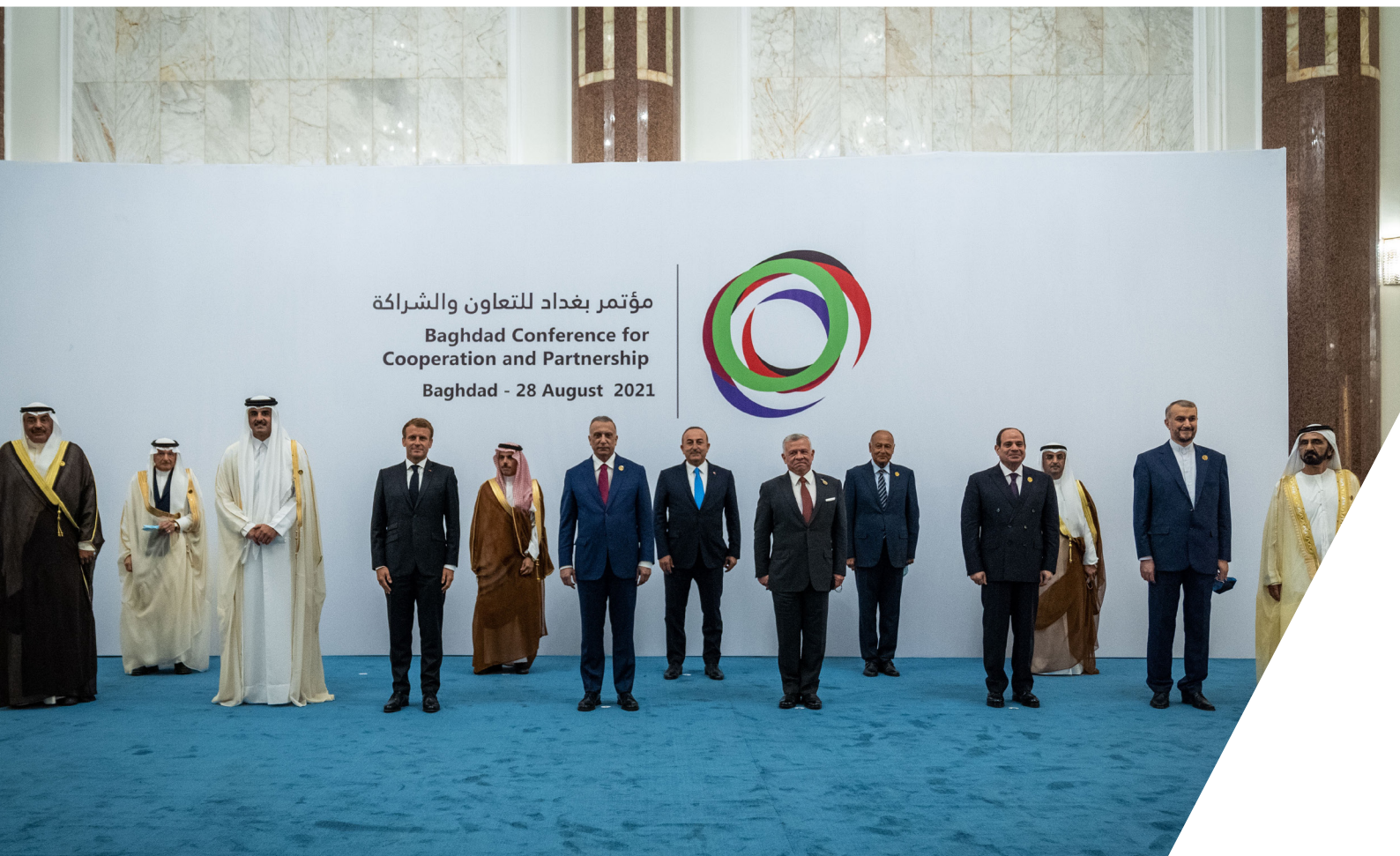


THE BAGHDAD CONFERENCE: PREPARATION FOR U.S. WITHDRAWAL OR THE BROKERING OF A NEW REGIONAL BALANCE?

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Introduction

Early August 2021, the Mustafa al-Kadhimi government announced the “Iraqi Neighboring Countries Conference,” designed to focus on regional challenges and ways to overcome them. The conference, held on August 28, 2021, was initially aimed at hosting Iraq’s neighbors, particularly Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Jordan (Syria was not invited). However, the list of participants later evolved to include delegations from countries outside the region and non-neighboring states such as France, Egypt, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Delegations from regional and international organizations such as the League of Arab States, European Union and the United Nations were also invited. What is significant about the Baghdad Summit is that it marks the first time Iraq has taken on a diplomatic initiative to mitigate regional tensions within a well-attended high-level conference. Although it is too early to talk about the conference’s impact,¹ if Iraq manages to facilitate a regional dialogue it will become post-2003 Iraq’s most important diplomatic achievement, normalizing its status as a regional player.

