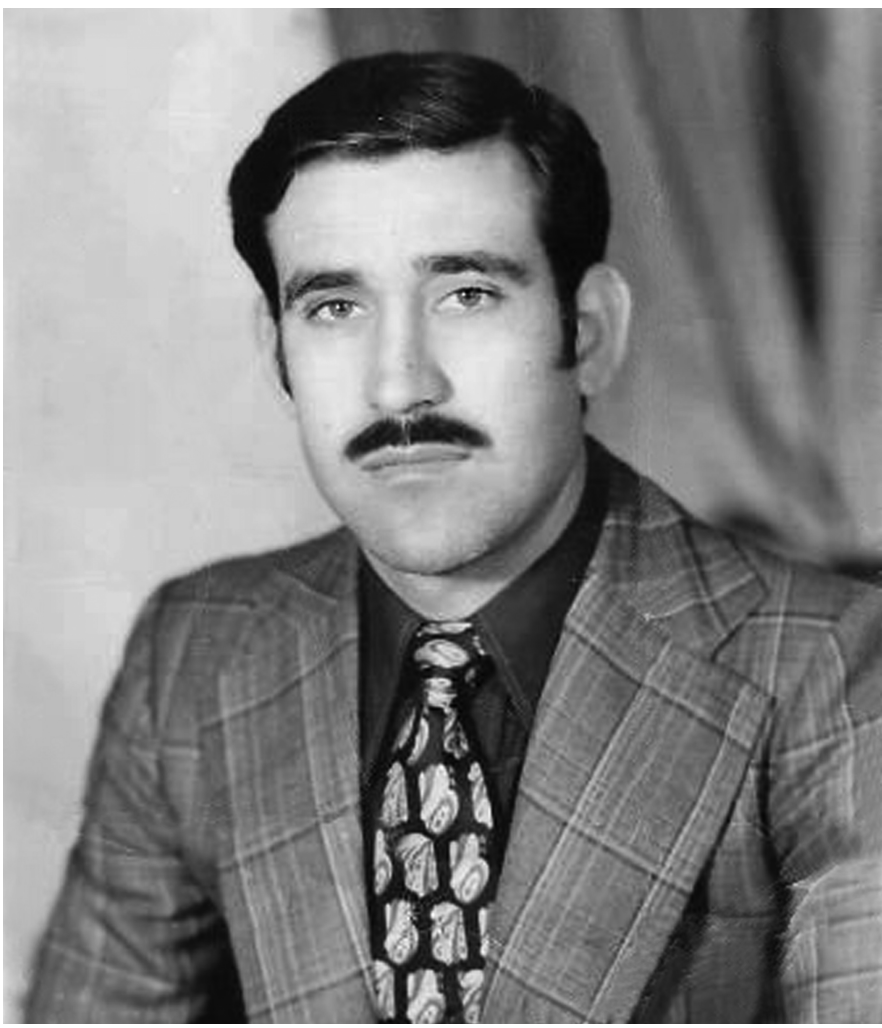
Notes from the Underground:
The Rise of Nouri al-Maliki and the New Islamists

NED PARKER AND RAHEEM SALMAN

BAGHDAD—It was December 2010, and Nouri Kamal al-Maliki sat in a faux palace, erected by Saddam Hussein, on the Feast of Sacrifice, one of the most sacred days in the Muslim Calendar. The politician, who had just secured his second term as prime minister of Iraq after an eight-month stalemate, sat in a gilded, thronelike chair, surrounded by members of his Shiite religious Dawa Party. Former enemies walked into the hall to congratulate him, and Maliki rose to embrace them. To his left was a founder of his party, the oldest surviving Dawa member, who had been tortured under Hussein and was now spending his golden years in quiet retirement



near the Shiite shrine of Imam Khadim in western Baghdad. There were others like him, who basked in the pageantry like a balm for the jail, death, and humiliating exile they endured. Their grip on power, a feverish dream during decades abroad putting out tracts and plotting, now seemed permanent.

Hussein had once presented himself on television receiving obsequious visitors and inspecting his forces, and now Maliki did the same. The irony of the moment was not lost. But after years in the wilderness, the prime minister understood, as did his opponents who wished to replace him, the importance of strength and ruthlessness. Without it, you would perish.

There had been moments when Maliki recoiled from such displays, uncomfortable with the parallels. Once, he shuddered in anger when a Western official commented on the photos of him meeting dignitaries lining his walls. Maliki was disgusted. This was Hussein's behavior, and the pictures were removed. But in the winter of 2010, in the sunset of the American presence in Iraq, Maliki was comfortable projecting power, and his aides deferred to him as they would a great man. He was confident he would dictate the makeup of the government and how power would be apportioned to his rivals. Those in the Shiite ranks who had conspired against him greeted him now as a conquering hero. If their smiles were false, their scheming was dead for the moment. The methods he had used to consolidate power were as cruel as those inflicted upon him and Dawa members under Hussein—arresting and torturing political enemies and turning a blind eye to his allies' corruption and criminal acts.

