Iraq Situation Report: April 29 - May 5, 2020

1 April 29-30: Prime Minister-designate Mustafa al-Kadhimi Sends List of Goals to the Speaker of the Council of Representatives. Prime Minister-designate Mustafa al-Kadhimi released his government plan outlining objectives for his term in office if he receives a vote of confidence from the Council of Representatives (CoR), the Iraqi Parliament. The Prime Minister's Information Office released a video via Twitter of Prime Minister-designate Kadhimi signing the plan and sending it to Mohammed al-Halbousi, the speaker of the CoR and leader of the Sunni Alliance of Iraqi Forces bloc. Kadhimi said his top priorities include conducting early elections, improving the governmental response to the COVID-19 outbreak, and restricting the existence of armed groups outside of state control. Anonymous sources told Iraqi media outlets the next day that unspecified Shi'a blocs threatened to reject Kadhimi's candidacy if he did not set a specific date for early elections and promise to expel US forces from Iraq as part of his government plan.

2 April 29: Kata'ib Hezbollah Reiterates Allegations of Prime Minister-designate Kadhimi's Involvement in US Strike that Killed Soleimani. Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH), issued a warning via Twitter to supporters of Prime Minister-designate Kadhimi. Askari claimed that Kadhimi has not been proven innocent in his involvement in the January 3 US strike on Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani and Qassim al-Fahdawi, and former Defense Minister Khalid al-Obaidi to finalize the formation of the Conquest Alliance. The unnamed source stated that Khanjar hosted a December 2019 for engaging in corruption at the expense of the Iraqi people. Khanjar is close to Iraq's political proxy bloc, Conquest Alliance. The United States sanctioned Khanjar in April 2020 for engaging in corruption at the expense of the Iraqi people. Khanjar is close to Iraq's political proxy bloc, Conquest Alliance. The unnamed source stated that Khanjar hosted a December 2019 meeting with Decision Alliance representative Talal al-Zubeir, former Minister of Electricity Qasim al-Fahdawi, and former Defense Minister Khalid al-Obaidi to finalize the formation of the group. Sunni parliamentarians claimed on April 17 that Khanjar reached an agreement to form the bloc.

3 April 29: US Secretary of State Urges Iraq to Bring All Armed Groups Under State Control. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo urged the government of Iraq to "heed the call from many elements of Iraqi society to bring all armed groups under state control" in a press conference. He added that the United States welcomes Iraq's actions taken "in the past days in that direction," likely referring to Kadhimi’s government formation process further splintered Iraq's already fractious political scene. Disagreements over cabinet appointments created new infighting. Iraq's political proxy bloc, Conquest Alliance, released its government plan outlining objectives for his term in office if he receives a vote of confidence from the Council of Representatives (CoR), the Iraqi Parliament. The Prime Minister's Information Office released a video via Twitter of Prime Minister-designate Kadhimi signing the plan and sending it to Mohammed al-Halbousi, the speaker of the CoR and leader of the Sunni Alliance of Iraqi Forces bloc. Kadhimi said his top priorities include conducting early elections, improving the governmental response to the COVID-19 outbreak, and restricting the existence of armed groups outside of state control. Anonymous sources told Iraqi media outlets the next day that unspecified Shi'a blocs threatened to reject Kadhimi's candidacy if he did not set a specific date for early elections and promise to expel US forces from Iraq as part of his government plan.

4 April 29: Influential US-sanctioned Sunni Politician Reportedly Close to Finalizing Sunni "Liberalized Cities" Coalition. An unnamed source told Iraqi news outlet Shafaqaa that US-sanctioned Sunni politician Khamis al-Khanjar is close to announcing the formation of his "Liberalized Cities" coalition, which will reportedly be comprised of 22 seats in the CoR and will represent Sunni cities liberated from IS. The United States sanctioned Khanjar in December 2019 for engaging in corruption at the expense of the Iraqi people. Khanjar is close to Iraq's political proxy bloc, Conquest Alliance. The unnamed source stated that Khanjar hosted a December 2019 meeting with Decision Alliance representative Talal al-Zubeir, former Minister of Electricity Qasim al-Fahdawi, and former Defense Minister Khalid al-Obaidi to finalize the formation of the group. Sunni parliamentarians claimed on April 17 that Khanjar reached an agreement to form the bloc.

5 April 30 - May 01: Political Blocks Reportedly Agree to Vote for Prime Minister-designate Kadhimi's Government, Leaving Three Important Seats Unfilled. Azad Hamid Shaib, a Kurdish member of Parliament for Moqtada al-Sadr's Toward Reform, told Iraqi news outlet Shafaqaa that unspecified political blocs agreed to vote on 19 of the 22 ministerial seats in Prime Minister-designate Kadhimi's cabinet. The blocs reportedly agreed that the Ministry of Finance will be allocated to Kurdish blocs, Ministry of Oil to Ammar al-Hakim's Wisdom Trend, and Ministry of Interior to Hadil al-Amiri's Conquest Alliance. Parliament will likely be able to satisfy enough Shi'a blocs to elect Kadhimi, which will likely stem from April 30 meeting at America's ambassador's office and the sale of the Conquest Alliance to Kadhimi. Kadhimi's government formation, cabinet appointments are likely to change until approved by the CoR.

