



# Iraq Situation Report

August 19 – 25, 2020

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**Key Takeaway:** Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi led an Iraqi delegation to Washington, DC, for a productive second stage of the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue. Delegates representing Iraq and the United States agreed to a number of economic and energy deals and to the continued drawdown of US forces. They did not set a concrete timeline for the complete withdrawal of US forces from Iraq, a key demand of the Iranian regime and its Iraqi proxies. Iran’s proxy militia network in Iraq accelerated its campaigns of targeted assassinations of activists and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks on US-affiliated Iraqi contractors during Kadhimi’s Washington visit. Iran’s proxies likely intend to demonstrate Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi’s domestic weakness and inability to control Iraqi security or protect Iraq’s allies, undermining his domestic authority and global credibility.

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**Aug. 19: Iraq and the United States Release Joint Statement ahead of Strategic Dialogue Meetings in Washington, DC.** The governments of Iraq and the United States released a joint statement outlining US-Iraq cooperation and negotiations in the economic, energy, health, political, security, and cultural sectors. The statement came after a meeting of the Higher Coordinating Committee chaired by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein. The Iraqi delegation to the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue, led by Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, traveled to Washington, DC for bilateral meetings the same day. The United States reiterated its support for Iraqi economic reform and pledged to facilitate foreign investment and aid packages. The United States reaffirmed its commitment to support the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and announced its intent to hold later technical discussions on the management and timing of transitioning to a “new phase” of the ISIS campaign focused on “training, supporting, and equipping” the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). The United States also discussed how to help Iraq hold early parliamentary elections, enhance its relationships with its Arab neighbors, and assist with energy and environmental concerns.

**Aug. 19: Iraqi Strategic Dialogue Delegation Discusses Economics, Humanitarian Aid, and Energy Development with US Partners.** Prime Minister Kadhimi and his delegation discussed economics, humanitarian aid, and energy development with representatives from the US Chamber of Commerce, the US Department of Energy, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) during the delegation’s visit to Washington, DC. The US Department of Energy announced that Honeywell International Inc, Baker Hughes Co, General Electric Co (GE), Stellar Energy, and Chevron each signed commercial agreements with Iraq worth approximately 8 billion USD. The US Department of State also announced that an additional 204 million USD will be allocated to support Iraq and Iraqi refugees in the region. Kadhimi stressed to the US Chamber of Commerce that Iraq is aiming to “remove all obstacles” and “facilitate” private foreign investments in Iraq, likely referring to the entrenched corruption and patronage networks that hinder foreign investment in Iraq.

Aug. 19: **Explosion Hits PMF Warehouse in Southern Baghdad.** Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Twitter account reported that an explosion hit one of its equipment warehouses near southern Baghdad. The PMF media account added that the explosion did not result in any casualties and stated it would immediately launch an investigation into the nature and cause of the explosion. Two other PMF weapons depots exploded on July 27 and July 28. Iranian proxy militias alleged that "external" airstrikes caused the July explosions, alluding to the United States or Israel.

Aug. 19: **Prime Minister Kadhimi Rebukes Basra's Security Leadership from Washington, Appoints New Officials amid Assassination Campaign.** Prime Minister Kadhimi dismissed the Basra Operations Commander Maj. Gen. Akram Saddam Mudannaf, who is likely connected to the Iranian proxy Badr Organization. His dismissal comes following an assassination campaign targeting civil activists in Basra Province. Kadhimi replaced Mudannaf with Maj. Gen. Nasser al-Ghanim, a former special operations officer. Kadhimi stated that former Basra Police Chief and Iranian proxy Rashid Falih and other Basra "security directors" were complicit in the spate of recent assassinations. Kadhimi flew directly from Washington to Basra after the Strategic Dialogue, vowing that the "killers would be in the hands of justice soon."

Aug. 19: **Iraqi Ministers of Defense and Foreign Affairs Meet with US Counterparts in Washington.** US Secretary of State Pompeo met separately with Iraqi Prime Minister Kadhimi and Foreign Minister Hussein. Pompeo reportedly vowed to continue US support to fight ISIS and outlined other aspects of cooperation. US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper separately discussed mutual security interests with Iraqi Defense Minister Jumaa Inad Saadoun at the Pentagon, where each reaffirmed their commitment to "build the Iraqi Security Forces, such that they are able to prevent [ISIS] from ever re-emerging and threatening Iraq."

