

Iraq 2023

RCD's Strategic Report

Edited by

Prof. Dr. As'ad K. Shabib

Prof. Dr. Ahmad S. al-Mamouri

Prof. Dr. Miqdam A. al-Fayyad



al-Rafidain Center for Dialogue

R . C . D

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مركز الرافدين للحوار
Al-Rafidain Center For Dialogue
R . C . D

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RCD's Forward

Prof. Dr. As'ad Kāzim Shabīb

CEO, Al-Rafidain Center for Dialogue RCD.

The Annual Strategic Report of the al-Rafidain Center for Dialogue (RCD) constitutes a significant contribution to the Center's research endeavors aimed at comprehending the profound transformations experienced by Iraq across political, economic, security, and social domains throughout the year. Given the numerous challenges confronting the Iraqi state, this report serves as an analytical and documentary record that traces the trajectories of events and offers an in-depth interpretation of facts, grounded in rigorous scientific methodology and reliable sources. The report is the product of the efforts of a distinguished group of researchers and writers specializing in Iraqi affairs, each contributing to various chapters within their areas of expertise, thereby reflecting intellectual diversity and analytical depth. The work was edited by Prof. Dr. As'ad Shabīb, Prof. Dr. Aḥmad al-Ma'mūrī, and Prof. Dr. Miqdām al-Fayyād, who oversaw the report's production in its rigorous scientific form, ensuring methodological coherence and thematic unity.

The 2023 Strategic Report encompasses several critical chapters that collectively provide a comprehensive overview of Iraq's situation during the year. It commences with the "Year in Review" chapter, which offers a precise review of the most significant events and developments in the country, encompassing political decision-making, social changes, and security challenges. This chapter aims to construct a cohesive chronological narrative to facilitate the reader's understanding of the broader context within which the other chapters are situated. The "Political Process" chapter examines the nature of interactions within the Iraqi political system, emphasizing power dynamics, relationships among political forces, and the degree of institutional stability, alongside challenges related to state-building and democratic consolidation. This chapter relies on an in-depth analysis of government decisions, political alliances, and legislation, enabling a realistic assessment of the political process's future trajectory.

Economically, the report provides a comprehensive analytical assessment of Iraq's economic performance in 2023, focusing on macroeconomic indicators, fiscal and monetary policies, and challenges related to economic diversification, as well as the influence of regional and international factors on the national economy. This chapter also addresses issues such as unemployment, investment, and resource management, proposing reform pathways grounded in empirical data. The security chapter receives particular attention, addressing

developments in Iraq's security situation and the threats confronting the state, whether from extremist groups or organized crime. It also evaluates the performance of security institutions and their capacity to maintain stability, in addition to analyzing the regional security environment and its implications for Iraq's internal affairs. The Iraqi Society chapter explores social transformations in Iraq during 2023, including demographic changes, educational attainment, youth-related issues, migration, and social identity. This chapter highlights challenges to social cohesion and offers an analytical perspective on enhancing social integration. Regarding public services, the report assesses the state's performance in delivering essential services such as electricity, water, healthcare, education, and infrastructure. It identifies gaps between actual needs and available capacities, examines causes of deficiencies, and suggests practical solutions to improve service quality.

The integrity chapter addresses corruption and anti-corruption mechanisms, illuminating institutional and legal obstacles to transparency and accountability. It reviews governmental and social efforts in this domain, evaluates their effectiveness, and provides recommendations to strengthen Iraq's integrity system. Furthermore, the report examines Iraq's international relations, focusing on its ties with regional countries and major powers, and the impact of these relationships on internal stability and economic development. This chapter offers an in-depth analysis of Iraqi foreign policy, its challenges, and opportunities to enhance Iraq's role regionally and internationally.

This report is distinguished not only by its comprehensive coverage of diverse topics but also by its documentary nature, making it a valuable reference for researchers and those interested in Iraqi affairs. It transcends mere event narration by interpreting and analyzing occurrences within broader contexts, thereby offering both scientific and practical value. The report's annual publication reflects RCD's commitment to continuous monitoring of transformations and the provision of a cumulative analytical database that aids in understanding long-term trends.

Publishing the report in English undoubtedly broadens its accessibility, enabling non-Arabic speakers interested in Iraqi affairs to remain informed and providing an objective perspective. This endeavor holds significance beyond traditional academic publishing, demonstrating the Center's dedication to presenting an accurate portrayal of Iraq to a wider audience of researchers, policymakers, and international organizations. Strategic reports published in international languages contribute to enhancing global understanding of the Iraqi context, fostering dialogue and comparative engagement, and elevating Iraq's presence in international discussions on political and developmental changes in the region. Consequently, through its annual reports, RCD has established itself as a leading research institution offering in-depth analyses grounded in rigorous scientific principles.

In conclusion, the 2023 Strategic Report constitutes a vital document that monitors Iraq's current realities and envisions its future, providing readers with rich analytical content. It serves as an essential tool for comprehending ongoing transformations and as a reference for policy formulation and decision-making. The continuation and advancement of such research efforts remain imperative given the escalating challenges facing Iraq, underscoring a steadfast belief in the role of knowledge in state-building. It is hoped that this English edition will meet readers' expectations and enrich academic and professional libraries with its documentary contributions.

1.

Year 2023 in Review

Prof. Dr. Ahmad Sāmī al-Ma'mūrī

Prof. Dr. Miqdām 'Abd-al-Ḥasan al-Fayyāḍ

Prof. Dr. As'ad Kāzīm Shabīb

I. The Political Process: Ambiguity of Alliances and the Necessity of Consensus

Throughout 2023, the political process and its associated aspects underwent numerous transformations. Notably, shifts occurred within the political alliances constituting the government of Muḥammad Shiyā' al-Sūdānī. These alliances endeavored to address entrenched issues such as financial and administrative corruption, including complications related to the "Theft of the Century" and other anti-corruption efforts, such as appointments to special grades, positions, and the political quota system. Consequently, the political process experienced significant developments over the past year. A key point of significance was the relative political calm observed after the political deadlock following the October 2021 elections, which resulted from the clash between two major forces: the Sadrist Movement and the Coordination Framework.

The Strategic Report highlighted the most prominent shifts in the political process during the past year, focusing on the performance evaluation of al-Sūdānī's government. This evaluation is particularly pertinent as the government exceeded the timeframe it set for delivering the achievements mandated by its program. An assessment of the implementation rate of these objectives reveals discrepancies in fulfilling promises across different sectors. While al-Sūdānī's government succeeded in advancing certain areas, such as infrastructure and road paving, the administration remains under considerable scrutiny, especially given the significant time elapsed without resolving pressing issues detailed in the report. These include the escalating crisis between the federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government, alongside complex files still requiring resolution, such as combating corruption and addressing serious irregularities recently uncovered. Furthermore, the report addressed issues concerning the foundations and criteria adopted for distributing special grades, promises of cabinet changes, deputies, and directors general. It also covered matters related to the return of displaced families, the disappeared, and the general amnesty demanded by key Sunni blocs.

Regarding the performance evaluation of the legislative authority, represented by the Iraqi Council of Representatives, the current parliamentary term faced several challenges. Foremost among these were the problems that emerged following the termination of the membership of its Speaker, Muḥammad al-Ḥalbūsī, by a decision of the Federal Court. This decision followed a complaint filed against him by former MP Layth al-Dulaymī of the Taqaddum Alliance, which al-Ḥalbūsī had led before al-Dulaymī's withdrawal and which was supported by some current members of parliament. Consequently, the judicial decision ended al-Ḥalbūsī's tenure as Speaker, an event that had significant repercussions on the overall political situation, including conflicts among political blocs, specifically among Sunni factions, over control of the speakership. Positions among political blocs varied between welcoming, neutral, and rejecting. Forces within the Coordination Framework and their allies in the 'Azm Alliance, led by Muthanná al-Sāmarrāī, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan welcomed the Federal Court's decision. Conversely, the Kurdistan Democratic Party maintained an ambiguous stance regarding the termination of their ally al-Ḥalbūsī's membership, a position mirrored by the Sadrist Movement, which had previously withdrawn from the political process and the Council of Representatives.

In evaluating parliamentary performance, observers noted that the Council's performance was not commensurate with the scale of challenges facing the country or the requirements of the current stage concerning the amendment and enactment of laws. This includes the Oil and Gas Law and the amendment of the Federal Court Law, among others that remain contentious between various groups and components. In contrast, the Council of Representatives expedited the legislation of other laws perceived to serve the interests of the political forces holding power and represented within the Council, such as the amendment to the Governorate and Parliamentary Elections Law. Some attribute the Council's hesitation in fulfilling its designated roles to its becoming a reflection of the executive authority following the Sadrist withdrawal, or to the weakness of the parliamentary opposition. Since most major blocs align with the government, the Council's roles in oversight, accountability, questioning, and votes of no confidence against executive members have come under scrutiny.

Therefore, the report concluded that the functioning of the Council of Representatives remains characterized by ambiguity, with its decisions dominated by certain political blocs and its performance of assigned tasks suffering from confusion. It posited that the primary objective of parliamentary oversight should be to rectify the performance of the executive authority across all institutions and to hold it accountable for policy implementation details. This ensures the achievement of the government's primary and secondary goals and the expenditure of budgets in accordance with the government program, while holding negligent or violating parties accountable. Additionally, parliamentary oversight is considered one of the most critical indicators for evaluating the democratic trajectory of the political system and the integrity of the mutual commitment between the

people's representatives in the legislature and those tasked with public service in executive institutions, a sentiment echoed by significant voices within the Council.

In a related context concerning political developments in Iraq during 2023, the report examined the governorate council elections held in December 2023. These elections were contentious among political groups and boycotted by some active political and social forces, such as the Sadrist Movement. The elections served as a mechanism for redrawing spheres of influence for several political powers. Consequently, these forces worked to fulfill the legal and political requirements by enacting an electoral law based on the Sainte-Laguë method. This method had been previously utilized, notably as the elections held prior to October 2021 operated under a different equation based on individual candidacy, which produced results favoring some entities and disadvantaging others. This triggered rejection of the election results that threatened civil peace. Subsequently, the forces rejecting those results were able to form the government following the Sadrists' withdrawal from parliament and the political process, seeking to redraw political influence through the governorate council elections.

All political groups and forces in Iraq aim to redefine their influence and assert control through the governorate elections or at least secure new gains by controlling the governorates. This applies to the two Kurdish parties (the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party) as well as the Sunni components caught between al-Ḥalbūsī and his rivals. Regarding the positions of political groups across various ideological and political spectra, most supported the resumption of the work of governorate councils, except for certain Tishrīn forces and the Sadrists. The latter argued that their return serves as a new gateway for corruption, looting of public funds, and power struggles. Other forces contended that the electoral method employed extinguishes any hope for the emergence of new political powers, particularly as these new forces suffer from division and lack strategic visions and programs. Meanwhile, the "silent majority" views the governorate councils negatively, perceiving them as products of the ruling political class.

In general, the governorate council elections were among the most prominent scenes in the 2023 political process, yielding closely contested results for the participating political forces. This outcome is attributed to the Sainte-Laguë method under which the elections were conducted. These elections delivered a shock to traditional political powers due to the significant results achieved by several governors, such as the Governor of al-Baṣrah, As'ad al-'Aydānī, the Governor of Karbalā', Naṣīf al-Khaṭṭābī, and the Governor of Wāsiṭ, Muḥammad al-Mayyāḥī. This has prompted a period of reassessment among traditional forces. It appears that there is a future-oriented trend within the Coordination Framework regarding the nature of upcoming alliances for parliamentary elections. These governors may represent potential allies in forming a parliamentary coalition that could enable a specific individual to head the government, a line of thinking that seems closely aligned with the mindset of the current Prime Minister al-Sūdānī.

II. Economy

This report examines various aspects of the Iraqi economy in 2023. At the federal budget level, it analyzes the reasons for the failure of al-Sūdānī's government to submit the 2023 federal budget draft within the timeframe stipulated by the Financial Management Law No. 6 of 2019. Despite the government's formation on October 13, 2022, and its subsequent vote of confidence by the Council of Representatives on October 27, 2022, the budget submission was delayed. Following the presentation and parliamentary approval of the ministerial program, the draft budget was eventually submitted to the Council and approved, with its publication in the Official Gazette of Iraq (Issue No. 4729, on June 26, 2023) marking a delay of 177 days. This budget represents the largest in Iraq's fiscal history. The government program outlined several economic priorities, including combating administrative and financial corruption, addressing unemployment by creating job opportunities for youth of both genders, supporting impoverished and vulnerable low-income groups, and reforming economic and financial sectors, specifically agriculture, industry, and banking, while supporting the private sector and striving to improve services directly affecting citizens' lives.

Moreover, the government's economic development program encompassed managing several critical issues: supporting local and foreign investment, disbursing petrodollar entitlements and restoring the rate to 5%, and unifying customs policy across all land, sea, and air ports of entry. It also involved conducting a comprehensive review of previous periods concerning the oil and gas sector in the Kurdistan Region and the relationship between the federal Ministry of Oil and the Region to achieve a vision consistent with the Constitution. Additionally, the agenda emphasized preparing the 2023 budget, committing to presenting a comprehensive economic reform paper linked to a specific executive program, establishing a sovereign wealth fund, and supporting the private sector. The report aimed to evaluate the promises made by al-Sūdānī's government during 2023 and assess its capacity to fulfill them; however, the findings were not particularly optimistic, as most of these objectives remain unachieved.

This situation also pertains to the challenge of reducing the value of the US dollar against the Iraqi dinar, a significant concern for the country's working classes that al-Sūdānī's government pledged to address. This issue was debated among political forces. The monetary authority, led by 'Alī al-Allāq, appointed after al-Sūdānī assumed office, was unable to control fluctuations in the dollar rate. Specifically, when the official exchange rate was 1,450 dinars, the parallel market average for 2022 was 1,482 dinars, a gap of 2.2%. Consequently, the report questioned the feasibility of maintaining control at an exchange rate of 1,300 dinars. The disparity widened, with the parallel market average for 2023 reaching 1,531 dinars, creating a 17.8% difference. Efforts are currently underway to strengthen the dinar after a reasonable period, while moving toward serious stabilization of the external sector and revitalization of the domestic economy.

Regarding the energy sector, particularly Iraqi oil exports, the report noted a decline in Iraq's crude oil production in 2023 to 4.275 million barrels per day (bpd), down from 4.439 million bpd in 2022. Meanwhile, average production in the Kurdistan Region decreased to 258,000 bpd in 2023 from 438,000 bpd due to the closure of the northern export pipeline to Turkey. Production levels may decline further in 2024 as Iraq complies with a lower OPEC+ quota effective January 2024, reducing Iraq's share from 4.220 million bpd to 4 million bpd.

In another dimension, Iraq seeks to develop its economic potential through the "Development Road" project, extending from Iraq to Turkey and its ports. The road and railway span 1,200 kilometers within Iraq and primarily aim to facilitate goods transport between Europe and the Gulf states. This project is considered one of the most significant initiatives proposed by al-Sūdānī's government and complements the Grand al-Fāw Port, aligning with the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. The Italian firm PEG has undertaken consultancy and supervision for the project, with the first phase estimated to cost between 17 billion and 20 billion dollars. Completion across all stages is scheduled by 2050. The route passes through eleven Iraqi governorates and major cities, featuring fifteen stations, and is expected to contribute to economic growth, enhance East-West cooperation, increase international trade, and provide a competitive new transport route to boost regional economic prosperity.

In efforts to strengthen the national economy and attract foreign investment, the Iraqi Ministry of Oil announced a new round of oil exploration and production licenses. This round targets international energy companies to implement 30 strategic projects across various regions. Previously, Iraq experienced the withdrawal of several international companies from the oil and gas sector due to security, political, and technical challenges. Nevertheless, the government aims to stimulate this sector and re-attract investment by providing a conducive investment environment and encouraging strategic partnerships with major firms.

Meanwhile, the electricity sector remains a concern for Iraqi citizens, particularly during the summer season, as the distributed supply does not meet expected demand despite noticeable improvements in supply hours. Recent information from the Ministry of Electricity indicates ongoing efforts to expand cooperation with several countries, including Germany and France. This strategy aims to achieve energy security in Iraq and reduce dependency on a single state by attaining high rates of self-sufficiency through locally produced electrical power. Furthermore, the strategy seeks to diversify interconnection sources for electricity imports, rather than relying on a single country, through links with Kuwait, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. The goal is to avoid a recurrence of issues related to the Iranian supply to Iraq's power grids and delays in payments, which negatively impact the electricity sector, a recurring problem each summer.

III. Security: Internal and External Challenges

The Iraqi government prioritizes security as a strategic objective and has undertaken consistent measures in 2023 to address both current challenges and potential future threats. Due to the efforts of security forces, surveillance systems, raids, and preemptive operations, there has been a notable decline in ISIS terrorist activities. This decline follows the organization's loss of most of its leadership, its isolation from social support networks, and its confinement to remote rural and mountainous regions. Additionally, the organization has experienced a significant reduction in financial resources compared to previous years, concentrating its presence mainly in the governorates of al-Anbār and Kirkūk, exploiting their complex geography. The government's security policy aims to rebuild trust with citizens by enhancing public services and combating administrative and financial corruption. Furthermore, it emphasizes the continued pursuit of the organization through targeted strikes, intensified intelligence efforts, and special operations to eliminate remaining leadership and disrupt funding sources both domestically and internationally.

