“Iraq and the Fight Against the Islamic State”

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FEATURING
Haider al-Abadi
Prime Minister, Iraq (2014-2018)

CSIS EXPERTS
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Dr. Haider al-Abadi was the prime minister of Iraq from 2014 to 2018. He had earlier served as an Iraqi parliamentarian after decades in exile as an active member of the Dawa party. He has a Ph.D. in electrical engineering from the University of Manchester, and he is the author of a recent book, *Impossible Victory: How Iraq Defeated ISIS*. Dr. Abadi, welcome to Babel.

Thank you for having me.

You say in your book that the United States threw money and resources into creating pockets of capacity where it mattered to them, such as intelligence and counterterrorism. If that’s what mattered to the United States, why was the Islamic State Group (ISG) able to establish such a strong foothold in Iraq?

Well, this is a very good question, but don’t forget that the ISG established a foothold in Syria first. They built their capabilities, their numbers, and conducted gained the capacity to invade Iraq across the northern and eastern border. They were enabled in Syria, and that spread to Iraq. Having said that, there were some weaknesses in Iraq because these areas were not amalgamated together very well. There was a sectarian problem between some political groups against the government in Baghdad. That sectarianism helped the ISG gain a foothold in Iraq.

Do you think that the seeds of a resurgence are still there? Is it possible that these western regions of Iraq that retain sectarian tensions might again host extremist groups that rise up against the central government?

Not to a large extent. I think it’s not dangerous, but what is there in Syria is dangerous. The remnants of the ISG ideology is very dangerous, and it’s still there. As I said in the book, there are young people who have been misled. They think that the Islamic world is not playing any role in the international arena, and they want a voice. They have been misled toward the way of oppression, using force, and using fear to make their presence felt. This ideology is still there, unfortunately.

What’s the appropriate response from the government of Iraq?

Well, at the time, it was to get them out of the country by not allowing them to hold territory. That was very important. When they held territory, they were killing people. They were slaughtering innocent civilians, so I think that was a huge task that we achieved by kicking them out of our territories. We have moved a long way to destroying them, but the ideology is still there. The reasons why the ideology has prospered are still there—not only in Iraq. They are moving elsewhere—in Nigeria, in Afghanistan, and other countries in this part of the world.

So, what do you do about it?

We have to build our own societies. We have to build good governance, and unfortunately, in this part of the world, there is very weak governance.
Jon Alterman: You talked a lot in the book—and you talked a lot when you were here at CSIS in 2015—about corruption in Iraq. You argued that there was corruption Iraq under Saddam Hussein. There’s even more corruption under the U.S. troop presence. One vivid example you give is when the army was fighting against the ISG in Fallujah, you kept cutting the money for fuel. And you found that rather than weakening the army, it actually weakened the ISG because the ISG was getting all the fuel from the Iraqi army it was fighting. Saudi Arabia has a very active anti-corruption agency, Nizaha, that seems entirely independent, without a lot of oversight. Do you think that a country like Iraq should adopt an anti-corruption program like Saudi Arabia?

Haider al-Abadi: Well, we have on paper. We have an anti-corruption commission that was established post-2003. We have some in other departments, too, but the point is that Saudi Arabia is a single system—it has one ruler. The ruler can control many things. With democracy—especially weak democracy—you have many rulers, and nobody owns the system. The system doesn’t belong to them. They only need to get what they want, and they aren’t responsible for the consequences. When you are a person or group that’s responsible, you will carry consequences for what you do. This is the problem. We have created a democracy that doesn’t have owners.

Jon Alterman: One of the things that I thought was impressive about your book is that you gave a sense of just how treacherous Iraqi politics can be. What surprised me was that I didn’t hear a lot about allies—people you relied on, people you thought you could trust. If you were to advise one of your successors, what would you tell them about how to build durable alliances in Iraq?

Haider al-Abadi: The number one piece of advice is to be very fair because you can aggravate the situation when you are not fair. If you tilt to one side because you think the other is not being fair, you create very solid enemies that are opposed to you. They will get to you, and there is no guarantee that those who you favored will stay with you. You need to be very fair and very balanced. Second, I think you have to deal with them. You need to look into their eyes. You need to listen to them. They will have some grievances, which you will need to answer and address. Some of their grievances will be right, and you have to address it. You have to correct. If there are grievances that aren’t correct, you have to explain it to them—at the very least. They can look at you as being fair and balanced, and they can trust you. If they don't trust you, I don't think you will have any allies.