Aug. 19 - 20: **Likely Iranian Proxies Target Protesters and Activists in Nasiriyah, Dhi Qar Province.** Unidentified militants detonated an explosive device at the home of pro-demonstrator civil activist Mohsen al-Zaid in the Sumer neighborhood of Nasiriyah, Dhi Qar Province. Zaid was not injured in the blast. Unidentified militants also targeted a protester site in Nasiriyah by detonating improvised explosive devices fixed to a motorcycle. Iraq's Security Media Cell (SMC), an official Iraqi military body, reported that a motorcycle-borne improvised explosive device (MBIED) "slightly" injured two civilian protesters. Demonstrators blamed Iranian proxy militias for the violence, citing similar recent events in Basra Province.

Aug. 19 - 20: **Likely Iranian Proxies Continue Assassination Campaign in Basra Province.** Unidentified gunmen assassinated women's rights activist Riham Yaqoub in central Basra City. Hours later, militants shot and killed Basrawi activist Falah al-Hasnawi and his fiancé. Protesters blamed Iranian proxies for the ongoing violence in Basra while multiple anonymous security sources told al-Araby al-Jadeed that the perpetrators were a part of "a militia linked to Iran." Likely Iranian proxies have killed at least four people, including three Basrawi activists, and attempted four other assassinations between August 14 and 20 in a campaign to intimidate Basrawi activists. An advisor to Basra Governor Assad al-Eidani blamed Gulf states and "other foreign countries" for the recent spate of assassinations.

Aug. 19 - 20: **Iraqi Minister of Interior Issues Security Directives in Basra Province.** Minister of Interior Othman al-Ghanimi arrived in Basra to address the ongoing attacks targeting activists and protesters. Ghanimi arrived with a delegation consisting of the head of the National Security Service Abdul Ghani al-Assadi, National Security Advisor Qassim al-Araji, and additional unspecified "intelligence and defense agents." Ghanimi and his delegation held a "top secret" meeting with Basra Governor Assad al-Eidani, the Basra Operations Commander, Police Chief Maj. Gen. Abbas Naji, and leadership from other unspecified security agencies. Ghanimi ordered the establishment of a coordinated intelligence effort to identify perpetrators of violence. Ghanimi also issued several orders including banning tinted car windows and ordering all unlicensed vehicles to be stopped and inspected.

Aug. 20: **Likely Iranian Proxies Attempt to Assassinate Three Protest Activists in Babil Province.** Likely Iranian proxy militants attempted to assassinate three protest activists, Muhammad Jaber, Adnan al-Kamar, and Muhammad al-Mansoori, in the al-Qasim district of Babil Province, south of Hilla. The gunmen followed the activists from Hilla to their homes and fired several shots into their vehicle without causing any reported injuries. The activists fled to a nearby police station. Iraqi outlet NasNews reported that the targeted activists were "pioneers" in the Qasim district protest movement.

**Aug. 20: President Trump Hosts Prime Minister Kadhimi for Oval Office Meeting, Addresses Troop Withdrawal.** US President Donald Trump met with Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi in the Oval Office in Washington, DC, during the second stage of the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue. The two leaders and their delegations reportedly discussed security cooperation to ensure the continued defeat of ISIS and the strengthening of economic, political, and humanitarian cooperation. Trump reaffirmed US support for Kadhimi and the government of Iraq while Kadhimi announced that “Iraq is open for American business and investment.” US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a press conference before the meeting that the United States will leave Iraq “as soon as we complete the mission. The President has made very clear he wants to get our forces down to the lowest level as quickly as we possibly can. That’s the mission he’s given us, and we’re working with Iraqis to achieve that.” Kadhimi also traveled to Capitol Hill to meet with Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi, House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, and assorted members of Congress to discuss bilateral ties and Iraqi sovereignty, according to a readout from Kadhimi’s office.

**Aug. 20: Likely Iranian Proxy Assassination Campaign Extends into Baghdad.** Unidentified militants shot and killed an unnamed member of Iraq’s High Electoral Commission in Baghdad. The assassination follows similar targeted violence against activists and protesters in the southern provinces of Basra and Dhi Qar. Early elections managed by the Commission are scheduled to be held in June 2021 but remain the subject of heated parliamentary debate.