But this was the price of his victory in Iraq. Maliki, disparaged by others as a Nixonian paranoid, given to rages and delusional displays of grandiosity, had persevered, tacking left and right on the touchstones of nationalism and his Shiite character—both coming naturally to him—in the name of survival.

At his moment of triumph, celebrated by friends and rivals, he could hardly imagine that he would soon be tested as never before. Despite his iron-fisted rule, Sunni areas harbored a resilient insurgency that would endure after the Americans' departure. In contested lands in the north, the Kurds answered him with their own hard-headedness, wooing Turkey as a protector and landing large foreign oil corporations to drill for oil in disputed northern territories. Each step promised to bring the Kurds closer to a declaration of independence from Baghdad.

Eventually, a popular revolt inside Syria would push Maliki into a deeper embrace of Iran, convinced he needed his Shiite neighbor's treacherous involvement as a check on Sunni competitors in Iraq and their supporters in Saudi Arabia and Turkey. In short, the reign of Maliki is an object lesson to other nascent Islamist leaders across the Middle East of how to consolidate one's rule from the rubble of a toppled state.

Ned Parker, a foreign correspondent for the Los Angeles Times*, reported from Baghdad for seven years and has contributed to* World Policy Journal*.*
Raheem Salman covered the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the post-Saddam era for the Los Angeles Times *from 2003 to 2011. He is currently a Baghdad-based Reuters correspondent.*

To understand Maliki—this century's first Arab leader elected through a genuinely democratic process, which prefigured the Arab Spring and came out of the extraordinary circumstances of the 2003 American invasion of Iraq—one needs to explore where Iraq's prime minister comes from, his early days as an ambitious young revolutionary, and his defining decades of hardship and punishing exile. This is a man swept up by the spirit of Islamic revolution, who lost his home and family in the name of an idea, and then plotted for 23 years devoting himself to incremental guerrilla violence. All the while, his backers and allies betrayed him as he bought time, studied them, and drew strength from every blow until one day he was stronger and tougher than them all. He understood what it was to lose everything, be betrayed, and then surprise your enemy by outlasting him.

His past provides insight into whether he will be able to transform Iraq into a freer society or perpetuate the country's recent history of violence, corruption, and authoritarian rule. His experiences—his successes and failures—are likely to provide their own critical lessons to Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, states that have recently cast off authoritarian rulers. Their citizens, now grappling with long-suppressed, volatile questions of ethnic, religious, tribal, and national identity, may look to the course taken by Maliki and Iraq as a cautionary tale. His story suggests the dangerous ways secular and Islamist parties, shaped and defined by an authoritarian and conspiratorial political culture, are poised to mirror the very oppressors they cast off. His efforts to govern show how difficult it is to lead a transformation to democracy, while ending a period of vendettas.

ORIGINS: 1950-1979

Nouri al-Maliki's home village of Janaga lies along the Euphrates. Wandering the family's date groves as a child, the legend of his grandfather, Mohammed Abu Mahesin, surrounded him. Tall, with an owlish face, Abu Mahesin wrote poetry about his homeland and revolution—incendiary verses recited at mosques and public gatherings, urging people to fight for Iraq's freedom against the British. He represented the Shiite clergy and led his tribesmen in the 1920 armed uprising against the British occupation. Maliki would memorize his grandfather's poems, imbued with their love of Iraq and revolution. His father, Kamel, kept Abu Mahesin's political traditions alive, pursuing a career as an ardent Arab nationalist, inspired by Egypt's President Gamal Abdul Nasser. In 1963, when the Baath Party and military officers violently overthrew the Iraqi government, Kamel sided with the military in forcing out the Baath. When the Baath plotted their own successful coup in 1968, they briefly detained Kamel, having not forgotten his loyalties five years earlier. Maliki's father exited jail with a black eye.

> MALIKI DID HIS BEST NOT TO ATTRACT ATTENTION, UNLIKE HIS FRIENDS WHO DIDN'T SHAVE AND REFUSED TO SHAKE A WOMAN'S HAND.

The son watched the failure of his father and elders to build an Arab state equal in strength to the West and Israel. The humbling loss to Israel in the 1967 war proved decisive, so Maliki turned back to the Islamic values of his grandfather to revive Iraq and the Arab world—

embracing the then clandestine Dawa Party and its spiritual guide the late Ayatollah Mohammed Baqr Sadr. Even now, Maliki proudly displays the ring the Sadr wore at the time of his execution by Hussein's security apparatus in April 1980. Sadr, who earned a reputation in Shiite Islamist circles as a child prodigy, joined in founding the Dawa Party at a secret meeting in the late 1950s. Seeking a religious answer to the Middle East's emerging secular nationalism and Western encroachments, Maliki joined the party in a mosque in Hindaya, the larger town that bordered Janaga. The party took hold of his life, and when other young men chose Baghdad University, considered liberal and urbane, Dawa members asked him to attend a religious college associated with Sadr.

