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# Iraq in 2022: Forming a government

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## Summary

Following elections in October 2021, in July 2022 Iraq marked its longest period without a government since an election, exceeding its [previous record of 289 days](#). This deadlock continued until October 2022, when [Abdul Latif Rashid was elected president](#). A new cabinet and Prime Minister, Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani, were [approved in late October](#).

Rashid's election follows a year of substantial political uncertainty and division among Shia parties in Iraq. This briefing describes the key events since October 2021 and the outlook for the country.

## Iraq's post-2003 politics

Following the US-led military campaign in 2003, there was a redistribution of political power in Iraq. Under Saddam Hussein, the Sunni Muslim minority was awarded greater influence. But elections have seen increased representation for Shia Muslims and the Kurdish minority. Iran, as a Shia power, [has also supported armed groups and others](#) to increase its influence.

Post-2003 politics has [typically operated on sectarian lines](#), but there have been growing divisions among Shia, Kurdish, and Sunni parties.

## 2019 protests and an early election in 2021

Elections scheduled for 2022 were brought forward to October 2021 following popular protests in 2019. These protests called for corruption to be addressed and invoked criticism of Iran's influence in the country. In response, Iraq's Prime Minister, Adil Abdul-Mahdi, resigned.

According to the Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights, [nearly 600 protesters were killed](#). Both state and paramilitary forces [were blamed](#).

The UN judged the elections to be [well-run overall](#). The elections [saw some rebalancing within Shia political parties](#): Shia Cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr's bloc gained at the expense of the Shia Al-Fatah alliance (the latter is backed by Iran). The Sadrist bloc won 73 of the 329 seats, being the largest party. Al-Sadr has [opposed both the US presence in Iraq and Iran's support for rival Shia groups](#). From 2003, his supporters, then known as the Mahdi army, conducted several attacks on US, coalition, and rival Shia forces.

Al-Fatah and some other Shia parties [protested the results](#), alleging fraud. Iran-backed militias were also [suspected of an assassination attempt](#) against the Prime Minister in November 2021. Iran's Government condemned the attack which, together with the losses for supportive parties in the election, suggested to analysts [that Iran is losing some of its influence in Iraq](#).

## Struggle to form a government

Al-Sadr, as leader of the largest political group, took the lead in proposing a government, in alliance with Sunni and Kurdish parties. However, these talks stalled. In June 2022, [Al-Sadr's representatives resigned their seats](#).

They were replaced by Al-Fatah and other parties, and the Shia Coordination Framework is now the largest bloc. They [nominated Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani for Prime Minister](#) in July. This was met by protests by Al-Sadr supporters, who sought to [exert external pressure on negotiations](#). In August, Al-Sadr announced his withdrawal from politics. This was marked by [further protests and violence](#).

In October, Kurdish politician [Abdul Latif Rashid was elected president](#). He appointed Al-Sudani as his Prime Minister and a [new cabinet was endorsed by the parliament in October](#). This ends the longest deadlock over the forming of a new government since 2003. The new Government faces the continuing challenges of addressing [an economic crisis](#), the [risk of terrorism](#), and negotiating tensions with the [US, Iran, Turkey](#), and the [Kurdish autonomous region](#). Among its policies are [new elections for Iraq within a year](#).

# 1

## The Iraqi constitution

Following the 2003 US-led military campaign that resulted in the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, a US-led Coalition of Provisional Authority was established as a temporary Government. A new constitution was agreed in 2005.

### Council of Representatives and speaker

Iraq has a unicameral (one-chamber) legislature of 329 members, known as the Council of Representatives (COR). Elections take place every four years. All Iraqi citizens over 18 are eligible to vote.

Following 2019 protests (see below, section 3.1), the electoral system was amended to a single transferrable vote system for the 2021 elections.

Under the constitution, at least 25% of all Council seats must be held by women. Nine seats are also reserved for minorities such as Christians.<sup>1</sup>

Following an election, a speaker is chosen. By convention, they are a member from a Sunni Muslim background.<sup>2</sup> In January 2022, [Mohammed Al-Halbousi](#) was re-elected. This allows the COR to elect Iraq's President.<sup>3</sup>

### President

Iraq's President is not directly elected by popular vote. Instead, they are elected by the Council following its own election of a speaker.

