



# Iraq Initiative Conference 2024

Wednesday 20 November

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**#IraqInitiative**

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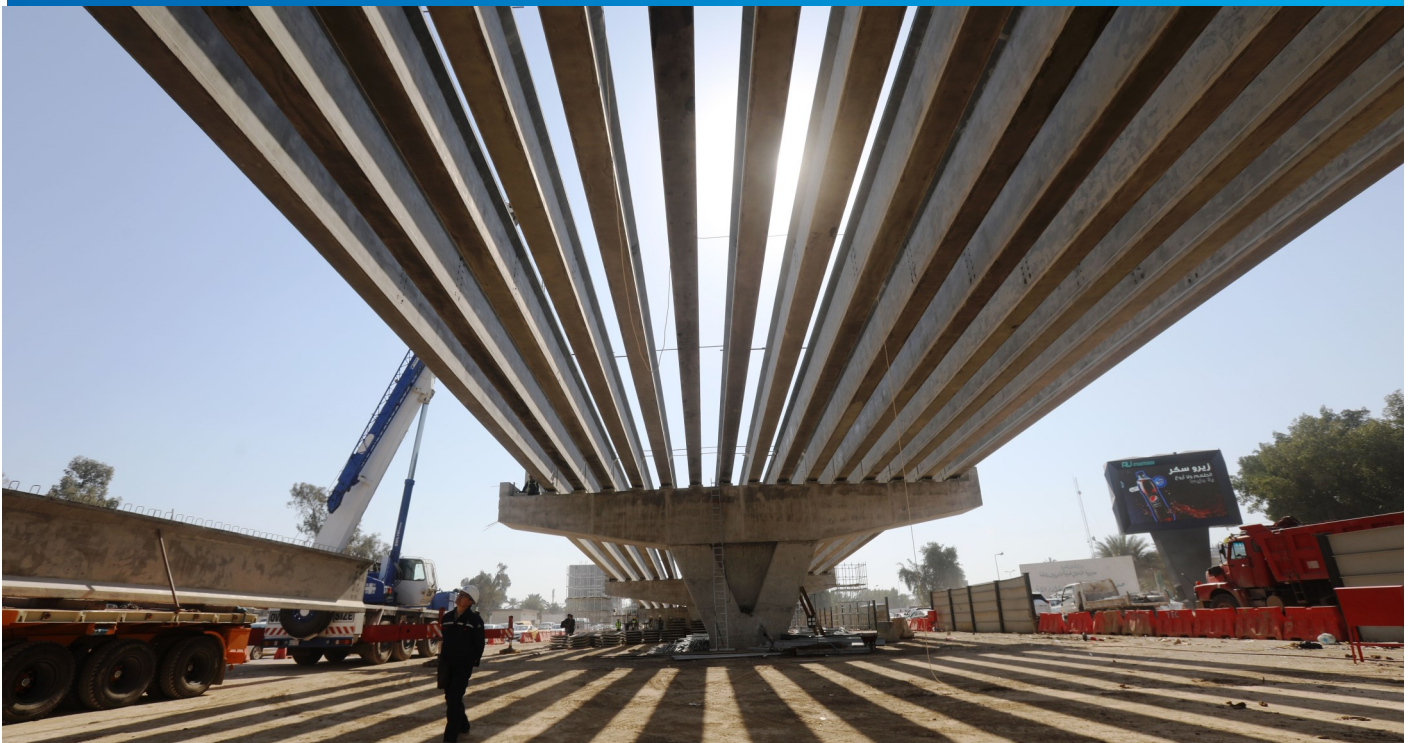
# Iraq Initiative Conference 2024

Over two decades following regime change, Iraq appears to be on a path to recovery and growth. With the support of high oil prices, Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani's government is implementing an ambitious plan to develop critical infrastructure, enhance ties with neighbouring countries, and renegotiate relationships with international partners like the US and UN. The political system has rebounded from a series of shocks and is in the process of consolidating and centralising power in Baghdad under the governing Shia Coordination Framework. However, underlying political, economic, security, and regional challenges, if not addressed, threaten this apparent stability and frustrate longer-term hope for a better future. Despite the country's wealth, many young Iraqis struggle to find jobs while the space for civic activism shrinks. Meanwhile, the escalation of violence across the region threatens to engulf Iraq in further conflict. With the 2025 parliamentary election approaching, infighting within the governing coalition also suggests political turmoil in the year ahead.

