

# Ramifications from Coordinating Committee of the Iraqi Resistance Factions' July 28th, 2021 Statements

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## Key Points

- The ramifications from the Coordinating Committee of the Iraqi Resistance Factions' statements regarding the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue are likely to be felt within the political and information domains.
- Nasr Al-Shammari, Deputy Secretary-General of the Al-Nujaba Movement, one of the Shiite Popular Mobilization factions, threatened to continue targeting US forces in Iraq regardless of superficial attempts to retitle the US "occupation."
- Muqtada al-Sadr has expressed concern that a US withdrawal will increase the power of the Shiite militias linked to Iran.
- Iranian leaders and their Iraqi allies, claim that the purpose of US forces is to counter Iran and not to defeat the Islamic State.
- Iranian leaders consider the US-Iraq announcement of the ending of a US combat mission as a success for Iran's strategy to expand its regional influence and control.

## Background

The delegations of the Republic of Iraq, led by Dr. Fuad Hussein, Iraq's Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the United States of America, led by Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, co-chaired the final session of the June 11, 2021 Strategic Dialogue. The Strategic Dialogue is a continuation of the 2008 Strategic Framework Agreement for a Relationship of Friendship and Cooperation (SFA) between the US and Iraq. The Iraqi delegation also included representatives of the Kurdistan Regional Government.

The US and Iraqi governments reaffirmed the importance of strengthening the long-term strategic partnership defined by the SFA. Discussions centered on the following key concerns: regional stability, public health, climate change, energy efficiency, energy independence, humanitarian aid, human rights, economic cooperation, and cultural and educational exchanges. Iraq provided a detailed accounting of its efforts to promote the safe and voluntary return of internally displaced persons to their home regions, and the US pledged its continued support to this effort. The US reaffirmed its respect for Iraq's sovereignty and laws, and pledged to continue providing the resources Iraq needs to maintain its territorial integrity. The Government of Iraq also declared its commitment to protecting and empowering the Coalition personnel tasked with advising Iraqi Security Forces.

The Iraqi government maintains that all Coalition Forces in Iraq are there by invitation. The delegations emphasized that the bases hosting the US and other Coalition personnel operate under existing Iraqi laws, and the presence of international staff in Iraq is only to support the Government of Iraq's fight against ISIS.<sup>1</sup>

In response to the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue, the Coordinating Committee of the Iraqi Resistance Factions released a statement, declaring the US and Iraqi governments were attempting to repackage the continuation of the US "occupation" of Iraq. This paper will examine the Coordinating Committee of the Iraqi Resistance Factions' response, possible ramifications, Iranian interests, and provide additional political and economic context.

### **Statement of "Resistance Coordinating Committee & Kata'ib Hizbullah (KH)"**

*Although the result of the dialogue held between the current government and the American administration, which came out with a statement that is bearer of multiple faces and is not explicit, but rather carries a lot of ambiguity and fraud, and there is no word for withdrawal at all, we have closely followed all the introductions and outputs of this dialogue, and we are very convinced that there is manipulation of terms and titles only to prolong the hegemony and the American presence, which has already lost the legitimacy of its existence after the historic decision of the Iraqi parliament in 2020, the implementation of which was one of the government's first pledges. Therefore, if a real withdrawal is intended, it must include all foreign forces, transfer all camps under the occupation authority completely to the authority of the Iraqis with all the combat equipment in these bases, and end the presence of all foreign military aviation in Iraqi airspace of all kinds and forms.*

*Then, we affirm that the demands of the Iraqi resistance are firm and clear to achieve sovereignty and to liberate Iraq completely from occupation, and to reject all pretexts to cover up its defeat and keep it in another way. We also affirm categorically that Iraq does not need any foreign forces in any way.*

*Then, we should point out to our dear people of all kinds that there are the following gaps in the statement issued by the Iraqi and American foreign affairs [ministries]:*

*First: What was mentioned in the statement in the phrase: (The security relationship will move entirely to advice, training and intelligence cooperation) clearly means that the issue does not go beyond a deceptive declaration to maintain the occupation, but only changing its title; and in this case the position of the Resistance that rejects the existence of any kind of occupation in all its forms will not change, especially since we proved in our previous statement that our security forces do not need them, and that they are capable and strong, and that the presence of American advisors is harmful and not beneficial.*

*Second: The outcomes of the dialogue, inadvertently or intentionally, neglected any talk about the United States' occupation of Iraqi airspace and repeatedly violating its sovereignty, noting that all the crimes of the American occupation since 2014 until now have been carried out by air. So, if the Iraqi airspace remain subject to the American hegemony and the American aircrafts continue to fly without oversight, then, there is no sense in announcing the withdrawal of the forces while they remain occupying the airspace of Iraq.*

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<sup>1</sup> Office of the Spokesmen, "Joint Statement on the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue of April 7, 2021," <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-u-s-iraq-strategic-dialogue/> (accessed August 1, 2021).

