The New Three-Dimensional Political Situation in Iraq: An Iraqi Point of View

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The Burke Chair at CSIS is presenting a commentary by an affiliate of the organization. Dr. Munqith Dagher is an Iraqi expert and a Senior Associate with CSIS, whose biography is summarized below.

As a native Iraqi pollster, I have been closely watching the recent political developments in Iraq, which remind me of the poll results I have observed over the last three years that show a sharp decline in Iranian soft power in Iraq. It is clear that Iran and its supporters in Iraq have started to behave differently in the recent few months than they have in the past. They have chosen less confrontational policies and have added more flexibility in their relationship with Iraq and the U.S. interests in Iraq as well.

Recent tweets by Muhammad al Ghabban, head of the al-Fateh bloc – a coalition of pro-Iranian parties in the Iraqi parliament – surprised many and elicited both positive and negative reactions. In his first tweet, he called on the United States to understand the position of his bloc in voting for Mustafa al Kadhimi’s role as Prime Minister and their support for his new government in parliament. Ghabban said that it was a position dictated by the critical circumstances that Iraq is going through and that America must now fulfill its pledges to support Iraq.

Ghabban (who was initially opposed to the appointment of Kadhimi) was then made the subject of a major attack campaign from those close to the Iranian revolutionary axis. He was accused of retreating from the principles of resistance against America. In the wake of this campaign, which was launched in both Arabic and Persian, Ghabban responded with a tweet accusing his critics of not understanding the policy and trying to bring down the traditional leaders in the Al-Fateh bloc, which had long been very close to Iran's hardline revolutionary stance in Iraq. To understand the reality of this important development, it must be placed in a three-dimensional analytic framework from an Iraqi, Iranian, and American point of view.

The Iraqi Dimension

These developments come after important events in the political scene during the past two years. The most important of which is Iran's loss of its soft power, which has long helped it win the Shiite street in Iraq. Since 2017, polls conducted by my
research group, Alustakilla (IIACSS), indicated that Iran is continuously and sharply losing its popularity to the point where the percentage of Shiites who see Iran as a reliable partner for Iraq has reached less than 25% by the end of 2019, a decrease from 75% in 2016. Also, the percentage of Shiites who believe that Iran has a negative impact on Iraqi politics increased to more than 80% at the end of 2019.

This negative attitude towards Iran among the Shiite masses of Iraq, which has evolved out of practical economic and political considerations, has made all Iraqi Shiite political forces recalculate their positions. The dumping of cheap Iranian goods in the Iraqi market (especially in the Shiite South) led to the collapse of many Iraqi factories and farms due to their inability to compete. Iran, which was deeply supportive of the previous Iraqi governments that were mired in failure and corruption, was considered the source of much of this deterioration in the political and economic situation because Iran was the main force behind the establishment of these governments.

The October 2019 uprising in Baghdad and the South illustrates this negative thinking. The slogan “Iran must stay out of Iraq!” was among the most prominent slogans used by the demonstrators. The demands of these demonstrators to change the entire regime and its main players showed the leaders of Shiite political Islam – who currently dominate the Iraqi political scene – that their displacement would be inevitable unless they made substantial changes in response to the desire of the street. These changes included agreeing to the resignation of Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi and dropping their reluctance to accept the nomination of Kadhimi, who has long been accused by Shiite political forces close to Iran of being an American stooge. They even went so far as to accuse him of killing Soleimani and Muhandis.

The killing of two key leaders, Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran’s IRGC Al Quds Force, and Abu Mahdi al Muhandis, the deputy command of the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq – who had been able to unify much of the Shiite political base at the beginning of 2020 – added another dimension to the problems that Iraqi leaders close to Iran found themselves in after the October uprising.

The absence of such leaders, who had been able to control the divisions among the components of Shiite political Islam in Iraq, led to the public eruption of Shiite differences. The reference Ghabban made in one of his tweets to those specific differences is added evidence of those divisions, which surfaced with the resignation of Abdul-Mahdi and the first choice of a potential successor.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its massive economic repercussions in combination with the decline in oil prices threatened the Iraqi economy with collapse. This added another burden that the Iraqi state cannot bear without resorting to some very difficult solutions and decisions – the most important of which is the need to request
foreign aid from countries that can help Iraq. These are countries that have taken tough positions on Iran and its proxies in Iraq. Taken together, these factors caused Ghabban and other hawks of the so-called Axis of Resistance to show a level of flexibility and pragmatism that no one would have thought possible a few months ago.

**The Iranian Dimension**

It is no secret that Iran is suffering severely as a result of the interaction between the effects of the U.S. economic sanctions and the anger on the Iranian street that was embodied in the recent popular demonstrations. This has put the forces of Iranian militancy in direct confrontation with both the people and with the more moderate Iranian leaders that have been held responsible for the severe economic political crisis and the suffering of the people.

The COVID-19 pandemic – which has hit Iran harshly and made Iran one of the epicenters of the global epidemic – added major economic and social problems as well. So did the assassination of Soleimani, Iran's strongman and the principle mind behind its policy in the region, which caused a leadership vacuum in Iran’s efforts to influence outside states. The downing of a Ukrainian passenger plane by the Revolutionary Guards further undermined the credibility of both Iran and its Revolutionary Guards internally and externally.

As a result, Iran lost much of its influence and soft power not only in Iraq, but in other parts of the region. The most important scene of such protests was in Lebanon, which also witnessed major demonstrations. The popular demands in Lebanon called for the end of Iranian influence, making the joint forces of political moderation and state forces win this round of conflict with the joint forces of militancy and revolution.