MALIKI CONFESSED AN INFATUATION WITH THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION IN ITS FIRST BLOOM.

The work of a young party member in the late 1960s focused on promoting Shiite Islam through producing magazines and organizing events at mosques and on religious holidays. To be a member was to belong to a secret society. The very name Dawa would not be revealed publicly until the early 1970s when the government arrested and executed its first members. After college and serving briefly in the army, Maliki found a job in accounting at the education department in Hilla, an hour's commute from his home. On the surface, Maliki's routine as a minor bureaucrat was ordinary, but behind the scenes, he quietly preached the teachings of Sadr and Islam to his relatives. Maliki did his best not to attract attention, unlike his friends who didn't shave and refused to shake a woman's hand. Yet already, he was under scrutiny for having gone to an Islamic college in Baghdad and had not been made a teacher, because the government viewed him warily. He sought to win over the Hilla education department's party members. "The senior Baath Party member in our department fell under the impression that I was a Baathist," he recalled.

By Maliki's final year in Hilla, however, the noose had tightened. Inspired by the February 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, Dawa had become bolder, with pilgrimages to Najaf to declare their loyalty to Sadr. These marches encouraged Hussein to multiply his arrests and executions of members of underground Shiite religious groups and silence the moderate voices in his government. Maliki continued traveling by bus to work every day but now sounded angry and nervous. He criticized a visit by Hussein to a village in the south where the dictator handed out presents, calling it shameless. At work, the mood was tense after masked men stormed their building and beat Maliki's friend, who was suspected of being Islamist. In his final weeks at work in Hilla, Maliki and a colleague, Kareem, were summoned by security officials for questioning on suspicion of being Dawa members. "They blindfolded us and took us to the security and put us together in a garage. When my friend Kareem asked what was going on, I told him this is the end of our lives," Maliki remembered.

But by a stroke of luck, a judge sympathetic to Maliki, later executed by the regime, freed him, and the young revolutionary promptly prepared for departure. At 2 p.m., October 20, 1979, Ahmad Najat, a police security officer from Hindaya, entered his office building with three offi-

cers and asked for Maliki. A friend said he hadn't shown up that day. Najat slammed his hands together as if he had lost something, then rushed down the street to an alley where 16 security cars were waiting, and sped off.

INTO EXILE: 1979-1981

That same morning, Maliki walked from his lush farming village to Hindaya. A police car passed him, but the officers planned to arrest him at work that day, so they ignored him. Maliki, passport in his pocket, hailed a ride through the desert of the western Anbar province to the Jordanian border, where guards demanded his papers. He handed over his passport and tried to act normal, explaining he was going to Amman for medical treatment and would be back in two days. Behind him was detention, torture, and death. Maliki arrived in Damascus with nothing. He waited at the tiny Abbas hotel for an old friend from his army days. Each vowed to keep the ideas of Islamic revolution alive. Back in Iraq, the state had confiscated Maliki's family land and, over the next decade, killed at least 67 of his relatives. His wife and two-year-old daughter changed houses regularly, fearful that they would be killed. It took a year to smuggle them to Damascus. In April 1980, came the execution of Sadr and Sadr's sister. Stunned by the loss of their movement's spiritual leader, Dawa rallied 45 protestors in front of the Iraqi embassy and tried to storm inside, but Syrian forces stopped them.

The Baath Party had executed several Dawa members and religious figures before, but never a cleric of Sadr's stature, respected across the Shiite world. His execution marked a hardening of sectarian divisions in Iraqi society, with Hussein killing anyone he suspected of affiliation with Dawa. The killings implanted vengeance as a guiding principle for Maliki and his generation of Islamists. Radicalized, Maliki drew on his military experience recruiting fighters to set up guerrilla cells in Iraq, training them and hiding weapons and pamphlets inside cars and bicycles entering the country. Their party carried out the Middle East's first modern suicide bombing in 1981—a suicide car bomb at the Iraqi embassy in Beirut—and conducted assassinations and sabotage against Hussein's regime.

Maliki proved himself a tough leader in Damascus, establishing new communication channels with Dawa members from Iran to Beirut as the movement reinvented itself in exile as a resilient, battle-tested organization. The Dawa Party took notice and summoned Maliki to Iran to help run its military training camp in 1981. Hussein's war with Iran had broken out the previous year, and Iraqi opposition groups were using Iran as a base for their efforts to topple Hussein.

THE IRAN YEARS: 1981-1989

Maliki confessed an infatuation with the Iranian revolution in its first bloom—a fervent belief in Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as a seminal figure who did what Shiite Iraqis could only dream of. "When the Iranian revolution began, we interacted with it madly. It was the first revolution with Islam embedded. Its leader wore the turban and was a cleric," Maliki recalled. But actual life in the new Islamic Republic proved a rude awakening for the Dawa Party. Most members speak with bitterness of Iran and Khomeini to this day.

