

POLITICAL TRANSITION IN IRAQ AND ITS FUTURE



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Iraq has been a battleground for the last two decades. The challenges it faced and still faces are enormous. The job that President George W Bush outlined as the decision to invade Iraq (2003), two decades later, is still not complete. The years following the US invasion have marked little economic growth, mass unemployment, the rise, fight and defeat of ISIS and political instability in Iraq. Yet, there are definite changes that have been made and more changes that could be made. Steps could be taken to make Iraq a secure and safe place with meaningful change being carried out.

The main problem that Iraq faces, when looking holistically, is the lack of stability. Governments have come and gone with minute impact, while militant groups have both protected and attacked Iraqi citizens. Of course, there are also the constant interventions by the United States of America and Iran, which has often led to tensions between groups and even protests; the recent one being the attack on the US embassy in Baghdad in response to US airstrikes on Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).

To understand the situation in Iraq, we need to understand the different religious groups present in Iraq, and which side they are on. There are mainly three ethnic groups in Iraq: the Sunnis, the Shias and the Kurds. These ethnic groups have been present in the region for hundreds of years. These groups coexisted peacefully together, however there were tensions between each of these groups. After the US invasion of 2003, nearly all of the population treated the coalition troops as heroes.

18 years later, Iraq is certainly better, but it's in the midst of huge crises. The large protests by Iraqi citizens since October 2019, culminated in the resignation of Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi. Many protested the corruption and inaction of the government, leading to unemployment and the influence of Iran in Iraqi politics. Many protested in front of government buildings, and burned down the Iraqi Consulate. In turn, many pro-Iranian protestors attacked the US Embassy, leading to US President Donald Trump to call for swift action to catch the perpetrators. Protestors of both sides were dealt with violence from the police, security forces and militias.

The situation in Iran is mainly influenced by foreign power such as Iran and the United States. However, the slogan for this mass protest was "Neither America nor Iran, our revolution is a young revolution."¹ The protestors are angry about corruption at the highest level of government. The government is, in paper,

¹ Al-Rubaie, Azhar. "No to America, no to Iran': Thousands protest against foreign influence across Iraq." 10 January 2020. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/no-america-no-iran-thousands-protest-against-foreign-influence-iraq>

supposed to be an inclusive system. However, it functions differently and is based on the *Muhasasa* system. After the invasion in 2003, this system was introduced in Iraq to maintain political balance between political parties and make sure minorities are fairly represented in the government.

The *muhasasa* system was the brainchild of Iraqi opposition during the premiership of Saddam Hussein. It was decided that when there would be power, it would be divided between political parties based on religious sects. When the coalition troops liberated Iraq, there needed to be a governing force in Iraq. The American government foresaw this and established the Office for Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA) on 20th January 2003, two months before the invasion. After the invasion, ORHA was transformed into the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) with Lieutenant General Jay Garner being its head. However, he was soon replaced by Paul Bremer who would serve as its head for the remainder of the CPA's existence. Bremer made two important decisions during his first days: the "De-Ba'athification" of Iraqi society and the disbandment of the Iraqi army. The CPA then formed the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) which was made up of members who had fled during Hussein's reign. They made important decisions and the plan by the US government and Bremer was to hand over the country to them. The IGC members were selected based on sectarian lines and according to the population of Iraq so as to represent minorities as well.

This system of *Muhasasa* was continued in the elections, the first of which was held in December 2005 and the last in May 2018. The *Muhasasa* system works on how many parliamentary seats each party or each bloc gets. The bloc with a certain number of seats has a number of "points" to spend. For example, a bloc with 30 parliamentary seats have 15 points to spend. It is generally decided that the Prime Minister, President and the Speaker of Parliament would be divided between a Sunni, Shia and Kurd. The parties can spend 10 or 15 points to get a ministry post. This is particularly important as there are important portfolios such as the Foreign Ministry and the Minister of Oil. Such points could also be used to get deputies of certain posts. There is also a division of posts based on sects in the Prime Minister's cabinet: 54% Shi'a, 24% Sunni, 18% Kurdish, 4% minorities.

This system is particularly the reason the Iraqi government is unstable. While it is true that this system allows minorities to be included, it also leads to the party messages mainly on religious sectarian lines. When there is already a defined set of ministry posts, parties do not stray beyond their voter base. It is already known what a party or bloc can win before the election and thus most revert to populist or nationalist rhetoric. Another major flaw in this system is that elected parliamentarians can change their parties after the election. This means that politicians change their alliances and the votes of people don't

particularly go to their supported parties. Another reason the *Al Muhasasa* system is bad for Iraqi politics is that it allows many politicians to hold the reigns of power over a long time. So there are very few reforms in the country.

