

Iraq's New Prime Minister Prepares for Strategic Talks with US

Featuring Nicholas Heras and Katherine Lawlor



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New Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi has strengthened his position and achieved a handful of successes in the first few weeks of his tenure. However, Kadhimi will face enormous challenges as Iraq's new head of state, particularly in balancing Iraq's tumultuous and often contradictory relationship with the US and Iran. In this episode of Overwatch, Middle East Program Manager Nicholas Heras and Research Assistant Katherine Lawlor discuss the first steps of Kadhimi's administration and the pressures he will face as he renegotiates the role of the United States in Iraq.

Kim Kagan:

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Nicholas Heras:

Hello, everyone, and thank you for joining us for today's segment of the Overwatch Podcast. My name's Nicholas Heras and I'm the Middle East Security Program Manager here at the Institute for the Study of War. Today we'll be discussing the moves that Iraq's new Prime Minister, Mustafa Al-Kadhimi, is making to solidify his power as he manages this challenging relationship vis a vis Iran and its Iraqi proxies. I'm joined today by Katherine Lawlor. Kat is a research assistant here at the Institute for the Study of War, where she focuses on Iraq. She's been following Kadhimi's cabinet formation, his key security appointments, his delicate dance with Iran and Iran's Iraqi proxies very closely. Kat, it's great to have you here today.

Katherine Lawlor:

Thanks so much, Nick. It's great to be here.

Nicholas Heras:

Well, Iraqi Prime Minister, Mustafa Al-Kadhimi, came into office widely perceived as the compromise candidate between the two most powerful foreign actors currently involved in Iraq: United States and Iran. Kadhimi, who was formerly the Chief of Iraq's powerful National Intelligence Service, is viewed by many observers, both foreign and Iraqi, as a leader who wants to promote Iraq's interests first and foremost. Less than a month into the job, Kadhimi has already shown a bold streak by replacing Iran-backed security chiefs with US trained officers, extending an olive branch to Iraq's battle protest movements, and showing to the powerful Popular Mobilization Forces, or the PMF, which is composed of many Iranian-backed proxy groups, that he is here for business. There's also widespread perception among foreign observers in Iraq that Kadhimi will not back down in his efforts to reign them in. Kat, I wanted to start by asking you, what is Kadhimi trying to accomplish with all these moves, and will Iran let him get away with making them?

Katherine Lawlor:

Yeah, so, Kadhimi's first priorities are to resolve Iraq's current crises, particularly the financial crisis and the government response to the Coronavirus. He's also promised to end corruption, uh, enforce the rule of law, hold early elections, and work to confine arms to the control of the state, but he also needs to prepare for the upcoming June US-Iraq strategic dialog, which will shape Iraq's future for years to come, and he needs to cope with a resurgent ISIS in the meantime, but I do want to push back a little bit on the framing that Kadhimi won't back down on his efforts to reign in Iran. Kadhimi is arguably a liberal who has advocated for human rights and an end to non-governmental armed groups in Iraq, but that background has lead probably too many western commentators to seize on him as the immediate answer to all of our problems, and what I think they're missing

is that Kadhimi is also a pragmatist. He will work within the existing system, including with all of its Iranian influences, to change what he can in Iraq. He's already taking a different approach from previous administrations. Prime Ministers Mahdi and Abadi, both promised sweeping changes and were hailed as, you know, major reformists coming in, but both failed. So, Kadhimi is pursuing a more incrementalist style of reform, and he'll likely please no one with that approach, but given sufficient time and US support, he may actually be able to make some real progress, but even if Kadhimi doesn't call for early elections, which he has promised to do, his government has a two-year expiration date, and that really isn't much time to make the sort of changes necessary to get Iraq back on track.

Nicholas Heras:

That's very interesting, Kat. So, Kadhimi inherited a country on the brink of collapse, mired in security, economic, political, and public health crises, and is caught up in a tug-of-war between the United States and Iran. So, how does he move forward?