How can the Sudani government tackle the roots of these obstacles to ensure that development can be sustained over time? What are the key steps to coherent and effective state-building? And how can regional and international actors support this process?

*This year's conference features **RE-PLAY** – a video art exhibition curated by Dr Tamara Chalabi of the Ruya Foundation. The artists featured in this exhibition, spanning multiple generations both within Iraq and in the Iraqi diaspora, use their work to grapple with complex notions of Iraqi identity through the thematic issues of heritage, exile, disconnection, freedom of expression, and other persistent issues explored in this show.*

At Chatham House's sixth annual Iraq Initiative conference, Iraqi and international policymakers, experts and civil society, will convene in London to discuss these critical questions for Iraq's future, and the country's trajectory in the year ahead.



**08.45 – 09.30**     *Registration*

**09.30 – 09.35**     **Welcome and introduction to the 2024 Conference by Bronwen Maddox, Chatham House Director and Chief Executive**

**09.35 – 10.45**     **Session 1: The political arena ahead of upcoming national elections**

Ahead of next year's parliamentary elections, Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani appears to be enjoying high approval ratings as a relatively stable oil price has allowed his government to focus on infrastructure development. The political system has seemingly rebounded following a series of shocks, from the 2019 Tishreen uprisings to Muqtada al-Sadr's failed majority government bid. The governing Shia Coordination Framework appears to be in the process of consolidating and centralising power, manifested by a weakened civil society and Kurdish and Sunni political camps. However, the competition for the upcoming national election is underway and exposing internal political fault lines that will feature in the year ahead.

In this session, policymakers and experts will discuss the positions of different parties and political movements in Iraq's political landscape. Speakers will offer their views on the changes and continuities that can be expected in the year leading to elections and what this means for the system more generally.

**Opening remarks: Dr Haider al-Abadi**, Prime Minister, Republic of Iraq (2014-18) *(via Zoom)*

**Speakers:**

**Mina Al-Oraibi**, Editor-in-Chief, The National

**Falah Mustafa Bakir**, Special Assistant to the President of Kurdistan Region for Foreign Policy Affairs, Kurdistan Region of Iraq

**Sajad Jiyad**, Fellow, Century International; Director, Shia Politics Working Group

**Renad Mansour**, Senior Research Fellow, MENA Programme; Director, Iraq Initiative, Chatham House

**Chair: Raya Jalabi**, Middle East Correspondent, Financial Times

**10.45 – 11.15**     *Refreshments break*

**11.15 – 12.30**     **Session 2: The political economy of climate policy in Iraq**

Iraq been experiencing more frequent heat waves with temperatures often reaching above 50°C. In July 2024, 11 of the 15 highest temperatures in the world were recorded in Iraq. Prolonged droughts have intensified due to climate change exacerbating acute water shortages with detrimental impacts on public health and livelihoods. In March 2023, more than 70,000 people were reportedly displaced by water shortages, high salinity and poor water quality in at least ten governorates. In March 2024, Iraq's Minister of Environment and the UN Humanitarian Coordinator launched the Iraq Environment and Climate Change Policy Advisory Group to increase coordination between the government, international organizations, civil society, academia and the private sector to address the effects of climate change and environmental degradation. However, growing corruption and Iraq's near total economic reliance on energy revenues challenge the effectiveness of climate policies and reform in resource management.

This panel will address the barriers and potential pathways to climate reform in Iraq. Speakers will discuss what steps should be taken to address the country's multiple climate-related crises and prevent further environmental degradation and social instability.

