



Iraq at a crossroads – Between sectarianism and a functional state

Bitte Hammargren
2021

Iraq at a crossroads – Between sectarianism and a functional state

EDITORIAL NOTES

Researcher and writer: Bitte Hammargren

Cover photo: Haidar Hamdani, Getty Images (from demonstration in Najaf December 2019).

English language proofing: Richard Langlais

Layout: Viera Larsson

Editorial support: Gunnar Andersson

This report has been developed as part of the Local Governance Development in Iraq Project, funded by the Swedish Government, and managed by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) and SALAR International.

PREFACE

As part of the Swedish Government's five-year development cooperation strategy for Iraq, 2017–2021, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) and SALAR International, are implementing the Sida-funded Local Governance Development in Iraq (LOGDEVI) project. The project partner in Iraq is the Iraqi Research Foundation for Analysis and Development (IRFAD), with which SALAR has a long experience of collaboration.

LOGDEVI is built around two distinct components. One is being implemented in the Kurdistan Region, with a thematic focus on inclusive education and child protection, while the other is being implemented in the south of Iraq, where decentralisation reform is in focus. The project's main geographical target areas are the governorates of Diwaniyah, Duhok and Muthanna. Selected work is also underway in Baghdad and Erbil.

Because the project is due to end and the Swedish Government is preparing for another cooperation strategy with Iraq, SALAR and IRFAD are in the process of taking stock of and evaluating what has been achieved within LOGDEVI to date. As a basis for any forthcoming cooperation, the need to thoroughly analyse the broader context of Iraq has been identified.

With this background, SALAR has assigned Bitte Hammargren, independent MENA & Turkey analyst, journalist and writer, and Senior Associate Fellow at the Swedish Institute for Foreign Affairs (UI), to research and write a number of analytical reports on the current state of affairs in Iraq and possible scenarios for the future. In the research for this report, she has interviewed several prominent Iraq analysts, civil servants, ex-politicians and Tishreen activists, all of whom wish to remain anonymous.

ABBREVIATIONS

AANES	Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
ICCPR	International Convention on Civil and Political Rights
ICP	Iraqi Communist Party
IDP	Internally displaced person
IHEC	Independent High Electoral Commission
INIS	Iraq's National Intelligence Service
IS	Islamic State; previously called ISI and ISIS/ISIL, sometimes called Daesh, an acronym of ISIS's Arabic name
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
NSC	National Security Council
PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces (also called PMU, where U stands for Units); Hashd al-Shaabi, in Arabic
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
UNAMI	United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq

CONTENTS

- PREFACE 3
- ABBREVIATIONS 4
- 1. IRAQ: GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS 6
- 2. IRAQ'S CURRENT CHALLENGES 7
 - 2.1 Political 7
 - 2.2 Economic 8
 - 2.3 External powers 9
 - 2.4 Internal rivalries 9
 - 2.5 Social services and education 10
 - 2.6 Gender 10
 - 2.7 Other special features 11
- 3. OCTOBER 2019 PROTESTS, TISHREEN 12
- 4. OCTOBER ELECTIONS, 2021 13
 - 4.1 Framework 13
 - 4.2 Preliminary results 14
 - Key figures in the election 15
- 5. POST-ELECTION SCENARIOS 18
 - 5.1 What comes next? 18
 - 5.2 What should Iraqis do? 19
 - 5.3 What could 'internationals' do? 19
- 6. SOURCES 21

1.

IRAQ: GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

Iraq's new constitution was penned in 2005, two years after the U.S. invasion that led to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, the dissolution of the Iraqi Army and the banning of the former ruling Baath Party. The constitution was written in extremely complicated circumstances, "under the pressure of terrorist attacks, the presence of the American occupation, an electoral boycott of some components, and politicians' fear of the ghost of the previous dictatorial regime", as the independent al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies in Baghdad puts it.¹

The constitution laid the ground for a federal system. Three Kurdish-dominated governorates in the north were guaranteed a high degree of autonomy, to the extent that some observers describe it as "confederalism rather than federalism".² However, in central and southern Iraq, 15 Arab-dominated governorates are part of a highly centralized system. In 2008, decentralization was codified in Law 21, known as the Law of Governorates Not Incorporated into a Region. The law has been amended three times, gradually shedding more light on the powers of provinces and, in theory at least, providing more significant administrative and fiscal authorities to the governorate level.³

Moreover, the constitution paved the way for a power-sharing system, originally aimed at reducing ethno-sectarian tensions, but gradually imbuing the system with politically sanctioned corruption, which helped new ruling elites to position themselves and to sustain their share of power, status and money. An ethnic distribution of the three leading positions of the Iraqi state is not defined in the constitution, yet it has become a given that Shiites hold the executive powers

of the premiership. According to praxis, a Kurd has always been the president in post-Saddam Iraq, whereas the speaker has been a Sunni Arab. The ethno-sectarian power-sharing system has cemented structural corruption within ministries and other state institutions, whereby big parties compete for influence, using budget allocations for rewarding their own loyalists in the ministries. An ever-increasing number of politicized civil servants have promoted their parties' interests rather than those of the Iraqi nation and population.⁴

With sectarianism engrained in the system, many Sunni Arabs saw themselves as the underdog, leading scores of former Baathists and Sunni Islamists to seek revenge against the U.S. occupation forces and Iraq's new Shiite leaders. Early in the 21st century, fueled by Sunni jihadism, al-Qaeda in Iraq began targeting not only U.S. soldiers but also Iraqi Shiites, their clerics, places of worship and marketplaces. The insurgency became viciously sectarian, to the extent that 'core al-Qaeda' rejected it. Al-Qaeda in Iraq rebranded itself as the Islamic state of Iraq (ISI). After gaining a foothold in Syria's civil war, the name was changed to 'the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant' (ISIS, or the Arabic acronym, Daesh). Taking control of Iraq's second largest city, Mosul, in June 2014 and threatening to seize Baghdad, the terrorist organization omitted all geographical denotations, calling itself the Islamic State, IS, and sought to build a new so-called caliphate. At its height, before an Iraqi and a U.S.-led international counter-offensive started, the terror group controlled around a third of Syria's territory and 40 percent of Iraq's.

From its onset, shortcomings in Iraq's new constitution, such as the inability to solve the status of disputed territories (Article 140) and the management of oil and gas, came to the fore.

1 Al-Ali & Auf (2021).

2 Inside Iraqi Politics, 2015. Guide to Iraqi politics, 2nd edition.

3 Arab Reform Initiative (2019) & El-Meeny (2017).

4 Dodge & Mansour (2021).

2.

IRAQ'S CURRENT CHALLENGES

In 2017, the Kurdistan Regional Government, KRG, held a non-binding referendum for full independence, with more than 92 percent voting in favor. Rejecting the legality of the referendum, the central government in Baghdad, with the help of paramilitary forces, retook the city of Kirkuk and other disputed territories from the Kurdish peshmerga.

In October 2019, a new generation that had come of age after the fall of Saddam Hussein started a protest movement, calling for fundamental changes to the system. Chanting slogans such as “No to political sectarianism”, young Iraqis protested against sectarianism in politics and Iran’s meddling. Furthermore, they demonstrated against a system where the rule of law has been trumped by “the rule of the gun” and against a political class that delivers neither jobs nor basic services. Anger was directed against an elite who proved incapable of protecting Iraq’s sovereignty, or of providing services to its citizens and stopping corruption in state institutions.⁵ Protesters called for better representation, impartial distribution of wealth and a legal system that “applies a more comprehensive law equally” to all citizens.⁶

These demands, further discussed in Chapter 3, were in many cases suppressed by lethal force and assassinations.