The pervasive presence of organized crime at local and international levels underscores the necessity of the government's prompt response through field security measures, intelligence collaboration, regional cooperation, and the establishment of effective legislation and mechanisms to combat criminal networks. Organized crime remains a persistent threat, with networks continuing activities such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, arms smuggling, and oil smuggling.

In combating drug trafficking gangs, security agencies have encountered significant challenges due to the gangs' expertise in evasion, armed capabilities, and influence, resulting in casualties among security personnel and the death or suicide of several mafia leaders. The Ministry of Interior has adopted a strategy centered on developing a comprehensive database detailing the locations, activities, and transit routes of dealers to facilitate timely targeting.

Smuggling of petroleum derivatives constitutes one of the most severe forms of criminality, posing a substantial threat to the state and adversely affecting Iraq's economic policy. Therefore, the government has initiated efforts to confront smuggling mafias and supported relevant security agencies in their tracking efforts. Measures include restructuring the Energy Police to enhance control, supervision, and monitoring of oil pipelines, implementing job rotation, forming nine brigades across all governorates, and strengthening border ports to eliminate smuggling routes.

The report identifies the emergence of various criminal offenses as a serious threat and an impediment to social and economic development. These crimes stem from internal and external shifts in value systems, behaviors, and methods, contributing to the rising crime rate in Iraqi society. This situation necessitates increased allocation of human and material resources and the development of comprehensive plans and programs to combat organized crime in its diverse forms.

The proliferation of weapons outside state control, often termed “uncontrolled weapons,” represents a deeply rooted crisis due to the ongoing violence inflicted on civilians and state institutions. These weapons contribute to unjustified bloodshed and social risks, frequently employed in altercations, threats, murders, and tribal conflicts. The estimated presence of 13 to 15 million medium and light weapons has exacerbated these conflicts, which have escalated to exchanges of heavy weapons fire. Despite government security efforts, containment remains incomplete, with weapons spreading from rural to urban areas as tribal members migrate due to limited livelihoods. This shift has transformed urban centers into new arenas threatening community security and peace, necessitating urgent and effective solutions. The possession of more sophisticated weapons and military equipment by certain armed groups poses even greater dangers, as these are utilized in broader, more sensitive operations and for political purposes.

The so-called “behavioral movements” (*al-ḥarakāt al-sulūkīyah*) introduce additional security concerns in Iraq. These groups have formed armed organizations that accumulate weapons and engage in violence against the state, characterized by intellectual extremism and ideologies promoting violence. An example is the *Aṣḥāb al-Qaḍīyah* group, extremists claiming affiliation with the Sadrist Movement, which the movement has disavowed; the group has been pursued and its active members eliminated. Additionally, the *Jamāʿat al-Qurbān* movement has emerged, accompanied by a notable number of suicides among its members, particularly in Dhī-Qār Governorate.

Iraq faces significant challenges regarding cross-border security movements, especially from neighboring Iran and Turkey, both citing the presence of armed opposition forces on Iraqi territory as justification for military actions. Turkey targets the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which it designates as a terrorist organization, conducting military operations including airstrikes deep within Iraqi territory since early 2023. Iranian shelling of the Kurdistan Region has also caused governmental embarrassment; Iran claims to target Israeli Mossad headquarters or separatist Iranian Kurdish groups. In response, the Iraqi government has redeployed armed forces along the borders with Iran and Turkey. Given the insufficiency of existing forces (comprising four border brigades, the Customs Police Directorate, and a training school) to secure over 1,100 km of rugged terrain, the government has formed two additional brigades, equipped and armed accordingly. Furthermore, the PKK announced its withdrawal from the Makhmūr camp, relocating militants within the Kurdistan Region. American shelling and attacks on Popular Mobilization Forces and other faction headquarters in late 2023 represent additional threats to national security and sovereignty. These threats persist, negatively impacting domestic security and stability, necessitating both international and local efforts to reduce tensions and mistrust with neighboring countries.

In response to an incident involving an Iraqi refugee in Sweden, Salwān Mūmīkā, who insulted the Holy Quran, widespread protests erupted in Baghdād and other governorates. These protests escalated to the storming and burning of

the Swedish Embassy, resulting in injuries among protesters and security forces. The Iraqi government condemned the embassy burning as a security breach and denounced the Holy Quran burning as incitement to violence and hatred. The protests subsided following the government's expulsion of the Swedish Ambassador in Baghdād, while Sweden summoned the Iraqi Chargé d'Affaires in Stockholm to protest the embassy attack.

IV. Society: Burdens and Transformations

In 2023, Iraqi society experienced a range of social challenges and phenomena, encompassing both traditional issues and novel, complex problems. The existing legal and social frameworks proved insufficient to contain these crises, prevent their escalation, or provide effective and definitive solutions, except within limited contexts.

Tribal conflicts emerged as a primary challenge, particularly in the central and southern governorates. These conflicts predominantly arose from disputes over water resources, land allocation, and encroachments on agricultural crops. Certain tribes possessed substantial and advanced weaponry, leading to considerable human and material casualties. The situation was further exacerbated by the exploitation of these conflicts to extort government entities and companies operating within conflict zones. Tribal disputes extended into urban centers, transforming residential areas into battlegrounds, as observed in Dhī-Qār and al-Baṣrah. A concerning development was the use of drones to film opposing parties and identify their deployment locations.

The Ministry of Interior undertook multiple initiatives to mitigate tribal conflicts and their destabilizing effects on community security. These included implementing legal and security measures and launching extensive campaigns to restrict weapon possession to state authorities. The Ministry established centers for the registration, purchase, and confiscation of unlicensed weapons, while Rapid Intervention Forces were deployed to conflict zones to apprehend armed individuals and seize abundant light and medium weapons. The religious authority in al-Najaf al-Ashraf, led by Grand Ayatollah Sayyid 'Alī al-Sīstānī, engaged in peaceful mediation efforts. Collaborating with local authorities over several months, it successfully resolved hundreds of tribal disputes. Additionally, the Ministry of Interior organized tribal conferences and workshops to raise awareness about the dangers of conflicts and the importance of civil peace. The Tribal Affairs Directorate reported a decline in "tribal warning strikes" and the discharge of live ammunition during social events.

In 2023, Iraqi society also faced a persistent increase in domestic violence, with tens of thousands of related lawsuits recorded. The majority of these cases involved violence against children, women, or the elderly, with fewer instances involving husbands. Reporting such incidents to security or relevant authorities for legal intervention is a positive social trend regarding domestic violence. However, not all domestic violence cases reached the courts; many were resolved

through reconciliation within families and relatives. This indicates significant challenges due to evolving patterns of domestic violence, necessitating comprehensive research into the sources and causes of changes in family dynamics. It is imperative that Community Police efforts adopt comprehensive and integrated approaches, emphasizing prevention and treatment for vulnerable groups exposed to various forms of violence.

Suicide has emerged as a critical social crisis, undermining confidence in cultural and value systems. Data from the Iraqi Ministry of Interior and the High Commission for Human Rights indicate a noticeable annual increase in suicide rates. Iraq ranked low among countries with the highest suicide rates in 2023, with hundreds of attempts reported across various governorates, affecting both males and females, though more prevalent among females. Methods included self-inflicted gunshot wounds, hanging, and the use of sharp instruments.

To address this phenomenon, the Ministry of Interior implemented preventive measures and convened consultative meetings to develop strategies in coordination with specialized authorities. These efforts culminated in the Council of Ministers' approval of the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention (2023–2030), recognizing the severity of the issue and aiming to contain its spread and mitigate its consequences. Nonetheless, substantial work remains in psychological, security, and economic domains.

Human trafficking represents a deviant social manifestation, with Iraq's crime index ranking rising in 2023 compared to 2021. Iraq ranked eighth globally, second in Asia, and first in West Asia. Specialized gangs, particularly in Baghdād, employed fraud and exploitation targeting homeless and vulnerable populations. Security agencies conducted numerous operations arresting suspects involved in trafficking girls, selling female minors and infants by parents, and prostitution for financial gain.

The phenomenon of begging expanded rapidly, driven by economic and social factors. It became widespread, including among foreigners of various nationalities, particularly those smuggled into Iraq or overstaying their visits. Organized mafias managing begging networks were uncovered in Baghdād. Additionally, cases of fraud and deception via social media, termed "electronic begging," increased. In response, security authorities implemented preventive and remedial measures. The Residency Affairs Directorate launched campaigns to monitor begging at intersections and public streets in Baghdād, while the Anti-Crime Department in al-Başrah arrested numerous beggars. The government adopted a national policy aimed at dismantling the links between begging and other social problems, limiting its spread, and addressing its root causes.

Displacement continued to afflict segments of Iraqi society. Despite efforts by the federal government and the International Organization for Migration, which expended significant human and financial resources, the issue remains unresolved. Social and personal factors led many displaced individuals to refuse return to their original areas. Approximately half a million families remain displaced

across seven governorates, constituting 44% of the total displaced population, residing in various displacement areas or camps. Security concerns are not the sole cause of displacement; drought also contributed significantly. Many families migrated from marsh areas due to water scarcity. Iraq is among the countries most vulnerable to climate change, water scarcity, and food insecurity, affecting millions and displacing hundreds of thousands, signaling new displacement waves.

Social, economic, and terrorism-related factors prompted many Iraqis, especially youth, to migrate illegally to Western countries seeking employment and improved living conditions. Gangs specializing in transporting Iraqis to European Union countries via Belarus emerged. Consequently, the government established the Comprehensive National Plan to Limit Illegal Migration, which includes travel bans to Belarus, coordination with the European Union to regulate migration, and practical solutions addressing root causes. The Ministry of Migration and Displaced Persons launched awareness campaigns highlighting the harms and consequences of illegal migration. With tightened border restrictions and increased deportations, the Ministry monitored Iraqis abroad, verified identities of rejected asylum seekers, facilitated their return and reintegration, while opposing forced returns.

At the social level, civil society is expected to play a more effective role. Approximately 5,000 non-governmental organizations operate in Iraq, alongside over 100 branches of foreign organizations. Despite significant challenges, the Department of Non-Governmental Organizations performed well in 2023, engaging in government meetings, conferences, seminars, and workshops, and collaborating with international and regional organizations. It launched community programs targeting extremism and evaluated organizations according to international standards to support sustainable development goals and assist in securing funding and implementing community activities.

The Parliamentary Civil Society Organizations Committee supports these organizations in promoting anti-corruption culture, despite some organizations holding orientations foreign to Iraqi society. It advocates for strict monitoring of civil society activities. The Ministry of Higher Education expressed reservations about some civil organizations, issuing directives prohibiting universities from engaging with certain organizations, sparking legal and political objections. Recommendations also prohibited university dealings with organizations until security status verification, and banned the General Union of Students within universities. It is hoped that non-governmental organizations will enhance their role in monitoring government performance to promote reform and rectification.

V. Human Rights: Optimism and Concerns

The situation of human rights in Iraq has long been a subject of considerable debate and contention. This is unsurprising given the complex circumstances of Iraq; even in politically stable countries, human rights issues often provoke

significant challenges due to divergent perspectives on evolving concepts within global human thought. Despite more than two decades having passed since Iraq's political transition, human rights remain a contentious issue at both national and international levels.

Periodically, human rights concerns resurface, placing national legislation, governmental initiatives, and social efforts under scrutiny and pressure, while also presenting opportunities for progress and success. In 2023, critical issues such as the conditions of detainees and prisoners, the rights of women and children, displacement, and migration continued to demand the state's full mobilization of resources for resolution. Additionally, freedom of opinion and expression faced ongoing threats. It is important to clarify that certain practices, such as the 2023 phenomenon termed "low-quality content" produced by some social media bloggers, do not fall within the scope of human rights. These individuals' posts undermined public morals and general taste, prompting governmental intervention through legal measures, although these efforts exhibited certain shortcomings.

One of the most significant challenges to human rights in Iraq during 2023 was the suspension of the Independent High Commission for Human Rights. To date, a new Board of Commissioners has not been appointed, and the Commission remains under the temporary management of the Minister of Justice. This situation constitutes both a constitutional and legal violation and negatively impacts the implementation of the Commission's programs, visions, and strategies aimed at enhancing the human rights landscape in Iraq. It also reflects instability and inconsistency in the Iraqi state's approach to human rights issues and their long-term resolution. While temporary ministerial management is preferable to complete suspension, it must be strictly time-limited, with measures assessed according to their proportional necessity.

Conditions within Iraqi prisons continue to fall short of nationally adopted standards, necessitating further efforts to align with human rights requirements. Challenges such as food quality, overcrowding, and the health and humanitarian conditions of prisoners and detainees remain pressing concerns, alongside initiatives to develop integrated reformatory cities. Similarly, issues related to the status of women, employment opportunities, underage marriage, and the prevalence of human trafficking, organized crime, trade in human organs, prostitution, and sexual deviance persist as critical areas of concern.

International reports issued by official and non-governmental organizations have consistently documented human rights violations in Iraq over several years, based on reports, field visits, and investigations conducted by their personnel. Iraq has frequently expressed divergent views regarding these reports, often criticizing them for lacking objectivity and accuracy and for overlooking the substantial efforts made by the state across various sectors to address human rights issues. This divergence is evident in the discrepancies between information presented in international documents and that contained in national reports and records.

VI. Public Services

This chapter evaluates the government's initiatives to prioritize public services within its strategic agenda and daily operations, aiming to enable citizens to observe tangible progress as a foundation for broader development. The administration focused on infrastructure projects such as the construction of roads and bridges, hospital rehabilitation, and power generation. These efforts leveraged relative stability, parliamentary consensus, and a genuine commitment to reconstruction, thereby distancing from prior allegations of corruption and fraudulent practices. Electrical energy remained the government's foremost priority in 2023, despite notable shortcomings in fulfilling several commitments, attributable to the ambitious scope of the government's program, entrenched bureaucratic structures, the political quota system in certain sectors, and Iraq's complex political, economic, and social milieu. The Prime Minister mandated all ministries to extend maximum support to the Ministry of Electricity, which initiated projects to complete transformer stations and enhance transmission and generation infrastructure to strengthen the national grid. Emphasis was placed on clean energy, particularly solar power, alongside maintenance and rehabilitation campaigns for existing stations. Consequently, supply hours improved noticeably across all governorates throughout the year, including the summer months; production reached approximately 24,000 MW, representing a 22% increase from the previous year. This output satisfies nearly 65% of the total demand, estimated at 34,000 MW. Ambitious plans aim to generate additional thousands of megawatts within the next two years to meet projected demand, which may reach 36,700 MW by 2025, contingent upon the implementation of comprehensive energy policies in Iraq.

Iraq engaged reputable international firms, including the American General Electric and others, to revitalize the power grid. These collaborations encompass maintenance of existing stations, establishment of new primary and secondary substations, capacity expansion of current units, enhancement of interconnection between the Jordanian and Iraqi power grids, and personnel training. Given Iraq's substantial potential for renewable energy (currently constituting a marginal 1.65% of total primary energy consumption), there is an urgent need to expand this sector. The country benefits from high solar radiation levels and economically viable wind speeds, which could enhance national energy security and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Despite progress in power generation, chronic challenges persist within the sector. These include fluctuations in Iranian gas supplies to power stations due to Iran's high domestic demand during peak heat and cold seasons, and occasional delays in payments for imported gas resulting from American sanctions. Additionally, specialized agencies must decisively address acts of sabotage and attacks on transmission lines, which, although significantly reduced, continue to occur. Substantial financial allocations are necessary for the Ministry of Electricity

to augment generating capacity in line with investment requirements for new units.

al-Baṣrah Governorate anticipates a significant improvement in services through the al-Fāw seawater desalination project, the first of its kind in Iraq. This strategic initiative aims to provide potable water to northern and southern areas of the city center. However, the project has faced criticism due to implementation delays, a 25% reduction in planned production capacity, and increased operational costs (maintenance, filter replacement, and energy expenses are estimated at approximately 200 billion dinars annually, deducted from the governorate's budget).

In 2023, health services experienced relative improvement, evidenced by enhanced medicine availability, the opening of health centers across various governorates, and an increase in hospital bed capacity. The Health Insurance Law was implemented with a pilot registration phase. Under this system, registrants pay mandatory health insurance premiums, and a ministry-licensed insurance company covers approximately 75% of surgical costs. Employees contribute 1% of their salaries to provide health coverage for themselves, their spouses, children under 18, and non-employed parents. Nonetheless, the health system remains burdened by ongoing conflicts, poverty, malnutrition, and security challenges, which exacerbate pressures on health institutions, including insufficient capacity in government hospitals and a severe shortage of operating theaters.

