

Politics and Security in Iraq: Challenges and Opportunities

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The government of Iraq, led by Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, faces a number of complex, interconnected problems and challenges, both political and security-related, domestic and foreign. Confronting these issues and finding solutions for them is crucial, as failure to deal with them will only allow them to mount, in addition to causing broader and deeper complications in the political landscape which could lead to the breakdown and collapse of the al-Kadhimi government. This study discusses the most important of these problems and challenges and recommends appropriate solutions.

Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan

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1

Introduction

Al-Kadhimi, who served as the director of the Iraqi National Intelligence Service since 2016, came to prominence as a compromise candidate who was acceptable to the political blocs, in addition to enjoying the support of the United States and being welcomed by Iran. On 7 May, the Iraqi Parliament gave his cabinet and government program a vote of confidence. This occurred in the midst of a political crisis that had lasted more than seven months since the outbreak of popular protests on 1 November 2019. The protests drew the support of the marja'iyya (senior Shi'ite clergy) in Najaf, forcing former prime minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi to submit his resignation in November 2019. Among the main issues driving the protests were: rampant corruption in branches of the state, poor government performance, mounting errors without real solutions, and regional and international interventions in Iraq, which turned the country into an arena for settling scores.

The fundamental challenge facing the new Iraqi government is the extent to which it seeks to change the political status quo – which is precisely what the political elites are working vigorously to preserve. This has resulted in opposing visions which are bound for collision

sooner or later. The al-Kadhimi administration's effort is impeded by numerous challenges which the executive authority must confront, including the following:

- The narrow timeframe for solving Iraq's crises and problems
- The scope of the governmental task of holding early elections
- The government's lack of effective tools, due to both domestic and foreign pressure exerted upon it
- The Iraqi government's lack of a supportive parliamentary bloc to rely on while pursuing reforms

The pursuit of reforms requires substantial, painful sacrifices. However, the nation's health and economic crises have left popular forces both unprepared and unable to make such sacrifices, which strips the government of the necessary popular support. In light of this complex situation, will the new Iraqi government be able to implement its reforms without a domestic confrontation? Will it be able to keep Iraq neutral in the US-Iran conflict? And does it have the time and the tools to find alternative courses of action and solutions?

2

Entrenched Problems

The government of Iraq, led by Prime Minister al-Kadhimi, faces a number of complex and interconnected problems and challenges, both political and security-related, foreign and domestic. Confronting these issues and finding solutions for them is crucial, as failure to deal with them will only allow them to mount. If these issues go unsolved, it would further complicate the political landscape and might lead to the breakdown and collapse of the al-Kadhimi government. With this in mind, it is possible to identify the main problems.

2.1 Clientelist-Confessionalism

The current government came into existence in the midst of systemic problems and upheaval in both foreign and domestic affairs. Among the main problems is confessionalism, which emerged as part of a government where power is divided along ethno-sectarian lines, as well as through mutual understanding between ruling elites, which led them to monopolize power. Consequently, the government became subject to these very actors, moving more towards an autocratic system than a democratic one, despite the democratic principles on which it was founded. This was accompanied by an

interdependent relationship between patrons and clients—part of the equation of clientelist corruption—seen in the ongoing role of mutual favors on the basis of cronyism, subservience, and dependency. Thus, a system of clientelism was erected on the basis of a hierarchy of political and financial clout, *quid pro quo*s in the interest of the powerful and influential, and exploitation of the nation's resources for personal and partisan favors. Beneficiaries of this system are able to mobilize their supporters to counter any threat to their position, which impedes state institutions' ability to function in an impartial, professional manner and curb inconsistent and unequal treatment.

Clientelist-confessionalism manifests not only in the executive branch, but also in the performance of the legislature, leading to the parliament's disregard for the separation of powers and interference in the functions of the executive branch. Under the notion of confessionalism, maximum pressure is applied to the executive authority for the benefit of partisan or sectarian interests, and the parliament has ceased to be able to carry out its proper role of oversight over the functioning of

the Iraqi government. The result is overlapping interests between the two branches, particularly as regards accountability, which is subject to mutual understandings between the political forces or simple convergence of interests, usually at the expense of the general public. No-confidence votes against ministers are merely a demonstration of intersecting interests between blocs, rather than any issue of paramount national interest.¹ This situation also led to Parliament passing laws which contradicted, or were at least inconsistent with, the Iraqi constitution, such as the budget law and the share it allocates to Kurdistan. Despite the Constitution's stipulation that revenues be distributed and that oil and gas belong to all Iraqis, Kurdistan controls oil revenues at the federal government's expense, to such a degree that it only hands over 250,000 barrels per day to the federal government.