2.1 Political

No single party has ever secured a majority on its own in post-Saddam Iraq. Instead, rival, mostly Shia parties have vied for power-sharing in government, usually after months of horse-trading. The latest premiership, of Mustafa al-Kadhimi, serves as an illustration. The former head of Iraq’s National Intelligence Service (INIS) began his tenure in May 2020, after months of arm-twisting between leading Shiite factions, and despite strong opposition from the pro-Iranian militia, Kata’eb Hezbollah.⁷ The quarrel over Kadhimi’s tenure became “the first sign of a split among Iran-backed Shiite groups” during the current phase.⁸ This division within the so-called ‘Shia House’ has sharpened, in post-election 2021.

Kadhimi framed his government as the result of the ‘October Revolution,’ *Thawrat Tishreen*, i.e., the protests that began in October 2019.⁹ However, his promises to bring justice after the killings of activists were unfulfilled. In May 2021, he reined in a militia commander with strong links to Iran, after the assassinations of a protest leader in Karbala earlier the same month. This led paramilitary factions to threaten both Kadhimi and his government. After a standoff in the Green Zone in Baghdad, the militia leader was released, making Kadhimi look weaker.¹⁰ Despite Kadhimi’s declared tolerance of peaceful protests, his term was marked by “continuous repression, often carried out by groups tied to the state, acting autonomously”, as the International Crisis Group writes.¹¹

In the Iraqi post-Saddam system, ministers appointed as technocrats have found themselves rubberstamping decisions taken by politicized

5 Al-Ali & Auf (2021).

6 Al-Ali & Auf (2020).

7 Azizi (2021).

8 Azizi (2021).

9 Al-Hurra, 3 Oct 2020.

10 Inside Iraqi politics, no. 223, 14 June 2021.

11 International Crisis Group (2021).

civil servants who control ministries and serve their own parties.¹² This system has led to institutionalized corruption that is hard to eradicate, since the political class benefits from it. As David Gardner from the Financial Times puts it, Iraq's ruling class treats government offices "as booty under a spoils system."¹³ In Iraq, this system is known as 'muhasasa tayfia' (sectarian quota).

2.2 Economic

Although Iraq is oil-rich, nearly three-fifths of the population live on less than six U.S. dollars a day. It is OPEC's second biggest exporter of oil, with a production that has almost doubled over the past decade, holding the world's fifth largest reserves.¹⁴ Yet, Iraq suffers from a mismanaged economy. Much of the national oil income is unaccounted for. Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index ranks Iraq as 160 out of 180 countries.¹⁵ Corruption, some experts argue, has done more damage to the country's economy and political stability than Al-Qaeda and IS. Due to lax governance, payments are funneled away from much-needed investments in human and physical capital, such as improvements to the infrastructure in central and south Iraq, and reconstruction of areas in the west that were liberated from IS. Corruption and the absence of legal framework keep foreign investors away. Iraq's dependence on oil, accounting for around 92 percent of the state budget, makes it one of the least diversified economies in the MENA region. Iraq is exceptionally vulnerable to swings in the oil price, as was evident after the crash of the oil price in 2014, when the government struggled to find the means to fund the war against IS. Enormous sums in an opaque system have been allocated from the state budget to paramilitary units of the so-called Popular Mobilization Fronts (PMF), which set up institutions parallel to the state's, and have also derived revenues from illicit trade and lucrative reconstruction activities.¹⁶

The economy is further exhausted by a system that enables leaders of the blocs in parliament to

offer money-spinning jobs in the public sector to their loyalists and family members. The government's contracting procedures are "the father of all corruption issues", an Iraqi judge once put it.¹⁷ As a result, Iraq's wage bill represents the single biggest item in the state budget.¹⁸ The number of civil servants ranges between seven to nine million.¹⁹ In 2020, Finance Minister Ali Allawi estimated that Iraqis held between USD 100 million and USD 300 million overseas, mostly assets that were illegally acquired.²⁰ In a recent report by Toby Dodge and Renad Mansour, a senior official estimates that a quarter of his ministry's budget has been spent on tendering for fraudulent contracts, while another quarter is being wasted on the political appointees payrolls. Iraq has never had a transparent investigation into the financial costs of its systemic corruption.²¹

Iraq's labor force participation of 43 percent is one of the lowest in the world. Yearly, around 800,000 young Iraqis enter the work force, while new jobs are lacking. According to a World Bank report a few years back, more than a fifth of those in ages 15–24 and economically active are unemployed.²² Other sources indicate that the level of youth unemployment is even higher, 36 percent.²³ Among the internally displaced persons (IDPs), underemployment is particularly high. Only around 12 percent of women are engaged in the workforce. The Covid-19 pandemic and the drop in oil prices in 2020 further increased vulnerabilities.

During the war against IS (2014–2017), six million Iraqis were displaced. Many have since returned, but as of October 2020, around 1.4 million remained displaced, mostly people with perceived IS affiliations.²⁴ In late 2020 and early 2021, several IDP camps were closed or reclassified as informal camps. But in February 2021, 29 camps were still open, mostly in areas administered by the KRG. Despite camp closures, the overall number of people in need, and the drivers of need, remain unchanged, OCHA, United

12 Dodge & Mansour (2021).

13 Financial Times, 13 Oct 2021.

14 Financial Times, 13 Oct 2021.

15 Transparency International (2020).

16 Hammargren (2020).

17 Judge Radhi Hamza al-Radhi, quoted by Dodge (2019).

18 Al-Mawlawi (2019).

19 Dodge (2019).

20 Dodge & Mansour (2021), p. 12.

21 Dodge & Mansour (2021), p. 12.

22 World Bank (2019).

23 Al-Mawlawi (2019).

24 International Crisis Group (2020).

Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, writes.²⁵

Even with oil prices surpassing USD 60 per barrel, Iraq needs to cut inefficient spending to have resources for a stimulus package. Necessary economic reforms are curtailed by an absence of fiscal space. Failure to halt a rapid accumulation of the national debt “will divert more resources away from productive investment and chip away at foreign exchange reserves and the economy’s resilience to shocks”, the World Bank states. To tackle its huge socio-economic problems in a future where oil prices might be permanently low, Iraq must attain a rapid and dramatic increase in non-oil economic productivity.²⁶

2.3 External powers

Since the U.S. invasion and the overthrow of the Baath regime, Iran has filled power vacuums in Iraq for its own strategic interests. After a military escalation between the United States and Iran on Iraqi soil under Trump’s presidency, Iraq faced the risk of becoming a battleground for a major proxy war, which could have spread to the wider region. Tensions ran particularly high after President Trump’s January 2020 decision to kill Major General Qassem Soleimani, commander of Iran’s Quds forces, by a drone attack in Baghdad. Soleimani’s close Iraqi ally, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, commander of Kata’eb Hezbollah, was also killed in the attack. Muhandis was the deputy commander of Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces, *Hashd al-Shaabi*. Washington’s justification for the targeted killings was the need to prevent an “imminent” attack from Iran. However, experts in international law did not find evidence to substantiate such claims. Agnes Callamard, former UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions,²⁷ stated that:

“... the few details made publicly available thus far do not establish a factual basis for the claim that any attacks were imminent, let alone that Soleimani was key to their implementation. On Jan. 5 [2020], the Iraqi prime minister stated that, to the contrary, General Soleimani had come

to Iraq seeking to de-escalate tensions with the U.S. and had asked the Iraqi government to act as a mediator for this purpose, raising further doubts as to imminence of one or several ‘armed attacks’.²⁸

Two days after the lethal attack, Iraq’s Council of Representatives passed a non-binding resolution, calling for the government to work towards ending the presence of all foreign troops on Iraqi territory. Lately, the U.S. has held 2,500 troops in Iraq for counterterrorism operations against remnants of IS/Daesh. During a bilateral meeting in Washington in July 2021, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi and President Joe Biden agreed on a December 2021 deadline for the withdrawal of U.S. combat troops. The United States aims to shift to training and advising the Iraqi military to defend itself.²⁹ However, even a diminished U.S. military presence in Iraq is anathema for both pro-Iranian militias and an Iraqi nationalist such as the cleric Muqtada Sadr, winner of the 2021 elections. At the best of times, Iraq can serve as a bridge-builder between enemies, which has been the case when Baghdad on several occasions has hosted a dialogue between Iran and Saudi Arabia, often low-key, as part of a silent diplomacy. Serving as a bridge-builder between Iran and the United States has proven harder.

