

Warsaw Conference: The Second Guadalupe in Iraq

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Introduction:

During his eight-day visit to the Middle East, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced a Middle East security conference in Warsaw. Pompeo met with several regional leaders and foreign ministers in his visits to Amman, Baghdad, Erbil, Cairo, Manama, Abu Dhabi, Doha, Riyadh, and Muscat, inviting them to a conference focused on "Middle East stability, peace, freedom and security". The meeting takes place in Warsaw on Feb. 13-14, with Iran as its particular focus.

Has Pompeo summoned leaders of the Kurdistan Region to the Warsaw meeting? What are the implications of Kurdish warm receptions of Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif in Erbil, who visited Kurdistan after Pompeo? Can Erbil survive the conflict between Tehran and Washington?

Hypothesis: The US administration wants to use Kurdistan Region as one of the key centers to accomplish its regional strategy against Iran. It seems very likely that pro-Iran groups in the Iraqi parliament demand the withdrawal of the US forces from their country, which would increase the prospect of confrontations between Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and the American soldiers. It is not unlikely that the US administration consider using Kurdistan Region as the key host of its bases in Iraq.

Warsaw: the second Guadalupe after 40 years

Warsaw, the cradle of the colored revolutions and social uprisings, will host an anti-Iran summit. The ruling Polish Law and Justice Party is critical of European Union's migration policies. It has also supported the US withdrawal from Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), criticizing EU's passive attitude.

Polish Foreign Minister Jacek Czaputowicz is eager to enhance the international position and prestige of his country. He also points to the disagreements between Poland and the EU on several policy levels. Poland's position has enraged Iranians. Tehran government has recently summoned Polish consul to express their objection to the summit. Iran sees the February meeting as a hostile attempt.

Several world leaders have been invited to the summit. According to Czaputowicz seventy leaders have been invited to the conference, including all EU members. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is the first guest to be invited to the event. Some experts believe that choosing Poland to host the summit is due to the disagreements between east and north of Europe, while the US wants Poland to play more roles in the Middle East.

Until now it is not clear whether Federica Mogherini will take part in the conference or whether France, Britain and Germany will send their top diplomats to the events. The rifts between the US and other members of NATO have reached new heights. The EU, however, has increased its pressure on Iran in the recent months, which would somehow bring the Europeans closer to the US maximum pressure policy against Iran.

The Warsaw summit will focus on four topics: 1. Terrorism and Extremism, 2. Curbing Iran's ballistic program, 3. Confronting proxy groups, 4. Protecting free trade.

Some pundits resemble the conference in Poland to the Guadalupe Conference in 1979, in which the US, Britain, France and the West Germany announced that they would no longer support Iranian King Mohammed Reza Shah, and few later the Shah regime collapsed. Experts wonder if the Warsaw conference could be a second Guadalupe. What has changed in

the last 40 years between Guadalupe conference and the Warsaw conference?

Warsaw: Consequences for the KRG

24 hours after Pompoe's departure from Kurdistan Region, Iranian Foreign Minister along with tens of business leaders arrived in Iran and two days later in the Kurdistan Region. Pompoe and Zarif's visit raised the question of whether Baghdad and Erbil can play a balanced game between Washington and Tehran? The US government wants Iraq and most likely Kurdistan to participate in the Warsaw meeting, while both sides have signed new trade deals with Iran.

Pompoe talked to the Kurdish officials about his country's new policy in the Middle East. Hours later, Kurdish leaders warmly welcomed Zarif to the capital of the Kurdistan Region. Those scenes were both surprising and tragic, revealing how fragile the position of KRG and Baghdad is when it comes to dealing and keeping balance in their relations with Washington and Tehran.

What will happen in the Warsaw conference? How will the KRG be affected by the Iran-US conflict? Iran has already started its reaction against US pressure. Pro-Tehran legislators in the Iraqi parliament are currently working on project to force the US forces out of Iraq, which, if succeeded, would provoke US counteracts.

The US will not leave Iraq to Iran, and for this reason it intends to boost its military presence in Iraq by building new military bases. Iran will not abandon Iraq (its strategic backyard) to the US either. But Iranians eye the political arena as battleground against their biggest enemy, which would entail huge consequences for the Adel Abdul-Mahdi's cabinet. The current situation increases the possibility of political or even military conflict.

The tensions between pro-Tehran and pro-Washington forces will be heated in next six months. This has already reflected in naming Iraqi Defense and Interior Ministers. Iraqi politics will become more polarized in the coming months, and a similar situation is expected to dominate in the KRG's internal politics, though to a lesser degree.

Kurdistan Region has 450 km border with Iran, and is eager to translate its good trade relations with Iran into political achievements. On the other hand, Kurdistan Region hosts several US military bases, while there are speculations that the US administration intends to US Harir Airbase for its strategic goals against Iran. All these make it very hard for the KRG to play its game between these two extremely hostile poles.

A rational policy in line with preserving KRG stability should embrace the following steps:

One: The KRG's new cabinet must be formed as soon as possible; the unity among KDP, PUK, Goran, and other forces is the bedrock of this policy.

Two: Erbil and Sulaimania must stop their divisions, unify their policies about the disputed areas, and present their alternative strategy for Kirkuk.

Three: Kurdistan should not take side in the ongoing tensions between US and Iran, as in the current situation keeping neutrality is vital for the KRG.

Four: Iraqi politics will be more polarized in the coming months. It is not unlikely that Kurdish politics be prompted to follow the same suite. Kurdistan should keep its unity while dealing with a polarized Baghdad.

KRG is facing a new reality; a wise policy will protect it from the divisions in Baghdad and turn it into an island of peace and stability in an already turmoil region.