



Iraq Initiative Conference 2023

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Iraq Initiative Conference 2023

Iraq appears to be turning a corner in its statebuilding process. With oil prices high and the security situation seemingly stable, the new government is pursuing a development plan that includes improvements to infrastructure, outreach to regional and international countries, and promises of much-needed reform. However, over the past two decades, previous governments have attempted similar initiatives, only to see them falter. Sustainable progress requires solid foundations based on accountability.

Can the Sudani government successfully tackle the country's challenges and bring the necessary reforms to the economy, essential public services, and the security sector? What steps are required to ensure that reform initiatives can mitigate the peaks and troughs of Iraq's struggle to build a coherent state and push past the cycles of conflict? How will the raging conflict in Israel and Palestine affect Iraq's domestic dynamics and foreign policy considerations?

At Chatham House's annual Iraq Initiative Conference, policymakers, analysts, academics and civil society members will convene in London to discuss these critical questions and Iraq's trajectory in the year ahead.

On the agenda:

- Iraq's politics a year on
- The climate emergency
- Youth and the future of economy & society
- Accountability
- Economic recovery
- Iraq's foreign and regional policy



AGENDA

08.15 – 09.00 *Registration*

09.00 – 10.15 **Session 1: Iraq's politics one year on**

One year into the Mohammad Shia al-Sudani government, relatively high oil prices and a sense of stability suggest that Iraq is on the right track. The government is pursuing a development plan which includes improvements to infrastructure, an open-door policy to regional and international countries, and a commitment to reform. However, its populist economic policies are challenged by the demographic realities of an increasing youth population which struggles to find employment and livelihoods. Also, rulings by the Federal Supreme Court have threatened Erbil's financial autonomy and as such the post-2003 federal system. Moreover, across Iraq, the space is shrinking for civil society and independent journalism, two critical pillars of the accountability required for sustainable state-building. The same leaders enjoy the impunity that they have had since regime change, challenging the possibility of meaningful reform.

The opening session of the conference will discuss the prospects and pathways to sustainable reform in the context of recent challenges. Panellists will explore the Sudani government's ability to overcome the accountability gap which can unlock more sustainable and forward-looking reform strategies.

Speakers:

Opening remarks: Rebar Ahmed Khalid, Minister of Interior, Kurdistan Regional Government

Lahib Higel, Senior Analyst for Iraq, International Crisis Group

Renad Mansour, Senior Research Fellow and Director of the Iraq Initiative, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

Further speakers TBC

Chair: Maryam Nemazee, Journalist and Broadcaster

10.15 – 10.45 *Break*

10.45 – 12.00 **Session 2: Youth and the future of Iraq's economy and society**

In 2019, young Iraqis took part in the largest protests Iraq has witnessed since 2003, demanding better economic prospects, essential services, and a more dignified life. Despite brutal repression, protesters brought down the government and momentarily shook the political establishment. However, more than four years later, their demands remain unfulfilled. Relying on a relative surge in oil prices, the Sudani government hopes that a populist national budget which promises nonessential public sector employment can satisfy Iraq's growing youth population. At the same time, it has tightened its control over the public, shrinking the space for civil society and critical voices. The end of protests has not meant an end of its message. Iraqis are, in many ways, still performing everyday politics to push for a better future.

This panel will explore the role that Iraqi youth and civil society can play in moving past the government's short-termist policies and towards more sustainable, longer-term reforms underpinned by accountability. It will examine how young people are navigating difficult political dynamics to better meet the needs and interests of the growing population, and what can be done to support this process.

Speakers:

Hayder Al Shakeri, Research Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

Hanaa Edwar, Activist, Founder of Iraqi Al Amal Association and Iraqi Women Network.

Faris Harram, Iraqi Writer and Poet

Yaser Mekki, Co-founder and Director, Moja NGO

Chair: Taif Alkhudary, PhD Student, Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Cambridge

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AGENDA

12.00 – 13.00 *Networking Lunch*

13.00 – 14.15 **Session 3: Addressing Iraq's Climate Emergency**

COP28, the second of two consecutive climate summits in the MENA, has put a spotlight on the region. Even amongst others, Iraq is a country at particular risk of the effects of climate change. The UN had identified Iraq as the world's fifth most vulnerable country to climate change. Severe droughts, increasing desertification, and the decimation of water resources are causing persistent dust storms, loss of agricultural land, and record temperature rises. The social impacts of environmental degradation and climate change are also apparent: people are suffering from acute health conditions, and internal displacement and food insecurity are on the rise. The climate emergency is also not confined to Iraq's borders but pushes Baghdad to cooperate with neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Iran, and the Gulf states to reach sustainable solutions.