*Third: We, since 2014 and the beginnings of the war against ISIS, have been hearing from the American and Iraqi sides that the American forces in Iraq are not combat forces; rather, they are forces for advising and training exclusively. Then everyone- except us - was surprised by the announcement after seven years that these forces were combat forces, and are intended to convert their tasks to advisory later. So, If the American side has been lying - as usual - for seven years, why do we believe it now? And if some parties were covering up the combat presence on the pretext that it was an advisory presence in the past, what would prevent them from repeating that now?*

*Fourth: If the official announcement is made at the end of the year that all foreign forces have left Iraqi territory and all bases will be vacated of them, who will prove that this departure and withdrawal has actually been achieved? Will impartial parliamentary committees be allowed to enter these bases without prior warning to inspect them and prove that they are free of American forces? Or will these bases remain closed and protected, causing concern and astonishment?*

*Fifth: What did the American advisors offer other than infiltrating the security services for intelligence and spying on the country and then targeting the Iraqi security forces?*

*Sixth: that the Resistance will remain fully prepared until the real withdrawal, and it will have its own action and stance that it will not hesitate if it is a nominal withdrawal; and any foreign aircrafts in Iraqi airspace [then] will be considered hostile; and it will be dealt with in a way that makes regret for their stay the least they feel for their lies and deception.*

– The Coordinating Committee of the Iraqi  
Resistance Factions  
7/28/2021

### **Analysis of the Coordinating Committee of the Iraqi Resistance Factions' Statement**

The Coordinating Committee of the Iraqi Resistance Factions expressed their initial rejection of the Strategic Dialogue even before the US-Iraq official statement regarding the transition of combat forces.<sup>2</sup> The Committee sees the US-Iraq narrative only as a US plan to gain more time and stay longer in Iraq. As a result, Nasr AlShammari, Deputy Secretary-General of the Al-Nujaba Movement, one of the Shiite Popular Mobilization factions, threatened to continue targeting US forces in Iraq regardless of superficial attempts to retitle the US “occupation.”

The Coordinating Committee of the Iraqi Resistance Factions includes armed Shiite factions backed by Iran, including the Iraqi Hezbollah Brigades, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada', and Harakat al-Nujaba, which has previously claimed attacks on US military targets in Iraq. Their statements also indicated that “foreign forces” includes the international Coalition forces against ISIS and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

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<sup>2</sup> The Future Center for Research and Advanced Studies, “The future of the US presence in Iraq after the fourth round of the strategic dialogue,” <https://futureuae.com/ar-AE/Mainpage/Item/> (accessed August 10, 2021).

The ramifications from the Coordinating Committee of the Iraqi Resistance Factions' statements regarding the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue are likely to be felt within the political and information domains. Politically, the alignment of Shia representation in the Iraqi government with the Committee will generate further fractures within the Iraqi political system. Taking such a position fosters two divisions: one segment allied with the Iraqi government and the other aligned with an armed Shiite faction backed by Iran.

It is noted that there is a division among the Shiite forces over a US presence. The leader of the Sadri movement, Muqtada al-Sadr (once an ardent fighter against US forces) even wrote a lengthy statement calling for the cessation of all operations targeting the US military and diplomatic presence.<sup>3</sup> The message reveals the Sadri's concern that a US withdrawal will increase the power of the Shiite militias linked to Iran.

The Coordinating Committee of the Iraqi Resistance Factions' message is intended for both internal and external audiences. The internal message is political to influence future parliamentary elections. The Committee's statement can be viewed as a tactic aimed at removing embarrassment from the Iraqi President Al-Kazemi while pressing hard to remove US forces through targeted operations. The Committee wants to provide support to political parties close to Iran prior to the Iraqi parliamentary elections in October. The message for external audiences targets the US, Iran, and GCC. Coordinating Committee said, that they would not allow the presence of any US forces in Iraq under any circumstances. They added in a statement, that for the withdrawal of "occupying forces" to be real, it "must be comprehensive from all of Iraq."

