

Biden's Indifference Has Given Iran the Upper Hand in Iraq

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Articles & Testimony

In light of Tehran's concerted efforts to reverse last year's electoral setback, it has become too risky to let Baghdad's nascent democracy simply fend for itself.

About six weeks ago, U.S. President Joe Biden boasted (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/07/09/joe-biden-saudi-arabia-israel-visit/>) in the *Washington Post* that the Middle East was “more stable and secure” than when he inherited the region from his predecessor, Donald Trump. Among other examples, Biden named Iraq, where rocket attacks against U.S. troops and diplomats had diminished. While he's correct that fewer Americans have been targeted, this single metric alone is hardly enough to support his claim of stability. By nearly every other measure, Iraq is less stable today than in January 2021—and U.S. interests there more threatened.

It's a remarkable turn of events. Just 10 months ago, Iraq improbably appeared poised to form a government committed to diminishing the destructive role played by Iran-backed militias and enforcing Iraqi sovereignty against its bigger neighbor. Now, Iran's political allies in Iraq have the upper hand, the country's fragile democracy is threatened as never before, and, for the first time in a decade, violence even among Shiite groups is a possibility.

It didn't have to be this way. The big winner in last October's parliamentary elections was Moqtada al-Sadr, a populist Shiite cleric who during the campaign called for an Iraq dominated by neither Washington nor Tehran. Sadr's alliance secured a plurality of the 329 seats in the Council of Representatives, defeating Iranian-backed Shiite Islamist parties that represent the political arms of the militias known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).

Sadr is no panacea. Following the 2003 U.S. invasion, Sadr's Mahdi Army became a leading adversary of the U.S.

presence in Iraq, and the cleric was nearly killed by U.S. forces. More recently, though, Sadr has positioned himself as a nationalist, an anti-corruption crusader, and a critic of PMF military activity in Iraq targeting U.S. diplomatic and military personnel.

To be sure, we do not know whether the mercurial cleric, once in power, would eventually have opted for an Iranian-style theocracy, with himself as the self-styled supreme leader. In the wake of the election, at least, Sadr was poised to establish a majoritarian government coalition of Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds that excluded Iranian-backed parties. He and his parliamentary allies might have been able to exert Iraqi sovereignty and fight corruption—a major goal of a massive countrywide protest movement in 2019.

That government never materialized. Government formation was delayed by Iran's allies: PMF groups Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada, and Kataib Hezbollah reportedly threatened to overrun the government, attempted to **assassinate** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-backed-militia-behind-attack-iraqi-pm-sources-2021-11-08/>) Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, **rained** (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/17/pro-iran-protesters-torch-kurd-party-offices-in-baghdad>) down rockets and drones on the Kurds, and **bombed** (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/01/iraqi-parliament-speakers-home-targeted-amid-power-plays>) the home of the speaker of parliament, Mohamed al-Halbousi. Admittedly, Sadr and his Kurdish partners didn't exactly seize their moment, but at least they were making slow progress.

Then the Iran-backed Coordination Framework coalition—Sadr's Shiite rivals—played their ace card. To prevent Sadr, the Kurds, and Sunnis, who had secured a majority of the seats in parliament, from selecting a prime minister and cabinet, the Iran-backed opposition used their control of the corrupt judiciary to move the goalposts. The Federal Supreme Court ruled that now—for the first time—not just a simple majority but a two-thirds supermajority would be needed to form a government. Unable to reach that threshold, Sadr's 73 members of parliament resigned en masse in June, and their seats were reallocated to Iran-aligned parties.

Who masterminded this judicial coup? None other than Nouri al-Maliki, who served as premier from 2006 to 2014 and is best known for his prodigious corruption and vicious sectarianism, which in no small part contributed to the rise of the Islamic State. In January 2021, he **reportedly** (<https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/iraq/2021/07/26/ex-iraqi-pm-nouri-al-maliki-narrowly-escaped-us-sanctions/>) narrowly escaped being sanctioned by the Trump administration. As kingmaker, Maliki would once again be pulling the strings.

