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THE CURRENT: What will US combat forces withdrawal mean for Iraq?

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

This week, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi of Iraq visited the White House for an official announcement and additional talks on the end of the U.S. combat mission in Iraq. To discuss this shift in the U.S. military mission, what it means for Iraq, and the future of U.S.-Iraq relations is Ranj Alaaldin, visiting fellow at the Brookings Doha Center, and a nonresident fellow with the Center for Middle East Policy here at Brookings. Ranj, thanks for talking to us today.

ALAALDIN: Thanks very much, great to be with you.

PITA: This meeting between Prime Minister Kadhimi and President Biden was billed as announcing the quote-unquote end of the U.S. combat mission, but a lot of the details are still up in the air. What do we know so far about what's actually been decided and what's still an open question?

ALAALDIN: Thanks very much, Adrianna. I think you hit the nail on the head there. There's still a number of details that have to become clearer and I do believe over time they will. Of course, the U.S. has been in a non-combat capacity in Iraq for some time now, if not a number of years. A similar announcement was also made under the Trump administration, and the key announcement during Prime Minister Kadhimi's visit to the White House was that the U.S. will fully, and I emphasize the word "fully" here, transition to a training, advising, assisting, and intelligence-sharing role, with combat forces out of the country by the end of the year.

Ultimately, I think this is, by design, this actual statement, and it stems in large part because of the political pressure Prime Minister Kadhimi is under in Iraq on the on the domestic front. U.S.-Iraq relations became increasingly eroded, reached their lowest ebb since the 1990s, I would argue, under the previous administration in the U.S. At one point, former President Trump even threatened to impose sanctions on Iraq in response to repeated attacks on U.S. targets in Iraq by Iraqi proxy groups that answer to Iran. And so with this current administration, the Iraqis are hoping for a more delicate, more moderate approach to the country, and understanding that the security climate in Iraq is tied heavily to the domestic political dynamics in Iraq. And within that equation, the Iraqis would argue, or the Iraqi government would argue, is the status, the presence of U.S. forces.

Now all this becomes rather complicated because Iraq has a very heavy dependency on the U.S. for the campaign to defeat ISIS. That's, I guess, in a way, the essence of the relationship itself. U.S.-Iraq relations are particularly important because of the continued threat that ISIS presents. Iraq is of course

the arena where ISIS established and declared its so-called caliphate in 2014. It has technically been defeated. It no longer controls territory like it did before and hasn't done since around 2017, but the group has proven to be rather resilient. It's ramped up its attacks in recent months and recent weeks, including a very deadly attack in the capital Baghdad last week.

I would say, away from the glare of the international media, it's expanding its reign of terror in other parts of the country, in the north, in the Arab Sunni heartlands, especially where it's expanding the scope and scale of attacks. That includes things like assassinations, kidnappings, coercing or extorting local communities. And really establishing the infrastructure that would or could potentially at some point, give it an opening, an opportunity to control territory like it did. So that's why the U.S. is so important to Iraq's efforts to prevent that from happening.

Now, what comes into the picture is this scenario which came into play under the Trump administration, where the assassination of Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the head of a major Iran-aligned proxy group, Kata'ib Hezbollah, set into motion the, let's say, intensified demand for the withdrawal of U.S. forces in the country. Although there was a nonbinding vote in the Iraqi parliament, passed predominantly, if not entirely, by groups that are either very loyal to Iran or that because of their constituencies and support bases had no choice but to support that vote, that set into motion the political momentum domestically.

And with Prime Minister Kadhimi, you effectively have a prime minister who in many regards is a transitional prime minister. He came into office because the previous government in Iraq, the previous prime minister, was effectively forced out by a very ferocious protest movement which has demanded greater rights, human rights, demanded accountability in the country, reforms, an end to corruption, and a better standard of living overall. Now that was met with an onslaught by Iran-aligned militias who, to this day, haven't really answered for the crimes that were committed during that that period, where you had around 600-plus Iraqi civilians killed, thousands were wounded.

And the legacy of that continues today where you've got near-daily human rights atrocities being committed by Iran-aligned militias, kidnappings, and so forth, which also, at the same time itself, is very political. Because what it does is, it undermines Prime Minister Kadhimi, it discredits him and ultimately creates the kind of environment that is very conducive to an ISIS resurgence because it's creating grievances, polarization that is very helpful to the organization, but at the same time, is also very conducive to the objectives and interests of Iran-aligned militias.

Ultimately the trip to Washington is, like I say, was designed to try and get, let's say, some breathing space from the Americans; an effort to ensure that the U.S. doesn't really retaliate to continued rocket attacks, drone attacks by Iran-aligned militias on U.S. targets in the country in a manner which perhaps would be similar to the confrontational stance that the Trump administration took. So, something proportional from the U.S. side, a response that doesn't plunge the country into yet another conflict, and which at the same time, can help de-escalate tensions in the region. Because Prime Minister Kadhimi is certainly carving out a role for himself with the support of other political actors in Iraq, whether it's the president or whether it's his allies in Erbil, trying to carve out a role where Iraq can play the role of a bridge-builder of sorts in the region, where Iraq effectively becomes a conduit through which to de-escalate tensions between Iran and its rivals but also Iran and the U.S.

Now that there are a lot of moving pieces here, and it does ultimately come back to this question of whether the announcement from President Biden and Prime Minister Kadhimi in Washington will be

enough to convince Iran and its allies to, I would say, either end their rocket attacks on U.S. bases, U.S. targets in Iraq, on U.S.-aligned actors, like-minded Kurdistan regional government, or at least to reduce the number of these attacks, to reduce and limit the scope and scale of these attacks, and that's something I think will become apparent over the coming days and weeks, most certainly.