The President must receive at least a two-thirds majority of the COR and is limited to two four-year terms. The role is a largely ceremonial one.<sup>4</sup>

By convention, the Presidency is held by a Kurd. In October 2022, the parliament elected a new president, Abdul Latif Rashid. In the second round of voting, he won 160 votes to 99 against the incumbent Barham Salih.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> UN Iraq, [General background: Iraq elections 2021](#), August 2021. All sources accessed 28 July 2022 unless stated.

<sup>2</sup> R. Mansour, [Iraq's 2018 government formation](#), 2019, p7

<sup>3</sup> Reuters, [Iraq's new parliament elects speaker in first step towards establishing govt](#), 10 January 2022

<sup>4</sup> Europa World, Iraq: Directory: Government and politics. Accessible via a [Commons Library log-in](#)

<sup>5</sup> Al-Jazeera, [Iraqi parliament elects Abdul Latif Rashid as president](#), 13 October 2022, accessed 18 October 2022

## Prime Minister

Selecting a Prime Minister is the President's first task following their appointment. The Prime Minister-designate should be selected by the largest bloc in the COR. By convention, they are from a Shia background.

The Prime Minister names cabinet members, who the COR must approve.<sup>6</sup>

The Prime Minister is [Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani](#), who took office in October.<sup>7</sup>

## 2 Iraq's politics since 2003

### 2.1 The fall of Saddam and the rise of parties

In 2003, the US-led invasion of Iraq saw Saddam Hussein removed from power. He had been President of Iraq since 1979 and had overseen both the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 (known as the first Gulf War).

Since 2003, Iraq has conducted six elections to the COR. These have seen the political power of Sunni Muslims, favoured by Saddam Hussein, reduced, and that of Iraq's larger Shia Muslim population increase. The Kurds also gained power as the Kurdistan region became autonomous.

Generally, elections are followed by negotiations between Shia and Kurdish groups. However, there is also intra-Shia rivalry and the recent elections have seen greater political fragmentation. In 2018, for example, there were 27 registered electoral alliances.<sup>8</sup>

### 2.2 Iranian influence

Since 2003, Iran has sought to build up greater political and armed influence in Iraq with the aim of influencing its politics, protecting Shia Muslims (Iran is a Shia-majority state), and neutralising Iraq as a potential threat.

In response to the threat posed by Islamic State/Daesh in 2014-17, several Shia militias aligned with Iran, such as the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMB), were legalised by Iraq's parliament to combat the group.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> R. Mansour, [Iraq's 2018 government formation](#), 2019, p8

<sup>7</sup> France 24, [Iraq's new PM-designate faces tough task to unite bitter rivals](#), 13 October 2022

<sup>8</sup> S. Herbert, [Who are the elite groups in Iraq and how do they exercise power](#), July 2018, pp2, 4

<sup>9</sup> United States Institute for Peace, [Profiles: Pro-Iran militias in Iraq](#), 10 December 2021

Iran has provided training and funding to several militias since 2003. Some are held responsible for attacks on US and coalition forces.<sup>10</sup>

These militias are also aligned to several of Iraq's political parties, including the Al-Fatah Coalition.

Nouri al-Maliki, Prime Minister from 2006 to 2014, was also seen as close to Iran's leaders until the Iraqi Government began losing ground to Islamic State/Daesh in 2014.<sup>11</sup> His party gained the third largest number of seats in the 2021 elections (see below, page 7).

While Iran supports several Shia political groups, not all Shia parties support greater engagement with Iran. Muqtada Al-Sadr, a Shia cleric, is an [opponent of both US and Iranian influence](#) in the country (see page 8).<sup>12</sup> His Sadrist group won the largest number of seats in the 2021 elections.

## Briefing on the 2018 elections

Commons Library, [Iraq and the 2018 elections](#), June 2018. Following talks, Adil Abdul-Mahdi was selected as Prime Minister in October 2018.

## 3 2021 elections

### 3.1 Protests and PM resignation, 2019-20

Elections due in 2022 were brought forward by six months in response to 2019 protests centred on the capital Baghdad and southern Iraq.

These protests, also known as the Tishreen (October) movement, were seen as the most significant since 2003 and focused on demands for reform of the Iraqi state, better accountability and public services, and for the government to address unemployment and corruption. Some protests expressed anti-Iran sentiments and targeted Iranian diplomatic posts. In response to the protests, Iraq's Prime Minister, Adil Abdul-Mahdi, resigned.