Municipal departments exerted considerable efforts to develop infrastructure and services such as transport routes. However, certain services in Baghdād and other governorates experienced stagnation due to mismanagement and allegations of financial and administrative corruption. For instance, public sewage networks cover a limited proportion of the population, many of whom rely on private septic tanks. The adoption of advanced technologies for wastewater treatment for industrial and agricultural reuse is necessary, alongside the introduction of smart water meters for all subscribers to monitor consumption. Waste management remained unresolved in 2023; approximately 11 million tons of waste are buried annually using primitive methods, with projections estimating an increase to 30.4 million tons by 2050 due to population growth and human activity.

The government demonstrated significant commitment to alleviating traffic congestion in Baghdād, under the direct supervision of the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Construction and Housing. Comprehensive plans were developed, and substantial progress was achieved through numerous projects targeting road and bridge development in high-density areas. Subsequent project phases face challenges including financial constraints, overlapping ministerial jurisdictions, and multiple land ownership issues, particularly concerning the Baghdād Metro, a promising initiative expected to substantially mitigate congestion by expanding transit options.

Iraq is confronting an escalating housing crisis driven by unprecedented population growth and urban expansion, resulting in the proliferation of informal settlements across all governorates. The Ministries of Planning and Construction and Housing have collaborated to address this deficit through national housing policies and the announcement of investment opportunities in this critical sector. These initiatives include the development of new cities in Baghdād, Bābil, al-Najaf al-Ashraf, Wāsiṭ, al-Baṣrah, and other locations, whereas some governorates have yet to announce investment opportunities, according to data from the National Investment Commission.

Pressure on transport routes has intensified due to increased demand and the influx of imported vehicles, which has not been matched by a commensurate expansion of roads or railways, except for the commencement of the first phase of the expressway project linking al-Najaf al-Ashraf to the international highway, and the government's commitment to establishing the Iraqi Development Road, a strategic project connecting the Gulf states to southern Turkey.

Regarding air transport and passenger movement, activity was confined to the airports of Baghdād, Erbil, al-Najaf al-Ashraf, al-Baṣrah, and al-Sulaymānīyah. The ban on Iraqi aviation in European airspace remains in effect after eight years, attributed to the failure of successive Civil Aviation Authority administrations to meet regulatory requirements. Moreover, the 2018 government decision to separate the Civil Aviation Authority from the Ministry of Transport exacerbated the issue by distancing the responsible body from formal correspondence channels. Conversely, Iraq is progressing toward expanding maritime port activities and increasing vessel capacity. Work on the Grand al-Fāw Port continued throughout 2023, with quay construction reaching approximately 85% completion.

VII. Anti-Corruption Efforts

Corruption constitutes a significant challenge that undermines the political and administrative framework of the Iraqi state across all its institutions. It poses a threat to the democratic system and the constitutional order of the country, facilitating the emergence of rivaling illegitimate entities (deep state). Moreover, corruption depletes the state's resources and its human, financial, and economic capacities, diverting them from efforts aimed at achieving sustainable development. In this regard, Iraq has consistently ranked near the bottom of the Corruption Perceptions Index, positioned 154th out of 180 countries in 2023, reflecting only a marginal improvement of three ranks from the previous year. It is noteworthy that the 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index published by Transparency International reveals that most countries globally have made minimal progress in combating public sector corruption, with the global average remaining steady at 43 for the twelfth consecutive year.

Addressing corruption necessitates a collective effort involving all sectors of society, beginning with public authorities, the private sector, civil society organizations, the media, and citizens as the fundamental base. Nonetheless, reform

must originate from the highest levels of state authority before extending to other institutions and sectors, guided by systematic strategies, visions, and plans, alongside universally applicable mechanisms. This reform process demands genuine and resolute political will to effectively combat corruption.

In 2023, new evidence emerged implicating additional figures from the previous government in the embezzlement of tax deposits, referred to as the “Theft of the Century.” Consequently, investigative courts specializing in integrity cases issued arrest and search warrants for four senior officials from the former administration. Furthermore, the Federal Commission of Integrity announced the execution of a “major and exceptional” operation at the Real Estate Registration Directorate in al-Anbār Governorate, resulting in the arrest of employees, including the director, on charges of manipulation and forgery concerning land plots.

Despite growing demands within Iraq to combat corruption, numerous obstacles impede progress. Efforts by oversight institutions are weakened by fragile political structures and a lack of genuine commitment to establishing effective integrity systems. Several cases remain unresolved, with the Iraqi public awaiting investigation outcomes and the disclosure of the roles played by various parties that facilitated the activities of those allegedly involved in cases such as the “Theft of the Century” and others.

VIII. Development of Education and Higher Education

The academic year commenced on October 12, 2022. The Ministry of Education mandated full in-person attendance for all school administrations and educational staff, despite the lingering effects of disrupted school hours caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which continue to affect educational standards. The 2022–2023 academic year suffered the recurring annual shortage of school textbooks. Initially, the Ministry of Education was unable to distribute new textbooks due to the non-approval of the 2023 federal budget, a customary delay each year, alongside administrative delays and longstanding suspicions of corruption surrounding this financial matter. Additionally, the shortage of school buildings and the reliance on dual and triple-shift systems in most Iraqi schools remained significant challenges. This issue is particularly critical given the high population growth rates, which outpace the supply of schools. Such conditions impede the teaching process, limit teachers’ ability to effectively convey scientific knowledge, and reduce classroom interaction. According to announcements from the Ministry of Education, there is an actual need for at least 8,000 additional schools.

Regarding human and administrative capacities, educational institutions face a severe shortage of staff and a cumulative deficit in diverse educational personnel, alongside an increasing demand for specialized staff. Furthermore, the e-learning system and distance education failed to provide students with adequate opportunities to acquire necessary information and knowledge. Despite efforts, these platforms and applications did not establish an effective learning environment, as many scientific subjects across all levels require prac-

tical application and interaction. Moreover, students' varying academic levels and cognitive abilities hindered simultaneous information acquisition and learning. In 2023, the Education Management Information System (EMIS) was implemented in most educational directorates across Iraq for use by school administrations. This system is designed for data collection, processing, analysis, and reporting to accurately reflect the educational system's status, including schools, students, teachers, and staff.

The rate of educational loss, including dropout and failure, remains high in Iraq. Approximately 3.2 million school-age Iraqi children are out of school, according to the latest UNICEF statistics from 2021. This situation results from decades of wars, conflicts, and underinvestment, which have weakened the educational system and severely limited children's access to quality education. The fragility of political and social conditions, declining education quality, and ineffective modern mechanisms to address these issues have exacerbated the problem. Additionally, the limited role of vocational education, the obsolescence of technical education, insufficient capacity building for instructors, and weak administrative governance contribute to these challenges. These issues stem from a lack of partnership between public and private educational institutions, slow progress in delegating powers to governorates, inadequate implementation of administrative decentralization between central and local levels, and weak monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

Concerning higher education, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research emphasized, at the start of the 2022-2023 academic year, the commitment of educational institutions to full in-person instruction across more than one hundred government and private universities and faculties. These institutions employ over fifty-three thousand instructors and enroll more than one million students. The year witnessed a significant increase in admissions to private universities compared to previous years. This increase was due to their enhanced capacity to accommodate students who were unable to gain admission to government universities because their grades did not meet the required thresholds, both among low-achieving students and high-achieving students who did not secure places in faculties aligned with their scientific ambitions, particularly in medical and engineering fields.

Regarding senior leadership within the ministries, the 2022-2023 academic year experienced several administrative changes. In early November 2022, Dr. Na'im al-'Abbūdī assumed the ministerial portfolio for the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, succeeding Dr. Nabīl 'Abd al-Šāhib. Similarly, the Minister of Education, Dr. Ibrāhīm al-Jubūrī, officially received his duties from his predecessor, 'Alī al-Dulaymī, within the new government.

The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research launched an electronic central admission application form for universities for the 2022-2023 academic year, admitting over two hundred thousand students. Results published on the Ministry's official website and the Department of Studies, Planning, and Follow-up portal indicated the admission of 197,724 students through general

and direct admission channels, 7,616 through the martyrs' families channel, and 146 through the elite channel.

In 2023, Iraqi government and private universities actively participated and competed in several international rankings. Notably, the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2022 assessed 1,799 universities from 104 countries. Iraqi universities achieved competitive indexed ranks, with eight universities attaining significant global results. Furthermore, the University of Baghdad appeared in the Shanghai Ranking, and five Iraqi universities were featured in the QS World University Rankings, among other classifications.

IX. Difficult Steps Toward Restoring Iraq's Regional and International Status

Iraq's international relations remain a complex issue due to structural political factors. This complexity primarily stems from the political system imposed by international agendas following Iraq's transition from an authoritarian regime to a democratic one. Although Iraq was initially dependent on the decisions and actions of the United States and its international allies, developments in both domestic and regional contexts have significantly influenced Iraqi foreign policy. Given its extensive ties and associations, Iraq cannot pursue a policy of isolationism; nearly all countries worldwide are interconnected politically, economically, or in terms of security.

Simultaneously, international relations have become increasingly integrative, characterized by high levels of mutual dependence and regional and global interaction. Nations do not always align with specific blocs or axes, as such alignment may render them vulnerable and dependent on one side while fostering hostility and strategic conflict with another. This balance is particularly challenging for Iraq due to its pluralistic political and social realities and its pursuit of equilibrium in engaging with global powers amid a regional context deeply intertwined with its domestic sphere. Consequently, Iraq must avoid aligning exclusively with one axis against another. Therefore, a strategy of balance and parity remains the most appropriate approach for Iraqi foreign policy to achieve economic and political independence and to prevent interference in its internal affairs. The experiences of previous Iraqi governments have complicated the ability of leaders to effectively manage external influences and ambitions; thus, Prime Minister al-Sūdānī is endeavoring to navigate multiple directions, including Arab, regional, and Western spheres.

Under Prime Minister al-Sūdānī's administration, Iraq has recognized the importance of strengthening relations with its Arab neighbors, particularly in an era marked by globalization and interdependence. Accordingly, Iraq has engaged more actively with its regional environment, seeking to intensify political, economic, and security ties through "productive diplomacy." Leveraging its strategic location, Iraq serves as a hub for trade, economy, and energy, with potential integration into regional transport projects, especially within the oil sector.

The report further examines Iraq's international relations by highlighting key foreign policy trajectories across several regional and international issues. Notably, it discusses the visit of UN Secretary-General António Guterres to Baghdād in his first visit in six years. According to the United Nations, the visit aimed to "support peace efforts" and reaffirm the UN's commitment to assisting Iraq in promoting peace, human rights, and sustainable development. Subsequently, Guterres visited a displaced persons camp in northern Iraq before traveling to Erbil to meet representatives of the Kurdistan Regional Government.

Secondly, Iraq's position on the events in Gaza aligned with Arab and international stances condemning what is regarded as ethnic cleansing and an unjust war. Iraq was among the foremost countries denouncing Israeli massacres in the Gaza Strip, as evidenced by millions demonstrating in Baghdād and several Iraqi governorates. This popular sentiment was echoed by official statements from the Iraqi government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which condemned the attacks. Iraq called upon the international community and organizations to end the Zionist massacres, lift the blockade on Gaza, and establish safe corridors for civilians and urgent humanitarian aid. Additionally, Baghdād hosted the 35th emergency conference of the Arab Parliamentary Union to address Zionist aggression and halt barbaric attacks on civilians.

Regarding relations with Arab and Islamic countries, significant developments occurred during Prime Minister al-Sūdānī's visits to several nations aimed at expanding cooperation, including Egypt, Syria, the Gulf States, Iran, and Turkey. These visits underscored the ongoing policy of openness pursued by successive Iraqi governments, from the administrations of al-'Abādī and 'Abd-al-Mahdī to al-Kāzīmī and finally al-Sūdānī. The visit to Egypt highlighted Iraq's desire to elevate strategic cooperation by activating bilateral joint committees, a process initiated during al-Sūdānī's first visit to Cairo in early March 2023. Economic cooperation was prioritized, particularly concerning Iraq's reconstruction, investment, trade, tourism, and the exchange of expertise.

Similarly, the report discusses al-Sūdānī's visits to neighboring countries such as Syria, Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. These visits aimed to convey messages regarding regional developments, especially "hotspots" directly affecting Iraq, such as the Syrian conflict and the tensions between the United States and Iran. This situation is particularly sensitive given that key parties within al-Sūdānī's government are associated with an axis perceived as a source of concern for several Arab states. Meanwhile, Iraq's relationship with Saudi Arabia is founded on cooperation and partnership, emphasizing security, mutual interests, and shared strengths, while recognizing Saudi Arabia's political and spiritual influence in the Islamic world.

Concerning relations with the United States, these remained heavily influenced by regional events and marked by divergence between the Iraqi government's objectives and the positions of certain supporting forces with specific political and religious agendas. These forces sought to disrupt the relationship, especially following repeated American strikes against leaders of armed factions within

the Popular Mobilization Forces, who viewed the termination of the American presence in Iraq as essential. At this juncture, Prime Minister al-Sūdānī emphasized that this issue was vital for national stability and represented both popular and official demands. He underscored the necessity of an agreement with Washington to establish a committee tasked with discussing the future of the US-led military coalition and formulating a timetable for troop withdrawal. Conversely, some political forces allied with the government were cautious not to undermine al-Sūdānī's relations with the US, refraining from targeting American interests and bases or demanding an immediate exit. Meanwhile, the official government stance remained cautious regarding the continuation of US support. This stance likely formed a central component of efforts by US Ambassador Romanowski to communicate with key political actors to reach understandings that safeguard mutual interests. Consequently, the relationship with the US is perceived as progressing toward activating the Strategic Framework Agreement and mobilizing strategic partnership and business development committees.

Regarding relations with key European Union countries, several agreements were signed with France to advance projects initiated during al-Kāzīmī's administration. During Prime Minister al-Sūdānī's visit to France, he and President Macron agreed on a Strategic Partnership Agreement encompassing over 50 articles of cooperation across various fields. This agreement aims to diversify Iraq's external relations and strengthen counter-terrorism efforts, where Iraqi initiatives, supported by the International Coalition, have achieved success against ISIS.

Iraq's relationship with Germany also experienced progress, with opportunities toward signing memoranda of understanding involving German investment in various sectors, infrastructure, and development projects. Iraq seeks to enhance its investment environment and attract global expertise, particularly with the launch of the Development Road project and its associated opportunities, as well as the nearing of agreements with Siemens and other German firms concerning investment in associated gas for electricity generation. Iraq is attempting to implement a similarly balanced approach with the Russian Federation. In contrast, relations with Sweden deteriorated following the desecration of the Holy Quran in front of the Iraqi Embassy in Sweden, which provoked hundreds of angry Iraqis to burn the Swedish Embassy. Consequently, Sweden withdrew its diplomatic mission, and Iraq reciprocated.

In conclusion, Iraq's international relations have undergone significant changes amid considerable regional challenges, most notably the ongoing war in Gaza and the repercussions of US-Iranian tensions on Iraqi soil. Iraq continues to strive for positive relations with neighboring countries, emphasizing the importance of maintaining consistent foreign policy to safeguard the interests of the state and its people in the forthcoming period.

2. Political Process

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I. al-Sūdānī Government: Performance Evaluation

The ministerial program for the cabinet of al-Sūdānī, which received a vote of confidence from the Council of Representatives on Thursday, October 27, 2022, comprised 23 concise pillars. The program's objectives did not significantly differ from those of preceding governments. To evaluate the performance of al-Sūdānī's government, its actions must be assessed against the commitments and pledges outlined in the program, which included several key pillars, most notably:

1. Social Protection and Poverty Alleviation

In his ministerial program, al-Sūdānī pledged to support the Social Development Fund in cooperation with the World Bank to implement projects aimed at improving conditions in the most impoverished areas, in addition to prioritizing the improvement and reform of the "Ration Card" system (Prime Minister's Office, 2022, p. 4). An examination of the government's work in this area reveals progress in including the largest possible number of eligible groups, both in enhancing the items of the ration card and in social protection. The Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs announced that the number of individuals covered by social protection aid reached 7 million in Iraq, noting that the number of families identified by the Ministry of Planning as living below the poverty line reached 52,081 (Rudaw, 2023, September 20). This high figure undoubtedly represents a positive aspect of any Iraqi government's performance. However, this issue is often subject to political calculations; most beneficiaries receive care through mediation by political entities or parliamentary figures. This file is frequently exploited for political and electoral purposes and continues to be managed traditionally rather than institutionally, which would ensure the protection of marginalized groups without political manipulation.

2. Unemployment and Development Sectors

The ministerial program regarding unemployment aimed to expand the role of the industrial sector, reconsider investment sectors, and strengthen agricultural sectors (Prime Minister's Office, 2022, p. 5). It also included the distribution of residential land plots in every governorate, similar to promises made by predecessors, though limited to certain groups. The program also featured the

establishment of the Reconstruction and Development Fund. After more than a year and a half of al-Sūdānī's government, the administration remains unable to provide jobs except in the public sector. According to observers, this policy will generate significant problems for the Iraqi economy, especially if financial crises occur that harm the oil sector, particularly since Iraq is a rentier state entirely dependent on oil revenues. Instead of absorbing graduates and holders of higher degrees through government employment, it would have been more appropriate to utilize their capabilities and specializations to revitalize the private sector. This requires an integrated strategic vision to provide jobs for every Iraqi citizen (especially graduates) as a legitimate right. Many holders of higher degrees desire to engage in the private sector, and have been already working in private universities; however, because their work there does not guarantee their rights, and out of concern for their academic and professional status, some were forced to seek government employment.

