Iraq is Reluctant to Jump on the Anti-Iranian Bandwagon

It went somewhat unnoticed by the international media that US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo paid an urgent unannounced visit to Iraq in early May. The reasoning behind such a rushed visit was an attempt by Washington to renegotiate the terms of cooperation with this Middle Eastern country against the backdrop of Iran’s “increased activity” in regional politics. At least this was the official explanation behind his meeting with Iraqi President Barham Salih together with Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi. Additionally, Pompeo urged Iraqi authorities to ensure the safety of American diplomatic and military personnel stationed across Iraq.

The unusual urgency of this visit is highlighted by the fact that Pompeo had to cancel his visit to Germany, where he was supposed to meet with German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Foreign Minister Heiko Maas. The liberty with which a US Secretary of State ignored pre-planned events involving the head of the German state resulted in the German newspaper Suddeutsche Zeitung running an article announcing that Berlin’s friendship with the United States was “shattered.”

But what was the real reason behind such a dramatic change of plans made by Pompeo?

It is hardly a secret for anyone that has been following international events lately that Washington’s relations with Baghdad have hit an all time low.
Almost two decades after the US invaded Iraq under a false pretext there’s still at least 5,200 American servicemen still operating inside this country. When US President Donald Trump paid a surprise Christmas visit to Iraq last December, which marked his first trip to a conflict zone since taking office, he made an unexpected announcement that Washington was planning to withdraw American troops from Syria. Back then it was perceived by many as a plan to reinforce the US military mission in Iraq with those troops abandoning illegal American bases inside Syria. But it seems that Trump would have been better off if he held consultations with Iraqi officials before making such public statements.

Over the course of its development in the capacity of an independent state, Iraq has undergone a drastic transformation from the richest military stronghold in the Middle East into a broken failed state that remains occupied by foreign invaders and remains at all times at the brink of civil war. Now it seems that it’s much closer to being plunged back into chaos once again than on the path to prosperity.

It’s been announced that almost the entire territory of Iraq has been successfully liberated from the presence of radical militants that would only remain in control of remote enclaves in the deserts of the northwest of the country, near the border with Syria. However, the radical threat hasn’t been fully eliminated. After the liberation of Mosul in the summer of 2017, relations between Baghdad and the Kurds took a drastic dive once the latter chose to hold a referendum on independence. However, instead of reaping benefits from this risky step, Erbil had to surrender the territory it took while fighting extremists.

Therefore, today’s fragile peace in Iraq can at any given moment turn into a free-for-all bloodbath. As the situation in the Middle East as a whole remains highly volatile, Baghdad finds itself in the eye of a brewing storm.

Last February, Baghdad and Washington reached an agreement on the withdrawal of US troops from Syria through the territory of Iraq. Moreover, US authorities promised not to drag this operation out into April, launching the withdrawal immediately after the end of US operations on the eastern bank of the Euphrates. But now it seems that some part of the 2,000 strong US task force operating there will be permanently redeployed to Iraq. In his interview for CBS in early February, Trump announced that it was important to keep a US military presence in Iraq so that Washington can keep a close eye on Iran “because Iran is a real problem.”

However, this statement provoked a massive outcry in Baghdad. It’s been reported that President Salih rejected the idea outright. “We will not allow this,” he said mere days after Trump’s announcement. “Iraq does not want to be a party or axis to any conflict between multiple countries.” The Iraqi president added that American forces were allowed into the country only to fight terrorism. In turn, Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi offered his own response, “when it is said that the mission of these US forces is to fight a neighboring country, like Iran, for example, we reject that notion.”

In the meantime, Baghdad would try to develop its bilateral ties with Iran. In mid-March, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani paid an official visit to Iraq, showing his determination to strengthen the “fraternal ties” between the two countries, while sending a clear signal to the United States and its regional allies that Tehran would carry on enjoying special relations with Baghdad. And in April, against Washington desperate attempts to draw Iraq away from Tehran, Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi visited Iran to discuss bilateral trade challenges that could become aggravated by continuous rounds of US sanctions against Iran.

In general, it’s safe to say that Iraq’s new government has tried to avoid getting caught in the middle of a tussle between Washington and Tehran. Abdul-Mahdi is said to be willing to seek compromise no matter how long it takes, and he is supported in this conviction by local Shia politicians led by populist cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, a critic of both the United States and Iran.

However, it’s not just the stubborn resilience that the sitting Iraqi authorities show in the face of Washington’s anti-Iranian zeal that makes things difficult for the US, it’s the openly anti-American stance that the leading figures within the Iraqi government have been showing for a while now that Pompeo was tasked with reversing. This problem has become particularly acute in recent days, against the backdrop of a new round of anti-Iran sanctions announced by Trump.

Moreover, there’s been reports that Iraq is going to start buying weapons manufactured in Russia, China, Japan and South Korea to make its military arsenal more competitive and to reduce its dependence on weapons imports from the United States.

That is why Washington chose to urgently send Pompeo to Baghdad so that he could remind Iraq that is should be
supporting Washington's anti-Iranian narrative along with a reminder of Baghdad's dependence on the United States.

However, it seems that Trump is coming to grips with the fact that pursuing Washington's agenda across the Middle East under the pretext of combating terrorism is one thing, while getting regional powers to beat the anti-Iranian war drum is another. And predictably enough, the US hasn’t had much success with fulfilling the latter objective.

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