innocent who suffered within the “debaathization” campaign of former ordinary Baath Party members and military agencies under Saddam Hussein. It will not be easy for the new government to restore confidence in the hundreds of thousands of Sunni Arabs who were victims of political purges and repression, many of whom were forced into hiding in neighboring countries. Without solving the problem of winning the support of the politically active Sunni Arab tribes, Baghdad cannot be expected to stabilize the political situation in the country.

Secondly, but not any less important, the political task for the central government will be closer cooperation with the Kurds to implement Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution signed by Nouri al-Maliki regarding the Erbil agreements that provide for a peaceful resolution to the issue of administrative boundaries in the area of Kirkuk and a number of other the so-called disputed territories in the north of the country, as well as adopting new legislation governing hydrocarbons and the legal status of the Kurdish Self-Defense forces (The Peshmerga Brigades).

The third task involves solving the country’s urgent social and economic problems. Iraqis fail to understand as to why they, as citizens of one of the richest oil and gas exporters in the world, continue to suffer from a lack of water and electricity, housing, schools, hospitals and damaged roads and infrastructure? And why tens of billions of dollars went to Washington for the delivery of heavy weapons and military equipment which was then abandoned and handed over to international terrorists? It is not at all clear with whom Iraq was going to fight, because it has no external enemies and to fight terrorists requires different weapons; but what is most needed are effective and well-equipped law enforcement agencies in the regions and the support from all levels of the population.

The fourth point, and very important, is the direction the new prime minister will take to establish relations with its neighbors and regional centers of power. Today, Iraq has turned into an arena of armed conflict between Sunnis and Shiites and Al-Abadi’s task could be the transformation of Iraq into a bridge of friendship between the two groups. Why can’t the new Prime Minister attempt to establish normal relations with Riyadh, Doha, Ankara, without harming traditionally good relations with Tehran? All the prerequisites for this are present. The new president of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, recently visited Turkey where he was very warmly greeted and there has been gradual progress in mitigating the sanctions imposed by the United States and the EU against Iran.

Thus, to overcome the protracted government crisis in Iraq, a change in the leadership of the country can objectively create the conditions for the consolidation of all internal and external forces in the fight against international terrorism and local radical political and military factions. However, one can hardly expect a quick and speedy victory in Baghdad in this fight. After all, the Wahhabi-Salafi, as sponsors of military-political groups, have not yet abandoned their plans to further use “jihadists” in the vanguard against the unwanted pro-Iranian Shiite governments and other groups in the region. And Washington clearly prefers not to destroy the Islamist militants, but only squeeze them into a nearby theater of operation, into Syria and with the assistance of the maniacal White House, overthrow the hated regime of Bashar al-Assad.

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