The program contained pillars on developing the sectors of industry, agriculture, and water resources. Coincidentally, the Prime Minister himself is an agricultural engineer, the President of the Republic is interested in water resource affairs (having previously served as the Minister of Water Resources), and the current Ministry of Water Resources is led by an expert in this field, at a time when Iraq is facing a major water and drought crisis affecting most Iraqi cities, particularly rural areas.

3. Displaced Persons, the Missing, and Victims of Terrorism

al-Sūdānī's ministerial program stated that the file of displaced persons and deportees would be addressed within approximately six months of the government's tenure (Prime Minister's Office, 2022, p. 4). However, this file remains unresolved to this day; this shortcoming is attributed to al-Sūdānī. The third paragraph of the program, under the pillar of displaced persons titled "The File of Displaced Persons, Reconstruction of Liberated Areas, and Minorities," raised concerns regarding the term "minorities." This term carries a non-neutral connotation and does not align with principles of equality, despite its common use in political contexts. It was expected that the term would be phrased differently in the program (Abd-Allāh & Shabīb, 2023, pp. 35-36).

Generally, the ministerial program aimed to accelerate the reconstruction of liberated areas and resolve the displaced persons file by facilitating their return to their cities. Other pillars referred to supporting the "Fund for the Reconstruction of Liberated Cities" and preparing suitable conditions for the return of the displaced, solving security problems in some areas, and encouraging "voluntary return." The term "voluntary return" emphasized that voluntariness is not determined by the citizen but depends on the availability of several factors: health, education, and security. This is currently subject to "security screening," which al-Sūdānī also pledged to address. Simultaneously, other paragraphs focus on security screening, particularly concerning the Jurf-al-Naṣr area and other regions (Abd-Allāh & Shabīb, 2023, pp. 35-36).

The program agreed upon by the political blocs forming the government, within the "State Management" Alliance, stipulated the necessity of providing the required allocations and procedures for the reconstruction of governorates damaged by terrorism. The government committed to returning the displaced to their residential areas within six months of its formation. Although the government was formed on October 27 and the program was presented on December 12, this issue remained unresolved for a long period, similar to other topics. The fundamental question directed to al-Sūdānī's government is: if it recognized that it could not return the displaced and deportees to certain areas, why did the ministerial program include this promise? (Abd-Allāh & Shabīb, 2023, pp. 35-36).

These issues, among others, created genuine problems between the former Speaker of the Council of Representatives, Muḥammad al-Ḥalbūsī, and the Prime Minister, al-Sūdānī. The former indicated that al-Sūdānī did not fulfill all the promises made in the ministerial program. This tension reflects the stagnation occurring in the implementation of the program.

Another point mentioned by al-Sūdānī was working with specialized agencies to reveal the fate of the missing, who were included under the "Victims of Terrorism Law" after conducting security screening. It is recognized that the implementation of the program is a collective responsibility shared by all blocs forming the government. Some forces do not want this matter to proceed, which was met with resentment from al-Ḥalbūsī. This generated harsh reactions from leaders within the Coordination Framework, who asserted that most of these individuals were terrorists or members of the ISIS terrorist organization. Therefore, it would have been better to distinguish between the "missing" and the "forcibly disappeared;" using the term "forcibly disappeared" includes those from all sects, regions, and various cities in Iraq.

Another topic concerns the "General Amnesty Law," which has confounded the political scene and become a subject of political controversy between the "Sovereignty Alliance," led by al-Ḥalbūsī and al-Khanjar, and the leaders of the "Coordination Framework." Notably, this has been proposed in most Iraqi ministerial programs, including those of al-Mālikī, al-'Abādī, 'Abd-al-Mahdī, and al-Kāẓimī, who conditioned the general amnesty upon rehabilitation and the conviction of terrorist groups.

In al-Sūdānī's program, Article (4) indicated the necessity of conducting a legal review of the General Amnesty Law by adding other paragraphs, including conducting security screening processes. This file represents the same chronic problem, as al-Sūdānī has been unable to implement it, even though the general amnesty file does not exclusively concern the Sunni component but other components as well. This is in addition to other pillars mentioned in the program, such as the issue of compensation and the cancellation of security permits for liberated areas, which remain pending resolution.

4. The Electricity Crisis

Promises, programs, and strategies aimed at resolving the electricity crisis in Iraq are frequently characterized by vague rhetoric. This ambiguity was evident in the ministerial program of al-Sūdānī, which lacked explicit plans. Moreover, it omitted reference to prior commitments and the contentious discourse surrounding the involvement of international companies, such as the German firm Siemens, in the development of Iraq's electricity sector. The program also failed to mention agreements signed during al-Kāzīmī's administration with countries including Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, intended to supply electrical energy to Iraq. Consequently, the electricity sector has not experienced significant improvement, particularly during the summer months.

5. Corruption and Misappropriation of Public Funds

al-Sūdānī characterized the fight against corruption as more perilous than the COVID-19 pandemic, a comparison that underscores the severity of the issue. While the efforts of the Federal Commission of Integrity in prosecuting corrupt individuals and those embezzling public funds are commendable, questions persist regarding the substantive measures taken by al-Sūdānī to address corruption. Despite his references to remedies involving the recovery of funds, there appears to be insufficient commitment to opening all major corruption cases, including those implicating successive Iraqi governments. Although no specific individuals are accused, it is imperative that anti-corruption efforts are impartial and not selectively applied to conceal corruption within certain administrations. Additionally, the mechanisms employed in addressing the "Theft of the Century" have attracted criticism, which will be elaborated upon in a subsequent section of this chapter. It appears that al-Sūdānī's government may have sought to emulate the Egyptian model; however, the contexts differ significantly. Furthermore, the government's release of three individuals convicted in the aforementioned theft undermines public confidence in its capacity to combat corruption effectively (ʿAbd-Allāh & Shabīb, 2023, pp. 35-36).

6. The Relationship Between the Federal Government and the Kurdistan Region, and the Return of Kurdish Parties to Kirkuk for Political and Governmental Activity

The relationship between the federal government and the Kurdistan Region remains complex and fraught with challenges. These difficulties stem from the parties' failure to adhere to agreements, the non-implementation or ambiguity of the Constitution, and the absence of legislation to resolve outstanding issues. Among these challenges are the ongoing disputes over oil exports by the Regional Government, the distribution of salaries to regional employees, and the unresolved status of territories designated as "disputed areas" between the Region and the federal government.

Conflict in Kirkuk arose following the federal government's transfer of headquarters to Kurdish forces as stipulated in the ministerial program. This transfer was contested by Arab and Turkmen parties, prompting the government to

reclaim control of the headquarters pursuant to a Federal Court decision (No. 213/Federal/Interim Order/2023) suspending the government's order. The Federal Court decreed: "To stay the execution of the Prime Minister's (Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces) order dated August 25, 2023, which included 'evacuating the building currently occupied by the Advanced Headquarters of the Joint Operations Command in Kirkuk Governorate and the consequences arising therefrom' until the resolution of the aforementioned lawsuit seeking its annulment, in order to preserve security in Kirkuk Governorate and prioritize national unity, peaceful coexistence, and the public interest; a final and binding decision for all authorities."

The issue of Kirkuk must be analyzed with reference to Article 140 of the Constitution, originally Article 58 of the Law of Administration for the State of Iraq for the Transitional Period, which was incorporated into the Permanent Iraqi Constitution. This article stipulated that the related issues should be resolved within seven months. Political negotiations commenced in 2010, intensified after 2014, and became more pronounced following the Kurdistan Region's secession referendum on September 25, 2017. Some political actors argued that the article had expired and lost relevance over time. However, the Federal Supreme Court ruled that Article 140 remains valid until all associated matters are resolved. Accordingly, the ministerial program aligns with the Federal Court's decision by activating a specialized committee to address the issues outlined in the article (Abd-Allāh & Shabīb, 2023, pp. 41-42).

7. Uncontrolled Weapons

The ministerial program also addressed the issue of uncontrolled weapons, which poses a significant threat to sustainable peace and the consolidation of shared values of coexistence. This issue is complex, involving tribal, political, and regional dimensions. Recently, direct and indirect communications between Iraq and the United States, facilitated through the US Embassy in Iraq, have aimed to isolate this issue from broader regional conflicts. These efforts appear to have contributed to a relative reduction in attacks on American bases in Iraq. The issue has caused considerable embarrassment for al-Sūdānī in his role as Prime Minister, representing the official position of Iraq. Moreover, al-Sūdānī's government intends to advance its agenda, demonstrate its effectiveness to the populace, and secure additional international support.

II. Parliamentary Performance

More than two years have elapsed since the commencement of the current term of the Council of Representatives. Nevertheless, political and sub-national conflicts, divisions, and the predominance of factional interests continue to characterize the Council's performance. Various indicators and observations highlight the performance of this term in comparison to previous parliamentary sessions. Although the Council of Representatives, as a legislative institution within the federal parliamentary system established by the current Constitution, has

faced numerous challenges and shortcomings reflecting the country's political conflicts, the current parliamentary term has not adequately met the demands posed by national challenges. These challenges encompass the enactment and amendment of laws and the management of critical issues, alongside a notable deficiency in the exercise of oversight functions. Consequently, the Parliament has become a direct reflection of the prevailing political landscape, influenced by mechanisms that govern a political system based on the participation of all political forces represented in the Parliament within the Executive Authority. This situation is exacerbated by the absence of a parliamentary opposition and the current dormancy of popular opposition. Accordingly, the evaluation of parliamentary performance and the political climate during 2023 can be structured around the following pillars:

1. Legislative Reforms

Several legislative reforms were anticipated to be expedited by the Iraqi Council of Representatives, either through enactment or amendment, in collaboration with the Executive Authority or the Iraqi government. More than two and a half years have passed since the inaugural session of the current Council, during which most of these laws were incorporated into the legislative reform agenda within al-Sūdānī's ministerial program. These reforms include the enactment of the Oil and Gas Law, the Civil Service Law, and the Federal Council Law. Notably, political blocs succeeded in enacting the Governorate Council Elections Law and scheduling its implementation; however, this action provoked widespread controversy and has been characterized as partisan and politically biased, particularly amid a period of political realignment following the withdrawal of the Sadrist bloc from the Parliament and the political process.

The legislative agenda in the ministerial program also addressed issues of simultaneous importance and urgency, such as amending the Federal Court Law, revising the Elections Law within a three-month timeframe, repealing the decisions of the dissolved Revolutionary Command Council, amending the Martyrs Foundation Law, and enacting the National Security Law. A prominent commitment involved conducting local and parliamentary elections within one year of the program's approval, contingent upon the enactment of necessary laws and the formation of the Board of Commissioners.

Despite these commitments, the Legislative Authority (the Parliament) has been unable to enact or address many of the aforementioned laws. While the government successfully conducted governorate council elections in December 2023, the status of Council of Representatives elections remains uncertain, despite references in the program. It appears that the government intends to complete its full constitutional term, a matter that will be further examined in a subsequent pillar of this study.

2. Party Defections (Schism within al-Siyādah Alliance)

A prominent feature of political alliances in Iraq, both pre- and post-elections, is the absence of a comprehensive national strategy aimed at achieving alliance

cohesion. Consequently, the political landscape has witnessed the formation of numerous alliances, most of which have failed to endure beyond a few weeks. The primary factors contributing to the fragmentation of these alliances include narrow personal interests and competition over positions and resources, particularly given that alliance-building in Iraq predominantly reflects sub-national alignments. Among the alliances that have experienced internal fractures is the al-Siyādah Alliance. This section examines the origins of this alliance, its principal components, and the factors leading to its eventual disintegration.

A. Reasons for the Establishment of al-Siyādah Alliance and Its Key Components

Several internal and external factors contributed to the formation of the al-Siyādah Alliance. Internally, the competitive dynamics of the October 2021 elections and divergent visions and projects played a significant role. The government formation process was influenced by the “National Majority” thesis, advocated by the Sadrist Movement, which necessitated the creation of an alliance comprising the largest number of MPs to secure a comfortable majority within the Council of Representatives. This strategy facilitated the unification of the two most prominent Sunni political rivals: the ‘Azm Gathering, led by Khamīs al-Khanjar, and the Taqaddum Party, led by Muḥammad al-Ḥalbūsī (the then Speaker of Parliament) under the banner of the “al-Siyādah Alliance.” The alliance aimed to strengthen their negotiating position with the Sadrist Movement concerning parliamentary and executive obligations.

Externally, regional relations played a crucial role in aligning the visions of the two main Sunni parties, both of which maintain ties with Gulf states, Turkey, and Jordan. Leadership from both ‘Azm and Taqaddum engaged in multiple meetings across various countries, notably Turkey, Jordan, and even Qatar. In a joint statement, the parties attributed their alliance to several motivations, foremost among them a commitment to their constituents’ aspirations, protection of their interests, and functioning as a unified team defending their constituents’ rights. The statement also addressed the issues of displaced persons and forcibly disappeared individuals, sought to consolidate Iraq’s sovereignty, and emphasized the establishment of a genuine state of citizenship. Furthermore, it underscored the importance of partnership with all national forces dedicated to national salvation and citizen service, alongside support for Iraqi institutions, particularly security forces, in combating terrorism and limiting weapons to state authority.

Ultimately, the ‘Azm party (also known as the Arab Project), holding 34 parliamentary seats, and Taqaddum, with 37 seats, successfully established the al-Siyādah Alliance on January 25, 2022. This alliance became the largest Sunni bloc within the Council of Representatives, comprising 71 MPs. Leadership roles were allocated as follows: Khamīs al-Khanjar assumed the chairmanship of the alliance, Muḥammad al-Ḥalbūsī’s speakership of Parliament was renewed as the Sunni representative within the political quota system, and Sha’lān al-Karīm was appointed chair of the al-Siyādah parliamentary bloc.

Following the failure of the “Saving the Homeland” Alliance, which included al-Siyādah alongside the Sadrist Movement and the Kurdistan Democratic Party, to form a government based on a national majority, the al-Siyādah Alliance disintegrated after approximately one year. Defections commenced with the withdrawal of several MPs from the Taqaddum bloc, including Falāḥ al-Zaydān, Laṭīf al-Warshān, ‘Ādil al-Maḥllāwī, and Yūsuf al-Sab’āwī, as well as former MP Layth al-Dulaymī. These individual defections precipitated the withdrawal of the Taqaddum Party, one of the alliance’s two wings, although the alliance’s name remained associated with al-Khanjar’s political project. Subsequently, al-Khanjar contested the December 2023 governorate council elections independently under the al-Siyādah Alliance title. The factors contributing to the alliance’s disintegration are elaborated below.

B. Factors Leading to Defections within al-Siyādah Alliance

Defections within the two principal factions of the al-Siyādah Alliance (Taqaddum and ‘Azm) undermined and ultimately dismantled the coalition. Conversely, these defections benefited a rival alliance, the “Civil ‘Azm Alliance,” led by Muthannā al-Sāmarrāī, an ally of the Coordination Framework. To elucidate the causes of these defections and the alliance’s total disintegration, this analysis draws upon perspectives from parliamentary and political circles.

MP ‘Ādil al-Maḥllāwī, a defector from al-Siyādah, attributed his withdrawal to what he described as “monopolization of decision-making,” amid reports of rival Sunni parties preparing to announce a new Sunni bloc. Concurrently, Taqaddum Party leader MP Haybat al-Ḥalbūsī cited the partners’ failure to adhere to national covenants and principles as a cause (Arabi21, 2023, February 21).

Iraqi politician Mash‘ān al-Jubūrī observed that successive resignations from Taqaddum weakened the party and would inevitably lead to its collapse. Regarding al-Khanjar’s decision to permit resigning MPs to retain membership in al-Siyādah, al-Jubūrī remarked that al-Khanjar had a historical opportunity to rectify the alliance’s trajectory by embracing all Sunni MPs and politicians. Through a series of tweets, al-Jubūrī asserted that they would overcome internal disputes and collaborate to form a broad alliance representing MPs and politicians from liberated areas, aiming to “liberate the will and decision of the component from the grip of al-Ḥalbūsī,” and entrusting responsibility to those truly worthy of carrying it (Arabi21, 2023, February 21).

The Youth Political Movement Gathering, a significant Sunni force in Diyālā Governorate, identified three causes for the repeated defections: the fracturing of the “Sunni house,” disputes over political interests, and dominance over decision-making within al-Siyādah. The movement’s Secretary-General, Sayf al-Dahlakī, emphasized the lack of responsiveness to MPs’ demands in Diyālā and the prevalence of individualistic decision-making as factors prompting withdrawals. He noted that most defectors from both the Taqaddum and Arab Project wings were joining the ‘Azm faction led by Muthannā al-Sāmarrāī, who has become an influential Sunni leader (Arabi21, 2023, February 21).

