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5 on 45:

On Iraqi Prime Minister al-Abadi's visit

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PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network: analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

POLLACK: Hi, this is Ken Pollack. I am a senior fellow here at the Brookings Institution. I concentrate on the Middle East; in particular, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and the other nations of the Arabian Peninsula. I'm here to talk a little bit about Prime Minister Abadi of Iraq's visit to Washington this week. It's an important visit for Prime Minister Abadi. Of course, Abadi came to power after ISIS had conquered over a fifth of Iraqi territory, so he came to power in the midst of a crisis. Now, fast forward three years and the war against ISIS is starting to wrap up. The battle for Mosul is still raging, but it seems likely that it will be over within a matter of months, perhaps even a matter of weeks. But for Abadi, the Mosul battle is, in many ways, only the beginning. As everyone has made clear, as various experts and government officials on all sides have regularly intoned, and absolutely correctly, defeating ISIS is going to require a lot more than just military victory, and in particular it's going to require a lot more than just liberating Mosul.

First of all, there's still some military work that will need to be done. After Mosul, there are still a few other places in Iraq that are controlled by ISIS – the towns of Hawija and Tal Afar, some other towns in the Euphrates Valley – these all need to be liberated, and it'll probably take another six to twelve months of effort, and Abadi wants to make sure that the U.S. is going to stick around to finish the job. He's probably concerned that the U.S. will liberate Mosul, evict ISIS from the biggest city – the second biggest city in Iraq, the biggest one that they held – and that we might leave, and that we might decide

that this is mission accomplished and head home. Obviously, he doesn't want that to happen.

But even more important than the military victory is what happens next, and he wants to know whether the U.S. is going to be willing to stick around, in both a literal and a metaphorical sense, to help Iraq with the reconstruction, to help Iraq with the political and economic and social ramifications of both ISIS's prolonged occupation of Northern Iraq and also the civil war that led to their presence in Iraq in the first place. All of that desperately needs to be dealt with, and Abadi needs help to do it. He needs help in all aspects of reconstruction, he needs help repairing the fissures between the Sunni Arab and Shia Arab populations. He needs help mediating his relationship with the Kurdish population. He needs help redeveloping Iraq's infrastructure, rebuilding the towns devastated by ISIS, and also fixing the government services that frankly haven't worked since long before Saddam Hussein fell.

All of this is very important for Abadi, for a variety of reasons. First of all, Abadi himself is facing a very significant challenge from Iran and its various allies and proxies in Iraq. While Abadi is Shia and he is an Islamist, he has always been very wary of the Iranians, looking to keep them out of Iraqi politics as much possible, and needs American assistance to do so. The more help he's got from the U.S., the more freedom of action that he's going to have vis-à-vis Iran, and that's important. It's important in part because we've now got all of these militias running around Iraq. After the ISIS invasion the Iraqis created these, Ayatollah Sistani called them into being, they've since been legalized, and they're now a very formidable military force inside of Iraq. And Abadi is trying desperately to get a hold of these militias and prevent them from becoming a new

Iraqi Revolutionary Guard: a separate military, one that potentially may take its orders from Tehran rather than Baghdad. He needs American help for that.

In addition, and kind of all focusing all the other points on this, Abadi's going to be facing national elections in 2018, and he's more or less going to run on two key platforms: first, militarily liberating the country from ISIS; and second, getting Iraq's dysfunctional government and its economy going again. He's got to finish off the job against ISIS, and that requires American help, and he's going to really start the job of reviving Iraq's economy and sorting out its sclerotic bureaucracy. And again, he desperately needs American help, both in terms of expertise, diplomatic support, and actual financial assistance, whether it be from the United States, our coalition partners, or international financial organization.

So the trip to the United States was a critical one for Abadi. He needs help on all of these different scores, only the United States can provide him with this help, and I think it's very clear that he wanted to come here – and come here early – to establish a good relationship with the Trump administration, find out what he can expect from them, and hopefully shape their policy toward Iraq going forward. It's something that Iraqis have learned through hard experience: that if you don't get to the United States and help us to think about our Iraq policy, we'll come up with it on our own, and that could be very problematic for Iraq and its Prime Minister.

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