

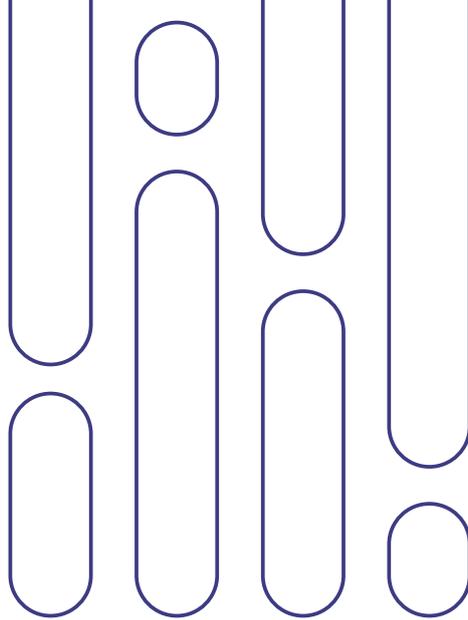
REPORT

Assassination Attempt on Iraq's Prime Minister: Motives and Consequences

11 Nov. 2021



RASANAHA
المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية
International Institute for Iranian Studies



Contents

Introduction	3
Parties Involved in the Failed Assassination Attempt	3
Motives Behind the Assassination Attempt on Kadhimi	4
Internal, Regional and International Condemnation of the Assassination Attempt on Kadhimi	9
The Scenarios Available to Iran in Iraq	14

Introduction:

On the morning of Sunday November 7, 2021, an explosive-laden drone targeted the residence of Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi in Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone, the Iraqi-run Security Media Cell said in a statement. The media cell also circulated pictures showing parts of a Katyusha rocket on Kadhimi's house. Earlier reports indicated that the prime minister was hospitalized after minor injuries to his right hand. Some Iraqi news agencies released images showing damage to parts of his residence as well as minor injuries to his bodyguards.

After the attack, Kadhimi called for "calm and restraint from everyone" and said, "I was and still am a redemption project for Iraq and the people of Iraq" in a [Twitter](#) post. "The missiles of treachery will not discourage the believers and will not shake a hair of the stability and determination of our heroic security forces to preserve people's security, achieve justice and set the law in place," Kadhimi added. He also delivered a [televised](#) video message on the incident, stating that his residence "came under a cowardly attack" but also reassured the Iraqi people about his safety. He said that he and all those who work with him were safe. "Cowardly missiles and drones do not build nations or build a future. We are working to build our homeland through respecting the state and its institutions and creating a better future for all Iraqis."

1. Parties Involved in the Failed Assassination Attempt:

The weapons used in the attack prove that it was planned by Iran's proxies. In Iraq and Lebanon, IRGC-backed militia groups only possess Katyusha rockets. Several international intelligence reports have indicated that Iranian-made portable [Katyusha](#) rockets have been [used, a dozen if not hundreds of times](#), by pro-Iran militias in Iraq to target US bases and interests over the last four years.

Drones are easily accessible to Iran-backed militias. In early June 2021, [The New York Times](#) revealed that Iran's militias secured

access to sophisticated weapons, including armed drones and used them to attack US interests in Iraq. The newspaper quoted Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., the top US commander in the Middle East, as saying to The Associated Press last month that the drones pose a serious threat to US troops in Iraq.

2. Motives Behind the Assassination Attempt on Kadhimi:

A. The Loss of Iran-Allied Groups in Iraq's Parliamentary Elections

The results of the recently held parliamentary elections in Iraq were unfavorable to Iran, as pro-Iran groups lost against cross-sectarian and Sunni groups. The cross-sectarian bloc of Muqtada al-Sadr was the largest vote winner, securing 73 seats while the Sunni political bloc, Taqaddum (Advancement), came second with 38 seats, ahead of the Iran-backed Fatah (Conquest) Alliance which came second in the 2018 elections. This progress clearly reflects the rebuilt trust between Sunni voters and leaders. In a marked decline, however, Fatah Alliance came in fifth position, and the National Power of the State Coalition, consisting of the Nassar (Victory) and Hekma (Wisdom) coalitions, won four seats compared to the 58 seats secured by the two parties in the 2018 elections.

