

Iraqi Prime Minister's Electoral Coalition Fractures, Signaling Change of Premier

By Jessa Rose Dury-Agri with Omer Kassim

The U.S. should reassess military and political plans that rest on Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's continued premiership after Iraq's May 12, 2018 elections. A series of splits from Abadi's electoral list will increase opportunities for alternative candidates to gain the premiership. Abadi's failed political alliance with Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces and inability to maintain the confidence of Ammar al-Hakim's political allies signals that Abadi is unable to manage varying political interests and will struggle to hold together a post-election coalition. Abadi must prevent additional fractures in his electoral list, ensure friendly candidates have funding, and block alternate political blocs such as Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition from achieving competitive electoral success. Abadi will likely make major political concessions post-election to retain the premiership if unable to meet these requirements, compromising his will and ability to pursue policies compatible with U.S. national security interests.

Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) leaders briefly joined and subsequently withdrew from U.S. - favored Haider al-Abadi's electoral list on January 14, 2018.

The Popular Mobilization Forces Tahlaf al-Fatah (Conquest Alliance) includes several lethal Iranian-backed militias, such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) and the Badr Organization, and Iranian-friendly parties like the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI). Badr Organization head Hadi al-Ameri is the leader of the Conquest Alliance. The Conquest Alliance joined Abadi's Itilaf al-Nasr (Victory Coalition) for just one day before withdrawing. Several PMF-affiliated politicians cited as reason for the split the inclusion of Ammar al-Hakim-led Tayar al-Hikma al-Watani (National Wisdom Trend) and Shi'a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr in the Victory Coalition. Separately, AAH's political wing pointed to the participation of "corrupt blocs and figures" within the Victory Coalition. Hadi al-Ameri stated the Conquest Alliance split for "technical" reasons and denied a link between the decision to withdraw and Hakim or Sadr's inclusion.

Hakim announced his party's split from the Victory Coalition on January 29, and six other parties reportedly followed suit as of January 30.

Hakim split from ISCI in July 2017, established a new political party, and likely sought to join an electoral list with a less Iranian-aligned actor as its leader. Hakim likely lost confidence in Abadi's ability or willingness to secure Council of Representatives and Provincial Council seats for National Wisdom Trend candidates as Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission's (IHEC) February 10 deadline for the submission of electoral list candidates rapidly approached.

Abadi's faltering electoral list leadership and increasing demands are the likely cause of Hakim's loss of confidence. Abadi reportedly rejected the use of a quota system, which would ordinarily guarantee National Wisdom Trend candidates inclusion on the list. Rumors also suggest Abadi insisted Victory Coalition parties could not submit lists of candidates to be considered for the electoral list by party, but rather had to nominate independent candidates.

Most importantly, Abadi reportedly demanded the Victory Coalition's candidate list include only individuals with a ["good reputation of integrity and sincerity"] ranked by skill and experience level. Abadi likely sought to place fellow, technocratic Hizb al-Dawa al-Islamiya (Islamic Call Party) members at the top of the Victory Coalition's list, which would push National Wisdom Trend candidates lower and decrease the likelihood they would acquire seats. Abadi may have also have rejected placing Hakim in a desired ministerial position.

Hakim is likely unable to join or create an alternate electoral list due to IHEC procedures, and will rather run the National Wisdom Trend as a party on a singular electoral list in Iraq's federal and provincial elections.

Abadi must adjust his electoral strategy in order to retain the premiership following May elections.

Abadi has historically made concessions to other politicians and parties to achieve his political objectives because he does not have a sufficiently large or strong political base within the Iraqi CoR or Council of Ministers. Abadi's electoral list politics suggest he has deviated from a compromise strategy, however, and has instead adopted a firm stance that is pushing his Victory Coalition members away. Abadi's unwillingness to compromise on the Victory Coalition's electoral list and consequential inability to maintain unity within his coalition poses serious risks to his continued tenure as Iraqi Prime Minister, even if it is a component of a long-view electoral plan.

Abadi will need to prevent additional fractures in his electoral list, ensure regional state actor funding for his candidates, and block alternate political blocs such as Maliki's Itilaf al-Dawlat al-Qanoun (State of Law Coalition) from achieving competitive electoral success. Abadi is at risk of losing Sadr to the more secular Vice President Ayad al-Allawi. Sadr stated he was shocked by Abadi's attempt to form an electoral list with "sectarians" and reiterated his insistence in participating on a cross-sectarian list. Abadi is also at risk of losing the confidence and funding of regional actors such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.

Abadi may secure the chance to form a government as premier despite these risks, however, because he remains a unique candidate within Iraqi and international political circles. Both Badr's Conquest Alliance and Hakim's National Wisdom Trend expressed interest in forming a coalition with Abadi after elections. Abadi holds an incumbent's advantage, and he has earned some cross-sectarian political legitimacy during his tenure as Prime Minister. Abadi also maintains support levels from the international community and may actually be attempting to garner more by refusing to bow to other political actors. He is seeking additional popular support through an anti-corruption campaign, even if that campaign will likely be directed at his political rivals such as Maliki.

Abadi will not cede his aspirations for the premiership even if he is unable to mitigate these risks. He will rather make major post-election concessions, possibly to Iranian-backed actors such as the Conquest Alliance, to retain his position. U.S. interests lie in the restoration of an inclusive Iraqi government not dominated by Iranian-backed actors. Abadi's flirtation with the Conquest Alliance and failure to hold together an electoral list may suggest it is time for the U.S. to reassess our favor toward Abadi as Iraq's Prime Minister. Certainly, the U.S. must not assume Abadi will remain premier. The U.S. risks losing its military basing and freedom of action to pursue ISIS remnants in Iraq if a pro-Iranian premier takes office. It must plan now for that contingency.

Victory Coalition
Haidar al-Abadi

State of Law Alliance
Nouri al-Maliki

February 2, 2018

National Alliance Coalition
Ayad al-Allawi

Conquest Alliance
Hadi al-Amiri

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Fractures in Abadi's Electoral List

Victory Coalition
Haidar al-Abadi

February 2, 2018

- | | |
|--|--|
| Iraqi Renaissance and Peace Bloc | National Iraqi Conference |
| Islamic Virtue Party | We are Iraq |
| Independent Bloc | Shaban Blessed Uprising |
| Turkmen Civil Rights Party | Justice and Advancement Trend |
| Islamic Alliance for Turkmen of Iraq | Shaban Uprising Council of Brotherhood |
| Development Gathering | Liberal Movement |
| Victory and Reform Bloc | National Certitude Party |
| Stability Bloc | Voice of the Masses Gathering |
| National Reform Trend | Welfare of Iraq Gathering |
| The Competent for Peace Building Gathering | Organization of the Interior |
| Iraqi Stability Party | Hope of Mesopotamia |
| Iraqi Loyalty Movement | |

January 15
Split

Conquest Alliance
Hadi al-Amiri

- | | | | | | | | | |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| 10 | 11 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | |

Amiri's Conquest Alliance is now running as a separate electoral list with 18 political parties.

January 29
Split

National Wisdom Trend
Ammar al-Hakim

Hakim's National Wisdom Trend will likely run as a singular party on an independent electoral list.

January 30
Possible Split

- | |
|---|
| 1 |
| 2 |
| 3 |
| 4 |
| 5 |
| 6 |

Several members of Iraq's Council of Representatives stated an additional six to seven parties would split from Abadi's Victory Coalition on January 30, however no official statements of withdrawal have been made as of February 2, 2018.

By *Jessa Rose Dury-Agri*

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