Maliki, his wife, and a second daughter, born in Syria, arrived and settled into the small Dawa-run military camp outside of Ahwaz in Iran across the border from

the marshes of southern Iraq. The camp, named after the recently executed Sadr, was run under the supervision of Dawa's military veterans like Maliki and was in a dangerous location. Iraqi missiles often shelled the base. Over two years, Maliki saw 63 Dawa members die in bombardments. Maliki's time in Ahwaz coincided with the growing tensions between Iran and Dawa. Both were comprised of Shiites, but Iran wanted Dawa as a proxy for its fight with Iraq—expecting Dawa to recognize Khomeini as the organization's spiritual leader and submit to Tehran's will. The demands sparked resentment among Dawa members who saw themselves as Iraqi Islamists, not puppets for Iran's theology and ambitions. Unable to co-opt Dawa, Iranian political and military leaders formed a competing movement, coaxing senior Iraqi Shiite clergy including Ayatollah Mohammed Baqr Hakim and his brothers—sons of an Iraqi grand ayatollah and founding members of the Dawa Party—to accept Iran's offer of patronage and pledge allegiance to Khomeini as their religious guide. Rank and file Dawa members defected to the Hakims, joining their new party, the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution, and their militia, the Badr Brigade.

Dawa's leading members recall with hatred the dark hour when the Iranians announced the Ahwaz camp no longer belonged to Dawa and handed the facility to the Hakims' Badr troops. Some remember Maliki marching to the front of Ahwaz's mosque, telling fighters they could choose to carry on or leave, but the camp no longer belonged to them. It was a lesson to Maliki in the exercise of power and perception. Dawa was abandoned by those who saw that prestige was with the Hakims. People could be bought, and old alliances severed in an instant. Summoned to Tehran to serve on the party's military committee, Maliki grew to hate life there and the small indignities that followed. "You don't know their arrogance until you live among them," Maliki told an American diplomat long afterward, explaining why he never learned Farsi.

Miserable, he returned to Damascus hoping for more freedom. Instead, Maliki found himself doing little but sipping tea in party offices, while suffering from stomach bleeding. Finally, he packed a suitcase and took off for Iran, hoping a change of scenery would lift his black mood and improve his health. But the situation in Tehran remained bleak. Iran had co-opted specific Dawa factions to carry out attacks, including the bombing of the American and French embassies in Kuwait in 1983. Another Lebanese Dawa member took part in the creation of Hezbollah. There was never a formal rupture between Dawa and its splinter groups. They were all fellow travelers who received funding from Iran, shared basic religious tenets, and believed in war with Hussein. The U.S. government eventually cleared Dawa's main branch of responsibility for the attack in Kuwait. But U.S. officials declined to authorize meetings with senior Dawa leaders until 2002.

Asked about Iran's manipulation of Dawa, Maliki told an American diplomat years later: "I don't trust the Iranians for a minute." In 1987, he quit Iran when its security services began to harass and kill Dawa members, according to a classified U.S. government biography of Maliki. One American diplomat remembered Maliki in 2004 choking up as he recalled a Dawa Party friend in the 1980s, who was jailed and executed by the Iranians for not pledging allegiance to Khomeini. Maliki

roamed from the marshes of southern Iraq to the mountains of Kurdistan to Damascus as he strove to guard his independence and carry on his guerrilla fight. "I never stopped working in Iraq. I lived the suffering of the Iraqis," Maliki said. "I refused any other nationality."

Little was left of the young man who had grown up in a village off the Euphrates River. Pictures of him from this time show a middle-aged man standing unsmiling in gray fatigues with a prayer rug and worry beads in hands. He was known by his pseudonyms—Jawad, Abu Mohasin, Abu Isra. Nouri al-Maliki no longer existed.

THE WASTED YEARS: 1991-2003

While Maliki had bitter feelings toward Tehran and Damascus, the 1991 Gulf War deepened his darkest thinking about the West. Like others, Maliki listened when President George H.W. Bush called publicly for Iraqis to rise up against Hussein. Then he watched with horror as Hussein sent helicopter gunships to fire on Shiite rebels in southern Iraq, and the Americans did nothing. Tens of thousands died, and hundreds of thousands more were displaced, while southern cities and religious shrines were left in ruins. Even two decades later, Maliki was still calling the American decision to let Hussein smash the uprising "a conspiracy."

