



Iraq Initiative Conference 2026

Wednesday 11 November

The 8th annual conference convenes Iraqi and international policymakers, business leaders, experts, and civil society to assess whether Iraq's new government can navigate growing regional and domestic pressures and reinforce national sovereignty.

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Conference overview

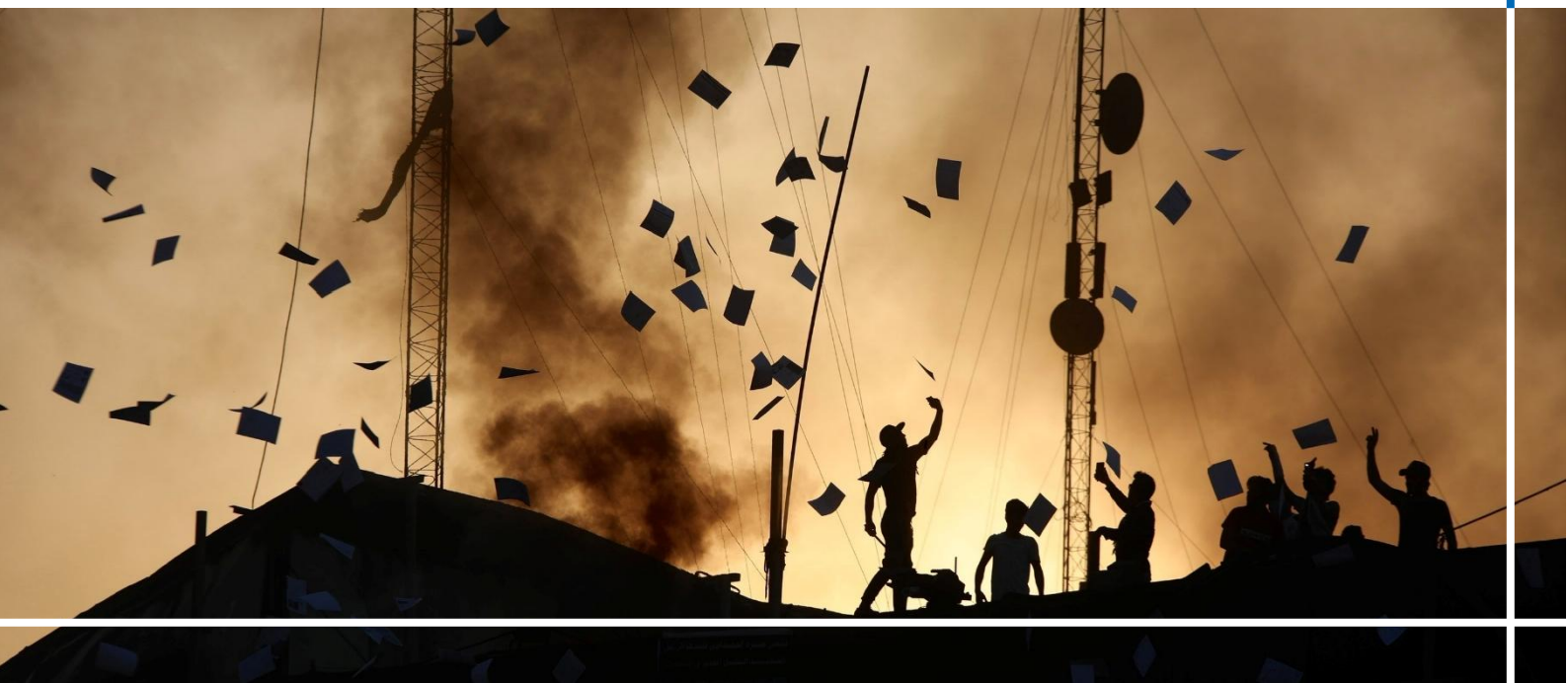
As Iraq moves into a new political phase following the 2025 elections and the formation of Prime Minister Ali al-Zaidi's government, the country faces a defining test: can it reform and strengthen state institutions while navigating the unprecedented pressures generated by the regional war.

The conflict has exposed Iraq's vulnerabilities across multiple fronts. Militarily, Iraq has again become a theatre in the wider regional confrontation. Iran-aligned armed factions in Iraq have launched attacks inside the country and across the region, while the US and Israel have targeted actors and infrastructure on Iraqi soil, raising questions about sovereignty and the government's ability to establish a monopoly over the use of force.

