Iraq Situation Report: June 17 - 23, 2020

1 Jun 17: US Secretary of State Holds Phone Call with Iraqi Foreign Minister. US Secretary of State蓬佩奥 holds a phone call with Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein to discuss the ongoing US-Iraqi Strategic Dialogue, according to an official readout. The US and Iraq agreed that the Strategic Dialogue, which began on June 11, presents an opportunity for the two countries to strengthen ties.

2 Jun 17-18: Turkish Military Launches Offensive "Operation Claw-Tiger" inside Northern Iraq. The Turkish National Defense Ministry announced the launch of "Operation Claw-Tiger" in northern Iraq targeting the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a US-designated terrorist organization. The PKK targets approximately 200 km east of the Turkish military's main effort for Operation Claw-Eagle, a major operation targeting the PKK that started June 14. A anonymous Turkish official told Reuters on June 15 that Turkey intends to increase its presence by building small, temporary bases in rural mountainous terrain less than 14 km inside Iraq's northern border. Turkey already maintains 10 such bases in that area.

3 Jun 17-18: Iran and Turkey Continue Libya's Coordinated Operation against Iraqi Kurdish Militia. The Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI), an Iranian Kurdish separatist group based in Iraq, claimed Iranian artillery is targeting KDPI sites. The Greek government issued a statement condemning the operation and warned against militant groups trying to undermine the stability and future of Iraq.

4 Jun 17: New Shi'a Militia Group Claims Responsibility for Spate of Recent Rocket Attacks on Camp Taji, the US Embassy and Baghdad International Airport. Ubdat al-Thairi, one of the seven new "shadow militias" that have emerged since the death of Iranian Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani, released a 3-minute video showing projectile targeting US facilities in Iraq. The footage, all recorded at night, shows the rockets striking near Camp Taji on June 5, the US Embassy in Baghdad on June 11, and the Badr International Airport on June 16. The video also accused the US Embassy the "den of espionage" and warned Iranian security personnel to stay away from US personnel.

5 Jun 17: Iranian Central Bank Delegation Secures Agreement to Purchase Non-sanctioned Goods inside Iraq. Iranian Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi received Iranian Central Bank Governor Abdul Nasser Hemmati in Baghdad to discuss financial and economic cooperation between Baghdad and Tehran. Hemmati also met with Iraqi Central Bank Governor Ali Masho Al-Aziz as well as Iraq Finance Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Ali Allawi. Hemmati announced following the meetings that he reached an agreement with his Iraqi counterparts to reduce Iraqi energy debts to Iran in exchange for allowing Iran to purchase non-sanctioned food, medicine, and other goods inside Iraq. US-imposed maximum pressure sanctions have prevented Iran from receiving foreign currency for gas and electricity. Iran seeks to use its financial resources inside Iraq to purchase goods in lieu of direct debt payments. The deal essentially allows Iran to bypass US sanctions, permitting Iraq to pay off energy debts by trading goods to Iran.

6 Jun 17: Outgoing Head of the Middle East Broadcasting Network Warns that Iraqi Communications and Media Commission Cannot Ensure Media Freedom. Ahmed Fawaz, the outgoing head of the US-funded Middle East Broadcasting Network (MBN), warned via Twitter that the Iraqi Communications and Media Commission (CMC) had temporarily shut down MBN radio transmitters in Baghdad, leading to a serious threat to the free flow of media content. Fawaz warned that many CMC employees are loyal to Iran. The CMC has repeatedly antagonized international media organizations and cooperated with the media license of Reuters in May 2020 for reporting on Iran's rising coronavirus case numbers.

7 Jun 17-23: Iraq Fails to Prevent the Spread of COVID-19 as Cases Reach All-time Highs. COVID-19 cases have surged across Iraq with the number of positive cases increasing seven-fold since the end of March and reportedly setting a new record. The government lifted the lockdown on May 11, raising the total to 592 infected doctors according to the Washington Post. Anonymous medical professionals complained that those who experience COVID-19 symptoms are being "discarded back into work," ignoring the risk of spread. Iraqi Speaker of Parliament Mohammed al-Halbousi stated that 20 members of parliament contracted the disease and that Iraq's parliament, the Council of Representatives (CoR), may suspend sessions as a result.