In the aftermath of the uprising, the Dawa Party dispatched Maliki to Saudi Arabia to visit the thousands of Iraqi Shiite fighters who escaped. Rather than being warmly welcomed, the Shiite Iraqis were penned up in spartan desert refugee camps, viewed with hostility in Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia—a mute testament to the wreckage of Iraq's Shiite resistance. Maliki met the refugees, listened to their stories from the rebellion, and asked for news of relatives from his village Janaga. In his years as an outlaw, the family had burned all their old photos of Maliki, afraid the security forces might find them. When Maliki's nephew, Majid, first saw his uncle in the camp, he had no idea who Maliki was. His mother never mentioned him. It was as if Maliki had never lived. Majid cried and told his long-lost uncle how the men in Janaga had risen up and fought until Iraqi tanks assaulted the region. Maliki answered coolly. "You should be patient," he said. "What is in front of you will be much more difficult, so be patient."

By 1991, Maliki had settled in Damascus running the party's office. Whenever he feared he was slighted or in danger of slipping into obscurity in Syria, Maliki asserted himself in public. He insisted on paying a condolence call to Syrian President Hafez al-Assad when his son died in a car crash, although he had not been invited. Still, Maliki carried a gun for self-defense, as he grew more alarmed about assassination plots with a thaw in Syria-Iraq relations. Years later, angered by Damascus for its support of armed Sunni groups, he would say darkly to a Western diplomat: "Boy, I know the Syrians, and believe me, they are sons of bitches to the last man. We are going to have to deal with them. They need to remember that we know how to blow things up in other people's cities too."

"I KNOW THE SYRIANS, AND BELIEVE ME, THEY ARE SONS OF BITCHES TO THE LAST MAN. WE ARE GOING TO HAVE TO DEAL WITH THEM."

THE HOMECOMING: APRIL 2003

Maliki returned to Baghdad in a taxi

US ARMY

without fanfare, spending his first night in an abandoned house with no electricity or water. He and his two companions begged food from some young men. In the morning, the three drafted a party statement and phoned fellow Dawa members, who waited in Kurdistan for news. They appeared solitary figures, compared with exile leaders favored by the West and Iran, like Ahmad Chalabi and the Hakim entourage, who entered the capital with armed supporters and long lines of vehicles. Not far from where Maliki stayed in Baghdad's Sadr City, a new generation of Shiite activists were rallying around Muqtada Sadr, the son of a slain cousin of the late Mohammed Baqr Sadr. Dawa was a voice of the past, recalled with nostalgia but lacking relevance.

Maliki waited just a day before racing south to his native village he had dreamed of for the last 23 years, but on arrival, he recognized nothing. His childhood home was in ruins, an abandoned yellow brick building and courtyard, with trash scattered across the property. Maliki's obsession with what the Baath had done to his family and village quickly defined him. He opened a new Dawa Party office on Hindaya's main street, sandwiched in a row of shops. One of his first public acts was to hold a symbolic funeral for local Dawa members killed by the Baath Party. He didn't recognize some of the people who attended. "I was asking: Who is this? I was told he is from intelligence, this is a Baathist," Maliki recalled. "I told myself, those people should feel shy

after what they did to us." At the end of the service, Maliki addressed the strangers: "Oh, Baathists. Listen to me. Don't say that we surprised you. We have the right to seek revenge for Sadr. Our eyes will not shut until we retaliate." Soon after, some Baathists were killed in Hindaya.In Maliki's mind, it was the natural order. "Those who didn't harm anyone are still working in the area," he explained. "People differentiate between the good and the bad."

One hated figure who paid the price was the police officer, Ahmed Najat, who had terrorized Hindaya in 1979 on the hunt for Dawa members and had barely missed detaining Maliki. In the summer of 2003, masked men picked up Najat in Baghdad, put him in a car, and brought him to Hindaya, where gunmen executed him on the street. Those who knew Maliki from the 1970s were shocked at his change. A handsome man with light hair and tan skin had morphed into a bespectacled politician with thinning black hair and a darker complexion.

RISE TO POWER: 2003-2006

Maliki spent his early days in Baghdad working in cramped Dawa and government offices. The country's national leaders hobnobbed with the West and Iran and basked in the public spotlight. Maliki served a tier below—executing their plans, a faithful emissary and troubleshooter. He belonged to a stable of Dawa men who insinuated themselves into the country's weak institutions. The party tapped him for the new de-Baathification board, which would earn notoriety for its secretive meetings, where he, Ahmed Chalabi, and other Shiite hardliners approved the dismissal of thousands of suspected Baathists from ministries.

When the country's first election took place in January 2005, the Hakims and the ascendant Sadrist movement, both with their potent militias, viewed Dawa as their weak cousin. Maliki shuttled through the halls of government on Dawa's behalf, with lists of names and negotiating points for positions in the first elected-government. He was kept waiting in political figures' reception rooms, in an implicit reminder of his lower place in the pecking order of Iraqi politics. Ibrahim Jafaari, a doctor who had served as Dawa's spokesman in London, desperately wanted to be premier, and the rival parties saw the advantage to letting him serve ahead of elections for a four-year government in less than eight months.

