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The New U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue: Expert Views from Both Sides

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Brief Analysis

One of Iraq's most prominent public opinion analysts joins two American experts to assess the dialogue's achievements and discuss what Baghdad and Washington can do to advance real reform.

On June 12, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Munqith Dagher, Barbara Leaf, and Bilal Wahab. Dagher is one of Iraq's leading political analysts and a consultant to senior government and party officials. Leaf is the Institute's Lapidus Fellow and formerly served as deputy assistant secretary of state for

Iraq, among numerous other regional posts. Wahab is the Institute's Wagner Fellow, focusing on governance in Iraqi Kurdistan and Baghdad. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

MUNQITH DAGHER

The bilateral strategic dialogue has kicked off at a time when the new Iraqi government is under heavy domestic pressure, facing demands to end the U.S. military presence and sundry other political debates. Although Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi does not have the advantage of a large parliamentary bloc to support his agenda, he did emerge as the compromise candidate to lead Iraq toward a more functional political system.

Fresh polling data from the region provides intelligence about how much Kadhimi can leverage popular approval while conversing and negotiating with U.S. officials. In one survey, approximately 63 percent of Iraqi respondents expressed approval for his initial month in office. The results contrasted with those of his predecessor Adil Abdulmahdi, who received only 36 percent support during his first month. It is still too soon to truly evaluate Kadhimi, but the numbers reflect public confidence in his ability to confront Iraq's challenges.

The people's attitudes toward Iran and the United States have shifted dramatically over the past three years, signaling a new phenomenon in the Iraqi political theatre. Favorable views of Iran dropped from 50 percent in 2017 to 15 percent today, while approval of the United States has remained steady at around 30 percent. Similarly, while 74 percent of Iraqi respondents listed Iran as a reliable partner in 2017, that percentage plummeted to a mere 14 percent this year.

U.S.-Iraqi dialogue is undoubtedly focusing on ways in which the two governments can reduce corruption in Iraq, since the people voiced their major frustrations over this issue during mass demonstrations prior to Kadhimi's ascension. Economic reforms designed to ensure transparency and sustained growth can only be achieved through increased stability, and U.S. officials can play a vital role on that front as well. In doing so, however, they must learn from previous Iraqi efforts to combat corruption; repeating the mistakes made by the Coalition Provisional Authority and past Iraqi governments will only erode Kadhimi's support and damage the prospects for real reform.

In this sense, Iraqis must first help themselves by demonstrating enough political will to institute meaningful reforms while limiting Iranian influence. U.S. support will largely be contingent on the Kadhimi government's ability to counter Tehran's goal of growing its local spheres of influence.

BARBARA LEAF

The June 11 "Zoom dialogue" counts as a success and a necessary move in the political realm. To recall, the Iraqi political context has been overheated since at least January due to the targeted killings of Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the symbolic parliamentary vote to expel U.S. troops, several failed attempts to form a new government in Baghdad, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the subsequent drop in oil prices. In Washington, tempers have flared over the continued Iraqi militia potshots that led to the withdrawal of NATO personnel and a drastic consolidation of the U.S. military presence, not to mention the looming U.S. presidential election and longstanding pressure to call troops home.

Despite all these issues, the pandemic understandably compelled officials to distill the dialogue down to a few essential economic and security questions. For the Iraqis, the event helped defuse the incendiary politics surrounding the very notion of holding a bilateral event; it also emphasized the priority that both countries place on economic support for Iraq. For the Americans, the dialogue helped bolster the legality of the U.S. military mission by citing the original language of the bilateral Status of Forces Agreement and, more recently, the 2014 exchange of diplomatic notes over this issue, with a focus on underscoring the Iraqi government's responsibility for the mission's security. The event also offered a message of visibility to the Iraqi public by reiterating U.S. support for elections and government accountability. In this sense, both sides can call the substance of the dialogue a "win."

Yet officials on both sides are still keen on seeing Kadhimi visit Washington as soon as possible, in part because such a trip could drive each government to follow through on its deliverables and help kick off renewed military-to-military talks for the new era. Wrapping the U.S. security assistance program within a larger NATO effort would be more politically palatable, but alliance members will first want to see if the U.S. training mission is sustainable and under what conditions. Similarly, the international community will react negatively if militia attacks continue and U.S. politics spur troop withdrawals.

On the issue of corruption, the prime minister should focus on professionalizing, digitizing, and modernizing the banking sector in order to create an environment in which corrupt practices do not thrive. The question is no longer whether the government is willing to acknowledge the problem, but whether it can muster enough political will to make controlling corruption its top priority.

BILAL WAHAB

As Iraq increasingly looks within to solve domestic disputes, Kadhimi is well positioned to bridge deep rifts with the Kurdistan Region over oil and natural gas management. Doing so would be a big step toward placing the Iraqi energy sector on a more legally sound foundation. The United States can help by staying focused on fostering stronger relations between Erbil and Baghdad. Further deterioration would hurt the U.S. mission to defeat the Islamic State and may foment more animosity inside Iraq, exacerbating the harmful use of identity politics for political gain.

Another point that stood out in the official communique from the strategic dialogue was Iraq's acknowledgement of the need for reforms and the U.S. offer to extend technical assistance on this front. Yet the new government needs to show more political will than in the past. The reason successive governments have been unable to enact such reforms is because the country's entrenched patronage system limits its ability to muster the requisite collective action. Fortunately, the culture of patronage politics is beginning to expire as the younger generation has become increasingly frustrated with its consequences—namely, corruption and inefficiency. The system only “works” when oil prices are high, and even then, political parties can only hire so many people into an already bloated bureaucracy.

Going forward, Kadhimi will need to use his public approval and the momentum from the dialogue to lay the foundation for deep reforms. The first priority is to organize credible elections for next year. More broadly, targeting corruption needs to be more than just a slogan—it needs to be seriously considered, intentionally planned, and faithfully monitored. This means prioritizing reform of the banking sector, since Iraq remains almost entirely a cash economy. Another hotbed of local corruption is the dollar auction, which has become an avenue for laundering money and supporting Iranian interests. Finally, the government needs to reform the service sector by subjecting party finances to exposure and accountability. With U.S. help, this move alone could go a long way toward limiting Iran's influence.

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