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President Trump Intervenes in Iraq's Government Formation Talks

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Iraq is currently in the midst of government formation negotiations, but a sudden intervention by President Trump has further deepened the confusion.

In Iraq, once a general election is held, it typically takes one to two months for the results to be finalized, followed by more than three additional months of negotiations to form a government. In the most recent case, voting took place on November 11, 2025, and the results were confirmed on December 14. In response, the Council of Representatives convened its first session on December 29, during which members were sworn in, and the Speaker of Parliament was elected. The next step is the election of the President, who then designates the candidate nominated by the largest parliamentary bloc as Prime Minister-designate. Once the ministers nominated by the Prime Minister-designate receive a vote of confidence in parliament, the new government is formally established.

In Iraq's multi-ethnic and multi-sectarian society, it is an established convention that the prime minister—the highest executive authority—is drawn from the Arab Shiite community. Meanwhile, the Arab Sunni and the Kurds customarily assume the positions of Speaker of Parliament and President, respectively. Consequently, the election of the President requires Kurdish parties to unify behind a single candidate. However, the Kurdish parties have yet to reach an agreement even in their own government formation negotiations within the Kurdistan Region, and inter-party rivalries have deepened. As a result, the process at the federal level has also stalled.

The selection of the prime ministerial candidate, on the other hand, is determined through consultations among Shiite political parties. Incumbent Prime Minister Mohammed al-Sudani, whose party emerged as the largest in the election, sought to remain in office. At the same time, former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who served two terms from 2006 to 2014, made no secret of his desire to return, suggesting that the selection process would be contentious. However, in early January, Sudani suddenly announced that he would withdraw from the race and instead support Maliki. In late January, the Shiite parliamentary bloc—though not unanimously—decided to nominate Maliki as the new prime ministerial candidate.

Only three days later, President Trump posted on social media that Maliki's selection was “a very bad choice,” criticizing his “insane policies and ideologies” during his previous tenure and warning that if he returned to office, “the United States of America will no longer help Iraq.”

Maliki is the only prime minister in post-2003 Iraq to have been reappointed to a second term. In the April 2014 election, his party again emerged as the largest, making a third term appear highly likely. However, his stance at the time—effectively conflating Sunni Arabs with terrorists—proved useful in mobilizing Shiite voters but deepened domestic divisions and contributed to the expansion of support for the ISIS within Iraq. During the subsequent government formation negotiations, ISIS captured roughly one-third of Iraqi territory, including the key city of Mosul. Facing intense domestic and international criticism, Maliki ultimately abandoned his bid for a third term. The rise of ISIS prompted U.S. forces, which had withdrawn from Iraq at the end of 2011, to return only three years later.

From this perspective, it is understandable that the U.S. government would express concern over Maliki’s potential return. However, the timing and method of the intervention were highly unusual. Given that the United States maintains a massive embassy in Baghdad, it could have conveyed its opposition to Maliki’s reappointment discreetly through diplomatic channels before Shiite leaders formally settled on a candidate. That this did not occur likely reflects President Trump’s characteristically direct decision-making style—judging matters in terms of whether they benefit the United States and expressing that judgment without diplomatic restraint, as seen in many other cases.

Unsurprisingly, the overt interference in Iraq’s domestic politics provoked widespread backlash within the country. Publicly, the Shiite parliamentary bloc has not changed its nominee. In practical terms, however, Maliki’s return to the premiership has become considerably more difficult. Some observers suggest that Sudani’s early withdrawal from the race may have been a calculated strategy to undermine a rival—anticipating that domestic and international opposition would ultimately block Maliki’s comeback. Whether this strategy will result in Sudani’s continuation in office or whether a third candidate will ultimately emerge remains unresolved.

For Iraq, incurring U.S. anger is a matter of vital importance. Although more than half of Iraq’s overseas assets are held in countries other than the United States, such as France and China, daily oil revenues are transferred to Iraq via the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, a legacy of post-2003 reconstruction arrangements. If the U.S. government were to restrict dollar transfers to Iraq, the impact on Iraq’s public finances would be severe. For Washington, this represents an easily deployable and highly effective instrument of pressure. As illustrated by the case of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, resisting the overwhelming power of the United States is exceedingly difficult. Yet while the United States’ willingness to prioritize its own interests without regard for the dignity of other states or the international order may yield powerful short-term results, over the medium to long term, it risks eroding the very foundations of its influence. Repeated application of such pressure could quietly accelerate a gradual “drift away” from the United States beneath the surface.