Furthermore, Sayf al-Dahlakī highlighted false promises and illusory obligations as underlying causes of the alliance's recent disintegration, noting that the public emergence of disputes between the alliance's poles was unsurprising. He added that the alliance had made false promises to some MPs following their October 2021 electoral victories, only for it to become apparent that all obligations were controlled directly by the leader (al-Ma'lūmah, 2023, February 19).

MP Muḥammad Qutaybah al-Bayyātī explained his withdrawal from al-Siyādah as motivated by a desire to work independently and demonstrate his commitment to serving Iraqis broadly and the people of Diyālā Governorate specifically. He indicated that prior warnings of withdrawal, due to neglect of their regions' suffering and lack of services, were met only with failures and unfulfilled promises (al-Sūmariyah, 2023, February 15).

Council of Representatives member Muḥammad Sa'dūn al-Sūdānī attributed the defections to the monopolization of decisions and positions by the bloc's head, forecasting continued withdrawals for this reason. He argued that such schisms stem from individualistic leadership and could have been mitigated by inclusive decision-making to preserve the bloc (al-Ālam, 2023, February 19).

The al-Faḥ Alliance, led by Hādī al-Āmirī, characterized the disputes and defections within al-Siyādah as a struggle for "influence." Alliance leader 'Alī al-Zubaydī observed that the "Sunni-Sunni" conflict is longstanding and revolves around interests and power, with each Sunni political party seeking control in Sunni areas at the expense of others. While divisions are common among Iraqi political forces generally, they are particularly acute among Sunni factions due to intense competition for leadership (al-Ālam, 2023, February 19).

The spokesperson for the Popular Movement in al-Anbār, Ḍārī al-Dulaymī, stated that al-Ḥalbūsī had lost confidence in his political leverage and resorted to resolving disputes through financial incentives and project contracts in the governorate. He noted that Sunni parties opposing al-Ḥalbūsī exploit these political tensions, as alliances are fundamentally based on the distribution of positions; when a partner ceases to support others with such positions, defections inevitably follow (al-Ālam, 2023, February 19). Iraqi researcher and political analyst Kāẓim Yāwar asserted that the fragmentation of political alliances (whether Sunni, Shi'i, or Kurdish) is expected in the post-election phase, as alliances are primarily formed through the allocation of positions. He explained that the "Sunni house" is particularly susceptible to rapid schisms due to weaker protective mechanisms compared to other groups. He noted that Sunni alliances in the current electoral term, especially al-Siyādah, lack safeguards against swift disintegration beyond pre-election agreements on sharing governmental and parliamentary positions. Consequently, if any part of the alliance fails to meet the aspirations of its constituents, defections occur rapidly, especially given competing incentives from Shi'i or Kurdish factions (Arabi21, 2023, February 21).

Researcher Iyād al-Anbar attributed this phenomenon to the "excessive personalization of political work" and the failure to establish effective institutional

frameworks capable of managing ideological and political differences within reasonable limits. He argued that personal disagreements often suffice to cause splits, as politicians frequently operate from inflated egos, perceiving dissent as a threat, particularly when coupled with leadership ambitions and recruiting supporters who seek to redress their marginalization through the establishment of an alternative center of power, one that propels them toward higher levels of authority, even if such advancement entails the weakening of their political entity (al-'Anbar, 2023).

Researcher Ḥaydar al-Lāmī contended that Muḥammad al-Ḥalbūsī and Khamīs al-Khanjar were ineffective in managing the al-Siyādah Alliance, attributing MPs' resignations to an "absence of leadership" from both figures. al-Lāmī noted that recent resignations underscore the leadership vacuum within al-Siyādah during the preceding period, highlighting that many Sunni leaders were marginalized to enable al-Ḥalbūsī and al-Khanjar to dominate the political scene. He concluded that neither was adequately qualified to lead the "Sunni house," as evidenced by numerous observations during the prior term (al-Ālam, 2023, February 19).

III. The Crisis of Accusations Regarding the "Theft of the Century" Case

As the caretaker government led by al-Kāẓimī neared its conclusion, the largest theft and misappropriation of public funds in modern Iraqi history was uncovered. Specifically, in early October 2022, the "Tax Deposits Theft," widely known as the "Theft of the Century," was revealed. This operation involved the seizure of no less than 2.5 billion USD between September 2021 and August 2022 through 247 checks issued by five shell companies. These checks were authorized by the directors general of the General Commission of Taxes, and the funds were withdrawn in cash from these companies' accounts at al-Rafidain Bank. Most of the owners fled the country after laundering the stolen funds through shell companies via the Central Bank auction operations, transferring the money abroad in dollars. The remaining cash stayed with the perpetrators inside Iraq, who either retained it or distributed it among their accomplices and those providing cover. According to 'Alī 'Allāwī, the Minister of Finance in the al-Kāẓimī's government, the theft from the tax deposits account was facilitated by the illegal issuance of tax deposit refund checks by accomplices within the Tax Commission, leaving no paper trail or records of any kind for these unlawful transactions ('Allāwī, 2023, p. 1).

This situation raises the following questions: Who bears responsibility for what has been termed the "Theft of the Century"? And what factors contributed to the delay in uncovering such a theft?

Given the persistent spread of corruption in Iraq, the country was ranked 157th in corruption indices by Transparency International. Accordingly, we inquire: To what extent is the new government capable and committed to combating financial and administrative corruption amid the challenges impeding these efforts?

It was incumbent upon al-Kāzīmī to fulfill public expectations regarding anti-corruption measures. However, what transpired was an expansion of corrupt systems within state institutions, enabling certain forces to further encroach and seize control through various means. From this environment, the “Theft of the Century” emerged among hundreds of other theft cases perpetrated by influential figures from political factions. This prompts a second question concerning the entities and individuals who facilitated or executed the “Theft of the Century.”

Reports indicate that a case as massive as the “Theft of the Century” was not the result of a single individual’s actions; rather, it involved an almost integrated system that facilitates and manages such thefts. This is particularly relevant as most corruption operations in Iraq are “legalized,” and the “Theft of the Century” falls under this category of legalized corruption. In light of this, the factors that enabled the theft of public funds can be attributed to the following:

1. Political and Party Cover

Most political forces and parties infiltrate state institutions and ministries, with their presence forming a direct or indirect cover for the corruption that has been rampant for more than two decades since the political transition from the authoritarian regime. This pattern has driven many forces to compete for partisan representation in every state institution through the mechanism of “special grades,” including the three presidencies, ministers, members of the Council of Representatives, directors general, governors, independent commissions, and down to heads of departments, committees, and investment companies, extending even to security institutions. Furthermore, party loyalty dictates the appointment of employees in state institutions. These forces have reached the point of purchasing positions within state institutions for exorbitant sums (exceeding their official allocations by dozens of times) knowing they will regain these massive amounts by extracting them from public funds, which then flow to the party’s incubator, leadership, and individuals. Regarding the dimensions of the “Theft of the Century,” former Finance Minister ‘Alī ‘Allāwī stated that a theft of this magnitude could not have occurred without the involvement of high-level officials inside and outside government institutions to provide legal, political, and logistical cover (‘Allāwī, 2023, p. 3). Moreover, the state of the political quota system and the sharing of positions represent the fundamental element in providing longevity to the corrupt political and partisan state. If we trace the elements involved in the “Theft of the Century,” we find a clear professional extension and political and party cover.

2. Institutional and Ministerial Cover

As noted, the “Theft of the Century” revealed the involvement of figures working in official institutional bodies, including ministers, directors general, businessmen, and investment companies. The most prominent individual revealed among businessmen and investors is Nūr al-Muẓaffar, owner of al-Qānit and al-Mubdi’ūn companies. He had previously worked in Iraqi ports before serving as an advisor in the office of the former head of the Parliamentary Finance

Committee, Haytham al-Jubūrī. Other names were also convicted as partners, with their companies mentioned in the investigation.

At the leadership level, reports indicated that the “Theft of the Century” accelerated the resignation of ‘Alī ‘Allāwī, the Minister of Finance, on August 16, 2022, because he was “unable to do what needed to be done” due to the al-Kāzīmī government’s lack of legal status and full powers at the time. This was detailed in a lengthy ten-page statement provided by the Minister. ‘Allāwī is known as a veteran politician who served as Minister of Defense in Iyād ‘Allāwī’s government. In August 2023, the judiciary issued an arrest warrant against him on charges of officials and ministers facilitating the “Theft of the Century.” ‘Allāwī defended himself through a document he wrote regarding the theft, stating that he was first informed in August 2021 of possible forgery by individuals impersonating agents for certain international companies to obtain their deposits. Consequently, in his capacity as Finance Minister, ‘Allāwī formed an investigative committee, informed al-Rafidain Bank of suspicions of corruption, stopped the checks, and notified the Federal Commission of Integrity. He issued a directive to the Director General of the General Commission of Taxes to ban and investigate all tax deposit refund transactions. He further claimed that during that period and until his resignation, no information regarding any tax deposit refund activity reached him from financial institutions, the Tax Commission, al-Rafidain Bank, the Central Bank, or any other government department that would have alerted him to a major theft occurring at the General Commission of Taxes (‘Allāwī, 2023, pp. 1-2).

‘Allāwī attributes the delay in uncovering this theft to several reasons, most notably: the total absence of automated information, reporting systems, and controls at the Ministry of Finance and the main administration of the General Commission of Taxes. The Commission showed no trace of the illegal checks that were issued (‘Allāwī, 2023, pp. 1-2). Furthermore, he mentioned that the supposed legal documents submitted to the General Commission of Taxes on July 8, 2021 (which seemingly allowed an Iraqi businessman to act as a representative for a Chinese company in the country) were verified by a notary at the federal Ministry of Justice and approved by Tax Commission officials despite clear indicators that they were forged (al-Jazīrah, 2022, December 10). Additionally, data showing the actual balances of the Tax Commission’s deposit accounts at al-Rafidain Bank were not sent to the Commission; rather, they were ignored or hidden by the Director General of the General Commission of Taxes and other senior staff, amid a lack of integrity, competence, and transparency among directors general (‘Allāwī, 2023, p. 6).

Some of the reasons and even justifications provided by Finance Minister ‘Allāwī may seem reasonable, particularly those related to the incompetence of certain directors general, political cover, or flaws in al-Rafidain Bank’s procedures. However, it is peculiar that Minister ‘Allāwī indicates he had no information or even rumors regarding what he termed the “Great Theft” during his tenure, whether from the Tax Commission, the Ministry of Finance, or other government departments like intelligence. The Minister attributed this to widespread collusion by

many parties to cover up the theft for their own benefit. If the Minister of Finance lacks information on a major theft like the “Theft of the Century,” who would? Especially since the Ministry of Finance knows better than anyone that financial corruption in Iraq was not born at the moment of the “Theft of the Century”; rather, it was preceded by several attempts to defraud the General Commission of Taxes in previous years, by the Minister’s own admission. Moreover, there are thousands of crimes of theft and squandering of public funds diagnosed by internal and external parties; how then could the Minister claim a lack of sufficient information regarding the “Theft of the Century”?

Perhaps what further refutes this is the discovery of the “Great Theft” only weeks after his resignation, when the Ministry of Finance was managed in an acting capacity by Oil Minister Iḥsān ‘Abd-al-Jabbār. He was the first to uncover the “Theft of the Century” in October 2022 and subsequently announced his resignation from the Ministry of Finance. Arrest warrants were also issued for others, such as the former head of the National Intelligence Service, Judge Rā’id Jūḥī (who was sentenced by the judiciary in absentia and also served as the director of former Prime Minister al-Kāzīmī’s private office), as well as the former Prime Minister’s advisor for political affairs, Mushriq ‘Abbās al-Janābī, and al-Kāzīmī’s private secretary, Aḥmad Najātī.

Typically, files that resonate with public opinion in Iraq, such as the “Theft of the Century,” are utilized by political opponents. Accusations are exchanged, particularly as the ruling party seeks to attribute all problems from before and after the Tishrīn protests to the former Prime Minister’s team. Meanwhile, responsibility appears to extend to all parties involved in this crime, which has caused dangerous repercussions in many fields, including market inflation (especially in real estate markets by more than 200%) as well as rising gold prices and other issues such as currency smuggling. These files continue to pose a significant challenge to state-building as part of the oligarchic governance pattern that has become the most prominent feature of the political process in Iraq after the transition from the authoritarian regime.

IV. Termination of the Membership of the Speaker of the Council of Representatives

While the Taqaddum Party intensified its electoral campaign for the governorate council elections scheduled for December 18, 2023, under the slogan “We are a Nation,” the Federal Supreme Court issued a surprising ruling on November 14, 2023. Decision No. (9/Federal/2023) terminated the membership of Muḥammad al-Ḥalbūsī, the Speaker of the Iraqi Parliament. This decision raised numerous questions among public opinion and observers, which are addressed in the following points:

1. Reasons for the Federal Supreme Court's Termination of al-Ḥalbūsī's Membership

The termination of Muḥammad al-Ḥalbūsī's membership in the Council of Representatives originated from a political dispute between him and a member of his party, Layth al-Dulaymī. al-Dulaymī, a figure from the outskirts of Baghdād, ran in the October 2021 parliamentary elections on the Taqaddum list led by al-Ḥalbūsī. This followed the resolution of al-Dulaymī's judicial case; he had previously been detained on allegations of supporting terrorist organizations, a case that attracted significant media attention at the time. Amid divisions within political alliances, al-Ḥalbūsī reportedly compelled al-Dulaymī to sign a resignation letter. As the dispute escalated, al-Ḥalbūsī used this resignation on several occasions, only to retract it based on mutual understandings. However, the conflict eventually became irreconcilable. Months before the termination of his membership, al-Ḥalbūsī resubmitted al-Dulaymī's resignation with a new date of May 7, 2022. Although initially cancelled by mutual consent on May 8, 2022, the resignation issue was revived, resulting in al-Dulaymī's exclusion from the Council of Representatives under Parliamentary Order No. 5 on January 15, 2023. In response, al-Dulaymī filed an appeal before the Federal Court through legal representation. Subsequently, the Court issued a decision terminating al-Ḥalbūsī's membership on grounds of forgery and tampering with al-Dulaymī's resignation letter. Simultaneously, the Court terminated Layth al-Dulaymī's membership for professional misconduct, as he continued to exercise his parliamentary role after his resignation had been formally accepted. Thus, while the reasons appear legal in form, they are simultaneously driven by political conflict among various blocs and figures.

2. Termination of al-Ḥalbūsī's Membership: Legal Procedure or Political Maneuver?

In justifying the termination of al-Ḥalbūsī's membership from the Council of Representatives, the Federal Court cited legal violations of both formal and substantive nature:

- The act of a party leader compelling candidates to submit resignation letters, retaining them, and using them at will violates constitutional principles and the provisions of Articles 5, 6, 14, 16, 17, 20, 39, and 50 of the Constitution, representing a significant deviation from democratic processes.
- The Federal Supreme Court holds the authority to rule on the termination of a MP's membership if constitutional and legal obligations are violated, primarily the breach of the constitutional oath.
- The Federal Supreme Court possesses absolute discretionary power to assess such matters based on facts, evidence, and investigations.
- The Court's jurisdiction to rule on the validity of an MP's membership is "constitutive" for terminating membership rather than merely "declaratory," contrasting with its jurisdiction under Article 12 of the Law of the

Council of Representatives and its Formations No. 13 of 2018, which is declaratory of a termination already established by law. It was proven that the defendant, the Speaker of the Council of Representatives, altered and tampered with resignation requests submitted by the plaintiff, necessitating termination of his membership.

- Article 52 of the Constitution cannot be relied upon when a member of Parliament is proven to have committed constitutional and legal violations, specifically breaching the oath in Article 50, rendering continued membership untenable and requiring termination.
- The Federal Court noted that al-Ḥalbūsī committed forgery by changing resignation dates from 2022 to 2023.

Various parties objected to the Court's interpretation. The Taqaddum Party, through its leader al-Ḥalbūsī, emphasized the legal rather than political dimension of the event. al-Ḥalbūsī stated that the 2005 Iraqi Constitution specifies cases necessitating termination of membership: death, resignation, commission of a felony, or illness. He argued that the Federal Court did not adhere to all specified conditions for terminating membership from the Council. Furthermore, he asserted that the Court's decision violated the Constitution, noting that the Court lacks the right to receive termination requests before they pass through the Council of Representatives. He added that the Court's duty is to adhere to the Constitution and apply its texts without discretion. al-Ḥalbūsī maintained that the Court had the right to rule on Layth al-Dulaymī's resignation but not on the validity of his own membership, effectively performing a constitutional amendment without public referendum. He noted that the Federal Court Law governs accusations against the Presidency of the Republic and the Council of Ministers, not the Parliament, and that no case regarding termination of a deputy's membership had been considered until this instance (al-Sharq al-Awsat, 2023, November 15).

The timing of al-Ḥalbūsī's termination occurred within a tense domestic political context and perhaps as an extension of regional conflicts reflected in Iraqi local politics. The decision came weeks before the governorate council elections amid various political scenarios. While some view the termination as legally grounded, it was at least utilized to influence the Taqaddum list's electoral prospects. However, the results proved otherwise; al-Ḥalbūsī leveraged the termination to bolster his political and electoral presence, achieving advanced results in several governorates, including Baghdād. Despite ongoing conflicts with rivals, the local government election results demonstrated that al-Ḥalbūsī and his electoral list retain significant constituent support.

