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IRAQ AND MIGRATION – WHAT CHALLENGES FACE THE NEW ADMINISTRATION?

by Rami Bathish

The country has a promising new government under Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi but faces a range of challenges connected to its large refugee and irregular migrant population.

Last month's approval by Iraq's Council of Representatives of a new government paves the way for a more hopeful phase in the country, albeit a volatile period during which the incoming Prime Minister, and former intelligence chief, Mustafa Al-Kadhimi will need to tread with caution and tact.

In a televised statement shortly after the swearing in of his new cabinet (minus a foreign minister and an oil minister, whose appointments are postponed), caution and tact are precisely what he displayed. Speaking to the dominant political climate of the past months, and perhaps as an appeasement to his country's significant protest camp, he made some key announcements.

A path of reform and integrity

Al-Kadhimi has reinstated Abdel-Wahab Al-Sa'di as chief of the Counter Terrorism Service, a position he held with vigour until being reshuffled to the Ministry of Defence by former Prime Minister Adel Abdel-Mahdi. This move had contributed to anti-government protests last October. Al-Sa'di was viewed as a central figure in the defeat of ISIS in Iraq, and was outspoken about widespread corruption within Abdel-Mahdi's government. A respected figure in Iraq whose popularity transcends factional and sectarian divides, General Sa'di's close association with Al-Kadhimi is a symbolic and powerful gesture by the new Iraqi premier aimed at reversing deeply rooted popular sentiments against corruption and dysfunctionality within Iraq.

This, along with an openness to hold early elections; the immediate release of delayed pensions; the promise to provide accountability, justice, and compensation to families of victims of violence during the protests; and hints that his government will engage in strategic negotiations with the US that "...safeguard Iraqi sovereignty", put Prime Minister Al-Kadhimi on a stable course. He will have to navigate some major obstacles, however.

The anticipated economic impact of an unprecedented drop in oil prices looms large, particularly given the economy's 67 per cent dependency on oil revenues. The impending pressure on national finances will add to Iraq's fragile socio-economic structure, with significant consequences for the most vulnerable groups.

Migration challenges and opportunities for enhanced cooperation

Add to this the inherent challenges Iraq faces regarding both regular and irregular migration flows, even an enlightened democratic path of good governance can, and will, be tested. Iraq hosts 450,000 war-torn internally displaced persons (IDPs) in dire need of basic services; an estimated community of 246,000 Syrian refugees (mostly in Kurdistan Iraq); and between 200,000 and 300,000 labour migrants, a significant portion of whom survive only within the precarious informal economy. All three are vulnerable, both within and beyond the context of the COVID-19 global crisis.

The extent to which the new government will be able to cater to Iraq's migration challenges in the midst of multiple other crises will, to a considerable degree, depend on the future of cooperation with the international community. It is perhaps this rationale that will hopefully reinforce the relevance of solid and consolidated efforts by the international community to support Iraq's national capacities in addressing its migration challenges, including a concerted effort to safeguard fundamental rights of migrants and refugees; continued inclusivity, if not increased emphasis, of IDPs, refugees, and labour migrants in a comprehensive international support package to Iraq; a sober outlook, and decisive action, on the future of mobility from Iraq to both Western countries of destination as well as neighbouring Gulf States with high demand for skilled migration; and a deeper engagement of the Iraqi diaspora community in private sector investment within Iraq, aimed at revitalising the economy and re-generating employment. Meanwhile, now more than ever, there is the need to advance solid EU engagement and rational dialogue with Iraq on returns of rejected asylum seekers, particularly given the limitations presented by the COVID-19 pandemic (at least in the immediate term).

A more robust migration policy within and towards Iraq would do a lot to promote stability and long term prosperity in a country that has endured almost 40 years of devastation and upheaval. The confidence demonstrated by the new government in Iraq deserves our attention as policy makers and practitioners in the field of migration.

The uncertainty caused by a pandemic that has all but paralysed the global economy must be seen as a wakeup call to the need for long-term strategies and sustainable international cooperation in all aspects of development. Migration is no exception.

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