



Iraq Initiative Conference 2024

Wednesday 20 November

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CONTACT
menap@chathamhouse.org

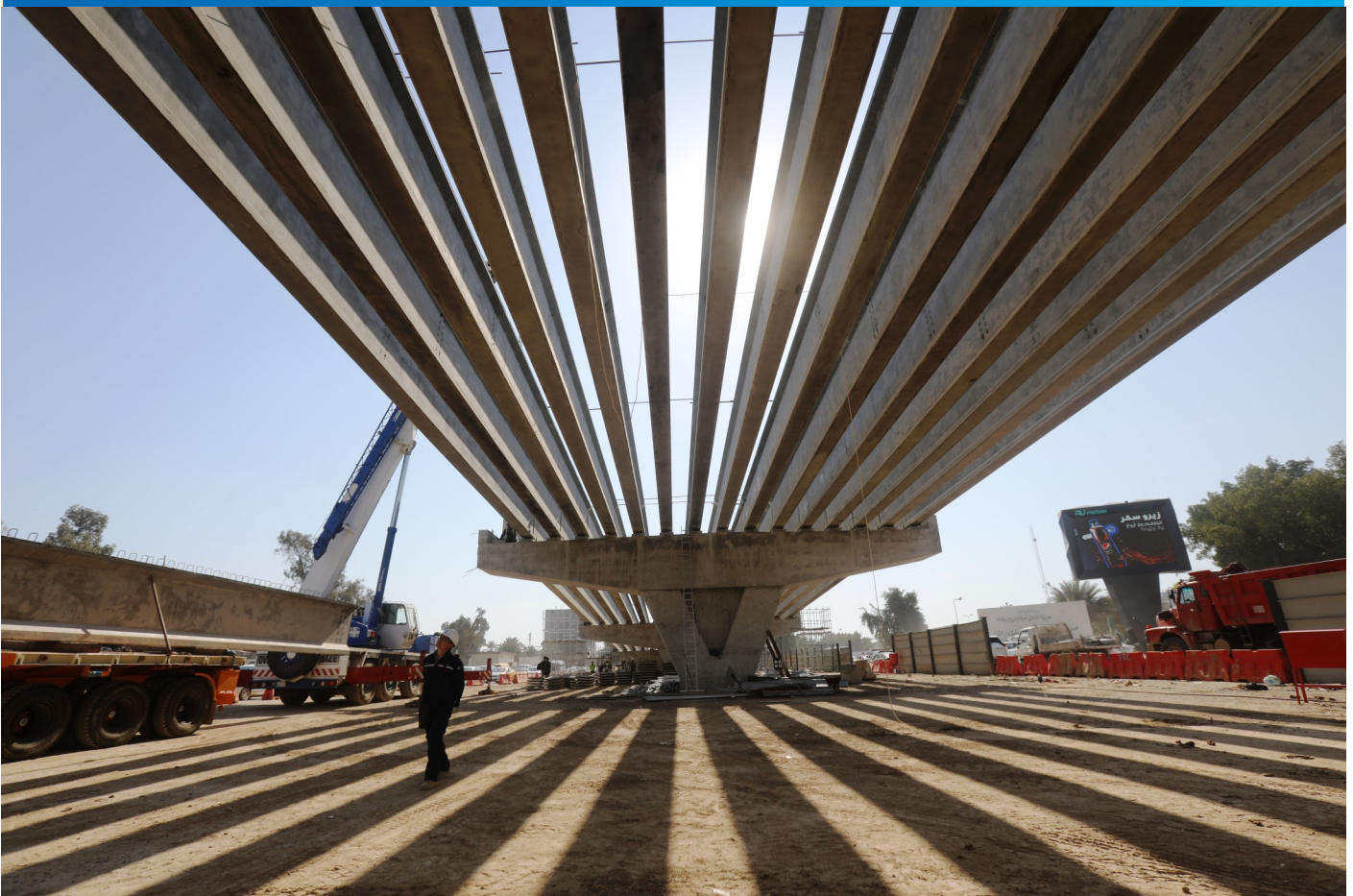
Iraq Initiative Conference 2024

Over two decades following regime change, Iraq appears to be on a path to recovery and growth. With the support of high oil prices, Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani's government is implementing an ambitious plan to develop critical infrastructure, enhance ties with neighbouring countries, and renegotiate relationships with international partners like the US and UN. The political system has rebounded from a series of shocks and is in the process of consolidating and centralising power in Baghdad under the governing Shia Coordination Framework.

However, underlying political, economic, security, and regional challenges, if not addressed, threaten this apparent stability and frustrate longer-term hope for a better future. Despite the country's wealth, many young Iraqis struggle to find jobs while the space for civic activism shrinks. Meanwhile, the escalation of violence across the region threatens to engulf Iraq in further conflict. With the 2025 parliamentary election approaching, infighting within the governing coalition also suggests political turmoil in the year ahead.

How can the Sudani government tackle the roots of these obstacles to ensure that development can be sustained over time? What are the key steps to coherent and effective state-building? And how can regional and international actors support this process?

At Chatham House's sixth annual Iraq Initiative conference, Iraqi and international policymakers, experts and civil society, will convene in London to discuss these critical questions for Iraq's future, and the country's trajectory in the year ahead.



08.30 – 09.30

Registration

09.00 – 10.15

Session 1: The political arena ahead of upcoming national elections

Ahead of next year's parliamentary elections, Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani appears to be enjoying high approval ratings as a relatively stable oil price has allowed his government to focus on infrastructure development. The political system has seemingly rebounded following a series of shocks, from the 2019 Tishreen uprisings to Muqtada al-Sadr's failed majority government bid. The governing Shia Coordination Framework appears to be in the process of consolidating and centralising power, manifested by a weakened civil society and Kurdish and Sunni political camps. However, the competition for the upcoming national election is underway and exposing internal political fault lines that will feature in the year ahead.