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<sup>10</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, [Iran's networks of influence—Chapter four: Iraq](#), 2019

<sup>11</sup> Crisis Group, [Iran's priorities in a turbulent Middle East](#), 13 April 2018, Section IV.A

<sup>12</sup> Carnegie Middle East Center, [Does Muqtada Al-Sadr pose a threat to Iran's influence in Iraq?](#), 2018

According to the Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights, [nearly 600 protesters were killed](#) and several activists were killed in targeted killings.<sup>13</sup> Both security forces and paramilitary forces were blamed for the attacks.<sup>14</sup>

Following six months of negotiations, [Mustafa al-Kadhimi was appointed as Prime Minister](#) in May 2020. The Iranian-backed Al-Fatah bloc opposed his appointment, in that he is seen as close to the US.<sup>15</sup>

In response to the protests, [Kadhimi pledged](#) early elections, electoral and economic reform, and to limit violence and paramilitary activity.<sup>16</sup> Despite the pledge to reduce violence, abductions and targeted killings against journalists and activists [continued into 2021](#).<sup>17</sup>

## 3.2 Election campaign and results

Elections to the Council of Representatives were held on 10 October 2021.

The lowest turnout since 2003 was recorded, at 44% of registered voters. This followed calls for a boycott by protesters due to earlier attacks on demonstrators and activists.

Despite the low turnout, UN officials in Iraq said the elections were [generally peaceful and well-run](#).<sup>18</sup> The UK Government [welcomed “notable improvements”](#) in the transparency of the election and its processes.<sup>19</sup>

### Headline results

No single party or alliance won a majority. The results saw a partial rebalancing of the power between Shia political parties, with cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr’s bloc gaining at the expense of the Al-Fatah alliance.

Al-Fatah is closer to the Shia paramilitary groups mobilised in 2014 to fight Islamic State/Daesh. Some of these are close to Iran and remain a separate legal military force to the Iraqi military. Al-Sadr has previously led a [powerful armed force](#) which has fought both US, coalition, and government forces.

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<sup>13</sup> Al-Jazeera, [“Country has no future:” Iraq protester killed at Baghdad rally](#), 25 May 2021

<sup>14</sup> Crisis Group, [Iraq’s Tishreen uprising: From barricades to ballot box](#), 26 July 2021

<sup>15</sup> Al-Jazeera, [Who is Mustafa al-Kadhimi, Iraq’s new Prime Minister?](#), 7 May 2020

<sup>16</sup> Brookings Institute, [Six months into his premiership, what has Mustafa Al-Kadhimi done for Iraq?](#), 13 November 2020

<sup>17</sup> Human Rights Watch, [Impunity for killings will cast a pall over Iraq’s elections](#), 20 May 2021

<sup>18</sup> UN, [National elections mark hard-won victory for Iraq, women candidates \[...\]](#), 23 November 2021

<sup>19</sup> Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), [Continued commitment to the democratic process of Iraq](#), updated 24 November 2021

Due to changes in the electoral system, where the party-list system was replaced by a single-transferable vote one, independent and new parties involved in the 2019 protests also made gains.<sup>20</sup>

## Results of the October 2021 election

329 seats were up for election. Final results were confirmed in November:

- The **bloc led by Shia cleric Al-Sadr**, the Sadrist movement, won 73 seats. This was up from 54 in 2018. Sadr is the former leader of the Mahdi Army militia, and is seen as a nationalist Iraqi movement, opposed to both the US and Iran.
- **Taqadum (Progress Party)** won 37 seats. It is led by the current Speaker Mohammed Al-Habousi. This was the first election the party ran in.
- **The Dawa, State of Law, party** won 33 seats. It is led by former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Its representation was up from 25 in 2018.
- The **Kurdistan Democracy Party (KDP)** won 31 seats.
- The **Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)** won 18 seats.
- **Al-Fatah**, affiliated with Iran-backed Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), won 17 seats. This compared to 47 seats in 2018. The PMF are militia forces that were legalised to combat Islamic State/Daesh, being separate to the Iraqi military.<sup>21</sup>

Ten other parties secured representation and independent candidates won 43 seats.<sup>22</sup> Following the resignation of Sadrists from the COR in July 2022, several parties increased their representation—see section 3.3, page 9.

## Initial response by Iran-aligned groups in 2021

Fraud was alleged by several parties, including Al-Fatah and some other Shia leaders. Protests were also held against the results. Some of these were violent.<sup>23</sup>

Final results were certified by the Iraqi Supreme Court in December.