**Speakers:**

**Torhan Al-Mufti**, Advisor to the Prime Minister of Iraq

**Sameh Al-Muqdad**, Director, Green Charter GC. Germany

**Sarine Karajerjian**, Program Director, Environmental Politics Program, Arab Reform Initiative

**Glada Lahn**, Senior Research Fellow, Environment and Society Centre, Chatham House

**Chair: Mac Skelton**, Director, Institute of Regional and International Studies (IRIS), American University of Iraq, Sulaimani

12.30 – 13.45 *Networking lunch*

13.45 – 15.00 **Session 3: The health of Iraq's economy**

In an effort to overcome previous political and societal shocks, the Mohammad Shia' al-Sudani government has sought to leverage relatively stable oil prices to build infrastructure and invest in megaprojects that demonstrate to both political elites and the public a positive trajectory. However, significant issues remain unresolved, namely that the government's reliance on energy revenues makes its economic plan susceptible to oil price fluctuations as it struggles to diversify its economic policy or create new channels to address rising youth unemployment. Instead, the government has continued the policy of expanding the bloated state payroll by offering more jobs in the public sector, which is marred by mismanagement, inefficiency, politically sanctioned corruption, and lack of accountability.

Panellists will address how political incentives can be developed to implement meaningful reform aimed at increased accountability and diversification of Iraq's economy. The session will explore alternative ways to address the country's growing youth unemployment and demographic challenges.

**Speakers:**

**Mohammed Al-Najjar**, Advisor to the Prime Minister for Investment Affairs; CEO, Iraq Fund for Development

**Basima Abdulrahman**, Founder and CEO, KESK

**Ahmed Tabaqchali**, Chief Strategist, AFC Iraq Fund

**Shwan Ibrahim Taha**, Chairman, Rabee Securities

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

15.00 – 15.30 *Refreshments break*

15.30 – 17.00 **Session 4: Iraq in the precarious Middle East**

Iraq and its neighbours are experiencing a turbulent period following the 7 October Hamas attack and Israel's war on Gaza, which has spread into Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran and the Red Sea. As a result of the war's regionalization, the conflict between Islamic Resistance of Iraq groups and the US has increased on Iraqi territory. Despite these regional dynamics, Baghdad and Washington maintained a bilateral process and renegotiated the future of their relationship. Meanwhile, the Sudani government has ambitions to connect with neighbours through initiatives such as the Development Road, and other mega-projects that can help enhance Iraq's geopolitical standing in the region. More generally, the government has pushed a policy of non-alignment which welcomes relations with all regional and international states, including for example China which has increased its presence in Iraq.

This session will discuss Iraq's regional and international standing and its evolving relationships with neighbouring and global powers amidst domestic stability and regional pressures. Speakers will explore how the government is navigating external challenges and how it can maintain stability in the precarious neighbourhood, and also look ahead at the future of Iraq's relations with the US, Iran, and other powers.

**Speakers:**

**Mohammad Ali Shabani**, Editor, Amwaj.media

**Krikor Der-Hagopian**, Director General of International Affairs, Prime Minister's Office, Republic of Iraq

**Wang Guangda**, Executive Director, China-Arab Research Center on Reform and Development, Shanghai International Studies University

**Denise Natali**, Director, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University

**Chair: Liz Sly**, Journalist and Writer

17.00–17.05 **Closing remarks by Dr Renad Mansour, Senior Research Fellow and Director of the Iraq Initiative, Chatham House**

17.05 – 18.30 *Networking reception featuring RE-PLAY video art exhibition*

# SPEAKERS' BIOGRAPHIES



**Dr Haider al-Abadi** served as the Prime Minister of Iraq from 2014 to 2018. He is presently a leading figure within the governing Shia Coordination Framework. Prior to this, he was an Iraqi parliamentarian, having spent decades in exile as an active member of the Dawa Party. In 2003-2004, he briefly held the position of Minister of Communications under the Coalition Provisional Authority. Elected to Parliament in 2005, he chaired both the economic and finance committees. During his tenure as Prime Minister, al-Abadi concentrated on combating the Islamic State insurgency, culminating in the declaration of victory over ISIS in 2017. Dr. al-Abadi holds a Ph.D. in electrical engineering from the University of Manchester and is the author of the book *Impossible Victory: How Iraq Defeated ISIS*.