While Iran did not explicitly express its dissatisfaction with the election results, some pro-Iranian analysts did. Hassan Hanizadeh — an expert on Middle East issues — questioned the integrity of the elections, denouncing them as “rigged.” He added that, “The next Parliament will aim towards **downgrading** ties between Iran and Iraq.” In addition, Mohammad Vafapour criticized Sadr saying, “Sadr has a volatile personality, thus his words and actions cannot be relied upon.” He also added that “Sadr's party is the reason behind the country's instability in recent years; the riots that took place in the streets in the past **three** years were all led by Sadr's supporters.” Such remarks express Iranian concerns over the election results, which overwhelmed the Iran-backed groups.

The remarks also reflect that Iran is aware that its hegemony and

control in its most important sphere of influence (Iraq) is likely to be curbed. For Iran, the price of losing its grip on Iraq will be costly, especially at a time when it is facing economic hardship, international isolation, volatility in its neighboring countries such as Afghanistan as well as deepening disputes with Azerbaijan and increasing competition with Turkey.

On the other hand, Iraqi political parties which are pro-Iran rejected the early results of Iraq's elections and threatened to take to the streets to push the Iraqi Independent High Electoral Commission to change the results based on the new manual counting process. In its [statement](#), the Shiite Coordination Framework (a group including armed Shiite parties and forces, mostly from the [Fatah Alliance](#)) questioned the results of the elections. Iraqi politicians warned that Iran-backed militias may resort to violence in the wake of the results, especially after they called on their affiliates to cancel their vacations in order to [join](#) their camps, and threatened to punish those who were absent with immediate dismissal.

According to Reuters, one pro-Iran militia commander said that the armed groups were prepared to resort to [violence](#) if needed to ensure that they did not lose their influence after the "rigged" elections. He also mentioned other options such as taking to the streets or burning the party buildings belonging to the Sadrist. Unsatisfied with the results of the elections and the Iraqi Independent High Electoral Commission's announcement which confirmed the validity of the results, thus ending the consideration of appeals and complaints lodged against the results, Iraqi militia groups, operating on Iranian directives, executed their threats. They and dozens of their supporters took to the streets on November 5, 2021, to overturn the election results. They burnt tires, closed some roads and demanded a recount of the votes, raising tensions and instability in the country. The Huqooq (Rights) Movement, the political wing of the Iraqi Hezbollah Brigades, held the Independent High Electoral Commission [responsible](#) for the

events unfolding across Iraq.

B. Kadhimi's Effective Role in Leading Iraq

Iran is fully aware that the main reason behind its allied groups losing in the elections, which not only threatens its influence in Iraq but also in the region, is Kadhimi's policies. In fact, Kadhimi made great efforts to push his country towards further independence and sovereignty and bring it back to its Arab fold. This important role represents a "battle for sovereignty," that is opposed by Iran-backed militias in Iraq. They violate Iraq's sovereignty for the sake of Iranian interests.

In almost less than a year and a half, a relatively short period since his appointment as Iraq's prime minister, Kadhimi managed to strengthen his country's political institutions and decision-making processes through:

Changing the Political Discourse Regarding Iran's Influence in Iraq

Kadhimi's governmental program was based on emphasizing Iraq's sovereignty, limiting arms to the state and implementing the rule of law, as well as establishing a balance in foreign relations in line with national interests. In addition, Kadhimi introduced a visa requirement for official visits, and stressed the need to create more openness with Iraq's Arab neighbors. This program represented a major shift in Iraq's course, which Iran realized when Kadhimi came to power and has tried in vain to alter this course.

Instructing Top Security Officers to Be Reshuffled

In his pursuit to counter Iran's influence in Iraq, Kadhimi replaced militia leader Falih al-Fayyad who headed the country's National Security Council with Qasim al-Araji. He also appointed the Iraqi military hero Abdel-Wahab al-Saadi, who is renowned for resisting Iranian influence, as head of the Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service (ICTS).

Intensifying Security Efforts to Control Border Crossings

Kadhimi imposed control over Iraqi crossing points which are

now under the control of the Iraqi army. He closed unofficial border crossings in November 2020. Prior to this, Iran-backed militias such as the Iraqi Hezbollah Brigades, the Badr Organization, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, used their control over the crossings to consolidate Iran's influence in Iraq. These crossings were used to transfer and smuggle weapons and drugs into Iraq. The Iraqi government's strict measures deprived these militia groups of military support and created another impediment for them as Iran's economic crisis had already negatively impacted them, with a decline in financial support.

Official Visits Requiring Entry Visas

Kadhimi issued orders stipulating that all foreign military and political officials, without exception, must have entry visas prior to visiting Iraq. This forced the commander of Iran's elite Quds Force, Ismail Qaani, and other Iranian officials to apply for visas before traveling to Iraq.

