

Research Briefing

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Iraq in 2022: Forming a government

Summary	1
1 The Iraqi constitution	3
2 Iraq's politics since 2003	4
3 2021 elections	5
4 Outlook and significance	11

Summary

In July 2022 Iraq marked its longest period without a government since an election, exceeding its [previous record of 289 days](#). A caretaker government is in place, however. As of August, it is now more than 320 days since the 2021 elections, and political uncertainty has continued to grow.

In June 2022, the largest Shia political bloc in the Iraqi parliament, led by cleric Al-Sadr, resigned from the parliament. In late August, Al-Sadr announced his withdrawal from political life. This was followed by [violent clashes between his supporters, Iran-aligned militias and security forces](#). The UN and others [have called for calm](#). This briefing describes the election's background and the outlook for Iraq.

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 are seeking to [exert external pressure on negotiations](#). In August, Al-Sadr announced his withdrawal from politics. This was marked by [further protests and violence](#). The risk of further confrontation remains high.

Any new Government also faces the challenge of addressing [Iraq's economic crisis](#), the [risk of terrorism](#), and negotiating tensions with the [US](#), [Iran](#), [Turkey](#), and the [Kurdish autonomous region](#).

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.¹

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

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.⁴

The current President, [Barham Salih](#), has been in office since 2018. He was elected by 219 votes to 22. By convention, the Presidency is held by a Kurd.⁵

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.

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

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

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

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

⁵ Al-Jazeera, [Iraq: Parliament elects Barham Salih as new president](#), 2 October 2018

The Prime Minister names cabinet members, who the COR must approve.⁶

The [current Prime Minister is Mustafa Al-Kadhimi](#). He was appointed in 2020.⁷

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.⁸

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.⁹

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

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

⁷ Al-Jazeera, [Who is Mustafa Al-Kadhimi, Iraq's new Prime Minister?](#), 7 May 2020

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

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

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

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 2014.¹¹ 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).¹² 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.

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

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

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

¹³ Al-Jazeera, ["Country has no future:" Iraq protester killed at Baghdad rally](#), 25 May 2021

¹⁴ Crisis Group, [Iraq's Tishreen uprising: From barricades to ballot box](#), 26 July 2021

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. Kadhimi remains in office.¹⁵

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

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](#).¹⁸ The UK Government [welcomed “notable improvements”](#) in the transparency of the election and its processes.¹⁹

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.

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.²⁰

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

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

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

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

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

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

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.²¹

Ten other parties secured representation and independent candidates won 43 seats.²² 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.²³

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

Unknown groups also resorted to violence. In November 2021, Prime Minister Al-Kadhimi survived an assassination attempt via armed drone. No group claimed responsibility, but Iranian-backed militia groups were suspected. Iran itself condemned the attack.²⁴ The US called it an “act of terrorism.”²⁵

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

²² Europa World, Iraq: Recent developments: The 2021 legislative elections.

²³ 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

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

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

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 Moqtada 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.²⁶

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.²⁷

As the largest group in the Council, Al-Sadr's group took the lead on forming a new government. However, negotiations have been deadlocked for much of this time, and the Sadrists resigned their seats in July 2022. This leads the field open for other parties to propose a government.

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

²⁷ 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

Election of a Speaker, 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.²⁸

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.²⁹

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

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.³¹

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.

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 29.³²

²⁸ 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

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

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

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

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

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.³³

Protests by Al-Sadr supporters, July 2022

The Coordination Framework nominated Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani for Prime Minister in July. Their next decision will be negotiating with Kurdish representatives to select a president before seeking COR support.³⁴

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 is a demonstration of political relevancy and strength.³⁵

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.³⁶

The [UN has called for "de-escalation"](#) in response to the protests and for negotiations to continue.³⁷

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.³⁸

Protests have 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 Sadrist, security forces and Iranian-aligned militias.³⁹

The UN has called for political actors to work to reduce tensions. The UN Assistance Mission in Iraq has warned the survival of the state may be "at stake" if further violence between communities occurs.⁴⁰ The UK has called for

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

³⁴ Al-Monitor, [Mohammed Shai Al-Sudani nominated for Iraqi premiership](#), 25 July 2022

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

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

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

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

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

⁴⁰ UN, ["Very survival" of Iraqi state at risk, UN mission warns](#), 29 August 2022

protests to remain peaceful and for the response of security forces to be proportionate.⁴¹

4

Outlook and significance

The below describes ten issues facing Iraq, including the challenges any 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.