**Dr Torhan M. Al-Mufti** serves as an Advisor to Iraq's Prime Minister for water issues. Previously, he was Iraq's Minister for Telecommunications and, prior to that, Minister for Provincial Affairs. Dr Al-Mufti also served as advisor to the Speaker of Parliament, and the President of Iraq. Prior to that he was also a Kirkuk provincial council member. He holds a PhD in geochemistry and remote sensing.



**Dr Sameh Al-Muqdadi** is an expert in water politics and climate security, holding a PhD from TU Bergakademie Freiberg, Germany. He currently serves as the Managing Director for Relief International in Iraq, Chairman of Sanad Organization for Economic Development, and Research Director of the Green Charter. Sameh has led numerous international projects across Europe and the Middle East, focusing on water governance, climate change, and economic development. He strongly advocates that water and climate security can serve as drivers of cooperation and peace, and believes that a sustainable environment is essential for resilient economy. His work reflects a commitment to integrating environmental sustainability with economic growth strategies.

# SPEAKERS' BIOGRAPHIES



**Mohammed Al-Najjar** is Advisor to Iraq's Prime Minister on investment and CEO of the Iraq Development Fund. Mr Al-Najjar has 27 years of international experience across Europe, Australia, Asia and the Arab Gulf region with a proven track record in driving business, economic development, investment and growth. He is Founder and CEO of Al Ghadeer Real Estate Investment, the first real estate development company in Iraq, overseeing projects valued at \$1 billion. Mr Al-Najjar is author of 'Rising from the Ashes: The Young Economy of Iraq', a white paper which set the foundation of the current government's economic vision. He holds a BA in Business Administration and Computer Science from Webster University, and is fluent in Arabic, English and French.



**Mina Al-Oraibi** is the Editor in Chief of The National, an English-language regional outlet based in Abu Dhabi. She has over 20 years of experience covering Middle Eastern, European and American affairs. She has conducted multiple high profile interviews including with Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia AlSoudani, Managing Director of the IMF Kristalina Georgieva, President of the European Central Bank Christine Lagarde and former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair. Previously, Mina was a Senior Fellow at the Institute for State Effectiveness and a Yale World Fellow. She was the Assistant Editor-in-Chief of Asharq Alawsat, the international Arab-language daily newspaper 2011-2015. Previous to that, she was the Washington Bureau Chief for the newspaper. Mina is columnist for Foreign Policy magazine and a member of the International Media Council. She is also a member of the board of trustees of the American University in Iraq, Sulaimani. Mina was named as a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum. She completed her BA and MA in Modern History from University College London.



**Hayder Al-Shakeri** is a Research Fellow with the Middle East and North Africa programme at Chatham House. Prior to joining Chatham House, Hayder supported the Arab regional cooperation programme in the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining. Before this, he worked with the UN and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency in Baghdad. He frequently provides commentary on Iraqi affairs on several platforms. Hayder holds a BA in public administration and political studies from the American University of Beirut (AUB), and an MSc in development studies from SOAS, University of London. He is also a fellow with the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC).

# SPEAKERS' BIOGRAPHIES



**Basima Abdulrahman** is the Founder and CEO of KESK, a company in Iraq that integrates renewable energy solutions with software technologies. She has over 15 years of expertise in sustainable development, focusing on transitioning to sustainable energy generation by harnessing solar power and enabling real-time monitoring of solar energy assets. Abdulrahman has served as a World Economic Forum Foundation Board Member from 2019 to 2022 and is a laureate of the Cartier Women's Initiative in the MENA Region, as well as the ExpoLive Global Innovators Award. She has been featured in prominent publications including TIME magazine, Forbes, and CNN, and was named one of the 100 most influential women by the BBC in 2023. Abdulrahman holds a BSc in Civil Engineering and a MSc in Structural Engineering from Auburn University in the USA.