Tightening the Noose Around the Neck of Armed Militias Loyal to Iran

In an unexpected and unprecedented move in the post-Saddam era, Iraqi security forces raided a number of strongholds of powerful Iran-backed militias as part of their efforts to limit weapons to the Iraqi state. Many observers viewed this as the most serious move taken by Kadhimi in controlling the proliferation of weapons.

Creating Openness With Neighboring Arab States

In a more solid attempt than Abadi's to balance Iraq's relations with its Arab neighbors, Kadhimi reshuffled the Iraqi members of the Saudi-Iraqi Coordination Council to boost cooperation with Riyadh. It is also important to mention here that Kadhimi decided to visit Saudi Arabia first in his foreign tour before visiting Iran and the United States in July 2020, although it was postponed due to King Salman's health condition at the time.

The virtual meeting that took place between Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Kadhimi in November 2020 reflected the improved Saudi-Iraqi relations. The Arar border crossing

between the two countries, which has been closed for 30 years, reopened. The two leaders also discussed the progress made in the project related to Saudi Arabia supplying Iraq with electricity. In what was considered to be an Iraqi awakening regarding Iran's role in complicating Iraq's electricity crisis, Kadhimi, during his meeting with members of the Emergency Crisis Cell to tackle the country's shortage of electricity posed the question: over the past 17 years, why did former Iraqi governments solely rely on Iran for the country's electricity requirements, thereby failing to diversify the country's power sources? Other countries had **diversified** their sources of electricity. His government, therefore, took the initiative to present the electrical connection project with the Gulf states, Jordan and Egypt, to diversify Iraq's sources of electricity instead of relying on one source.

These policies and moves adopted by Kadhimi created challenges for Iran in Iraq. Thus, Kadhimi's presence in the upcoming phase is seen as a threat by Iranian decision makers as he managed to turn the Iraqi public against Tehran's influence in Iraq. Iran believes it can deal with the recent parliamentary results but the main hurdle to its clout in Iraq is Kadhimi. Therefore, Iran ordered this failed assassination attempt through its proxies to end the efforts to undermine its influence.

Columnist Hassan Fahs believes that the pro-Iran militias' targeting of Kadhimi was an Iranian response to the Saudi political escalation against Lebanon. Riyadh's action shook Tehran's calculations as it was betting on the agreement reached in Lebanon on the formation of a new government under the leadership of Prime Minister-designate Najib Mikati who is Hezbollah-backed and wanted to focus its attention instead on the Vienna talks.

Hours before the attack on Kadhimi, Qais Al-Khazali, leader of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, appeared in a video clip threatening him. Yet, the attempt to assassinate Kadhimi tipped the scale in his favor as many experts of Iraqi affairs believe: what does not kill you, makes you stronger. In the aftermath of surviving the deadly at-

tack, Kadhimi calmly called for restraint in his televised video message and rejected the use of violence to determine the future of Iraq.

The failed assassination attempt probably reflects the peak of the current tensions in Iraq and the urgent need to end the political deadlock that Iraq has been witnessing since the announcement of the results. In the meantime, the Kadhimi government needs to respond harshly against those involved in the attack to avert a similar attack that might target other Iraqi officials.

3. Internal, Regional and International Condemnation of the Assassination Attempt on Kadhimi

Iraq

Iraqi President Barham Salih condemned the attack saying, “We cannot accept that Iraq will be dragged into chaos and a coup against its constitutional system.” He also called for unity to confront “the evil men” who are violating the security of the country. Muqtada al-Sadr, leader of the Sadr party, described the attack as an attempt to return Iraq to a state of chaos and violence. He also called on the Iraqi army and security forces to confront the attacks against Iraq until it recovers and transforms into a powerful country once again.

Ammar al-Hakim, leader of the Hekma coalition, condemned the assassination attempt, stressing that it was a serious incident, endangering the prestige and reputation of Iraq in front of world. The Kurdistan Region’s President Nechirvan Barzani also condemned the attempt, denouncing it as an act of “terrorism.”

Saudi Arabia

The Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed Saudi Arabia’s strong condemnation of the cowardly terrorist act that targeted Kadhimi, reiterating that it stands shoulder to shoulder with Iraq’s government and the Iraqi people in confronting all the terrorists who are trying in vain to prevent Iraq from restoring its independence, strengthening its security and stability, and advancing its prosperity and development.

The UAE

The UAE announced its strong condemnation of the assassination attempt that targeted Kadhimi, describing it as a terrorist act.

