

Iraq on the Eve of Elections: A new era or return to the *status quo*?

LSE Middle East Centre | Zoom | 28 -29 September

DAY 1: Tuesday 28 September 2021

Panel 1: Prospects for Reforming the Political System on the Eve of Elections

10:00 – 11:00 BST / 12:00 – 13:00 AST

In October Iraqis will go to the polls for the sixth time since regime change to vote in early elections, held as a key concession to the demands of the Tishreen protest movement. The elections will be the first to be based on the new Elections Law passed in December 2019. This divides Iraq into 83 electoral districts in a bid to make it easier for smaller parties and independent candidates to run in elections. Despite this, the elections have been marred in controversy, with political activists often becoming the targets of threats and assassinations. This has resulted in widespread calls to boycott elections in protest against the inequitable electoral environment. In this session, panellists will discuss the likely outcome of elections and what they could mean for reform of Iraq's political system.

- Chair: Toby Dodge – LSE Middle East Centre
- Marsin Al Shamary – Institute of Regional and International Studies
- Sajad Jiyad – Independent Researcher
- Lahib Higuel – International Crisis Group

Panel 2: The State of Iraq's Economy One Year on from Allawi's White Paper

11:30 – 12:30 BST / 13:30 – 14:30 AST

Iraq has long been on the verge of economic collapse. This was expounded in April 2020, when the fall in oil prices in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic meant that the government struggled to pay public sector workers for several months. In response, Finance Minister Ali Allawi published a White Paper meant as a road map for the country's economic recovery and later, in January of this year, devalued the dinar by 20% as a means of stimulating internal markets. Yet, 90% of all government revenues continue to come from oil sales leaving Iraq's economy vulnerable to the volatility of global oil markets and state sanctioned corruption sees up to 30% of public funds lost every year. What is more, while the public payroll has more than tripled since 2003, the development of the private sector continues to be hampered by poor infrastructure and limited access to capital. As a consequence, youth unemployment in Iraq stands at 25.2% and the World Bank estimates that 5.5 million Iraqis are at risk of being pushed into poverty. This panel examines the success of reforms

undertaken by Mustafa Al Kadhimi's government and opportunities for further reforms, as well as the socio-political consequences of economic complacency.

- Chair: Chloe Cornish – Financial Times
- Ahmed Tabaqchali – Institute of Regional and International Studies
- Ali Al Mawlawi – Independent Consultant
- Alia Moubayed – Jefferies International

Panel 3: State Violence in Iraq: The PMF and prospects for accountability
13:30- 14:30 BST / 15:30 – 16:30 AST

Since the beginning of mass protests in Iraq in October 2019, the country has seen a sharp increase in the use of violent coercion against government critics. A coordinated campaign of violence, including the use of live bullets, military grade tear gas canisters, targeted assassinations, snipers and enforced disappearances resulted in the extrajudicial killing of over 700 protesters and the injury of at least 25,000 others. While this eventually forced protesters to go home, the campaign led by militias from the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) has continued unabated targeting political activists and forcing many to flee Iraq. In Kurdistan, the government has also launched a crackdown on activists and journalists known to be outspoken government critics, with at least five sentenced to jail terms following flawed trials. This closing up of civic space comes against the backdrop of the increasing power and influence of the PMF with Prime Minister Mustafa Al Kadhimi unable to hold them to account despite several attempts to do so. In light of these events, this panel will discuss the role of the PMF in Iraq, the systemic use of violence against government critics and prospects for accountability.

- Chair: Jessica Watkins – LSE Middle East Centre
- Belkis Wille – Human Rights Watch
- Renad Mansour – Chatham House
- Inna Rudolf – International Centre for the Study of Radicalization

Panel 4 – The Struggle for Women's Legal Rights in Iraq
15:00 -16:00 BST/ 17:00– 18:00 AST

Despite the decades long struggle of Iraqi feminists, women in the country continue to face structural violence and have their rights consistently denied. In March 2021 the Iraqi government passed the Yazidi Survivors Law, putting in place a reparations framework for women and girls from minority communities who were subjected to violence at the hands of Daesh. While this has largely been heralded as a positive development, the law contains key omissions including failing to account for the rights of children born out of sexual violence and their mothers. In addition, despite a surge in cases of domestic violence in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, political parties have continued to block the passing of an Anti-

Domestic Violence Law in Federal Iraq. In Kurdistan, where a similar law was passed in 2011, the government has failed to allocate the resources necessary for its proper implementation. In this panel, speakers will discuss the current state of women's legal rights in Iraq, including key considerations for the implementation of the Yazidi Survivors Law and the need to enact a domestic violence law in Federal Iraq.

- Chair: Zahra Ali – Rutgers University
- Marwa Abdul Ridha – Independent Researcher
- Zeynep Kaya – Sheffield University
- Güley Bor – Independent Researcher

DAY 2: Wednesday 29 September 2021

Panel 1: The Future of Iraq's Protest Movement 10:00 – 11:00 BST/ 12:00 – 13:00 AST

In October 2019 over a million Iraqis took to the streets of Baghdad and the Southern Provinces calling for employment and basic services, such as clean water and electricity. Their demands later evolved to include calls for the overhaul of the post-invasion political system, a caretaker government made up of independent technocrats and early elections. The protests forced key concessions from the political elite, including the resignation of Prime Minister Adel Abed Al Mahdi, the introduction of a new electoral law and elections to be held in October 2021. In addition, they saw the creation of a number of independent civil organisations and political parties meant to act as an organised opposition to the political class that has dominated Iraqi politics since 2003. However, in response to the increased use of violent coercion and targeted assassinations against activists, many have since began to campaign for a widespread boycott of the upcoming elections. In light of these developments, this panel will ask what's next for the Iraqi protest movement.

- Chair: Hanaa Edwar – Iraqi Al Amal Association
- Inas Jabbar – Iraqi Women Network
- Omar Al Jaffal – Journalist
- Taif Alkhudary – LSE Middle East Centre

Panel 2: Iraq's Climate Crisis: Environmental challenges and ways forward 11:30 – 12:30 BST / 13:30 – 14:30 AST

Iraq is considered to be one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change in the Middle East. By 2059, temperatures in the country are set to rise by 2.53 degrees, while rainfall will

decline by around nine percent. Already, water in Iraq's rivers and lakes are at critical levels and mismanagement of water resources coupled with outdated farming methods have resulted in increasing rates of desertification. Among the biggest challenges that Iraq will face in the coming decades is how to adapt to its drastically altered climate and mitigate the effects of climate change. Failure to effectively deal with the impacts of the climate crisis will only exacerbate existing socio-economic instability, with high temperatures and the government's inability to provide services such as electricity and water being historical triggers for civil upheavals in Iraq's recent past. In this session panellists will discuss the environmental challenges facing Iraq and examine ways to tackle them going forward.

- Chair: Michael Mason – LSE Middle East Centre
- Maha Yassin – Clingendael Institute
- Basima Abdulrahman – KESK
- Azzam Alwash – Nature Iraq

Simultaneous interpretation will be provided in Arabic and English