During Jafaari's brief time in office, Maliki often led the political and administrative battles against the Sunnis and Baathists. He always sat in the front row of parliament. When he stood to speak, everyone listened. He clashed with Sunni politicians on the country's constitutional committee over the right of former Baathists to work in the ministries and security forces. As head of the parliament's security committee, he vowed to hunt down Baathists in the army and police. Bloodshed reached epic heights after the al-Qaida bombing of a Shiite shrine in Samarra in February 2006. In its aftermath, Shiite militias scoured Baghdad to kill Sunnis, and Jafaari became a scapegoat for the chaos.

FOR MALIKI, THE KILLINGS AND EXCESSES OF THE SHIITES PALED BEFORE THE FIRST ENEMY—AL-QAIDA AND THE BAATH.

Iraq had held elections in December for a four-year government, and Jafaari

secured enough backing among the Shiite parties for a second full term. But the Americans made clear they would reject another four years of Jafaari, especially after Samarra. It was apparent, however, that Dawa and the Sadrists would only abandon Jafaari if another Dawa member replaced him. During a four-month stalemate, Maliki emerged as a dark horse candidate. The Americans played the role of kingmaker. U.S. Ambassador Zalamay Khalilzad interviewed the candidates, and his staff drew spreadsheets charting candidates' positions. On Maliki's interview day, he appeared uncomfortable. He sat with Khalilzad and refused the customary offer of tea that other candidates would take. A servant brought water, and Maliki left it untouched. The message was implicit, according to those who were there. Maliki did not intend to be the Americans' puppet.

Khalilzad thought whoever was prime minister would be sectarian, but at least Maliki would chart a Shiite Iraqi direction, not an Iranian one. Of course, Maliki had clear question marks. A few Sunni political figures warned the embassy that Maliki had been an aggressive proponent among Shiite leaders for the assassination squads carrying out hits against Sunnis. Maliki's dossier, however, was inconclusive: rife with allegations, but lacking credible evidence. The United States considered Maliki the best worst option.

IN POWER: 2006-PRESENT

Coming to office, Maliki knew to bring along those who were loyal to him—linked to him by blood and tribe, exile, or the bonds of the Dawa Party and its history of martyrdom. His son, Ahmed, served as an assistant in the office of chief of staff. Over time, he would take on more responsibilities, including supervising his father's security. Years later, Ahmed would become arguably the most powerful force in his office, with the ability to commandeer military units. Trusted friends like Abu Mujahid, a squat, tubby man who drove Maliki around during his Damascus days had come back from his new life as a butcher in Australia. Now he served as protocol secretary, controlling access to Maliki, while running informant networks that collected intelligence for his friend. Men from the ranks of Dawa served as his enforcers and represented the party's voice. Maliki's first chief of staff, Tareq Abdullah, considered as ruthless as Maliki, would take on any task.

Then there were the professional Dawa security men. Farouq Arraji, a colonel in Hussein's army and Dawa member who secretly joined the party in 1963, headed Maliki's office as commander in chief, establishing direct oversight of the defense and interior ministries that officials resented. Similarly, Abu Ali Basri, 12 years younger than Maliki, who earned enough of the prime minister's trust to run his special intelligence office, boasted credentials as the son of a Dawa Party member executed by Hussein. Basri's activities, cloaked in mystery, inspired fear among Maliki's enemies. A U.S. intelligence report claimed, "derogatory information about Ali Basri includes operating secret prisons, torturing, and threatening detainees." Maliki imposed his own direct hand on security matters, as if he were running underground cells against Saddam's regime. His office called commanders in the field and angered the Americans by giving units direct orders. Maliki seldom slept and spent hours around the clock monitoring troop operations from his office.

For Maliki, the killings and excesses of the Shiites paled before the first enemy—

al-Qaida and the Baath. After President George W. Bush sent his surge troops in early 2007, the Americans were frustrated by Maliki's reluctance to go after the Shiite militias. Maliki prevented major operations in Shiite militia strongholds, and the Iraqi police and army provided cover for death squads, some of whom killed U.S. soldiers. A debate raged privately inside Shiite political circles about how far they could go in the name of defending their sect. In meetings, Maliki accused General David Petraeus of allowing his troops to kill innocent Shiites, and the American commander raised his voice rebutting the allegations, while Maliki, repeated the charges and avoided the general's eyes.

One of the pair's biggest sources of tension was the emergence of Sunni insurgents, known as the Awakening movement, who joined with the Americans in 2007 to fight al-Qaida. Maliki initially opposed the groups, seeing the fighters as vehicles for Hussein loyalists to overthrow his government. But the fighters, protected by the U.S. military, helped reduce violence, and Maliki reluctantly offered them positions in the security forces and ministries.

Ever the strategist, Maliki insisted the Americans hand over the fighters' full files to the prime minister's reconciliation committee and offered low level posts to ordinary Awakening members. The prime minister understood symbolism. By virtue of his post, he—not the American military or Sunni fighters—received the credit for the dramatic drop in violence. Maliki's security forces targeted many of the movement's leaders for arrest, several of whom now waste away in jail.