Interference and confessionism affect the judicial branch as well. One public opinion survey shows that more than 58% of people believe that the judiciary is not independent, that it is subject to pressure and political interference, and that there are deliberate obstructions of the role of the public prosecution. Furthermore, its jurisdiction overlaps with that of other bodies such as the

Commission of Integrity.² Disagreements have arisen between the Supreme Judicial Council of Iraq and the Federal Supreme Court of Iraq regarding their respective powers and their places within the Iraqi judicial system. The resultant dilemmas, conflicts of interest, and legal disputes have impacted the legal status of both bodies, as there are numerous loopholes in the constitutional and legal regulation concerning the judicial branch's makeup.³ This has weakened the law and caused citizens to lose faith in it (or at least shaken their trust), leading them to resort to narrow sub-identities such as tribe to provide them protection.

Clientelist-confessionism is not limited to the domestic level, but has become a foreign affairs issue as well. Indeed, successive governments have only risen to power in light of regional and international confessionism, any breach of which would impact political stability. At the forefront of this phenomenon are US and Iranian interventions and their conflicts and consensus-building efforts in the Iraqi arena. The flaws in the political system are structural, rather than stemming from individuals, and thus any change that fails to address these flaws is meaningless and may even exacerbate the problem.

¹ Governance Center for Public Policies (2020): "National Index for Democratic Transformation in Iraq 2018 - 2019, Stagnant Transition", Baghdad: Al-Hasheme Publishing, 54.

² Governance Center for Public Policies (2018): "Governance Indicator of Democratic Transformation in Iraq 2017 - 2018 Faltering democracy", Baghdad: Al-Hasheme Publishing, 71.

³ Nabeel Mahdi Zowein and Haider Mohammed Hassan (2020): "The Truth between Supervision and Independence: A Study of the Dilemma between the Supreme Judicial Council and the Federal Supreme Court", Rewaq Baghdad Center for Public Policy, 3 April, (<https://bit.ly/2BDBEc3>)

2.2 Compound Crises

The formation of the Iraqi government was accompanied by compound political, public health, and economic crises. Since each crisis is connected with the other two, all must be confronted at once. But does the government have the ability to do so, given limited means and the lack of a domestic consensus?

At the forefront of these crises are the protests which erupted in early October 2019. On a fundamental level, they were driven by social and economic demands, violations of sovereignty, public outrage at poor governance, and the public's rejection of rampant corruption in state institutions, which had turned them into fiefdoms for the ruling elites.⁴ By the measure of the 2018 Corruption Perceptions Index, Iraq achieved a score of 18 out of 100 and came in 168th place out of the 180 countries included in the ranking.⁵ Unemployment and poverty are widespread among youth, reaching 27.5% and 20.5% respectively in 2018.⁶ On top of this is a health crisis resulting from the inadequate response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has lessened but not completely stopped the protests. Daily cases have risen noticeably, especially since the start of June, surpassing one thousand cases per day. According to the latest Ministry

of Health figures, by 26 June the total case count had reached 41,193 with 1,559 deaths.⁷ With the overcrowding of hospitals and the government resorting to regional quarantines, the health sector has begun to suffer due to a shortage of funds and poor quality of service. This is heading towards a national state of emergency where the government will be administratively impotent and devoid of political will. If the administration's response is ineffective, then it will almost certainly face popular outrage at some stage in the future. Political forces and armed factions opposed to al-Kadhimi may exploit this to build opposition and overthrow him.

Alongside these two crises there is a severe economic crisis. In January and February 2020, oil revenues reached nearly \$6 billion USD per month, only to drop by 80% in April and May to 1.5 billion dollars per month due to the collapse of oil prices and the reduction of Iraq's market share of oil exports in accordance with the OPEC+ agreement.⁸ In a rentier state that is more than 90% reliant on oil revenues, a crucial question presents itself as to whether the government will be able to meet its financial obligations, pay the salaries of civil servants, and provide essential services.

