



KADHIMI: A NEW HOPE FOR IRAQ'S MULTIPLE CHALLENGES

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



On May 6, 2020, Mustafa Al-Kadhimi assumed office as Prime Minister of Iraq after more than 5 months of intense political turmoil.¹ Having served as former intelligence Chief, Kadhimi is no stranger to the labyrinth of power tussle that is Iraq's political landscape. Kadhimi was nominated by Iraq's President Barham Salih on April 9, 2020 after the previous two candidates, Mohammed Tawfiq Allawi and Adnan al-Zurfi failed to form a government.²

Kadhimi's appointment to office comes at an extremely tense point in time when Iraq is grappling with a plethora of challenges, public protests, IS resurgence in some areas, oil crisis, socio-economic woes and the latest threat, the Coronavirus pandemic. Unlike other countries, Iraq cannot afford the liberty of dealing with the virus outbreak as a singular top priority. Rather, such is the ubiquitous nature of issues plaguing the country that the incumbent Prime Minister has found himself in quite a bind. The new prime minister seems to have his work cut out for him in form of a triple threat that could easily overturn his infant rule, dissatisfied public, rogue militias and of course the Coronavirus pandemic.

¹ News Desk, "Who is Mustafa al-Kadhimi, Iraq's new prime minister?", *Al Jazeera*, May 7, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/mustafa-al-kadhimi-iraq-prime-minister-200507062954351.html>

² Ali Mamouri, "Iraq's parliament approves government of new PM Kadhimi", *Al-Monitor*, May 6, 2020. <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/05/iraq-vote-parliament-kadhimi-government-economy.html>

Public Protests and Kadhimi's Response

Countrywide mass protests have been going on almost continuously since October 2019 led mostly by anti-Iran Shiite Iraqis who loathe Iran's influence and interference in their country. Crackdowns on these protestors were carried out allegedly at the behest of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) ordered by Soleimani and carried out by Muhandis and his militia men.³ Iraq's previous Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi backed the Iranian interference in the Iraqi government's response towards the disgruntled protesters.

Thus, Kadhimi has decided to engage the public protesters to listen to their demands in a civilized manner. As his first decision as Prime minister, he ordered release of the detained anti-government protesters and also promoted a respected Iraqi general, Lieutenant General Abdul Wahab al-Saadi who had been demoted by the previous government sparking protests.⁴ Kadhimi has promised an open investigation into the mysterious killings of the anti-government protesters which allegedly has become a new chapter of human rights' abuses in Iraq. He has also pledged compensation for those killed in last year's demonstration. The latest report released by the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq depicts disturbing accounts of 99 documented cases of abductions and disappearances of 123 victims, out of which 25 are still missing. While it is believed that nearly 500 protesters had been killed by unidentified armed groups as well.⁵

Kadhimi's promises to bring justice to the bereaved families and to get to the truth of the matter will need practical follow ups especially in wake of the published UN report. Unfortunately, up until now, no protesters have actually been released even though court order had been issued. An activist with the Iraqi al-Amal Association rights group Hisham al-Mozani has reported to have said that protesters are not being freed as of yet but are being kept in detainment over crimes they have not even committed.⁶

³ Kim Ghattas, "Qassem Soleimani Haunted the Arab World", *The Atlantic*, January 3, 2020.

⁴ News Desk, "New Iraq PM releases protesters, promotes respected general" *Al Jazeera*, May 11, 2020. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/iraq-al-kadhimi-pledges-release-anti-government-protesters-200510032625751.html>

⁵ Alissa J. Rubin, "U.N. Documents Abductions and Torture Of Iraqi Protesters", *The New York Times*, May 23, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/23/world/middleeast/iraq-un-protests-kidnapping-militias.html>

⁶ Alex MacDonald, "Iraq protesters have little faith new PM Kadhimi will pursue justice over killings", *Middle East Eye*, May 23, 2020. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraq-protesters-kadhimi-human-rights-killings>

Rogue Militias

The wide network of Iran-backed militias in Iraq has since long pushed political boundaries to interfere in state affairs, toppling governments that opposed their intervention. Thus, it does not seem like an easy task for Kadhimi to tame these ragtag band of militias into security forces with a mandate working under the state's influence. But at least he recognizes the problem. In his swearing in speech, he pointed out what and who was causing instability in Iraq. Writing in one of Iraq's dailies, he wrote, "Our sovereignty is compromised, our territory turned into a field where other (countries) settle scores. The security of our citizens is threatened, not only by ISIS (Daesh) and its sleeping cells, but also by arms in the hands of non-state actors."⁷

Following the assassination of Iranian Quds force commander General Qassem Soleimani and Abu al-Muhandis (Hashd al-Shaabi leader), the complex network of non-state actors working in Iraq has become undone. Divisions within the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), the largest umbrella organization containing over 40 different militias, have become more and more pronounced in absence of Soleimani's unifying presence. Although fissures within the different PMU factions are also a symptom of an ideology getting older and their purpose getting staler. PMU were first mobilized against the threat of the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and once the threat diminished, they embedded themselves deeply into the Iraqi government.

Ongoing protests have also been against PMU's monopoly over the domestic political setup in the country. Thus, Prime Minister Kadhimi took rapid action against killing of a protester in Basra by arresting and apprehending culprits.⁸ But since these culprits belonged to a marginalized group that does not fall under the patronage of PMU, Prime Minister Kadhimi was careful not to ruffle any important feathers. Thus, it reflects the overall inclination of his policy posture which would be pragmatist and realist devoid of any sectarian or ethnic pull, but also without stepping on any important toes. Many say that his neutral sectarian posture combined with his practical demeanor was the reason that President Barham Salih handpicked him for candidacy.