Unknown groups also resorted to violence. In November 2021, then Prime Minister Al-Kadhimi survived an assassination attempt via armed drone. No group claimed responsibility, but Iranian-backed militia groups were

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<sup>20</sup> Crisis Group, [Iraq's surprise election results](#), 16 November 2021; Center for Strategic & International Studies, [Sadr and the Mahdi army](#), August 2008

<sup>21</sup> Al-Jazeera, [Iraq announces final results of October parliament election](#), 30 November 2021

<sup>22</sup> Europa World, Iraq: Recent developments: The 2021 legislative elections.

<sup>23</sup> Al-Jazeera, [Iraqi protesters demand election recount in Baghdad](#), 19 October 2021; Al-Monitor, [Investigation finds militias involved in Iraq post-election violence](#), 3 December 2021

suspected. Iran itself condemned the attack.<sup>24</sup> The US called it an “act of terrorism.”<sup>25</sup>

## Background to the 2019 elections

- Royal United Services Institute, [Iraq’s elections: More of the same](#), November 2021
- Arab Center Washington DC, [Iraq’s Tishreen protest movement](#), November 2021
- Reuters, [Fact box: Iraq’s competing Shi’ite groups](#), August 2022

## 3.3

## Negotiations on forming a government

### Who is Muqtada Al-Sadr?

Al-Sadr is a Shia cleric and leader of the Sadrist political movement. He is the son of Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Sadiq Al-Sadr, who was assassinated in 1999, reportedly by the Iraqi state. Following the fall of Saddam Hussein, Al-Sadr’s network of charities played an important role in providing social assistance.

An Iraqi nationalist and populist, Al-Sadr has opposed both the US presence in Iraq and Iran’s support for rival Shia groups. From 2003, his supporters, then known as the Mahdi army, conducted several attacks on US, coalition and rival Shia forces. The Sadrist movement first stood in the 2005 elections, winning 32 of the 275 seats.<sup>26</sup>

Sadr has also been flexible in his alliances as well as methods, reaching out to both Saudi Arabia and Iran (two states usually in conflict), allying with Iraq’s communist party in 2018, and supporting the Tishreen protest movement to leverage his influence.<sup>27</sup>

For more analysis of the Sadrist movement, see Chatham House, [The Sadrist movement in Iraq](#), October 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Al-Jazeera, [Is Iran losing some of its grip on Shia militias in Iraq?](#), 12 November 2021

<sup>25</sup> US State Department, [Condemning the reported attack targeting the residence of PM Kadhimi](#), 6 November 2021

<sup>26</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, [Muqtada Al-Sadr](#), updated 16 May 2008

<sup>27</sup> Al-Jazeera, [Muqtada Al-Sadr: Iraq’s kingmaker in uncertain times](#), 23 October 2021; BBC News, [Muqtada Al-Sadr: The firebrand cleric who could calm Iraq](#), 20 December 2019



As the largest group in the Council, Al-Sadr's group took the lead on forming a new government. However, negotiations were deadlocked for much of this time, and the Sadrists resigned their seats in July 2022. This left the field open for other parties to propose a government. A new President and Prime Minister were appointed in October following these negotiations.

## Election of a Speaker, January 2022

Sadr had initial success in January 2022 with the election of the speaker of parliament, Mohammed Halbousi, who gained the backing of most Sunni members of the COR and the Kurdish Democratic Party. This was seen as suggestive that a majority government led by the Sadrists was possible.<sup>28</sup>

## Failure of Al-Sadr to form a majority government

Al-Sadr had initially proposed forming a “national majority” government with the Taqaddum (Progress) group of Speaker Mohammed Al-Halbousi (winning 37 seats), the Kurdistan Democratic Party (31 seats), and others. The group is known as the Coalition for Saving the Homeland.

Sadr sought to exclude the Shia groups of former prime minister Nouri Al-Malik and the pro-Iran Al-Fatah coalition from negotiations. The two, together with Al-Fatah's allies, have grouped together as the Shia Coordination Framework. They have used a mixture of popular protest and legal routes to oppose the election result and negotiations on forming a government.<sup>29</sup>

Negotiations have also been impeded due to divisions among the two Kurdish parties over a candidate for the presidency.<sup>30</sup>

April and May 2022 saw several attempts to form a government. However, all failed due to their lack of support or COR votes not meeting the required two-thirds quorum.<sup>31</sup>

## Withdrawal of the Sadrists from the COR, June 2022

In June 2022, Al-Sadr directed his representatives to [withdraw from the Council of Representatives](#), having failed to form a government. He said he did not want to participate in a government, or any future elections, in which “corrupters” are participating. This is considered a reference to the Shia Coordination Framework.