The previous statements stressed that if the US does not plan on withdrawing its forces, the Committee will treat any foreign military presence in Iraq as an occupation, and will continue to fight with all their might. Moreover, the announcement asserted that "the American trainers, along with the international coalition forces, have proven a catastrophic failure in Iraq with experience over 10 years, the result of which was the collapse of all security and military institutions."<sup>4</sup>

### **Iraqi Government Reaction to Coordinating Committee Statement**

Currently, there is not a declaration from the Iraqi government regarding the statement from the Coordinating Committee of the Iraqi Resistance Factions. This has led to disinformation which may cause a loss of political will of Iraqis regarding US presence. This may impact CENTCOM's ability to maintain Access, Basing and Overflight in Iraq. A loss of this would be detrimental to CENTCOM's mission in Iraq and deterring Iran. Due to the disinformation put out by the Committee and lack of information from the Iraqi government, the October parliamentary elections may be affected with negative outcomes for the US and the Coalition.

### **An Overview of the Environmental Context for the Competing Narratives**

#### ***Iranian Interest in Iraq***

After Iran's exit from the eight-year war with Iraq in the 1980s, the nation has worked to rebuild the infrastructure destroyed by the war in various industrial, economic, scientific, and military sectors. It is currently engaged in a strategy based on countering any threats, whether from regional or Middle Eastern neighbors. Through a

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

determined and deliberate effort to expand its influence, Iran seeks to prevent a recurrence of a scenario that risks the future of the Iranian Islamic Revolution and strengthen its ruling regime.

When the US overthrew Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, Iran saw a golden opportunity to interfere in Iraqi affairs and consolidate Iraqi Shiite influence. Iran sought to expand the base of Shiite political forces inside Iraq, urging Iraqi Shiites to adhere to the mentality of not ceding power, and to devote all their political, security, and financial efforts to achieving this goal. This included allocating resources to support Iraqi leaders known to be loyal to Iran. Iran worked on several parallel efforts to influence and try to control Iraqi decisions by dealing directly with the Iraqi leaders who engaged with Iran during the time of the opposition. Some Shiite political parties entered the political scene with Iranian financial and logistical support, which ensured that Iran, after these parties won the elections, would gain increased influence in Iraq.

ISIS emerged in 2014, occupied about a third of Iraq, and gained control over major cities in northern, western, and central Iraq. ISIS advances even posed a serious threat to the capital, Baghdad, and the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf. Iran rushed to support the Iraqi factions with weapons, equipment, experts, and advisors. At the end of the ISIS war, some of these factions turned into political movements for the purpose of expanding the Shiite power base sympathetic to Tehran. The Shiite factions ran in the 2018 elections and won, as expected, due to two factors: the Iraqi popular perception of its role in eliminating the threat of ISIS, and Iranian support. In fact, these factions have a wide and influential representation in the Iraqi parliament.

Over time, the loud cries of disparity from the Iraqi youth in Shiite cities increased. In the forefront of Najaf and Karbala, Iraqi youth denounced the Iranian presence with demands for its removal. Activist chants were even echoed by a segment of the Shiite youth, who are unemployed and missing the simplest of human services. They see Iran's negative influence and its support for the new political parties have failed to provide services, job opportunities, or to rebuild Iraq's infrastructure destroyed by wars, neglect, and widespread corruption.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Regional Stability***

In regards to the joint US-Iraqi statement, the US does not want a complete withdrawal from Iraq, because it would be a strategic victory for Iran. The US is looking for options to remain within Iraq to provide training, technical advice, and intelligence sharing while counteracting Iranian influence. Although ISIS collapsed in 2019, they still carry out insurgent attacks in Iraqi cities, such as the June 30th bombing in Baghdad's Shiite-majority Sadr City. The decline of the Islamic State forces has led many, including Iranian leaders, to believe that the group no longer poses an existential threat to the Iraqi government; some consider Iraqi forces are able to successfully fight the extremist group without much US military assistance.

The Joint Statement focuses on the resistance to ISIS specifically and did not refer to the establishment of Shiite factions in Iraq. This is an indication that the US military will not be conduct operations against Shiite factions, which should lead to a reduction of terrorist operations against U.S. and Coalition forces in Iraq. The statement of Muqtada al-Sadr, who leads the Sadri movement in Iraq and represents one of the Shiite factions requested that,

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<sup>5</sup> Ferhad Allauden, "Iran and the politics of hegemony over Iraq of February 21, 2021" *شأن الأوسط* | العراق | إيران وساسات الهمنة ع العراق | ال (aawsat.com) (accessed August 1, 2021).