Economically, disruptions to regional trade and global energy flows have placed Iraq's oil-dependent economy under acute strain, reducing revenues at a time when the state faces growing pressure to sustain salaries in an already expanded public sector. In parallel, constraints on energy imports threaten electricity generation, risking further public dissatisfaction amid rising living costs and unemployment.

These challenges are unfolding against the backdrop of intensifying competition for influence inside Iraq. Washington is pressuring the Zaidi government to strengthen government control over weapons and confront armed groups, while Tehran continues to view Iraq as central to its regional strategy. As the balance of power shifts across the Middle East, Baghdad faces the difficult task of managing relations with both powers while safeguarding its own stability and autonomy.

- Can the government advance meaningful reforms, strengthen state institutions, and preserve economic stability? Or will mounting security, economic, and geopolitical challenges further constrain Iraq's ability to chart an independent course?
- How has the new government fared in its first 100 days in office?
- What steps are needed to diversify Iraq's economy away from volatile energy markets and respond to growing public demands?
- How can Baghdad navigate rising regional tensions while balancing relations with international actors?
- What role should regional and international partners play in supporting Iraq's long-term stability and development?



Agenda

08.45 – 09.25 **Arrival and refreshments**

09.25 – 09.30 **Welcome remarks**

09.30 – 11.15 **Plenary session 1 | Iraq's new government: Governing through crisis**

Prime Minister Ali al-Zaidi entered office with an ambitious agenda to strengthen institutions, tackle corruption, bring militias under greater state control, and restore public confidence in government. Yet his administration has quickly found itself governing in an exceptionally challenging environment. Regional conflict, economic pressures and persistent security challenges are testing the government's ability to deliver on its early promises while responding to rapidly evolving crises.

Since taking office, the government has launched a high-profile anti-corruption campaign, sought to assert greater authority over armed groups, and confronted the economic and political consequences of a changing regional order. These early initiatives offer insight into the administration's governing style, priorities and the political constraints it faces.

This session assesses the government's performance to date and examines the challenges that are likely to shape its agenda in the year ahead.

- Has the government established a clear strategic direction for Iraq?
- What progress has been made on the government's key priorities, and where have ambitions collided with political realities?
- What do the government's early decisions reveal about the prospects for reform over the coming years?

11.15 – 11.45 **Networking break**

11.45 – 12.45 **Debate | Can protest still influence politics in Iraq?**

Protest movements have been a recurring feature of Iraq's political landscape since 2011, reflecting popular frustration with corruption, unemployment, poor public services, and a political system widely perceived as unresponsive to citizens' needs. The 2019 Tishreen movement marked a watershed moment, forcing the resignation of the government, contributing to changes in the electoral law and creating space for independent and protest-linked candidates to enter parliament.

Yet seven years on, many of Tishreen's demands remain unmet. Protest-linked Members of Parliament struggled to sustain a coherent political force, established parties reasserted their dominance over government formation, and subsequent electoral reforms reversed many of the changes introduced after 2019. While the protests demonstrated the power of public mobilisation, Iraq's political system has also proved capable of absorbing pressure without undergoing fundamental transformation.

Agenda

This debate asks whether protest remains an effective vehicle for political change, or whether Iraq's political system has become increasingly adept at containing dissent.

- Did the Tishreen movement fundamentally reshape Iraq's political system, or merely disrupt it temporarily?
- Can protest movements achieve lasting change without sustained organisation and political representation?
- Are successive Iraqi governments responding to public demands, or simply containing dissent?
- Does Iraq's increasingly securitised political environment limit the ability of protests to influence political outcomes?

12.45 – 13.45 Networking lunch

13.45 – 14.15 Spotlight session | Iraq's security outlook

14.15 – 15.30 Plenary session 2 | Is Iraq ready for the digital economy?

Technology and artificial intelligence are rapidly reshaping economies, governments and societies around the world. In Iraq, digital payments, mobile banking, e-commerce and digital government services are beginning to transform how citizens access services, communicate, and conduct everyday business.

Yet, Iraq's digital transformation remains uneven. The economy continues to rely heavily on cash, while weak infrastructure, limited digital literacy, unreliable electricity and internet connectivity, and cybersecurity risks constrain progress. The Iraqi government is also grappling with how to regulate rapidly evolving technologies. From restrictions on cryptocurrencies and digital assets to questions surrounding AI governance, data privacy, consumer protection and financial crime, regulation must strike a balance between managing risk and enabling innovation.