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<sup>28</sup> Al-Monitor, [Iraq's speaker re-elected with backing of Muqtada Al-Sadr](#), 10 January 2022. Sources in section 3.3 accessed 28 July and 1 August 2022

<sup>29</sup> T. Dodge, [Muqtada Al-Sadr's evolving post-election strategy and the battle for Iraq's political system](#), 29 April 2022

<sup>30</sup> Al-Monitor, [Iraq's parliament sets date for selecting president from Kurdish ranks](#), 16 March 2022

<sup>31</sup> Al-Monitor, [Alliance blocks formation of new Iraqi government](#), 20 April 2022

Under Iraq's laws, the vacated seats are offered to candidates who came second in each constituency. This means that the Shia Coordination Framework is now the largest group in parliament, at 130 members. The Al-Fatah coalition increased its own seats from 17 to 29.<sup>32</sup>

Analysts disagree over Al-Sadr's decision, seeing it as a potentially effective move which will allow him to [side with protesters outside parliament](#) and give him the freedom to criticise the COR, or mistakenly [yielding the floor to his opponents](#) to form a government and wield power.<sup>33</sup>

## Protests by Al-Sadr supporters, July 2022

The Coordination Framework nominated Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani for Prime Minister in July.<sup>34</sup>

In opposition to the nomination, supporters of Al-Sadr entered the parliament building in Baghdad. They withdrew after a request from Al-Sadr. Analysts suggest this was demonstration of political relevancy and strength.<sup>35</sup>

Protesters later entered the parliament building again and in August Al-Sadr called for other political movements to protest. This suggested he intends to continue to wield influence from beyond the COR.<sup>36</sup>

The [UN called for "de-escalation"](#) in response to the protests and for negotiations.<sup>37</sup>

## Withdrawal of Al-Sadr from politics, August 2022

In August, Al-Sadr called for the dissolution of the COR and for early elections. This call was backed by some other Shia political leaders, though they may seek to implement electoral reforms before any new contest.<sup>38</sup>

Protests continued throughout August. On 29 August, Al-Sadr announced he would leave politics altogether, though some analysts have expressed scepticism at whether this withdrawal is final. There have been instances of violence since his announcement: at least 23 people were killed in clashes between Sadrists, security forces and Iranian-aligned militias.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW), [Inscrutable ambitions: Sadr's exit from Iraq's parliament strengths rivals](#), 6 July 2022

<sup>33</sup> France 24, [Secret recordings deepen political-crisis in Iraq](#), 16 July 2022; AGSIW, [Inscrutable ambitions: Sadr's exit from Iraq's parliament strengths rivals](#), 6 July 2022

<sup>34</sup> Al-Monitor, [Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani nominated for Iraqi premiership](#), 25 July 2022

<sup>35</sup> Al-Jazeera, [Iraqi protesters storm the parliament in Baghdad's green zone](#), 27 July 2022

<sup>36</sup> France 24, [Iraqi cleric Sadr calls for wider protest as supporters occupy parliament](#), 1 August 2022

<sup>37</sup> UN, [Iraq protests: "De-escalate" urges UN chief, rise above differences](#), 31 July 2022

<sup>38</sup> Al-Jazeera, ["No authority:" Iraq judiciary says it cannot dissolve parliament](#), 14 August 2022

<sup>39</sup> BBC News, [At least 23 dead amid fighting after Moqtada al-Sadr quits](#), 30 August 2022

The UN called for political actors to work to reduce tensions. The UN Assistance Mission in Iraq warned that the survival of the state may be “at stake” if further violence between communities occurs.<sup>40</sup> The UK called for protests to remain peaceful and for the response of security forces to be proportionate.<sup>41</sup>

## A new Prime Minister and President, October 2022

Further instability dominated Iraqi politics in September 2022, with continuing protests and clashes in Baghdad.<sup>42</sup> In September and October, there were also rocket attacks against the Green Zone in Baghdad, where the COR is based.<sup>43</sup>

There is the potential now for greater stability. On 13 October, Iraq’s parliament elected Kurdish politician Abdul Latif Rashid as president, beating the incumbent Barham Salih.