With the widened scope of mandate given to al-Kadhimi government, this conference is regarded as a landmark achievement for Iraq’s diplomacy since the United States’ (U.S.) invasion of the country in 2003. This brief will explain the Iraqi government’s aims in hosting the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership. I argue that uncertainty towards the future of U.S. support and its commitments to Iraq’s protection and sustainability has forced Iraqi leaders to seek regional cooperation and integration. In addition, Baghdad also aims to forge a regional understanding among Iraq’s neighbors to have a constructive role after the U.S. change of mission in Iraq. The success of this attempt of the Iraqi government will largely depend on two major conditions: firstly, the nature of Iraq’s post early election government, and secondly, the outcome of U.S-Iran nuclear talks.

Since the American 2011 withdrawal from Iraq numerous efforts have aimed to restore the country’s appropriate role in the regional and international arena. The most recent effort was an agreement between Iraq, Egypt, and Jordan at a high diplomatic level in late June of this year, in which Iraq’s prime minister al-Kadhimi asserted that the Arab states have attempted to develop a “common vision through cooperation and coordination” to resolve the conflicts in Syria, Palestine, Libya, and Yemen.² Since Kadhimi took office in May 2020, there have been high expectations from US, European countries and to a lesser extent Arab Gulf countries that he might be able to lead his country in a manner that balances its relations with neighboring countries and regional actors. Kadhimi’s ascendance to power came at an

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apt time, as angry protestors and Iraq's key international backers hoped that he could build strong political and legal institutions, contain armed militia groups and address corruption. Public expectations for Kadhimi's government were high, and it initially enjoyed popular support across Iraq's diverse communities.³

Regarding Kadhimi's regional diplomacy, there are two factors that are working in Kadhimi's favor, but were not available for his predecessors. First and foremost was the decline of political favor and affinity for Iran among Iraq's Shia population. According to the polls which were conducted in the end of 2020 "Iran has lost its soft power as a model of Shi'a political Islam" to an extent that over 85 per cent of Iraqis, including 82 per cent of Shi'a, say that Iran plays a negative role in Iraq.⁴ The second factor was the decline of public trust for the traditional political elite that has dominated Iraq's political process since 2003, specifically among the Shia population. Over the past years, the Shia communities have shown high rates of dissatisfaction regarding their political system when compared to Iraqi Sunnis and Kurds.⁵ Comparing these two different moments in Iraq's political process is indicative of the disappointment of Iraqis and specifically Shia towards both Iran and the existing political class. The above-mentioned changes have provided a space, and importantly, a mandate to Kadhimi's government to expand the scope of Iraq's diplomacy and the turn towards balancing relations within the Arab region.

Baghdad Summit as an achievement for the Kadhimi administration

Kadhimi's government realized significant diplomatic achievements this year. Pope Francis' March 2021 visit also showed Iraq's readiness, diplomacy and engagement with the world. Another important event, which was viewed as a "diplomatic victory" for Kadhimi, was the Strategic Dialogue between Baghdad and Washington, ending the US combat mission in Iraq by the end of 2021. Similarly, the tripartite summit that was held at the end of June and brought together Iraq, Egypt and Jordan, was considered as a diplomatic achievement for the administration.

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Kadhimi's attempt at regional diplomacy benefits from the political fragmentations at home. Parties, specifically the Shia parties and blocs, are preoccupied with their internal problems, and evaluating their current political performance and the extent of their public support in preparation for the upcoming elections scheduled for October 10. This has provided Kadhimi and his government with space to move without the vigorous presence of voices in opposition to holding conferences and meetings with regional powers, including rivals to Tehran, the main external patron for many Shia groups.

While Kadhimi's government has been successful in regional diplomacy, it has not been able to deliver on its two key promises: holding accountable the killers of protesters and preparing the country for fair and peaceful elections.⁶ The domestic challenges facing Kadhimi's government have pushed him to shift his focus towards regional and international issues. Kadhimi has so far not shown any clear intention of making a political bloc or party to participate in upcoming elections, hence, staying in power as a PM. However, traditional parties' weak performance, the support of the Sadr movement and key Kurdish and Sunni parties, and above all, the divisions within the Shia ranks might result in Kadhimi once more being favored as a consensus figure for the premiership. Additionally, many of the aforementioned diplomatic activities require continuity, which this might help Kadhimi to also obtain the support of regional powers for his possible second term.

