Is Iraq between the Hammer and the Anvil?

“Iraq caught between a rock and a hard place”, “Iraq between the hammer and the anvil” and similar headlines in Iraqi news reflect public reactions towards recent events within the nation. We are referring here to the assassination of Iranian Major General Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the deputy head of Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF, or Hashd al-Shaabi), by Americans at Baghdad airport on 3 January of this year.

In response to the killing, the Council of Representatives of the Republic of Iraq voted to expel foreign troops from the country and to work out appropriate arrangements to remove US forces from its territories. In turn, Washington has threatened to take measures that would hurt the Iraqi economy, and could ignite an ethnic and religious conflict there.

In such a climate, tough rhetoric describing potential scenarios of the manner the situation will develop in has not abated as yet in the country. According to Iraqi website sotaliraq.com, the decision made by the Council of Representatives was no accident. Politicians appear to have lost their patience with the USA as a result of mounting pressure caused by negative actions taken by the United States against Iraq. They include constant violations of the nation’s airspace and open attacks against Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Force, which is part of the republic’s military and security structure. In addition, the United States has been interfering with affairs of the Iraqi government either directly or indirectly, and applying pressure on the country’s economy by, for instance, blocking a trade deal agreed on with the PRC, etc.

All the above actions were accompanied by US rhetoric meant to convince the public that Iraqi affairs were being manipulated by Tehran.

At present, Iraqi leadership and officials from executive bodies, who courted the United States before, are exasperated by US treatment of the Popular Mobilization Force. After all, it made a significant contribution to the crushing defeat of ISIL (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), which had controlled one third of Iraqi territory in 2014.

At the time, Americans kept any issues they had with the Iraqi force to themselves since the United States needed allies in their fight against terrorists. But once the latter had been defeated, they turned against Hashd al-Shaabi. And then everything came to a head with the assassination of one of its commanders in Baghdad.

Political forces and the Prime Minister of Iraq depend on the PMF and, therefore, feel truly frustrated by, what they perceive as, efforts to pit them against those who support them (i.e. part of the Iraqi society). And these actions to undermine Iraq’s sovereignty cannot remain answered. In light of the current crisis plaguing the Iraq–United States relations, the reaction of the republic’s leadership resonates with different parts of society.

For instance, the Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS) from Diyala Governorate launched a campaign called “I am Iraqi”. Its aim is to organize protests in provinces with the view of pressuring the Council of Representatives and the Iraqi leadership to officially annul the 2008 security pact between Iraq and the United States, and to expel the latter’s troops from the lands of ancient Mesopotamia.

In the city of Basrah, local residents demonstrated near the oil fields being exploited by US company Exxon Mobil. The protesters demanded a cancellation of the agreement with this firm in response to the killing of their fellow countryman, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.
There were also calls for freeing all Iraqis who had been convicted of opposing US troops during the 2003 war from local prisons.

In the meantime, commentators have been reminding the public that Iraq’s “hands are tied” by its fairly close relations with two adversarial nations, the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Some have issued warnings about the possibility that Washington would cut off Iraq’s access to bank accounts at the Federal Reserve Bank that hold proceeds from Iraqi oil sales, or would freeze Iraqi assets such as US Treasury securities, etc.

Other commentators believe that Iraq has sufficient resources and capabilities to follow an independent course and ensure its demands are met. For instance, Iraqi economic expert Saleh al-Hammash thinks that if the USA imposes unilateral sanctions against his nation, they will not cause much damage to the Iraqi economy, unlike the 1991 sanctions levied against the country by the United Nations. Trade between the United States and Iraq is worth $6 billion, and since American companies are signatories to oil contracts with Baghdad, the USA is unlikely to give those up.

According to political scientist Dr. Fahri Al-Shukri, since the United States was the first to invade and occupy Iraq, and establish its military bases there, it was only apt that they had to be the first to leave the country. After the invasion, Iran ended up being “squeezed” by Washington from the east via Afghanistan, where US troops are stationed, and from the west via Iraq. In addition, there are American military bases to Iran’s south, in the Persian Gulf nations. It is also well-known that Iran does not have any strike forces, camps or military bases in Iraq. Hence, Baghdad first needs to resolve its issues with the USA and then start talks with Tehran. It is important for Iraqi people to remove all foreign military bases from their lands.

A number of Iraqi analysts believe that Donald Trump will not have much choice or many options in the future. The United States can either focus on reoccupying Iraq and expend a lot of resources to achieve this goal, which will lead to significant losses and many casualties. And the White House simply cannot pay such a price... Or it can withdraw its troops from Iraq and call for its blockade. In the meantime, Iraqis will be left with the only option of uniting together and saving their country from any future disasters.

Yury Zinin, Leading Research Fellow at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook.”