



Mutual Concessions:

Did al-Kadhimi's visit to Tehran achieve its objectives?

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On September 12, 2021, Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, led a high-profile government delegation on an official one-day visit to Tehran that came upon invitation from Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi. Besides Raisi, al-Kadhimi also met Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, and other senior officials.

The aim of Al-Kadhimi's second visit to Tehran (his first was in July 2020) was to achieve a number of goals, especially because it comes less than a month before the early parliamentary elections in Iraq, scheduled for October amid severe polarization among parties and militant groups loyal to Iran and those opposing it. The most notable goals of al-Kadhimi's visit are outlined as follows:

1- Supporting the railway link with Iran: The timing of al-Kadhimi's visit is important for Iran which seeks to emphasize its economic interests in Iraq. This is especially significant after Iraq began to open up to other Arab countries through new land, air and sea transport networks with Saudi Arabia, importing electricity from Arab Gulf countries as well as through new cooperation avenues with Egypt and

Jordan in the new Levant project or "al-Sham al-Jadid" in Arabic. No doubt that these projects raised heightened concerns in Tehran which seeks to maintain its economic influence on Baghdad. That is why Iraq agreed to Iran's request to build a 32-kilometer railway link between the southern Iraqi port city of Basra and the Iranian town of Shalamjah, just across the border. Negotiations about the project began last year and culminated in an agreement to start construction of the project, which eventually serves Iran's efforts to link its Khomeini sea port to Syria's Lattakia sea port via Iraq in order to reach the Mediterranean.

Additionally, Iran can also benefit from the railway link to convince China to include it in its the Belt and Road Initiative, a project aimed at linking China to

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Europe. But Tehran might fail in achieving this goal because China chose to transport its exports to Europe via Central Asian countries, and especially Kazakhstan and Turkey. This means that the railway link between Iraq and Iran will be used solely for passengers and trade traffic between the two countries.

2- Bringing Iranian militia's under control:

Al-Kadhimi seeks to convince Iran to control its militant groups operating in Iraq, and to refrain, in the coming period, from targeting US interests in Iraq and executing the leaders of popular protests that denounce Iran's influence on Baghdad.

It should be noted that tension between pro-Iranian and anti-Iranian militia groups has escalated. There is, however, a certain degree of balance of military power between the two camps that makes any escalation, currently, go against Iranian interests. It is for this reason that Iran might respond to al-Kadhimi's request.

3- Securing Iran's "no-objection" to al-Kadhimi:

Al-Kadhimi seeks to get guarantees that Iran will not oppose him so as to remain in his post after the upcoming parliamentary elections as the new parliament will see division between pro-Iranian and anti-Iranian parties and that is where he can serve as a 'compromise candidate' between the two sides.

The major issue facing al-Khadimi is that he is considered to be close to the Sadrist Movement and someone who sought to reduce pro-Iranian militia groups' abuses and excesses, which lead to hostility among these forces. But on the other side, Iran's influence in Iraq is faced with popular rejection. That is, people in Iraq's southern Shiite-majority governorates oppose not only Tehran but also the Iraqi political class affiliated with Tehran. That is why al-Kadhimi may become acceptable by Tehran in these circumstances, especially because it is still under pressure from Washington and the West to return to the talks over its nuclear program.

4- Reducing Iran's Pressure on the Kurds: Al-Kadhimi is also trying to convince Tehran to reduce its military pressure on the Kurds in northern Iraq after the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps launched attacks against Kurdish parties, and the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan in particular, that oppose Tehran and are taking shelter in Iraq's Kurdistan Region.

Al-Kadhimi forged good relations with Iraq's Kurds, especially the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party, and sought to resolve a number of pending issues between Baghdad and Erbil, most importantly the Kurdistan Region's budget, which make it likely that both parties will back him in the coming elections.

5- Baghdad Emerging as a Regional Mediator:

Among the most important reasons for al-Kadhimi's visit to Tehran is to emphasize Iraq's intermediary role between Iran and Saudi Arabia. So far, three rounds of talks were held by the two countries in Baghdad and a fourth round, which was postponed because of the elections in Iran and the Hajj pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia, is scheduled to be held soon in Iraq.

Iraq hopes for success in the upcoming round of talks to make a breakthrough between Riyadh and Tehran, especially because the previous three rounds failed to address issues between the two countries. Additionally, the two countries will engage in the fourth round of talks with a higher level of representation.

It should be noted that al-Kadhimi's intermediary role will earn him guaranteed support from Saudi Arabia, which is an extension of Arab support, eventually boosting his popularity at home.

6-Resolving the electricity issue with Iran:

Al-Kadhimi seeks to use his latest visit to reach a solution to the crisis of Iran's gas and power exports to Iraq, which saw a sharp decline and were even cut



by Iran in July. Iran cited higher demand at home. Iran justified halting its crucial supply of power to Iraq by claiming that Iraq owes Iran about \$4 billion for energy imports.

It should be noted that talks between the two countries can possibly go as far as settling these points of contention. That is, Iraq will complete a power link to the Arab Gulf countries which will mean its power and gas imports from Iran will go down, especially because electricity imports from the Gulf will be at lower prices than those from Iran.

In conclusion, it is safe to say that al-Kadhimi sought to use his visit to guarantee that he is well-accepted across the region, especially after the Baghdad Summit. He wants to capitalize on the summit to make gains both regionally and at home, and especially to enhance his popularity among the Iraqis as a politician who is independent from Iran and who seeks to achieve rapprochement with Arab countries without antagonizing Iran. Regionally, al-Kadhimi is making efforts to spare Iraq from new conflicts and polarization between regional alliances.

On the other side, al-Kadhimi went to Iran on an invitation from Iran's president which signifies concerns in Iran over his recent regional movements. Furthermore, Iran is not expected to respond fully to several requests from Iraq, especially in regards to the need to fully rein in pro-Iranian militia groups at a time when Tehran is trying to place pressure on Washington and associate its regional influence with the nuclear talks. The reason is Tehran's desire to make a minimum of concessions during the talks, especially as the economic deterioration caused by the US sanctions curbs its ability to continue escalation.

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.