Iran, for its part, did not officially oppose Kadhimi's initiative and expressed their support. When Iraq's foreign minister handed in the summit invitation to his Iranian counterpart, Hussein Amir Abdollahian Iran's new Foreign Minister, expressed that "Tehran would like to improve relations with the region through economic and cultural co-operation, without what he called the usual interference from international powers".⁷ Iran also attempted to use this summit as a platform for the country's regional agenda. The Iranian ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, praised Kadhimi and described his initiative as "a service to the resistance project."⁸ At this stage, it is too early to predict Iran's position on Baghdad's diplomatic push towards the Arab world. However, if it results in a Baghdad more independent from Tehran and in more Arab nationalist sentiments among Iraq's Shia, it would be a major challenge to Iran's regional power.

Preparation for U.S. withdrawal

The US military withdrawal from Iraq could lead to more regional competition over Iraq. The Gulf States are expected to play a more assertive role in Iraq to counter the Iranian influence in the country. The US supports Baghdad's pivot towards Arab states as a strategy to counter Iran in Iraq. For example, the Baghdad Summit was supported by U.S., and attended by delegations from the permanent members of the United Nations (UN) Security Council, the G20 countries, and the European Union. Currently U.S., and France in particular, are concerned over the involvement of Iraq's neighbors following the changing of U.S. mission at the end of this year. The Baghdad Summit appears to be about preparation for the gradual decrease of Washington's leverage in Iraq, and an attempt to integrate it into the Arab regional order to balance Tehran's influence. Iraq, without integration into regional politics in the absence of U.S. military support and presence, will become even more vulnerable to Turkish intervention in the north and Iranian intervention in other parts of the country. Turkey's military operations and activities to counter Kurdistan's Workers Party (PKK) in northern Iraq have become more assertive and comprehensive, and it has built more military bases inside the Kurdistan Region (KRG). Turkish presence in the KRG consists of at least 41 military points and headquarters, reaching 25 kilometers deep inside Kurdish lands in Iraq, and extending from the west to a few kilometers from the Iranian border in the east.⁹ A few days prior to the conference, Turkey bombarded a hospital in Sinjar. This shows that Iraq is still far from establishing itself as a regional player and maintaining its domestic authority and sovereignty.

While there is no current competition over replacing the U.S. patronage and military presence in Iraq, there is certainly space for international actors to fill a possible leadership vacuum in the country in the near future. French President Emmanuel Macron's participation, which provided powerful support to the conference, is indicative of this. Paris's political engagement in Iraq has increased, with President Macron having visited the country twice since September 2020. Macron told a news conference in Baghdad that "no matter what choices the Americans make, we will maintain our presence in Iraq to fight against terrorism, for as long as the Iraqi government requests support."¹⁰ Compared to other EU countries, at present France is playing a dynamic role, engaging

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different parties in Iraq including the Kurdistan Region. There are a number of issues which are important for France, including engagement in Iraq's energy sector and the war against the Islamic State (IS). The jihadist group may still command up to as many as 8,000 fighters across Iraq and Syria despite its defeat.¹¹ Unlike Afghanistan, in Iraq there are other international actors, such as France and rising regional powers such as Iran and Turkey, ready to engage and fill the vacuum. In November 2020, the Iraqi delegation headed by the Defense Minister Juma Inad visited France. Inad stated, "The visit to the French capital aims to strengthen cooperation between the two countries in training and arming Iraqi forces and combating terrorism."¹² Furthermore, France doesn't want to see Iraq and the Kurdistan region dominated by Iran and Turkey. On the Sunday following the conference, Macron visited Mosul, a Sunni-majority city which was the de facto capital of the IS during the period 2014-2017. "We will bring back a (French) consulate and schools," he pledged, while criticizing the pace of reconstruction in Mosul as "too slow."¹³ These are clear indications that France intends a deeper engagement in Iraq following the supposed U.S. change in mission.

Iraq and regional powers

Following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the role of Iraq's neighbors in its internal affairs has always been a problematic and complicated issue. The subject encompasses various aspects, such as an apparent negligence on the US' part prior to the 2003 invasion regarding Iraq's neighbors capabilities and political and security agendas, and a lack of understanding of the degree to which Iraq's regional security is intertwined with its neighbors. This is particularly important in terms of the ramifications of Iraq's occupation on the regional power balance in the Persian Gulf on one hand, and 'regional conflict complexes' on the other. The "persistent permeability" of the regional state system in the Middle East is an important factor that should be considered in any serious analysis of the region's order. Given its historical, economic, religious and demographical factors, Iraq is in a very volatile position, whereby it has the potential to be a source of greater regional influence, with the possibility of either stabilizing or further destabilizing the region. Thus, having a number of regional powers such as Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia (Syria before 2011) in a penetrated regional state system such as the Persian Gulf and the Levant is going to be extremely challenging for post U.S. withdrawal Iraq.