2.4 Internal rivalries

Sectarian policies by Iraqi prime ministers, most notably during Nouri al-Maliki’s term in 2006–2014, and by Shia-led, pro-Iranian paramilitary forces in post-Saddam Iraq, fueled the Sunni revanchism described above. In 2014, after IS captured Mosul, the paramilitary Popular Mobilization Forces were set up, after a fatwa from Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who urged volunteers to fight IS/Daesh. Tens of thousands of young men, mostly Shiites, signed up. Sistani, revered by his Shiite followers in a manner similar to how the Pope is regarded by pious Catholics, wanted volunteers to join Iraq’s regular armed forces. However, the paramilitary commander, Muhandis, together with Prime Minister Maliki, organized them as a hybrid form of militia. In defiance of the constitution, Maliki ensured that

25 OCHA (Feb 2021)

26 Inside Iraqi politics, no 227, 22 Oct 2021

27 Callamard led the UN investigation of the murder of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. She is currently the secretary-general of Amnesty International.

28 Callamard (2020)

29 Reuters (July 2021).

the PMF were beyond the reach of the Ministries of Defense and the Interior. Instead, he placed PMF under the premier's National Security Council (NSC) and his national security advisor, which meant that the deputy director, Muhandis, used his influence over the militias.³⁰

In 2017, the PMF were formally incorporated into the Iraqi state apparatus. These *hashd* began to resemble Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps by operating as parallel military structures. As such, the militias promoted Tehran's geostrategic interests in Iraq.³¹ Yet, after the killing of Soleimani, Iraq experienced strains between its staunchest pro-Iranian PMF, such as Kata'eb Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and other armed units who wished to be independent from Tehran. In December 2020, internal disagreements led four PMF brigades to form a new structure, called *Hashd al-Atabat*, the Shrine Units. The split was a blow to Iran's efforts to maintain unity among Shiite groups in Iraq.³²

Meanwhile, instability, corruption and grievances among Sunni Arabs make Iraq susceptible to a re-emergence of Sunni takfiri jihadism, which thrives in turmoil.³³ From inside Iraq, pockets of active IS cells, remnants of the Islamic State, are able to play "a long game"³⁴ in their long-term ambition to rebuild the 'caliphate'. IS cells carry out bombings, hit-and-run attacks, and abductions across several provinces.³⁵ In October 2021, IS militants killed eleven people in Diyala province.³⁶ Prison breaks of IS captives from the Kurdish-led autonomous region in northeast Syria, AANES, cannot be excluded.

2.5 Social services and education

Since 2003, none of Iraq's governments have been able to ensure basic services, such as clean water and electricity, to the country's citizens, not the least in south and central Iraq, where Shiites form the majority. In 2015–2016, mass demonstrations against corruption started in Basra, the main city in the south. This was followed by a scandal in

2018, when at least 118,000 persons in Basra were diagnosed with stomach diseases. Water contamination was the likely cause.³⁷

Furthermore, Iraq's electricity grid is so poor that it provides electricity for only a few hours a day, even when temperatures exceed 50 degrees Celsius in the summer and air-condition is a must to make life bearable. Pollution and poor water management aggravate the problems. Most of Iraq's solid waste is disposed of "in unregulated landfills" with "little or no concern for both human health and environment". Spontaneous fires, groundwater contamination, surface water pollution and large-scale greenhouse gas emissions have been the hallmarks of Iraqi landfills.³⁸ The climate crisis adds to the woes, pushing more people from the countryside to the cities.

Years of war, sanctions, neglect and endemic corruption led to a dwindling educational system, which worsened during the pandemic. For most students, the concept of online learning is meaningless, since millions of Iraqis lack internet connections and safe access to electricity. The educational system suffers from a shortage of teachers and school buildings, "both of which need to be two-to-three times the current numbers".³⁹

2.6 Gender

Iraq was the first country in the MENA region to adopt an action plan for UN Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, but it has yet to be implemented.⁴⁰ Iraq is also a party to the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), whereby Iraq is obliged to ensure participation in public life without discrimination based on gender. Iraq has committed to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 on "gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls", which aims to "ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life".⁴¹ However,

30 Hammargren (2020).

31 Hammargren (2020).

32 Azizi (2021).

33 Takfir is the act of declaring another Muslim an apostate.

34 Hiltermann (2021).

35 Rudaw, 23 Sep 2021.

36 News agencies, 27 Oct 2021.

37 Human Rights Watch (2019).

38 Al-Najjar (2019).

39 Inside Iraqi politics, issue no. 223, 14 June 2021.

40 UN Women in Iraq.

41 UNAMI (2021), Fact sheet #6.

after decades of repression, sanctions, armed conflict and a surge of conservatism and religious fundamentalism, the lives of Iraqi women have deteriorated. An often-heard patriarchal attitude is that “gender issues cannot be prioritized today, since there are worse things happening”⁴²

Rising poverty affects many young widows and displaced females. Reports reveal how women and underage girls are forced into prostitution, under the cover of so-called ‘*mutaa* marriages’, when a man pays for a temporary ‘wife’ for sometimes an hour or less. A BBC documentary describes this practice as illegal under Iraqi law yet officiated by clerics who profit from it.⁴³ One of this research’s interviewees comments that her brother on several occasions has been offered to buy sex with young girls, down to the age of twelve, something he disgustingly declined.⁴⁴ “They sell young girls like they sell fruit in the streets”, this source says.⁴⁵

For more on the October 2021 elections, which gave a record number of women seats in the parliament, by far exceeding the 25 percent minimum quota, see Section 4.1.

2.7 Other special features

Although ethno-sectarianism is a major factor in Iraq’s political system, social realities paint a different picture. According to statistics, 38 percent of Iraqi marriages are ethnically or religiously mixed.⁴⁶ Tribes and their sub-groups, important in Iraq’s social fabric, are sometimes cross-sectarian. In some areas, tribes supported the Tishreen protesters, providing food, transport, and security against violence from security forces.⁴⁷

Shiism in Iraq differs from Iran, although Twelver Shiism is dominant in both countries. Iraq hosts Shia Islam’s holiest places, next to Mecca and Medina. Iraq’s leading Shiite clergy, based in Najaf, interpret the role of religion differently than their counterparts in Iran. Iraq’s supreme Shiite authority – *marjaiyya* – issues religious and sometimes political guidance for its followers from its seminars, *hawza*, in Najaf. Yet, Iraq’s top

Shiite hierarchy is ‘quietist’ in terms of politics, rejecting the Iranian system of Guardianship of the Jurists (*velayat-e faqih*). Over the years, quietism has protected the Iraqi *marjaiyya* from being perceived as corrupt. With this stance, the grand ayatollahs in Najaf constitute a challenge to the Iranian system. The foremost *marja al-taqlid* (source of reference) in Najaf, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, is of Persian background, but addresses the needs of Iraqis.