⁴ Hasan, Harith (2020): "A Vehicle for Revolution", Carnegie Middle East Center, 2 March, (<https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/81226>)

⁵ https://www.transparency.org/files/content/pages/2018_CPI_FullResults.zip

⁶ Republic of Iraq, Ministry of Planning, Central Organization for Statistics: Monitor Survey and Assessment of Poverty in Iraq 2018.

⁷ <https://baghdadtoday.news/FlightStats>

⁸ "The Al-Kadhimi Administration in Iraq: Challenges and Opportunities for Success", Emirates Policy Center, 27 May 2020, (<https://bit.ly/2AqjHw5>)

This situation has impacted the government's ability to address the protestors' demands and fulfill its promises to them. It has also raised doubts about the government's ability to hold accountable the groups which, according to the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, are accused of killing more than 490 protestors.⁹ It remains to be seen whether the government will reveal the fate of the activists and journalists who were arrested months ago, whether it can handle holding early elections, and whether it can provide a safe electoral environment by keeping armed groups under control and preventing them from buying votes. Thus, among the challenges faced by the Iraqi government, these formidable crises strip it of its ability to fulfill its promises. Though the popular protests dwindled after the previous government was forced to resign, public outrage is now greater than ever before, the consequence of which will be a worsening of the political, social, and economic conditions in the country. The dramatic collapse in oil prices will force the government to adopt austerity measures, causing a rise in unemployment and poverty rates. Most likely, the ensuing frustration will produce a new wave of protests, which may be more intense and violent than before.¹⁰ The protests are a reminder to the

new prime minister that the anger is real and will not dissipate, that the demand is for accountability and improved governance, and that the protests are as strong today as they were seven months ago.¹¹

2.3 Lingering Disputes

Al-Kadhimi has inherited lingering disputes with the government of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. There are many issues of contention between the federal government and this region, which it must face in order to avoid negative impacts on security, political, and economic stability. The issues include Article 140 of the Constitution of Iraq, the 2007 Draft Federal Oil and Gas Law, the federal government's demand for transparency in oil sales and revenues at government points of entry and airports, the reinstatement of a federal budget share for the Kurdistan Region, and the enforcement of all oil deals between Erbil and Baghdad in order for Erbil to receive a share of the federal budget. Further demands are to resolve the Peshmerga issue in terms of its affiliations and working mechanisms, and the nature of its relationship to the federal government and to the military laws in force. These demands are seen as difficult and unfeasible given that since 2003, the government of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has pursued a policy of *fait accompli* and threatening to escalate crises.

⁹ "Demonstrations in Iraq: Kidnappings, Torture, and Enforced Disappearances in the Context of the Ongoing Demonstrations in Iraq, Human Rights Special Report, 3rd Update", Baghdad: United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, 23 May 2020, 2.

¹⁰ Young, Michael (2020): "Has the Coronavirus Crisis Permanently Silenced the Protests in Iraq?", Carnegie Middle East Center, 23 April, (<https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/81620>)

¹¹ Halawa, Hafsa et al. (2020): "Iraq special briefing: The challenges facing Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi", Middle East Institute, 12 May, (<https://bit.ly/2XDu3Cw>)

2.4 Security Vulnerability and Terror Threats

In the realm of security, the Iraqi government faces two fundamental challenges. The first relates to weapons restrictions by the state, a goal which the prime minister made clear in his government program. The second challenge is to counter the resurgence of ISIS.

The most prominent challenge facing the new government, and one which is closely related to security, political, and even economic benefits, is that of curbing armed groups in the country which are in competition with one another. The main task is to control the movement and activities of non-governmental actors, namely armed factions and groups, which have amassed significant military force as well as a political and security role which affords them freedom of movement, action, and influence.¹² The new government must establish its authority over the Iraqi Security Forces in order to achieve true stability in the country, as Iraq is burdened by the presence of a variety of paramilitary units. This is due in part to the weakness of its regular army, which was dismantled and reconstructed following the 2003 US invasion as part of the process to undo the legacy of the previous dictatorial regime. The army had to be rebuilt again after collapsing in the face of Islamic State attacks in 2014.¹³ In June of the same year, Ayatollah al-Sistani's fatwa was issued on the collective

obligation to engage in jihad, which played a significant role in liberating the territory and defeating ISIS. The Popular Mobilization Forces was formed and organized by Law 40 in 2016, reflecting the role of armed factions. Although these factions are joined under the banner of the Popular Mobilization Forces, there is a major dispute over their roles, vision, and underlying doctrine. Despite their connection with the PMF, they are separate, independent entities, armed factions with political wings which enable them to intervene in political affairs. Some are linked to the Supreme Leader of Iran's vilayat-e faqih doctrine, making their roles transnational. Thus, the factions are a strategic ally for Iran and a central component to its strategy in the region, both for countering the United States in Iraq and for their role in Syria. This puts the factions in conflict with the vision of the Iraqi state, and in contradiction with Article 9 of the Constitution of Iraq as well as the Popular Mobilization Forces law. The divide only continues to widen as the armed factions continue to oppose any substantive reform which could be detrimental to their interests and their vision.

