



# Iraq Initiative Conference 2023

*Wednesday 8 November*

**@CH\_MENAP**  
**#IraqInitiative**

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## Iraq Initiative Conference 2023

Iraq appears to be turning a corner in its statebuilding process. With oil prices high and the security situation seemingly stable, the new government is pursuing a development plan that includes improvements to infrastructure, outreach to regional and international countries, and promises of much-needed reform. However, over the past two decades, previous governments have attempted similar initiatives, only to see them falter.

Sustainable progress requires solid foundations based on accountability. Can the Sudani government successfully tackle the country's challenges and bring the necessary reforms to the economy, essential public services, and the security sector? What steps are required to ensure that reform initiatives can mitigate the peaks and troughs of Iraq's struggle to build a coherent state and push past the cycles of conflict?

At Chatham House's annual Iraq Initiative Conference, policymakers, analysts, academics and civil society members will convene in London to discuss these critical questions and Iraq's trajectory in the year ahead.

### On the agenda:

- Iraq's politics a year on
- The climate emergency
- Youth and the future of economy & society
- Accountability
- Economic recovery
- Iraq's foreign and regional policy



# AGENDA

**08.15 – 09.00**      *Registration*

**09.00 – 10.15**      **Session 1: Iraq's politics one year on**

One year into the Mohammad Shia al-Sudani government, relatively high oil prices and a sense of stability suggest that Iraq is on the right track. The government is pursuing a development plan which includes improvements to infrastructure, an open-door policy to regional and international countries, and a commitment to reform. However, its populist economic policies are challenged by the demographic realities of an increasing youth population which struggles to find employment and livelihoods. Also, rulings by the Federal Supreme Court have threatened Erbil's financial autonomy and as such the post-2003 federal system. Moreover, across Iraq, the space is shrinking for civil society and independent journalism, two critical pillars of the accountability required for sustainable state-building. The same leaders enjoy the impunity that they have had since regime change, challenging the possibility of meaningful reform.

The opening session of the conference will discuss the prospects and pathways to sustainable reform in the context of recent challenges. Panellists will explore the Sudani government's ability to overcome the accountability gap which can unlock more sustainable and forward-looking reform strategies.

## **Speakers**

**Lahib Higel**, Senior Analyst for Iraq, International Crisis Group

**Renad Mansour**, Senior Research Fellow and Director of the Iraq Initiative, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

*Further speakers TBC*

**Chair: Maryam Nemazee**, Journalist and Broadcaster

**10.15 – 10.45**      *Break*

**10.45 – 12.00**      **Session 2: Addressing Iraq's climate emergency**

COP28, the second of two consecutive climate summits in the MENA, has put a spotlight on the region. Even amongst others, Iraq is a country at particular risk of the effects of climate change. The UN had identified Iraq as the world's fifth most vulnerable country to climate change. Severe droughts, increasing desertification, and the decimation of water resources are causing persistent dust storms, loss of agricultural land, and record temperature rises. The social impacts of environmental degradation and climate change are also apparent: people are suffering from acute health conditions, and internal displacement and food insecurity are on the rise. The climate emergency is also not confined to Iraq's borders but pushes Baghdad to cooperate with neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Iran, and the Gulf states to reach sustainable solutions.

This session will examine how Iraq's policymakers are addressing the climate crisis and its multitude impacts on society and the country's fragile environment. Panellists will discuss whether COP28 can lead to tangible outcomes geared towards supporting Iraqis, and whether regional cooperation opportunities on climate exchange exist.

## **Speakers:**

**Shukri Al Hassen**, Environmental Specialist, Department of Geography, University of Basrah

**Greg Shapland**, Visiting Senior Fellow, Middle East Centre, London School of Economics

**Fareed Yassin**, Climate Envoy of the Republic of Iraq; Advisor to the Prime Minister on Climate Change and Sustainable Development; Ambassador of Iraq to the United States (2016-22)

*Further speakers TBC*

**Chair: Glada Lahn**, Senior Research Fellow, Environment and Society Programme, Chatham House

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# AGENDA

**12.00 – 13.00**      *Networking Lunch*

**13.00 – 14.15**      **Session 3: Youth and the future of Iraq's economy and society**

In 2019, young Iraqis took part in the largest protests Iraq has witnessed since 2003, demanding better economic prospects, essential services, and a more dignified life. Despite brutal repression, protesters brought down the government and momentarily shook the political establishment. However, more than four years later, their demands remain unfulfilled. Relying on a relative surge in oil prices, the Sudani government hopes that a populist national budget which promises nonessential public sector employment can satisfy Iraq's growing youth population. At the same time, it has tightened its control over the public, shrinking the space for civil society and critical voices. The end of protests has not meant an end of its message. Iraqis are, in many ways, still performing everyday politics to push for a better future.