42 Interviews, Sep 2021.

43 Al-Maghafi (2019).

44 Interview Sep 2021.

45 Interview Sep 2021.

46 Blecua (2021).

47 Pargeter (2021).

3.

OCTOBER 2019 PROTESTS, TISHREEN

The popular uprising that erupted in October 2019 started as a spontaneous manifestation against corruption, lack of social services and jobs. Called Tishreen, after the Arabic word for October, it has become the largest and longest-lasting social movement in post-Saddam Iraq. Since the first demonstrations broke out in eleven of Iraq's 18 provinces, crowds in the streets have been calling for a complete removal of the political class. The mostly young, Shiite, and leaderless protesters have directed their anger against Shia-led parties and militias and Iran's influence.

The ruling elite in Iran, just like its Iraqi allies, labelled the Iraqi uprising as a conspiracy instigated by the United States and its Arab friends. Before becoming Iran's new president in 2021, the conservative Iranian cleric, Ebrahim Raisi, called the Iraqi mass protests an American-Saudi 'sedition', aimed at sowing discord between Iranians and Iraqis and at stopping pilgrimage on a Shiite holiday, *Arbaeen*.⁴⁸

In November 2019, the Tishreen uprising forced Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi to resign, because of his failure to stop the killings of protesters and the systemic corruption. Tishreen enforced a new electoral law and new elections. However, due to a fight between the big parties over the shape of voting districts – an Iraqi version of gerrymandering – it took eleven months before President Barham Salih ratified the new electoral law.⁴⁹

Similar to other Arab states where protesters took to the streets in 2019 – Lebanon, Sudan, and Algeria – the Iraqi movement was youth-driven. Many journalists, civil society leaders and other personalities with leadership skills became victims of arrests, kidnappings, torture or assassinations. During the first six months, more than 600

were killed by state security forces or paramilitary groups, while more than 20,000 were injured. Most of the assassinations remain unsolved. Militias also tried to pressure some tribal elders, to make them stop their youngsters from joining Tishreen.⁵⁰

Numerous prominent human rights and women's rights defenders fell victim to unidentified assassins. In August 2020, Reham Yacoub, a medical doctor in Basra who had organized women's marches and raised her voice against youth unemployment, was shot by an unknown assailant. In December 2020, the Baghdad-based activist Salah al-Iraqi, who had spoken out against corruption and militias, was assassinated. Not even family members of high-profile activists feel safe. In July 2021, Ali Karim, son of the women's rights defender Fatima al-Bahadly, in Basra, was kidnapped and killed. Fatima al-Bahadly is the founder of Al-Firdaws Society, an organization focused on protecting women and girls affected by war and strengthening their role in peace-building.⁵¹

Some victims were well-connected to the highest echelons in the state apparatus. In July 2020, Hisham al-Hashimi, a counterterrorism advisor to Prime Minister Kadhimi and an expert on IS and other radical jihadi groups, was gunned down by two assailants on a motorcycle. A few weeks before the assassination, Hishami had published a report titled, *The internal dispute within the Popular Mobilization Forces*.⁵² The motive behind the killing is obscure; Hashemi was known for having conflicting loyalties. Ramon Blecua, former EU Ambassador in Baghdad, writes: "Like the *Murder in the Orient Express*, one is left with the sense it could be all of them with motive to kill. But in this case, it appears that he was

48 Radio Farda (2019).

49 Al-Jaffal (2021).

50 Neuhof (2021).

51 Frontline Defenders.

52 Al-Arabiya [in Arabic], 7 July 2020.

4.

OCTOBER ELECTIONS, 2021

suspected of complicity in the killing of the Iranian general Qassem Soleimani, and the deputy of the hashd, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. That this is almost certainly untrue did not matter; his fate was sealed by their belief”.⁵³ Continued killings scared many from taking to the streets again, or even from staying in touch with friends. Some took refuge in the KRG or left Iraq.⁵⁴

4.1 Framework

In July 2020, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi promised to hold ‘early elections’, but the vote was postponed until October 2021. Under the new electoral law, independent candidates were given a better chance, at least formerly. Following the new law, seats are allocated to winning candidates, regardless of whether they have a party affiliation or not. In all, 789 independent candidates put themselves forward, among them some tribal leaders. To form a majority in Iraq’s unicameral Council of Representatives, 165 of the 329 seats are needed. Spread around Iraq’s 18 provinces are 83 voting districts, according to the new electoral law. This is a significant increase from the earlier system, when the 18 governorates were designated as single districts.

Out of a population of 40 million, 25 million were registered to vote in October 2021. Since January 2005, when Iraq held its first post-Saddam election, voting turnout has plummeted. In the first election, the participation was nearly 80 percent, despite the fact that Sunni Arabs called for a boycott. In October, it was a record low, 43 percent (an increase from an initial figure of only 41 percent) of those registered to vote. If all eligible voters are comprised, the participation was only 34 percent.⁵⁵ The head of the EU election mission in Iraq, Viola von Cramon, commented that the low turnout should send a “political message” to the ruling elite.⁵⁶

The international community invested significantly in the elections. A UN Security Council resolution in May 2021 supported an international observation mandate for the elections to be supplemented with local observers. The UN deployed hundreds of staff in every governorate across Iraq, in what was described as the UN’s

53 Blecua (2021).

54 Interviews in October 2021.

55 Tweet by Farhad Alaaldin, chairman of Iraq Advisory Council, 11 Oct 2021.

56 Rudaw 11 Oct 2021.

currently biggest electoral mission worldwide.⁵⁷ The EU sent 90 observers. The Arab League and the Organization of Islamic States also monitored the elections together with domestic observers. These missions, combined, showed a strong interest in preventing Iraq from becoming the next failed state in the region.

In October 2021, Grand Ayatollah Sistani called voters to participate, countering widespread calls for a boycott.⁵⁸ The main challenge to the system came from frustrated Shiites in central and south Iraq. Split between voices favoring participation or boycott, the Tishreen movement did not produce a platform of its own for the elections. Most protesters shunned traditional parties, reflecting the bad connotation that the word ‘party’ (*hizb* in Arabic) has in Iraq.⁵⁹

In a multicultural Iraq, five seats are guaranteed for Christians, in Baghdad, Dohuk, Erbil, Kirkuk and Nineva, respectively; one each for Yezidis and Shabaks, in Nineva; one for Sabeen Mandean, in Baghdad, and one for Fayli Kurds, in Wasit.⁶⁰ Iraqi Turkmen, many of whom are Shiites, have called for a quota representation, but to no avail.⁶¹

Failure of the government to bring justice after killings of protesters and assassinations of profiles within the Tishreen movement led to massive calls for a boycott of the elections. As a Tishreen activist explains, “Prior to the elections, we agreed to have some Tishreenis run for parliament, primarily as independents. If we had run for the elections as a movement, it would make us look weak, since power in Iraq lies with parties and militias who have money and arms. Therefore, we decided to stay on the streets as well. Democratization in Iraq is a long process.”⁶²

In May 2021, following the assassination of a well-known activist in Karbala, the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) joined the calls for a boycott.⁶³ In the 2018 elections, the non-sectarian ICP was allied with Muqtada Sadr’s movement, Sa’iroun. A member of ICP’s Central Committee, Reda

al-Zaher, said that the boycott was “due to the deepening political and security crisis in Iraq”, where unnamed forces have conducted “rampant corruption, assassinations, kidnappings and intimidation”. He added that deteriorating living conditions denied the country of an “appropriate atmosphere for holding free and fair elections.”⁶⁴ Calls for a boycott were condemned by the head of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI).⁶⁵