Kuwait

It announced its condemnation of the assassination attempt. The Kuwaiti Foreign Ministry said that the criminal and vicious attempt not only targeted Kadhimi but also the unity and accomplishments made by Iraq at all levels. It reiterated that it is convinced of the awareness of the Iraqi people to deny opportunities to those who intend to harm their homeland and unity.

Qatar

Qatar's Foreign Ministry reiterated the necessity of hunting down those involved in the assassination attempt and bringing them to justice. It reiterated its well-established position in support of Iraq's unity, stability and sovereignty as well as the aspirations of the brotherly people of Iraq for security, stability and development.

Egypt

President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi condemned the assassination attempt, describing it as a violent act and called on the Iraqi parties to remain calm and adhere to the principle of unity to preserve the country's stability.

Jordan

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates reiterated Jordan's full support and solidarity with Iraq and its people and its total support for its security and stability and the efforts of the Iraqi government to combat terrorism, enhance the democratic process and preserve its national accomplishments. The ministry also stressed Jordan's total denunciation and condemnation of all the cowardly terrorist practices and acts that pose a threat to the security and stability of Iraq.

Lebanon

President Michel Aoun condemned the assassination attempt on Kadhimi, considering that it not only targeted him in person, but

also Iraq's security and stability and the efforts being made to strengthen Iraq's national unity. Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati held a telephone conversation with his Iraqi counterpart, congratulating him for surviving the assassination attempt.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

Nayef Falah Mubarak al-Hajraf condemned the failed attempt, indicating that Iraq's security is reflective of GCC security.

The Arab League

The Secretary General of the Arab League Ahmed Aboul Gheit condemned in the strongest terms the cowardly attempt to assassinate Kadhimi, reiterating that the attack against the home of the Iraqi prime minister using booby-trapped drones mainly targeted the prestige of the Iraqi state as well as its security and stability.

The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)

The OIC strongly denounced the attempt. It said in a statement, "The Secretariat-General of the OIC is following with deep concern the developments of the situation in the Republic of Iraq. It condemns in the strongest terms the cowardly assassination attempt that targeted the Iraqi Prime Minister Mostafa al-Kadhimi." OIC Secretary General Yousef bin Ahmad al-Othaimeen stressed that this attack was a terrorist act that targeted the unity, security and stability of Iraq.

Iran's Position

In the initial Iranian response, Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran Ali Shamkhani condemned the attempt, saying "it is a new **sedition** that must be attributed to foreign think tanks that supported the terror groups in Iraq."

Furthermore, media sources revealed a visit made by Ismail Qarani, chief of Iran's Quds Force, to Baghdad, where the attempted assassination took place. He met with Kadhimi and the Iraqi President Barham Salih, announcing his country's condemnation of any attack targeting Iraqi officials. He also met with commanders of the Iran-backed armed militias to discuss the results of the

Iraqi elections with the aim of calming tensions between the militias and Kadhimi after the former were accused of involvement in the assassination attempt. They had been waging a campaign to incite the Iraqi people against Kadhimi since the parliamentary results were announced.

The visit indicated Iran's desire to reduce tensions and to prevent the situation in Iraq from spiraling out of control, especially amid the ongoing incitement campaign waged by the militias against Kadhimi after the assassination attempt. In a tweet, Secretary General of the Sayyid al-Shuhada Brigades Abu Alaa al-Walaei attacked Kadhimi, threatening to deprive him of winning a second term as prime minister. He wrote, "I tell you (Kadhimi), **you should forget two things**: the first is repeating the farce of naming you as prime minister. The second is reinstating you to your former position (the head of intelligence)."

In addition, Abu Ali al-Askari, a security official in the Iraqi Hezbollah Brigades, downplayed the importance of the attack. He said in a tweet, "No one is ready to lose a drone to attack a former prime minister's home, indicating that if there is anybody who wants to inflict harm on this man, there are less costly and more guaranteed ways."

The United States

The US Department of State was quick to condemn the attack, considering it a terrorist act. It expressed relief that Kadhimi had come out unscathed, reiterating that it stands by its Iraqi partners — the government and the Iraqi people. It also indicated that it is closely liaising with the security forces tasked with ensuring the independence and sovereignty of Iraq. The US Department of State also indicated that it offered to help Iraq investigate the attack on Kadhimi's residence. This US position in support of Kadhimi's course of action raises questions about the future of implementing the decision of the US troop withdrawal from Iraq scheduled for December 2021.