**Mohammad Ali Shabani** is the Editor of Amwaj.media, focusing on Iran, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula. He has contributed to various leading outlets, including the New York Times, the Guardian, Foreign Affairs, CNN, BBC World News, Al Jazeera English, and the National Interest. Previously, Shabani served as the Editor of the Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs and conducted research at the Center for Strategic Research in Iran. He has also worked with the Institute for Political and International Studies' English-language journal, Iranian Journal of International Affairs, and researched at the Al-Ahram Center for Political & Strategic Studies in Egypt. Shabani holds a Master's degree in Middle East Politics from SOAS University of London.



**HE Falah Mustafa Bakir** currently serves as the Special Assistant to the President of the Kurdistan Region, Nechirvan Barzani, overseeing Foreign Policy Affairs since July 2019. Mr Bakir was appointed as the inaugural Minister and Head of the Kurdistan Regional Government Department of Foreign Relations in September 2006. Continuously reappointed as the Head of the Department in four successive cabinets, Mr Bakir's was the KRG's liaison officer to the Coalition Provisional Authority in 2003 and to the Multi-National Forces' Korean Contingent stationed in Erbil in 2004. His experience includes serving as a Senior Adviser to the KRG Prime Minister from 2002 to 2004, after which he was appointed Minister of State. In the earlier stages of his career, Mr Bakir held the position of KRG Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Irrigation from 1999 to 2002. Prior to that, he served as the Kurdistan Democratic Party Deputy Head of the Public Relations Office from 1996 to 1999. His journey with the KDP began in 1991 when he joined the International Relations/Public Relations office. Mr Bakir earned his undergraduate degree at the University of Mosul, pursued graduate studies in Development Studies at the University of Bath, and received a Senior Managers in Government executive certificate at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

# SPEAKERS' BIOGRAPHIES



**Krikor Der-Hagopian** is Director General of International Affairs, Prime Minister's Office, Republic of Iraq. He was previously Director General of the Planning and International Relations Division at the Iraqi Presidency. From 2015 to 2018, he served as the Director General of the Public Policies Department at the Presidency and was the acting interpreter to the President of the Republic. Between 2009 and 2013, Der-Hagopian was the Director General at the Presidency's Secretariat General. He holds a Master of Arts in International Studies from the University of Denver and a Bachelor's degree in Computer Science from the University of Al-Mansour. Der-Hagopian is a James Madison Fellow and has published several research papers. He is fluent in English, Arabic, and Armenian and is a professional interpreter and translator.



**Wang Guangda** is the Secretary General of the China-Arab Research Center on Reform and Development and a Professor at Shanghai International Studies University, specializing in Arab States Studies and China-Arab relations. He has published more than 100 papers and five books, including *The Society & Culture of Contemporary Bahrain*, *The Theory and Practice of Arabic Listening Teaching*, and *Arab Studies (Sections 1-6)*. Wang has attended numerous international academic seminars, including the 1st International Chinese Language Teaching Seminar in Morocco (2013), the International Seminar on "The Biography of the Prophet in Chinese Writing" (Morocco, 2014), and the Enriching the Middle East's Economic Future Conference in Doha (2019). He is also a Chinese-Arabic simultaneous interpreter.



**Raya Jalabi** is the Middle East Correspondent for the Financial Times, covering Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Before joining the Financial Times in 2022, she was a Senior Correspondent for Reuters, focusing on Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, as well as serving as their correspondent in Iraq from 2017 to 2020. Jalabi reported extensively on the impact of the Islamic State, including the illicit cross-border transfer of detainees, the plight of foreign children left behind, and the consequences of the 2017 US travel ban. She also covered Iraq's mass protests in 2019 and their brutal crackdown. Prior to her tenure at Reuters, Jalabi worked as a news editor and reporter at The Guardian in New York, where she focused on US foreign policy and the 2016 US presidential election. Jalabi holds a Master's degree from Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism and an undergraduate degree in history from the University of Pennsylvania.