4.2 Preliminary results

Bloc	Total seats	Bloc	Total seats
Sadryst Bloc	73	Azm Alliance	12
Taqaddum	37	New Generation	9
State of Law	34	Imtidad	9
KDP	33	Ishraqat Kanun	6
Fatah	16	Hakim-Abadi/Idani/Fayyad	5 each
PUK	15	Ahmad Abdulla al-Jiburi	3

Preliminary distribution of seats among main blocs in Parliament. Source: Inside Iraqi politics, no. 227, 22 October 2021

The preliminary results announced by the Independent Higher Election Commission (IHEC) on October 18 shook the ground of Iraqi politics by changing the balance between Shia factions. Sa’iroun (Alliance Towards Reform) gained 73 seats (up from 54, in 2018), despite its decline in the absolute number of votes. Sa’iroun’s advancement is explained by its clever handling of the new electoral system, including the women’s quota, whereby they let only one woman candidate – candidates who were well-suited to a conservative, Shiite electorate – run per district.

In second place was the Taqaddum (National Progress Party) of the Sunni Arab speaker, Mohammed al-Halbousi, with 37 seats. Former

57 UNAMI (2021), Fact sheet #8.

58 Reliefweb 30 Sep 2021.

59 Interview with Iraqi expert, September 2021.

60 UNAMI (2021), Fact sheet #1.

61 Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization.

62 Interview Oct 2021.

63 Nas News (2021).

64 Jawad (2021).

65 Rudaw, 25 Aug 2021.

66 This reflects preliminary results of main blocs, a total of 262 seats, and does not include e.g. independents or minority quotas.

prime minister Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law alliance won 34 seats (up from 25). Other Shia parties lost big by running too many candidates, competing against each other, and by failing to use the women quota skillfully. The pro-Iranian Fatah (Conquest) Alliance slumped to 17 seats (down from 48). Fatah's leader Hadi al-Ameri, a powerful militia commander, cried foul, claiming the results were fabricated.⁶⁷ The former premier, Haider al-Abadi, and his ally, the moderate cleric Ammar al-Hakim, lost drastically by running too many candidates. Kurdish parties won 60, altogether, with 32 for KDP and 16 for PUK. The pro-Tishreen Imtidad Movement and the New Generation Movement received 9 seats each, while independents of different tendencies (some of whom are considered close to the militias and the Fatah bloc) won around 40 seats.⁶⁸ Imtidad's victory in the Dhi-Qar1 district, where its leader Alaa al-Rikaby won far ahead of the second, a Sadrist, shows what opponents to the system could achieve if they encouraged participation.

Technical improvements, such as new biometric voting cards and electronic transmission, decreased the risk of fraud, widespread in earlier elections, international observers noted.⁶⁹ The EU Election Observation Mission in Iraq concluded in its preliminary assessment that the elections were technically well-managed, competitive and largely calm. The UN Security Council stated that the elections were technically sound and proceeded smoothly.⁷⁰ However, the Security Council's endorsement of the elections before the final results were announced led many ordinary Iraqis to believe that the UN has 'a hidden agenda'.⁷¹ Iran-backed parties and militias, who lost big, refused to accept the results. IHEC accepted a number of appeals over the preliminary results. As of early November 2021, final results were yet to be announced and ratified by Iraq's Federal Court.

As pinpointed by the EU mission, unregulated campaign spending "negatively affected the level playing field." Independent candidates were

hardly able to match the assets of the big parties or their access to media.⁷² Promises to enable voting for disabled citizens were not fulfilled.⁷³ Death threats against some journalists, temporary closures of some television channels and the imprisonment in the KRG of three journalists impeded the freedom of the media during the electoral campaign. But from a wider perspective, the Washington Post's senior columnist, Fareed Zakaria, notes that eighteen years after the U.S. invasion, which ushered in an era of chaos, civil war and the rise of IS, Iraqis showed that their democratic system has endured.⁷⁴ An Iraqi civil servant echoes this view, saying that the transition of power has now become part of Iraq's political culture. The decision of Tishreen MPs to form an opposition in parliament is also important, he underlines.⁷⁵

Pre-election fears that the quota of 83 seats for female parliamentarians would become the ceiling were dashed. According to preliminary figures, the Council of Representatives will have 97 female lawmakers, 57 of whom would have made it without the quota.⁷⁶ However, according to preliminary results, there appears to be no high-profile female lawmakers among independent, pro-Tishreen MPs. Conservative female lawmakers from Islamic parties are not expected to raise gender issues.

Key figures in the election

Muqtada Sadr

A populist Shiite leader with a nationalist agenda, Muqtada Sadr dominates the biggest bloc in parliament, Sa'iroun. Belonging to a family comparable to a 'Shiite nobility', the black-turbaned cleric draws part of his standing from the fact that his family never left Iraq during Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, unlike other famous religious Shiite families. His father, a Grand Ayatollah, was killed in an ambush in 1999, most likely by agents of the Saddam regime. Muqtada's father established a network of devoted followers,

67 Al-Jazeera 12 Oct 2021.

68 Anadolou Agency, 17 Oct 2021.

69 New York Times, 11 Oct 2021.

70 UNSC Press Statement on the Situation in Iraq, 22 Oct 2021.

71 Interviews with Iraqi analysts.

72 EU Election Observation Mission Iraq.

73 Human Rights Watch, Oct 2021.

74 Washington Post, 14 Oct 2021.

75 Interview October 2021.

76 Amwaj Media, 13 Oct 2021.

many of whom were migrants from southern provinces to poor neighborhoods in Baghdad, which the former Baath regime never managed to control.

Capable of mobilizing poor urban Shiites, Muqtada Sadr previously led the Mahdi Army, which started an anti-U.S. insurgency in 2004, and targeted Sunni neighbourhoods during the sectarian war in 2006–2007. During those years, many viewed him as an Iranian proxy, which he defies. Nowadays, he is building his reputation of being a nationalist alternative to Iran's influence.⁷⁷ In today's Iraq, many see Sadr as a potent force to keep Iran's influence at bay. "We will seek to form (a) non-sectarian and non-ethnic national coalition under the umbrella of reform", he said after the preliminary results were announced.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, he has a residence in Qom, center for Iran's Shiite clergy, where he has conducted religious studies. Before the October 2021 elections, Sadrists reportedly reached out to the embassies of the United Kingdom and the United States, although this has not been confirmed.⁷⁹ In his first post-election speech, Muqtada Sadr said that all embassies are welcome in Iraq, provided they do not interfere in Iraqi politics and the formation of a government – a message directed to both Tehran and Washington.⁸⁰

A specialty of Muqtada Sadr is playing both sides of the game: on the one hand appearing to support 'the street', on the other being an important stakeholder in government institutions. During the Tishreen protests, Sadrists staged demonstrations opposing the government, although they held some key cabinet posts.

Before the 2018 election, Sadr's party formed Sa'iroun together with the Iraqi Communist Party and some small Sunni and liberal parties, framing itself as a joint Islamist/secular list.⁸¹ After the 2018 elections, Sa'iroun entered a coalition with the pro-Iranian Fatah Alliance. The Sadrists took control of ministries with large budgets – for water, electricity and education – which should have provided, but failed, essential services to the citizens. A source in Baghdad

commented that "most Iraqis know that Sadr's people control the ministries that are responsible for providing public services that they don't get, so this has damaged some of his standing".⁸²

In July 2021, Muqtada Sadr announced that he would withdraw from the elections and forbade his followers from supporting any candidate.⁸³ In September, he reversed his decision. Such U-turns undermine his credibility in the eyes of independent MPs.

