



Middle East  
Centre



CONFLICT  
RESEARCH  
PROGRAMME

Research at LSE ■

# CONFLICT RESEARCH PROGRAMME IRAQ

A SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

2017–2021



## ABOUT THE PROGRAMME

The Conflict Research Programme (CRP) was a three-year programme designed to address the drivers and dynamics of violent conflict in the Middle East and Africa and to inform the measures being used to tackle armed conflict and its impacts.

The programme focused on Iraq, Syria, DRC, Somalia and South Sudan, as well as the wider Horn of Africa/Red Sea and Middle East regions.

The LSE Middle East Centre led the research on Iraq and on wider drivers of conflict in the Middle East. Our partners and independent researchers in Iraq were crucial to the success of the research produced as part of this programme.

## OUR PARTNERS IN IRAQ

- » Al-Tahreer Association for Development
- » Iraqi Al-Amal Association
- » Iraqi Women Network
- » Public Aid Organization
- » Center of Strategic Studies, University of Anbar
- » The Institute of Regional and International Studies, American University of Iraq, Sulaimani
- » Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies



This project was funded by UK aid from the UK government; however, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.



Support for this work also came from the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme.

**Cover Image:** Iraqi protesters in Najaf, Iraq, 10 January 2020.  
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# WELCOME

The Conflict Research Programme Iraq (CRP–Iraq) ran from April 2017 to March 2021. The programme was designed to assess the drivers and dynamics of the violent conflict that came to dominate the country since 2003. CRP–Iraq started its work just after Iraqi forces liberated the northern city of Mosul from the Islamic State. In one of its first publications, we recognised that the liberation of Mosul offered a window of opportunity for the country. A little under a year later, in May 2018, Iraq went to the polls in its fourth national election since regime change. Could a decisive military victory have been married to a new popular government to deliver sustainable stability? Sadly, today, Iraq continues to be destabilised by primarily political dynamics.

The profound problems facing the country were highlighted by the sustained political protests that swept the south and centre of the country from October 2019 onwards. This mass movement was driven forward by young people, many of whom had not been born in 2003, when the Ba'athist regime was removed by the US-led invasion. The October protest movement developed an accurate critique of Iraq's post-2003 governing system. They damned it for being mired in corruption, failing to deliver reliable government services, let alone being able to offer the education and support needed for the country's young people to work towards a better future.

Today Iraq is in the midst of three interlinked crises; first, the extended violence used to suppress the protest movement continues and activists are still being murdered with impunity. Secondly, the Iraqi state faces a financial crisis that its politicians are unwilling to resolve. Finally, Covid-19 has cruelly exposed the weakness of the country's health service, undermined by nearly two decades of violence, mismanagement and corruption. The papers that the Iraqi and multinational CRP–Iraq team will have published by the end of the programme, numbering more than 30, outline in great detail the dynamics that have caused the crisis that Iraq faces today. In doing so, they have contributed to the ongoing discussions across Iraqi society and amongst its governing elite about how best to deliver a better life for the Iraqi population, one it so richly deserves.

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**TOBY DODGE**

CRP–IRAQ PROGRAMME DIRECTOR



As an Iraqi researcher working on this project, I was able to conduct in-depth investigations into important issues that are normally understudied due to lack of funding or interest.

Working as part of the project gave me access to excellent advice and support from Sandra, Toby and the team at all levels.

Another important aspect of this project is that it allowed local Iraqis to produce high quality research and make these available to other local researchers, both in Arabic and English, thus overcoming language barriers.

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OMAR AL-JAFFAL  
INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER

# PUBLICATIONS

As part of CRP–Iraq, the Middle East Centre has published 16 reports to date, of which two were translated into Arabic. A further 11 papers are due to be translated into Arabic in the coming months, and another 8 reports will be published in the coming year. These reports present key findings of the different research projects and offer policy recommendations for the Iraqi government, local authorities, international organisations and other stakeholders involved in Iraq. Below are a few highlighted papers.



## Payroll Expansion and the Political Marketplace in Iraq

*by Ali Al-Mawlawi, 2019*

The public payroll in Iraq has grown unchecked since 2003, commensurate with the country's vastly expanding oil wealth. With few alternative sources of government income, the state budget's growth poses worrying questions about whether this ongoing trend can be sustained without risking economic ruin. Based on an analysis of publicly available reports and unpublished government documents, and informed by interviews with officials in Baghdad, this paper quantifies the extent of the expansion in spending on public sector salaries and sheds light on aspects of the state's budgetary allocations that lack a significant degree of transparency. Notably, the paper focuses on spending trends within key ministries and the state-owned enterprises and offers recommendations on how spending could be curtailed through greater accountability and long-term investment in reform measures that could lead to a more robust approach to managing the country's economy.