This session will examine how Iraq's policymakers are addressing the climate crisis and its multitude impacts on society and the country's fragile environment. Panellists will discuss whether COP28 can lead to tangible outcomes geared towards supporting Iraqis, and whether regional cooperation opportunities on climate exchange exist.

Speakers:

Shukri Al Hassen, Environmental Specialist, Department of Geography, University of Basrah

Greg Shapland, Visiting Senior Fellow, Middle East Centre, London School of Economics

Fareed Yasseen, Climate Envoy of the Republic of Iraq; Advisor to the Prime Minister on Climate Change and Sustainable Development; Ambassador of Iraq to the United States (2016-22)

Glada Lahn, Senior Research Fellow, Environment and Society Programme, Chatham House

Chair: Lina Khatib, Director, SOAS Middle East Institute; Associate Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

14.15 – 14.45 *Break*

14.45 – 16.00 **Session 4: Iraq's foreign policy and regional standing**

In recent years, Iraq's foreign policy has prioritized strengthening ties with neighbouring states. This regional integration has seen increased diplomatic activity between Baghdad and a number of Middle Eastern capitals. Iraq has also played a role as a key mediator in regional conflicts, namely between Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, the war in Israel and Palestine which erupted following the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 will dramatically impact regional relations.

This session will explore the far-reaching effects of the conflict in Israel and Palestine on Iraq and its neighbourhood. It will also discuss the shifting dynamics of Iraq's engagement with pivotal countries such as Iran, Gulf states, Turkey, the United States, and the United Kingdom, offering a comprehensive analysis of the nation's complex foreign affairs landscape and the connection between domestic and foreign politics.

Speakers:

Farhad Alaaldin, Advisor for Foreign Affairs, Office of the Prime Minister of Iraq

Stephen Hickey, Director, Middle East and North Africa, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

Denise Natali, Director, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University

Adnan Tabatabai, Co-Founder and Chief Executive Officer, CARPO-Bonn

Chair: Sanam Vakil, Director, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

AGENDA

16.00 – 16.30 *Break*

16.30 – 17.30 **Keynote | In conversation with Abdul Wahab al-Saadi**

Staff General Abdul Wahab al-Saadi became an Iraqi hero for leading the war that defeated the Islamic State (ISIS). In 2019, his removal from office by political opponents became the trigger for the October 2019 (Tishreen) protests that brought down the government of Adel Abd al-Mehdi. After being reinstated and promoted, al-Saadi heads the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service. Although ISIS is still territorially defeated, the socio-economic roots that led to its rise, including a lack of accountability in the political system, continue to challenge the post-war environment. Now a public and key figure in the Iraqi state, al-Saadi is on the frontline of preventing the re-emergence of ISIS. This call goes beyond militarily targeting armed groups.

In the keynote session, Staff General al-Saadi will discuss the different ways in which ensuring accountability in Iraq's security sector can tackle the roots of conflict and push the country towards a more stable trajectory.

Speaker: Staff General Abdul Wahab al-Saadi, Commander-in-chief, Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service

Chair: Bronwen Maddox, Director and Chief Executive, Chatham House

17.30 – 18.30 *Networking reception*

IRAQ INITIATIVE

The Chatham House *Iraq Initiative* is a fieldwork-based policy project that rethinks the nature of state-building and governance in Iraq. The project tackles the root causes of state failure to challenge assumptions held in Western capitals about stabilization and peacebuilding and reach a more nuanced approach to navigating Iraq's complex and interlinked political, security, and economic environment. The project uses these field-based insights to inform international policy towards Iraq. Chatham House convenes Iraq Initiative activities in various cities in the Middle East, the UK, the US and Europe.

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SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES



Shukri Al Hassen

Dr Shukri Al-Hassen is an environmentalist and academic from the University of Basrah. His research focuses on the impacts of climate change and environmental pollution. He contributed to the BBC investigative documentary 'Under Poisoned Skies', the winner of the Royal Television Society Award.