Upon his election, Rashid appointed Muhammad Shia al-Sudani as Prime Minister designate. Sudani has the backing of elements of the Shia Coordination Framework,<sup>44</sup> and his government was [confirmed in October](#).<sup>45</sup> The United States is among those to [welcome the new government formation](#).<sup>46</sup>

The Sadrists have said they will not participate in the new government, arguing it to be subordinated to militias.<sup>47</sup>

## 4

## Outlook and significance

The below describes ten issues facing Iraq, including the challenges the new government faces to address the country’s economic challenges, the potential for further violence, continued tensions between the Federal Government and the Kurdish autonomous area, and Iraq’s relationships with the United States, Iran, and Turkey.

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<sup>40</sup> UN, [“Very survival” of Iraqi state at risk, UN mission warns](#), 29 August 2022

<sup>41</sup> British Embassy in Baghdad, [James Downer, Chargé d’Affaires Tweet](#), 29 August 2022

<sup>42</sup> Al-Jazeera, [Al-Sadr supporters clash with Iraqi security forces in Baghdad](#), 28 September 2022

<sup>43</sup> VOA, [Rockets hit Iraqi capital’s green zone](#), 13 October 2022

<sup>44</sup> Al-Monitor, [Iraqi lawmakers elected Abdul Latif Rashid as new president](#), 13 October 2022. This subsection accessed 18 October and 2 November unless stated.

<sup>45</sup> Al-Jazeera, [Iraq’s parliament approves new government](#), 27 October 2022

<sup>46</sup> US State Department, [Formation of Iraqi government](#), 27 October 2022

<sup>47</sup> France 24, [Iraq’s Sadrist camp refuses to join government](#), 15 October 2022

## 1) Shia Coordination Framework Government

Together with other groups, the Shia Coordination Framework have now formed a government, following the Prime-Minister designate, Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani, and [a majority of his ministers gaining parliamentary approval](#) in October 2022.<sup>48</sup>

There remains the [potential for tensions among Shia groups](#):

- While they have left the COR, the Sadrists were electorally successful, and there is a potential for greater division and tension between Iraq's Shia groups going forward.
- The new Government will revisit Iraq's electoral laws (see below).
- Some elements of the Coordination Framework are also held responsible for acts of violence against Kurds and delays to construction efforts in Sunni-majority cities. This could further increase tensions and protests.<sup>49</sup>

The new Government also involves pro-Iran elements. This is likely to complicate Iraq's relationship with the United States, offer opportunities for Iran, and draw some domestic criticism.

## 2) Protests and risk of violence

Rival protests by Shia groups and others were at the height during the summer, when supporters of Al-Sadr occupied the parliament building and several were killed in clashes in Baghdad's Green Zone. How the Sadrists will react to the formation of new government is uncertain. Prior to the election of a president in October, the Head of the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq warned that public disillusion was "sky high" and the situation highly volatile.<sup>50</sup>

## 3) Fresh elections in 2023

The new government's ministerial programme includes a [commitment to early elections within a year, and the amendment of the law governing parliamentary elections within three months](#). While allowing further elections

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<sup>48</sup> Al-Jazeera, [Iraq's parliament approves new government](#), 27 October 2022

<sup>49</sup> Washington Institute, [Implications of the Sadrist withdrawal for the Shia Coordination Framework and Iran](#), 29 June 2022

<sup>50</sup> UN, [UN envoy urges dialogue to end political impasse in Iraq](#), 4 October 2022

is an acknowledgement of a key demand of Al-Sadr, amending the law may prove controversial.<sup>51</sup>

## 4) End to US combat mission in Iraq

In July 2021, the US and Iraqi Governments agreed to [formally end the US combat mission in Iraq by the end of 2021](#).<sup>52</sup> This transition took place in December. A number of coalition forces remain in the country at the invitation of Iraq's government to advise, assist and support the Iraqi security forces.<sup>53</sup> Some other NATO forces remain in Iraq for the same purpose.<sup>54</sup>

Iran-backed groups have continued to target US, coalition, and Iraqi forces. During 2022, this has included include missile strikes in Iraqi Kurdistan, and attacks using rockets and drones against Al Asad Air base and the US Embassy in Baghdad.

