

There Is No Iranian-American Agreement and No Truce in Iraq

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Mustafa Al-Kazemi has been chosen Prime Minister after difficult negotiations marked by intra-Shiite disagreement. The President of the Republic, Barham Salih, had exploited this disagreement when he boldly challenged the majority Shia in Iraq by his choice of an anti-Iranian and pro-US candidate, Mr Adnan Al-Zurfi. The nomination of Mr Al-Kazemi is a response to this move; Shiite blocs had already circulated his name several months ago.

When Mr Adel Abdul-Mahdi, the caretaker Prime Minister, resigned, consultation began among various Shia political leaders to find a candidate enjoying support from most blocs. That is a task that, in the past, had always been given to the Iranian IRGC-Quds commander Major General Qassim Soleimani (treacherously assassinated by President Donald Trump at Baghdad Airport) and Sheikh Muhammad Kawtharani, who represents Lebanese Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah. Sayyed Nasrallah enjoys great respect and a close personal relationship with all Iraqi parties of different religions and policies (Shi'a, Sunni, Kurds, tribal, and others) with whom he is in regular contact. Iraqi leaders failed to reach the agreement without outside intervention.

Many Shia groups categorical rejected President Saleh's candidate (al-Zurfi) and decided to oppose his candidacy. However, Al-Kazemi's selection as a new Prime Minister did not take place until Tehran asked all the Shi'ite blocs to unify their decision, to disregard al-Zurfi and choose a candidate that all could agree upon.

This is how al-Kazemi reached the premiership:

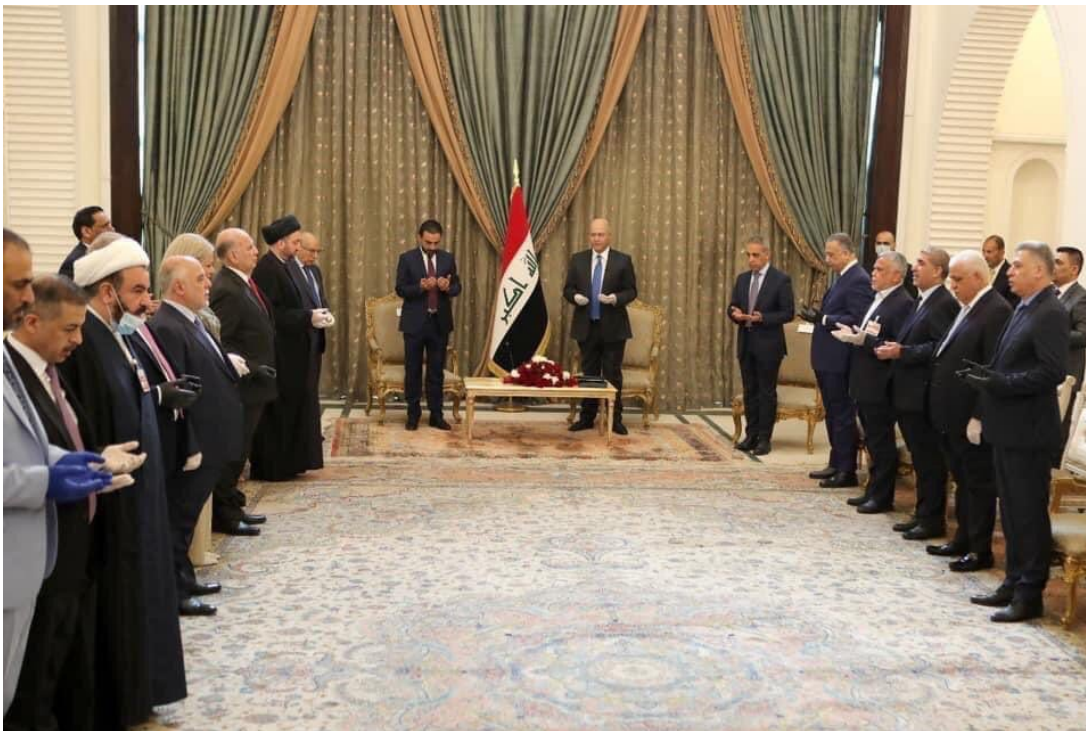


Sayyed Ammar al-Hakim, supported by Muqtada al-Sadr, was the first to promote Mustafa Al-Kazemi last year following the resignation of Abdel-Mahdi. However, other Shiite blocs refused to accept any counter-terrorism officer, intelligence chief or any other officer belonging to the military-security establishment. Many Shia blocs are apprehensive about any candidate with a similar profile to Saddam Hussein. The experience of Nuri al-Maliki in control – he who refused to share the power with Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds – is still alive in these leaders' memory.

Due to the disagreement within the Shia bloc, Qusay al-Suhail fell and was followed by the governor of Basra, Asaad Al-Eidani, when President Barham Salih refused to abide by the constitution and nominate the candidate of the largest bloc. Saleh played on the intra Shiite disagreement, mainly between the Al-Fatah bloc headed by Hadi al-Amiri and the Saeroun bloc led by Muqtada al-Sadr.