Maliki was left alone, the man who held Iraq together. Maliki saw himself as a nationalist and patriot, an impulse inherited from his grandfather. As al-Qaida suffered defeats, he viewed the Shiite militias, attached to Sadr, who had defended their communities against al-Qaida, as a threat to his ambitions.

In March 2008, Maliki surprised the Americans by announcing his own military offensive against the Sadrists in the lawless southern city of Basra, the main port for Iraq's oil exports. His relationship had already soured with his onetime allies, and now Maliki felt strong enough to attack. The Americans urged him to wait, saying they needed six months, but taking a page from his past as an underground Dawa commander, he flew to the city and launched his war. His headquarters was pounded with rockets and mortars. U.S. air strikes decimated the ranks of the Mahdi Army, the military backbone of the Sadrists. A formal ceasefire was brokered. But it didn't matter how much Maliki relied on the Americans or Iranians to end the fighting. To the public, he stood triumphant.

MALIKI DID NOT BELIEVE IN MEETING ANYONE HALF WAY. INSTEAD, HE WANTED TO PUSH OTHERS TO THEIR BREAKING POINTS.

If Maliki had been perceived as weak and beholden to his Shiite rivals, he now towered above them. Iraqis wanted strength, and Maliki radiated it. This was the high point of Maliki's rule. His office used cash to woo Sunni and Shiite tribal leaders alike. Ordinary Iraqis saw him as someone willing to stand up to anyone. "Our triumph [in Basra] gave credit to the rule of law," he told me in a 2010 interview. At the same time, the prime minister still believed in the currency of fear. Bred in a world of conspiracy and shaped

by authoritarian figures who chased him from Iraq, he understood that being labeled weak would leave him vulnerable to enemies of all stripes. Maliki intimidated his rivals with the creation of his own special brigade and security detention centers that existed outside of any normal chain of command. Police who had been involved in death squad killings in 2005 and 2006 worked in the new jails attached to Maliki's office. His special forces initiated mass arrests in Sunni communities in Mosul, locking up the men in an undeclared jail in Baghdad, where detainees were raped and tortured. Human rights officials, who Maliki had supported to expose abuses in the police and army, soon found themselves threatened with arrest for looking into Maliki's own special security apparatus. The judiciary was twisted to his purposes. He may have longed for a modern state, but he would not risk anything that lessened his authority.

HIS DECADES OF HUMILIATION SET HIM ON THE PATH OF RUNNING A FALTERING AUTOCRATIC STATE IMMERSED IN PERPETUAL WAR.

As elections approached in 2010, Maliki juggled his contradictory impulses. He remained a staunch Shiite Islamist, vigilant to maintain his sect's grip on power. At the same time, Maliki's grandest gesture was to defy the other Shiite religious parties to pursue his own vision of a bloc, which included Sunnis, liberals, and secular-minded figures. Maliki and his advisers discounted the possibility that the Shiite religious vote could splinter between Maliki and his Islamist rivals. They also underestimated the popularity of former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, a secular Shiite, who aimed to inhabit the same nationalist space as Maliki.

When the March 2010 election ended, Maliki had won two fewer parliament seats than Allawi, but the prime minister refused to accept his loss. Instead, Maliki warned of a plot by Baathists, foreign powers, and terrorists to appeal to Iraq's Shiite majority. He extracted a legal ruling that whoever had the biggest coalition in parliament, even without the highest popular vote, could form a government. He lobbied and bullied political figures—both threatening arrest and tempting them with lucrative jobs and patronage. Unlike his rivals, nothing was beneath him. He had spent too much time doing their errands as a party functionary. Now, he would use his skills to defeat them. A future out of office would mean death or exile. He despised Iran and the Sadrist movement but made arrangements with both. When the government was seated nine months later, Maliki remained prime minister and had ceded little real power, keeping control of the state security apparatus and the cabinet. Indeed, Maliki acted as if the American era was already gone and went after coalition partners in his government, either reneging on power-sharing deals or seeking their arrest. He struck his opponents before they could move against him. Barely a day after the last American soldiers left Iraq at the end of 2011, he obtained an arrest warrant for Iraq's Sunni vice president, who fled the country. No move promised the creation of durable institutions all groups could trust. Similarly, in the face of regional upheaval, he demonstrated support for Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, a man he blamed for suicide bombings in Iraq. Yet he dreaded Iraq's Sunni

neighbors more—especially Turkey and the giant Saudi Arabia—and saw Assad and his Iranian allies as the lesser evil.