# SPEAKERS' BIOGRAPHIES



**Sajad Jiyad** is a fellow at Century International and director of the Shia Politics Working Group. An Iraqi political analyst based in Baghdad, he is the managing director of Bridge, an Iraqi nongovernmental organization and consultancy focused on development projects for young people. Sajad's main focus is on public policy and governance in Iraq. He is frequently published and cited as an expert commentator on Iraqi affairs. Sajad's educational background is in economics, politics, and Islamic studies.



**Sarine Karajerjian** is the Program Director of the Environmental Politics program at the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI). Prior to working at ARI, she worked for 15 years at the AUB's Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs since the Institute's inception. Her previous work covered strategic management, fundraising and outreach, and partnerships and grants management. She is currently pursuing a PhD in Anthropology at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris and writing her dissertation on the exile and trauma of Syrian refugee women in Beirut. She holds a Masters' degree in Environmental Policy Planning and a Bachelor of Science in Environmental Health from AUB.



**Glada Lahn** is a Senior Research Fellow in the Environment and Society Centre at Chatham House. Since joining Chatham House in 2004, she has worked on a range of international resource-related projects which intersect with geopolitical, economic and development concerns. Lahn has led influential research on energy policy in the Arab Gulf, energy access amongst displaced people globally in 2015, and how climate change and decarbonization affect the prospects and choices for developing country oil and gas producers. She is currently working on CASCADES, a multi-partner EU initiative to assess the transboundary risks of climate impacts and make recommendations for actions on resilience building. From 2002 to 2004, she was senior research fellow at the Gulf Centre for Strategic Studies. She has a BA in Arabic and international relations, and an MA in Near and Middle Eastern studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies, London.

# SPEAKERS' BIOGRAPHIES



**Dr Renad Mansour** is a Senior Research Fellow with the Middle East and North Africa Programme and Director of the Iraq Initiative at Chatham House. He is also a senior research fellow at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani, and a research fellow at the Cambridge Security Initiative based at Cambridge University. Dr Mansour was previously a lecturer at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), where he taught the international relations of the Middle East and, from 2013, he held positions as lecturer of international studies and supervisor at the Faculty of Politics, also at Cambridge. He was previously a senior research fellow at the Iraq Institute for Strategic Studies in Beirut and was adviser to the Kurdistan Regional Government Civil Society Ministry between 2008 and 2010. He received his PhD from Cambridge University. He is co-author of *Once Upon a Time in Iraq*, published by BBC Books/Penguin to accompany the critically acclaimed BBC series.



**Dr Denise Natali** is the Director of the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University. She previously served as the Assistant Secretary of State for Conflict and Stabilization Operations. Dr Natali has worked extensively overseas in conflict and border zones as part of the Agency for International Development's disaster assistance relief team in northern Iraq in support of Operation Provide Comfort II, director of cross-border operations for an NGO in Peshawar, Pakistan, and dean of students and director of the Institute of Regional and International Studies at the American University of Iraq-Sulaimani. Dr Natali is an award-winning author whose books include *The Kurdish Quasi-State: Development and Dependency in Post-Gulf War Iraq* and *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey, and Iran*. Dr Natali received a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Pennsylvania, a Master of International Affairs from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, and a B.A. in government at Franklin & Marshall College.

