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US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue: Prospects for Change

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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After meeting last week at the White House, US President Joe Biden and Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi agreed to end the combat missions of the 2,500 US forces in Iraq at the end of 2021, with their role shifting to training, supporting and advising the Iraqi army and intelligence sharing. The US and Iraqi parties issued a statement on the joint “strategic dialogue”, which was held at the US State Department, headed by the foreign ministers of the two countries, in which the Biden administration pledged to continue supporting Iraq to preserve its security and territorial integrity.⁽¹⁾

The General Framework of US-Iraqi Understandings

Although the understandings reached by the US-Iraq summit focused mainly on redefining the role of the US forces present on Iraqi soil, they also included topics related to regional stability and cooperation in the energy, health, economy, environment, education, human rights, and humanitarian aid sectors.

1. Military and Security Issues

The two parties agreed that the US would provide training and advice to the Iraqi armed forces and would exchange intelligence information that would “guarantee the security of Iraq.”⁽²⁾ According to the statement issued by the strategic dialogue between the two countries, “The United States reaffirmed its respect for Iraq’s sovereignty and laws and pledged to continue providing the resources Iraq needs to preserve its territorial integrity.”⁽³⁾ The Iraqi government “reaffirmed its commitment to protect Coalition personnel advising and enabling the Iraqi Security Forces”; considering that “all Coalition Forces are in Iraq at its invitation.” The parties also agreed that “the bases hosting US and other Coalition personnel are Iraqi bases and are operating per existing Iraqi laws; they are not US or Coalition bases, and the presence of international personnel in Iraq is solely in support of the Government of Iraq’s fight against ISIS.”⁽⁴⁾ Although the United States confirms that its forces will not participate in combat missions by the end of 2021, it stressed that its cooperation with Iraq in the fight against terrorism will continue even with the transition to this new phase of the relationship.⁽⁵⁾ Iraq asserts that its security and military forces have the capacity and competence to confront the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), but they remain in need of support and advice, especially with regard to intelligence information, weapons maintenance and training.⁽⁶⁾ According to officials

1 “Joint Statement on the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue,” U.S. Department of State, 26/7/2021, accessed on 4/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/37gad56>.

2 “Remarks by President Biden and Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi of the Republic of Iraq before Bilateral Meeting,” The White House, 26/7/2021, accessed on 4/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/37h1Qp9>

3 “Joint Statement.”

4 Ibid.

5 “Remarks by President Biden and Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi.”

6 Qassim Abdul-Zahra & Samya Kullab, “AP Interview: PM Says Iraq doesn’t Need US Combat Troops,” *Associated Press*, 26/7/2021, accessed on 4/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3CgSet5>



in the Biden administration, the understandings with Iraq do not include the “counterterrorism mission in Syria, a parallel to the one in Iraq, [which] will continue for now.”⁽⁷⁾

ISIS was defeated in 2017 and lost the territory it had controlled in Iraq since 2014 but is still capable of launching large sporadic attacks. There are fears that an early US withdrawal will lead to its return, mirroring the repercussions of the Obama administration’s withdrawal from Iraq in 2011. That is why Washington is keen to stress that the new understandings do not mean the end of the “partnership” between the two countries, or even a withdrawal from Iraq, but is rather considered a “change of mission.”⁽⁸⁾ Washington refuses to provide details about the number of troops that will remain in Iraq by the end of the year. This leads to the belief that the withdrawal will be mostly on paper, by renaming the role that will be played by the American forces on the ground, and assigning them advisory and training roles instead of combat roles.⁽⁹⁾ In fact, US forces have stopped carrying out combat missions in Iraq since November 2020, under the Trump administration, which then reduced the number of US forces from 5,000 to 2,500 soldiers. The US military command confirms that its forces have for months no longer been accompanying the Iraqi forces in ground operations, and that their assistance is limited to intelligence gathering, monitoring and the dissemination of advanced military technologies.⁽¹⁰⁾

2. Other Areas of Cooperation

In addition to redefining the role of US forces in Iraq, the two sides discussed aspects of cooperation in the fields of energy, environment, health, economy, freedoms, human rights, education and humanitarian aid. The Biden administration had announced that it was in the process of providing Iraq, within the global COVAX mechanism, with half a million doses of the Pfizer-Biontech vaccine to address the Covid-19 pandemic, due to arrive within two weeks.⁽¹¹⁾ The United States will also provide \$5.2 million to help fund the United Nations Mission to observe the Iraqi legislative elections scheduled for October 2021. The Biden administration has announced that it will also provide \$155 million in additional humanitarian assistance to Iraq for the displaced and the areas hosting them, to provide shelter, healthcare, food, and water and sanitation services.⁽¹²⁾ In the context of promoting “economic reform and enhance[ing] regional integration,” Washington expressed its support

7 Anne Gearan, “Biden, Pulling Combat Forces from Iraq, Seeks to End the Post-9/11 Era,” *The Washington Post*, 26/7/2021, accessed on 4/8/2021, at: <https://wapo.st/3jppjNaG>.

8 “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki,” The White House, 26/7/2021, accessed on 4/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3jnGFYo>.

9 Jane Arraf & Eric Schmitt, “U.S. to Announce Troop Drawdown from Iraq, but Little Is Expected to Change,” *The New York Times*, 24/7/2021, accessed on 4/8/2021, at: <https://nyti.ms/3lyswKu>.

10 Abdul-Zahra & Kullab.

11 Steve Holland & Trevor Hunnicutt, “Biden, Kadhimi Seal Agreement to End U.S. Combat Mission in Iraq,” *Reuters*, 27/7/2021, accessed on 4/8/2021, at: <https://reut.rs/2TSjlDQ>.