Abdul Wahab al-Saadi

Staff General Abdul Wahab al-Saadi is Director of the Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service. Born in 1963 in Baghdad, al-Saadi studied at the University of Mosul before entering the Iraqi Military Academy in its 69th class. He then served in the special forces branch and entered the Command College in 1994. Al-Saadi entered the Staff College in 1996, graduating with the rank of staff major. When he reached the rank of colonel, he entered the War College and graduated as a warfare officer. Al-Saadi served as deputy director of the Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service from 2014 to 2019. During this time, the service achieved numerous victories against the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). He was removed from his post in September 2019 but was reinstated in May 2020 and promoted to director of the CTS, a position he still holds today.



Hayder Al-Shakeri

Hayder Al-Shakeri is a research fellow with the MENA programme at Chatham House. Previously, Hayder supported the Arab regional cooperation programme in the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining. Prior to this, he worked with the United Nations and Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency in Baghdad. He frequently provides commentary on Iraqi affairs on several platforms. Hayder holds a BA in Public Administration and Political Studies from the American University of Beirut in Lebanon and an MSc in Development Studies from SOAS, University of London. He is also a fellow with the United Nations Alliance of Civilisations.



Rebar Ahmed

HE Rebar Ahmed is the Minister of the Interior for the KRG, overseeing agencies including police, narcotics, human trafficking, and border enforcement. He's also responsible for heading the KRG's Board for implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security, as well as the ministerial committee recognizing ISIS crimes against Yazidis as genocide. He leads the Committee for the Constitutional Article 140 implementation, and liaises with Baghdad on security in disputed areas, the Sinjar Agreement, and Iraq-Iran Security Agreement. A seasoned security and government official, Ahmed played a crucial role in the Kurdistan Region Security Council, particularly against ISIS with Coalition Forces. His expertise led to his 2022 Iraqi presidency nomination. He has a bachelor's degree from Salahaddin University and a master's in National Security from the Iraqi National Security University.

SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES



Farhad Alaaldin

Farhad Alaaldin is the Advisor of Foreign Affairs to the Prime Minister of Iraq. He was head of the Iraqi Advisory Council, and formerly served as political advisor to President of Iraq Barham Saleh and as political advisor to the former President of Iraq Fuad Masum from 2014 to 2018. Prior to this period, he was the Chief of Staff for the Kurdish Regional Government Prime Minister (2009-11), then senior advisor to the KRG Prime Minister (2011-12). He is a writer and observer on current political affairs of Iraq and Kurdistan and holds a Law Degree from alBayan University, and Master's Degree in Leading Innovation and Change from York St. John University.



Taif Alkhudary

Taif Alkhudary is a PhD student at the Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Cambridge. Prior to this she was a Research Officer at the LSE Middle East Centre. She has also worked for several human rights NGOs conducting strategic litigation on cases of human rights violations in the MENA region.



Hanaa Edwar

Hanaa Edwar has been a human rights, women's rights, and democracy defender for over 50 years. She is the co-founder and general secretary of Iraqi Al-Amal Association, which promotes human rights, gender equality, peace building and development. She is also a co-founder and head of the Iraqi Women Network and has led numerous campaigns against gender-based violence, for gender equality, and for enhancing women's role in decision-making positions and in building peace, security, and justice. She has also been involved in human rights advocacy campaigns and lobbying. In 2011, she was awarded the Sean MacBride Peace Prize in 2011 by the International Peace Bureau. In 2013, she was awarded Arab Woman of the Year by TAKREEM Foundation. She is also a member of the Advisory Arab Committee of Human Rights Watch. She holds a law degree from Baghdad University.



Faris Harram

Faris Harram is a poet, academic and activist. He has written four books; *A Land Ready for Fascists* (2023), *To Overturn an Idea* (2019), *Iraq 360 Degrees* (2007), and *One Time* (2005). He served as the Head of Union of Writers in Najaf from 2010 to 2016 and has been actively involved in Iraqi protests since 2011. He has received various international awards in the fields of poetry, screenplay, and photography. He received the 2005 Sharjah Prize for Arab Creativity in Poetry, Kuwait's 2010 Al-Babtain Prize for Poetic Creativity, and Berlin's 2011 Open Eye Award for Photography. He holds a masters in philosophy from the University of Kufa and is currently pursuing a doctorate in the same field. Currently, he is a lecturer of philosophy at the University of Kufa.