Katherine Lawlor:

Well, as a political independent with no real support base, Kadhimi had to make some tough compromises to even get into office. So, as you pointed out, he, he did make some bold moves from the outset. For example, he nominated his own cabinet ministers before political blocs had the chance to even put forward their own candidates. That's pretty much unheard of. He wanted a cabinet of like-minded allies, who could help him to implement the reforms that he thinks are necessary to rescue Iraq from these current and overlapping political security health, et cetera, crises. It was a bold move and an unsuccessful one. All of the blocs, not just Iran's political proxies, pushed back pretty hard. They were unwilling to give up that influence that comes from holding cabinet posts, so Kadhimi and the parties eventually compromised and the ministers who now make up Kadhimi's cabinet are not officially members of any party, but almost all of them were selected by blocs, to which they have some political or, or financial ties. They're certainly not friends to Kadhimi or his anti-corruption fight, and most will be unable or unwilling to, to purge the ministries that they now lead of the corruption that is, frankly, endemic to Iraqi governance.

There are a handful of exceptions to this. Most notably, Kadhimi replaced the Minister of Interior, who was a member of the Iranian proxy Badr organization, with a US-trained, highly-professional and well-respected Iraqi army general, Othman al-Ghanmi, and that's a key appointment, and it's, it's good news for the US and for Kadhimi. I'm sure that Ghanmi had to make significant concessions to the Badr organization to get that post, but Badr and therefore Iran, have, as you know, thoroughly infiltrated the federal police, which Ghanmi will now manage, as part of the Minister of Interior's portfolio, but Ghanmi has already tasked the Ministry of Interior with hunting down protestors who are still missing, and at his very first cabinet meeting, he promised to cut off the hands of corrupt members of his ministry. He will absolutely face limitations, but his nomination is a great first step towards cleansing that ministry of its own endemic corruption. But in lieu of a totally competent or reliable cabinet, Kadhimi will need to focus on reforming his own office. Former Prime Minister Mahdi allowed the office of the Prime Minister to become pretty thoroughly infiltrated by Iran's proxies and political picks, but Kadhimi has the chance to change that. The Office of the Prime Minister has control over Iraq's most effective and professional security forces, the, the counter terrorism service, and actually right before Kadhimi formed his government, the office gained direct control over the four militias, which are most directly affiliated with the religious establishment in Najaf. I'll call them the Hawza Militias, and the Hawza Militias defected from the Iranian infiltrated Popular Mobilization Forces, to Iran's chagrin and the chagrin of PMF leadership. Kadhimi already has used those militias to demonstrate his leverage over some of the Iran-backed PMF factions. So, he has to continue to make these political and security moves to consolidate his authority and to begin making the sorts of changes that he wants to see in Iraq.

Nicholas Heras:

Thank you, Kat. So, I want to take a second to turn to the protest movement. Kadhimy seems to be prioritizing outreach to Iraq's protest movement, but many of the protesters don't seem to be ready to take him at face value, just yet. Iraq's protest movement has been getting, gathering strength for the last three years, and it is a major focus of international attention on Iraq. So, can Kadhimy win the Iraqi street and the protest movement? Or, is that too tall a task?

Katherine Lawlor:

So, in addition to everything I, I previously mentioned, Kadhimy's other objective in the first few weeks of his premiership has definitely been to attempt, at least, to get Iraq's popular protest movement on his side, and he's done that in a number of ways, including by prosecuting a group, which fired on protestors in Basra and by promising to form a committee that would compile the names of all the protestors and security forces who were killed or wounded in the first months of the latest movement, and that committee would actually provide restitution to the families of those who were disabled by, uh, some of that violence.

This method is guaranteed, pretty much, to push Kadhimy into conflict with Iranian proxy groups, and has seen somewhat mixed success. The protest movement actually appears to be split between those who want to give Kadhimy a chance to enact some of those reforms, and those who argue that any government formed within the current system and without protestor participation is illegitimate and should be overthrown. This split's pretty new. Up until this point, the movement has remained surprisingly united, but if Kadhimy is successful in getting a majority of the protestors on his side, he may be able to replace his lack of a political support base with, uh, that different sort of authority, just straight up popularity.

And going back to your first question, too, that is, you know, whether Iran will let Kadhimy get away with all of this. That remains to be seen. Iran retains tremendous influence in Iraq and in every component of the Iraqi government. It can absolutely influence Kadhimy, both through traditional political means and through its more figurative, you know, Godfather-style, horse head in the bed devices. Kata'ib Hezbollah, which is one of Iran's most dangerous proxies, now reportedly has an armed encampment right across the street from Kadhimy's guest house. So, if Kadhimy can reclaim the Office of the Prime Minister from Iran's proxies, and maintain a balance with Iran in, in the security arena, as well as the political one, he has a shot.

Nicholas Heras:

Thank you, Kat, and that's quite a powerful reference you make to that Godfather, in regard to how Iran might approach its interactions with Kadhimy.

