

Will Trump-MBS Shore Up Iraq's Corrupt Ruling Families in Return for Keeping US Troops? Iraq-Iran Relationship in Crisis?

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Global Research, August 13, 2020

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)
Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Military](#), [Military and WMD](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)
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Iraq's new Prime Minister Mustafa al Khadimi's, decision to make Saudi Arabia rather than Iran his first destination abroad contradicted with what all his predecessors had done. It was designed to send a clear message indicating that he has not only sympathised with Trump-MBS outrage that Iraq's previous PM - Adel Abdul Mehdi - has tilted the balance of power in favour of their arch foe Iran, but he is also determined to take practical steps to rein in what they perceive as Iranian perilous influence. In response, Iran dispatched its Foreign Minister Javid Zarif on 19 July, to Baghdad to underline that while Tehran would shield its interests in Iraq, it would nevertheless back Khadimi's quest to mediate between Tehran and Riyadh.

And while Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) - King Salman's young son, who is the de facto ruler - cited his father's sudden illness as an excuse for cancelling Kadhim's visit, yet in reality Riyadh has made no secret that it regarded Kadhim's steps to curb Iranian influence woefully short of achieving its overarching goal, namely dismantling the Popular Mobilisation Forces PMF, a government controlled grouping of predominantly Shia paramilitary units - formed after Grand Ayatollah Ali al Sistani fatwa in 2014 - that have spearheaded Iraq's fight-back against ISIS. And given the unprecedented dire economic challenges facing Riyadh - largely due to MBS's futile unwinnable war on Yemen and tumbling oil prices precipitated by coronavirus - MBS was keen to avoid financially propping up Khadimi's government.

With Khadimi's visit to Tehran on 20 July under the spotlight, he emphasized that Iraq is hell-bent on balancing US-Iranian competing interests, urging both sides to refrain from turning Iraq into a battlefield. His appeal comes amid an escalating confrontation that was triggered on 3 January, by the US assassination of Gen. Qassem Soleimani head of Iran's elite Revolutionary Guard Corps near Baghdad airport. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei fired back reminding Khadimi that the US had not merely assassinated your guest Suleimani on Iraqi soil - the ultimate humiliation according to Arabic tradition -, but also defiantly bragged about it. More significantly, however, he insisted that Iran expects Khadimi to implement Iraq's Parliament resolution issued on 5 January, demanding the full withdrawal of all foreign troops.

As ever, the latest waves of protest that have been rocking the Shia heartland since 1 October 2019 were sparked by almost non-existent public services, widespread unemployment and endemic corruption, but in the face of a vicious crack down by Abdul Mahdi's government it spiralled out of control, prompting al Sistani to explicitly instruct the

parliament to replace Abdul Mahdi with an uncontroversial new PM, whose primary task would be preparing the ground for a fair elections.

As part of the increasingly aggressive Trump-inspired and MBS-sponsored strategy Iraq, instead of Syria, became the central battlefield for rolling back Iranian influence. Brett McGurk, who was US Envoy to Iraq, successfully managed – after the last 2018 parliamentary elections – to forge a coalition of Shia political blocs comprised of Muqtada al Sadr, Ammar al Hakim, and Iraq's ex-PM Haider al Abadi. But, Soleimani's intervention derailed his attempts to install a US-friendly PM.

Buoyed by Soleimani's assassination and emboldened by US-Saudi support, Ammar al Hakim – who is increasingly becoming Riyadh's main Shia point man – scrambled to revive his alliance with al Sadr and Abadi while also conspiring with Barham Salih – Iraq's Kurdish President – to promote al Khadimi's candidacy and simultaneously thwart attempts by Iran-friendly political leaders, namely Hadi al Amiri and Nouri al Maliki, to appoint an Iran-backed PM. Faced with an unparalleled existential threat, the leaders (God Fathers) of the Mafia-like family-controlled political blocs concluded that the only conceivable way to shore up the unravelling political system was mollifying Trump by appointing Khadimi on May 9 Prime Minister and striking a deal enabling Washington to keep a fraction of its troops in Iraq. Yet ironically, the strategic dialogue which took place on 11 June, amounted to a declaration of Iraq's unconditional surrender. The US not only refused committing itself to a withdrawal timetable but far worse demanded Iraqi protection for its troops. As expected, this provoked a dramatic surge in rocket attacks targeting US interests, including its embassy in the Green Zone (GZ) – home of Iraq's government –, hence calling into question al Khadimi's legitimacy and credibility. And amid growing US pressure on Khadimi to retaliate, he ordered Iraq's counter terrorism forces (ICTF) on 26 June, to raid Kataib Hezbollah – part of PMF – Headquarter and arrest 14 members. In reprisal the PMF rapidly stormed the GZ, forcing Khadimi to backdown, releasing those detained and thereby exposing the limitations of his powers despite US support. Alarmed by calls for Khadimi to resign after his raid backfired, al Hakim sought to fend off such moves by forming on 29 June, a new parliamentary bloc (Iraqis) whose task was securing al Khadimi's position in parliament.

Against this backdrop the US felt it was necessary to test on 4 July, its C-Ram system above the GZ to demonstrate that it was not relying on al Khadimi for protection, despite being aware that such action would further erode Khadimi's authority. To fix that, Gen. Kenneth Mackenzie the commander of US CentCom stressed – after meeting Kadimi on 7 July – that the US endorsed al Khadimi's attempts to take on the PMF and he was confident that Khadimi would ask US troops to stay. But he opened the door for further negotiations by saying a smaller US force could do the job, thus signalling that Kadimi has done enough to secure a meeting with Trump.

Khadimi's call for early elections on 6 June 2021 was an attempt to placate violent protests – which were inexcusably met with deadly force on 26 July – and also to quash accusations that he was dragging his feet over early elections while also shifting the blame to the leaders of political blocs, who are ultimately responsible for passing the new electoral law in parliament.

Trump's overriding priority has implacably been winning the 2020 US elections. In his book this means US troops must not pull out of Iraq, as he has consistently scolded Obama for doing so in 2011, regarding it the chief reason behind the resurgence of ISIS. But with the

US economy reeling, unemployment soaring, anti-racism protests raging and a spectacular failure in combating coronavirus, all of which are increasingly boosting the prospects of a Joe Biden triumph, therefore it is doubtless that Trump will utilise Khadimi's trip to Washington on 20 August, to push him to further tighten the screw on Iran's already faltering economy, hoping it would compel Iran to succumb to US relentless campaign of maximum pressure and sanctions by renegotiating a new nuclear deal. Of course, Trump will press Khadimi to expeditiously end Iraq's dependency on Iranian electricity by replacing it with Saudi sources. But while Trump will demand tougher concrete steps to strip the PMF of its weapons, he will consider a timetable for reducing US troops if Khadimi can get Iranian assurance that rockets targeting US interests – which reflects Trump's powerlessness as a commander-in-chief – would cease. Khadimi, in turn, will highlight that no previous PM has ever dared to tackle Iranian influence or challenge armed groups. Surely, he will call for much more tangible support in the economic, commercial, energy and security sectors as well as help in combatting coronavirus. He will also urge Trump to intervene, complaining that Riyadh has not just resisted helping Iraq but also continued stoking sectarian and ethnic divisions.

Khadimi's meeting with Tump may consolidate his position in the short term, but it would not ease tensions or dampen growing calls for a sweeping overhaul of the political system and an outright ousting of the ruling families who have brought Iraq to its knees.

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