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Stephen Hickey

Stephen Hickey was appointed Her Majesty's Ambassador to Iraq in September 2019. Prior to this appointment, he was the Ambassador and Political Co-ordinator in the UK Permanent Mission to the United Nations. Stephen joined the FCO (Foreign and Commonwealth Office) in 2001 as a Desk Officer in the South East Asian Department. Some of his previous postings include Deputy Head of Mission to Egypt (2013 to 2015) and Syria (2010 to 2011); Political Counsellor in South Africa (2011 to 2012) and Head of Office and Deputy Special Representative for Libya (2011). He is an Arabic speaker and has made the Middle East a focus of his career.



Lahib Higel

Lahib Higel is the Senior Analyst for Iraq at the International Crisis Group. She has worked in Iraq and the Kurdistan region in various capacities since 2013. Prior to ICG she worked on mediation efforts in Iraq, Libya and Syria for the Dialogue Advisory Group (DAG). She has worked as a security adviser for the International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO) and conducted research for a wide range of organisations and institutions, including the EU, UNDP and Minority Rights Group (MRG), on topics such as displacement, security and politics in Iraq. She holds an MSc in International Relations from the London School of Economics and an MA in International Security from Sciences Po, Paris.



Lina Khatib

Dr Lina Khatib is director of the SOAS Middle East Institute and MBI Al Jaber Chair in Middle East Studies as well as Professor of Practice at the Department of Politics and International Studies at SOAS University of London. Prior to this, she served as director of the Middle East and North Africa programme at Chatham House, where she is currently an Associate Fellow, and director of the Carnegie Middle East Center at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. She also co-founded and led the Program on Arab Reform and Democracy at Stanford University's Center on Democracy, Development, and the Rule of Law and was a senior associate at the Arab Reform Initiative. She has published seven books and is a frequent writer and commentator on politics and security in the Middle East and North Africa.



Glada Lahn

Glada Lahn is a Senior Research Fellow in the Environment and Society Centre at Chatham House where she works on a range of international resource-related projects which intersect with geopolitical, economic and development concerns. Glada has led influential research on energy policy in the Arab Gulf, energy access amongst displaced people globally, and how climate change and decarbonization affect the prospects and choices for developing country oil and gas producers. She was previously a senior research fellow at the Gulf Centre for Strategic Studies. She has a BA in Arabic and international relations, and an MA in Near and Middle Eastern studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies.

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Bronwen Maddox

Bronwen Maddox took up the post of Director and Chief Executive of Chatham House in August 2022. Bronwen was Director of the Institute for Government (2016-22). From 2010 to 2016 she was editor and chief executive of Prospect, the monthly current affairs magazine. Before that, she served as chief foreign commentator, foreign editor and US editor at The Times, after a period at the Financial Times where she ran award-winning investigations and wrote economics editorials. Before becoming a journalist, Bronwen was an investment analyst in the City and a director of Kleinwort Benson Securities, where she ran its highly-rated team analysing world media stocks. Bronwen is a Visiting Professor in the Policy Institute at King's College London, Honorary Governor of Ditchley, an honorary fellow of the British Academy, and a council member of Research England, one of the research councils of UK Research & Innovation. Bronwen has a degree in Politics, Philosophy and Economics from St John's College, Oxford.



Renad Mansour

Dr Renad Mansour is a senior research fellow and project director of the Iraq Initiative at Chatham House. He is also a senior research fellow at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani, and a research fellow at the Cambridge Security Initiative based at Cambridge University. Renad was previously a lecturer at the London School of Economics and Political Science and held positions as lecturer of international studies and supervisor at the Faculty of Politics, also at Cambridge. He was previously a senior research fellow at the Iraq Institute for Strategic Studies in Beirut and was adviser to the Kurdistan Regional Government Civil Society Ministry between 2008 and 2010. He received his PhD from Cambridge University. He is co-author of *Once Upon a Time in Iraq*, published by BBC Books/Penguin to accompany the critically acclaimed BBC series.