US intelligence says that [Iran-backed militias use Iraqi territory to target other Gulf states](#). This included a drone attack against the UAE in January 2022. It also judges the Iraqi Government under Prime Minister Al-Kadhimi has been hesitant in targeting Iran-aligned militias to avoid an outbreak of violence while negotiations to form a government are ongoing.<sup>55</sup>

In 2020, a US strike in Baghdad killed Qasem Soleimani, the head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds force. Iran vowed retaliation, and in response launched missiles against two airbases housing US and coalition forces. In March 2022, it also launched missiles towards a US consulate building in Erbil, Iraq. This was the first time since 2020 Iran had fired missiles directly at US facilities.<sup>56</sup>

## 5) Islamic State/Daesh poses a threat

While Iraqi and coalition forces ended Islamic State/Daesh control of Iraqi territory in 2017, it remains present in some rural areas. In February 2022, US officials warned that ["the group maintained a larger presence and greater capability in Iraq" than Syria](#).<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Al-Monitor, [Iraq's new government outlines priorities](#), 31 October 2022

<sup>52</sup> Al-Monitor, [Biden announces end of US combat mission in Iraq](#), 27 July 2021

<sup>53</sup> Reuters, [US-led troops end Iraq combat mission, as planned—military](#), 9 December 2021

<sup>54</sup> NATO, [NATO mission in Iraq](#), 27 May 2022

<sup>55</sup> Lead Inspector General, [Operation Inherent Resolve](#), May 2022, pp44-7

<sup>56</sup> Commons Library, [Iran's influence in the Middle East](#), CBP 9504, p13

<sup>57</sup> Lead Inspector General, [Operation Inherent Resolve](#), February 2022, p2

## 6) Turkish military activity

Turkey has been taking action against the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) in northern Iraq since the 1980s. The PKK is designated a terrorist organisation in Turkey. Since 2008, Turkey has primarily conducted airstrikes.<sup>58</sup>

July 2022 saw reported Turkish attacks in the Kurdish province of Dohuk, killing nine civilians, and near to Baghdad. Turkey has denied responsibility, but Iraq's foreign minister called for the withdrawal of Turkish forces from Iraq.<sup>59</sup> The UK also condemned the attack and supports a full investigation.<sup>60</sup>

Continuing violence is likely to lead to criticism of Iraq's government, and increased tensions with Turkey.

## 7) Kurdish autonomy

The Kurdish regional government and the national government [contest the boundaries of the Kurdish autonomous region in northern Iraq](#), including its oil fields. Following the collapse of the Iraqi army in the region in the wake of Islamic State/Daesh in 2014, Kurdish forces occupied the Kirkuk oil fields.

However, following a disputed independence referendum in 2017, they were retaken by government forces. The UN has sought to mediate the conflict.<sup>61</sup>

The Kurdish autonomous government have criticised federal control of the region's energy exports and called for new national legislation. Tensions over the issue are likely to continue.<sup>62</sup>

It's also been reported that disagreements between the two Kurdish parties in the COR over the presidential nomination were primarily a negotiating tactic for resolving the Kirkuk dispute.<sup>63</sup>

## 8) Iran's influence

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iran's influence in Iraq has grown and it supports several Shia militia groups in the country. It has also backed the Al-

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<sup>58</sup> Washington Institute, [Turkey's war in Northern Iraq: By the numbers](#), 28 July 2022

<sup>59</sup> VOA, [At UN, Iraq's foreign minister demands withdrawal of Turkish forces](#), 27 July 2022

<sup>60</sup> Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [Condemning the attack and loss of civilian life in Duhok governorate](#), Iraq, 28 July 2022

<sup>61</sup> Crisis Group, [Reviving UN mediation on Iraq's disputed internal boundaries](#), 14 December 2018

<sup>62</sup> Al-Monitor, [Iraqi Kurdistan government denies taking control of oil fields in Kirkuk](#), 16 May 2022

<sup>63</sup> Middle East Eye, [Iraq's KDP isn't after the presidency. It wants Kirkuk instead](#), 6 February 2022

Fatah political alliance. Iran's primary aim is to ensure Iraq does not become a threat to its interests or aligned with powers such as the US.

Iran's engagement or ability to control events may have weakened after the assassination of General Qassem Suleimani in January 2020 by the United States. Suleimani was leader of Iran's revolutionary guard Quds force, and responsible for Iranian military activities abroad.<sup>64</sup>

Iran has also come under greater criticism in Iraq, due to its association with unpopular leaders. The Tishreen movement, for example, see it as associated with the present governance system in the country, and the Al-Fatah alliance lost seats in the October 2021 elections. This suggested a rebalancing of power between Shia parties (albeit on a lower turnout).