Mohammed al-Halbousi

The 40-year-old Sunni Arab, former governor of Anbar province, who was named Speaker of Parliament in September 2018, skillfully mobilized voters for the Taqaddum Alliance, by winning two-thirds of the Sunni seats. Halbousi was rewarded for an efficient allocation of reconstruction funding to Anbar, helping to build hospitals and roads after the war against IS. He thereby won over his Sunni contender, the business tycoon and leader of the Azm (Determination) Alliance, Khamis al-Khanjar, who received 15 seats.⁸⁴ Internationally, Halbousi is considered to be closer to the United Arab Emirates and Khanjar closer to the Qatar/Turkey axis. Initially, Halbousi wished to become Iraq's next president. "But after President Erdoğan brought both Halbousi and Khanjar to Turkey for talks prior to the elections, this appears to be over", a well-informed Iraqi source says.⁸⁵

Nouri al-Maliki

The leader of the Islamic Dawa Party and head of the State of Law coalition, is another victor in the elections. Unlike many other Shiite leaders, he did not claim election fraud. Within the 'Shia house', he wants to take the lead among Shia parties who wish to balance Muqtada Sadr's dominance. Prior to the elections, Maliki appeared more receptive to anti-Tehran sentiments. Unlike his earlier stance, he expressed support of Kadhim's ambitions to rein in the paramilitary forces, arguing that "opposition to the US–Israeli-Saudi axis does not permit Iran to interfere in Iraq".⁸⁶

77 Lahib Higel to Financial Times, 22 Sep 2021.

78 Reuters, 17 Oct 2021.

79 Financial Times, 22 Sep 2021.

80 YouTube 2021.

81 International Crisis Group (2021).

82 Interview Sep 2021.

83 Reuters, July 2021.

84 Al-Monitor, 20 Oct 2021.

85 Interview Nov 2021.

86 Azizi (2021).

However, Maliki's eight years in government cast long shadows. "All of Iraq's current problems originate from his tenure: the gross corruption, sectarianism, rise of Daesh, the lawlessness of the militias and the puffed-up state apparatus with civil servants who just lift their salaries", says a disgruntled man from Baghdad.⁸⁷

Mustafa al-Kadhimi

The incumbent premier has no party of his own but could potentially be reappointed as the prime minister after negotiations between the blocs, with Maliki as a main rival. Kadhimi, a former head of intelligence who has a background as a journalist and has lived in both Sweden and the United Kingdom, is seen as largely pro-Western. Taking office in 2020, he was dependent on Sadr to counterbalance Iran loyalists.⁸⁸ Post-elections 2021, Sadr is willing to see him reappointed, something the Fatah bloc is opposing.

Hadi al-Ameri

Head of the powerful Badr Organization and commander of its armed wing, Badr Brigade, leads the pro-Iranian Fatah Alliance. Ameri has long and deep ties to Iran. Rejecting the initial election results, Ameri threatened violence.⁸⁹

Qais al-Khazali

In both parliament and military operations, Ameri's partner is Qais al-Khazali, a Shia cleric, who leads Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH, League of the Righteous), one of the most powerful pro-Iranian militias in Iraq. Khazali has frequently challenged the U.S. presence in Iraq. Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq is designated as a terrorist organization by the United States.⁹⁰ Khazali has called for militias to do the job of reducing the presence of American troops if legislation is not enough.⁹¹ He called for revenge of the deaths of Qassem Soleimani and his Iraqi partner, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Rejecting the elections results, he was filmed threatening Prime Minister Kadhimi after clashes

between militia members and security forces in the Green Zone.⁹²

Hussein Muanis

Leader of Harakat Huquq (Rights Movement), the political wing of Kata'eb Hezbollah, Iran's closest ally in Iraq, which is designated as a terrorist organization by Washington. His party alleged that the election result was a US-Israeli conspiracy to crush the hashd.⁹³

Massoud Barzani

Leader of the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party), headquartered in Erbil, the strongman of the KRG. At home, KDP's main rival is the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan), based in Suleimaniya. Until now, the KDP has let the post of Iraqi president go to the PUK, but after KDP's strong win over its rival Kurdish party, Barzani's party may try to obtain the presidency.

Alaa al-Rikaby

Leading profile of the pro-Tishreen Imtidad movement. Dr Rikaby is a pharmacologist from Nasiriya in the south, where some of the deadliest attacks against protesters took place in 2019.⁹⁴

Haidar al-Abadi

Former prime minister, in alliance with a moderate Shiite cleric, Ammar al-Hakim, leader of the Hikma (Wisdom) movement. After crushing defeats, they won only a few seats each, as compared to Sadr's 73. Hakim, a clergyman, neither attracted disenfranchised pro-reformists, nor his traditional constituency.

Ali al-Sistani

The leading Grand Ayatollah at the hawza, the religious Shiite seminar in Najaf, has no direct political power, but his fatwas and recommendations have tremendous influence over his followers. Born 1930.

87 Interview Sep 2021.

88 Financial Times, 22 Sep 2021

89 Inside Iraqi politics, no 227.

90 Hammargren (2020)

91 Washington Post, 4 Feb 2019. See also the author's FOI Memo 7024.

92 Financial Times, 7 Nov 2021.

93 Inside Iraqi politics, no 227

94 Middle East Eye, 16 Jan 2021

5.

POST-ELECTION SCENARIOS

5.1 What comes next?

The loss for the pro-Iranian parties and militias was a political earthquake. Alongside that, the gap between Iraq's political class and its young, alienated citizens remains and may deepen further. The low voting turnout, particularly in big cities such as Baghdad, showed a widespread political apathy that may further undermine the legitimacy of the system, if political and economic reforms and distribution of wealth are not tangible soon.

While focus has shifted from the former grand competition between the major ethnicities – Kurds, Sunni Arabs, and Shiites – to a competition within the 'Shia house', Muqtada Sadr has appeared more statesmanlike than before. This shows his taste for controlling more ministries in the coming government and having the final say during the negotiations for the premiership. In his victory speech, Sadr declared that he wanted an end to foreign intervention in Iraqi affairs, meaning both Iran and the United States. His wish to reduce Iranian influence resonates well in Washington, Amman and Riyadh, but less so his insistency that the last U.S. troops in Iraq must withdraw.⁹⁵ He also insisted that weapons should be banned for those "who claim to be resistance", i.e. the pro-Iranian militias.⁹⁶ However, no one expects Sadr to demand that his own Peace Brigade (Saraya al-Salam), a remnant from his former Mahdi Army, put their arms under state control. He did, however, ask his followers to refrain from celebratory gun-firing, a habit in the Middle East that can lead to fatalities and injuries.

Maliki's improved results mean that he also wants to have a strong say in the negotiations, possibly as the leader of an informal 'Shia coordination' counterbalancing Sadr. If Sadr and Maliki can agree on a candidate who does not pose a threat to other Shia parties, a consensus is likely

to emerge, "making that candidate unopposable".⁹⁷ With such a scenario, the next government will likely be led by someone who does not have a strong political base of his own. But a new technocrat-led government, like the one under Abdel-Mahdi, is not the answer to Iraq's deep structural problems.