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At a regional level, there are two major incentives for its neighbors to intervene in Iraq's internal affairs after the regime change in 2003. First, due to the existing regional security complex of both the Persian Gulf and the Levant sub-regions, complicated dynamics link the internal and regional security of most of the countries neighboring Iraq to the country's stability. Given these countries' substantial regional interdependence, they cannot accurately be analyzed in separation of one another. Furthermore, the relationship among Iraqi factions themselves on the one hand, and their links with Iraq's neighbors on the other, has created powerful connections between domestic and regional factors. These relations have historical, ethnic and sectarian roots, whereby if one group considers its political and sectarian rights as not being protected, they seek support from external allies. This has been a case for the Shi'a, Sunni and Kurds after the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Second, the U.S. invasion of Iraq tilted the regional balance of power in Iran's favor at the expense of Saudi Arabia, Turkey and even Syria. Due to the intertwined regional security, the main forces driving this shift were ethnic and sectarian factors. Consequently, new socio-political developments in Iraq after 2003 divided Iraq's neighbors into ethno-sectarian blocks, thus facilitating regular interference from Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Turkey in Iraq's domestic affairs. Moreover, the U.S. presence in Iraq has posed a strategic threat to regional powers, particularly those whose relationship with the U.S. is dictated by mutual distrust or even enmity, such as Iran and Syria.

Iraqi officials hope to contribute to a new regional order based on common regional security and economic interdependence.¹⁴ Iraqi parties are aware of possibility of Afghanistan's case recurring in Iraq. Thus, the Baghdad regional conference is also about establishing a regional power balance as an alternative to U.S. patronage. However, Iraq's desire to establish itself as a bridge in regional politics depends on the future of the nuclear negotiations between Iran and the U.S. If the negotiations end with positive results, Iran will minimize its policy of using Iraq as a means of pressure against U.S. and its allies in the region.


Implications for Iraq's future?

It might be still be too early to talk about the summit's consequences, despite it being one of the biggest diplomatic events since the U.S. invasion of 2003. At the least, it

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means Iraq was able to gain acceptance in the regional and international scene. As an official close to Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi said: “Even if we bring the foreign ministers together at one table this could be considered a breakthrough to end the tensions between Iranians and the Gulf Arabs.”¹⁵ However, the conference is unlikely to have ramifications on the regional competition among Iraq’s neighbors. There was no indication of any direct meetings between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as an Iranian official ahead of the Baghdad summit stated: “the conference was only focused on Iraq and how the regional countries can cooperate to help Iraq.”¹⁶ The Iran-Saudi Arabia conflict is not something that can be resolved over one or two meetings, hence, the need for a new regional order with Iraq playing the role of a bridge between the two. However, there might be some grounds for hope that that the conference will continue in this regard after its conclusion. Iran is currently isolated by U.S. sanctions and the new Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi might need to ease the conflict with U.S. and amend relations with neighbors. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia, after witnessing the Biden administration’s policy of holding negotiations with Iran, is looking to reduce tensions given its uncertainty of the impact of these talks.

Considering the regional complexities, it appears that the Baghdad summit is unlikely to have productive ramifications at the regional level in the short term. This is due to the fact that many of the invited countries have deep contentions and the most influential rival countries in the region (namely, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey) did not participate at the head of state level, but instead sent their foreign ministers. It can be argued that Iraq is still far from becoming capable of integrating into regional politics, due to number of issues, such as its deep domestic divisions, powerful militia groups out of state control, and fragile state institutions. The U.S disengagement (or withdrawal) will pose even further challenges for Iraq to encounter both domestic and regional challenges, so it seems illogical to claim that Iraq is becoming “the Middle East’s New Power Broker.”¹⁷ Iraq is still suffering from the influence of regional powers in the country, and still does not have enough political, economic and military weight to influence its neighbors. It sometimes cannot even avoid getting unwillingly dragged into its neighbors’ regional rivalries. Furthermore, the



conference's aim of non-interference in Iraq's internal affairs will ultimately depend on two factors. Firstly, it will depend on which political bloc dominates the coming Iraqi cabinet, whether pro-Iranian militia groups, Sadrist or those who seek to bring Iraq back to the regional and international stage. Secondly, it is highly dependent on the Iran-US nuclear negotiations ending positively, which could reduce Iran's negative effects on internal Iraqi affairs. Otherwise, both Iraq and the wider region will only witness further conflict and tensions.

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