This session will examine whether Iraq is keeping pace with the global digital transformation and how the country can harness new technologies and AI to build a more dynamic, inclusive economy.

- Is Iraq prepared for digital transformation across government, business and public services?
- Can Iraq develop the skills, institutions and regulatory frameworks needed to employ these technologies, or will it remain dependent on foreign platforms, expertise and digital infrastructure?
- How can Iraq protect digital rights, personal data and online safety as technology becomes more embedded in everyday life?

15.30 – 16.00 Networking break

Agenda

16.00 – 17.15 **Plenary session 3 | Iraq's foreign policy amidst a regional war**

For much of the past several years, Iraq managed to insulate itself from regional conflicts through a policy of balanced engagement, maintaining relations with competing powers while avoiding becoming a frontline in their rivalries. The 2026 Iran war fundamentally challenged this strategy. Iraq became both a battleground for conducted military operations by external actors, and a launching pad for attacks beyond its borders, exposing the limits of its ability to remain on the sidelines.

The crisis has reshaped Iraq's regional relationships. From Iran and the Gulf states to Turkey, Syria and Lebanon, as well as its strategic partnership with the United States, Baghdad now faces difficult questions about how to rebuild trust, protect its sovereignty and navigate a rapidly changing Middle East. Prime Minister Ali al-Zaidi has sought to strengthen Iraq's international partnerships while reaffirming state authority at home, but persistent regional conflict and domestic constraints continue to test this approach.

This session will examine the future of Iraq's foreign policy and regional role in an increasingly volatile Middle East.

- Can Iraq move beyond being an arena for regional confrontation and emerge as a sovereign actor?
- Is there still scope for Iraq to act as a bridge, convener or mediator between rival powers?
- How can Iraq strengthen its strategic partnerships while preserving its sovereignty and balanced foreign policy?

17.15 – 18.30 **Conference close and networking reception**

Seeing Iraq: A photo exhibition

Iraq is often represented through the lens of politics, conflict and crisis. The Iraq Initiative Photo Competition invited photographers to offer a different perspective – capturing the people, places, communities and everyday experiences that shape Iraq today. The competition sought photographs that tell compelling stories and offer insight into Iraq beyond the headlines.

This exhibition brings together the three winning portfolios from the competition, each offering its own story and insight, inviting the audience to engage with Iraqi people and landscapes through the eyes of those who photograph them.

The three winning portfolios are on display throughout the Iraq Initiative Conference, offering conference participants an opportunity to explore different perspectives on Iraq alongside the discussions and debates taking place across the programme.

Photography competition winners

Second place

Tiba Sadeq

Through her *'Harvest Season in Al-Mashkhab'* series, Tiba documents the enduring relationship between rural communities and the land they depend on. Set against the backdrop of water scarcity, climate change and declining Euphrates water levels, the images capture the challenges facing farmers as they adapt traditional livelihoods to a changing environment.

Tiba's photography highlights physical labour, generational knowledge, and cultural identity, emphasizing community strength and efforts to preserve rural life despite environmental and institutional challenges.

First place

Ali Dab Dab

Ali's photography captures the tensions and contradictions shaping contemporary Iraq through a striking and imaginative visual lens. It depicts Iraq's environmental and social struggles: oil fires destroying land, protests exposing government hypocrisy, youth rejecting bureaucracy, capitalism clashing with political ideology, and the passion and resilience of rising generation of Iraqis.

Rich in symbolism and visual storytelling, Ali's photographs offer an insightful and thought-provoking reflection on a country undergoing profound change.

Third place

Khalid Tawfeeq

In *'The Face of the Marsh'*, Khalid explores the deep connection between people, water and identity in the Iraqi Marshes. His photographs capture the cultural richness and ecological significance of this unique landscape, revealing how generations of communities have shaped their lives around its waterways.

Through intimate and thought-provoking imagery, Khalid's work encourages reflection on the shared responsibility to protect the Marshes and preserve their cultural and environmental heritage for future generations.



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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Image – 'Ashes of Bureaucracy', Basra, Iraq, 7 September 2018. Copyright © Ali Dab Dab