This panel will explore the role that Iraqi youth and civil society can play in moving past the government's short-termist policies and towards more sustainable, longer-term reforms underpinned by accountability. It will examine how young people are already strategically navigating difficult political dynamics to better meet the needs and interests of the growing population, and what can be done to support this process.

**Speakers:**

**Hayder Al Shakeri**, Research Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

**Hanaa Edwar**, Activist; Founder and General Secretary, Iraqi Al-Amal Association

**Faris Haram**, Iraqi Writer and Poet

**Yaser Mekki**, Co-founder and Director, Moja NGO

**Chair: Taif Alkhudary**, PhD Student, Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Cambridge

**14.15 – 14.45**      *Break*

**14.45 – 16.00**      **Session 4: Iraq's foreign policy and regional standing**

In recent years, Iraq's foreign policy landscape has seen an increase in diplomatic activity, both on the regional and international stage. Notably, Iraq's role in the region has been enhanced, evident through heightened interactions with neighbouring countries and active mediation endeavours involving regional players like Saudi Arabia and Iran. The ongoing high-level Baghdad diplomatic initiatives continue to serve as a platform for regional engagement. However, despite these efforts, challenges remain. The past year has seen a series of diplomatic crises, from groups protesting continued US presence to the Sadrist movement's invasion of the Swedish embassy and the Sudani government's severing of ties with Stockholm.

This session will examine Iraq's foreign policy standing and evolving regional role. The discussion will focus on the shifting dynamics of Iraq's engagement with pivotal players such as Iran, other regional countries, the United States, and the United Kingdom, offering a comprehensive analysis of the nation's complex foreign affairs landscape and the connection between domestic and foreign politics.

**Speakers:**

**Farhad Alaaldin**, Advisor for Foreign Affairs, Office of the Prime Minister of Iraq

**Stephen Hickey**, Director, Middle East and North Africa, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

**Adnan Tabatabai**, Co-Founder and Chief Executive Officer, CARPO-Bonn

**Victoria Taylor**, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Iraq and Iran, US Department of State

**Chair: Sanam Vakil, Director**, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

# AGENDA

**16.00 – 16.30**      *Break*

**16.30 – 17.30**      **Keynote | In conversation with Abdul Wahab al-Saadi**

Staff General Abdul Wahab al-Saadi became an Iraqi hero for leading the war that defeated the Islamic State (ISIS). In 2019, his removal from office by political opponents became the trigger for the October 2019 (Tishreen) protests that brought down the government of Adel Abd al-Mehdi. After being reinstated and promoted, al-Saadi heads the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service. Although ISIS is still territorially defeated, the socio-economic roots that led to its rise, including a lack of accountability in the political system, continue to challenge the post-war environment. Now a public and key figure in the Iraqi state, al-Saadi is on the frontline of preventing the re-emergence of ISIS. This call goes beyond militarily targeting armed groups.

In the keynote session, Staff General al-Saadi will discuss the different ways in which ensuring accountability in Iraq's security sector can tackle the roots of conflict and push the country towards a more stable trajectory.

**Speaker: Staff General Abdul Wahab al-Saadi**, Commander-in-chief, Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service

**Chair: Bronwen Maddox**, Director and Chief Executive, Chatham House

**17.30 – 18.30**      *Networking reception*

## IRAQ INITIATIVE

The Chatham House *Iraq Initiative* is a fieldwork-based policy project that rethinks the nature of state-building and governance in Iraq. The project tackles the root causes of state failure to challenge assumptions held in Western capitals about stabilization and peacebuilding and reach a more nuanced approach to navigating Iraq's complex and interlinked political, security, and economic environment. The project uses these field-based insights to inform international policy towards Iraq. Chatham House convenes Iraq Initiative activities in various cities in the Middle East, the UK, the US and Europe.

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*The conference is organized by the Middle East and North Africa Programme as part of Chatham House's Iraq Initiative.*

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