3. Repercussions of the Decision to Terminate al-Ḥalbūsī's Membership

The termination of al-Ḥalbūsī's membership elicited varied reactions among allies and opponents. The Taqaddum Party rejected the decision, while his allies' stance was lukewarm. The Kurdistan Democratic Party, led by Mas'ūd Bārzanī,

regarded the termination as a Federal Court matter and refrained from interference. The Sadrist Movement, al-Ḥalbūsī's other primary ally, remained silent as part of its boycott of political affairs, particularly concerning parties currently in power. Conversely, the decision represented a victory for al-Ḥalbūsī's opponents within his own national component.

al-Ḥalbūsī's political and popular position is among factors that contributed to forming the current government and stabilizing the political situation after the Sadrist withdrawal. While his political performance has been subject to various observations, for the Coordination Framework (the party that formed the government and to which the Prime Minister belongs) the inclusion of al-Ḥalbūsī and others in a joint coalition (the State Management Alliance) enabled the Framework to advance its agenda. Therefore, his exclusion or termination represents a significant shift in political norms, with all due respect to the judiciary, especially since al-Ḥalbūsī remains a significant electoral figure, as evidenced by his advanced results in the December 18, 2023, governorate council elections.

V. Governorate Council Elections

The government led by al-Sūdānī and its allied forces endeavored to establish an electoral framework and a definitive timeline for the 2023 governorate council elections. This effort involved amending the Law of Elections for the Council of Representatives, Governorate Councils, and District Councils No. 12 of 2018 (amended) to delineate the mechanism and structure of electoral districts for local elections after a decade since the last governorate vote. These councils had been subject to considerable controversy, culminating in their dissolution over three years prior, following the October 2019 protest movement. At that juncture, the Council of Representatives voted to abolish the governorate councils due to widespread failure in fulfilling their duties, compounded by numerous systemic flaws and their transformation into instruments for dominant political blocs. Conversely, legal opinions underscored that local authorities are constitutionally mandated; thus, their abolition or the curtailment of their powers must be enacted through constitutional provisions. This stance persists despite Article 20 of the Law of Governorates Not Incorporated into a Region No. 21 of 2008, which stipulates that a council (Governorate Council) and local councils may be dissolved by an absolute majority of the council's members upon the request of one-third of the members under specific circumstances (al-Mūsawī, 2019).

Accordingly, the process of re-electing governorate councils in Iraq became a contentious issue among various political groups and forces. The process was met with skepticism from its inception, as public perception of these councils was predominantly negative. Following the political shifts subsequent to the October 2021 elections, the political entities constituting the current government and the Parliament sought to realign their priorities and redefine their political presence. These entities focused on two primary objectives:

1. Fulfilling Legal and Political Requirements: This entailed enacting an electoral law that would sustain their political existence. They adopted the Sainte-Laguë method with odd numbers (1, 3, 5, 7, etc.). This method had been previously tested, notably since the October 2021 elections, which operated under a different system based on “individual candidacy,” resulting in the ascendancy of certain powers and the decline of others. This outcome provoked rejection of the election results, escalating to threats against civil peace.
2. Redrawing Political Influence: All political groups and forces in Iraq aimed to redefine their influence and assert control through the governorate elections or, at minimum, secure new gains by controlling the governorates. Some political factions sought to capitalize on the absence of the Sadrist Movement (a grassroots movement representing a genuine competitor in every electoral cycle) to their advantage (Shabīb, 2023).

Essentially, these factions intended to proceed with the elections as long as the Sadrist Movement maintained its abstention, thereby occupying the seats typically allocated to the Movement in each governorate, akin to the “spoils” of the Council of Representatives seats. Conversely, other factions regarded the return and participation of the Sadrist Movement as crucial to preventing the dominance of any single power. These factions likely supported postponing the elections to 2024 to afford the Sadrist Movement time to decide on re-engagement, as the Movement remains silent and observant regarding the political process and its stance on the government and the Council of Representatives (Shabīb, 2023).

While the majority of political groups across ideological spectra endorsed the resumption of governorate council activities in principle, certain Tishrīn forces and figures perceived it as a conduit for corruption, public fund misappropriation, and power struggles. Other forces contended that the electoral method would extinguish prospects for the emergence of new political powers, particularly given the divisions and lack of strategic vision and programs among these new entities.

Regarding the stance of the Iraqi public, the governorate councils are largely viewed negatively, perceived as extensions of the ruling political class. This sentiment was reflected in the low voter turnout, which unofficial sources estimated at below 30%. However, the Independent High Commission for Elections reported turnout exceeding 39%. Table 2-1 presents the general voting percentages on December 18, 2023, across all Iraqi governorates, excluding the Kurdistan Region. The overall turnout reached 39%, with variation among governorates.

The outcomes of the governorate council elections indicate that established political entities maintained dominance in the highest positions throughout Iraq, surpassing the performance of emerging groups. Several governors leveraged their “legitimacy of achievement,” securing prominent standings within their respective governorates, particularly in al-Baṣrah, Karbalā’, and Wāsiṭ, as well as the electoral list associated with the former Governor of Nīnawá, Najm al-Jubūrī.

Table 2-1: Voting Percentage in December 2023 by Governorate (Excluding the Kurdistan Region).

No.	Governorate	Total Number of Voters	Total Number of Attendees	Participation Rate
1	al-Başrah	1,398,862	587,593	42%
2	Maysān	523,391	140,807	27%
3	al-Dīwānīyah	602,920	220,367	37%
4	Dhī-Qār	945,258	283,364	30%
5	al-Najaf al-Ashraf	702,704	217,275	31%
6	al-Muthanná	433,975	191,433	44%
7	Baghdād (al-Ruṣāfah)	1,854,244	357,414	19%
8	Baghdād (al-Karkh)	1,541,764	452,250	29%
9	Karbalā' al-Muqaddasah	557,992	214,940	39%
10	Bābil	969,698	373,803	39%
11	Diyālá	892,710	359,364	40%
12	al-Anbār	787,229	441,032	56%
13	Wāsiṭ	648,669	243,935	36%
14	Ṣalāḥ-al-Dīn	703,563	400,936	57%
15	Kirkuk	813,590	525,971	65%
16	Nīnawá	1,695,566	882,479	52%
Total		15,108,135	5,892,963	39%

Source: Compiled by the researcher based on data from the Independent High Commission for Elections.

Overall, the results achieved by various alliances and political factions are summarized in Table 2-2.

Table 2-2: Results Obtained by Alliances and Political Forces.

No.	Alliance	Number of Parties	Names of Parties and Political Forces within each Alliance	Number of Seats
1	Nabnī Alliance	9	Badr Organization, Ṣādiqūn, National Elite Alliance, National Contract Alliance, Iqtidār Waṭan Gathering, Jihad and Construction Movement, Services Alliance, al-Sanad.	43
2	State of Law Coalition	2	Islamic Dawa Party, tribal figures	35
3	National State Forces Alliance	2	al-Ḥikmah Movement, al-Naṣr Alliance	23
4	Taqaddum National Alliance	2	Taqaddum Party, tribal figures	22
5	al-Siyādah	2	al-Siyādah Party, tribal figures	14
6	Taṣmīm	3	Istimrār led by As'ad al-'Aydānī, Justice and Unity Gathering led by 'Āmir al-Fā'iz, Takhtīt Gathering led by Qaḥṭān 'Abd-al-Ḥusayn	12

Table 2-2 (continued)

7	'Azm al-'Irāq Alliance	4	Civil 'Azm Party, al-Taṣaddī led by Khālīd al-'Ubaydī, Gathering for Democracy led by 'Izz-al-Dīn Ra'd, Iraqi Unity Gathering led by Junayd Muḥammad	10
8	Abshir yā 'Irāq	2	Supreme Islamic Council, tribal and social figures	8
9	National Ḥasm	4	Usāmah al-Nujayfī, Rāfi' al-'Īsawī, Thābit al-'Abbāsī, and al-Ḥall Party.	8
10	Ibdā' Karbalā'	2	Governor of Karbalā' Jāsim al-Khaṭṭābī, tribal and social figures.	7
11	Wāsiṭ Ajmal	2	Governor of Wāsiṭ Muḥammad al-Mayyāḥī, tribal and social figures	7
12	Civil Values Alliance	10	Communist Party, Social Democratic Trend, National House, Nāzil Ākhidh Ḥaqqī Movement, and several emerging forces from the Tishrīn movement.	6
13	Ishrāqat Kānūn	2	Academic and tribal figures and independents	6
14	Kurdistan Democratic Party	1	Kurdistan National Party	6
15	National Basis (al-Asās) Alliance	20	Wāthiqūn Party, Political Majority Alliance (11 entities), al-Ṭumūḥ Party, al-Wa'd, National Oversight Party, and Civilization Gathering	5
16	Nīnawá for its People	2	Gathering led by former Governor of Nīnawá Najm al-Jubūrī, tribal and social figures.	5
17	National Masses (al-Jamāhīr)	2	Aḥmad al-Jubūrī (former Governor of Ṣalāḥ-al-Dīn) and tribal figures.	5
18	Kirkuk is Our Strength and Will	2	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, Kurdistan Communist Party	5
19	Diyālatunā National Alliance	4	A group of Coordination Framework forces in Diyālā	4
20	al-Anbār is Our Identity	3	Led by former Governor of al-Anbār 'Alī Farḥān (affiliated with Taqaddum), and tribal figures like Aḥmad Abū-Rīshah and others	3
21	Arab Alliance in Kirkuk	10	Led by Governor of Kirkuk Rākān al-Jubūrī; includes Iraqi Republican Gathering, National Right Party, Iraqi National Congress, Union of National Forces, National Masses, Muqtadirūn Gathering, Arab Authenticity Party, Arab Project in Iraq.	3
22	al-Qiyādah (The Leadership)	3	An alliance contested in Kirkuk; consists of Taqaddum Alliance, al-Siyādah Alliance, and tribal figures	2
23	Idrāk Movement	2	Youth forces from the Tishrīn movement and social/tribal figures	1

Table 2-2 (continued)

24	United Iraqi Turkmen Front	9	Iraqi Turkmen Front and other Turkmen blocs and figures	2
25	National Framework Alliance	7	Group of Shi'i forces in Ṣalāḥ-al-Dīn in a joint alliance	2
26	Qimam Alliance	5	al-Ufuq al-Mutajaddid Gathering, 'Irāq al-Ḥadath, Iraqi Press Network, Taqaddum al-'Irāq Party.	2
27	al-Ḥadbā' Alliance	7	Coordination Framework forces in Nīnawá	2
28	National Identity	2	Social forces in Nīnawá	2
29	Nīnawá People's Union	5	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and other parties	2
30	al-'Urūbah Alliance	2	'Azam Alliance and the United Arab Front in Kirkuk.	2
31	Ajyāl Gathering	2	Led by Maḥmūd Ṣayḥūd al-Sūdānī and tribal figures	2
32	Madār	2	Tribal and independent figures	2
33	Iraqi Wafā' Movement	1	Iraqi Wafā' Movement Party in al-Najaf	2
34	People's Parliament Gathering	1	Political and social figures in Bābil	2
35	al-Mākinah	1	Civil forces in Dhī-Qār	2
36	al-Fāw-Zākho Gathering	1	Led by MP 'Āmir 'Abd-al-Jabbār	1
37	al-Mahammah Alliance	1	Led by Aḥmad al-Khafājī (former Governor of Dhī-Qār)	1
38	al-Muthanná Masses	1	Led by MP Bāsīm Khashshān	1
39	al-Ri'āsah Alliance	1	Led by activist Ḥusayn al-Rammāḥī	-
40	Wāthiqūn	1	Wāthiqūn Party in al-Najaf	1
41	Khaymat Wāsiṭ Alliance	1	Tribal figures	1
42	Bābiliyūn Movement	1	Rayyān al-Kildānī	4

Source: Compiled by the researcher based on data from the Independent High Commission for Elections.

Assessing the conduct of the governorate council elections held in December 2023 and the priorities of the political forces constituting the government proves challenging, as these were deeply intertwined with the agendas of the respective forces. These actors swiftly moved to redraw their spheres of influence rather than focusing on defining priorities. This tendency was evident during the government formation process; the unifying factor among these forces, even those in coalition, was not national programs, projects, or services, but rather partisan, personal, and factional interests and privileges. Such dynamics are likely to exacerbate the crises threatening the state's stability, which continues to face

escalating challenges and difficulties in implementing solutions and providing national strategic options.

Even if these political forces intended to seek solutions, it would not be through redrawing influence or via the political quota system and the distribution of power and influence, as has been the practice since the inception of the political process. This approach will be employed to circumvent the post-election conflict: by allocating governorships according to the major blocs within each alliance (particularly the government-forming forces) and distributing other positions such as the Chair of the Governorate Council, Deputy Governors, and extending to the directorates of each governorate. This will result in a reiteration of local and federal governance that closely resembles previous models characterized by quotas, mismanagement, and the dominance of partisan blocs over governorate affairs, due to the marginalization of qualified experts and the absence of professionalism and integrity.

1. Participating and Boycotting Entities in the Governorate Council Elections

The majority of traditional political entities participated in the governorate council elections, including Shi'i factions within the Coordination Framework and Sunni alliances such as the 'Azm and Taqaddum coalitions, alongside other groups representing various components. Kurdish participation was evident through the Kurdistan Democratic Party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, and other civil and Tishrīn forces. Notably, the elections featured significant involvement from "Governors' Parties," which are groups led by individuals who previously governed their respective governorates. Examples include the Taṣmīm Alliance, headed by the Governor of al-Baṣrah, As'ad al-'Aydānī; the Wāsiṭ Ajmal bloc, led by Muḥammad Jamīl al-Mayyāḥī, Governor of Wāsiṭ; and the Ibdā' Karbalā' bloc, under the leadership of Naṣīf al-Khaṭṭābī, Governor of Karbalā'. Additionally, the "Nīnawá for its People" bloc received support from the resigned Governor of Mosul, Najm al-Jubūrī, with similar dynamics observed in Diyālā and other governorates. The political fortunes of these governors varied according to criteria such as achievement, which will be further discussed in this chapter.

For the first time, several emerging political forces that arose following the October 2019 movement participated, including the Civil Values Alliance (a coalition of civil political groups), the Idrāk bloc, Wāthiqūn, and al-Madār. Other participants included the Iraqi Basis (al-Asās) Alliance, led by Muḥsin al-Mandalāwī, who maintains close ties with the Coordination Framework. Conversely, the elections witnessed a notable boycott, unprecedented in the history of both parliamentary and governorate elections. The most prominent boycotting entity was the Sadrist Movement, which withdrew from the political process following its exclusion from the federal government formation after the failure of its "National Majority" political project. Several civil and Tishrīn forces and figures also joined the boycott.

2. Implications of the Low Voter Turnout

According to a preliminary report issued midway through election day by the Independent High Commission for Elections, the voter turnout was approximately 17%. Observers noted that polling stations appeared largely vacant, occupied primarily by security personnel and election staff. By the close of voting at 6:00 PM, the Commission reported that the total participation rate, including both general and special voting, had increased to 40%. However, alternative sources estimated the turnout to be significantly lower, not exceeding 30%, based on the following calculation: The total number of registered voters in the 2023 governorate elections (excluding the Kurdistan Region) was 23,367,081, while the actual number of voters (general plus special) was 6,599,668. According to international standards, the accurate participation rate is determined by dividing the number of actual voters by the total number of registered voters. Consequently, the actual turnout rate was approximately 28%. This decline in voter participation during the 2023 governorate elections was more pronounced compared to all previous elections, including the October 2021 parliamentary elections, which also experienced a decrease. Several factors contribute to this trend: First, the public perceives the electoral process as largely formalistic, dominated by the political quota system and the partisan division of power across political and ministerial positions. Second, the boycott by influential political and social forces, particularly the Sadrist Movement. Third, a pervasive lack of trust in the ruling political class, among other observable indicators.

3. Outcomes of the Governorate Council Elections

The results of the 2023 governorate council elections varied amid the significant boycott, especially in the capital, Baghdad. The Taqaddum list, led by Muḥammad al-Ḥalbūsī, secured first place, followed by the Nabnī Alliance, the State of Law Coalition, and the National State Forces Alliance. The success of the Taqaddum list can be attributed to several factors, notably the impact of the Sadrist boycott and the exclusion of al-Ḥalbūsī from the speakership of the Council of Representatives, which strategically benefited his electoral list. His prominence as a Sunni-Anbāri figure since his tenure as Governor of al-Anbār further contributed to this outcome. Several governors achieved decisive victories: In al-Baṣrah Governorate, the Taṣmīm list won 12 of 24 seats. In Karbalā' Governorate, the Governor's list received the highest number of votes, a result mirrored in Wāsiṭ, where the Wāsiṭ Ajmal list also secured the top position.