In this session, policymakers and experts will discuss the positions of different parties and political movements in Iraq's political landscape. Speakers will offer their views on the changes and continuities that can be expected in the year leading to elections and what this means for the system more generally.

Speakers:

Abbas Radhi Al-Ameri, Secretary-General, Shiite Coordination Framework

Mina Al-Oraibi, Editor-in-Chief, The National

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

Amanj Raheem, Cabinet Secretary and Chief Legal Advisor, Kurdistan Regional Government

Chair: Raya Jalabi, Middle East Correspondent, Financial Times

10.15 – 10.45

Refreshments break

10.45 – 12.00

Session 2: The political economy of climate policy in Iraq

Iraq is the fifth most vulnerable country in the world to climate change. It has been experiencing more frequent heat waves with temperatures often reaching above 50°C. In July 2024, 11 of the 15 highest temperatures in the world were recorded in Iraq. Prolonged droughts have intensified due to climate change exacerbating acute water shortages with detrimental impacts on public health and livelihoods. In March 2023, more than 70,000 people were reportedly displaced by water shortages, high salinity and poor water quality in at least ten governorates. In March 2024, Iraq's Minister of Environment and the UN Humanitarian Coordinator launched the Iraq Environment and Climate Change Policy Advisory Group to increase coordination between the government, international organizations, civil society, academia and the private sector to address the effects of climate change and environmental degradation. However, growing corruption and Iraq's near total economic reliance on energy revenues challenge the effectiveness of climate policies and reform in resource management.

This panel will address the barriers and potential pathways to climate reform in Iraq. Speakers will discuss what steps should be taken to address the country's multiple climate-related crises and prevent further environmental degradation and social instability.

Speakers:

Jassim Al-Asadi, Co-founder and Head, Nature Iraq

Sameh Al-Muqdadi, Managing Director, Relief International

Sarine Karajerjian, Program Director, Environmental Politics Program, Arab Reform Initiative

Fareed Yasseen, Climate Envoy, Republic of Iraq, Advisor to the Prime Minister on Climate Change and Sustainable Development

Chair: Glada Lahn, Senior Research Fellow, Environment and Society Centre, Chatham House

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12.00 – 13.15

Networking lunch

13.15 – 14.30

Session 3: The health of Iraq's economy

In an effort to overcome previous political and societal shocks, the Mohammad Shia' al-Sudani government has sought to leverage relatively stable oil prices to build infrastructure and invest in megaprojects that demonstrate to both political elites and the public a positive trajectory. However, significant issues remain unresolved, namely that the government's reliance on energy revenues makes its economic plan susceptible to oil price fluctuations as it struggles to diversify its economic policy or create new channels to address rising youth unemployment. Instead, the government has continued the policy of expanding the bloated state payroll by offering more jobs in the public sector, which is marred by mismanagement, inefficiency, politically sanctioned corruption, and lack of accountability.

Panellists will address how political incentives can be developed to implement meaningful reform aimed at increased accountability and diversification of Iraq's economy. The session will explore alternative ways to address the country's growing youth unemployment and demographic challenges.

Speakers:

Mohammed Al-Najjar, Advisor to the Prime Minister for Investment Affairs; Executive Director of the Iraq Fund for Development

Basima Abdulrahman, Founder and CEO, KESK

Ahmad Tabaqchali, Chief Strategist, AFC Iraq Fund

Further speakers TBC

14.30 – 15.00

Refreshments break

15.00 – 16.15

Session 4: Iraq in the precarious Middle East

Iraq and its neighbours are experiencing a turbulent period following the 7 October Hamas attack and Israel's war on Gaza, which has spread into Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran and the Red Sea. As a result of the war's regionalization, the conflict between Islamic Resistance of Iraq groups and the US has increased on Iraqi territory. Despite these regional dynamics, Baghdad and Washington maintained a bilateral process and re-negotiated the future of their relationship. Meanwhile, the Sudani government has ambitions to connect with neighbours through initiatives such as the Development Road, and other mega-projects that can help enhance Iraq's geopolitical standing in the region. More generally, the government has pushed a policy of non-alignment which welcomes relations with all regional and international states, including for example China which has increased its presence in Iraq.

This session will discuss Iraq's regional and international standing and its evolving relationships with neighbouring and global powers amidst domestic stability and regional pressures. Speakers will explore how the government is navigating external challenges and how it can maintain stability in the precarious neighbourhood, and also look ahead at the future of Iraq's relations with the US, Iran, and other powers.

Speakers:

Mohammad Ali Shabani, Editor, Amwaj.media

Krikor Der-Hagopian, Director General of International Affairs, Prime Minister's Office, Republic of Iraq

Wang Guangda, Executive Director, China-Arab Research Center on Reform and Development, Shanghai International Studies University

Further speakers TBC

16.15 – 16.30

Comfort break

16.30 – 17.30

Keynote speech

17.30 – 18.30

Networking reception

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

The Chatham House *Iraq Initiative* tackles the root causes of state fragmentation in Iraq, and challenges assumptions in Western capitals about stabilization and peacebuilding. The aim is to reach a more nuanced approach to navigating Iraq's complex and interlinked political, security and economic environments.

The Initiative is based on original analysis and close engagement with a network of researchers and institutions inside Iraq. At the local level, it maps key political, business, military, tribal, clerical, and civil society figures across Iraq. At the national level, it explores the struggle over the state.

The Initiative uses these field-based insights to inform international policy towards Iraq. Chatham House convenes Iraq Initiative activities in the Middle East, the UK, the US and Europe.

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