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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

Haider al–Abadi Visits President Trump

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Apr 2017

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Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

PO Box 10277

Street No. 826, Zone 66

Doha, Qatar

Tel.: +974 44199777 | Fax: +974 44831651

www.dohainstitute.org

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Iraqi Concerns	1
American Interests	2
A New Strategy to Counter ISIL?	3
Conclusion	5

Introduction

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi held a meeting with US President Donald Trump during a visit to Washington on March 20. Abadi's visit, aimed partially at securing economic assistance for his country, coincided with a multilateral meeting convened by the US State Department, bringing together 68 countries and intergovernmental organizations to intensify the coalition efforts against ISIL. The meeting of foreign ministers from the "Global Coalition" ended on March 22. Abadi's visit also coincided with the fourteenth anniversary of the US-led invasion of Iraq which toppled Saddam Hussein, during which invasion Trump vacillated in his own support for American action that installed a new regime in Iraq.

Iraqi Concerns

Abadi's visit was aimed at securing further American military and logistical support in the fight against ISIL, but his overall concerns went further beyond that. The Iraqi PM also wanted to obtain economic assistance for his country, which has been facing a financial crisis since the battle against ISIL. Speaking to the media following his meeting with the US president, Abadi stated that "force alone will not defeat ISIL" and that Iraq was looking forward to expanded cooperation with the United States¹. In addition to military support, Abadi sought to secure American economic backing for the reconstruction of destroyed Iraqi cities and for dealing with up to 4 million Iraqis displaced from those cities. During the meeting of the Global Coalition, Abadi emphasized the role of economic factors in governing and rapidly stabilizing and rebuilding areas liberated from ISIL².

Although White House officials agreed with the Iraqi PM that more than military force would be needed in order to truly defeat ISIL, it is highly unlikely that the US will either increase the level of its economic aid to Iraq or otherwise enhance economic coordination between the two countries. The new Foreign Aid budget approved by the

¹ "Iraqi Leader al-Abadi Meets with Trump, Anticipates 'More Cooperation'", *NBC News*, March 20, 2017, available online: <http://nbcnews.to/2moRQ8E>

² Remarks by Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson and Prime Minister of Iraq Haider al-Abadi at the Ministerial Plenary for the Global Coalition Working to Defeat ISIS, The Department of State, March 22, 2017, available online : <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/03/269039.htm>

Trump White House includes a near 30% reduction in the budget for both the State Department and the US Agency for International Development³. In contrast, the Trump budget envisions a USD 54 billion increase in defense expenditures. While the new budget allocates USD 3 billion to fighting ISIL, this is exclusively intended for military spending.

This reflects a stark difference in outlook between the Trump administration and the previous four administrations (two each under Barack Obama and George W. Bush) which regarded development spending in Iraq as a means to counter Iranian influence in the country. For his part, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stressed during the meeting of the Global Coalition that international efforts to destroy ISIL in Iraq and Syria would soon move from military operations to stabilization. Nonetheless, Tillerson also stressed that the funding for reconstruction and stabilization would have to be a joint, international effort. He added, "As a coalition, we are not in the business of nation-building or reconstruction. We must ensure that our respective nations' precious and limited resources are devoted to preventing the resurgence of ISIS and equipping the war-torn communities to take the lead in rebuilding their institutions and returning to stability."⁴

American Interests

The Trump administration's main concern appears to be the combatting of ISIL, and the prevention of its resurgence. It will aim to do this by persuading Abadi to abandon sectarian, exclusionary policies which serve to enhance ISIL's strength and popularity. Previously, a number of US Senators, including Bob Corker, the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, penned a letter to President Trump demanding that Abadi be pressured into sharing power with Iraq's Sunni community, and to deescalate the conflict with his country's Kurds. The petitioners had demanded that the implementation of such steps become preconditions for the provision of American

³ See "Trump seeks 30% budget cuts to State Department, USAID", *MarketWatch*, March 15, 2017, available online : <http://www.marketwatch.com/story/trump-seeks-30-budget-cuts-to-state-department-usaid-2017-03-15>

⁴ Remarks by Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson and Prime Minister of Iraq Haider al-Abadi at the Ministerial Plenary for the Global Coalition Working to Defeat ISIS;

foreign aid⁵. The Trump administration also wants to build up Iraq to limit Iranian influence on the country. Abadi was quick to assure the Americans that he was committed to these goals, declaring that he was looking for ways to cooperate with the Sunnis of Iraq, particularly in Mosul. He added that he was opposed to all foreign intervention in Iraq, including Iranian influence⁶.

A New Strategy to Counter ISIL?

Trump consistently attacked Obama's strategy to tackle ISIL throughout the 2016 presidential election campaign, making repeated references to the root-and-branch reforms he would bring about once in the White House. Reports confirm that Trump's Secretary of Defense, James Mattis, has already presented the president with the broad outlines of a new strategy to defeat ISIL and similar jihadist groups around the globe⁷.