Given these events in mind, it is possible to understand the reasons for a recent tweet by the leader of the Iranian Revolution, Supreme Leader Khamenei. He is referred to Imam Al-Hassan (who was known in the Sunni and Shi’ite Islamic heritage as having reconciled with Mu’awiya, Shi’ite Islam’s most historically important enemy) and as the bravest person in Islamic history.

This tweet has tremendous significance. There is a clear indication here of the possibility of a new agreement with the United States, despite all the structures that prevailed in the Iranian discourse towards the American administration during the past year.

The same possibilities emerge from the lack of Iranian opposition to the nomination of Prime Minister Kadhimi, who Iranians feel is close to America. Iran is increasingly aware of the size of the threat to its leadership and stability that it now
faces, and it is seeking help from the West to get out of its predicament. This became even clearer after Iran’s leadership realized that relying on its Chinese and Russian allies and friends, and even Europeans, could not provide it with a way out of the current crisis. Iran now believes that Iraq may be one of the arenas to reach an understanding with the West, particularly America. It has also become clear to Iran that Trump’s position on Iran is truly different from Obama’s and that threatening American forces in Iraq can only lead to more pressure on Iran.

The American Dimension

All of the previous U.S. administrations since the time of President George Bush Jr. relied on sanctions, opposing Iranian arms transfers, a military presence, and an influence in Iraq, the Gulf, and the Levant, while avoiding serious escalation in confronting with Iran. This left the initiative in the hands of Iran and allowed its representatives to threaten American influence and interests without serious retaliation.

Iran’s use of revolutionary militias loyal to Iran were particularly difficult for America to confront without wading into a political and military quagmire. As a result, successive U.S. administrations relied on containing the Iranian threat by not escalating and leaving their allies in the region to confront the Iranian expansion.

It was this pattern of events that led Iran to nominate its powerful ally in Iraq, Nuri al Maliki, for the post of prime minister despite his loss in the 2010 elections. The U.S. accepted this nomination in exchange for a pledge that the militias allied to Iran would not hinder the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq.

At the same time, the U.S. did not send clear signals. In his interview in the April 2016 issue of The Atlantic near the end of his term, Obama stressed the need for Iran and Saudi Arabia to sit down to work out a deal about distribution of power in the region as if they were responsible for the people of the region. In the Iranian nuclear agreement, there were no stipulations to limit Iran's military, political, and economic influence, which was one of the reasons behind the rise of ISIS.

In contrast, the Trump administration adopted the strategy of directly confronting Iran front and center, making major increases in the pressure it put on Tehran’s leadership. By restoring and increasing major economic and political sanctions on Iran, this administration has caused tremendous negative effects on Iran’s economy. These effects became steadily more critical by the end of 2019, and they are still escalating. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic and the sharp drop in oil prices, there were reports that indicated the possibility that the Iranian economy would collapse at the beginning of 2021.
The Trump Administration also took firmer military action. When Iran experimented with making more use of pro-Iranian Iraqi militias against American forces in Iraq, it had already successfully tested during the Obama administration, it got a completely different U.S. reaction. The U.S. reacted by attacking these militias, punishing their leaders, and sending clear messages that the U.S. had no intention of giving up influence in Iraq.

While Trump’s tough stance toward Iran may have been guided by his close relations with Saudi Arabia and Israel or by his desire to look strong and decisive in responding to pro-Iranian militias in Iraq, what is important is that Iran got a very different response than it expected when it used its proxies to threaten U.S. forces in Iraq.

The Potential Scenario of Confrontation in Iraq

It now seems that Kadhimi will adopt a policy of dual containment of American and Iranian influence in Iraq. The strategic dialogue between Iraq and Iran next month will provide a golden opportunity for Kadhimi to implement that policy.

Kadhimi’s government is not required to become a strategic partner of America. Rather, the Americans have signaled that they will be satisfied if Iraq makes a serious effort to become independent of Iranian influence. This U.S. satisfaction will also increase if Kadhimi manages to control the institutions of the Iraqi state and uproot the parallel state led by those with guns and money on the streets of Iraq.

On the other hand, the Iranians now seem likely to be satisfied if Iraq is not used to threaten their sovereignty and their state. They will be even more satisfied if Iraq guarantees them economic relations that will help them out of their suffocating crisis. They also hope that Kadhimi will be one of the keys to sitting down again with the Americans to reach an agreement that may not satisfy their revolutionary ambition but meets their urgent economic and political needs.

This, however, will only be possible if the U.S. demonstrates support and goodwill in its next strategic dialogue with Iraq. Now is not a time when Iraqis should expect much aid from the Americans, especially in light of the dire economic situation in the United States after the pandemic. However, the U.S. must prove to Ghabban and those behind him that it places a high value on its strategic interests in Iraq and that it is ready to extend American aid to support Iraq’s economy and to confront the prospects of ISIS’s return. Such a strategy may help greatly in strengthening the growing pragmatic trend in Shia political Islam in Iraq.

This commentary entitled, The New Three-Dimensional Political Situation in Iraq: An Iraqi Point of View is available for download.

Biography of the author:

Dr. Munqith Dagher is the CEO and founder of IlACSS research group (Al Mustakillah) in Iraq and a Gallup International board member. He conducted Iraq’s first ever public opinion poll in 2003. Munqith holds a Ph.D. in Public Administration and a Master’s degree in War Sciences. He was professor of public administration and strategic management in Baghdad, Basrah and at the National Defense University.