## Assessing Iraqi Kurdistan's Stability: How Patronage Shapes Conflict

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by Zmkan Ali Saleem and Mac Skelton, 2020

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has generally lacked the security incidents common throughout the country since 2003. Yet, tension between the main political parties ruling over the region – the Erbil-based Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Sulaimani-based Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – has increasingly come to the surface. This paper explores the increasingly overt signs of volatility within the region and the reasons behind them. The current political order in the KRI is built upon a two-party patronage system that undercuts any meaningful institutionalisation of a joint administrative and security system. Public employment, access to government contracts, and positions in security forces are mediated by party-controlled channels. Troublingly, the potential for conflict arises when one party impedes on the capacity of the other to maintain its patronage networks. In the absence of sustained pressure from the public or international community, the political order will continue to rest upon a two-party patronage system, leaving the region vulnerable to instability.



## Iraq's Yazidis and ISIS: The Causes and Consequences of Sexual Violence in Conflict

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by Zeynep Kaya, 2019

This paper argued that preventing sexual violence in conflict is not possible without tackling the underlying structural factors that foster this form of violence. Militant radical groups such as ISIS use specific gender norms in connection to perceived religious/sectarian identities in order to morally justify and organise violence. ISIS reinforced gender norms that perpetuate patriarchy and men's control over women to organise the lives and behaviours of its recruits and the people under its control. ISIS's attacks on the Yazidis showed again that gender (and gendered violence) is a key component of the politics of violence and cannot be reduced simply to an outcome of conflict.



## List of Publications

		English	Arabic
Renad Mansour and Christine van den Toorn	The 2018 Iraqi Federal Elections: A Population in Transition?	July 2018	-
Zmkan Ali Saleem and Mac Skelton	Iraq's Disputed Internal Boundaries After Daesh	February 2019	-
Jessica Watkins	Satellite Sectarianisation or Plain Old Partisanship? Inciting Violence in the Arab Mainstream Media	April 2019	Forthcoming
Aida Al-Kaisy	A Fragmented Landscape: Barriers to Independent Media in Iraq	June 2019	Forthcoming
Güley Bor	Response to and Reparations for Conflict- Related Sexual Violence in Iraq: The Case of Shi'a Turkmen Survivors in Tel Afar	October 2019	April 2020
Zeynep Kaya	Iraq's Yazidis and ISIS: The Causes and Consequences of Sexual Violence in Conflict	November 2019	-
Hayder Jaber	Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Forces: The Possibilities for Disarmament, Demobilisation & Reintegration	November 2019	-
Ali Al-Mawlawi	Public Payroll Expansion in Iraq: Causes and Consequences	November 2019	Forthcoming
Alexander Hamilton	The Political Economy of Economic Policy in Iraq	March 2020	Forthcoming
Isadora Gotts	The Business of Recycling War Scrap: The Hashd al Shaabi's role in Mosul's post conflict economy	May 2020	-
Jessica Watkins	Iran in Iraq: The Limits of 'Smart Power' Amidst Public Protest	July 2020	-
Mac Skelton and Zmkan Ali Saleem	Assessing Iraqi Kurdistan's Stability: How Patronage Shapes Conflict	July 2020	-

Alexander Hamilton	Is Demography Destiny? The Economic & Political Consequences of Iraq's Demographic Profile	November 2020	-
Ali Al-Mawlawi and Sajad Jiyad	Confusion and Contention: Understanding the Failings of Decentralisation in Iraq	January 2021	-
Omar Sirri	Destructive Creations: Social-Spatial Transformations in Contemporary Baghdad	February 2021	-
Omar Jaffal and Safaa Khalaf	A Locality in Crisis: A Study of the Local Governance Crisis and Public Protests in Basra	April 2021	April 2021
Omar Jaffal	Undemocratic Parties in a 'Democratic' System: The Formation and Function of Political Parties in post-2003 Iraq	Forthcoming	Forthcoming
Omar Jaffal and Safaa Khalaf	'Basra is Burning': The Protests in the Basra Governorate 2018–2020	Forthcoming	Forthcoming
Benedict Robin D'Cruz	Protest, Violence and Strategies in Southeast Iraq	Forthcoming	Forthcoming
Jessica Watkins	Iraq's Local Policing Post-ISIL: Carving out an Arena for Community Service?	Forthcoming	Forthcoming
Michael Mason	Failing Flows: Water Management in Southern Iraq	Forthcoming	Forthcoming
CRP–Iraq	Disinformation in Iraq	Forthcoming	Forthcoming
Sajad Jiyad	Why Iraq's Next Elections are Unlikely to be Game Changers	Forthcoming	-
Taif Alkhudary	Challenging Narratives of 'Fate and Divine Will': Access to Justice for Gender-based Violence in Iraq	Forthcoming	Forthcoming

# PROJECTS

Over the past 3 years, CRP–Iraq has funded 20 research projects investigating the various drivers of conflict in Iraq, covering topics as varied as media disinformation in the country, the role of patronage networks in the Kurdish Region of Iraq, and water governance in Basra. Below are some project highlights.

