Iraq: the Elections are Over, but the Struggle Continues

The daring assassination attempt on Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi at his residence in Baghdad’s heavily fortified Green Zone came as no great surprise, according to many observers. As al-Kadhimi himself said a few hours later, the perpetrators are known and will be punished. The fact is that, throughout the time since the early legislative election results were announced last month, local militias and parties with significant losses have claimed fraud and demanded that the results be cancelled or counted manually.

The uncompromising heads of the factions of the Popular Mobilization Forces, acting as a Fatah alliance, made direct threats to Al-Kadhimi and the members of the Independent High Electoral Commission. Hadi al-Amiri, one of the commanders of the PMF, immediately rejected the election results as fabricated, while Asaib Ahl al-Haq leader Qais al-Khazali threatened to use force as the only way to change the result. There are more than a dozen other groups in the alliance, including Kataib Hezbollah, a militant group that the US has declared a terrorist group because of its armed resistance to American aggression in 2003. It’s simple: he who is not with us is a terrorist.

Incidentally, three explosives-laden drones were used in the attack, two were shot down and one managed to hit the al-Kadhimi residence. According to security reports, the drones came from the eastern side, giving a number of Iraqi commentators the opportunity to blame it all on Iran. Although al-Kadhimi survived the attack with minor wounds, the message was clear: it was to disrupt the nascent democratic process in Iraq, which suffers from ethno-religious
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Al-Khazali noted the movement had many doubts, many observations about the incident, saying the explosion had
certainly taken place at the Prime Ministers house, but the nature of the blast left many questions to be
answered. He questioned the inability of the US C-RAM system deployed at the US Embassy in Baghdad’s Green
Zone to detect any approaching projectile during an attack. Indeed, the prime minister’s residence is just one
diameter from the US Embassy, and, according to boasts from the Pentagon, the C-RAM system’s radar can detect
“unmanned aerial vehicles and missiles or even a pigeon from 15 kilometers away” with the ability to shoot down the
target. That is why it is suspicious how the perpetrators of the assassination attempt managed to launch three
drones in the immediate vicinity of the US Embassy, which looks more like a heavily fortified castle.

What happened in Baghdad was seen by many as a failed military coup attempt. The militias, whose followers
barricaded the Green Zone for several days to protest the election results, believed they could first intimidate al-
Kadhimi and then eliminate him in order to hinder the political process.

What is shocking is that, days after the initial election results were announced, former prime ministers Haider Abadi and Nuri al-Maliki, joined by moderate cleric Ammar al-Hakim and several other politicians, tried to form an alliance that would derail the election results. However, the head of the largest bloc, nationalist Shiite cleric Muqtada al-
Sadr, refused to join them. These politicians are now seen in the country as having provoked an even deeper crisis in Iraq. Whereas al-Kadhimi was a nonpartisan Iraqi nationalist who sought to preserve his country’s neutrality in the ongoing US-Iranian standoff. His goal is to distance Iraq from Iran and the United States, to bring the country back into the Arab fold, which is anathema to many pro-Iranian and pro-American “proxies”.

Given that all the facts initially pointed to Iran, it was interesting that al-Quds Force Commander Brigadier General

Esmail Qaani met with Iranian-backed fighters and officials in Iraq hours after the assassination attempt. He quickly
headed to Baghdad to try to contain the very forces encouraged and aided by Tehran. Iran, among other countries, condemned the assassination attempt.

This incident is a tipping point in the critical relationship between Iran and its Iraqi proxies, on the one hand, and
between Tehran and Baghdad, on the other. Iran, some Iraqi commentators point out, is playing a dangerous game
in Iraq that is about to wipe out all its gains after the brazen and unprovoked US invasion in 2003 that toppled Saddam Hussein’s regime. It is the only regional power capable of supplying drones to its proxies, who have often used them to attack US bases in Iraq. The rapid arrival of Esmail Qaani sends a warning signal: some pro-Iranian
Iraqi militias are spinning out of control and starting to run their own game. It is understandable that the blame for
this would have to be placed squarely on Tehran. By supporting the groups and providing them with such formidable
weapons as explosives-laden drones, the Iranians are now the prime suspects in the plot and attack on the Iraqi
prime minister, according to Arab observers who share Washington’s viewpoint.

But there are other points of view which are also entitled to life, especially as they have stronger arguments on their
side. The secretary-general of Asaib Ahl al-Haq has strongly denied allegations that his movement played any role in
the attempted assassination of the country’s prime minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi. In an exclusive interview with Al
Jazeera, Qais Al-Khazali noted that there had been no direct or indirect accusations against the group from any
political side in Iraq. He said: “As for the media accusations, we have become accustomed to these accusations as we
hear them made against us in almost every incident that happens in Iraq.”

Incidentally, Al-Khazali discussed all attack scenarios, including technical details, during his meeting with Iraqi
Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi. The resistance leader pointed directly to Israel, saying Baghdad could not rule
out the role of Americans and Israelis collaborating in the assassination attempt. He said the scenario was real and
could not be dismissed, explaining that since the prime minister’s term was likely to end now (after the elections), an
attack would bring Iraq to the attention of an international tribunal to further destabilize that highly turbulent
country. The secretary-general of Asaib Ahl al-Haq said Israel has the most to gain from the chaos in Iraq, which is
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has worked to destabilize the country. We have repeatedly warned not only about the presence of Israeli intelligence
in Kurdish northern Iraq, but also in Baghdad and some provinces”.

An Iraqi Joint Operations Command official also raised questions about the US military’s C-RAM systems used to
detect and destroy approaching missiles and flying objects, as an unmanned aerial vehicle packed with explosives
targeted the residence of Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi in Baghdad’s High Security Green Zone. “We are
currently discussing the matter with the American side and officials from the US embassy. This is an issue that experts should throw light on and explain,” Major General Tahsin al-Khafaji stated. I wonder what the brave Yankees will say about their “state-of-the-art” technology? It is also interesting that it is not the first time that a lauded American inventory has “jammed” and at just the right moment it somehow fails. Or maybe Al-Khazali is right to say that the assassination attempt was planned and executed by Washington and Tel Aviv, given the results of the recent elections, which dramatically increase Baghdad’s chances of pursuing independent nationalist policies? Why not?

Al-Kadhimi is currently running out of time and options if he wants to survive politically and keep his country from plunging into another “dark chapter” of political assassinations and possible civil war. First of all, he needs to find and rely on worthy allies to carry out his policies. He must also find a way to neutralize and contain the PMU and other militant groups influenced by Tehran. Of course, this is a very brave and dangerous challenge that can fail. It is quite clear that Iran will not back down under any circumstances in its bitter struggle against the US for influence over Baghdad and its leadership. And in doing so, it, like Washington, will not stop at any means and opportunities.

The weeks ahead will be crucial for Iraq, and any move by the prime minister will be met with a fierce backlash from both Tehran and Washington, which will cling desperately to Iraq after losing Afghanistan. Its success or not against superior forces is likely to determine Iraq’s future as a sovereign country.

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