Yaser Mekki

Yaser Mekki is the Co-founder and director of Moja, a nonprofit organization based in Najaf-Iraq that works nationwide, focusing on democratization, human rights, countering extremism, and youth and women participation in decision-making. A dentist by profession, he graduated from dental school at Kufa University and studied public policy at UMass Amherst, USA. He worked as a project manager for several civil society projects and initiatives.



Denise Natali

Dr Denise Natali is the Director of the Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) at National Defense University (NDU). She previously served as the Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations at the Department of State. Dr Natali has also held positions with a non-governmental organization in Peshawar, Pakistan, the American Red Cross in Washington D.C., and USAID/DART and the American University of Iraq-Sulaimani in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Dr Natali specializes in the Middle East, Iraq, Kurdish issue, and post-conflict stabilization and is the author of numerous publications op-eds, and analyses. Dr Natali received a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Pennsylvania, a Master of International Affairs from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, and a B.A. in government at Franklin & Marshall College.

SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES



Maryam Nemazee

Maryam Nemazee is a television news presenter, correspondent, broadcaster and journalist. For over fifteen years she has worked in countries across Europe, the Middle East, Asia and the US. She's covered global news and international politics with a particular focus on the Middle East. Previously, Maryam was a London-based anchor and correspondent for Bloomberg Television during the peak of the 2008 global financial crisis. She was the host of the prime-time morning programme broadcast across all global markets. Prior to that she was selected as one of the original anchors for Al Jazeera International. She was on air broadcasting during the first 24 hours of the channel's launch. Maryam is a graduate of the University of Durham, and City University in the UK.



Greg Shapland

Greg Shapland is a researcher and writer on politics, security, resources and the environment (including water) in the Middle East and North Africa. He is a Senior Visiting Fellow at the LSE. Greg served as a Middle East/North Africa analyst in Research Analysts in the FCO from 1979 until 2015. He was also Head of Research Analysts from July 2010 to July 2013. During his time with the FCO, Greg served in several British Embassies in the MENA region and in the Consulate General in Jerusalem. Greg holds degrees in Geography, Arabic and Area Studies. His book *Rivers of Discord: International Water Disputes in the Middle East* was published in 1997. He is currently writing a book entitled *A Political Geography of the Middle East and North Africa*.



Adnan Tabatabai

Adnan Tabatabai is the CEO of the Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient (CARPO) in Bonn, Germany. He obtained his MSc in Middle East Politics at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. As an Iran analyst he is consulted by European policymakers and businesses on Iran related affairs. Through his work at CARPO, Tabatabai has designed and facilitated track 2 and civil-society dialogue formats between Iran and Saudi Arabia since 2015. He is furthermore involved in a variety of projects at CARPO on regional security in the Persian Gulf region. Tabatabai is author of the book *Morgen in Iran* (Oct 2016, Edition Körber-Stiftung). He is regularly featured in international media with commentary and analysis on developments in Iran and the Middle East.

SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES



Sanam Vakil

Dr Sanam Vakil is the director of the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House. Before her appointment as director in 2023, she was the programme's deputy director and senior research fellow, and led project work on Iran and Gulf Arab dynamics. Sanam's research focuses on regional security, Gulf geopolitics, and on future trends in Iran's domestic and foreign policy. She is also the James Anderson professorial lecturer in the Middle East Studies department at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS Europe) in Bologna, Italy. Sanam is the author of *Action and Reaction: Women and Politics in Iran* (Bloomsbury 2013). Sanam received her BA in political science and history from Barnard College, Columbia University and her MA/PhD in international relations and international economics from Johns Hopkins University.



Fareed Yasseen

Dr Fareed Yasseen is the Climate Envoy of the Republic of Iraq and Advisor to the Prime Minister on Climate Change and Sustainable Development. He was Iraq's ambassador to the United States from 2016 to 2022. He previously served as the Iraqi ambassador to France (2010-2016). Dr Yasseen has held a number of posts within the Government of Iraq, including as the head of policy planning of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and diplomatic adviser to former Deputy President Mr Adil Abd al-Mahdi. He has also worked and consulted for numerous United Nations agencies and think tanks. Dr Yasseen was educated in Iraq, Switzerland, and the United States. Prior to joining the diplomatic service, he trained as a physicist and worked as a researcher in Europe and the United States, and later became heavily engaged in political activism and human rights advocacy.



The conference is organized by the Middle East and North Africa Programme as part of Chatham House's Iraq Initiative.

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