Maliki did not believe in meeting anyone half way. Instead, he wanted to push others to their breaking points. His confrontational tactics had caused him to be loathed as he created a new military command in the fall of 2012 to stare down the Kurds over the contested northern territories. Maliki's aggressiveness also alienated Sunnis, who rose up in anger this winter with weeks of protests after he arrested the guards of his Sunni deputy prime minister, Rafaa Issawi. But Maliki bet he could push the sides to exhaustion and once more emerge improbably triumphant.

His aspirations for a prosperous, modern Iraq were sincere but hobbled by his own traumatic memories of persecution as a religious Shiite. His ruthless drive to control a population, which he saw as restive, sabotaged him.

A BROADER LESSON

Maliki's experiences are especially relevant for today's Middle East: in Egypt and Tunisia, where Islamist parties, long hidden in the shadows, similar to those that nourished the Dawa, are striving to shed authoritarian instincts and make the transition to mainstream democratic politics; in Libya, where regional militias, mindful of recent history, still do not trust one another enough to disarm; and in Syria, which is currently roiled by bloodshed among its warring ethnic and religious groups that rival the darkest moments in Iraq.

Maliki is neither pro-American nor pro-Iranian. He will take what he can from whomever he can. He will adapt ideologies as much from expediency as belief. When he heeds the Iranians, his responsiveness stems from his own interests and an instinct for survival. If he turns a blind eye to Iranians traversing his air space to arm the Syrian regime, it is a calculation he makes based on his own national concerns. It doesn't make him Iran's servant, just as taking American weapons doesn't make him America's man.

His ultimate destiny, he believed, was one where he stayed alive, dreaming of a grander, glorious future for himself, his nation, and its leadership role throughout the region. The decisions to attract or discard allies—whether Iranian, American, or Shiite—were always undertaken to further this calculus.

Maliki should be judged based upon the realities of Iraq, not America's or Iran's interests. This does not mean blindly and fatalistically to accept his behavior or inclination toward authoritarianism. Excesses by Maliki that violate principles of human rights and democracy should be confronted pragmatically. The prime minister should not be allowed simply to indulge his worst impulses, yet still receive a blank check from the United States for military weapons. There is a limit to what any nation can do to affect another. It is arrogant to think the West can shape Iraq's destiny or Maliki's behavior, but neither does the United States have to enable Iraq's slow downward spiral. At this point, the United States has likely ceded most of its influence in Iraq through inertia and lack of vision, but the fading relationship still provides an opening to encourage the country's leaders to turn away from their darker impulses and pursue genuine institution building. The alternative risks the demise of the Iraqi state and years of bloody civil war.

It is a mistake to see Maliki or Mohammed Morsi in Egypt or any of the

ascendant new leaders in the Middle East as builders or wreckers of new democracies. Maliki was a defender of Iraq, the country's Shiite population, and himself, the way his predecessors had been defenders of their own amendable ideologies. His experiences were what allowed him to rise in the turbulence of post-Saddam Iraq, but his decades of humiliation set him on the path of running a faltering autocratic state immersed in perpetual war.

In Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia, it may prove tempting to color the country's new leaders as democrats when they are not, or to accept their potentially dictatorial tendencies as the natural order. Maliki, the first elected Arab Islamist leader, shaped in the shadows, exemplifies all the challenges of the new breed. He is not bound to authoritarian rule, but his history leads him in that direction. Since taking office in 2006, amid dismal hopes, he has both disappointed and exceeded expectations. There is a fundamental tension among the new Islamists, whether from Maliki's Dawa Party or the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or their counterparts in Tunis—on how to create a society living in harmony with Islamic values. How much of this can be imposed, and how much should be a free choice made by the society, remains an open, but crucial, question. Iraq under Maliki has seen the slow creeping tide of religious values imposed with raids on alcohol shops and nightclubs. Sudden whispers that the government will shut down arts colleges and separate male and female students at university are swiftly dismissed—perhaps planted by the state to see how far it can go. Intimidation and pressure by the state has also been apparent in Egypt since its revolution, as Islamist lawyers bring lawsuits against artists they consider blasphemous. In Tunis, radical Salafis are given tacit freedom to physically attack bars, actors, and political opponents. It is still a riddle for the Arab world's now ruling Islamists leaders—how to bring their societies into harmony with their religious values. But Maliki and his counterparts all have similar aspirations for their nations. They want to establish modern, vibrant states in accordance with Islam.

What has always guided Maliki is a wish to be seen as a great leader of Iraq. When he left his village full time for Baghdad in the early days after Hussein's fall, some warned him that he would be swallowed by the state. His answer: You can forget your political party, but never your own people. It is this wish to be true to his people that could still redeem him. And it is this wish that could redeem the Arab world's post-revolution leaders as they juggle their nations' ghosts and their own demons.

This article is based on trips the authors made to Maliki's village; a 2010 interview one of the authors conducted with the prime minister; state television interviews given by Maliki; and interviews the authors conducted with relatives and friends of Maliki, members of the Dawa Party, other Iraqi political figures, U.S. military officers, and current and former U.S. officials. ●