The UN Security Council

The UN Security Council members condemned the failed assassination attempt on Kadhimi, reiterating their support for Iraq's independence, sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity, and the democratic process. They also emphasized that terrorism in all its forms and manifestations represents one of the most dangerous threats to global peace and security and that the perpetrators of vicious terrorist acts, their orchestrators, financiers and sponsors should be held accountable and brought to justice.

The aforementioned condemnations indicate strong Arab, regional and international dimensions as several countries and organizations strongly condemned the assassination attempt. These condemnations express regional and international support for Kadhimi's course of action to build an independent Iraqi state that embraces balanced foreign relations.

The widespread condemnation also reveals the desire of the aforementioned countries to see this course of action continue in the coming period in order to tackle the crises facing Iraq, build a modern Iraqi state and meet the aspirations of its citizens. What is significant is that these condemnations came from regional and international actors that have huge influence on regional issues such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt and international powers such as the United States. The most remarkable condemnation came from the UN Security Council (the United States, China, Russia, the UK and France), since its permanent members wield the biggest influence on regional and international affairs as they hold the veto in regard to international draft resolutions. They also possess military capabilities and economic resources deemed the biggest in the world. For example, the United States is the world's number one in terms of military strength, and it also tops global economic rankings, followed by China. Hence, condemnations from these international heavyweights put Kadhimi in a stronger position. This support can provide him with greater options for maneuverability and compromise to end the political deadlock

which the country has been experiencing since announcing the results of the early parliamentary elections.

4. The Scenarios Available to Iran in Iraq

In light of the major transformations on the Iraqi landscape following the assassination attempt on the prime minister to end his project to restore the state's writ and exercise Iraqi sovereignty, three options are available for Iran and its proxies in Iraq:

Repeating the Yemen Scenario

Following the announcement of the Iraqi parliamentary election results, many Iraqis expressed concern about the possibility of the groups that did not secure the seats and wanted to attempt to impose a *fait accompli* on the ground by the use of force. Iraqis fear that these groups will repeat the experience of the Houthi militia when it took over Sana in case their interests are gravely threatened, or they sense a serious attempt to disarm them.

Yet, there are major economic, political and security challenges facing Iran if it resorts to this scenario, as well as the regional and international impediments to Tehran if this scenario materializes.

Chaos at Home

Iran could resort to spreading even more chaos and end the political process completely. This scenario playing out would impact the pending agreements — if any — and the agreement Iran intends to sign with Iraq to maximize its clout. This is an attractive scenario if Iran totally loses its clout in Iraq and the parties aligned with Iran adhere to their positions regarding Kadhim. The country would then be on the verge of a civil war, however, this is unlikely to happen, as Iran's proxies have lost their political clout in Parliament. However, Iran's military clout remains powerful as well as its economic and cultural clout. Hence, Iran will not resort to spreading chaos unless it loses its clout comprehensively — which is not something that will happen easily.

Moreover, Iran is in dire need of Iraq as the latter is Tehran's most important economic outlet and strategic artery in light of

the ongoing US sanctions. Moreover, as it will be difficult for Iran to reach an agreement in the coming months leading to the sanctions being lifted or in case the talks collapse with world powers because of a negative incident, Iraq will be an important vent for Iran. Therefore, it is difficult for Iran to resort to spreading chaos in Iraq.

A Calculated Escalation to Reach an Understanding

This is a scenario Iran could opt for through several moves in the Iraqi arena. Through calculated pressure and escalation, Iran could reshuffle the cards and facilitate the process of power-sharing, in a bid to negate the results of the elections and influence the new Iraqi equation in light of its proxies performing badly in the elections. Through this calculated pressure, Iran will take into account its interests and send a clear message to whosoever leads Iraq: anyone daring to strip Iran of its influence in Iraq will face threats to their life.

Furthermore, Iran's proxies may continue to hold protests and issue threats while Tehran moves ahead with depriving Iraq of its share of electricity. Iran is also likely to intensify its calls for Iraq to pay compensation for the Iran-Iraq War and instruct its militias to carry out military parades on Iraq's streets to flex their muscles. This scenario, if realized, is likely to continue until a compromise is reached, ensuring Iran's clout in Iraq. The formation of the next government in light of this scenario is likely to be a slow process.

Iran also fears igniting an intra-Shiite war, since the winner of the elections (the Sadr party) is a cross-sectarian bloc. As Iran realized that this victory would benefit the Sunni and cross-sectarian alliances, Tehran quickly sent Qaani to Iraq following the assassination attempt to quell rising tensions in the country.

