



Persistent Challenges:

The future of the US presence in Iraq following the fourth round of the strategic dialogue

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At the conclusion of the fourth round of the strategic dialogue between Baghdad and Washington, US President Joe Biden and Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi signed an agreement officially ending the US combat mission in Iraq by the end of 2021, more than 18 years after US forces entered Iraq. In return, Baghdad confirmed Iraq's commitment to protecting the international coalition personnel, who provide advisory and training assistance.

According to the statements of the Iraqi Foreign Minister, the fourth round of the strategic dialogue between the two countries will be the last. Hence, the understandings that took place between the two sides will form the general framework governing the bilateral relations between the two countries.

Fourth round considerations

The first round of the strategic dialogue between the two sides was held virtually on June 11, 2020, while the second round was held in Washington, DC, on August 19, 2020. The third round was held on April 7, 2021. Among the key issues discussed during these rounds is the issue of the US military presence in Iraq, particularly with US officials leaking information before the last round of dialogue, regarding the possibility of Washington's inclination to withdraw its forces from Iraq.

Not much information was revealed about the implications of the agreements that took place between

Biden and Al-Kadhimi, with the exception of what the two parties revealed in the press conference, which can be illustrated in the following:

1- Changing the status of US forces: the US-Iraqi agreement included the withdrawal of US combat forces by December 31, 2021, and the transformation of the US military presence in Iraq into one of advisory and training. This is not a novel matter that will lead to a substantial transformation of the US military role in Iraq. The joint official statement of the third round of dialogue between the two countries on April 7 of last year stipulated the same direction.

This agreement may be perceived as a strategic tactic, aimed at sparing Al-Kadhimi the embarrassment posed by the Iranian-backed militias, who were pressing hard to remove these forces by military operations, as well as supporting him politically against political parties affiliated with Iran, prior to the next parliamentary elections due in October.

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The US President stressed the continuation of security cooperation with Iraq against terrorism during the new phase, which implies the continuation of US intelligence support for the Iraqi forces. Although terrorism refers to ISIS, Washington believes that supporting the security capacities of the Iraqi forces will qualify them later to curb the threats posed by Irani militias.

2- Establishing a long-term political partnership:

the US seeks to foster the political partnership with Iraq, which was made clear in Al-Kadhimi's assertion that coordination between Iraq and the US will not be limited to the security aspect.

3- Ensuring Iraq's independence from Tehran:

Washington is seeking to support Al-Kadhimi's endeavors to maintain a sufficient distance from Iran. Al-Kadhimi also sought to achieve this at the security level, through his failed attempt to curb Iran's militias, and to establish the New Mashreq project with Egypt and Jordan, or considering the electrical interconnection with the Gulf states, to enhance Baghdad's economic independence from Tehran.

Washington believes that the Iraqi government's endeavors to control Iran's militias remain far from satisfactory. The Iraqi security forces are seeking to secure the US bases, without attempting to engage the perpetrators of these attacks.

4- Iraq not turning into a threatening base for the region:

another aspect that was considered is the assurance that that Iraq would not be a source of threat to its regional neighbors. The US seeks to secure a commitment by the Iraqi government not to use its territory as a platform for potential threats to its neighbors by the militias affiliated with Iran within Iraq.

This was explained in the statements made by Matthew Tueller, US ambassador to Iraq, on July 28, where he confirmed that Biden indicated that Iraq's stability was central to the stability of the entire region, and that establishing Iraq as a strong, stable and united country will reflect on the region.

5- Supporting the Iraqi elections: Washington seeks to ensure holding free and fair Iraqi elections, and to exploit public opinion against Tehran and the

Iraqi politicians affiliated with it, in order to bolster Al-Kadhimi's endeavors to curb Iranian influence.

These elections are quite pivotal, as Washington's influence hinges on the ability of the forces opposed to the Iranian presence to win these elections. These forces are specifically represented in Al-Kadhimi, the Sadrist movement and other forces concerned about Tehran's continuous attempts to dominate Iraq. In contrast, Tehran and its affiliates in Iraq are seeking the acquisition of advanced positions in these elections, despite the Shiite public protests against the class of politicians associated with Iran.

Tueller stressed that some parties seek to obstruct the elections, stressing that the US provides significant financial support, first to UNAMI, which will play a role in monitoring the elections, as well as to the Independent High Authority for Elections, through civil society and NGOs that provide technical support. He also stressed that the Iraqi people want to see fair elections and to see many Iraqis vote, in order to prevent Iran's parties from resorting to intimidation or vote-buying to maintain their current weight in Iraqi politics.

Possible challenges

The key challenges to the success of the US-Iraqi talks are as follows:

1- The extent of Iran's response to Al-Kadhemi's demands:

Iran is the main instigator of Iraqi Shiite militias to target the US presence in Iraq. Thus, it will be concerned with the outcome of this round of negotiations, particularly with respect to the presence of US forces in Iraq.

Al-Kadhemi is well aware of this, and accordingly, he was planning to visit Tehran after his return from Washington and after Ebrahim Raisi's coming to office. This reflects Al-Kadhemi's realization that Tehran is a major party in stirring unrest in Iraq, and that Iran needs to control the conduct of its militias within Iraq.

Tehran is betting that the Biden administration may resort to withdrawal from Iraq, if the Shiite factions target its forces in Iraq, which tempts them to continue intensifying their operations against the US presence.



2- The stance of Tehran militia: the armed factions expressed their initial rejection of the outcome of this dialogue, even before broadcasting the final statement, considering this transition of combat forces to training and advisory tasks to be mere attempts to buy time and to stay longer in Iraq. Nasr Al-Shamari, Deputy Secretary-General of the Al-Nujaba Movement, one of the Shiite Popular Mobilization factions, threatened to continue targeting US forces in Iraq even after changing their title.

Ismail Qaani, Commander of the Quds Force, arrived in Baghdad, on a 'secret' visit on July 28, after a meeting with Biden and Al-Kadhemi, in order to meet with the leaders of the Iraqi armed factions. This visit may possibly be an indicator of escalation, as Qaani's visits, as well as the past visits of former commander Qasem Soleimani, were anticipating intense escalations led by Shiite militias against US forces in Iraq.


Notably, there is a division among the Shiite forces over the US presence, as Muqtada Al-Sadr, Leader of the Sadrist movement, was one of the key supporters of the shift in the role of the US forces. He even wrote a lengthy statement calling for the cessation of all operations targeting the US military and diplomatic presence, which reflects the Sadrist movement's concern that the US withdrawal will enhance the power of the Shiite militias affiliated with Iran against the forces which are independent of it.

3- Baghdad's ability to secure the US presence: according to the US-Iraqi talks, the Iraqi government will assume direct responsibility for securing the US forces within Iraq. This raises the question about the extent of Baghdad's ability to do so, as well as whether or not the US forces will continue to respond to the attacks against them, as has recently been done.

In conclusion, this round of strategic dialogue between Iraq and the US will have significant implications, both on the Iraqi interior and on the regional security. This requires a close monitoring of Iraqi developments over the coming period, in order to test the abilities of both the Iraqi government and the US to establish agreements and understandings between the two sides against the expected Iranian challenges.

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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