Additionally, these factions dominate the administration and leadership of the Popular Mobilization Forces,¹⁴ of which 80% is affiliated with the factions, which neutralizes the influence of other actors participating in this

¹² Hasan, Harith: op. cit.

¹³ Frantzman, Seth J. (2020): "Iraq's New Prime Minister Needs to Take Control of His Security Forces", 16 June, (<https://bit.ly/31gjGHj>)

¹⁴ Rudolf, Inna (2020): "The Future of the Popular Mobilization Forces after the Assassination of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis", Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Institute, April, 4.

institution.¹⁵ This has led to disputes between the factions and impacted their performance, driving a segment of the Popular Mobilization Forces' formations to associate with other bodies, as in the case of the al-Abbas Combat Division, the Imam Ali Combat Division, the Ansar al-Marja'iyya Brigade, and the Ali Akbar Brigade. All of these groups severed their ties with the Popular Mobilization Forces to instead affiliate with the General Commander of the Iraqi Armed Forces.¹⁶ Armed factions pose a complex situation in Iraq's political and security landscape. Previous governments failed to contain or deal with them, so the Iraqi government has a significant challenge in getting them under control.

On top of these factions, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has its special security forces known as the Peshmerga. Though the organization is formally under the command of the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs within the regional government, dozens of its battalions are closely affiliated with the two dominant political parties in Kurdistan, the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, in clear contradiction to the principles of Iraq's constitution. Since these armed groups lack any central government authority, play political roles, and generally have competing goals,

their existence is a major security challenge for the Iraqi government.

The other challenge involves the return of ISIS in Iraq, and the likelihood that the events of 2014 could repeat themselves. Since suffering regional defeats in 2017, the Islamic State has recovered and is waging a strong and steady resurgence as a rebel force within Iraq. It has recovered its tactical effectiveness and reimposed its presence throughout numerous areas, as shown by an annual comparison of attacks it carried out in 2019 and 2020. From the 292 attacks it carried out in the first quarter of 2019, there has been a 94% increase to 566 attacks in the first quarter of this year.¹⁷ This is driven by several factors, including the following: the establishment of strongholds in rugged terrain which the Iraqi Security Forces struggle to reach;¹⁸ the lack of major fighting capabilities with which to eliminate the remnants and roots of ISIS;¹⁹ poor leadership of elite Iraqi troops; these troops' slow recovery from the losses they incurred from 2014 to 2017 in the war against ISIS;²⁰ military

¹⁵ Al-Hashimi, Hisham: "The Conflict over Loyalty and Marja'iyya within the Popular Mobilization Forces", (<https://bit.ly/2MG41Sh>)

¹⁶ Al Qaysi, Majid (2020): "The Necessary Military Steps to Defeat the Remnants of ISIS in Iraq", situational assessment, International Strategic and Political Research Center, 7 May, (<https://bit.ly/2AOkwQ8>)

¹⁷ Michael Knights and Alex Ameida (2020): "Remaining and Expanding: The Recovery of Islamic State Operations in Iraq in 2019 - 2020," CTC Sentinel, May. 1.

¹⁸ Aaron Y. Zelin and Michael Knights (2020): "The Islamic State's Resurgence in the COVID Era? From Defeat to Renewal in Iraq and Syria", Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch 3322, 29 May, (<https://bit.ly/3eOW1Rz>)

¹⁹ Al-Hashimi, Hisham (2020), "ISIS in the First Quarter of 2020", Baghdad: Sippar Center for Analysis and Expectation Management, 30 April, 1.