12 Michael Collins & Maureen Groppe, “US to End Combat Mission in Iraq by End of Year, Biden Announces in Meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister,” *USA TODAY*, 27/7/2021, accessed on 4/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3jjaXvn>

for Iraq's efforts, "in particular through energy projects with Jordan and the GCC Interconnection Authority."⁽¹³⁾

Motives behind the Change of Missions in Iraq

Biden's announcement of his decision to change the nature of the US military presence in Iraq came as US forces neared completion in their withdrawal from Afghanistan, a decision the president made in April 2021, ending twenty years of military involvement there. It seeks to end two decades of US wars against "terrorism," which it sees as useless endeavours, draining US resources and capabilities, and diverting its attention from the most important challenges.⁽¹⁴⁾ The Biden administration does not hide its interest in containing China both economically and militarily as the main motivation behind changing the US approaches in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Vice Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General John E. Hyten, believes that "the drawdown in Iraq is necessary to ensure the military is prepared for a fight with China, or maybe Russia, if that day comes."⁽¹⁵⁾ Although he stresses the need not to ignore threats in the Middle East, he believes that Washington should do so in a different way, and with less presence, so that it "divert more of our body on threats in China and Russia."⁽¹⁶⁾ According to this vision, "the defense of vital US interests does not warrant any permanent military bases in the region," and "while the potential resurgence of a terrorist group such as ISIS may warrant further US military action, permanent bases in Iraq are neither necessary nor helpful."⁽¹⁷⁾

In addition to focusing on the strategic threats it faces from China and Russia, the US is seeking by redefining the role of its forces in Iraq to avoid attacks on its bases there by Iranian-backed Shi'i militias. Since the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani, and the deputy head of the Popular Mobilization Forces, which includes Iranian-backed militias, Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, in January 2020, the US bases and embassy in Baghdad have been subjected to continuous attacks by these militias. US soldiers were transferred to three Iraqi military bases in order to reduce the risk of attacks, but this did not stop them. The Biden administration is trying to balance the necessity of a US military presence in Iraq to fight ISIS, and avoiding an escalation with Shi'i militias and Iran, without leaving a vacuum for them as well. They want to ensure there is some international support for the forces opposing Iranian hegemony in Iraq and also prevent the militias affiliated with Iran from seizing the Iraqi army, which the United States reconstructed and armed after dismantling it; support that is not provided by any regional powers, let alone Arab countries. However, it is unlikely that the Shi'i militias will stop their attacks on US forces, especially since these attacks have become linked to the results of the negotiations on the Iranian nuclear deal and the continuation of economic sanctions on Iran rather than the nature of the role that these forces play on the ground.

¹³ "Joint Statement."

¹⁴ Gearan.

¹⁵ Tara Copp & Jacqueline Feldscher, "US will End Combat Mission in Iraq, Biden Says," *Defense One*, 26/7/2021, accessed on 4/8/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3s5t3Ff>

¹⁶ Ibid.



The Iraqi government is seeking, by redefining the role of US forces in Iraq, to ease the pressures exerted on it by political forces and Iranian-backed militias, especially since it has no parliamentary basis to confront them. Al-Kadhimi is considered a transitional prime minister in the wake of the popular protests that toppled his predecessor, Adil Abdul-Mahdi, amidst demands for economic and living reforms, an end to corruption, guarantees of freedoms and human rights, and most important of all, the rejection of the sectarian system and the militias. Those protests led to the killing of at least 600 Iraqi activists, and the wounding of thousands at the hands of Shi'i militias loyal to Iran. Al-Kadhimi came to his position within political understandings and under public pressure, promising to hold early elections, and to hold the killers of Iraqi activists accountable. Although the Biden administration is trying to support him and strengthen his position before the October 2021 elections, the pressures he is facing prompted him to ask Washington to officially announce the change of mission and allow him more room for political manoeuvring in the face of Iran's allies.

Al-Kadhimi finds himself in a difficult position; His government has failed to curb militia attacks against the Americans, while he is also forced to condemn the US retaliatory air strikes against them as a violation of Iraqi sovereignty. Al-Kadhimi insists that the responsibility for responding to and protecting the attacks on US forces lies with the Iraqi government, which cannot effectively do this job.

On the other hand, Al-Kadhimi's attempts to consolidate his power politically on the Iraqi arena have been unsuccessful. Due to the continued deterioration of the economic conditions exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic and the collapse of oil prices in 2020, frustration has increased with the fires that break out from time to time in Iraqi hospitals, killing dozens, and the inability to fight corruption or provide basic services such as water and electricity. Meanwhile, there are real doubts about the ability of the Al-Kadhimi government to organize the legislative elections on their scheduled date, which is the month of October 2021. Despite Al-Kadhimi's promises that the elections will be free, transparent and fair, many doubt the government's ability to guarantee this and many activists announced their intention to boycott.

Conclusion

The recent US-Iraqi understandings about redefining the role and mission of US forces in Iraq intend to relieve the pressures of political forces and Iranian-backed militias facing Al-adhimion the one hand, and to provide the Biden administration with an opportunity to strategically rearrange its priorities, especially in terms of containing China, on the other hand. However, it is doubtful that these understandings will satisfy the Shi'i parties and militias, which are calling for the complete withdrawal of US forces, based on their conviction that the presence of these forces in Iraq precludes their complete monopolization of control over it. The Biden administration will face a difficult challenge if the Shi'i militias' attacks on US interests in Iraq continue and the Al-Kadhimi government fails to confront them.