8 Jun 18: Militants Target US Embassy with Fifth Rocket Attack in Ten Days. Unidentified militants launched a direct hit on the US embassy in Baghdad’s Green Zone. The attack caused no damage or injuries. An unidentified unit of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) fired four Katyusha rockets toward the US embassy near the Rashid Base. Kadhimi issued a statement via Twitter calling such attacks "unacceptable" and warned against militant groups trying to undermine the stability and future of Iraq.

9 Jun 20: US-designated Terror Group Condemns US-Iraqi Dialogue and Issues Set of Demands to Remove US Troops. Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HHN), a US-designated terrorist organization and leader of the US-designated terrorist group Asa'a Al-Haqq, issued an official statement condemning the US-Iraqi Strategic Dialogue. HHN argued that Iraqi negotiators are weak and submissive to the will of the United States. HHN issued a set of demands that include the formation of a monitoring and evaluation committee to observe the Strategic Dialogue by the Council of Representatives, a "deterrent action" against Turkey for violating Iraqi sovereignty by Prime Minister Kadhimi, and the rapid removal of all foreign forces from Iraqi territory by executive order.

10 Jun 20: US-designated Terrorist Accesses the US of Trying to Stay in Iraq Civil War. Qassem al-Khara, a US-designated terrorist and leader of the US-designated terrorist group Asa'a Ail al-Haqq issued an official statement accusing the US of trying to restore the Iraqi political system and trying to replace Iraqi officials under the guise of an anti-corruption drive to replace them with officials responsible for "systematic corruption." Kharaeis the US is taking steps to restart an Iraqi civil war.


12 Jun 22: Prime Minister’s Office Delays New Media Law Markup. The Iraqi Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) released copies of a memo ordering the end of duplicative payments paid out to former political office holders to avoid funding the new media law. The memo remains to be seen if the memo will be enforced. Khadihi promised to reduce bloated public salary funds but received pushback from other elected officials and has yet to implement such reforms.

13 Jun 17-23: Iraqi Military Activities to Include Ramadan. Officials in Iraq, Brigadier General Mostafa Moradi, met with Lieutenant General Andrew A. Vavilov to discuss the general state of affairs on June 23. Moradi pledged to support the Iraqi military in the fight against ISIS and to continue to develop the Intelligence Quartet - an intelligence sharing group with the base located in Badush, Iraq. Russia and Syria founded in 2015. Yarallah is under pressure to maintain relationships between Iranian forces and US forces and lost speak by phone with the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley on June 17.

14 Jun 22-23: New Shi'a Militia Group Issues Warnings and Claims it Will Shoot Down US Aircraft. Askhdar al-Sabhi, an Iraqi militia's group that emerged following the death of IRGC Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani, issued a series of messages on Telegram. In one post, the group threatened to launch shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles at US military aircraft in Iraq. The group also claimed it had aborted an attack on current carrying supplies for US personnel in Iraq because it learned the convoy had a connection to a Shia company supported by the Iraqi proxy Badr Organization.

Key Takeaway: Converging challenges to the Iraqi leadership threaten to deepen Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi’s political support he needs to improve Iraq’s security and economy. Kadhimi must improve domestic stability in areas like service provision, fiscal policy, and security in order to secure leverage for the second round of the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue scheduled for July 2020. Kadhimi is facing increasing anti-US attacks by Iraq’s Iraqi proxies, a surge of COVID-19 cases, and increasing opposition to the financial reforms necessary to keep the Iraqi economy afloat. Iranian officials are pressing Kadhimi in high level meetings to accept key Iranian demands that support Iran’s objectives in Iraq, such as purchasing essential goods inside Iraq with foreign currency to circumvent the US-imposed maximum sanctions pressure.