

# Centering Iraq Policy on Human Rights and Fair Elections

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Brief Analysis

**The surest way to counter Iran’s malign influence is to proactively focus on human rights issues that the new prime minister can actually affect, such as organizing free elections and preventing further violence against protestors.**

**O**n February 1, a plurality of Iraqi parliamentary factions gave President Barham Salih the go-ahead to nominate Mohammed Tawfiq Allawi as the new prime minister-designate. The mild-mannered Shia Islamist nominee will now attempt to form and ratify his cabinet in the next thirty days. As he does so, political blocs will probably rally behind him while limiting his mandate to organizing early elections next year, having struggled through a long and fractious process to replace resigned prime minister Adil Abdulmahdi. For the first time since the dramatic events of the past two months, Iraqis and U.S. policymakers alike can catch their breath and consider their medium-term options.

## ENGAGING THE NEW PREMIER

**I**n the end, Allawi was chosen because he was unlikely to spur strong opposition from any corner, including Shia leader Muqtada al-Sadr’s movement, Iranian officials, Sunni factions, the Kurds, Iraqi moderates, or the West. He was by no means Tehran’s preference—the Iran-backed Bina bloc failed to push their first four candidates through. Rumors persist that Allawi was helped over the finish line by lobbying from Lebanese Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah; however, this was probably orchestrated not by Allawi himself, but by Bina, which desperately sought to block the nomination of Mustafa al-Kadhimi, a moderate civil-society activist who currently heads the Iraqi National Intelligence Service. As for Washington, if the cool tone of the State Department response to Allawi’s nomination is any indicator, the administration will judge him by his actions and the company he keeps.

Whatever its views, the U.S. government does need to engage Allawi quickly—before his ratification, as his small transition team shapes the cabinet and prepares for office. To be sure, his political and religious sponsors are already steering him away from major policy decisions on any matters besides setting up elections. For instance, on January 31, the day before Allawi's nomination, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani made clear that renegotiating the presence of foreign military forces should be left to the next government, after new elections. Nevertheless, Allawi will be in power at a critical juncture, setting the conditions for a free and fair vote and heading an interim government that will last not only until elections (likely in 2021), but until a new prime minister is appointed some months afterward (which may be Allawi himself if he wins sufficient support). He will thus be in the picture for the next two years at minimum, and perhaps much longer.

Washington should be very clear with Allawi about its expectations and redlines in the coming period, giving him all the information he needs to fulfill his domestic role while taking into account the views of a major economic and security cooperation partner. In general, U.S. expectations align with those of the Iraqi people, especially on the following issues:

- **Protecting Iraqi citizens.** According to the Iraqi High Commission for Human Rights, Prime Minister Abdulmahdi's government oversaw crackdowns in which officially sanctioned militias killed 536 protestors and injured 23,545. Washington should strongly press Allawi to prevent any future use of live fire, riot bullets, or gas canisters against protestors (even the latter items are often used in deadly fashion in Iraq). In addition, President Trump, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and other officials should routinely and publicly mention the plight of Iraqi protestors in the same robust manner they have called for the protection of Iranian protestors. The administration should also praise their resilience and bravery—they already do so with Iran's demonstrators, creating a contrast with Iraq that is stark and noticeable.
- **Protecting state institutions.** Militias used Abdulmahdi's tenure to accelerate the installation of corrupt officials in the prime minister's office, assorted ministries, the security forces, and strategic sectors such as banking, ports, customs, and civil aviation. There are signs that Allawi is already being pressured to bring corrupt officials into his office. Accordingly, Washington needs to let him know that it is watching very closely and has a raft of targeted sanctions available for imminent use against corrupt senior officials and human rights abusers who continue to operate within the system. The most obvious such targets are Abdulmahdi's national security advisor Faleh al-Fayyad and chief of staff Abu Jihad (birth name Mohammed al-Hashemi), both of whom played paramount roles in organizing the killing of protestors, among other violations. The U.S. government should also immediately punish any further Iraqi moves to purge technocrats, including at security institutions such as the National Intelligence Service.
- **Protecting democratic rights.** The UN and European Union have both called for early elections, and if Allawi is able to avoid the issues that plagued the broadly condemned 2018 ballot and oversee a free and fair vote next year, then Iraq has a chance to reboot as a democracy. All indications are that he does indeed have the authority and responsibility to ensure that the process is not corrupted, to protect candidates and civil society in the lead-up to election day, and to support intense international observation of the vote.
- **Protecting U.S. personnel.** Secretary of State Pompeo should tell Allawi directly that any attacks on U.S. personnel will trigger painful retaliation against Iraqi militias as well as Iranian targets inside Iraq and beyond. He should also be privately made aware of the potential breadth of senior leadership targets that might be struck, and the deep crisis this would bring on his government.

