

Why US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue? Security and Military dimensions of the Upcoming US-Iraq talks

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Introduction

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that they "proposed a strategic dialogue with the government of Iraq to be held in middle of June". The US side will lead by under Secretary for political affairs David Hale. And "all strategic issues between both countries will be on the agenda, including the future presence of the United States forces in that country".^[1] Previously Iraq's caretaker Prime Minister Adil Abdul Mahdi has mentioned plans for a strategic dialogue with Washington. Also in the past days Iraq's National Security Council held meeting on this matter.

Iraqi government officially has welcomed US proposal for strategic dialogue, but some of the Shia parties are suspicious about it. Question here why Washington-Baghdad Strategic talks matters? And more importantly how this will affect Kurdistan Region?

Washington-Baghdad Strategic Dialogue

Desire for the US-Iraq strategic dialogue is at the time that despite some Shia parties calls to terminate or amend the strategic agreement of 2008, but Iraqi government officially did not propose such notice. And if do the "termination shall be effective one year after date of such notification".^[2]

In the strategic framework agreement US pledged to support Iraq in fighting terrorism and provide logistics and training to make Iraq capable in self _ defense from internal and external threats. Even in the agreement indirectly guaranteed Iraq to prevent Kurdistan region breakaway through enhancing Iraq's ability to "deter all threats against its sovereignty, security and territorial integrity".^[3] And more importantly US recognized Iraq's sovereignty. Therefore many of the Iraqi realistic politicians instead of making ideological call to terminate the agreement they have agreed to amend some provisions of the agreement. Is worth to mention that it seems the agreement does not satisfy US interests and that's why is proposing a strategic dialogue. In fact the strategic agreement of 2008 in many aspects was in the interest of Iraq. And it was drafted at time when Washington was muddled under internal pressure regarding to war and security turmoil in Iraq.

As reflections of the 2008 Strategic Agreement of 2008, such proposal for dialogue is at time where:

First: Baghdad in 2020 has accused US for violating its sovereignty twice. After killing of Qasim Soleimani and Abu Mahdi Muhandis and targeting some of the PMF bases. These attacks have made US actions legally questionable in Iraq, so might be one of the goals of this dialogue is to gain back legitimacy.

Second: There is serious discussion going on whether Iraqi territory been used to attack other countries. This is obvious in the case of attack on Saudi Aramco sites from Iraq and intervenes in Syrian affairs. Which is contradicts with the strategic agreement as stated that shall not use Iraqi "land, air and sea as launching point or transit for attacks against other countries" it seems that Washington want Iraq to control its land and air more and protected from attacking Washington allies in the region.

Third: The attacks on US bases and plan to burn American embassy in Baghdad proved that Iraqi government does not have enough capability to protect American facilities and personals. So is likely another goal of this dialogue is to get guarantee or set a proper mechanism to protect American interests.

Fourth: So far US is not willing to withdraw from Iraq , but in the strategic agreement Washington has given such right to Baghdad anytime can ask US troops to leave. And also promised not request for permanent bases. ^[4] By considering Iraqi

parliament resolution to expel US forces, America like 2008 might be is seeking for solution to stay or set a timetable to withdraw.

Strategic deal likely to take place

US set mid-June for the strategic dialogue with Iraq. Most probably until then new Iraqi PM- designate Mustafa al-Kadhimi is able to form his cabinet and Washington will be clearer to whom is talking to. But is Kadhimi represents all Iraqis? Officially yes he is, but there are many other groups with different interests that Kadhimi without them won't be able to decide. Such deal will work out when US is holding talks with Iran or its proxies under the table or when Iraq is independently make decisions. But does not seem Iraq can make decisions independently anytime soon. This issue also is related to the Iraqi political parties' attitude. Are Iraqis reached that point which instead of forming new armed groups and units should build strong economy and best products? If they got such attitude to build strong economy, then is more likely the deal with US to happen. This was a process that Europeans and Japanese went through in post Second World War. Through US financial support both Europe and Japan's economies were revived and moved to the world economic powers line. But this was done on condition that they should stay under America's security umbrella. Question here are the Shias accept such condition? Most likely that some of the Shia nationalists will welcome such initiative, but those have religious-ideological vision are not going to accept it.

Conclusion

If the schedule has not changed, the US-Iraq strategic dialogue will start in about two months. And if this eventually took place, it will be the second strategic deal since 2003. This is an outcome of post- ISIS era, which some of the Shias feel that without American presence can manage and even consider the presence of America as an obstacle. US to protect its forces and interests in Iraq is facing legal-political and military issue which need to be fixed. US-Iraq dialogue is to find new framework. Such deal carries potentials to affect entire Iraq and Kurdistan region as well. And most likely this deal will make Baghdad stronger. Therefore is important for Kurdistan region to take part in these talks or at least try to make sure it won't happen on the expense on the Kurds.

[1] <https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-remarks-to-the-press-8/>

[2] Section XI: Final Provisions-Strategic Framework agreement

[3] <https://photos.state.gov/libraries/iraq/216651/US-IRAQ/us-iraq-sfa-en.pdf>

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[4] <https://photos.state.gov/libraries/iraq/216651/US-IRAQ/us-iraq-sfa-en.pdf>

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