The decision of Al-Sadr, an opponent of both the US and Iran, to withdraw from representative politics is seen as offering a window for Iran-aligned groups to take greater control despite earlier electoral decline. However, analysts see Iran as unlikely to push this far, in [fear of a backlash in which Sunni and Kurdish parties may gain](#) and see Iraq strengthen ties with Gulf states against Iran.<sup>65</sup>

In response to protests in Iran following the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022, Iran launched drone and artillery strikes against Iraq's Kurdistan region. The Iranian regime has blamed outside groups, including Kurdish groups in Iraq, for the protests. Iraq, the UK and US condemned Iran's actions.<sup>66</sup>

## 9) Increased oil prices and need for reforms

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and falls in oil prices, Iraq experienced a recession in 2020, before recovering in 2021. Oil is [significant to Iraqi government revenues](#), constituting 85% of its budget and 99% of the country's exports. Rising oil prices saw revenue increase 73% in 2021.<sup>67</sup>

The World Bank [forecasts overall growth in Iraq to be 8.8% in 2022](#), though notes the risk of higher food prices due to the war in Ukraine.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Commons Library, [Iraq, Iranian influence and the death of Soleimani](#), CBP8758, January 2020 and Commons Library, [Iran's influence in the Middle East](#), CBP9503, March 2022, pp12-14

<sup>65</sup> Reuters, [Analysis: Sadr raises the stakes in struggle for Iraq](#), 14 June 2022

<sup>66</sup> Al-Jazeera, [13 dead in Iranian attacks on Kurdish rebels in Northern Iraq](#), 28 September 2022 and Al-Monitor, [Tehran strikes Kurdish opponents in Iraq as protests over Mahsa Amini's death convulse Iran](#), 28 September 2022

<sup>67</sup> The World Bank, [The World Bank in Iraq](#)

<sup>68</sup> The World Bank, [Iraq economic monitor: Harnessing the oil windfall for sustainable growth](#), June 2022, pix

The Bank argues Iraq should use this improved economic outlook to undertake “urgent” structural reforms. Some of these are likely to prove controversial, however. They include reducing energy subsidies, diversifying revenues sources away from oil, reducing corruption, and addressing the government’s wage bill.<sup>69</sup>

Negative headwinds for Iraq’s economy include a continuing high rate of unemployment (around 25% of those aged 15 to 24 in 2019) and that half its food consumption is imported. Russia and Ukraine collectively account for a third of the world’s wheat supply, and the Ukraine conflict has pushed global prices higher.<sup>70</sup>

The country has also yet to pass a budget for 2022, other than emergency measures. The new government intends to move forward with a budget law.<sup>71</sup>

## 10) Iraq’s international role

Previous Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi [sought to act as a mediator between Iran and the Gulf](#), especially Saudi Arabia.

Iran and Saudi Arabia have had no diplomatic relations since 2016, when protesters in Iran broke into the Saudi Embassy following Saudi Arabia’s execution of a Shia cleric on terrorism charges.

Al-Kadhimi’s efforts included hosting meetings of Saudi and Iranian security officials and talks on resolving the conflict in Yemen (where Saudi Arabia backs the internationally recognised government and Iran the Houthi group opposed to it).

Regional reconciliation and engagement with Iran may also support the efforts to reach an agreement on Iran’s nuclear programme, on which talks have stalled since early 2022.<sup>72</sup>

Iranian officials have welcomed Sudani’s new government and have close links with many parties in the coalition. Both are [likely to stress cooperation](#).<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> The World Bank, [Iraq economic monitor: Harnessing the oil windfall for sustainable growth](#), June 2022, p7

<sup>70</sup> As above, p3

<sup>71</sup> Iraqi News Agency, [Al-Sudani directs to send the budget as soon as possible](#), 31 October 2022

<sup>72</sup> European Council on Foreign Relations, [Meditation nation: Iraq’s new role in Iran-Saudi talks](#), 14 May 2021

<sup>73</sup> Al-Monitor, [Iraq-Iran ties likely to improve under new Iraqi PM](#), 1 November 2022



How far any new Iraqi Prime Minister could continue to play a neutral mediating role is uncertain. The new president, Abdul Latif Rashid, has pledged “balanced relations” between Iraq and its neighbours.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Al-Mayadeen, [Iraq's new president takes office, vows to bring parties closer](#), 17 October 2022. Accessed 18 October 2022

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