While the details of any such plan adopted by the Trump administration remain scant, Secretary of State Tillerson did elaborate that his proposal would include the intensification of the battle against ISIL, and the creation of "interim zones of stability" in areas liberated from Al Qaeda and ISIL, small havens which could be used to help refugees return to their homes. Another phase of the plan detailed by Tillerson involved the enhancement of intelligence sharing by the governments of the countries within the Global Coalition. The Secretary of State also emphasized the need to cripple ISIL's ability to find new, international recruits online⁸.

Tillerson's proposed safe havens differ significantly in nature from the security corridors previously floated by Trump as a measure the US might adopt in Syria. While the exact

⁵ Mark Landler and Michael R. Gordon, "Iraqi Leader, in Washington, Gets Trump's Assurance of US Support", *The New York Times*, March 20, 2017, available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/20/us/politics/trump-iraq-prime-minister-haider-al-abadi-washington.html>

⁶ "Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi: Trump is Supporting Us", United States Institute of Peace, March 20, 2017, video available online: <https://www.usip.org/press/2017/03/iraqi-prime-minister-abadi-trump-supporting-us>

⁷ Mark Landler and Michael R. Gordon;

⁸ See Lesley Wroughton and Yara Bayoumy, "Tillerson pledges safe areas for refugees, more pressure on ISIL", *Reuters*, March 22, 2017, available online: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-idUSKBN16T0CQ>

mechanism governing the safe zones has yet to be fully elaborated, they certainly would involve a greater military role for the US in Syria. This in itself would be a stark difference from the very cautious approach taken by the former administration. One US military official made clear, however, that the military has not received specific instructions on the creation of safe zones⁹. In other words, there appears to be no major impending change in the US strategy in dealing with ISIL in Iraq or Syria, or anywhere. Even the Iraqi premier, known for his strained and lukewarm relationship with Obama and his voiced appreciation for Trump, could only bring himself to say that he knew that there was “a plan”, although conceded that he had yet to see it¹⁰.

These indications suggest that the Trump administration has no real plan to meaningfully change the US policies deployed under Obamas to counter ISIL and similar extremist groups in the Middle East. The now established strategy revolves around offering support for local armed groups in the form of air cover, without becoming embroiled in direct combat. Limited numbers of American soldiers were also made available to Iraq to help tackle ISIL, with a Pentagon spokesman confirming that between 200 and 300 US soldiers from the 82nd Airborne Division were working with their Iraqi counterparts, offering logistical support, advice and assistance near Mosul¹¹. The Pentagon has further made clear that another 1,000 additional troops from the same 82nd Airborne Division remain on hand to provide technical support in the battle to reclaim Mosul¹². These soldiers would join a group of 6,000 US soldiers already stationed in Iraq and Kuwait (up from 5,262 under Obama)¹³. The 82nd Airborne Division alone has 1,700 troops in these two countries, while a further group of 1,000 US Special Forces are providing assistance to the mainly Kurdish “Syrian Democratic Forces”. On March 22, this Syria-based contingent led a parachute drop for their Syrian

⁹ “US military says no orders yet to create safe areas for refugees”, *Reuters*, March 22, 2017, available online: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-pentagon-idUSKBN16T2JL>

¹⁰ Phil Stewart and Steve Holland, “Iraq’s Abadi says he wins Trump’s assurance of more US support”, *Reuters*, March 20, 2017, available online: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-iraq-idUSKBN16R2LX>

¹¹ Lucas Tomlinson, “US sending around 200 more troops to Mosul in ISIS fight, official says”, *Fox News*, March 27, 2017, available online: <http://fxn.ws/2n9ZPT1>

¹² Luis Martinez, “200 more US troops headed to Iraq to ‘advise and assist’ Mosul offensive”, *ABC News*, March 27, 2017, available online: <http://abcn.ws/2n9Ac55>

¹³ Lucas Tomlinson;

allies in the town of Tabqa, within the Governorate of Riqqa. These anti-ISIL efforts have been supplemented by the arrival in the Gulf of the USS George W. Bush, a naval aircraft carrier, from which sorties against ISIL-linked targets have already begun. Finally, the US is also using artillery to support the military efforts of its allies on the ground in Syria and Iraq.

Conclusion

Measured by what it achieved for Iraq, Haider's visit to Washington seemed to be futile. This applies with respect both to what expectations he may have had about the new president, as well as the dashed hopes of obtaining US economic support for his country — a possibility that seems extremely remote given the current drive in Washington to reduce foreign aid. Indeed, Trump is on record as having said that he would not spend taxpayers' money on financing the safety of foreigners. Additionally, Abadi's promise of greater power sharing and devolution to Iraq's Sunni Arab and Kurdish communities rings hollow, given the ever-expanding power of Iranian-backed Shia militia in his country. For Trump's part, the new president seems to be defaulting into a continuation of Obama's approach to dealing with ISIL, albeit with lesser consideration for the lives of civilians killed in anti-ISIL airstrikes, and a greater willingness to cooperate with dictators across the Middle East.

