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## *Meeting Haider al-Abadi, the Once, and Perhaps Future, Prime Minister of Iraq*

There are some Middle East politicians that have always reminded me of animals. Assad senior was always the ruthless Lion of Damascus. Even the Egyptians called Hosni Mubarak “La Vache Qui Rit” from the famous French cheese of the grinning cow.

But it took a while before Haider al-Abadi could secure a place in my Aesop’s fables. Iraq’s previous prime minister – and quite possibly its next – came bounding from his chair, tubby, cheerful and pretty over-confident, I thought. And then I got it: he’s the family cat who has just opened the canary’s cage and eaten it – and he doesn’t care the slightest what anyone thinks about that.

The canary is Isis or Barack Obama, or Donald Trump or Mohammed bin Salman – or any Iraqi politician. It’s oil and the economy and, I fear, it’s also Mosul.

An imperial pussycat, perhaps, but Abadi has sharp claws and evidently thinks he will return to power when his successor, Adil Abdul-Mahdi, fails. Not a cruel cat, perhaps, but a pitiless one.

So here he is, presciently talking to me shortly before Isis leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi reappeared on his grim videotape to threaten the world. “Daesh finished? As a state yes, they cannot go back to that. But not as a terrorist organisation... I have to give you a warning. They are badly wounded – and they realise their dream has gone. So they will do whatever it takes to restore it. I think they are looking for some spectacular operations here or there. They are planning very hard.... The other thing is that we have not accounted for all of their leadership. We don’t know where some of their leaders are.

That's another danger. My worry as an Iraqi is that many of these leaders are Iraqis. So we have to be very, very vigilant.”

Ouch. Well, Abadi sure got that one right.

He was Iraqi prime minister for just over four years, from 2014 to 2018, which straddled the Obama-Trump transition. Realising, of course, that he won't have to deal with Obama again but may very well have to go on talking to Trump, Obama gets a lot of stick but Trump not much at all. And the whole story, predictably, still embraces Isis.

“Generally the US administration had this direction to fight Isis, that ‘Iraq must be held together’. But how much would they support us? If you remember, back in 2015, I received a lot of promises, including from President Obama that he would ‘stand with us in fighting Isis’. I made this public. I said that fighting on the ground was painful but this US support had not materialised. I said that it is very slow while we are facing this terrorist organisation. I said this is endangering the war. Mr Obama wasn't happy about that. [He said] it was used by Republicans against him in Congress. But I told him: ‘I'm sorry. I had to do this. I know how it works in the US and the rest of Europe – and I know that in order to force you to give more support to our efforts on the ground that I had to go public. I'm sorry I've embarrassed you but we are sacrificing our citizens there [in Iraq]. We need all the support possible’.”

Abadi even has a Manchester accent, courtesy of his Manchester University PhD in electrical engineering; sometimes you can hear the previously exiled Iraqi in Britain, talking business rather than politics. But there is an intriguing story about the US military and Trump, which will no doubt be repeated in Abadi's proposed memoirs. “I think I can claim that I used [the Trump] transition to the benefit of Iraq. You see the [US] military wanted to support us – so I immediately used this fact. I remember some US generals were telling me: ‘Sir, we have commanders who don't even meet the new president’. I was communicating with Mr Trump more than they [US commanders] communicated with him.”

This sounds all too true. Abadi continues his story. “So I used this – but not in a bad way. Sometimes I would say: ‘If you [the generals] want me to talk to the top man, I will,’ and they said: ‘No, no, no – we'll do it’.... [Trump] surprised me. I have to tell you, he's a very good listener, as far as I can tell from my angle. He listens and he changes his mind. You remember when he put seven Muslim countries on the [US] no-entry list?

Well, everybody in the US administration told me that Trump will not change his mind. They said they knew it was bad to put Iraq on the list, but that he's not a guy to change his mind. So I talked to him directly and I explained to him [about Iraq's position], and he said: 'I'm sorry. I didn't know this – I'll look into it. I'll remove Iraq [from the list].' And he did."

When Trump announced he would withdraw troops from Syria in 2018, Abadi says he was forced to call him at once. "I said: 'Well, this is up to you, but I warn you that Isis is still on the eastern side of Syria, over very large areas, and they are very dangerous. We should stay focused on this until we finish them off.'

"What he had been saying was logical to him: 'What's in it for us?' He was saying: 'It is costing me so much in Syria – 2,000 personnel in Syria. This is not my problem, it is a problem of Russia together with Iran – let them solve it.'"

When Trump rashly talked of America's "base in Iraq" from which the US could "look into Iran", he was "misinformed", according to Abadi. "It is against the Iraqi constitution to use Iraqi territory against a neighbouring country."

Abadi has met Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman many times and talked through the original and deeply flawed western view: that he was a pragmatist, and had let women drive against the wishes of the establishment.

Then, quite remarkably, Abadi says the following: "But on the other issues like human rights, his foreign policy, the policy on Yemen, the treatment of [kidnapped Lebanese prime minister] Saad Hariri, at the end Khashoggi, I think these are very dangerous trends. Very dangerous. I don't intervene in the affairs of other countries but that guy [Mohammed bin Salman] had a very bright future ahead of him. I say 'had'. Now I'm not sure. You see, to become a leader, you need all the support of the west and the US. You agree? Especially with Saudi Arabia. Will that support be forthcoming now, do you think, without checks and balances? This operation in Istanbul, in the consulate, it's very alarming. I mean this guy [Jamal Khashoggi] was not in the opposition. He was very conciliatory. I think this is a huge misjudgement. If it wasn't Trump [as US president], we would see things differently."

Abadi remembers arguing with Obama about the Saudi war in Yemen. Why was he supporting this war, he asked. "'Well,' Obama said, 'I'm not supporting the war, but I went there to control the Saudis, [so that they should] not be excessive.' [But] they have

been very excessive. Look at the damage in Yemen. It's huge... As a leader of the region, I see it as responsible to do something about it, including Syria."

Terrorism, terrorism, terrorism. It has begun to pop up in the Abadi world view almost as often as in an American president's speeches. And Mosul looms rather too large. There was an unhappy Abadi peroration on the attempt he had made to discover how many civilian casualties there had been in the city. He had been told 1,400 had been killed in 2017, but then found that these included "[only] about six women and four children". Later, he would say: "I know there were some buildings which were bombed and there were families inside them... There were buildings that were hit by mistake."

There is much talk of rebuilding Mosul and the importance of allowing the inhabitants to repair their own homes, once bombs had been cleared, and of the problems of multiple ownership of old buildings. He also recalls how he had been anxious to stop Isis from freeing their surrounded fighters in Mosul because Isis had been telling their men that they could escape if they carried on shooting. "We would be forced to negotiate with the terrorists to evacuate them. That was their plan. And of course there was an attempt by Isis to move from Tal Afar. They made a very smart move, but I think we killed that plan. It was dangerous. We discovered it... I think we managed to eliminate them."

And so the former – and next? – prime minister of Iraq expresses his worry that economic stability, reunification of the country and the destruction of Isis (his achievements, of course) was "like a ball that's running and they [the present government of Abdul-Mahdi] have to act to achieve momentum".

And if they do not? Oh yes, I can see that Abadi will be ready to step into Abdul-Mahdi's shoes to claim victory over Isis all over again – and teach the American president how to run his Middle East policies, if he really has any.

I wouldn't want to be Abadi, I thought. But I certainly wouldn't want to be the canary.

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