

Inside the Kadhimi Visit to Washington D.C.

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Brief Analysis

Last week, Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi led a large cabinet delegation to Washington D.C. for new sessions of the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue, topped off by the first Iraqi prime ministerial visit to the White House in over three years.

During the visit, I spoke to most of the Iraqi delegation, including one-to-one dialogue with Prime Minister Kadhimi. In my questions to many of the Iraqi leaders, I did not limit myself to the usual eliciting of future plans and predictions, which Iraqis in any case tend to dodge, recognizing that they can neither plan nor predict with confidence. I focused on how the leaders were feeling, what their professional and personal lives were like, and what they needed from the United States and other players.

Anyone who knows the Kadhimi team understands that they are determined and almost recklessly brave. They have voluntarily taken on an impossible challenge: to administer Iraq at a moment when militias infest Baghdad and are able to menace the most senior government leaders with impunity. To balance the budget at a moment when minimum monthly spending is \$7 billion and income is less than \$3 billion. To defeat COVID in a state where overcrowding and pilgrimages collide headfirst with a partially collapsed healthcare system that people are afraid to use. To give Iraqis respite from record heatwaves at a moment when the United States is asking Iraq to buy less Iranian electricity.

When explaining these challenges of the Kadhimi team to a U.S. Congressional group, it was important for me to bluntly state that the Iraqi leaders coming to the United States were, in some cases, dead men (and women) walking. As we saw with the July 6 assassination of Hisham al-Hashemi—a long-time advisor to Iraq's leaders—the physical safety of the Kadhimi team is not assured. There is no space in Baghdad where government leaders can safely walk, work, or sleep. Before this term of government is out, there is a good chance that one or more of the men or women who visited Washington this week will also be struck down by militias.

Congress and the Trump administration seem to have recognized this basic fact: even if Kadhimi cannot fix Iraq as quickly or completely as we demand from the safety of our desks thousands of miles away, his cabinet will try and their efforts are worth supporting. In sharp contrast to Kadhimi's frosty reception in Tehran last month, the Iraqi premier was treated with great respect and warmth in Washington D.C.

So, what will U.S. policy-makers and legislators have learned about the Kadhimi government from this visit?

The first impression from the Kadhimi team is that they are over-strained at an individual level. There are simply not enough people in his team. A former head of Iraq's premier intelligence agency, Kadhimi sensibly places a very high value on trust in his team and longstanding interpersonal relationships. He is trying to re-wire the system of security and anti-corruption in Iraq through executive appointments and investigations, and leaks from his inner circle could terminally weaken this effort.

However, overwork and remorseless strain could also unravel his team. In my experience, 90 percent of what is achieved by Iraq's chronically inefficient bureaucracies is made possible by just a handful of workaholic policy-makers and administrators. This trend is even more evident today in the Kadhimi government. Even so, they need to slightly open their ranks in order to relieve the task saturation of key individuals and increase the bandwidth of the government to get things done.

The second observation is that the government policy-makers need to feel better protected. On the night of June 25, the Kataib Hezbollah militia reacted to the government arrest of some of their members by sending an armed column to surround the house of Iraq's prime minister. Iraq was simply not prepared for this reaction, and great damage was done to the psychology of cabinet leaders and security force officers. In the future, much greater effort should be invested in giving the Iraqi cabinet safe spaces to operate from—safe residences, including family accommodation, and safe offices for the prime minister and cabinet.

International partners of Iraq can very easily offer a range of assistance in the form of security training for bodyguards and threatened individuals, the loan or facilitated purchase of equipment and barriers, and rapid hardening of the government center. Just as important, Kadhimi's international allies need to develop a coordinated warning and response system that can help rally political support for the government. When high-threat moments loom, or when militia harassment is underway, every major nation's diplomats in Baghdad need to have a 'telephone tree' system in which they all know which Iraqi leaders they must contact to mobilize those blocs in immediate support of the government.

At present, the Kadhimi team feels thoroughly isolated and unsupported. This is not necessarily a perfectly accurate view, but it is how reasonable people feel when they are under enormous pressure. The Kadhimi team is correct that when militia rockets are fired at the U.S. Embassy or when militias threaten the government, America's new and old friends in Iraq are typically silent. Where is Iraqi speaker Mohammed al-Halbousi at that moment? Where are the Kurdish leaders? Where is Iran's most inveterate opponent Iyad Allawi, or the other Sunni groups, or new moderate groups like Haider al-Abadi's Nasr or the Hikma movement? Petty divisions, resentments, and rivalries among the moderate blocs are the only remaining ace card held by the country's Iran-backed militia factions.

During the visit, Iraqi leaders also expressed some exasperation that the United States asks a lot but provides little of tangible value to support its friends. However, when one scratches the surface of such statements to pin down Iraqi leaders' concrete asks, they themselves do not have good answers on what they actually want the United States to do. This is the quandary of U.S. policy in Iraq: America is always waiting for Iraq to request specific things, and Iraq always thinks the Americans should know what to offer, even if the Iraqi government does not itself know. There is no substitute for hard thinking, undertaken together in a pragmatic ongoing process.

This is why the re-invigoration of the Strategic Framework Agreement through today's Strategic Dialogue is so important. The Kadhimi team came to Washington in a defensive mindset, ready to be assailed by their most powerful strategic partner for, paraphrasing one Iraqi leader, "failing to fly even though our wings are broken." Instead the Kadhimi team received creative criticism combined with a significant amount of empathy for their tough situation. This dose of realism came as a pleasant surprise and energized the Iraqi delegation. They left Washington feeling *less* alone. In particular, the Washington D.C. visit gave major encouragement to the Kadhimi team because even if all the answers

were not revealed in this visit, the United States demonstrated that it was clearly willing to keep talking in ever-increasing levels of detail about what Iraq needed in order to economically and politically stabilize, with arms under the control of a stronger state. This reinforcement of morale was clearly visible in the diversion of Kadhimi's returning plane from its destination in Baghdad to an impromptu visit to Basra, where popular anger was spiking after militias murdered activists against a backdrop of economic depression and electricity blackouts. Everyone will now watch for the results of the subsequent security force investigations.

Both the United States and Iraq face elections in the coming year, assuming Iraq can pull its early elections together before the 2022 scheduled polls. Whoever runs America or Iraq in 2022, last week's visit is a good start towards a constructive national dialogue between two states that are undeniably blood brothers—different in so many ways, the ultimate odd couple, but tied together by a mutual effort to stabilize Iraq.

In terms of this stabilization, nothing is possible without brave top-level leadership, and anything is possible if such leadership exists. Iraqi leadership is the center of gravity for Iraq's friends and its enemies. Today, that means recognizing the psychological needs of Iraq's leaders—volunteers, some of whom are dead men walking—and strengthening them with encouragement and tangible assistance that Iraqis can see and attribute to their government.



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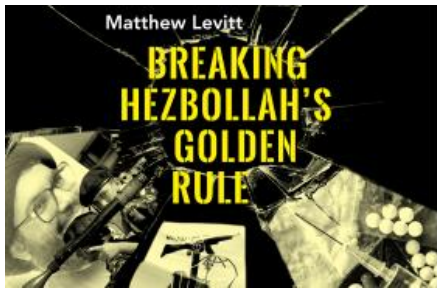
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