"the land of Iraq not to be a space for wars for other countries."<sup>6</sup> This is an indication that Iraqi society seeks stability and wants to play a neutral role between neighboring countries. In addition, Iranian support in Iraq is undesirable with the Iraqi president working to exploit the Sunni and Shiite public opinion to his advantage it is a positive step to unite the Iraqi ranks.

### ***Economic Domain***

The US-Iraqi statements that accompanied the strategic dialogue emphasized the many dimensions of the US-Iraqi relationship. This indicates that the Biden administration views strengthening the authority and effectiveness of the Iraqi state as the key to limiting Iranian influence in the country and throughout the region. Strengthening the Iraqi state requires improvements in Iraqi governance, building national pride among the many sects and ethnicities in Iraq, reducing official corruption, strengthening the rule of law in civil society, independent journalism and government oversight, and the diversification of its economy. It is clear that the US will continue its support of Iraq at adequate levels, even as the US military mission in Iraq is scaled back. The US agreed to provide \$5.2M to help finance a UN mission to monitor the October elections in Iraq and ensure their safety amid fears of security threats. This is a good indication of the level of US support for Iraq's stability. Iraq seeks to avoid any US economic sanctions related to dealing with Iran and its proxies. It also seeks to enhance economic support to Iraq and provided \$2.7B in humanitarian aid.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Political Domain***

Iraq is seeking an American commitment to support political stability. Baghdad wants to cooperate with Washington to ensure the unity and sovereignty of Iraq and not to divide it or encourage separatist tendencies or rebellion. Therefore, guarantees of non-interference in the internal and external Iraqi affairs are not in the hands of Washington only, but depend on the cooperation of all parties. The "US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue" aims to demonstrate independence and equality between the two countries in pursuing a common strategy and defending common interests.

Iran is probably in the process of reviewing its regional policy, defining its ways and means, and creating new influential factors. Most importantly, Iran is studying how to deal with the Iraqi interior in light of the ongoing conflict with the region and America. Also, it is important to mention that the Iranian economy has become weaker than ever before, and the Iranian people are suffering greatly as a result of the repercussions of the American sanctions imposed on Tehran.

### ***Energy Efficiency & Energy Independence***

Iraq has been suffering from a chronic electricity shortage crisis for decades as a result of the siege and successive wars. Residents have been protesting for many years against the frequent power cuts, especially in the summer. In the past years, Iraq has been importing electricity from Iran with the approval of the US to ensure that Iraq can meet its energy needs in the short term, but in the long term Iraq is taking steps to reduce its dependence on Iranian energy imports. Iraq is holding talks with GCC countries (led by Saudi Arabia) to import electricity from them by linking its infrastructure with regional neighbors. Iraq also intends to import electricity from Jordan and

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<sup>6</sup> Iraq Today, "Muqtada al-Sadr calls on neighboring countries to solve their problems," June 21, 2021, <https://www.radionawa.com/alldetail.aspx?Jimare=25087> (accessed August 1, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> IntelBrief, "Iraq Policy Revolves Around Iran," July 28, 2021, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-july-28/> (accessed August 1, 2021).

Turkey, in an effort from Baghdad to fill shortages until it builds power stations that are able to meet local consumption.

### **Conclusion**

The Strategic Dialogue emphasized the importance of strengthening the US-Iraq partnership and achieving stability. The American side pledged to respect Iraq's sovereignty and laws and to provide the resources it needs to maintain its territorial integrity. And the Iraqi government pledged to protect American soldiers who over the next five months will shift from combat missions to only providing advice and training to the Iraqi security forces. Unfortunately, the ramifications are that the US is still viewed as an occupier and not in Iraq at the request of the Iraqi government. The lack of information being released by the government to the Iraqi people is concerning and falls into the faction's information operations narrative which will may lead to a loss of momentum for the operation and political will.

### **Recommendations for the US / USCENTCOM**

- Monitor and Assess Iraqi Communications concerning the U.S. military presence in Iraq.
- Coordinate with Iraqi IO to insure information is being disseminated to the public in an effort not to lose political will.
- Monitor the activities of ISIS deployed to Iraq, but also to Syria as well as the various paramilitary groups and private military companies involved with Iran.
- Support Iraqi government to reduce Iranian influence by assisting with successful parliament elections in October.