So, I want to take a step back from the intricacies of Iraqi politics and pivot to the US-Iraq strategic dialog that's set to start in June. Kadhimy will have to navigate the Iraqi side for what is sure to be a difficult but open series of talks with the United States on the future of the US and Iraq. Put bluntly, Kadhimy needs good future relations with the United States to keep US sanctions off Iraq, and its support to navigate the economic crisis that could consume and ultimately destroy Iraq's fragile state.

Already, Kadhimy has had to show a political dexterity to manage the conflicted interests of Iraq's various ethnic, sectarian, and political power brokers, and to try to move his country away from collapse and civil conflicts. Iran's Iraqi proxies have been surprisingly hands-off with Kadhimy, thus far, but they've been consistent in expressing this message to him: US forces must leave Iraq, and ASAP. So, how will Iran's Iraqi proxies approach the US-Iraq strategic dialog?

Katherine Lawlor:

Yeah, so this dialog is really the first chance in years for Iraq to redefine the US military presence in the country without a Prime Minister making a unilateral decision to expel US forces, which, technically, the Iraqi Prime Minister is empowered to do, based on the current agreement that allows for US force presence. So, rather than blocking or torpedoing the talks, Iran is likely aiming to shape the strategic dialog in favor of Iran's broader regional agenda. So, the centerpiece of that agenda is absolutely expelling US forces from the region, and that is on the table here. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo has said that all of these issues are open for discussion, but if Iraq forces US troops to leave, the US will also no longer be able to support its small military presence in Syria. So, for Iran, that's sort of, you know, two birds, one stone, but the Iranian regime has shown remarkable patience in the lead-up to this dialog in that it's actually likely ordered Iraqi proxies, Iran's Iraqi proxies, to cease attacks on US forces. No major proxy attacks on US forces or our coalition allies have taken place since March of 2020, and that's a major shift in Iran's previous escalatory patterns.

So, in March, likely Iranian proxies killed two Americans and a British soldier. Uh, they've conducted dozens of attacks since January in Iraq, but based on regime rhetoric in Iranian media, Iran seems to sincerely believe that the United States will agree to a complete US military withdrawal from Iraq, potentially even within a two-year timeframe, and that's the best-case Iranian scenario. Iran has its proxies in a holding pattern right now because it seems to think that it's won the region, based on US consolidations in Iraq, US draw downs in Saudi Arabia, et cetera. So, if or when the US does not agree to a two-year timeline for complete withdrawal, I anticipate a sharp uptick in proxy attacks on US and coalition forces in Iraq, and I frankly struggle to see Kadhimy or the US agreeing to a sufficiently short withdrawal timeline because of the ever-increasing security threat posed by a resurgent ISIS.

Nicholas Heras:

Wow, Kat. You make it sound like Kadhimy really must walk a tightrope with the raging fire underneath him to carry out a successful and strategic dialog with the United States. So, Iran's proxies are fine stepping back for months in the lead-up to the dialog, and to hold their fire amidst aftermaths?

Katherine Lawlor:

I doubt they'll be given a reason to hold their fire following the talks, but while Iran has been focusing on its broader geo-political strategizing, the Shia militia groups in Iraq that we usually refer to as Iranian proxies have definitely grown restless. The rank and file members feel like their leadership has given up on the mission of expelling US forces and has kind of forgotten to avenge Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Some ... Well, definitely not all, but, but some of the new Shia militia groups that have sprouted up since January, like the recent Revenge of Muhandis Brigade, and the handful of smaller, sort of less professional attacks that we have seen in April and May are likely an expression of that dissatisfaction. So, in other words, Iran's proxies may be splintering, to some extent, without the personalized, hands-on leadership that Soleimani and Muhandis used to offer, and Iran is likely struggling to keep all of them completely under control in the lead-up to the dialog.

Nicholas Heras:

Well, thank you very much, Kat, and that's a great point for us to stop this discussion. I want to thank you again for your detailed analysis of Prime Minister Kadhimy's opening moves in what looks to be a long, multi-layered chess match with Iraqi and foreign actors. A lot will be riding on how he carries out Iraq's upcoming strategic dialog with the United States. We'll continue to maintain our persistent stare on Iraq's complicated political and security dynamics, here at the Institute for the Study of War. A big thank you to our listeners for joining us for this edition of the Overwatch Podcast.

Kim Kagan:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Overwatch. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingwar.org to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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