

IRAQ

RANDA SLIM

ISSUES

- The demands of the 2019 protest movement of fighting corruption, seeking accountability for the perpetrators of crimes against fellow activists, holding early elections, and minimizing Iranian influence in Iraq still attract the sympathy of large swaths of Iraqis. Armed actors continue to target civil society activists.
- Since the killing of the commander of Iran's Quds Force, Gen. Qassem Soleimani, and the deputy leader of the Iran-linked Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, on Iraqi territory in January 2020, Iraqi leaders and citizens remain split over the withdrawal of U.S. forces.
- Iran-aligned Iraqi militias remain committed to the objective of expelling U.S. forces from the country using any means at their disposal, including violent ones. In the absence of a denouement of the U.S.-Iran standoff, we should expect rocket/mortar attacks on U.S. forces and facilities in Iraq to continue.
- The government led by Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi has shown a willingness to gradually clip the wings of militias that are responsible for rocket attacks on U.S. facilities in Iraq and Iraqi bases hosting U.S. and coalition soldiers. However, he is reluctant to enter into a major confrontation with them for fear of igniting fighting between the government and the militias.
- While relations between Baghdad and Erbil have improved, outstanding issues remain between the two parties concerning oil revenue sharing, center-periphery power sharing, and the status of the disputed territories (Article 140).
- ISIS attacks have increased in Iraq, showing both a capacity and willingness on its part to terrorize people. While ISIS no longer enjoys support in the Sunni-majority communities it controlled in 2013-17, the group's modus operandi is to instill fear and showcase the failure of the government to provide security to its citizens.
- Political interference in anti-corruption bodies, politicization of corruption cases, insecurity, and the growing role of militias in the political and economic spheres have severely limited the government's ability to curb soaring corruption. This state of affairs is unlikely to change in the near term.

US INTERESTS

- Help the Iraqi government defeat ISIS and its affiliates and deal with internal threats emerging from Shiite militias operating outside the government's purview.
- Ensure the durable stability of Iraq, which lies at the center of the Middle East.
- Help the Iraqi government manage the twin economic and COVID-19 crises.
- Ensure that Iraq does not become a proxy for Iran in regional conflicts.
- Promote durable solutions to internal displacement in Iraq.
- Support the protesters' demands for an end to corruption, free and fair elections, and accountability of the security forces, including the PMFs.
- Promote partnerships between the Iraqi government and U.S. companies to develop Iraq's oil, gas, and water industries, thus breaking its dependence on Iranian gas and electricity imports.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- As the NATO mission in Iraq increases from 500 personnel to around 4,000, the U.S. and Iraq should discuss, within the context of the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue, a new framework for their bilateral cooperation on counter-terrorism operations and training, advising, and equipping Iraqi security forces, as well as intelligence sharing.

- Disentangle bilateral discussions about U.S. security assistance from other aspects of the U.S.-Iraqi relationship, including diplomatic, economic, and cultural relations and development and humanitarian assistance.
- Assist Iraq with accessing funding from international donors to manage the economic challenges conditional on the Iraqi executive and legislative authorities enacting fundamental economic reforms.
- Invest in the education of future Iraqi leaders by providing study-abroad scholarships to undergraduate and graduate students.
- Identify areas where U.S. civil society organizations can assist in protesters' efforts to fight corruption and promote accountability and good governance.
- Ensure upcoming Iraqi elections are secure, free, and fair. Working with the U.N. Assistance Mission for Iraq, provide technical assistance to the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) to ensure its work is effective and transparent.
- Identify Iraqi armed groups that are involved in human rights violations, ensure they are denied access to U.S. aid per U.S. law, and work with European allies to deny these groups' leaders entry to EU capitals and access to EU resources.
- Identify areas where Iraq needs help and the U.S. has a comparative advantage over Iran, such as banking reforms and assistance in the education and technology sectors.
- Discuss in the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue commercial investment reforms the Iraqi government must engage in, with the U.S. providing technical assistance when asked.
- Sustain funding to help Iraq address internal displacement issues in coordination with international organizations.
- Facilitate a dialogue between Baghdad and Erbil to promote constructive engagement to achieve win-win solutions on many conflicting issues between the two sides.