## RECOGNIZING PARTNERS, DETERRING ENEMIES

**A**s recently as last September, the United States seemed isolated in its goal of seeking a sovereign, stable, and democratic Iraq. Today, in the aftermath of months-long protests and the blooming of political resistance to Iran-backed militias, Washington should feel reassured that powerful forces inside Iraq are actively seeking the

same goal. Protestors, civil society movements, and Kurdish factions, along with President Salih, Speaker of Parliament Mohammed al-Halbousi, and many Sunni legislators, have shown determination and bravery in **standing up to militia intimidation (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/soleimani-is-dead-the-road-ahead-for-iranian-backed-militias-in-iraq>)**.

In addition to praising these Iraqis who put Iraq first, the U.S. government should give them a better-structured support mechanism, while also reaching out to the next generation of leaders and to less well-known political and social actors. A sizable Track II program should be established to help moderates get organized, spread their message, and stay aware of physical threats before the next election.

Moreover, many moderate Iraqis feel that Washington should keep up the pressure on destructive actors such as Kataib Hezbollah, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, the Badr Organization, and Faleh al-Fayyad. If these actors see that pressure is lifting, they will come back with a vengeance, killing not only protestors and Americans, but also new Iraqi political actors who emerge in the lead-up to elections. To prevent this outcome, the United States should establish a response ratio that triggers near-miss or lethal U.S. strikes (acknowledged or unacknowledged) on Iraqi militia leaders. (The details of this ratio should be known only to the U.S. government. This kind of system was used to weight responses to Saddam Hussein's constant harassment of U.S. no-fly zone patrols in the 1990s.) For those seeking peace and safety for Americans and Iraqis, it is important to deter risky rocket attacks on U.S. bases, which will eventually kill further Americans, even if by "accident."

At the same time, Washington should coordinate with Britain and the EU on an extensive, open-ended sanctions program that accelerates the targeting of corrupt Iraqi leaders and human rights violators. The order in which individuals are targeted should depend on their actions, with more negative behavior moving them up the queue. The United States should also withdraw security cooperation support from the Interior Ministry until a new minister is installed and removes human rights violators—a step made necessary due to the blatant involvement of ministry forces in repressing protestors. Finally, Washington should consider sanctioning individuals within Badr rather than the entire organization, to better splinter the already fractured movement.

## STRATEGIC VALUE OF A HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH

**U.** S. officials do not need to trumpet Tehran's malign influence in Iraq anymore: everyone in the country now understands this, which is why protestors have tried to burn down Iran's embassy and consulate rather than America's. The Iraqi people are America's best ally in the areas under Baghdad's control, so Washington should help to protect their slow-burning revolt against Iran's proxy occupation forces.

The best way to do so is by refocusing U.S. policy on human rights and anti-corruption efforts. On these issues, the United States is in lockstep with the next generation of Iraqis, the religious establishment, and the international community. Any U.S. administration can and should get behind these principles. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Lebanese Hezbollah are doing everything they can to defend Iraq's corrupt political elite from fulfilling the people's demands, so Washington should exploit this potentially fatal error on Tehran's part.

*Michael Knights is a senior fellow with The Washington Institute. Since 2003, he has conducted extensive on-the-ground research in Iraq alongside security forces and government ministries. ❖*

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