Macron’s Visit to Iraq and Ankara’s Zealous Reaction

French President Emmanuel Macron’s two-day visit to Iraq, during which he visited several cities and was the special guest at a regional conference in Baghdad, ended on August 30.

The president of France previously visited Baghdad in September 2020, where he met with Iraqi Prime Minister, Mustafa Al-Kadhimi and President Barham Salih. At the press conference then, Macron revealed several agreements that the parties had reached. Specifically, activating the 2019 roadmap for cooperation between the two states, supporting Iraqi sovereignty, rejecting foreign interference in Baghdad, and discussing military cooperation to confront DAESH (a terrorist group banned in Russia). They also discussed energy cooperation, joint work on a nuclear project that could solve Iraq’s chronic electricity shortage, and France’s support for constructing a subway in Baghdad.

France lost its influence in Iraq after the 1991 war when French President François Mitterrand decided to join the US-led coalition to liberate Kuwait from the Iraqi occupation. Before that, during the eighties, Paris maintained a prominent presence in Baghdad and, according to data from the Stockholm-based International Peace Research Institute, the Fifth Republic even ranked second after the USSR in supplying arms and modern technology to the country.

Iraq is now a regional arena of confrontation, primarily between Iran, the United States, the Arab states, and Turkey. These parties seek to gain a dominant share of influence over an oil-bearing state with a favorable regional location. Paris has also taken an active interest in this struggle for influence in Iraq in recent years.
During Macron’s last visit to Iraq on August 30, France continued its policy of strengthening relations with the Middle Eastern country. Speaking at a press conference following the event, the French leader made a resounding statement: Paris will not withdraw its military contingent from Iraq even if the US decides to leave the Middle Eastern state. However, he also recalled that France “has the operational capacity to provide such a presence in Iraq.” In addition, Macron pledged to return the consulate to Mosul, promote French schools’ opening, and expressed exceptional support for the country’s Christian community. These words of the French president can hardly be regarded as accidental. According to the analysts of The Arab Weekly, what is happening suggests that France is trying to use the same methods by which it hoped to strengthen its position in Lebanon, but which did not help to achieve actual results. “Macron can be helped in his mission by French companies that know the Iraqi problems very well, from weapons to electricity to the Baghdad metro. However, the question is whether France will finance these projects,” one of the publication’s analysts said. According to his estimates, Paris itself is in an unfavorable financial situation today.

As for Iraq, it became bankrupt after successive governments since 2006 squandered all the money that came into the treasury at a time when the price of a barrel of oil was relatively high. The COVID-19 pandemic and the sharp decline in oil prices and production have exacerbated the country’s economic situation, as evidenced in particular by a decline of nearly 11% of the country’s GDP in 2020. With Iraq being one of the world’s largest oil producers, it cannot even reliably deliver electricity to its citizens and has to import it from Iran. One of the main reasons for the country’s decline was corruption, bribery, flourishing in all echelons of power. Of the nearly trillion dollars Iraq had earned from oil since 2003 when US troops invaded the country, an estimated $150 billion of stolen money has been smuggled out of Iraq in corrupt deals since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iraqi President Barham Salih said.

However, against the backdrop of the USA’s withdrawal of its military personnel from Iraq by the end of this year, it will undoubtedly be quite difficult for France to take a key position in that country for several reasons. One of them is likely to be rejected by the corrupt Iraqi authorities and may have the opposite effect as in Lebanon. In addition, the opposition of other players in the Iraqi chess field is also unlikely to allow Paris to significantly strengthen its position in the country in the near future. It is in this context that Ankara has already started to criticize the actions of Paris openly.

Thus, one of the leading daily newspapers of Turkey Türkiye highly criticized the visit of the French President to Iraq and his participation in the “Summit of Cooperation and Solidarity of Neighboring and Regional Countries” in Baghdad, as well as his visit to Erbil and Mosul, qualifying it as a provocative “imperial reflexes.”

In another article by this leading Turkish publication, it is claimed that Macron, who has caused displeasure in Turkey with his provocative signals in Mosul and Erbil, where he headed after his contacts in Baghdad, is planning to occupy northern Iraq. In particular, it is reported that while Macron was visiting Erbil, there was a meeting in Kirkuk attended by representatives of the French intelligence, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the General Staff, the Iraqi military, representatives of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, which caused particular displeasure among Turks.

In particular, the Turkish media focused their attention on the fact that in the course of negotiations held by the French and Iraqi representatives in Kirkuk, an agreement had been reached to station 500 French soldiers at the Keyvan military base in Kirkuk. In addition, France will move 600 military personnel to Mosul. And the logistics base for the French military will be the Erbil airport - Hariri airport.

In this regard, the official spokesman of the Iraqi Turkmen Front, Mehmet Seman Ağaoğlu, stressed a clear occupation and violation of Iraqi sovereignty. “France’s presence in the region is, on the one hand, aimed at creating a safe corridor for the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and, on the other hand, supporting a terrorist organization (as Turkey views the PKK) by creating a buffer line in areas like Sinjar, Saladin, Duhok, and Makhmur,” said Ağaoğlu, clearly expressing Ankara’s official view on Paris’ actions in Iraq.

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