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Trump's Rhetoric and the Crisis of Iraqi Political Moderates

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Brief Analysis

Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi is expected to face questioning in parliament over the U.S. presence in Iraq in the coming months, an unprecedented situation made possible by the increasing power and influence of Iran-backed parties opposing the American presence in Iraq. Moderate politicians, who form the base of the United States' allies in Iraq, now find themselves in a critical situation. It is becoming increasingly difficult for moderates to defend their position that the United States is an important ally, or that U.S. presence on Iraqi soil is necessary in order to prevent a repeat of 2011, when a deteriorating security situation led to ISIS's occupation of a third of Iraqi territory. The sheer number of Iraqis who have doubts about the American presence and U.S. motives in the region should not be underestimated. Today's dramatic developments in Iraqi parliament must be understood through shifts in U.S.-Iraqi relations, shaped in part by the rhetoric of current U.S. President Donald Trump.

Several of Trump's statements, dating back to the 2016 presidential campaign, have since significantly damaged the image of the United States as an ally against ISIS. During his presidential campaign, Trump's claim that then-President Barack Obama was the literal "**founder of ISIS**" has given significant credence to an extant conspiracy theory that has taken root in large segments of the Iraqi collective consciousness, as well as the broader region.

The idea that "America created ISIS" is no longer merely a conspiracy theory circulating in certain circles; it has become recognized as truth by significant segments of the Muslim and Iraqi public, and is apparently confirmed by the sitting U.S. president himself. An example of this line of thinking is that the United States uses ISIS to create unrest among different segments of Iraqi society. The belief that there is a connection between the United States and ISIS has spread to the highest levels of Iraqi politics, exemplified by then-deputy speaker Dr. Humam Hamoudi, unhesitating assertion of this theory during the 31st session of the International Islamic Unity Conference in Iran in December, 2017.

There is no doubt that this widespread belief is one of the reasons for the rapid rise of political groups hostile to the U.S. presence in Iraq, which have begun to exert pressure on the Iraqi government to force it to take a stand against

the U.S. presence there. It appears that the Iraqi Prime Minister, Adil Abdul-Mahdi, is under fire from these groups; this pressure was emphasized at the end of January when the Parliamentary Committee on Security and Defense gave Abdul-Mahdi [ten days](#) to provide accurate statistics about U.S. forces in Iraq. The committee has threatened that if it is not provided with the requested information, Abdul-Mahdi will be charged with concealing “the number of U.S. forces present in Iraq.” Now that the then-ten day period has ended, preparations for questioning the prime minister in parliament have now begun, suggesting that this is an issue that will continue to haunt the prime minister.

However, the situation has been further exacerbated by Trump’s recent [statement](#) in early February that the United States would maintain its bases in Iraq in order to be able to closely monitor Iran, [causing outrage](#) among Iraqis. On the one hand, the logic behind the statement is clear. From the American perspective, Iraq constitutes a strategic corridor that allows the United States to control Iran’s movements and nuclear activity in the region. Maintaining a U.S. military presence in Iraq will of course contribute to cutting off communication between Iran and its offshoots in Syria and Lebanon. However, publicly framing this strategic interest in this way suggest an irreverence for Iraq’s sovereignty. It seemed from Trump’s statement that the United States paid no attention to Iraqi political will, and that it was using Iraqi territory as a ‘springboard’ for fighting neighboring countries, despite the fact that this is forbidden by Iraq’s constitution.

Indeed, this new statement galvanized pressure to sign a new agreement regarding the U.S. military presence in Iraq. Some have gone so far as to push for the full withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq. Once again, U.S. allies have been put in an uncomfortable position, especially since the president’s sentiment strengthens the position of American enemies in the region, who have attempted to sow doubt about U.S. intentions and objectives in the region.

There are also arrangements taking place in the Iraqi parliament to draft a law that would eject all foreign forces from all Iraqi territory—including Kurdistan—by the middle of this year. This bill has been signed by 75 representatives of Iraq’s 328 seat parliament and draws upon Article 50 of the Iraqi constitution, which states that “Iraq is an independent country with full sovereignty over its territory, and the Iraqi army is responsible for the security of its lands, seas, and skies.”

In light of these escalating pressures, there is no doubt that U.S. allies in Iraq have found themselves in an unenviable position. At minimum, they have been obliged to respond to Trump’s statement in order to diffuse escalating sentiment among the Iraqi public. In this respect, Iraqi President Barham Salih sent messages reassuring the Iraqi public that U.S. forces were only present in Iraq in order to “combat terrorism” and warned of the gravity of these statements for U.S. allies in Iraq. As Salih [put it](#) at an international forum in Baghdad: “do not burden Iraq with your own matters. The US is a major power, but do not come pursuing your own policy priorities, as we live here.”

From a policy perspective, an American withdrawal from Iraq would not benefit the Iraqi people. An American exit could result in Iraq slipping back into chaos and could also leave the country vulnerable to further Iranian influence. However, this future is no longer an unlikely scenario, especially if the United States continues to shape its Iraq policy without taking Iraqi public opinion into consideration. U.S. allies in Iraq are steadily decreasing, and those who remain are pushed into tighter corners.

The Trump administration is well aware of the role of Iranian influence, and is pressuring these groups in order to neutralize their influence. However, the current approach of “breaking bones” that involves harsh rhetoric may do more harm than good. This style of policy is stirring up the base supporters of these groups and creates a more robust opposition against the U.S. presence in the region. If the U.S. administration hopes to be effective, it must create new platforms for dialogue with groups that express willingness for a moderate approach, and must also create strong, genuine partnerships with its allies in Iraq in order to develop joint plans that advance the interests of

all parties and constrain the country's growing Iranian influence. ❖



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