Iraq: Things are not Entirely Peaceful in Baghdad

Last month, Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi convened a conference that he said would give people hope in the “turbulent” political system that emerged following the 2003 US invasion and overthrow of former President Saddam Hussein. “We call on all political forces and parties to defend the interests of the country, avoid discussions of violence, and stop political defamation in order to pave the way for early and successful elections,” he said. Mustafa Al-Kadhimi expressed hope that the conference would bring together both representatives of existing political parties and members of the opposition. He did not divulge any specific agenda for the conference, apparently because he did not know what it was himself, but said he expects it to put an end to the confrontation with Kurdistan and “preserve the territorial unity of Iraq.”

A similar proposal was made at a time when Iraq is still plagued by many different crises, ranging from political and religious unrest to popular protests to deteriorating security and the coronavirus pandemic. Mustafa Al-Kadhimi came to power himself after demonstrations that swept across many parts of the country in early October 2019, forcing his predecessor, Adil Abdul-Mahdi, to resign. He has pledged to reform the dysfunctional Iraqi government and restructure the security forces, reining in not only his opponents, but above all those who take up weapons to disrupt the foundations of society. The prime minister also called for early elections with free and fair voting, a key demand by anti-establishment protesters who accuse ruling political factions of rigging Iraq’s last elections in 2018 to secure a majority of parliamentary seats.

The Baghdad-based Special Representative of the Secretary-General for the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, Jeanine Antoinette Hennis-Plasschaert, who believes the country is at a crossroads and needs to address its problems, also supported a national dialogue to bring Iraqis together to draft a roadmap towards a more inclusive, stable, and prosperous Iraq. “Full access to all information, facts and figures will be key. Window dressing and
Representatives for M. Al-Kadhimi, who launched a media campaign to test his proposal, said the team in his office was developing a plan to call the meeting together, and draw up an agenda and a list of participants. One of the main ideas promoted by officials and functionaries is a “new sociopolitical agreement”, which must be adopted by the participants and lead the country out of its political deadlock. In this regard, it is doubtful that officials are the ones who will determine the makeup of the participants, and the agenda of the future Iraqi-wide meeting. But in this situation it is naturally necessary for someone to take the initiative and begin a dialogue.

Many of Iraq’s main factions have expressed initial support for M. Al-Kadhimi’s proposal, and some have suggested holding negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations. Muqtada al-Sadr, a Shia populist cleric whose political bloc holds the majority of Shia parliamentary seats, believes that engaging in dialogue should mean excluding former members of Saddam’s Ba’ath Party. For their part, pro-Iranian paramilitary groups, which have political factions in parliament where they often oppose the government, have so far remained silent about plans for a national dialogue. Critics, however, believe that there is something “unrealistic” in Al-Kadhimi’s desire to bring together competing actors with such disparate interests, and many intricate sources of discontent, at the negotiating table.

It is true that for now the Prime Minister’s statements lack details and clear goals that could lead to meaningful changes. They expressed serious doubts that entrenched ruling factions would be willing to make concessions to promote national concord.

It is worth remembering that since the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime, there have been several attempts at conciliation between rival political groups that represent the different sectarian and ethnic communities in Iraq, but none have succeeded in achieving any lasting peace or stability. Over the years, some international NGOs that have acted as coordinating organizations, but lacking accurate local information they have tried to achieve reconciliation in Iraq for their own purposes, proposing broadening the scope of dialogue at the grass-roots and national levels. These groups also provided experience and training in conflict management, resolving local problem challenges, promoting public debate, and religious peacebuilding. However, the entire national conciliation effort, including two meetings hosted by the League of Arab States, quickly turned into disarray, exposing not only deep political divisions but also the conflicting views on Iraq held by these “foreign teachers”.

From the beginning, national reconciliation in Iraq meant different things for different groups. For Shiites, this meant an end to the killings and other forms of violence practiced by disaffected Sunni groups, while for Sunnis it meant a fair deal to divide up national power and wealth. Kurds and other ethnic minorities have sought to balance their desire for greater autonomy with the benefits inherent in living in a unified Iraq. Most Iraqis have gravitated toward a democratic government in which political power would not be something that is absolute.

The unsuccessful endings for all previous dialogues have underscored the complexity of this objective given the mutual distrust, and the high level of criteria set by competing parties to enter into a deal geared toward national conciliation. The failure of a sustained effort to reach a lasting political agreement among Iraqis on the future for their country has contributed to the continued state of chaos and stalemate. In this atmosphere of confusion and anxiety, the picture formed by the many conflicts occurring in Iraq is more complex, and there is good cause to believe that the sources of mistrust between communities run even deeper than ten years ago.

Apparently, for national dialogue to be capped off with success, the participants involved must resolve the main issues that underpin public discontent, and the new challenges that have been cropping up over the years. Today, any intra-Iraqi dialogue needs to touch upon such key issues as sectarianism, corruption, the role of non-state actors, relations between the central government and Kurdistan, Iran’s influence on domestic political life, and relations with Arab countries on the Persian Gulf. Sectarianism in Iraq’s political system after the 2003 US invasion has become the dominant social force, surpassing power and wealth as an aspect of identity politics and becoming a source of disunity and violence. Epidemic corruption, according to the Iraqis themselves, has hit the country hard, and successive governments have failed to end this manifestation, which has negatively affected how the government functions, and exacerbated problems with the economy and security. Billions of dollars in public money have been withdrawn from circulation by various political leaders due to a drastic degradation of the living conditions for Iraqis and deteriorating deliveries of public services.

Until now, Mustafa Al-Kadhimi has not kept his promise for the state to take control of all the militia forces and their members. Understandably, no dialogue will be effective until the militias are disarmed and neutralized. Despite the repression, including assassinations and kidnappings, Sunni protesters that object to the government’s lack of
effectiveness, the role played by Shiite militias, and Iran's growing influence remain vigorous, crystallizing into various political parties and seeking to reinforce the role they have in the country's future.

Through dialogue, the Iraqi political system should send a clear signal of hope to these protesters, demonstrating that there is a place for them in the nation's life. The government has to act now to convince young, anti-establishment activists that they can strike a fair deal in Iraq by using the political process. While the participants in this dialogue must tackle all of these problems, they must also revise the Iraqi constitution, which has demonstrated enormous flaws. Many provisions in the document, which was developed primarily by Shiite and Kurdish leaders, and approved and ratified in 2005, were either rejected or contravened. Previous intra-Iraqi dialogues have been largely monologues, and for a new dialogue to succeed participants must immerse themselves in a new spirit of openness, and try to overcome the struggles and divisions of the past 18 years, whose main cause has been unprovoked aggression on the part of the United States.

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