
Iraq After Biden's Visit and Al-Sadr's Prayer

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Biden's Visit and The Formation of The Iraqi Government

Biden's visit to the Middle East appears to be a turning point. About a month ago, I tried to highlight the impact of this visit on Iraq and Kurdistan. [1] It seems that the Biden administration wants to create a balance in the Middle East, while Iran is waiting for the practical outcomes of this attempt. Iran had high hopes that Biden would return to the nuclear deal. However, when Biden became the president, he surprised the Iranians. He is behaving like Trump, despite his continuing desire to revive the nuclear deal. Biden's visit to the region was mainly aimed at establishing a balance between the regional powers that have been affected by the Iranian nuclear program and their missile capabilities, marches, and forces loyal to them. We will have to wait and witness what are the future moves of Russia and China and Iran, as another factor of this equation. Let's see if this balance will be achieved. But it may be comprehensible? Iran may want to destabilize the situation in the region or being yield to the new balance that the United States has created which is to preserve its policy in Iraq. This means Iran may not want to complicate the situation. Why?

With tensions likely to escalate in Syria and Lebanon, it may not be a suitable option for the Iranians to make the situation more complicated in Iraq. While in Syria, Israel resumes the offensive attacks, and Turkey may not hesitate to launch another operation against the Western administration. At the same time, the Russians withdrew from some areas in Syria, and the Iranians do want to miss the opportunity to fill the Russian Gap. Given the current tensions in Lebanon, further tensions in Iraq would not be in Tehran's interest. In addition, a dominant trend has emerged in Iraq against Iranian hegemony, and Tehran cannot turn a blind eye to this movement. Iran has recently appointed an Iraqi-born from Najaf [2] ambassador to Iraq, and this is a political and administrative process linked to Iran itself to appease the movement of the Shiite street that believes that Iran is interfering in its affairs. The protest movement and the Sadrists do not want Iranian hegemony over Iraq, and the supreme Shiite religious authority has likely pointed in this direction as well. Therefore, if the coordination framework wanted to form a government of their choice without Sadr's and other parties' interference, that probably means scenario of 2018 may repeat itself, where demonstrations and protests erupted shortly after the formation of the Adel Abdul-Mahdi government.

Sadr Prayer and Government Formation

Indeed, a day before the prayer when Sadr tweeted, there were indications that he did not intend to resort to demonstrations yet. [3] Sadr is very comfortable with this current situation, as he is outside and inside the government at the same time. This may have been the key reason for the coordination framework delay in forming a government without Sadr. Although Muqtada Al-Sadr had previously given them 40 days to form a government, they failed in this. At Friday prayers, Sadr gave the coordination framework a second chance to form a government. Al-Sadr validated his ability to persuade people to come on the streets, but at the same time, he allowed the coordination framework to form a government and drew a red line on Maliki and other supposed candidates for the prime minister, and set some other conditions as well.

Who Will Be The Next Prime Minister?

The circumstances are similar to 2010. Maliki remains a key player in the government formation race. This time, the race

has lasted more than nine months, and in a situation similar to 2018, the ball is now in the side of groups close to Iran. Among the obstacles to forming a government after Al-Sadr's withdrawal from Parliament, there are internal disputes within the coordination framework. This may be a sign that Iran is less willing than before to interfere in the government formation process. Therefore, if there are no surprising changes, the internal powers of Iraq and the coordination framework may determine the next prime minister very soon. Appointing someone from the framework's top leaders (Maliki or Amiri) could mean challenging Al-Sadr. Al-Maliki is a direct challenge while Amiri is an indirect challenge because this means his government will be strong vs a strong group like the Sadrist outside the Parliament, and this may mean more tensions, and none of the framework and Iran are unlikely to desire this in the short term at least. This is in addition to the fact that if Maliki or Hadi Al-Amiri becomes prime minister, it could affect the internal balance within the coordination framework. Therefore, Al-Amiri withdrew and it seems that putting up Maliki's name is somehow tactical. Otherwise, with the indirect veto of the Supreme Shiite Authority, the presence of Sadr, protest, and recently published audio recordings of him, Nouri Al-Maliki's chances of taking the position ended. If something like this happens, it will be a huge challenge and Iraq must prepare itself for a new phase.

Another option is keeping the current Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi, whose chances of staying at office increased after the Al-Sadr's prayer, the arrival of Biden, and publishing the recorded audios of Al-Maliki. During Al-Kadhimi's term, Iran's debt issues with Iraq were resolved. Also, Iraq played the role of Iranian-Saudi mediation, and its agenda was acceptable to external powers. Kadhimi also made a smart maneuver when he visited Tehran recently before going to Jeddah. Before his visit to Saudi, he also met with some of the coordination framework leaders while he did not do this with the rest and this is what he did not do with the other Iraqi parties. Through this Al-Kadhimi wants to tell them that he can maintain balance. His meeting with Biden and Mohammed bin Salman as caretaker prime minister can be interpreted as the US and Saudi support to keep him in office. One of Sadr's options will likely be Kadhimi's stay until another election. Despite Al-Kadhimi's attempts to gain the support of external forces and the framework, the coordination framework is not satisfied with keeping Al-Kadhimi. At the same time, the possibility of the parties agreeing on a second-class political name in the coordination framework is not excluded.

The Kurds and Iraq's Presidency

There are two opinions from the coordination framework on the Iraqi Presidency, one of which calls for the Kurds to agree and the other repeatedly claims that they will vote for the candidate of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. The truth is that Al-Sadr's withdrawal changed the situation. It seems that they want to interfere less in choosing the next Iraqi president this time because in the next stage they need the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan as same as the Kurdistan Democratic Party. Thus, the most suitable option for them is an agreement between the PUK and the KDP. If the two parties do not agree, the chances of Dr. Barham Salih for staying at office are the higher. Because Barham's return from Baghdad to Sulaimani could affect the internal balance of the PUK, and some internal and external parties may not want to do something that makes the current leaders of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan face more problems. Most likely the two sides will try to reach a compromise until the last minute, but if that does not happen, the PUK candidate may be voted in in return the KDP will be given privileges that will make it satisfactory and this will provide an outlet for a win-win match for both the two Kurdish parties.

Shortly, Al-Sadr's speech at Friday prayers was his second given opportunity for the framework to form a government. With Biden's visit to the Middle East, the situation in Iraq will become even more important to Iran, so Tehran will likely seek to balance Iraq as a close outsider to the group that now dominates the government formation process. So that there will be a coordination framework government that has an indirect partnership with Al-Sadr. This means keeping the Sadrists' positions in the government. Or at least the coordination framework may get Al-Sadr, the KDP, and Sunnis' approval. Similar to the balance of power that Biden wants to create in the Middle East, the situation in Iraq may move

towards a balance if only temporarily; if the situation remains as it is.

References:

[1] - <https://rudawrc.net/en/?p=601>

[2] -

<https://www.irna.ir/news/84748271/%D8%B3%D9%81%DB%8C%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%B1%D9%81%DB%8C-%D8%B4%D8%AF%D9%87-%D8%AC%D8%AF%DB%8C%D8%AF-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D8%BA%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%B4%D8%AF>

[3] - [https://fb.watch/ejBaLsvq_ /](https://fb.watch/ejBaLsvq_/)