

Buying Time in Baghdad? What to Expect from Sudani's Government

by [Bilal Wahab \(/experts/bilal-wahab\)](/experts/bilal-wahab)

Nov 3, 2022

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Bilal Wahab \(/experts/bilal-wahab\)](/experts/bilal-wahab)

Bilal Wahab is the Nathan and Esther K. Wagner fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

The hostile and corrupt forces arrayed behind him might ease their anti-American activities just to reassert their power at home, so Washington should make the new government's honeymoon a short one—and work around it if necessary to help the Iraqi people.

On October 27, Iraq's parliament approved Mohammed Shia al-Sudani's cabinet, formalizing a new government that looks much like the militia-infested government ousted in 2020 after months of mass protests and brutal crackdowns. Many observers have cast the outcome as the lesser evil to the political violence and dysfunction that prevailed during the past year's deadlock. Yet given its backers and structure, the new government may simply enable a fuller takeover by Shia political factions that are more susceptible to Iran's pull—especially in the absence of balancing actors such as Muqtada al-Sadr, Barham Salih, and Mustafa al-Kadhimi.

The Biden administration has welcomed Sudani's ascension, concluding that the best course for now is to start the relationship cordially. State Department spokesman Ned Price congratulated the new prime minister and noted, "We look forward to working with him and his government on the range of our shared interests"—a sentiment echoed by Ambassador Alina Romanowski. Sudani and his backers may reciprocate at first, if only because they believe souring relations with the United States could be too risky in the current environment of potent internal and regional challenges. Yet therein lies the strategic risk—if Washington simply stands pat during this presumed tactical lull in anti-American actions and rhetoric, it may give the militias-turned-politicians enough time to shoot their roots back into the Iraqi state's core institutions.

What's Under the Hood?

On paper, Sudani's government was formed as a consensus entity that reaches across ethnosectarian lines. In practice, however, it is dominated by Shia parties who waited until after they engineered a ruling plurality in

parliament before inviting Sunni and Kurdish parties to participate. Their platform includes a long to-do list of seemingly beneficial policy initiatives, but with no accountability measures attached to failure. Rather, the new government seems tailor-made to advance anti-democratic trends, ignoring the will of the millions of Iraqis who rose up in 2019 against a system based on divvying state resources and power among sectarian patronage networks.

In essence, the Shia have won the ethnosectarian war. Their internal divisions are what halted government formation for the past year, with Sadr winning the election but eventually succumbing to Iran-backed rivals. After failing at the ballot box, these rivals banded together with deadly effectiveness under the so-called Coordination Framework. Kurdish and Sunni groups were rendered inconsequential through a slew of military, legal, and political maneuvers, not to mention their internal divisions. The few elected moderates have now been coopted or sidelined.

Moreover, like his two predecessors, Prime Minister Sudani lacks a parliamentary constituency of his own. No surprise, then, that the Coordination Framework imposed the majority of his cabinet appointments. This furthers a long-developing Iraqi trend whereby powerful political players step back from the spotlight and accountability of directly heading the government in favor of ruling through bureaucrats. For instance, the Kurdish and Sunni ministers selected for the new cabinet hold little political sway in their respective communities; the only high-profile Sunni figure to retain a prominent political position is parliamentary speaker Mohammed al-Halbousi. Indeed, Shia leaders such as Nouri al-Maliki, Hadi al-Ameri, Qais al-Khazali, and Faleh al-Fayyad prefer puppet mastery—much like Sadr has done over the years.

What to Expect

A part from Sadr's absence, the powers behind Sudani's government are the same ones that supported Adil Abdulmahdi's government in 2018-2020. It is therefore logical to assume that their primary goals remain unchanged—namely, to take over the state, develop the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) as a parallel institution to the national military, and join Iraq and Iran at the hip (which would also facilitate closer connections with China and Russia). Indeed, Sudani's nascent government program already reflects some of these intentions, promising to “support and develop the PMF's capabilities and build its institutions” instead of integrating it into the broader military—a potentially catastrophic approach given that PMF militias have become the country's primary source of instability. Even in those instances when Iraqi leaders have asserted greater agency and bucked foreign influence, they have largely misused this independence.

Yet the new government's tactics might be less aggressive and hasty at first, partly due to internal power politics and regional dynamics, and also because of Sudani's reputation as a clean, capable administrator (albeit one with ample political ambitions). Although his cabinet **[and personal office \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/militia-journalist-head-new-prime-ministers-communications-team\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/militia-journalist-head-new-prime-ministers-communications-team)** include many ministers imposed by entities that have been designated by the U.S. government for terrorism and corruption, he handpicked the key posts of interior and finance minister at least in part to reassure Washington. And regardless of what Sudani does, the militias might not be in a hurry to resume attacks on U.S. targets. They and their backers might also decide to ease **[their pressure campaign on the Kurdistan Region \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/militias-pivot-away-us-targets-toward-kurdistan-and-turkish-bases\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/militias-pivot-away-us-targets-toward-kurdistan-and-turkish-bases)** in order to keep the Kurds in government, perhaps even making overtures to them on oil rights and the Sinjar territorial dispute.