6 April 30: caretaker Prime Minister Maliki Briefs Prime Minister-designate Kadhimi on US Presence ahead of Decisive US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue. caretaker Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mehdi briefed Prime Minister-designate Mustafa al-Kadhimi in order to ensure that Kadhimi is "fully aware of all the topics that will be discussed with the United States, including the US-Iraq strategic dialogue, according to Maliki's spokesperson. The briefing indicates that Maliki expects Kadhimi’s government to be approved by Parliament and in power when the strategic dialogue happens in June.

7 April 30: Anonymous Iraqi Intelligence Official Leaks that New “Shadow Miltia” Shi’i Groups are Funded, Trained, and Commanded by the IRGC. Anonymous Iraqi intelligence official claimed to have detailed intel from origins of the new Shi'a militia groups Usbat al-Thaier (UT), Qabdat al-Huda (QH), and Asha al-Kahf (AK). The source reported to the US-funded outlet al-Hurra that UT has 250-500 soldiers. The groups emerged from three US-designated terrorist organizations and Iranian proxy militias: UT from Kata'ib Hezbollah, QH from Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and AK from Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada. The source alleged the new groups separated from their original militias and are now directly funded, trained, and commanded by Iraqi Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

8 May 03: Maliki and Allawi’s Blocs Issue Statements Rejecting Kadhimi’s Government. Nouri al-Maliki, former prime minister and leader of the State of Law Coalition, issued a statement announcing that his bloc will refuse to vote for Prime Minister-designate Mustafa al-Kadhimi. Prominent secularist Ayad Allawi also announced his refusal to vote for Kadhimi. Allawi condemned Kadhimi's "vague and unknown" mechanism for Kadhimi's choosing of ministers, arguing that major political parties dictated the terms of the cabinet. The State of Law holds 25 seats in Parliament; Allawi's National Alliance holds approximately 21 seats but splintered due to party infighting.

9 May 04: US Ambassador to Iraq Urges Confirmation of the Next Government in a Letter to Parliament. Matthew Tueller, the US ambassador to Iraq, wrote a letter to Iraq's Council of Representatives in which he urged members of the CoR to confirm Prime Minister-designate Mustafa al-Kadhimi's government. His letter stressed the need for the parliament to resolve "disagreements over minimal political choices to solve the country's economic, health, and security problems. Nouri al-Maliki, the former prime minister and current leader of the State of Law Coalition, condemned the letter. Maliki told Iraqi outlets that the Iraqi people reject interference from "foreign entities" in their internal affairs.

10 May 04-05: Council of Representatives Schedules Special Government Confirmation Session for May 6; CoR Speaker Declares that Al-Maliki's Government “Must Pass.” The CoR confirmed on May 4 that the session will hold a special vote of confidence session for Prime Minister-designate Kadhimi and his cabinet on May 6 at 9:00 pm local time. The session will be held in person with precautions taken to avoid COVID-19 transmission. On May 5, CoR Speaker Mohammed al-Halbousi announced that the next day CoR will vote along their usual party lines. Despite worsening political acrimony, Kadhimi maintains Sunni and Kurdish support in Parliament and will likely be able to satisfy enough Shi'a blocs to elect Kadhimi, which will likely stem from April 30 meeting at America's ambassador's office and the sale of the Conquest Alliance to Kadhimi. Kadhimi's government formation, cabinet appointments are likely to change until approved by the CoR.

11 May 05: Iraqi Security and Defense Committee Chairman Claims Iraq Will “not Abandon Damascus.” The CoR confirmed on May 4 that the CoR must pass” Kadhimi's government. He stressed that Iraq “cannot tolerate further obstruction” and that Kadhimi has “many tools for success, his international relations are good, and he can help us in the economic crisis the country is facing.”

Key Takeaway: Prime Minister-designate Mustafa al-Kadhimi’s government formation process further splintered Iraq’s already fractious political scene. Disagreements over cabinet appointments created new frictions within political blocs, calling into question whether individual members of parliament will vote along their usual party lines. Despite worsening political acrimony, Kadhimi maintains Sunni and Kurdish support in Parliament and will likely be able to satisfy enough Shi’a blocs to elect Kadhimi, which will likely stem from April 30 meeting at America’s ambassador’s office and the sale of the Conquest Alliance to Kadhimi. Kadhimi’s government formation, cabinet appointments are likely to change until approved by the CoR.

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