These recent elections introduced shifts in Iraq's traditional political landscape. For example, the results in the three governorates where governors' lists secured significant seats, alongside the outcomes in Baghdad, surprised the Coordination Framework and prompted a strategic reassessment. Moreover, most traditional political forces intended these elections to serve as a gauge of public sentiment in preparation for the forthcoming Council of Representatives elections, the date of which remains undetermined. However, the results were disappointing for many of these forces, compounded by the extensive boycott stemming from the Sadrist

Movement's stance and broader public dissatisfaction among the majority of the Iraqi people.

VI. Agenda for 2024

The political system in Iraq continues to face chronic challenges that political actors have yet to resolve. Although the causes and triggers vary, many issues stem from structural, constitutional, and partisan foundations. The anticipated challenges for 2024 can be categorized into the following pillars:

1. Management of Governorates (Local Governments) and the Escalation of the Political Quota System

Political entities that participated in the December 2023 governorate council elections have begun allocating positions within the governorates (including the Chairman of the Council and deputies, the Governor and deputies, and various committees) according to the well-established political quota system in Iraq. Key observations include:

- Despite the quota-based distribution of positions, numerous challenges are expected, such as attempts by some members to obstruct Governors' work for personal or partisan reasons.
- Conflicts may arise between Governors and Governorate Councils, between Governors and their deputies, or between Chairmen of Councils and their deputies due to political, financial, dominance, influence, or jurisdictional overlaps.
- Governorates established independently of the ruling political alliance in Baghdad may face difficulties, including financial constraints aimed at undermining these initiatives for political reasons. This is particularly relevant as the country approaches parliamentary elections, especially if the ruling alliance seeks to limit Prime Minister al-Sūdānī's participation, who aims to leverage the successful electoral experiences of some governorates by forming a joint alliance. Nonetheless, the possibility remains that some ruling alliance forces may restrict these governorates' operations due to dominance and influence factors.

2. The Dilemma of Combating Corruption Amidst the Absence of Parliamentary Opposition

A significant reason for persistent governance issues is the dominance approach prevailing in conduct, influence, and control, which extends to anti-corruption efforts. While the Federal Commission of Integrity legally pursues those who misappropriate public funds, there is concurrent legitimization of public fund acquisition or political utilization, fostering a transition toward oligarchy. This trend has escalated to justifying such actions publicly as "economic activity," thereby blurring the distinction between political and economic endeavors. Ultimately, this trajectory risks serious governance flaws, including the emergence of a "political-economic dictatorship."

3. Foreign Presence in Iraq and Its Links to Regional Conflicts

This issue encompasses multiple internal and external challenges. Political forces' positions vary according to ideologies, affiliations, and discrepancies between the Executive Authority and its supporting political forces. Events in 2023 revealed regional conflicts threatening Iraqi national security through the "conflict of axes." Iraq is directly affected due to several political groups' associations with military structures aligned against foreign presence, particularly the American presence in Iraq and the region. While these groups embarrass the government they formed, they acknowledge the risks of armed conflict or attacks on military bases for the overall political and governmental situation. Conversely, the Iraqi government seeks to communicate its efforts to end foreign presence peacefully by requesting the American withdrawal. This issue remains complex, caught between political embarrassment of various forces and armed factions and the United States' strategy amid rapid regional developments, including the Gaza Strip conflict, the Russia-Ukraine war, the Syrian situation, and tensions in the Red Sea involving escalating attacks by the Anṣār Allāh (Ḥūthī) group. These dynamics place Iraq in imminent danger, especially as the United States approaches an electoral cycle that may bring a Republican president with unpredictable behavior.

4. Lack of Control Over Borders

The persistent lack of border control and the existence of "unofficial ports of entry" continue to threaten Iraq's security and society. This deficiency causes numerous issues expected to persist in 2024, including smuggling, human trafficking, illegal migration, and drug trafficking, a problem worsening daily. The absence of effective legislative and executive deterrents results from the dominance of parties exploiting government resources, hindering security agencies' efforts against these mafias. Iraqi officials report drugs smuggled hidden in vehicles, counterfeit fruit, or even via drones. Additionally, women, less subject to searches, have become involved in drug trafficking, a phenomenon severely impacting society, particularly youth (ʿAbd-Allāh & Shabīb, 2023, pp. 35-36).

5. Uncontrolled Weapons

Weapons outside state control remain a significant concern for Iraq's national and social security. Indicators from 2023 confirm this as a serious ongoing issue. Uncontrolled weapons include tribal arms (light to medium), frequently used in tribal conflicts, especially in southern governorates and parts of Baghdad, and increasingly in other governorates such as Erbil and western governorates. This phenomenon persists due to weak security measures against powerful tribes or their growing political influence, often supported or incentivized by political forces for electoral gains. Additionally, armed groups wield weapons for political, security, personal, or ideological reasons linked to regional conflicts, posing direct threats and challenges to legislative, executive, and judicial authorities, particularly security agencies.

VII. Obligations for 2024

1. Parliamentary Elections

The most recent parliamentary elections were held in October 2021, which subsequently led to significant political repercussions, including the withdrawal of the Sadrist Movement from both the political process and the Iraqi Parliament. At that time, the Movement's primary demand was the organization of early elections. However, the prevailing stance among most political factions and the Iraqi government is to conduct parliamentary elections according to the constitutionally mandated schedule, which occurs every four years. This schedule indicates that elections are expected to take place in early 2025, despite the government's initial commitment to pursue early elections during its formation. As a result, the issue of early elections is anticipated to serve as a source of political pressure throughout 2024, manifesting in several key areas:

A. Discourse on Amending the Electoral Law

The Third Amendment Law No. 4 of 2023 to the Elections Law for the Council of Representatives, Governorate Councils, and District Councils No. 12 of 2018 governed the governorate council elections held on December 18, 2023. Nonetheless, there is ongoing discussion among certain political groups, particularly those disadvantaged by the Sainte-Laguë method employed in recent elections, about replacing this system with an alternative, potentially a multi-district system. Despite this discourse, which is also echoed by popular forces such as the Sadrist Movement (which continues to boycott elections and the political process), the majority of political actors both within and outside the Parliament appear reluctant to abandon the Sainte-Laguë method, as it has historically ensured their representation in power, especially as evidenced by the governorate council elections.

B. Intensification of Political Dialogues

It is likely that 2024 will witness intensified political negotiations concerning the conduct of parliamentary elections and the configuration of political alliances both prior to and following the vote. Two primary variables are anticipated:

- The first variable pertains to Prime Minister al-Sūdānī's intention to contest the elections independently. He may form alliances with political forces not traditionally aligned with his current political base, potentially leading to conflicts with the political coalition that supported his government. It is expected that he will pursue parliamentary elections even if this results in confrontation with the Coordination Framework.
- The second variable involves the potential participation of the Sadrist Movement. Although their involvement remains uncertain, indicators suggest that they may decide to contest the parliamentary elections.

2. Legislation of Laws and Political Disputes

The Council of Representatives has yet to enact several laws that could alleviate ongoing issues, particularly those concerning the relationship between the federal government and the Kurdistan Region. A notable example is the Oil and

Gas Law, which is intended to establish the legal frameworks and jurisdictions for oil extraction, exportation, and revenue distribution. Despite recurrent discussions, political disputes among various parties continue to hinder the passage of such legislation.

Outstanding issues between the federal government and the Kurdistan Region continue to affect both parties, especially within the Region itself, where there is a pronounced division regarding approaches to Baghdad and the pursuit of solutions for the citizens of the Kurdistan Region. Given the escalating disputes among political factions within the government, particularly between the Coordination Framework and the Kurdistan Region, it is uncertain whether the Council of Representatives will successfully enact these laws.

Furthermore, other significant legislative matters remain pending in the Council of Representatives, including amendments to the Federal Court Law. These amendments aim to enhance the Court's operational procedures in response to concerns about the political influences affecting its decisions, as well as to address issues related to the number of judges and other pertinent matters.

3. Economy

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In 2023, the Iraqi economy demonstrated significant progress, particularly within the infrastructure sector, despite a 177-day delay in the approval of the tripartite federal budget, which accounted for nearly half of the budget’s implementation period. These developments reflect the government’s dedication to the program presented to the Council of Representatives, encompassing not only economic aspects. The government pursued economic reforms and course corrections, emphasizing the gas industry, which remains a critical issue due to its vital role in electricity production. Additionally, the refining industries were prioritized to reduce imports that deplete national resources. Moreover, considerable attention was devoted to infrastructure, especially in addressing traffic congestion, a problem necessitating comprehensive solutions.

I. Gross Domestic Product (GDP)

The Iraqi government identified “citizen satisfaction” as a key indicator of institutional performance success. Several reassuring messages were communicated to the markets, including:

1. Efforts to stabilize the Iraqi dinar, with repeated assurances that the dinar would regain strength, advising citizens against acquiring the dollar by stating, “Do not acquire the dollar... the dinar is stronger” (Kurdistan 24, 2023, January 31).
2. Commitments to development and reconstruction initiatives.
3. The reopening of previously stalled projects, such as the Karbalā’ Refinery.
4. Engineering efforts directed toward service provision in various areas of Baghdād and other governorates.
5. Evaluations conducted for positions at the rank of Director General and above.

Table 3-1: Contribution of Economic Sectors to GDP in 2022 and 2023.

Sector	2022					2023				
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total
Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing	2.11	4.91	1.56	2.54	2.85	2.11	5.6	1.51	2.1	2.79
Mining and Quarrying	57.82	58.8	58.14	54.08	57.32	46.53	41.76	47.04	44.16	44.88
Crude Oil	57.77	58.76	58.09	54	57.26	46.35	41.76	46.86	43.62	44.6
Other Types of Mining	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.08	0.05	0.18	0.21	0.18	0.54	0.28
Manufacturing	1.42	1.4	2.34	1.91	1.76	2.56	3.51	3.64	4.53	3.55
Electricity and Water	0.88	1.21	2.04	1.25	1.36	1.12	1.3	1.43	0.74	1.14
Building and Construction	1.96	1.96	2.01	3.33	2.29	3.58	4.16	3.62	10.75	5.66
Transport, Communication, and Storage	8.72	8.72	8.72	8.72	8.72	11.33	11.33	11.33	6.39	10
Wholesale and Retail Trade, Hotels, etc.	6.4	5.41	5.92	6.74	6.08	7.63	7.48	6.87	6.67	7.14
Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate Services	5.09	4.36	4.76	5.31	4.85	6.47	6.37	5.9	5.05	5.91
Banking and Insurance	0.58	0.58	0.58	0.58	0.58	1.1	1.1	1.1	0.62	0.97
Ownership of Dwellings	4.51	3.78	4.17	4.73	4.27	5.37	5.27	4.8	4.43	4.95
Social and Personal Development Services	16	13.52	14.92	16.5	15.14	18.67	18.5	18.66	19.79	18.93
General Government	12.46	10.53	11.64	12.79	11.78	14.28	14.09	14.44	15.9	14.71
Personal Services	3.54	2.99	3.27	3.72	3.36	4.39	4.41	4.22	3.89	4.22
Total by Activities	100.39	100.39	100.39	100.39	100.39	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Compiled by the researchers based on Gross Domestic Product data, Central Statistical Organization, National Accounts Directorate.

6. Planning for strategic projects, including the Development Road and the al-Nibrās Petrochemicals Project.
7. Prioritization of roads, bridges, and the mitigation of traffic congestion in the capital and governorates.

To assess the government's impact on economic activity, GDP indicators were reviewed and compared with those of the previous year. Although growth in the oil sector remains the primary driver of economic expansion, the non-oil real GDP exhibited robust growth in 2023, increasing by 6% relative to 2022. This growth coincided with a reduction in the inflation rate to 4%, down from 7.5% in 2022 (IMF, 2024). Nonetheless, the oil sector continues to dominate economic activity. As shown in Table 3-1, the oil sector's contribution to GDP formation declined to 44.6% in 2023 from 54% in 2022. This was followed by contributions from the social and personal development services sectors, which accounted for 18.93% and

16.5%, respectively. Conversely, the agricultural sector's performance declined slightly, with its contribution decreasing to 2.79% in 2023 from 2.85% in 2022.

II. The Federal Budget

The government led by Prime Minister Muḥammad Shiyā' al-Sūdānī failed to submit the 2023 federal budget draft within the timeframe mandated by the Financial Management Law No. 6 of 2019, despite its formation on October 13, 2022, and subsequent parliamentary vote of confidence on October 27, 2022. The government presented its ministerial program, which received parliamentary approval, outlining the following priorities:

1. Combating administrative and financial corruption.
2. Addressing unemployment and creating job opportunities for youth of both genders.
3. Supporting poor and vulnerable low-income citizens.
4. Reforming economic and financial sectors, specifically agriculture, industry, and the banking sector, and supporting the private sector.
5. Equitably improving and developing services that impact citizens' lives.

The ministerial program comprised twenty-three pillars defining the government's primary duties:

1. Social Protection and Poverty Alleviation.
2. Combating Unemployment and Providing Job Opportunities.
3. Issues of Displaced Persons, Reconstruction of Liberated Areas, and Minorities.
4. Addressing the Electricity Crisis.
5. Health Sector.
6. Construction and Municipal Services Sector.
7. Combating Corruption and Waste of Public Funds.
8. Agriculture and Water Resources.
9. Trade.
10. Industry.
11. Oil Sector.
12. Financial and Banking Sector.
13. Transport and Communications.
14. Education and Pedagogy.
15. Investment.
16. Tourism.
17. Population and Development.
18. Human Rights and Women's Empowerment.

19. Foreign Relations.
20. The Relations between Baghdad and Erbil.
21. Iraq's Security and Stability.
22. Implementation of Strategic Projects.
23. Legislation and Political Reforms.

Accompanying the ministerial program was a document titled the "Ministerial Program Paper," agreed upon by political blocs, consisting of two pillars:

First: The Executive Pillar, which prominently addresses the economic dimension with the following points:

1. Supporting local and foreign investment.
2. Disbursing petrodollar entitlements and restoring the rate to 5%.
3. Unifying customs policy across all land, sea, and air ports of entry.
4. Conducting a comprehensive review of the previous period concerning the oil and gas sector in the Kurdistan Region and the relationship between the federal Ministry of Oil and the Region to achieve a vision consistent with the Constitution.
5. Agreeing on the preparation of the 2023 budget.
6. Committing to a comprehensive economic reform paper linked to a specific executive program, with an emphasis on establishing the sovereign wealth fund.
7. Supporting the private sector.

Second: The Legislative Pillar, which did not include any legislation related to the economic dimension.

In 2023, the government operated according to the government program. Due to the failure to approve the budget on time, expenditures continued according to the (1/12) principle based on actual expenditures in 2022. The 2022 budget was not approved due to constitutional and political obstacles, as al-Kāzīmī's government had become a caretaker government without the authority to submit a budget draft. al-Sūdānī's government submitted the draft budget to the Council of Representatives; it was approved and published in the Official Gazette of Iraq (Issue No. 4729, on June 26, 2023) representing a delay of 177 days. This budget is considered the largest in Iraq's fiscal history. The key items of the budget are presented in Table 3-2.

The 2023 budget is the largest in Iraq's financial history and was presented as a three-year budget to mitigate recurrent delays in budget approvals as stipulated by the Financial Management Law, particularly addressing the political consensus that often impedes approval. Table 3-3 compares actual current spending between 2022 and 2023. The 2022 budget was not approved due to political conflict and delays in government formation. The increase in spending in 2023 amounted to 13,303 billion dinars compared to 2022, primarily concentrated in employee compensation (3,604 billion dinars) due to increased public

Table 3-2: Key Items of the 2023 Budget (Billion Dinars).

Item	Amount	Notes
Public Revenues	134,553	
Total Oil Revenues	117,253	Price: 70/barrel Exchange rate: 1,300 IQD/US Dollar
Other Revenues	17,300	
Total Public Expenditures	198,910	
Current Expenditures	149,560	
Employee Compensation	59,174	
Total Capital Expenditures	49,350	
Planned Deficit	64,357	

Source: Official Gazette of Iraq (al-Waqā'i' al-Iraqiyyah), Issue No. 4726, June 26, 2023.

Table 3-3: Difference Between Actual Current Spending for 2022-2023 (Billion Dinars).

Item	2022	2023	Difference
Employee Compensation	43,614	47,218	3,604
Service Requirements	1,142	1,900	758
Commodity Requirements	14,321	11,630	-2,691
Asset Maintenance	613	583	-30
Grants, Subsidies, Interest, and Other Expenses	11,246	20,370	9,124
External Obligations and Contributions	40	84	44
Social Welfare	24,783	24,988	205
Capital Expenditures	261	645	384
Indebtedness (Debt Service)	8,060	9,766	1,706
Special Programs	860	1,061	201
Total	104,940	118,243	13,303

Source: Compiled by the researchers based on state accounts published on the Iraqi Ministry of Finance website.

Table 3-4: Planned vs. Actual Revenue for 2023 (Billion Dinars).