## Reforming Legal Responses to Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region

*Led by Güley Bor, Independent Researcher*

This project analysed the extent to which existing domestic laws and practices surrounding conflict-related sexual violence response are being implemented and suggested how these laws should be reformed to provide better responses to the needs of female survivors of conflict-related sexual violence.

As part of the project, Güley published four blog pieces as well as a report, in Arabic and English, looking at the situation of Shi'a Turkmen survivors who returned to Tel Afar. The project informed policy discussions by providing an advocacy tool for politicians in Iraq and the KRI, NGOs and international development agencies and initiatives, including the UK Department for International Development and UNHCR.

## 'Pockets of Media Civicness' in a Conflictual Political Landscape: A Case Study of Iraqi Media

*Led by Aida Al-Kaisy*

The issues that have plagued Iraq's political and social history – violence, war, national and international power struggles – are all entrenched in the make up of the country's media landscape today. Fifteen years on from the US invasion, much of the media in Iraq still reflect the ongoing intersecting narratives of ethno-sectarianism, political control and violence, with a veneer of partisan media ownership masking a culture of fear and self-censorship.

Although many Iraqi journalists battle continually with the concept of professional identity, recent policy work and academic research has begun to show that, nonetheless, 'pockets of civicness' are emerging within the media landscape. This project sought the positive in an arena defined by the negative, exploring opportunities for enabling Iraqis to carve out spaces which can contribute to better journalism and, ultimately, better local and national governance.

Iraqi journalists are facing significant challenges to their work and the spaces for freedom of expression are becoming more limited with time. CRP–Iraq provided an opportunity to look at where the possibilities for independent and public interest media might lay with consideration for the continually changing context of Iraq. Without this kind of research, countries such as Iraq would continue to be defined by old tropes and stereotypes.

**AIDA AL-KAISY**



The then EU Ambassador to Iraq, Ramon Blecua, with Christine van den Toorn of AUIS and Ali Al-Mawlawi of the Al-Bayan Center speaking at a jointly convened workshop by CRP-Iraq and Al-Bayan Center in Baghdad, December 2018.

## **Patriarchal Norms and Legal Discrimination Against Women and Girls in Iraq**

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*Led by Taif Alkhudary, in partnership with Iraqi Al-Amal Association, Iraqi Women Network and Public Aid Organization*

This project examined how current domestic Iraqi laws discriminate against women and girls, both in theory and in practice. It assessed the public authorities' interpretation of laws affecting women and girls' rights and gender roles and analysed the experiences of women within their country's legal system. In this way, the research facilitated a better understanding of the underlying factors that lead to institutional and legal unaccountability, the prevalence of patriarchy in legal practices and the impact this has on women and girls' lived experiences. It shed a light on the reasons for delays or obstacles to institutionalisation and the strengthening of the rule of law in Iraq, offering potential strategies to overcome this.

## **A Locality in Crisis: A Study of the Local Governance Crisis and Public Protests in Basra**

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*Led by Omar Al-Jaffal and Safaa Khalaf*

This project analysed the role of, and challenges facing, local governance in the Basra province of Iraq in light of the ongoing crisis in service provision. The reasons for the persistent services crisis vary: one is the very small share of the total Iraqi annual budget that Basra receives; another is the province's poor infrastructure, which has not been maintained since the end of the Iran-Iraq war in the late 1980s. The project examined the public's responses to this crisis, the protest movement in Basra and the south of Iraq and its political causes and implications on state-citizen dynamics in the province, and in Iraq generally. Unlike most studies of Basra's crisis which focus on the role of the federal government, this study addressed the crisis through examining local dynamics and their impact on local governance.

# PEOPLE

We are grateful to our Iraq-based consultants and research partners whose expertise and collaborative spirit enabled valuable CRP–Iraq research to take place despite often difficult circumstances. Special thanks go to: Public Aid Organization, Iraqi Al-Amal Association, Iraqi Women Network, Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, the Center of Strategic Studies at Anbar University, Al-Tahreer Association for Development and the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani.



**TOBY DODGE**  
PROGRAMME DIRECTOR

From 2017 onwards, CRP–Iraq has built a series of innovative research networks across the whole of the country, from Basra to Erbil. These networks, in partnership with LSE, have produced ground-breaking research on the on-going dynamics that shape Iraq's politics. The published research will serve as a rich resource for those seeking to understand all aspects of Iraqi politics in the future.



