

Political Crisis Grips Baghdad as US Escalates Intervention

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Global Research, August 12, 2014

[World Socialist Web Site](#)

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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As the Obama administration announced the deepening of its military intervention in Iraq, adding the arming of the Kurdish Peshmerga militia to its campaign of air strikes against Sunni Islamist insurgents, the Iraqi capital of Baghdad was seized by a political crisis largely of Washington's making.

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki appeared on Iraqi state television at approximately midnight Sunday night to denounce the failure of Iraq's president, Kurdish politician Fuad Masum, to name him as prime minister by the deadline set in the Iraqi constitution. He called this "a coup against the constitution and the political process."

Even as he spoke, special forces units loyal to Maliki took up positions at key bridges and intersections in Baghdad, while surrounding the presidential palace and the heavily fortified Green Zone, where most government offices, including the parliament as well as foreign embassies, are located. There were some reports that tanks had also been seen in the streets.

"We have noticed suspicious security movements in Baghdad, distribution for forces and tanks which if persist can be considered a coup," a former senior Kurdish official involved in the negotiations on selecting a new prime minister told the *Wall Street Journal*. "So far, we haven't reached that point. It's only Maliki showing his muscles."

Within hours, the Iraqi president had tapped a rival from within Maliki's Islamic Da'wa Party, Haidar al-Abadi, one of two deputy parliamentary speakers, as prime minister, giving him 30 days to form a new government.

The action was hailed by US officials. President Barack Obama, vacationing on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, called it a "promising step forward." In a brief statement to the White House press corps Monday afternoon, Obama revealed that he and Vice President Joe Biden had called Abadi to congratulate him and "pledge support," even as the power struggle within the Iraqi state remained far from resolved. He said that he had urged Abadi to "form a new cabinet as quickly as possible."

Obama also claimed that US air strikes against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), an offshoot of Al Qaeda, conducted over the previous three days had advanced what he claimed were Washington's "limited military objectives" in Iraq, where he has ordered the first direct US armed intervention since the withdrawal of US troops from the country at the end of 2011.

These objectives, he claimed, were confined to protecting American citizens in Iraqi

Kurdistan's capital of Irbil, aiding the Iraqi military and delivering humanitarian aid to tens of thousands of members of the Yazidi religious minority forced to flee ISIS violence.

At least since June, when ISIS—which has been the main fighting force in the US-backed sectarian war against the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria—overran over one quarter of Iraq's territory, Washington has been pushing for the ouster of Maliki. Obama administration officials and the US corporate media have relentlessly scapegoated Maliki and his sectarian policies against Iraq's Sunni minority for a societal breakdown that is the direct product of over eight years of US war and occupation that claimed the lives of some one million Iraqis.

During this occupation, in 2006, Washington installed Maliki—then a little-known former exile and junior official in the Da'wa party—as prime minister after he was hand-picked for the post by then-US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad. In 2010 the US Embassy continued to back Maliki as he used his control of the state and the judiciary to essentially steal the election from his opponent, Ayad Allawi, whose Iraqiya bloc won the most seats in the parliament.

Now, while posing as defenders of the Iraqi constitution, US officials are backing a similar operation against Maliki, whose State of Law coalition was the front-runner in parliament elections held last April. Since then, with the country's disintegration and under mounting US pressure, members of Maliki's own party and bloc have deserted him. But he is still able to make a constitutional argument—diametrically opposed to the position he took in 2010—that as the head of the party with the most seats in parliament he has the right to attempt to form a government and secure for himself a third term in power.

There is little reason to give credence to Obama's claims that Abadi's installation—which has clearly been promoted by Washington—will signal the advent of a government that will “unite Iraq's different communities” or “address the needs of all the Iraqi people.” There is virtually nothing to distinguish him from Maliki outside of their falling out over positions within the Da'wa Party, a Shiite religious-based formation that, while historically tied to Iran, fully supported the US invasion of 2003.

While Maliki's bid for a third term is apparently opposed not only by Sunni and Kurdish factions, but also by a majority of the Shiite members of parliament, his departure is not yet an accomplished fact. Having over the past four years assumed direct control of Iraq's defense, intelligence and interior ministries, he may attempt to prolong his rule by force, potentially unleashing a new armed conflict, even as much of the country has been overrun by ISIS. In his speech Sunday, Maliki appealed directly to the Iraqi military to “defend the constitution.”

Behind the hypocritical claims that the present US intervention is merely directed at protecting American civilians and rescuing besieged Yazidis from an Iraqi desert mountaintop, US imperialism is determined to exploit the present crisis as a means of reasserting its control over Iraq and redrawing the map of the Middle East to suit its own interests.

While as many as 30,000 of the Yazidis have managed to cross through Syria into Iraqi Kurdistan, and others have been left to die, the impact of the US “humanitarian” intervention is far from clear. The British daily *Guardian* spoke by phone with Khairi Naif, 55, a Yazidi who reported being trapped on Sinjar mountain with his 10 children. “We have been

hearing of humanitarian aid that would be dropped on us by the US and British planes for the last two days, but up till the moment we have received absolutely nothing,” he said. “I believe that all the international promises are mere lies and no one cares about our catastrophe.”

The claims that US imperialism is driven by humanitarian considerations is belied by its record during the US war and occupation of Iraq, in which a divide-and-rule policy unleashed a sectarian bloodbath and led to the displacement of millions of Iraqis.

Meanwhile, US officials confirmed Monday that Washington has begun arming the Kurdish Peshmerga militia, whose troops are being backed by US close-air support in their battles with ISIS fighters near Irbil. According to US officials, the arms are being funneled to the Peshmerga by the CIA and include stocks of AK-47 assault rifles and ammunition.

There is no attempt by the Obama administration to reconcile this policy, which strengthens a separatist military force that has seized territory formerly controlled by the central government, including the key oil city of Kirkuk, during the present crisis, with US claims to be promoting a government of national unity in Baghdad.

US concerns over the Iraqi Kurdistan capital of Irbil are not just over the fate of US civilians, but the profit interests of US oil corporations, including ExxonMobil, Chevron and smaller companies, which have set up lucrative operations there. Their activities have been conducted in defiance of the central government in Baghdad, which insists that it alone can conclude oil deals with foreign corporations.

In June, Abadi, the now newly designated prime minister, made statements demanding US air strikes against ISIS, while warning that if Washington was not forthcoming the Iraqi government would have to seek an Iranian intervention. At the time, US Secretary of State John Kerry had stated that the US launching such air strikes would be “a complete and total act of irresponsibility” given the sharp sectarian divisions inside the country.

It is far from clear that some 20 separate US air strikes carried over the past few days have changed the situation on the ground. While Peshmerga forces claimed to have retaken the northern towns of Gwer and Makhmur from ISIS fighters, ISIS reportedly captured the town of Jalawla, northeast of Baghdad, from the Kurdish fighters.

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