Coronavirus Challenge

Iraq's coronavirus response has been marred by its poor health infrastructure and unstable security situation which is a result of the constant state of war in the country since 2003. However, some

⁷ Hussain Abdul-Hussain, "Iraq's new PM pledges to crush pro-Iran militias, so why is Tehran silent?", *Arab News*, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1678496>

⁸ News Desk, "The Iraq Report: Mustafa al-Kadhimi takes aim at pro-Iran militias", *Al-Araby*, May 15, 2020. <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2020/5/15/the-iraq-report-kadhimi-takes-aim-at-pro-iran-militias>

preventive measures had been taken in March such as enforcing lockdown, fumigation, curfews in provinces and banning interprovincial travelling.⁹ Schools and shrines had been shut down in the city of Najaf since February. However, in late March, thousands descended upon the Shrine of Imam Kadhim in Baghdad defying government orders which caused an outbreak of the virus in numerous pilgrims.¹⁰ Although people seemed to have learnt their lesson following this, but it is still a rather disturbing fact that this happened despite a religious fatwa by Ayatollah Sistani¹¹ over going to shrines during such times.

For the new PM, aligning his government's response with that of the different influential religious figures that hold sway over public opinion will be an uphill task. Apart from this, damage to Iraq's already unstable economy is tremendous as oil makes up about 90% of its revenue. With the oil prices plummeting to \$34 per barrel this week instead of the Iraq's pre-Covid expected projections of \$55 per barrel, oil sector has taken a hit and will continue to do so, compromising innumerable jobs. Iraq's religious tourism setup has also seen a complete collapse during this outbreak endangering local businesses attached to the pilgrimage sites. Former Iraqi Minister for Planning, Nuri Al-Dulaimi warned that poverty could rise to more than 20% in the aftermath of the Covid-19 crisis.¹²

Compounding all these challenges, a sleeping monster has also suddenly reared its head in form of the Islamic State (IS) that has used this opportunity to regroup. It has ramped up number of attacks during the past month but it seems weaker still. Prime Minister Kadhimi has announced an offensive against the group that is as of yet being classified as 'resurgent' and far from its peak of activity.¹³ However, it is important to keep the global response to this threat as proactive as before even during times of the pandemic to avoid resurfacing of its violent extremist agenda.

⁹ <https://gds.gov.iq/covid-19-iraqi-government-announces-new-measures/>

¹⁰ Henry Austin, "Hundreds of thousands defy Iraq's coronavirus curfew to visit martyred imam's shrine", *NBC News*, March 21, 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/hundreds-thousands-defy-iraq-s-coronavirus-curfew-visit-martyred-imam-n1165536>

¹¹ Raed Ahmed, "The Religious Dimension of Iraq's Coronavirus Response", *The Washington Institute*, May 8, 2020. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Iraq-Coronavirus-Religion-Sunni-Shia>

¹² News Desk, "Coronavirus to raise poverty rate in Iraq to over 20%, warns minister" *Middle East Monitor*, May 5, 2020. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200505-coronavirus-to-raise-poverty-rate-in-iraq-to-over-20-warns-minister/>

¹³ News Desk, "ISIS is taking advantage of the pandemic to regroup – but it is not as strong as it pretends to be", *The National*, May 28, 2020. <https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/editorial/isis-is-taking-advantage-of-the-pandemic-to-regroup-but-it-is-not-as-strong-as-it-pretends-to-be-1.1025502>

Kadhimi, Iran and the US

Warding off these internal challenges will not be easy for the new Iraqi premier especially if important external stakeholders like Iran and the United States are opposed to his policy posture. Both Iran and the US have so far welcomed him but his initial words and speeches have hinted that he is opposed to the idea of Iraq getting caught in a crossfire of a US-Iran conflict which has been happening ever since 2003.

US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo discussed the possibility of a US-Iraq strategic dialogue for future partnership, while Iran's media outlets also welcomed his appointment to the office. This rather unexpected consensus between Iran and US over Iraq seems amiss to many and news about a 'secret deal' between the two has also been making rounds according to which Iran enabled Kadhimi's appointment in exchange for US unfreezing some of its assets in Europe.¹⁴ It may be dismissed as a rumor, but there are questions about whether this appointment could bring divisions between Iran and its backed militias such as Kataib Hezbollah who strongly opposed Kadhimi's nomination.¹⁵

Kadhimi also seems irked by the deep influence of these militias which can cause him to lose Iraqi public's confidence as has been the case with his predecessors. Thus, it will be up to him to make tough decisions to weed out evils such as corruption and sectarian monopoly of the political set up to build a stable political structure that is backed by a sound economic backbone. Bringing all militias under stricter state control to check rogue actions will also help improve the security situation, while the fight against IS must continue to ensure its downfall. Iraq must also negotiate firmly with the US for better dividends of socio-economic development and security in return for its prolonged presence.

¹⁴ Zehra Nur Duz, "Secret Iran-US deal leads Kadhimi to power in Iraq" AA, May 18, 2020
<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/secret-iran-us-deal-leads-kadhimi-to-power-in-iraq/1844921>

¹⁵ Ibid.