²⁰ "The Return of ISIS to Iraq: Has the Organization Enter the Rebuilding Phase?", Washington: Al-Hurra-Translations, 6 June 2020, (<https://arbnews/2UgWT91>)

leaders who were seen as close to the US getting redeployed from combat command in response to pressure from the armed factions;²¹ domestic unrest owing to widespread anti-government protests; security forces' preoccupation with establishing order amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, which has required redeployment and repositioning; and the lack of coordination and leadership among the actors waging battle against ISIS, including the Iraqi Security Forces, the Popular Mobilization Forces, the Tribal Mobilization Forces, and the Peshmerga.²² On top of this, the international coalition against ISIS suspended its air and reconnaissance operations and reduced its capacity to provide counsel and escort to Iraqi troops. This was due to rising tensions and strikes exchanged between Washington and Tehran and its allies, following the Iraqi parliament's resolution on 5 January 2020 to end the presence of troops in the country, in the aftermath of the US assassination of Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy chief of the Popular Mobilization Force, on 3 January 2020.²³ Then came the COVID-19 situation, leading coalition and NATO training missions to suspend their operations for two months. By 29 March, Australia, Spain, France, New Zealand, Portugal, and Holland

had withdrawn nearly all of their trainers.²⁴ Thus, the Iraqi government is left to face the challenge of countering terrorism alone.

2.5 The Rivalry Game and the Struggle for Influence

The task facing Iraq's new government today is to strike a balance between the United States and Iran, the two rival powers in Iraq, to ward off the risk of Iraq turning into an arena for their conflict. The process of forming any government is the first of many fronts in the struggle between the US and Iran to extend their influence in Iraq. Clearly, coexistence is not easy, as there has been a tilt to one side or the other, which has persisted over successive governments.²⁵

US-Iran relations have not been good in recent years, but tensions began to escalate after Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear agreement in May 2018, and with his adoption of a new policy known as "Maximum Pressure." The situation worsened after the US assassinated General Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, launching a phase of dangerous escalation between the US on one side, and Iran and the armed factions on the other.²⁶ The Iraqi government found itself stuck

²¹ Michael Knights and Alex Almeida: op. cit., 13 - 14.

²² "The Return of ISIS to Iraq", op. cit., 1 - 3.

²³ Jiyad, Sajad (2020): "With ISIS Resurgent, Can Iraq's New Government Avoid a Repeat of the Past?", World Politics Review, 30 June, (<https://bit.ly/2BJbFQx>)

²⁴ Michael Knights and Alex Almeida: op. cit. 14.

²⁵ Kawas, Mohamad (2020): "Iraq after the Formation of Al-Kadhimi's Government: Opportunities and Expectations", Emirates Policy Center, 13 May, (<https://bit.ly/2A2HOSD>)

²⁶ Wolf, Albert B. (2020): "To Stop a US-Iran War, Finlandize Iraq: By treating Iraq as a neutral zone, Washington and Tehran can avoid conflict", Foreign Policy, 11 May, (<https://bit.ly/3feByGn>)

between the United States and Iran, with the US prepared to deprive Iraq of military aid or use economic measures to force Iraq to adopt a stance more favorable towards American forces. President Donald Trump has warned Iraq that if it were to expel American troops in accordance with the parliament's resolution, the US "will charge them sanctions like they've never seen before, ever."²⁷ Additionally, Iraq's foreign exchange reserves are in New York, and the US administration has explicitly warned that it could restrict or prevent Iraq from accessing these funds. At a time of falling oil prices and an acute economic crisis which will greatly impact Iraqi revenues, inability to access foreign exchange reserves could be devastating.²⁸ A complete US withdrawal from Iraq would give Iran a strategic victory - especially considering Trump's determination to contain Iran's regional ambitions and make this a cornerstone of his foreign policy in the region - and ensure Iranian control of Iraq.

Meanwhile, Iran has called for an end to the US military presence, pressing its allies to make this a reality, not to mention the statement by the Supreme Leader of Iran that American troops will be driven out of Syria and Iraq.²⁹ This is the product of Iran's anxiety regarding the possible

outcomes and consequences of the strategic dialogue to which the US invited Iraq last April. The realities enshrined by the dialogue may be antithetical to Iran's expectations and desires, as it could produce long-term ramifications. Moreover, the dialogue will define the nature and extent of US-Iraqi relations for the coming period, especially in regards to military, security, economic, cultural, and political dimensions of cooperation, which the US will put on the negotiating table with its Iraqi counterpart. This is in addition to establishing a new pathway within the Iraqi government for dealing with Iran's presence and influence within the country. Iran is concerned about what these American preconditions would mean for the future of the relationship between Baghdad and Tehran.³⁰ These are the driving factors behind Tehran's efforts to re-establish its position in Iraq, create a new generation of more extremist militant groups, and invest in the groups in order to better respond to the US presence in Iraq.³¹ Its first step may be propagating the accusation that al-Kadhimi, as director of the National Intelligence Service, was complicit in the killing of Iranian Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy chief of the Popular Mobilization Forces; encouraging parties and factions allied with it to undertake

