



Rebuffing Accusations:

Implications of Esmail Qaani to Iraq Following Attempted Assassination of al-Kadhimi

Future Briefs

Issue 621, 11 Nov 2021

Iraqi media outlets such as Dijlah, Al-Rafidain TV and Al-Sharqiya, on November 7, reported that Esmail Qaani, the commander of the Quds Force, a branch of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), had arrived in the Iraqi capital on November 7 on an unannounced visit. Qaani met with the chiefs of Shi'ite militant groups, as well as Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi and the Iraqi President Barham Salih. Qaani expressed rejection of the assassination attempt on al-Kadhimi. Qaani's visit was part of Iran's efforts to bring its Iraqi armed groups under control in exchange for giving their parties a share in the next government.

The timing of the visit

Qaani's visit to Iraq came amid mounting escalation between al-Kadhimi and the Popular Mobilization Forces, better known as Al-Hashed Al-Shaabi. The following notes should be considered:

1- Failed assassination attempt of al-Kadhimi:

Qaani arrived in Baghdad only hours after the failed attempt to assassinate the Iraqi prime minister by three armed drones. Asaib Ahl Al-Haq, Iraqi Hezbollah, and other militia groups allied with Iran are accused of the failed attempt. The accusation was based on threats by Qais al-Khazali, leader of the Asaib Ahl Al-Haq, to kill al-Kadhimi after protestors

belonging to his militia were killed in a sit-in near the Green Zone on November 5.

2- In anticipation of the final results of the elections:

The electoral commission is finalizing the manual recount of votes at polling stations, where complaints by some forces rejecting the initial results, were filed in October. It is also submitting all appeals to the federal court for ratification upon which the final results will be announced.

There are no signs yet that the final results will reveal a major change from the initial results. This is especially so if the electoral commission continues to resist pressure from the Popular Mobilization

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Forces, backed by Iran, to change the results. Most recently, the pro-Iran militia group threatened to resort to force if the final election results are ratified.

The Purpose of Qaani's Visit

Qaani visited Iraq and met leaders of political forces to achieve the following aims:

1- To contain al-Kadhimi's anger: Following the failed assassination attempt, al-Kadhimi announced that the perpetrators were identified and will be brought to justice. He was implying that pro-Iran militias were involved in the attack.

Iraq's National Security Council, the country's highest security body, held a meeting headed by al-Kadhimi himself and attended by Minister of Defense Juma Anad Saadoun, Minister of Interior Othman al-Ghanemi, National Security Adviser Qassem al-Araji, the Army Chief of Staff Abdul Amir Yarallah, and other security commanders. The council issued a statement in which it reiterated that "the criminal groups" will be prosecuted. Its further emphasis that "nobody is above the law" indicates al-Kadhimi's willingness to crack down on these militant groups, convict them and bring them to justice.

Iraqi security officials stated that the drones used in the assassination attempt were the same explosive-laden drones used to carry out attacks against US military bases this year in Iraq. Those attacks were claimed by pro-Iranian militias, which means investigations can be narrowed down to include only two such militias: Asaib Ahl Al-Haq and Hezbollah Brigades, which both possess the Iranian made explosive-laden drones.

It seems that Iran is concerned that if al-Kadhimi condemns these militias will weaken its influence, while strengthen his popularity among the Iraqis. Furthermore, this would also prompt the international community to condemn Tehran and its militias and expose Iran's influence and put it under pressure.

2- To exonerate Iran from the assassination attempt: It is highly unlikely that pro-Iran militias

want to kill al-Kadhimi without coordination with Iran. That is why Qaani sought to meet al-Kadhimi to try to clear Iran's name and pretend that the assassination attempt was carried out by undisciplined militias and not sanctioned by Iran. That is why Qaani claimed that his meeting, with the leaders of the militias, was tense and he had to cut it short.

3- To contain US pressures: Tehran fears that the failed assassination attempt will open the door for the United States to interfere in Iraq's investigations to expose the perpetrators. US President Joe Biden ordered his national security team to assist the Iraqi security forces to identify the perpetrators. This will consequently have a negative impact on Iran's role and influence in Iraq, especially if the United States is bent on condemning Iran at international organizations such as the United Nations.

4- To discuss the formation of the new government: Qaani was scheduled to visit Sulaymaniyah and Najaf, a sign that he seeks to influence the efforts to form the new Iraqi government. That is, Iran seeks to reach a settlement before the final results of the elections are announced to guarantee that political forces representing the Popular Mobilization Forces in the next government, in exchange for their acceptance of the results and refraining from escalating their militant activities against the Iraqi government in protest of the results.

One of the factors that might help Qaani achieve his goals is that Muqtada al-Sadr, leader of the Sadrist Movement, who won a majority of votes, is facing difficulties in forming a majority government. There are concerns that exclusion of the so-called "Shia co-operation framework" would lead to a deterioration of the security situation and eventually a civil war in Iraq.

However, Iran is aware that attempts to form a new Iraqi government that is inclusive of all the Shi'ite parties that lost the elections, will be no easy task. The Sadrist Movement, will seek to control sovereign ministries even if it agrees to involve the other Shi'ite




parties, or at least to control as much ministries as possible in a way to match the majority of seats it won in the recent elections. This would mean that the number of ministries to be controlled by the “Shia cooperation framework” is set to shrink.

On another side, both al-Kadhimi and al-Sadr might seek to discuss the issue of uncontrolled arms in possession of pro-Iran militias. Overall, any relevant negotiations will be complicated and will put pressure on Iran’s influence in Iraq.


In conclusion, Qaani’s visit to Iraq is aimed at taking advantage of the failed assassination attempt and the potential involvement of pro-Iran militias in any violence in the future as leverage against the Sadrist Movement and al-Kadhimi. Even though it is one of the powers that pose threats to Iraq’s security and independence, Iran’s aim is to try and force its Shia militias on the new Iraq government, while at the same time presenting itself as a party that seeks to spare Iraq from the dangers of division.

ABOUT FARAS

Future for Advanced Research and Studies (FARAS) is an independent think tank founded on April 4, 2014 in Abu Dhabi, U.A.E. FARAS seeks to enrich public dialogue, support decision-making and enhance academic research pertaining to future trends that currently constitute a real problem in the Middle East region. In light of instability and unpredictability, the overarching goal of FARAS is to help ward off future shocks regarding these developments.

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