The new government may be less predatory economically as well, if only to stymie its two gravest threats: public anger and Sadr. Sudani could invest in public services and jobs, especially in the predominantly Shia provinces in the south. Thanks to high oil prices and a coordinated effort to prevent the previous government from passing a budget, around \$85 billion is lying in Iraq's coffers waiting to be spent. No wonder, then, that Sudani has made passing a budget one of his top priorities. The resultant cash injection could buy the new government some quiet and, perhaps, goodwill, while also resurrecting Abdulmahdi's plans to **[deepen ties with China \(https://www.al-](https://www.al-)**

[monitor.com/originals/2020/02/iraq-economy-abdul-mahdi-china.html](https://www.monitor.com/originals/2020/02/iraq-economy-abdul-mahdi-china.html)). Ultimately, a flurry of government contracts would be a boon for the powerful forces behind Sudani.

One potential wildcard is the question of early elections, which remains unsettled. The new government has promised to hold them, but not before amending the election law. Accordingly, the Coordination Framework will do whatever it can to shape this legislative campaign effort in a manner that hurts Sadr, who lost his ability to counter such machinations after withdrawing his members from parliament. Coupled with a budgetary war chest and an empowered PMF, these efforts may enable the government to limit early elections to the local/provincial level or avoid them altogether.

In short, time is not on Sadr's side. Despite his potential as a formidable opposition figure, his strong public support is shrinking, and his former Kurdish and Sunni partners are disillusioned with him. His dilemma is a thorny one: if he speaks up now, he may give his rivals unity of purpose against him; if he waits for the new government's luster to fade, he might be too late.

Policy Recommendations

When the Biden administration took office, U.S.-Iraq relations were near rupture. The Trump administration viewed the country primarily through the prism of Iran, often leading Washington to battle out its differences with Tehran on Iraqi soil. Biden's team deescalated this tension and promised to deal with Baghdad in its own right, yet this decoupling soon became the de facto U.S. policy in itself rather than just a temporary prelude to pushing a new set of initiatives in Iraq. The administration **largely disengaged** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/bidens-indifference-has-given-iran-upper-hand-iraq>) after last year's election, apparently satisfied so long as Iraq stayed out of the headlines amid other major geopolitical challenges. When Washington later tried to play catch-up via high-level visits and a memorandum of understanding with the Kurdish Peshmerga, it was too late.

To coax Biden's team back into deeper passivity, the powerful militia and political figures behind Sudani's government may offer the tactical truce and surface calm that Washington desires—while giving themselves enough time to quietly reestablish their hold over Iraq's military, financial, and judicial institutions. Although U.S. officials were wise to engage the new government early on lest they default to anti-American elements from day one, many Iraqis were shocked by the perceived warmth and unrestrained rapidity with which Washington accepted Sudani and, by extension, the hostile and corrupt forces that elevated him.

To ensure that it is not once again misled by “nice guys,” Washington needs to keep a keen eye on the game, watching out for any militia or allied efforts to infiltrate the state and prime it for sustained pilferage. Outright antagonism is hardly the answer, but the Biden administration should maintain a healthy distrust of Sudani, communicate its expectations firmly, and coldly assess his performance **based on a clear set of metrics** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/scoring-iraqs-new-government-metrics-preserving-us-interests>).

For too long, Washington has underestimated its leverage and tools in Iraq. The powers that be in Baghdad are well aware of this leverage, however—they know they would not have had the luxury to wage a yearlong political battle without the United States actively preventing the emergence of another Islamic State insurgency. Indeed, Sudani will not be doing Washington a “favor” by allowing U.S. military advisors to stay in Iraq—it's the other way around. America's engagement, convening power, and sheltering of Iraqi financial assets still provide the foundation for the international legitimacy that the new government craves. And to complement these carrots, the Biden administration should remind Baghdad that it has an arsenal of sticks to punish continued corruption, money laundering, and human rights abuses.

At the same time, Washington should explore avenues to benefit the Iraqi people regardless of whether their

government reins in its predatory impulses. This would entail improving U.S. economic and civil society programs that support Iraq's private sector, youth population, and climate efforts. Creative thinking may be needed on some of these initiatives. For example, the Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research is run by the U.S.-designated terrorist group **Asaib Ahl al-Haq** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-asaib-ahl-al-haq-0>), making educational exchanges a thorny issue. One option is to establish university-to-university links and general scholarship programs that develop this sector without involving the ministry. More broadly, the White House will have to make its overarching policy goals on Iraq clear lest government departments pursue disjointed objectives.

Bilal Wahab is the Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Building Media Cooperation Between Abraham Accords Countries](#)

Nov 3, 2022



Najat AlSaied

[\(/policy-analysis/building-media-cooperation-between-abraham-accords-countries\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[From Torch to Tunis to El Alamein: The Most Important Forgotten Week in Modern Middle East History](#)

November 7, 2022, starting at 2:00 p.m. EST (1900 GMT)



Mehnaz Afridi,
Aomar Boum,
Martin Cüppers,
Haim Saadoun

[\(/policy-analysis/torch-tunis-el-alamein-most-important-forgotten-week-modern-middle-east-history\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Militia Journalist to Head New Prime Minister's Communications Team

Nov 3, 2022



Hamdi Malik,
Michael Knights

(/policy-analysis/militia-journalist-head-new-prime-ministers-communications-team)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iraq (/policy-analysis/iraq)