²⁷ Al-Bedaiwi, Adel (2020): "The Crisis of Iraqi-American Relations", Baghdad: Intellectual Dialogue, 51, March, 4.

²⁸ Geranmayeh, Ellie (2020): "Iran, Iran, and the Specter of American Sanctions", Baghdad: Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, 13 April, (<https://bit.ly/2MzxdkG>)

²⁹ "Khamenei: American Troops Will Be Driven Out of Syria and Iraq", Hawar News Agency, (<https://bit.ly/2Xvemxt>)

³⁰ Fahas, Hasan (2020): "Tehran and the Prospective Strategic Dialogue Between Washington and Baghdad", Independent Arabia, 28 May, (<https://bit.ly/2Mnlww3>)

³¹ Farzin Nadimi and Hamdi Malik (10), "Qaani's Surprise Visit to Baghdad and the Future of the PMF", Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 10 April, (<https://bit.ly/36QcJxj>)

a stronger pressure campaign by blaming the government for the causes of the economic crisis; or indirectly inciting protests to rally people against the Iraqi government. Iran may also urge its political allies in parliament to take stances against al-Kadhimi based on his failure to carry out the parliamentary resolution to end the presence of foreign troops.³²

The Iraqi government thus faces a test. It must ensure an orderly military relationship with Washington, while not allowing American military and civilian units in Iraq to be exposed to attacks by armed actors. At the same time, it cannot allow Iraqi territory to be used for American operations against Iran or Iraqi actors without Baghdad's approval.

32 "Al-Kadhimi's Government in Iraq: Challenges and Chances of Success", Emirates Policy Center, 27 May, (<https://bit.ly/2AqjHwS>)

3

Deferred Opportunities

The prime minister has a relatively wide margin in which to maneuver, owing to his role as head of the intelligence services. He possesses precise sensory data which other political figures may lack, as well as the ability to lead the intelligence services through a minefield of threats which the country knows all too well. This reveals a key aspect of the man's personality and his ability to engage with all of Iraq's internal contradictions. He knows how to coexist with the contradictions of foreign agendas surrounding Iraq.

In regard to the protests, the Iraqi government's opportunity arises from the fact that the supreme religious authority [marja'iyya] in Najaf backs most of the protestors' demands. Some political forces have embraced the demands as well, and the protestors have gained the support of the United Nations. Most importantly, the Iraqi government announced its support for the protestors, implemented a ceasefire to protect them, freed protestors who were arrested, and involved influential figures from the protests in political decisions. Additionally, youth groups representing the protest movement are increasingly inclined

to give the government a chance, describing it as the compromise between the demands of the movement, partisan interests, and the powers that dominate the political process. The government has pledged to the protestors to complete the transitional phase as quickly as possible, and to promptly undertake urgent tasks such as passing an election law with all the necessary reviews and modifications; completing the final version of the Law of the Independent High Electoral Commission; providing all that is needed in order to hold elections as soon as possible; and amending the Political Parties Law that was passed in 2015. It has also ordered its entire security apparatus to release all detained protestors; track down abductees; identify those who have carried out assassinations and bring them before a court of law; and form a high legal commission to research and investigate all events that transpired around the protests.

On the topic of Kurdish relations, one of the government's most promising opportunities is their strong Kurdish support, which may facilitate a breakthrough in the form of a sustainable agreement between Erbil and

Baghdad. Erbil has demonstrated its readiness to solve these outstanding differences, with Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq Masrour Barzani affirming that his government has taken serious steps in talks with Baghdad to resolve disputes that have festered for years. This shows that his government is prepared to settle these issues with the new government of Iraq, come together with the federal government to form two commissions to resolve financial and oil-related disputes between the two sides, and enter into intensive negotiations to reach a final compromise over the unresolved issues, in accordance with the Constitution.

