



The Quds Force Commander's Visit to Iraq

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The recent visit to Iraq by the new Quds Force commander, Esmail Qaani, had several purposes: to display the continuity of Tehran's involvement in the country, to rally the Shiite factions against the formation of a pro-US government by Adnan Zurfi, and to enable Qaani to stake a claim as a worthy successor to Qassem Soleimani. Yet Zurfi's abdication and his replacement by Mustafa Kadhimi does not necessarily constitute an Iranian achievement because of Kadhimi's diverse political associations and ties across the Middle East and the international arena.

In early April, Quds Force commander Esmail Qaani, who had succeeded Qassem Soleimani three months earlier, visited Iraq to unify the Shiite factions in opposition to the formation of a government by Adnan Zurfi, perceived by the revolutionary regime in Tehran as close to the US. Qaani's visit was also a test of his ability to step into the big shoes of his formidable predecessor.

It is difficult to gauge the extent to which the visit aborted Zurfi's attempt to form a government, as this failure stemmed from a combination of internal and external factors. It is clear, however, that Tehran is very pleased with this development as it deemed Zurfi's appointment as detrimental to its entrenchment in Iraq. Having served as Najaf governor under Paul Bremer's Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in the wake of Saddam Hussein's demise, Zurfi, though a Shiite who acquired his religious education in Najaf, did not demand the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq and was willing to cooperate with the international coalition forces. This made him and his family subject to repeated attacks.

As for Mustafa Kadhimi, who was tasked with forming a government after Zurfi's abdication, his future policy is impossible to predict. In his capacity as

head of the national intelligence apparatus he worked closely with key players in the regional and international arenas, from Saudi Arabia to the US to Britain, especially in the fight against ISIS. However, he also has a close relationship with the Iranian security establishment and has expressed more pro-Iranian positions of late.

Kadhimi was one of Saddam's prime opponents and spent a long time in exile in London documenting the tyrant's repression of his people. His lack of an explicit political affiliation might help him sidestep the political controversies that prevented his predecessor from forming a government, as well as address the deep domestic schism in Iraqi society and accompanying economic crisis that have been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic.

While the Qaani visit was presented in the media as an effort to bridge the gaps among the Shiite factions by way of forming a government in Iraq, it was in fact intended to rally them behind an alternate prime ministerial candidate who would act in accordance with the Iranian interest. To that end, the delegation held talks with senior members of the Sa'irun party led by Muqtada Sadr; the Fatah coalition led by Hadi Ameri; the Hikmat Watani party led by Amar Hakim; and Nuri Maliki's Dawlat al-Qanun coalition.

The formation of a new Iraqi government was however of lesser significance to Qaani than the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq would be. Even a partial withdrawal of those forces would be a major achievement that would allow him to emerge from his predecessor's long shadow and win a place of honor in the eyes of the Supreme Leader. Indeed, the local media's coverage of Qaani's meetings with the Iraqi president, officials, and politicians diverted attention from the instructions he gave local Shiite militias to intensify their resistance to the US presence in Iraq. In the words of an April 4 statement by several militias: "Since the United States respects only the language of force, it will be answered in this language." Hence the rocket attacks two days later on the Halliburton oil rig and the Taji camp in northern Baghdad. The Taji attack resulted in the deaths of two American soldiers and a British soldier.

It seems therefore that the extensive military infrastructure laid down by Soleimani will enable Qaani to further advance Iran's interests in Iraq while ignoring voices inside the country demanding that Tehran stop meddling in Iraq's internal affairs. For while the Islamic Republic's constitution explicitly precludes any such interference, the regime in Tehran has never refrained from acting in ways completely contrary to the constitution.

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