Perhaps the main criticism of the system is the difficulty to pass laws and reforms through their government and the lack of progress through that. The *Al Muhasasa* system allows for a multi-party cabinet, so it is very difficult to gain traction and support for a law or a bill introduced in the parliament. Since there are many parties, it is often difficult to nominate a prime minister, who has the most of the executive powers. The prime minister has to take into consideration the interests of all parties or at least, the ruling bloc, which is made up of political factions. What makes it worse is that there is external influence on these parties, thus interfering in Iraq's internal matters. Thus, a party of the ruling bloc may choose not to support a bill if it does not support their interests. It also makes the prime minister's job harder as he has to navigate the parliamentary system as well the cabinet to approve and pass a bill.

Iraq has been affected by decades of not only political instability, but also military instability. Although the Iraqi army is fairly dedicated to the government, the rise and fall of the Islamic State brought about a lot of military forces in the country. The main organization of militias in the country is the Popular Mobilization Forces, a group of 40 or more militias. The militias are mostly Shia Muslims, and were first recognized as a group in the fight against ISIS. The militias were called collectively as the PMF, after some of the militias responded to a fatwa by Ali al-Sistani. Sistani is one of the most influential Shia clerics and his call to fight ISIS was met with a huge response. The fight and eventual win against ISIS legitimized and popularized the PMF.

However, the Iraqi government didn't have any authority over the PMF, until recently. The PMF Law brought the PMF directly under the commander in chief, who is the Prime Minister. However, the transition has not been entirely successful. The organization is made up of militias, who were funded, armed and trained by Iran. Iran created these militias to fight ISIS. When the war against ISIS was over, the militias were still under Iranian influence. The Iranian government regularly sent military leaders such as the former commander of the Quds Forces Qassem Soleimani to Iraq to speak with such militias. Soleimani was meeting with the leader of the Iranian-influenced militias Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis when both were assassinated on 3rd January 2020 by a US airstrike.

The death of Soleimani and Muhandis brought the Middle East to a standstill. Soleimani was an influential leader around the world. He was extremely popular in Iran, second perhaps only to Ayatollah

Khameinei. His influence was also huge in the PMF. Soleimani openly mocked American troops and was virtually untouchable. The assassination was a shock to the international community.

The replacement for Soleimani is Esmail Ghaani, the long time deputy to Soleimani. However, he is not popular or influential among the Iraqi military or the general population. Soleimani was a visionary; he cultivated meaningful contacts with Iraqi politicians which would later help Iran extend its influence. He personally met with many militia leaders, often bringing them gifts.² The virtually unknown Ghaani faced a momentous task in keeping these relations strong, and a year after his succession, the situation has not improved.

Ghaani, on his first visit, did not have much of an impact. PMF leaders were reportedly displeased with his persona and with his brisk method of conducting business. This is particularly important as the PMF is an intricate group, with many interests to be taken into consideration when making a decision. Ghaani's appointment was because of him being next in line rather than being influential or important. Iran needed a strong response to the assassination of Soleimani and a replacement helped Iran portray itself as undeterred.³

Soleimani and Muhandis were planning to institutionalize the PMF forces. The assassination halted plans of that. The protests against corruption and American/Iranian influence that rocked Iraq in October 2020 also put a stop to those plans. The latter of these two events made Sistani, the religious leader, issue a call for no-violence. The Shia Pro-Sistani factions of the PMF left after the protests and reported to the Ministry of Defence and are now under direct command of the Iraqi government.⁴ The Arabat militias, as it is known in Iraq is unique. It has no human rights violations and is peaceful. It has no political views

²Press, Associated, editor. "Troubled Iran struggles to maintain sway over Iraq militias." 11 June 2020. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/world/2020/jun/11/troubled-iran-struggles-to-maintain-sway-over-iraq-militias-2155267.html>

³ Fazeli, Yaghoub, and Emily Judd. *Iran's new Quds Force commander Esmail Ghaani 'not another Solemani': Expert*, 4 January 2020. <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2020/01/04/New-IRGC-Quds-Force-commander-Esmail-Ghaani-not-another-Solemani-Expert>

⁴Ahmed, Omar. "Pro-Sistani factions leave Shia forces, but Iraq's PM signals they are here to stay." 18 May 2020. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200518-pro-sistani-factions-leave-shia-forces-but-iraqs-pm-signals-they-are-here-to-stay/>

and has rarely expressed political sentiments publicly. This group is made up of soldiers who mainly responded to Sistani's fatwa for the fight against ISIS.⁵

This has also presented an opportunity to the current Prime Minister Kadhimi to establish political stability. The assassination of both these influential leaders has left a void in leadership roles. This could help Kadhimi to convince PMF leaders to merge their commands with the Iraqi army. Kadhimi has already integrated the Arabat (Pro-Sistani) of the PMF. The death of Soleimani offered an unique opportunity to Kadhimi: interaction of all PMF forces without Iranian influence. Kadhimi has been stalled by the coronavirus pandemic, a bust economy and unemployment. However, bringing in the PMF would possibly result in a safer Iraq. It would also mean that Iraq can counter the threat of the newly formed ISIS, which has resurged in recent months.

