

A Strategy for Iraq: Guidelines for the Biden Administration

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Brief Analysis

A senior State Department official, a Baghdad bureau chief, and an Iraqi scholar explore the opportunities and increasingly desperate dangers facing U.S. policy toward the country.

On July 14, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Bilal Wahab, Joey Hood, and Jane Arraf. Wahab is the Institute's Wagner Fellow and author of its recent Transition 2021 memo "[Promoting Sovereignty and Accountability in Iraq \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/promoting-sovereignty-and-accountability-iraq-guidelines-biden-administration\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/promoting-sovereignty-and-accountability-iraq-guidelines-biden-administration)." Hood is the State Department's acting assistant secretary for Near Eastern affairs. Arraf is the Baghdad bureau chief for the New York Times. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Bilal Wahab

The key challenge in Iraq today is governance. Can the Iraqi state provide electricity, jobs, healthcare, and other basic services to its people? Thus far, it has consistently failed at these basic responsibilities. Instead of bringing much-needed attention to this problem, however, international media tend to focus on issues that feel like distractions to Iraqi citizens. Drones, rockets, and regional military flare-ups dominate the headlines, and although these issues are important, the average Iraqi has much more basic, urgent concerns that are not being addressed.

At the same time, there is a growing sense of agency among Iraq's body politic. From the downfall of Saddam Hussein to the rise of the Islamic State/ISIS, the biggest developments in Iraq previously featured heavy involvement from the international community. Today, the Iraqi people are leading the effort to address their most fundamental issues of governance.

The Biden administration has a cadre of experts whose careers were built around Iraq. They know the issues and the characters. Yet much has changed inside Iraq in just the past few years. Power has shifted from political parties to militias, with the Popular Mobilization Forces now wielding considerable leverage inside the government. For example, while the Health Ministry's budget has declined by 16 percent since 2019—during a pandemic, no less—the PMF's budget increased by 27 percent. Sectarian political shifts are plentiful as well; internal divisions within the country's Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish parties now run as deep as the divisions between these factions, resulting in new electoral alignments.

Despite their increased agency, however, many Iraqis feel they are still paying the price for geopolitical developments that are beyond their control. Accordingly, the United States needs to cultivate deeper ties with Iraq that go beyond counterterrorism and relentless discussions about troop levels and responsibilities. In particular, Washington should pressure Iraq's political elite to invest more deeply in local economic success and good governance. Iraq is not yet a democracy, but it does have competitive politics that can be nudged toward a framework that serves the people better. Yet this will require reining in the militias and reducing corruption.

Confronting the militias is particularly difficult due to a lack of political will. The Iraqi state does not have an international patron, but the militias do. The state does not feel strong enough to fight back on its own.

Yet challenging the militias is not enough; foreign officials also need to expand their understanding of what qualifies as a human rights abuse. Iraq's corruption, mismanagement, and graft are so all-consuming that they amount to an abuse of human rights.

Finally, U.S. officials must not forget that a stable and democratic Iraq is key to American policy throughout the region. Other Iraqi models—from a strong dictatorship to a weak, failing state—have proven to be sources of great instability.

Joey Hood

Our relationship with Iraq will always be important in its own right. We continue to seek an Iraq that is sovereign, stable, and prosperous, and the biggest obstacle to that work today is militia groups. Iranian-backed militias use propaganda and attacks to draw attention to the U.S. military presence because they do not want to talk about the broader U.S. relationship with Iraq, which is where their interests and their vision for the country are really threatened.

We are very active in stabilization work and helping Iraqis recover from ISIS. For those citizens who live in areas liberated from ISIS and have clean water, electricity, healthcare, and kids in school, they are most likely using facilities rehabilitated with U.S. government funding.

We are also talking with the Iraqi government about its moral duty to protect civil society activists. It has been one year since Hisham al-Hashimi was killed. We continue to push for accountability for those who killed him, Ehab al-Wazni, and others.

The militias want to create conflict and portray the United States as an occupying force. But we are not at war with the militias, we just want them to leave us and the Iraqi people alone. The more time we spend dodging rockets and defending ourselves—which we will do—the less time we have to deliver lifesaving aid. But deterring the militias is the Iraqi government's role, and therefore a question of political will. Baghdad has the region's premier counterterrorism service, which is capable of taking on the toughest ISIS members. If they will not designate and handle the militias similarly, the United States cannot do that for them.

Many Iraqi nationalists want to see a brighter future with a strong state, and that is what we will work on together. If the upcoming elections prove to be illegitimate, we will be very clear about saying so. We will not shy away from the truth as Iraq veers closer and closer to disaster.

Jane Arraf

On July 12, a deadly hospital fire broke out in a Nasiriyah COVID ward. And as the death toll continues to mount, several aspects of the tragedy—from shoddy construction to ignored warnings about oxygen leaks—make clear that it was entirely avoidable. An entire generation of young Iraqis has grown up with no memory of Saddam, and incidents like the hospital inferno have made them believe that living under his rule would be better than their current circumstances. Convincing them otherwise seems impossible when there is absolutely nothing for them in Iraq today.

In my reporting, I see young people in Nasiriyah and Baghdad exhibit incredible bravery even when security forces are shooting at them. More than ever before, they express their desperation to leave. A ten-year-old recently asked if he could come back to Canada with me, saying he was afraid the militias would shoot him. I have seen kids as young as ten, eleven, and twelve with bullet wounds from gunmen firing at protests.

How did it get to this point? We cannot solve these problems without understanding how we got to this point. When I visited a new Iraqi hospital before today's event, I learned it was a Turkish-built project that took ten years to complete—and this in an area where no new hospital had been constructed since 1981. This is not just an infrastructure issue; Iraqis have so little faith now in their elections and their leaders. It has become cliché to say “Iraq is at a crossroads,” but the country really is on the verge of something cataclysmic this time.

The value of the recent protest movement is that it brought together such a broad cross-section of Iraqis—families, women, children, people of all religions and no religion. But the movement has been deliberately and effectively crushed, with its leaders murdered or forced into hiding. Although protests have persisted in some places, none of the big agenda items the movement hoped to achieve has materialized, and no one has been brought to justice for killings by security forces and militias.

This lack of accountability has diminished activists' willingness to participate in elections. Additionally, the new election law erected high barriers to entry: it is very difficult to raise enough funds and find enough strong candidates to launch a national political party. Such problems have greatly undermined the chances that the next vote will create meaningful change in Iraq.

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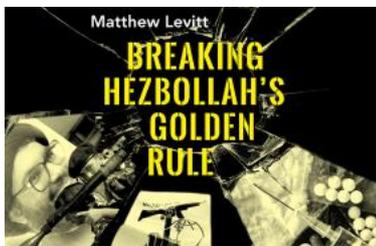
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