Sadr and Maliki have been rivals for the mantle of Shiite leadership in Iraq since at least 2008, when government forces led by Maliki attacked and defeated Sadr's Mahdi Army in the Battle of Basra. Given this history of bad blood, Sadr responded to the Coordination Framework's July 25 nomination of a Maliki ally—Mohammed Shia al-Sudani—for prime minister by directing his supporters to occupy the parliament and prevent a vote for prime minister, which they duly did. It was as if Sadr had taken a page from the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrectionists in Washington.

Today, Sadrists no longer inhabit the legislature but continue to camp out in the International Zone just across from the parliament, blocking Sudani's election. Meanwhile, Sadr is calling for the dissolution of parliament and for early elections to be held under a revised election law—demands opposed by the Iran-backed Coordination Framework. As the impasse drags on, tensions among Iraq's Shiites are spiking. Regardless of how the standoff is resolved, Iran will likely emerge with a strengthened position in Baghdad, thwarting the will of an Iraqi electorate that overwhelmingly voted for change last October.

To be sure, it's not clear that Washington could have prevented this outcome. In any event, it doesn't appear that the administration made any concerted effort to forestall this scenario. In nearly nine months between the elections and

the Sadr deputies' walkout, public records show, senior U.S. State Department and National Security Council officials visited Iraq only twice, and Secretary of State Antony Blinken made just a small handful of calls to Iraqi decision-makers in an attempt to affect developments on the ground. The excellent new U.S. ambassador to Iraq, Alina Romanowski, may have pressed the cause after her arrival in Baghdad this June as well. But by all appearances, she did so without sufficient backing from Washington.

The absence of high-level administration engagement in Iraq's post-election attempts to form a government was not an oversight but a purposeful decision. As one anonymous senior Biden administration official said (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/12/17/background-press-call-on-broad-middle-east-regional-year-end-discussion/>) rather indifferently last December, their plan was to "leave it to the Iraqis to sort out."

Washington doesn't typically weigh in on election outcomes in foreign countries, preferring instead to focus on supporting institutions. Regrettably, Iraq is not a typical case, given that its fledgling democracy has been struggling to survive under the pressure of Iran's long arm in Iraq, the approximately 100,000-strong PMF militia. Elections in Iraq could ultimately have contributed toward weakening Iran's stranglehold, but U.S. disengagement during the government formation process left a void eagerly filled by Tehran.

Meanwhile, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps chief Esmail Qaani and other senior Iranian officials visited Iraq no fewer than 10 times in recent months to threaten, cajole, and convince their local partners and adversaries how to sort out the next government. While the number of visits alone doesn't measure U.S. interest, the disparity does suggest that Washington's approach was laissez-faire. The administration did not employ Washington's diplomatic and economic leverage to protect a process under attack from Tehran.

All this matters because Iraq is important to the United States and its interests in the region. Not only did thousands of Americans lose life and limb to help build a post-Saddam Hussein Iraq, but, unlike Afghanistan, Iraq really is a counterterrorism partner with a real chance at becoming a full-fledged democracy. The country stands on vital geostrategic territory, holds the world's fifth-largest oil reserves, and is on the front line against Iran's effort to expand its influence throughout the Middle East.

As Washington appears to inch closer to a nuclear deal with Tehran, countering the latter's meddling in Baghdad has taken on added urgency—both for the United States and for its regional partners. After Iraqis bravely voted for parties opposed to Iranian domination, the Biden administration's subsequent hands-off approach to the government formation process has allowed the mullahs to steal victory from the jaws of defeat. Inexplicably, it appears that Iraq—where the United States has fought two major wars in recent decades—is no longer a priority for Washington. Unfortunately, it is for Tehran.

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and former assistant secretary for Near Eastern affairs at the State Department. This article was originally published on the Foreign Policy website (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/08/24/biden-iraq-iran-sadr-elections-parliament-militias-protests/>). ❖

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