PITA: Thanks, Ranj. As you've alluded to here, between the question of the resurgence of ISIS, ongoing tensions with Iran and their presence, while there is a lot of strong opinion for the U.S. withdrawal, that's not universal in Iraq. Kadhimi is also dealing with a lot of his own political dynamics, being not standardly a politician. So I'm wondering if you can give us sort of a little background about him and what he's dealing with in the country, trying to manage all these difference of opinions, and violence and issues, all these tensions that he's trying to balance?

ALAALDIN: So if you ask Iraqi observers, the wider Iraqi population, although there's a number of crises that the country is currently hit with – I would say, interconnected crises – whether that's the threat from militia groups tied to Iran, whether it's ISIS, wider geopolitical crises and tumult, or U.S.-Iran tensions, most of them will actually point towards the economic crisis in the country, and that's I would say, near existential crisis for Iraq.

And Prime Minister Kadhimi came into office with two objectives really, with two expectations being in place: the first is to hold early elections, and the hope is that the elections will enable some political reforms and bring into office, bring into state institutions moderate actors who do want to push Iraq towards recovery, who do want to install, implement a culture of accountability; and secondly, to address the economic crisis in the country.

Now, the economic crisis, in particular, has been devastating and could become an existential crisis as a result of the decline in oil prices, because of the pandemic. 70% of the Iraqi budget goes towards paying civil servants and the Iraqi state can simply no longer afford that public sector payroll. So, it's got a population of more than 30 million, expected to reach around 50 million in a decade, with around 60% of Iraqis under 24, and alongside that, 700,000 required jobs every year. And this is a country, bear in mind, that lacks infrastructure, sustainable governance, and most certainly lacks a private sector that can meet the demands and needs of its population. So that crisis, although it doesn't receive as much attention, and doesn't occupy, let's say, headlines as much as it should, is still there in the background. It still hasn't been addressed.

Although there are some genuine efforts, I would say, to be fair to the government, to actually address that. There is a blueprint of sorts, known as the White Paper. Well, it came into place actually almost months after Kadhimi came into office. It's a rather ambitious blueprint, because although conceptually and theoretically, you can have all the right principles, mechanisms, and ideas in place, its execution is made a little more difficult if not impossible precisely because of those interconnected crises that I refer to, not least the security environment, the security conditions.

So in a way, Prime Minister Kadhimi, as somebody who is a transitional prime minister, is something of a compromise candidate, has some breathing room amongst the wider Iraqi public, and for them, I would go as far as saying he could be the least worst option as it stands. Because the alternative could be far worse. It could be a militant individual or prime minister tied to Iran, which has been possible in the past, which could become a reality in the future, in the very near future. And the alternative could be a repeat of what unfolded under the previous prime minister, which is effectively carte blanche for Iran-aligned militias to conduct a full-scale campaign of oppression against protesters and the wider public.

That isn't to say that patience will not run out, and I think we're now reaching a point where the elections could make or break his prospects of securing another term. There could be a boycott of those elections because of the intensified campaign to assassinate activists and civilians by Iran-aligned militias, and that boycott will help them very much – that's Iran and its proxies – because they've already got an established and entrenched support base that follows, let's say, more the personalities within those groups. And they'll be loyal regardless of whether the wider Iraqi public boycotts the elections. And if that boycott happens, the moderates that will suffer, and I would say it's also Prime Minister Kadhimi that will ultimately suffer and fail to get a second term in office.

PITA: Looking ahead to the continued future of U.S.-Iraq relationship, while the question of the U.S. military is obviously the most significant element there, it's not the only one. What were some of the other issues that were discussed? And is there any question of the role that the U.S. can play in trying to assist either with the economic crisis or these attempts of political reform, or any of these other really important elements that you've brought up?

ALAALDIN: Absolutely, I think the U.S. has a capacity which it has exercised in Iraq to mobilize international support, whether it's from other countries' governments, whether it's the likes of the World Bank and the IMF, and to mobilize international support and resources towards Iraq's economic recovery. Sometimes it's about inspiring confidence and instilling confidence in the Iraqi climate, and the vote of confidence from the U.S. goes a long way towards mobilizing those international resources and support, I would say even regional support. So one of the notable improvements since Kadhimi came into office – and I would say since President Biden came into office – has been this rather significant improvement in Iraq's relationship with its neighbors, particularly the Arab world, so the likes of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and I think that could become a very important legacy for U.S.- Iraq relations under President Biden and Prime Minister Kadhimi.

So that's the first, I would say, element and basis for that relationship outside of the security cooperation. Secondly U.S. support for Iraqi civil society, for the democracy promotion, human rights promotion that unfolds in the country on a daily basis; it's actually part and parcel of the fabric of the Iraqi society. The U.S. is still a very important player in not just providing or enabling funds for that effort, but of course, at the same time to, let's say, mobilize NGOs, American and non-American, to ensure they remain invested in the country.

And I believe President Biden did announce, or at least in one of the announcements, there was an emphasis on continued U.S. support for direct education reforms, the pandemic. I believe the U.S. has already helped the Iraqis mobilize 500,000-plus vaccines in its efforts to combat the pandemic. And of course, support for Iraq's democracy and the rule of law. So here we're talking about things like improving the capacity of the judiciary to hold militias and militant groups to account. We're talking about making sure that the Iraqi moderates, the reformists, the activists, and civil society have a genuine and committed partner on the outside, even if that partner faces restraints and constraints here and there. But I still think the U.S. is particularly critical and crucial to Iraq's path to recovery. And in the absence of that support, even if it's symbolic, material support and so forth, Iraq would be in a much darker place right now.

PITA: All right. Well, Ranj, thanks very much for talking to us today and explaining about this.

ALAALDIN: Thanks very much, it's been a pleasure.