To say the position of the prime minister of Iraq is one of the hardest jobs in the world is an understatement. One of the more important parts of his jobs is securing and considering the interests of various domestic and international parties in Iraq. The two countries vying for influence in Iraq are Iran and the United States of America. The US is going through a tumultuous time domestically, and the inauguration of Joe Biden will mark a significant shift of foreign policy from the Trump administration, albeit similar to the Obama administration's policies. The crippling economic effects of the coronavirus pandemic, the assassination of Soleimani and the introduction of Joe Biden all point to the same thing: improved relations between Iran and the US.

Joe Biden's policies will be similar to that of his former boss Barack Obama. Experts expect the incoming administration to hold talks to salvage the Iran Nuclear Deal; Biden's team have apparently already started talks with Iran.⁶ Biden will approach Iran diplomatically and hope to make US-Iranian relations better. The Biden administration will also make sure that the US secures its interests as a long time partner of Iraq. Iraq should take this as a sign. Iraq, as a partner to both countries, can broker talks between them.

This move will help Iraq's interests. On the American part, Iraq can ensure military support from US military forces. American forces could be in Iraq in a training capacity to the Iraqi army. The Iraqi army

⁵ Knights, Michael, et al. *The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces*, 28 May 2020.
<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/future-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces>

⁶ Staff, TOI, editor. *Report: Biden team already holding talks with Iran on US return to nuclear deal*, 16 January 2021.
<https://www.timesofisrael.com/report-biden-team-already-holding-talks-with-iran-on-us-return-to-nuclear-deal/>

needs to be stronger to counter the new militant groups threatening Iraq's stability. Iraq will also need support to fight ISIS which has resurged in recent months. The Americans can serve as an able partner and Iraq can also reach out to the US' allies. This will also help Iraq lift itself out of the economic crisis it is presently in. The United States, on the other hand, will be keen to keep a military base in Iraq. Joe Biden has expressed eagerness to work with Iraq and Kadhimi can, hopefully, have an active relationship with the United States.

Iraq will also need to consider the Iranian factor. Iran is in the middle of a massive economic crisis. A number of factors including low oil prices, the coronavirus pandemic, and crippling US economic sanctions have put Iran in a desperate situation.⁷ There has been mass employment and the value of the Iranian Rial has shot down. This has led to the pumping of millions of dollars into the market. In short, Iran is in dire straits. Iran has repeatedly said that Washington "unconditionally" lift the sanctions, although it seems unlikely Joe Biden will be in a hurry to do that.⁸ Iran will pursue a diplomatic route and Iraq is the perfect mediator for this conversation.

Iraq, for all its trouble, can make the United States and Iran agree to no intervention in domestic affairs. This is something that Biden has expressed an interest in. On the other hand, Iran will be hard to convince and even harder to make them stick to their deal. Iran will not want to strain Iraqi-Iranian relations, but will be reluctant to loosen their grip in Baghdad. However, a call to the Popular Mobilization Forces to integrate with the Iraqi military could be a step in the right direction. Many soldiers in the pandemic have been going through rough times and legal recognition of their status, some believe, will help them cope with the economic effects. This will help Kadhimi control the military more effectively and hopefully Iraq will have some sort of stability and security,

The effectiveness of the premiership of Kadhimi will depend on the change he brings. For the change to be brought, his administration needs to carefully secure the interests of the different political factions in and outside of Iraq. This is a temporary step, and Kadhimi's long term focus should be to nominate and appoint leaders who will help Iraq's cause. In addition to that, his cabinet will have to carefully balance the influence Iran and the United States of America exerts on the affairs of the Iraqi government.

⁷ Parisa Hafezi and Davide Barbuscia, "Currency Crisis Impoverishes Iranians, strains Economic Defenses", July 7, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-economy-rial-analysis/currency-crisis-impoverishes-iranians-strains-economic-defenses-idUKKBN2480M3?edition-redirect=uk>

⁸ "Iran Calls on Joe Biden to Unconditionally Lift US Sanctions", Agence France- Presse, January 23, 2021. <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/iran-calls-on-president-joe-biden-to-unconditionally-lift-us-sanctions-2356819>

Hopefully, the Kadhimi government can bring change to Iraq and give the Iraqi people the change, peace and security it deserves.