1) Shia Coordination Framework Government

The Shia Coordination Framework are now in a leading position to appoint a Prime Minister and establish a government, though this remains to be negotiated and confirmed in the COR.

There is [potential for increased tensions](#):

- 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.
- Any new Government could also seek to revisit Iraq's electoral laws.
- 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.⁴²

A Government would also involve 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) Further protests and risk of violence

Rival protests by Shia groups and others are expected to continue in Baghdad. Supporters of Al-Sadr have previously occupied the parliament

⁴¹ British Embassy in Baghdad, [James Downer, Chargé d'Affaires Tweet](#), 29 August 2022

⁴² Washington Institute, [Implications of the Sadrist withdrawal for the Shia Coordination Framework and Iran](#), 29 June 2022

building. Such protests carry the risk of violence. The Prime Minister has called for restraint and continued negotiations in August.⁴³

3) An election in 2022?

The continued failure of negotiations could lead to another election later in 2022. Who would see an improved performance is uncertain, though Sadrist may be confident Al-Sadr's withdrawal from the COR will strengthen their position.

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](#).⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ Some other NATO forces remain in Iraq for the same purpose.⁴⁶

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.⁴⁷

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.⁴⁸

⁴³ Al-Jazeera, [Tensions soar as rival protests take place near Iraqi parliament](#), 1 August 2022

⁴⁴ Al-Monitor, [Biden announces end of US combat mission in Iraq](#), 27 July 2021

⁴⁵ Reuters, [US-led troops end Iraq combat mission, as planned—military](#), 9 December 2021

⁴⁶ NATO, [NATO mission in Iraq](#), 27 May 2022

⁴⁷ Lead Inspector General, [Operation Inherent Resolve](#), May 2022, pp44-7

⁴⁸ Commons Library, [Iran's influence in the Middle East](#), CBP 9504, p13

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](#).⁴⁹

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.⁵⁰

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.⁵¹ The UK also condemned the attack and supports a full investigation.⁵²

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.⁵³

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.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Lead Inspector General, [Operation Inherent Resolve](#), February 2022, p2

⁵⁰ Washington Institute, [Turkey’s war in Northern Iraq: By the numbers](#), 28 July 2022

⁵¹ VOA, [At UN, Iraq’s foreign minister demands withdrawal of Turkish forces](#), 27 July 2022

⁵² Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [Condemning the attack and loss of civilian life in Duhok governorate](#), Iraq, 28 July 2022

⁵³ Crisis Group, [Reviving UN mediation on Iraq’s disputed internal boundaries](#), 14 December 2018

⁵⁴ Al-Monitor, [Iraqi Kurdistan government denies taking control of oil fields in Kirkuk](#), 16 May 2022

It's also been reported that disagreements between the two Kurdish parties in the COR over the presidential nomination are primarily a negotiating tactic for resolving the Kirkuk dispute.⁵⁵

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-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.⁵⁶

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.⁵⁷

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 2021.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Middle East Eye, [Iraq's KDP isn't after the presidency. It wants Kirkuk instead](#), 6 February 2022

⁵⁶ 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

⁵⁷ Reuters, [Analysis: Sadr raises the stakes in struggle for Iraq](#), 14 June 2022

⁵⁸ The World Bank, [The World Bank in Iraq](#)

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.⁵⁹

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.⁶⁰

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.⁶¹

The country has also yet to pass a budget for 2022, other than emergency measures.

10) Iraq’s international role

Current Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi [has 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 have 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 2022.⁶²

How far any new Iraqi Prime Minister could continue to play a neutral mediating role is uncertain.

⁵⁹ The World Bank, [Iraq economic monitor: Harnessing the oil windfall for sustainable growth](#), June 2022, p16

⁶⁰ As above, p7

⁶¹ As above, p3

⁶² European Council on Foreign Relations, [Meditation nation: Iraq’s new role in Iran-Saudi talks](#), 14 May 2021

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