Because demonstrators rejected any candidate nominated by the dominant political blocs, Sayyid Muqtada tried to ride the wave by considering himself the representative of the demonstrators who in fact refused him as they did other establishment figures. Subsequently, President Saleh was asked by Sayyed Moqtada to reject any name he did not agree with. Moqtada claimed that he, not Al-Amiri, held the largest bloc.

Later on, Muhammad Allawi also failed because he refused to consult the Sunni, the Kurdish blocs, and some Shiites in choosing his cabinet members. Allawi wrongly believed he could rely on the support of Sayyed Muqtada Al-Sadr, who had promised to bring everyone to Parliament by all means to approve Allawi's cabinet. Moqtada failed to convince the Shia, the Sunni and the Kurds, and was unable to bring Allawi to power.



However, President Saleh went further relying on the Iraqi constitution rather the prevailing consensus between Iraqis (Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurd) and nominated Adnan al-Zarfi, who is anti-Iran and pro-American. Many political blocs and Shia organisations announced their rejection of al-Zarfi. At the same time, the Dawa candidate (Adnan al-Zarfi) enjoyed the support of his chief bloc, led by former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. Al-Zurfi was also

secretly supported by Nuri al-Maliki, who wanted the position of prime minister to return to the Dawa Party (since 2005 and until 2018 al-Da'wa held the position of PM). Al-Zurfi also enjoyed support from Sayyed Muqtada al-Sadr, who had been promised control over any ministerial cabinet or any other senior position within the Iraqi state.

Despite Iran's official statement that it did not oppose the nomination of Al-Zurfi, the reality was different. Al-Zurfi was tacitly accused of burning Iran's consulate in Najaf and Karbala during last months' demonstrations. Admiral Ali Shamkhani – who, along with Major General Qassim Soleimani, was in charge of the relationship between Iran and Iraq – visited Iraq, followed by a short visit of General Ismail Qa'ani. Both men carried one message to the Iraqis: "We don't disagree with the choice of Mr Mustafa Al-Kazemi, if he is your choice, and we enjoy good relations with him." Iran has never said these words about al-Zurfi.

First Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani announced his support for al-Kazemi, and then Sunni leader, Speaker Muhammad al-Halbousi, followed suit. Barzani wanted to send a message to the Shiite blocs, so they would not again choose a candidate for the presidency who does not have a Kurdish authority above him, as happened with President Saleh.

Saleh was Qassem Soleimani's choice and turned out today to be a mistake from the Iranian and the Shia blocs' point of view. Fouad Hussein, the Minister of Finance, was Erbil's choice, but Soleimani considered him at the time the candidate of the American presidential envoy Bret McGurk. This is why Soleimani asked the Shiites, Sunnis, and his allies Kurds in Sulaimaniyah not to vote to Hussein but to promote Barham Saleh. Saleh told Soleimani in 2018 that he would immediately nominate the candidate he wanted. This is how Adil Abdul Mahdi was elected Prime Minister.



There has never been a US-Iranian understanding in Iraq. Instead, when possible candidates have been chosen to attract minimal opposition from the Iranians and the Americans. Al-Kazemi enjoys good relations with Riyadh, Tehran, and Washington, as was the case of the caretaker Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi. Abdil Mahdi had been supported by Washington and yet, a year later, it was he who presented a draft proposal to the Iraqi Parliament demanding the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Iraq.

Al-Kazemi, who promised to support the “Popular Mobilisation Forces” (hashd al-Shaabi), agreed to seek the removal of all US forces from Iraq, as stipulated in the binding constitutional decision of the Iraqi Parliament. Tehran convinced its ally, Kataeb Hezbollah al-Iraq, which had publicly accused Al-Kazemi of responsibility for the assassination of Commander Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, to accept al-Kazemi as a Prime Minister and wait to see his actions before judging him. The price of the assassination of Soleimani and Muhandes is the total withdrawal of the US forces from Iraq, and not al-Kazemi.

This time – after three failed attempts to nominate a prime minister – Al-Kazemi will be supported to form his cabinet and will have the parliamentary support needed. However, he will face severe difficulties and challenges.

The US is redeploying its forces and not showing any intention of complete withdrawal. Al-Kazemi will not be able to seek an easy US withdrawal and won’t be able to disarm Iraqi organisations as he promised to do. Moreover, he will face a real economic problem because Iraq suffers from a low oil price and external debts. The income of Iraq is just over 30 billion dollars whereas it needs 80 billion to pay salaries and maintain the infrastructure as it is. Al-Kazemi will not be able to respond to demands from the street because he simply does not have enough money.

Iran is not afraid who sits at the top of the Iraqi government; today’s friend may turn out to be tomorrow’s enemy. Tehran enjoys enough connections with political leaders and military commanders and head of organisations in Iraq. Iran has experienced an aggressive Prime Minister in the past, Haidar Abadi, and managed its way in Iraq, a country sensitive to a balance among its political leaders. The US doesn’t have enough leverage in Iraq to match the leverage of Iran.

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