

Family Rule in Iraq and the Challenge to State and Democracy

by [Sardar Aziz \(/experts/sardar-aziz\)](/experts/sardar-aziz), [Bilal Wahab \(/experts/bilal-wahab\)](/experts/bilal-wahab)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Sardar Aziz \(/experts/sardar-aziz\)](/experts/sardar-aziz)

Sardar Aziz is a senior advisor in the Kurdish parliament and a researcher on civil-military relations, regional politics, and governance.



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

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



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A handful of personalities have consumed all the country's political oxygen, dashing hopes for a truly pluralistic ecosystem and requiring creative engagement from U.S. officials.

After the fall of Saddam Hussein's dictatorship in 2003, Iraqi political parties proliferated in a show of enthusiasm for the country's emerging democracy. In recent years, however, a handful of personalities and families have consumed all of the country's political oxygen, dashing hopes for a truly pluralistic ecosystem. Especially discouraging has been the authoritarian shift in Kurdistan, once viewed as a democratic beacon in the Middle East. At the federal level, feuding between the Sadr and Maliki camps now dominates Shia politics, and Mohammed al-Halbousi has crowded out other Sunni players. Meanwhile, corruption touches every surface, and the rare official who holds to ethical standards risks being rendered entirely ineffectual.

In this wide-ranging Policy Note, experts Sardar Aziz and Bilal Wahab outline the dispiriting state of Iraqi politics and how the United States can respond. To achieve the scaled-down goals of maintaining sovereignty and accountability, they argue, American officials must be creative, working with Iraqi institutional actors while simultaneously engaging with less central figures such as apolitical military commanders and the business community.

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