In regards to security, the federal government has moved to put competent leadership at the helm of the Counter Terrorism Service through a restructuring that includes the appointment of Abdel-Wahab al-Saadi. For Minister of Interior, it appointed Othman al-Ghanimi, a prominent, professional, and patriotic figure who previously served as chief of staff of the army. Having such leadership at the head of these security institutions restores their effectiveness and their ability to regain the initiative, combat terrorism, and address corruption and lack of accountability.³³ The government has also supported the leadership of the “Atabat” units and the religious establishment in their objection to some factions’ monopoly over the leadership and control of the Popular Mobilization Forces,

responding by attaching the PMF to the military institution under the command of the general commander of the Iraqi Armed Forces. This gives al-Kadhimi the ability to restructure the PMF in such a way as to ensure that it is subject to existing military laws. These are encouraging signs just a few weeks after the government’s formation,³⁴ as they indicate how serious al-Kadhimi is about reforming the deep divisions in the country.

In the fight against ISIS, there are local and international expectations of making significant headway in the battle against this terrorist organization, because al-Kadhimi comes from an important security body. Moreover, the Iraqi military now possesses greater experience and efficacy after years of battling ISIS. ISIS has also failed in its attempts to recreate the incubator that helped it to ready its ranks before the events of 2014, and it has found that these regions are better prepared to resist it.³⁵ ISIS is not as strong as it was prior to 2014, when it was trying to build momentum in the early stages of its ultimate recovery from defeat.³⁶ The Global Coalition against Daesh has affirmed that it will continue to combat ISIS in Iraq and Syria and create proper conditions to vanquish the terrorist organization. This remains the sole objective

³³ Sajad Jiyad: *op. cit.*

³⁴ Knights, Michael (2020), “Kadhimi as Commander-in-Chief: First Steps in Iraq Security Reform”, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch 3317, 19 May, (<https://bit.ly/2BzJUcZ>)

³⁵ Al-Hishami, Hisham (2020): “ISIS in the First Quarter of 2020”, *op. cit.*, 1.

³⁶ Aaron Y. Zelin and Michael Knights, *op. cit.*

of the Coalition through its comprehensive, multilateral effort.³⁷ Likewise, the ministers of defense of NATO agreed in May to enhance the alliance's training mission in Iraq, and that the alliance should focus on preventing the return of ISIS.³⁸ The United States reiterated its commitment to providing air, intelligence, and advisory support to Iraq's forces in the fight against ISIS.³⁹

In regards to the struggle for influence, Iraq held the first sessions of its strategic dialogue with the United States on 11 June 2020 to set the stage for bilateral cooperation and chart a course for future relations between the two countries, in an effort to reduce the fog of ambiguity. The United States pledged to provide Iraq with political, economic, and medical support, as well as a timetable for the withdrawal of its troops. This followed

the US granting Iraq a 120-day exemption from the prohibition on purchasing Iranian electricity and gas, which was issued when al-Kadhimi assumed office. Pompeo emphasized that "this gesture is aimed at showing our desire to help provide suitable conditions for the success of the al-Kadhimi government." Similarly, the US embassy announced its support for the new government in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. Through its foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran voiced its support for the formation of the new Iraqi government under the leadership of al-Kadhimi, as well as its preparedness to work together to overcome the country's problems. This message was reiterated by Iran's ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi. This paves the way for an opportunity to de-escalate US-Iran relations in Iraq.

37 "Joint Communique by Ministers of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS", media note, U.S. Department of State, 4 June, (<https://bit.ly/3dzO4j2>)

38 Al Qaysi, Majid (2020): "The United States and Iran in Iraq: What Is Next After the New Strategic Shift", report, Istanbul: International Strategic and Political Research Center, 10 - 11.

39 "Warmly Welcome Al-Kazemi: Pompeo Pledges Financial Support to Iraq to Recover 'Instantly'", Washington: Al-Hurra, 4 June 2020, (<https://arbnews/2MxqCak>)

4

Recommendations:

- The Prime Minister should act as the missing channel of communication between the United States and Iran in the Iraqi arena. This would be the most important positive development for Iraq, especially as both sides are determined to make no concessions.
- The government of Iraq should involve relatively impartial mediators, such as European nations, to create channels of communication and dialogue between the United States and Iran, and establish rules of engagement that protect Iraq's autonomy and prevent further escalation.
- In addition to the bilateral strategic dialogue with the United States, it is time for Iraq to open a bilateral strategic dialogue with Iran surrounding the full range of issues pertaining to the two neighboring countries.
- The government should seek to steer the strategy of the US and the US-led coalition in Iraq towards combating and defeating ISIS, and away from confrontations with armed groups and factions. Furthermore, the government should seek to strengthen the role of the US in supporting the Iraqi Armed Forces through trainings, technical support, and air support rather than operations related to ground fighting.
- With Denmark assuming control of the NATO alliance, the Iraqi government should discuss training contracts, support, military and security consultation, and logistics support so as to ensure the final defeat of ISIS and develop Iraqi military capabilities.
- The al-Kadhimi government should turn towards European Union nations and strengthen its cooperation with them, as their presence is uncontroversial domestically and the EU is not involved in a struggle in the Iraqi arena. This can be done by discussing European interests in Iraq, especially in the areas of counterterrorism, achieving stability in the country, and improving living conditions in such a way as to reduce the influx of refugees into Europe.

- The Iraqi government must set feasible goals and avoid overly ambitious ones. Initiatives should be defined so as to be achievable; for example, identifying the issues where there is least resistance to reform, and targeting these issues first. This approach will generate momentum for subsequent reforms that are larger and more fundamental. The government should pursue gradual reform to create a balance between reform and the status quo. It should also seek to build allies in the Iraqi parliament for support.
- The Iraqi government should form a national bloc that transcends subnational identities and narrow affiliations, with the aim of backing up the executive as it pursues reforms.
- The Council of Representatives should undertake a comprehensive review of the legal structure of the judiciary and its components in order to strengthen the judiciary's independence. Furthermore, it should establish a single authority to coordinate between the judiciary's components and to achieve integration.
- The system of oversight and accountability must be reformed, and the role of the public prosecution must be strengthened.
- There must be separation between the political and the administrative aspects of the state's executive institutions. Separating administrative and political duties prevents the country from falling into the clutches of clientelism; favoritism; and political, administrative, and financial corruption. It will consolidate state institutions, giving them momentum, durability, accumulated experience, and independence. All of this helps the government function in an effective and influential way in both foreign and domestic affairs.
- The foremost goal of the government must be to begin a new political era by working to provide the requisites for reform of the electoral system (an electoral law, an electoral commission, a political parties law, a conducive electoral environment); setting a deadline for early elections, the outcomes of which may yield positive political change; and taking care not to neglect the execution of other duties such as preserving security and sovereignty and ensuring that the needs of citizens are met.
- The government should embark on establishing the Youth Advisory Council as promised, in order to coordinate government steps related to reform, communicate with protestors, and follow up on their demands.
- The structure of the Popular Mobilization Forces should be applied in such a way as to ensure enforcement of its law and its orders; prevent any one party from taking

control of the PMF; and ensure that it is subject to military law in force.

- The Tribal Mobilization Forces should be better armed in order to play a significant role in hunting down the remnants of ISIS.
- The Iraqi Armed Forces should be made better prepared, and the forces of the Counter Terrorism Services should be increased. Capabilities also must be improved in the areas of military oversight, monitoring, reconnaissance, and combatting the financing of terrorism.
- Displaced families must be returned to areas of residence where the security and legal situations have been investigated, and no village or town should be left uninhabited.
- Intelligence efforts should be coordinated by a specific authority so as to bypass bureaucratic unwieldiness and inefficiency in information processing.
- Non-military cooperation between Iraq and the United States should be bolstered. In light of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, such cooperation is particularly important in order to manage this crisis through the provision of best practices and American medical support in Iraq.

About the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung - Jordan & Iraq

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The fundamental challenge facing the new Iraqi government comes from the extent to which it seeks to change the political status quo, which the political elites are working vigorously to preserve. This has resulted in opposing visions which are bound for collision sooner or later. The al-Kadhimi administration's effort is impeded by numerous challenges which the executive authority must confront.



The pursuit of reforms requires substantial, painful sacrifices. However, the nation's health and economic crises have left popular forces both unprepared and unable to make such sacrifices, which strips the government of the necessary popular support.



In light of this complicated, compound situation, will the new Iraqi government be able to implement its reforms without a domestic confrontation? Will it be able to neutralize the Iraqi arena with regards to the US-Iran conflict? And does it have the time and the tools to find alternative courses of action and solutions?

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