

Strengthening the Kadhimi Government (Part 1): Protection and Security Issues

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Washington expects Iraqi leaders to put their lives on the line to defend the country's sovereignty and secure the government center, but they can't do so without at least a little U.S. help.

The following is the first installment in a two-part PolicyWatch on bolstering Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi's new administration against urgent challenges. [Read Part 2](#), which focuses on government communications and media capabilities.

Iraq's government is now under almost daily assault from criminal militias such as Kataib Hezbollah (KH). The [July 6 assassination](#) of external advisor Hisham al-Hashemi is merely the latest in a string of incidents that show the government is unable to protect itself in the heart of Baghdad—an unsustainable situation that will result in rapid degradation of the state's capacity if not reversed. Fortunately, some tactical fixes are cheap, quick, and well within the capabilities of Iraq and its international partners.

VULNERABILITIES TO MILITIA INTIMIDATION

KH and other Iranian-backed militias publicly opposed Kadhimi's nomination as prime minister, and their explicit opposition to him continues today. For example, after KH members [linked to planned rocket attacks](#) were released from custody recently, they made a show of trampling on photos of the premier—despite being formal, active members of the Iraqi armed forces, which makes Kadhimi their commander-in-chief. On June 26, KH spokesman Abu Ali al-Askari publicly warned Kadhimi to stop disrupting terrorist acts against American targets, a point echoed a day later by Qais al-Khazali, head of the like-minded militia Asaib Ahl al-Haq. Worse, these sentiments have been supplemented with tangible security threats that would not be tolerated in any advanced society:

- **Assassinations.** Hashemi's murder by some combination of KH and its allies is hardly unique—various other academics, civil society campaigners, and social figures critical of the militias [have been killed as well](#). Hashemi was just outside Kadhimi's immediate circle of formal advisors, underscoring the threat faced by those who counsel or serve in the government.
- **Harassment and detention.** Hundreds of protestors were unlawfully detained by militias after mass demonstrations began in October 2019. Militias even waylaid the country's highest-profile leaders, including Kadhimi himself when he served as director of the Iraqi National Intelligence Service. In a more recent show of force, a thirty-vehicle KH column armed with heavy machine guns and 23-millimeter antiaircraft cannons drove around the International Zone on June 26, passing near Kadhimi's residence and other important locations.
- **Exclusion from key facilities.** Iraqi officials cannot safely use the prime minister's headquarters due to the presence of KH operatives on the premises and in nearby complexes taken over by the militia. The Republican Palace, where the premier is supposed to receive state visitors, is unsafe for the same reason. In all, KH and other militias occupy twenty-two key properties inside the government center, and have anywhere from 2,000 to 5,000 armed men there. Other facilities in the zone have proven similarly insecure in the past—parliament was ransacked by Sadrist figures in May 2016, and militias were free to set up camps outside the U.S. embassy and attack its outer perimeter last December.

PROTECTING IRAQI OFFICIALS

Numerous Iraqi officials and advisors live in unsafe settings and lack the most basic personal security capabilities and equipment. Tragically, in the July 6 attack, even small changes to Hashemi's security profile could have helped him survive—if he had defensive driving skills or could rely on someone who did; if his car's side window and door had been bulletproofed; if a medical first responder had been on-scene; and so forth.

It is easily within the capabilities of the U.S. Bureau of Diplomatic Security to help Baghdad protect Iraqi officials, particularly those who do not already have a personal security detail. Upon request, the U.S. government could provide some of the following support immediately, at little cost and in partnership with Iraqi intelligence and counterterrorism forces:

- Security awareness training, including countersurveillance
- Training for government drivers
- Basic life-saving training to help drivers and officials keep themselves or others alive until they reach a hospital
- Bulletproof vests
- Personal vehicle hardening kits with simple expedients such as door armor inserts, flat sheet bullet-resistant glass for windows, and run-flat tires
- Wireless car dashboard and doorbell camera systems

CREATING SAFE ZONES

Although the militias have a substantial presence inside the government center, they are not everywhere. One option would be to establish “mini Green Zones” by closing streets, but that would go against the current trend of opening up roads and avoiding permanent barriers to traffic.