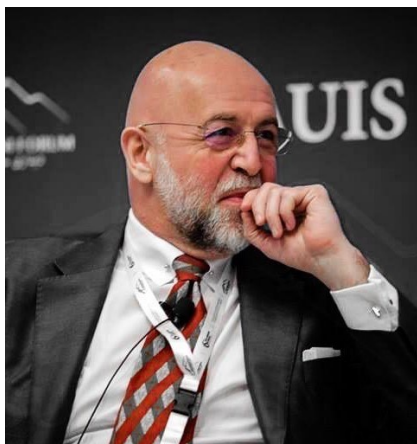


**Dr Mac Skelton** is Executive Director of the Institute of Regional and International Studies (IRIS) at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani, and a Research Fellow at King's College London. Trained as an anthropologist, he has led fieldwork and research across Iraq and the MENA region, focusing on conflict's impact on health systems, the climate-health nexus, and water governance. His research has been published in medical journals such as *The Lancet* and a variety of policy publications. He holds a Ph.D. in Anthropology from Johns Hopkins University and an M.A. in Anthropology from the American University of Beirut.

# SPEAKERS' BIOGRAPHIES



**Liz Sly** is a journalist and a writer. She was previously a correspondent-at-large with The Washington Post covering global affairs. She joined The Post in 2010 as Baghdad bureau chief, then in 2011 moved to Beirut to focus on Syria and the region. Before that, she covered Iraq for the Los Angeles Times and the Chicago Tribune. She has spent nearly three decades as a foreign correspondent, based in the Middle East, Africa, China, South Asia and Europe. She began her career with Lebanon's Daily Star newspaper in Beirut in the 1980s. She has received a number of awards and honours including: 2013, Citation, Overseas Press Club; 2003, George Polk Award ; 2003, Chicago Journalists Association, Daniel Pearl Award ; 1996, Overseas Press Club Madeline Dane Ross Award; 1996, National Association of Black Journalists International Reporter of the Year; 1996, Clarion Award; 1995, National Association of Black Journalists International Reporter of the Year. She holds a Bachelor's and Master's degrees in history from Cambridge University.



**Ahmed Tabaqchali** is a nonresident senior fellow with the Atlantic Council's Middle East Programs and chief strategist at the AFC Iraq Fund. He has over 25 years of experience in capital markets across the US and MENA regions, and serves as a visiting fellow at the LSE Middle East Centre, a senior fellow at the Institute of Regional and International Studies (IRIS) at AUIS, and a board member of Capital Investments. Previously, he was an executive director of NBK Capital, managing director and head of international institutional sales at WR Hambrecht + Co., managing director at KeyBanc in London, and director of capital markets and institutional sales at Jefferies International in London. Ahmed holds an MSc in Mathematics from the University of Oxford, a BSc in Mathematics from Victoria University of Wellington, and a BSc in Mathematics from the University of Canterbury.



**Shwan Ibrahim Taha** is the founder and CEO of Rabee Securities. He has over thirty years of experience in the financial sector, having started his career managing investments in the MENA region, including Turkey, Greece, and Pakistan. From 1997 to 2006, Shwan worked for Franklin Templeton as part of Mark Mobius's emerging markets team, where he was responsible for investments in the MENA region and established research and investment offices in Dubai and Istanbul. In 2006, he joined a two-man team to co-manage a hedge fund funded by George Soros before leaving to take over Rabee Securities, which he had acquired in 1999. Under his leadership, Rabee Securities expanded to four offices, including a subsidiary in Istanbul, and managed Iraq's largest listings, AsiaCell and Zain. In recent years, Shwan has focused on the startup scene in Iraq.



#IraqInitiative

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

The Chatham House *Iraq Initiative* tackles the root causes of state fragmentation in Iraq, and challenges assumptions in Western capitals about stabilization and peacebuilding. The aim is to reach a more nuanced approach to navigating Iraq's complex and interlinked political, security and economic environments.

The Initiative is based on original analysis and close engagement with a network of researchers and institutions inside Iraq. At the local level, it maps key political, business, military, tribal, clerical, and civil society figures across Iraq. At the national level, it explores the struggle over the state.

The Initiative uses these field-based insights to inform international policy towards Iraq. Chatham House convenes Iraq Initiative activities in the Middle East, the UK, the US and Europe.

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