**Aug. 20: Ministry of Water Resources Says Iran Cut Off Water Supplies Upstream of Iraq.** The Iraqi Ministry of Water Resources stated that Iranian irrigation projects are diminishing available Iraqi water resources. The ministry said that Iran has diverted the Sirwan and Lower Zab rivers, which originate in Iran and flow downstream to Iraq, for damming and irrigation projects. The ministry says that Iraq “recorded a significant decrease in the quantities of water coming from Iranian lands,” resulting in water shortages for residents of Kirkuk, Diyala, and the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. The ministry added that “these actions are in clear violation of [international] laws” and said it plans to follow up with Iranian officials to resolve the matter. Iraq is situated downstream of substantial damming projects in Turkey and Iran; disruption to this flow poses an existential threat to Iraq’s security, sovereignty, and relationships with its neighbors.

**Aug. 21: Likely Iranian Proxies Target Iraqi-operated Convoy Supporting US-led Coalition with IED, Kill Driver near South Baghdad.** The SMC reported that an IED detonated on an Iraqi-operated convoy contracted by the US-led anti-ISIS Coalition near Awareej, south Baghdad. The attack reportedly killed a civilian driver and set fire to a vehicle. Likely Iranian proxies have targeted Iraqi-contractors supporting US and Coalition forces with IEDs in at least 10 attacks in August to dissuade Iraqis from working with the United States and the US-led Coalition.

**Aug. 21: Islamic Resistance in Iraq Warns of Sharp Escalation in Attacks on American Interests in Iraq.** The Islamic Resistance in Iraq, a loose descriptor for primarily Iran-linked, anti-US militants in Iraq, released a statement responding to Prime Minister Kadhimi’s failure to establish a timeline for a full US troop withdrawal during his Washington, DC visit. The statement emphasized that Kadhimi’s visit did not result in the complete removal of US forces, the primary demand of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq. The group warned “we [...] will no longer wait for the strategic dialogue, but instead we will start to target all American interests in Iraq, and create an earthquake under their troops in Iraq, even if they move far away from our cities.” Groups associated with the Islamic Resistance in Iraq accelerated their campaign of IED attacks targeting Coalition-linked contractors in the days leading up to the Dialogue and may increase the tempo or scale of their rocket and IED attacks on US personnel and facilities in coming weeks.

**Aug. 22: Likely Iranian Proxies Target Iraqi-operated Convoy Supporting the US with IED Attack near West Baghdad.** Unidentified militants targeted an Iraqi-operated convoy contracted by the US-led international coalition with an IED near al-Ghazaliya in western Baghdad, according to a security source speaking to al-Quds al-Arabi. The source said that the attack resulted in damage to one of the vehicles but no casualties.

**Aug. 22: Anti-government Demonstrators Use Bulldozers to Demolish Headquarters of Several Shi'a Political Parties in Nasiriyah.** Anti-government demonstrators used bulldozers to demolish the headquarters of several political parties in Nasiriyah, Dhi Qar Province. Iraq analyst Harry Istepanian said that protesters demolished the headquarters of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's Dawa party, US designated terrorist organization and Iranian proxy militia Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, key Iranian proxy Hadi al-Ameri's Iran-backed Badr Organization, prominent Shi'a cleric Ammar al-Hakim's Wisdom Trend, and the Iraqi Communist Party. The chairman of the Iraq Advisory Council, Farhad al-Aaldin, added that protesters struck out against Kata'ib Hezbollah headquarters in Nasiriyah.

**Aug. 23: Ostensibly New Shi'a Militia Group Declares its Existence with IED Attack on Iraqi Convoy Contracting with the US-led Coalition near Camp Taji.** An IED detonated on an Iraqi-operated convoy contracted by the US-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS near Camp Taji military base, approximately 24 km north of Baghdad, hours after the Coalition formally transferred control of Taji to the ISF. Iraq's SMC confirmed that the attack caused some vehicle damage but no casualties. An eleventh ostensibly new Shi'a shadow militia group calling itself Alwaiya ad-Dam, or "the Guardians of Blood," revealed its existence in a statement posted on an extremist Telegram channel and took credit for the attack. The group stated that it will continue to "seek revenge" on the "brutal American occupation" for the January 3 drone strike that killed Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps - Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani.

**Aug. 23: Coalition Forces Leave Camp Taji Military Base, Transferring Control and Equipment to Iraqi Security Forces.** The US-led Coalition formally transferred its portion of Camp Taji to the control of the ISF and credited the transfer to "[ISF] success in the ongoing campaign to defeat Daesh [ISIS] remnants in Iraq." The Coalition announcement said that the ISF will continue to use the site "to lead and conduct training as part of the mission." Coalition forces also transferred equipment and property worth 347 million USD to the ISF, including airfield and runway renovations, aircraft hangers, infantry training areas, vehicles, and ammunition.