Jon Alterman: One of the really tricky issues in Iraq is the Iranian presence, and you and I spoke about it at CSIS in 2015. You said it was unacceptable for Qassem Soleimani to play such a visible role defeating the ISG. Your book is very complimentary about the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), but a number of analysts have pointed out that some PMF elements reject the authority of the prime minister and seem tied to Iranian forces. Are Iranian threats to Iraqi sovereignty a continuing problem in your view, and if so, what does Iraq need to do about it?

Haider al-Abadi: Don’t forget at that time we were living in different era. The Islamic State was a threat, and although it was a threat to us in Iraq, it was also a threat to the West. It was a threat to Iranians as well. It was a national interest for Iran to fight the ISG—to stop it from spreading to their border. The Islamic State got very close to Iran. They almost made it to the Iranian border in Diyala, so, I think Iran had a huge
interest in fighting the Islamic State and we had a common interest with them to
fight a common enemy. The PMF fought with us. They were under the same
umbrella. They have their weaknesses. They have their drawbacks—the same with
our military units—but they were Iraqis who were fighting for their country. They
answered the call from Ayatollah al-Sistani to defend the country. They had very
little training and very little knowledge of the infrastructure or the discipline of a
fighting force, so we had to work with them. But at the same time, they were very
disciplined within the Iraq combat unites, so there was a balance between the
leadership of a prime minister or a government and the fighting force. If a
government is weak and trying to give in to militias and armed groups, then that
balance will shift.

Haider al-Abadi: That’s what happened post-2018, when these armed groups with political
affiliations became stronger than the state itself. Whoever was in the seat of
government became an accomplice to that by being weak. I’m not saying they
should fight the militias in the streets, but they should put a limit to what they can
do. Arms outside the state should not be allowed. Mixing politics with the military is
not acceptable at all, and I think these lines which I’ve drawn during my time—I
drew it very clearly—became very thin later on. I think this is a problem. There are
volunteers in the fight against the Islamic State who are very useful and were
fundamental in our winning the war. These are Iraqis who have good hearts. They
want to defend their country. And don’t forget that the Islamic State is ideological.
You need an ideological element opposing them so that you can defeat them. And
they fit in that ideological space in the fight against this terrorist organization, but
the government must be strong. They must have a very clear vision where the arms
end. You cannot have a political army or a military wing to that political army.
That’s what happened post-2018, and it was very unfortunate.

Jon Alterman: When you spoke here at CSIS in 2015, you said the Iraqi constitution calls for
decentralization, and you said that in your view as prime minister there are no
limits to decentralization. Of course, two years later, Iraq had a political crisis when
the Kurdish region voted overwhelmingly in favor of independence. As you look
forward, what do you think the role of decentralization should be in Iraq and to
what extent do Iraqis have to be together and accommodate difference in a better
way?

Haider al-Abadi: I’m still a very firm believer in decentralization. You cannot run all the areas
centrally. You cannot answer the demands of the people only from the center.
People should have representation in their locality, and they should be able to
answer the grievances and answer the needs of the people locally. What happened
in 2017 was not decentralization. It was separation. It was partition of the country,
and once it starts, there is no stop to that—to be honest with you. If you started
from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), you would end up in Basra. You
would end up in Mosul, and the whole country would disintegrate. And don’t forget
that we have very powerful neighbors, and those neighbors have interests as well.
And these interests are complicated, and they are conflicting. With separation, we’ll
end up being very weak inside Iraq, and we’ll not be able to achieve the interests of
our people separately or independently. That’s a very dangerous road to take. We
have a constitution, and in that constitution, we voted that Iraq is one country. Yes,
it has decentralized, local governments, but you shouldn’t touch the fundamental
part of the constitution that makes Iraq one country. It is very unfortunate that the KRG thought that since the Islamic State was not a threat to them anymore—and at that time we were still preoccupied with the ISG in western Anbar—it was time to vote for separation from Iraq. I think it was very unwise. I respect the dreams of the Kurdish population, in that regard, but we are together in one country. You cannot just hold a vote and try to cut that branch out of the country.