Accordingly, the U.S. government should help Baghdad install a system of centrally controlled hydraulic barriers in the zone (i.e., concrete bollards that rise from recesses in the ground). This “ring of steel” approach has long been used in capitals around the world to rapidly bar vehicle access during emergencies. As long as it is remotely administered, it would pose a significant tactical challenge to militia movements within the government center and take vulnerable checkpoint guards out of the loop. Hydraulic barriers can be installed quickly and cheaply as long as the U.S. and Iraqi governments do not overcomplicate matters.

Baghdad should also think about consolidating some officials and judges in more secure housing. One option is the Prime Minister’s Guest House, an underutilized government hotel with fifty-eight rooms, including fourteen suites and two presidential suites. This facility is already used to house some officials who lack personal residences in the capital, though conditions for entry would need to be tightened if more officials are assigned there (militia actors can enter quite easily at the moment). Other locations could just as easily be used instead of the hotel, or in addition.

RECLAIMING THE GOVERNMENT CENTER

Currently, the government center is protected by the International Zone Special Forces Division (56th and 57th Brigades), an Iraqi army unit that operates under the prime minister’s National Operations Center (NOC). The unit is “special forces” in name only, though—its main duty in recent years has been to man checkpoints, so there is a strong argument for replacing it with seasoned combat units that need a rest from frontline duties against the Islamic State (IS). The refreshed division might also be reinforced with a quick-reaction unit seconded from the Counter Terrorism Service; the CTS could then conduct regular exercises in which additional reinforcements deploy from its base at Baghdad International Airport to the government center, sending a potent message to militias and desensitizing them to such movements.

For its part, the U.S. military could provide the CTS quick-reaction force with a small number of light-armored, cannon-armed fighting vehicles or similar systems, supplied at no cost as Excess Defense Articles. Such vehicles would have strong symbolic and tactical value because they overmatch any militia vehicle. They would also be easier to maintain and use than the tracked vehicles (tanks and personnel carriers) currently deployed in the government center, which rarely move and have no deterrent value anymore.

In the longer run, the government center should be cleansed of all armed forces not under the NOC’s direct operational control. The government undertook this effort in the past (albeit with less noble intentions) during the tenure of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. One approach is to appoint a “government center czar” who can inventory all properties and weapons inside the zone, then gradually reduce the number of militias illegally squatting in government residences, as well as the number and types of weapons present there. New bagging and access rules could be introduced. This is not rocket science—it has all been done before, and innovations such as hydraulic barriers would make the process smarter today.

PRINCIPLES FOR U.S. POLICY

Washington should proactively remind the Kadhimi government that the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Framework Agreement is intended to help the country defend itself against all threats, not just IS. Although the thirteen-nation Military Advisor Group (MAG) is in Iraq purely for the campaign against IS, the U.S. embassy has a broader mission, including counterterrorism, intelligence cooperation, security sector reform, and the provision of U.S. military equipment through defense sales and no-cost transfers. Another channel for cooperation is the two countries’ intelligence agencies, as outlined by Title 50 of the U.S. Code. Any of these U.S.-only, non-MAG channels would provide ample mechanisms for quietly (or loudly) supporting the Iraqi government’s efforts to protect itself.

The United States has a long wish list of actions that it is constantly prodding Baghdad to undertake, but as the latest incidents show, the price for doing so is usually paid by Iraqis—often with their very lives. Washington needs to be more proactive in offering ideas for bolstering protection, along with tangible assistance such as warning intelligence, training, and equipment. Anything less would invite the Kadhimi government to abandon hope of reining in militias and slowly crumble—one official at the time—in the face of deadly intimidation.

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