Incumbent prime minister Kadhimi, surviving an assassination attempt after a drone attack against his residence in the Green Zone on 7 November, ostensibly strengthened his chances to be renominated for a new term after showing calm and restraint. The Sadrists and moderate Shias are in favor of him, but for the Fatah bloc he is seen as too pro-American. Mainstream Iraqi observers, however, consider him to conduct an able balancing act between Tehran and Washington. "It's still too early to tell what the final decision will be", says a well-informed Iraqi source, who does not exclude a new name as premier.⁹⁸

Trying to bridge the gap between Shia rivals, Iraq's Supreme Shia authority, the *hawza* in Najaf, launched a post-election initiative for a consensus government. However, Grand Ayatollah Sistani, via his office, rebutted reports that he would be involved in the selection of the upcoming Iraqi cabinet.⁹⁹ Commenting on a Shia coalition scenario, a Tishreen activist says disgruntledly that "such a government would imply a weak prime minister, who can easily be controlled by the militias. The hashd want someone they can control, a prime minister who does not see, hear or declares that the militias have committed anything criminal. If that happens, Iraq will be another Afghanistan".¹⁰⁰ A grand coalition between Sadr (Shia), Halbousi (Sunni Arab) and Barzani (Kurd) is less likely, Iraqi experts in Baghdad conclude.

95 YouTube, Oct 2021

96 Financial Times, 7 Nov 2021.

97 Inside Iraqi politics, no. 227.

98 Interview Nov 2021.

99 Shafaq News, 4 Nov 2021.

100 Interview Oct 2021.

Undoubtedly, Iraq's political elite and Council of Representatives have thorny negotiations ahead of them. Within fifteen days from the ratification of the election results, the eldest member of parliament chairs a meeting to elect a new speaker and his deputies.¹⁰¹ The Council of Representatives also elects the new president who must be approved by a two-thirds majority in parliament and then must decide if he will be seconded by three vice presidents or not.¹⁰² The president nominates a prime minister, who must be approved by an absolute majority in parliament. These negotiations are expected to drag on until early spring 2022 and are thus likely to pass the December 2021 deadline for the presence of U.S. combat troops in Iraq. Pro-Iranian militias may use the timing to attack U.S. forces while negotiations are proceeding, in order to dilute Sadr's recent anti-hasdh rhetoric.

In the KRG, in the north, Masoud Barzani's overreach in 2017 can still be felt; his peshmerga lost Kirkuk after the Kurdistan referendum for independence, the results of which were shunned by both Baghdad and the international community (with Israel as an exception). Barzani failed to understand that U.S. support for the Kurdish cause is limited, and does not comprise the formation of an independent, Kurdish state in Iraq, since it would trigger repercussions from important regional stakeholders, primarily in Turkey and in Arab capitals.

5.2 What should Iraqis do?

The Tishreen uprising is a reminder that Iraqis need to solve their domestic problems, without being engulfed in a regional power struggle between Iran and the United States. The violent repression of activists was likely aggravated by a belief within the militias and in Tehran that the United States and its Arab allies fueled the protests. "Our next government must create a balance between external forces, to avoid making Iraq a battle-field for others", an ex-politician says.¹⁰³

A must for development and societal cohesion is accountability: this applies both to corruption and violence after protesters have been assassinated

or injured by state-affiliated armed actors. The enforcement of accountability and the rule of law is a litmus test for Iraq's next government and new parliament. Solely state officials who can be held accountable should be in control of arms. Chains of command must be clear, and police officers need training in crowd control.¹⁰⁴ The situation in Basra, an important hub for shipping that is run by militias, is of particular concern.

Another litmus test for the next government is budget transparency. To narrow the gap between Iraq's ruling elites and citizens, spending of the national oil income must be transparent. That would facilitate cuts in inefficient spending, downsizing of an overstuffed public sector and liquidation of opaque state-owned enterprises, to make funding available for development in neglected areas. Al-Mawlawi (2019).¹⁰⁵

In Iraq's deteriorating business environment, economic diversification is a must. For the private sector to thrive, salaries in the public sector need to be revised and regulated.¹⁰⁶ Transparency and regulations would also help attract foreign investment. Youth unemployment must be addressed. There is a strong need to revise labor laws and the hiring system in the public sector, and to create an environment that is conducive for young entrepreneurs. Vocational centers need to be established across the country. Targeted support to young women would increase their share in the labor market.¹⁰⁷

5.3 What could 'internationals' do?

Responsible external partners of Iraq must be principled, uphold basic values of the rule of law and demand that state-affiliated perpetrators of violence and abuse are brought to justice. In doing so, they should assist Iraq in developing its capacities and reforms in several areas. Given its oil wealth, Iraq is not in need of financial aid, but of know-how, institutional development and support to policy development, as well as reforms to address its grave political, economic, and administrative structural shortcomings. Decentralization plays an important role in such endeavors.

101 Article 54 of Iraq's Constitution.

102 These posts have been vacant since October 2018.

103 Interview Nov 2021.

104 International Crisis Group (2021).

105 Al-Mawlawi (2019).

106 Al-Mawlawi (2019).

107 Jiyad et al (2021).

International support must include efforts against pollution, and for better waste management, water supply and access to electricity; and assistance to rebuilding areas that were destroyed after the war against IS, so that IDPs can return, and younger generations can foresee a better future in their country. All efforts, including capacity development, need a gender perspective, so that men and women have equal opportunities to contribute to the development of their country, both economically, socially, and politically.

Pro-Tishreen activists, however, may expect more from the international community, given the extent to which foreign governments have been involved in Iraq's violent modern history. "Without international support, we will never see real democracy in the country," one activist says, stressing the bad legacy that the United States left in both Iraq and Afghanistan. "The U.S. brought endemic corruption to Iraq and broke the country by dissolving the state apparatus and leaving it to the Islamists". Meanwhile, fears that Iran will increase its influence further in Iraq and the region send chills to proponents of change and democratization.

Bitte Hammargren

Independent MENA Analyst
Senior Associate at the Swedish Institute of
International Affairs
8 November 2021

6.

SOURCES

Al-Ali, Zaid & Auf, Yussef (2020), *The Iraqi Constitution: Analysis of the Controversial Articles – Solutions and Recommendations*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Amman, 1st edition 2020, <https://www.bayancenter.org/en/2021/01/2156/>.

Al-Hurra (3 October 2020), <https://www.alhurra.com/iraq/2020/10/03/الكاطبي-يندد-بالصواريخ-العنيفة-ويطرح-رؤيته-العلاقة-مع-الولايات-المتحدة>.

Al-Jaffal, Omar (2021), *Iraq's New Electoral Law: Old Powers Adapting to Change*, Arab Reform Initiative, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/iraq-elections/>.

Al-Maghafi, Nawal (2019), *In Iraq, religious 'pleasure marriages' are a front for child prostitution*, The Guardian, 6 October 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/06/pleasure-marriages-iraq-baghdad-bbc-investigation-child-prostitution?fbclid=IwAR0ZaAZ8lVnTlSleoR8R6159lVT2Zmj0ipcQDZRBmN-JnwIuhFbOpylviz0Q>.

Al-Mawlawi, Ali (2019), *Public payroll expansion in Iraq*, LSE Middle East Center Report, October 2019.

Al-Najjar, Ashraf Yahya (2019), *Solid waste management in Iraq*, EcoMENA, <https://www.ecomena.org/swm-iraq/>.

Amwaj Media (13 October 2021), <https://amwaj.media/media-monitor/iraq-s-next-parliament-will-include-record-number-of-women>.

Arab Reform Initiative (2019), *Exploring the Rationale for Decentralization in Iraq and its Constraints*, 22 July 2019.

Azizi, Hamidreza (2021), *Challenges to Iran's Role in Iraq in the Post-Soleimani Era: Complex Rivalries, Fragmented Alliances, Declining Soft Power*, SWP Comment 2021/C 44, 22 July 2021.