Jon Alterman: I want to ask a few questions about the military. One of the things that I found very surprising in your book is that you said that even ten years after the U.S. military entered Iraq, the Iraqi military remained extraordinarily weak on logistics, and you pointed out in several places in your book that even feeding soldiers fighting on the front line was often beyond the Iraqi army’s capability. If the United States was committed to building an Iraqi army, why was this failing still there ten years later?

Haider al-Abadi: I think the idea was that the United States would never leave Iraq. At the time, had the United States left any other country that went so far with them? I think there are 83 countries with the U.S. army still there. They never left those countries, so they thought they would stay in Iraq and that they would still manage the logistics and everything else. When you are minding someone or some other entity and you think you will be always there, you will never think about the need to make them independent in that regard. The United States is a superpower. They have all the capabilities. There was huge gap between our capabilities and theirs because we didn’t just not have an army, we had a demoralized, collapsed army. We had a destroyed country. So, there is a huge gap, and it needed many years of effort to build our capacity, and I think planners in the U.S. military thought it was much easier for them to run the show than to spend so much bringing those capabilities to the Iraqis. And another major consideration was do they want to enable the Iraqis, so that they will ask them to leave? That is a major question, I think.

Jon Alterman: You say that there’s a question of who would run the show, and I was surprised to learn from your book just how much you ran the show and how many military decisions you made—both about strategy and tactics. You weren’t trained as a military person. You were trained as an electrical engineer. What experiences did you draw on to make the military decisions you made as prime minister and commander in chief?

Haider al-Abadi: It’s not only engineering. It’s political experience as well—social experience. I think being a good decision maker, or a good leader, is not just based on one element. There are many other elements. It depends how you utilize them. In engineering—especially engineering that has a social dimension that deals with people—you are dealing with how people think and how people will act with you and your. That helps you to collect data, to analyze data, and to make that data available so that they are complementary to the behavior of the people. In that way, you have owned something that will act automatically in your mind. You don’t even need a lot of time to analyze it. It’s just there in your mind, in your brain, and in your heart as well. And when I talk about engineering, it’s about machines. It’s much harder when you talk about society and about politics. You are dealing with people and the lives of the people, and war is a decision about life or death. So, to me, it was very critical and very worrying. And I did have nightmares about this, that it was in my hands—
that at the end of the day, who should live or die may rely on a decision by me. I think that was very hard to have on my shoulders. I didn’t want to lose my soul in that regard, so I was very careful, even with my enemies. I spent hours analyzing my enemies. I didn’t want to make mistakes. Although they were my enemy and fighting us, they had civilians among them. They had innocent people among them, and you shouldn’t treat them all as one. That’s hard. It was much easier if you could just draw a curtain and say, they are all bad and we are good. But I couldn’t do that. My insight wouldn’t allow me to do that, so it was tough. It’s much tougher than engineering.

Jon Alterman: So, as a very reflective person, if you could do one thing over from your time as prime minister, what would you do differently?

Haider al-Abadi: On the economic front, I would concentrate on how to raise the standard of living for people—how to create more jobs. I didn’t have that chance. I did spend some time addressing those issues, but you need a lot of fundamental decisions to change that in the right direction. With the war on, you didn’t want to create many other problems. With the lack of resources, you are one person. You have advisors and helpers, but as commander-in-chief, you don’t have a deputy. You cannot relegate responsibilities to others. Things had to be done by me. I had to be the one to make decisions, so it was very time consuming—and energy consuming. I think the economic wellbeing of the people is important. Number one is the need to create jobs. Number two is to make some changes to the life of the people, so there is hope for people who are moving in the right direction in rebuilding their lives. We did that for the war, and we achieved victory, but we needed this one to go parallel with it.

Jon Alterman: Do you miss being prime minister of Iraq?

Haider al-Abadi: No, I never miss it. I had the same life as I was before being prime minister. So personally, I didn’t miss that. Yes, for a while after I left, I missed the decisions that I made and the achievements that I made. Those who came after me didn’t realize the depth of that, and they started to unpack them, and we moved in the wrong direction. That’s what happened later.

Jon Alterman: Dr. Haider Al Abadi, former prime minister of Iraq and author of Impossible Victory: How Iraq Defeated ISIS, thank you for joining us on Babel.

Haider al-Abadi: Thank you.