**SANDRA SFEIR**  
PROGRAMME MANAGER

Managing this programme has been an incredibly rewarding experience. I'm proud of its diverse portfolio of research projects, the impressive number of open-access and Arabic language outputs produced by the team, and the huge engagement we've had with audiences both within and outside of Iraq. The most important legacy of CRP–Iraq for me has been the establishment of strong and enduring partnerships between the LSE Middle East Centre and individuals and organisations within Iraq.



## JESSICA WATKINS

RESEARCHER

I have been lucky enough to work on projects ranging from the pan-Arab media to Iranian soft power, to local policing and post-ISIL reconciliation processes in Iraq. I have learned a huge amount, but the most rewarding experience has been working with eight Iraqi researchers from Salah al-Din, Anbar, and Ninawa, who have really been the key to the projects' success. Covid restrictions have obliged us to work remotely but I hope to meet them all in person one day!



## TAIF ALKHUDARY

RESEARCHER

The Conflict Research Programme has provided me with an excellent opportunity to connect and work closely with researchers in Iraq, an experience that has given me invaluable insights into how to manage and conduct fieldwork in difficult circumstances. It has also given me the opportunity to examine access to justice for gender-based violence in Federal Iraq, a topic that has been long-overlooked due to continued instability in the region.



## ZEYNEP KAYA

RESEARCHER

As part of CRP-Iraq, I worked on gender, violence and conflict in Iraq and it was a great experience to carry out research on this important topic. I also enjoyed working with such brilliant scholars from whom I learnt a lot, especially through cross-regional engagements we had about our research areas.

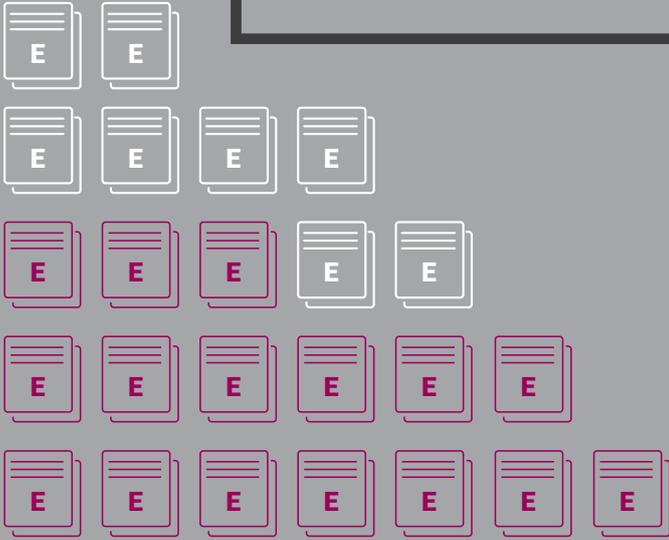
Through our research on patriarchal norms and legal discrimination, we had the opportunity to interview civil society activists, politicians, lawyers and judges, and tribal leaders. This allowed us to challenge some of our assumptions about how gender-based violence is understood among various stakeholders in Iraq and those working to support women's rights in the country.

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## ANFAL ABED

PUBLIC AID ORGANIZATION

# KEY NUMBERS



DOWNLOADED ON AVERAGE  
TIMES PER MONTH

149



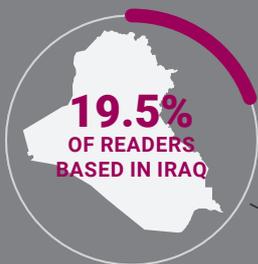
IN TOTAL **24** REPORTS PUBLISHED

**13** TRANSLATED TO ARABIC



25 EVENTS ORGANISED

800+ ATTENDEES



# LOOKING FORWARD

As the Conflict Research Programme draws to a close, the Middle East Centre will continue to focus on Iraq and to produce original research on the drivers of conflict and instability in the country. In particular, our research will focus on how the relationship between the state and society has developed 18 years on from regime change. A critical examination of the post-2003 political system, implemented by the US and exiled Iraqi politicians as a means of managing religious diversity, will be at the heart of this research. As too, will its impact on the state, civil institutions and anti-systemic protests. We will continue with our research thanks to an award from the Henry Luce Foundation towards our project 'Managing Religious Diversity in the Middle East: The Muhasasa Ta'ifia in Iraq, 2003–2018'

Early elections, scheduled for October 2021, will provide further opportunities to examine the functioning of the Iraqi state and voter engagement, as well as to analyse whether protests that have swept across Iraq since October 2019 will have any real impact on results. We will also closely monitor the worrying trend of increased violent coercion and the assassination of activists and its impact on freedom of expression. In addition, we will continue to follow the development of the on-going economic crisis and the effects of the global Covid-19 pandemic on the country's fragile health and education systems. These focus areas will give us an opportunity to expand, build on, and take the legacy of the research carried out as part of the Conflict Research Programme in new directions.

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**TAIF ALKHUDARY**  
CRP–IRAQ RESEARCHER



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