Bleuca, Ramon (2021), *The Iraqi paradox*, European Eye on Radicalization, <https://eeradicalization.com/the-iraqi-paradox/>.

Callamard, Agnes (2020), *The Targeted Killing of General Soleimani: Its Lawfulness and Why It Matters*, Just Security, <https://www.justsecurity.org/67949/the-targeted-killing-of-general-soleimani-its-lawfulness-and-why-it-matters/>.

Cambanis, Thanassis, et al. (2019): *Hybrid actors: Armed groups and state fragmentation in the Middle East*, (The Century Foundation).

Financial Times, 22 September 2021, *Muqtada Sadr seizes the moment ahead of the Iraqi elections*, <https://www.ft.com/content/3c036216-0f45-4ff6-b1c0-daa1f38dd51a>.

Dodge, Toby (2019): *Corruption continues to destabilize Iraq*, Chatham House.

Dodge, Toby & Mansour, Renad (2021), *Politically sanctioned corruption and barriers to reform in Iraq*, Chatham House.

El-Meehy, Asya (2017), *Revisiting decentralization in Iraq: Challenges and policy recommendations*, Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), 17 May 2017 [limited distribution].

European Union Election Observation Mission Iraq (2021), *Preliminary statement*, https://eeas.europa.eu/election-observation-missions/eom-iraq-2021/105451/eu-eom-iraq-2021-preliminary-statement_en.

Frontline Defenders, *Fatima al-Bahadly*. (Retrieved on 27 September 2021), <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/profile/fatima-al-bahadly>.

Hammargren, Bitte (2020), *Iraq moving closer into Iran's orbit*, FOI Memo 7024, <https://www.foi.se/en/foi/news-and-pressroom/news/2020-02-26-iraq-moves-closer-to-iran.html>.
Hasan, Harith (2021), *Low turnout, high drama*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/85555>.

Hiltermann, Joost (2021), *Al-Qaeda's Virulent Strain in Iraq: Commentary*, International Crisis Group, 7 September 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/al-sqaedas-virulent-strain-iraq>.

Human Rights Watch (2019): *Iraq: Security Forces Attack Medics Treating Protesters*, 14 November 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/11/14/iraq-security-forces-attack-medics-treatingprotesters>.

Human Rights Watch (2019): *Iraq: Abductions linked to Baghdad protests*, 2 December 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/12/02/iraq-abductions-linked-baghdad-protests>.

Human Rights Watch (2019), *Basra is thirsty: Iraq's Failure to Manage the Water Crisis*, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/07/22/basra-thirsty/iraqs-failure-manage-water-crisis>.

Human Rights Watch (2021), *Iraq's Electoral Commission Failed People with Disabilities*, October 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/20/iraqs-electoral-commission-failed-people-disabilities>.

Independent Arabia, 2018
'القوى المقاطعة للانتخابات العراقية ترحب بـتكرار سيناريو 2018', 23 September 2021, [The forces boycotting the Iraqi elections repeat the 2018 scenario] <https://www.independentarabia.com/node/261491/>
'المقاطعة للانتخابات العراقية - ترحب بـتكرار سيناريو 2018 - الأخبار العالم العربي/القوى'.

International Crisis Group (2018): *Iraq's paramilitary groups: The challenge of rebuilding a functioning state*, 30 July 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/188-iraqs-paramilitary-groups-challenge-rebuilding-functioning-state>.

International Crisis Group (2020), *Exiles in their own country: Dealing with displacement in Post-ISIS Iraq*, Crisis Group Middle East Briefing No. 79, 19 October 2020.

International Crisis Group (2021), *Iraq's Tishreen uprising: from barricades to ballot-boxes*, Report No.223, 26 July 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/223-iraqs-tishreen-uprising-barricades-ballot-box>.

Inside Iraqi politics [various issues], www.insideiraqpolitics.com.

Jiyad, Sajad et al (2021), *Economic drivers of youth political discontent in Iraq: The voice of young people in Kurdistan, Baghdad, Basra and Thi-Qar*, Global Partners Governance and Sida, <https://gpgovernance.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Economic-Drivers-of-Youth-Political-Discontent-in-Iraq-The-Voice-of-Young-People-in-Kurdistan-Baghdad-Basra-and-Thi-Qar.pdf>.

Jawad, Ali (2021), *Iraqi party to boycott upcoming Iraqi parliamentary election*, Andolou Agency, 24 July 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/iraqi-party-to-boycott-upcoming-parliamentary-elections/2312985>.

Mansour, Renad (2019), *Challenges to the post-2003 political order in Iraq*, UI Paper No. 8 2019 <https://www.ui.se/butiken/uis-publikationer/ui-paper/2019/challenges-to-the-post-2003-political-order-in-iraq/>.

Mansour, Renad & Jaber, Faleh A. (2017): *The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future*. Carnegie Middle East, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC_63_Mansour_PMF_Final_Web.p.

Middle East Eye (2021), *Iraqi protest leaders launch political bloc ahead of elections*, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraq-protest-imtidad-political-bloc-elections>.

Nas News, 9 May 2021, 'البيت العراقي' يدعو إلى مقاطعة الانتخابات المقبلة, <https://www.nasnews.com/view.php?cat=59979>.

Neuhof, Florian (2021), *Amid a Spate of Activist Killings in Iraq, Protesters Have Found Unexpected Allies*, Newslines Magazine, <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/amid-a-spate-of-activist-killings-in-iraq-protesters-have-found-unexpected-allies/>.

OCHA (February 2021), *Iraq humanitarian needs overview*, <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-humanitarian-needs-overview-february-2021>.

Pargeter, Alison (2021), *Tribes, political parties, and the Iraqi elections: a shifting dynamic*, War on the Rocks, 28 September 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/09/tribes-political-parties-and-the-iraqi-elections-a-shifting-dynamic/>.

Radio Farda (2019), *Iran hardliner says Iraq's protest undermine massive Iranian pilgrimage*, 7 October 2019, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-hardliner-says-iraq-s-protest-to-undermine-massive-iranian-pilgrimage-/30204319.html>.

Reuters (15 July 2021), *Iraqi cleric Sadr says he won't take part in October election*, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraqi-cleric-sadr-says-he-wont-take-part-october-election-2021-07-15/>.

Reuters (25 August 2021), *Iraq seeks to ease Saudi-Iran hostility at Baghdad summit*, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraq-seeks-ease-saudi-iran-hostility-baghdad-summit-2021-08-25/>.

Rudaw (23 September 2021), *Main' ISIS hideout destroyed in Hamrin mountains*, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/230920213>.

Transparency International (2020): *Iraq*, <https://www.transparency.org/country/IRQ>.

UN Women in Iraq, *Iraq National Action Plan* [retrieved 30 September 2021], <https://iraq.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/peace-and-security/iraq-national-action-plan>.

UNAMI), *Iraq elections, October 2021*, United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, [retrieved 9 October 2021], <https://iraq.un.org/en/133802-iraq-elections-october-2021>.

Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), <https://unpo.org/article/20781>.

U.S. Energy Administration Information, EIA (2021), *Iraq*, <https://www.eia.gov/international/analysis/country/IRQ>.

World Bank (April 2019): *Republic of Iraq*. <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/300251553672479193/Iraq-MEU-April-2019-Eng.pdf>.

World Bank in Iraq, (2021), *Overview* [last update 5 April 2021, retrieved 30 September 2021], <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iraq/overview#1>.

YouTube, Oct 2021, <https://youtu.be/2BW0JcG4OP4>.