Item	Planned Revenue	Actual Revenue	Realization Rate (%)
Public Revenues	134,553	135,681	100.84
Oil Revenues	117,253	125,882	107.36
Non-Oil Revenues	17,300	9,799	56.64
Taxes on Income and Wealth	6,357	4,923	77.44
Commodity Taxes and Production Duties	2,731	990	36.25
Duties	1,799	1,311	72.87
Budget Share of Public Sector Profits	3,300	1,703	51.61

Source: Compiled by the researchers based on state accounts published on the Iraqi Ministry of Finance website.

sector recruitment. Grants, subsidies, interest, and other expenses accounted for the largest share, increasing by 9,124 billion dinars, followed by debt service at 1,706 billion dinars.

Table 3-4 presents the comparison between planned and actual revenues. The realization rate exceeded 100% (100.84%) due to rising oil prices. The realization rates reveal significant discrepancies; the lowest rates were observed in commodity taxes and production duties (36.25%), indicating deficiencies in border control or instances of tax evasion and fraud. The realization rate for total tax revenues was 56.64%, reflecting collection inefficiencies and inaccuracies in estimating non-tax revenues.

III. The Financial Situation for the Year 2023 (Comparison with 2022)

Figure 3-1 illustrates the variance between the revenues achieved in 2023 compared to those in 2022, encompassing both oil and non-oil revenues. It is important to note that the federal government did not receive any revenues from the Kurdistan Regional Government due to the cessation of oil exports through the Turkish Port of Ceyhan and the absence of an agreement regarding the utilization of oil extracted from the Region for refining purposes. Figure 3-1 demonstrates a decline in revenues in 2023 relative to 2022, attributable to the decrease in oil prices and the consequent reduction in oil revenues.

Total expenditures amounted to 142,436 billion Iraqi dinars (IQD), of which 118,243 billion IQD were current expenditures and 24,193 billion IQD were investment expenditures. Current expenditures constituted 83%, while investment expenditures accounted for 17%. The subsequent chart details current expenditures; employee compensation represented 39.9% of current expenditures, followed by social welfare at 21.1%, and commodity requirements at 9.8%.

Figure 3-1: Public Revenues for the Years 2022–2023.

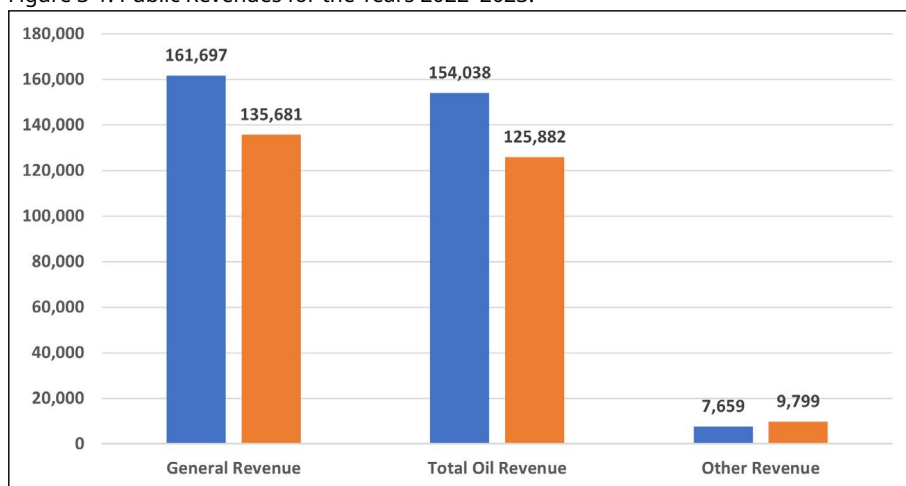
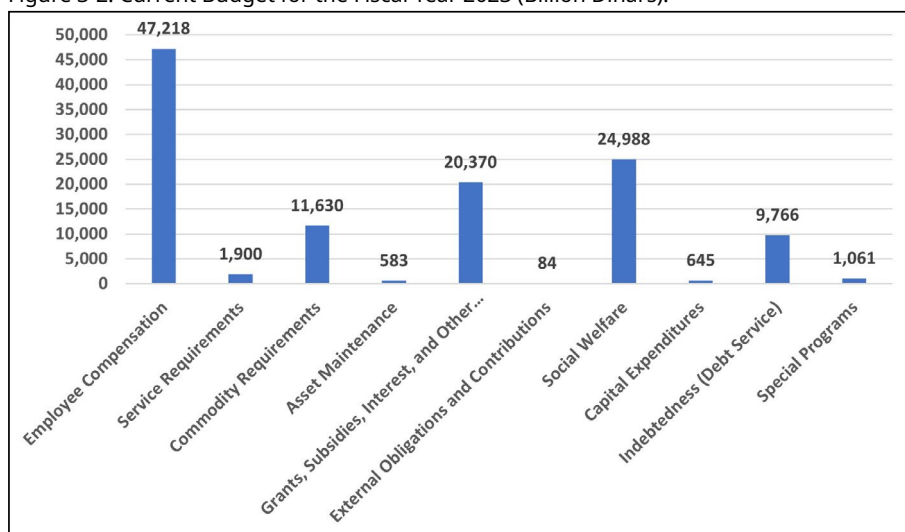


Figure 3-2: Current Budget for the Fiscal Year 2023 (Billion Dinars).



Source: Ministry of Finance, State Accounts for 2023.

Table 3-5: Iraqi Oil Sale Price, Monthly Oil Revenues, and Average Daily Export Rate (2023).

Month	Average Monthly Price (\$/barrel)	Oil Revenues (Million \$)	Average Daily Export (Thousand barrels)	Oil Revenues (Billion IQD)
January	75.695	7,664	3,266	9,963.2
February	76.556	7,063	3,295	9,181.9
March	74.385	7,506	3,255	9,757.8
April	78.058	7,699	3,288	10,008.7
May	71.485	7,325	3,305	9,522.5
June	71.755	7,180	3,335	9,334.0
July	78.033	8,330	3,444	10,829.0
August	84.787	8,998	3,423	11,697.4
September	92.050	9,494	3,438	12,342.2
October	88.200	9,669	3,533	12,569.7
November	82.660	8,512	3,433	11,065.6
December	76.960	9,316	3,486	12,110.8
Total Revenues	-	98,756	-	128,383

Source: Iraqi Ministry of Oil.

Employee compensation and social welfare combined accounted for 61% of current expenditures. This proportion is notably high and does not align with the government's vision for economic reform. This situation necessitates exceptional solutions aimed at diversifying the economy by encouraging the private sector or adopting a partnership model between the government and the private sector. It can be said that the increase in public spending did not result from a rise in oil prices, as prices were lower than the 2022 averages, which reached an average of

Table 3-6: Surplus/Deficit Account for the Year 2023 (Billion Dinars).

Details	Actual
Total Revenues	135,681
Total Expenditures	142,436
Deficit	6,755

Source: Compiled by the researchers based on state accounts for 2023.

Table 3-7: Iraqi Oil Sale Price, Monthly Oil Revenues, and Average Daily Export Rate (2023).

Governorate	2022	2023	Difference
al-Baṣrah	1,456	1,458	2
Nīnawá	379	748	369
Baghdād	404	507	103
Dhī-Qār	0	461	461
Diyālā	178	284	106
Bābil	184	184	0
al-Anbār	952	378	-574
Maysān	136	345	209
Wāsiṭ	255	354	99
al-Najaf al-Ashraf	153	344	191
al-Diwāniyah	94	128	34
al-Muthanná	168	243	75
Karbalā' al-Muqaddasah	237	387	150
Ṣalāḥ-al-Dīn	110	319	209

Source: Ministry of Finance, State Accounts for the years 2022–2023.

\$94.35 per barrel, whereas in 2023 the average was \$79.219 per barrel, as shown in Table 3-5.

Regarding the actual deficit calculation, Table 3-6 indicates that it reached 6,755 billion IQD, whereas the planned deficit in the budget was 64,357 billion IQD. Considering that the carried-over balance from 2022 reached 23 trillion IQD, and subtracting the actual 2023 deficit, the government's carried-over balance in its account for 2024 stands at 16,245 billion IQD.

Table 3-7 reveals that investment expenditures increased significantly in certain governorates, demonstrating the government's commitment to implementing its program and the urgent need to advance the country's infrastructure. At the governorate level, investment allocations were highest in al-Baṣrah Governorate, reaching 1,458 billion IQD. Nīnawá Governorate ranked second with 747 billion IQD. This indicates an inequitable distribution of investment expenditures among governorates; this variance may be attributed to the influence of political factors.

IV. The Development Road

The Development Road represents a pivotal infrastructure initiative proposed by the government led by al-Sūdānī, functioning as a complementary extension to the Grand al-Fāw Port. This project aligns with China's "Belt and Road Initiative"

and extends from the port to the Turkish Port of Mersin. The Italian consultancy firm PEG is responsible for the project's supervision and consultancy services. The road covers an approximate distance of 1,200 kilometers from al-Fāw to the Turkish border, while the associated railway spans 1,176 kilometers.

The initial phase of the project is projected to cost approximately 17 billion USD, potentially increasing to 20 billion USD, with the entire project expected to reach completion by 2050. The route traverses eleven Iraqi governorates, including several major urban centers, and incorporates fifteen stations.

The primary objectives of the Development Road include revitalizing transportation within Iraq and establishing a strategic corridor connecting the East and West. The project is designed to facilitate commercial exchanges between Iraq and Turkey and to promote spatial development. It is anticipated to generate approximately 100,000 jobs. Furthermore, the establishment of industrial cities adjacent to the road is planned to support economic growth and development.

V. The Central Bank

At the outset of 2023, the Governor of the Central Bank of Iraq (CBI) was replaced with the appointment of 'Alī Muḥsin al-'Allāq, who had previously served in this capacity for several years. This change was consistent with the objectives of the "Coordination Framework" coalition that led the government. Muṣṭafā Ghālib Mukhif was dismissed, with the official rationale being the necessity to manage disruptions affecting the foreign exchange rate against the Iraqi dinar, specifically the volatility of the dinar's value. These disruptions included issues related to the mechanism governing the sale and purchase window of foreign currency and the commitment to implementing the "SWIFT" financial transfer system, which regulates fund movements through global financial channels and ensures compliance with banking regulations and instructions.

It is important to note that several administrative changes occurred within the Central Bank throughout 2023 following al-'Allāq's assumption of the governorship. Academics from Iraqi universities were recruited and transferred to the Central Bank, with some appointed to the Bank's Board of Directors to leverage their scientific expertise. Additionally, numerous holders of postgraduate degrees (Master's and PhD) were employed, and others were granted scholarships to pursue studies both domestically and internationally.

The Central Bank endeavored to implement various initiatives aimed at developing banking operations, including expanding financial inclusion, enhancing internal and external electronic payment systems and processes, and combating money laundering and terrorist financing. These responsibilities fall within its mandate to advance the banking system, despite challenges faced by the private banking sector and the imposition of US sanctions on many banks, which restricted their ability to transact in US dollars or participate in the foreign currency window under various pretexts, thereby complicating the Central Bank's operations.

1. Exchange Rate Policy Amidst Administrative Changes

The new Central Bank administration initiated its tenure by lowering the foreign exchange rate against the Iraqi dinar (revaluing the dinar) to align with the preferences of the government and its supporting political coalition. This adjustment occurred only 24 months after the exchange rate had been increased during Mukhi's administration. At that time, despite administrative criticism, the rate increase was economically justified to address and adjust external sector balances, which were favoring neighboring countries engaged in "currency wars" against each other and Iraq to control trade. Furthermore, the devaluation of the dinar provided economic benefits by stimulating productive sectors and employing labor affected by unemployment resulting from trade policies that excessively liberalized imports, thereby undermining Iraqi industries and adversely impacting the agricultural sector.

The recent reduction in the exchange rate was approximately 10.3%, with the official rate decreasing from 1,450 IQD to 1,300 IQD per US dollar. This measure was not in the best interest of the Iraqi economy but appeared to serve non-economic objectives, despite the stated aim of controlling exchange rate fluctuations. In practice, this policy was contradictory: the monetary authority was unable to control fluctuations when the official rate was 1,450 IQD (the average parallel rate for 2022 was 1,482 IQD, reflecting a 2.2% gap), so it was unlikely to succeed at a rate of 1,300 IQD. Consequently, the gap between the official and parallel rates widened; the average parallel rate for 2023 reached 1,531 IQD, representing a 17.8% gap. A more prudent approach would have been for the Central Bank to maintain the 1,450 IQD rate and subsequently increase it after a reasonable period, while seriously addressing the balance of the external sector and stimulating the domestic economy. It is also observed that Iraq's major trade partners further devalued their currencies following the dinar's revaluation to preserve their trade advantages, thereby gaining additional benefits in early 2023 when the exchange rate was lowered to 1,300 IQD, exacerbating trade imbalances in their favor.

The resolution of exchange rate volatility does not lie solely in adjusting the rate but in addressing its underlying causes, which primarily stem from two sources: trade with countries subject to US economic sanctions (where the US restricts the flow of dollars to countries trading with Iraq, compelling Iraqi merchants to acquire dollars from the parallel market to finance trade outside the SWIFT system) and speculators who hold massive amounts of Iraqi Dinars and manipulate the parallel exchange rate, raising or lowering it to exploit triple arbitrage opportunities. This process occurs between the Dinar, the Dollar, and the currencies of certain neighboring countries where Dollar movement is permitted under the SWIFT system, leveraging electronic technologies and foreign transfers.

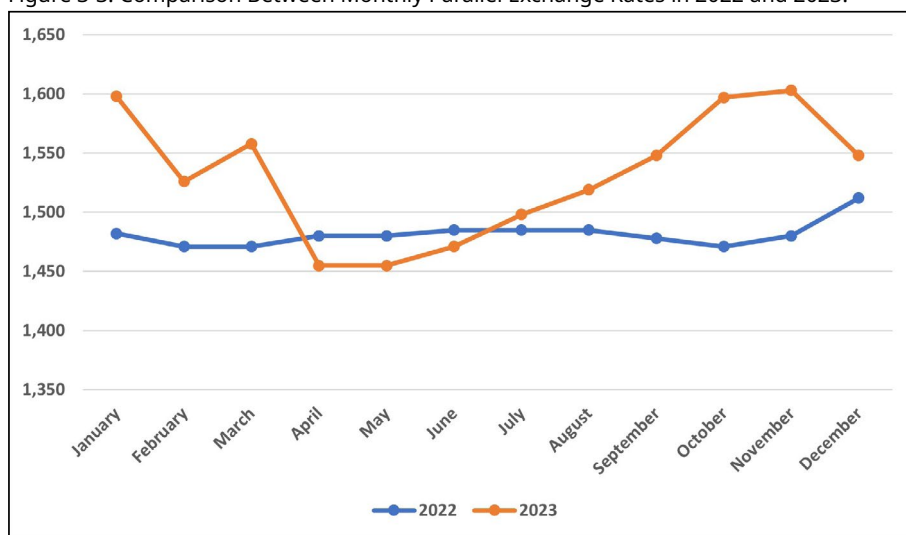
It is noted from Table 3-8 that the increases in the parallel exchange rate during 2023 were significant when compared to 2022, reaching an annual average of 3.3%. This trend persisted except for certain months of the year that witnessed sudden drops, specifically from April to June, where the difference between the

Table 3-8: Parallel Exchange Rate for 2022 and 2023 (IQD/USD).

Month	2022	2023	Monthly Change (%)
January	1,482	1,598	7.8
February	1,471	1,526	3.7
March	1,471	1,558	5.9
April	1,480	1,455	-1.7
May	1,480	1,455	-1.7
June	1,485	1,471	-0.9
July	1,485	1,498	0.9
August	1,485	1,519	2.3
September	1,478	1,548	4.7
October	1,471	1,597	8.6
November	1,480	1,603	8.3
December	1,512	1,548	2.4
Annual Average	1,482	1,531	3.3

Source: Ministry of Planning, Central Statistical Organization, Consumer Price Indices and Inflation Rates in the Iraqi Economy for 2022, 2023.

Figure 3-3: Comparison Between Monthly Parallel Exchange Rates in 2022 and 2023.



Source: Compiled by the researchers based on Table 3-8.

two years for these months was negative. This decline could be attributed to the devaluation of the official exchange rate at the beginning of 2023.

This trend was reflected in the growth of foreign reserves; the growth rate in 2022 was 54.5%, whereas in 2023 it was negative (-1.8%), as illustrated in Table 3-9. Reserves amounted to 140,086 billion IQD at the end of 2022 and 145,748 billion IQD at the end of 2023. The decline in reserve growth is attributable to the reduction of the official exchange rate and the consequent increase in demand for dollars and window sales, which exerted pressure on the reserves.

Table 3-9: Development of Foreign Reserves During the Period (2022–2023).

Month	2022		2023	
	Reserves (Billion IQD)	Exchange Rate (IQD/USD)	Reserves (Billion IQD)	Exchange Rate (IQD/USD)
January	90,658	1,450	148,414	1,450
February	94,525	1,450	134,397	1,339
March	97,361	1,450	141,849	1,300
April	102,112	1,450	143,118	1,300
May	109,145	1,450	141,900	1,300
June	108,440	1,450	142,105	1,300
July	114,948	1,450	142,451	1,300
August	118,709	1,450	143,406	1,300
September	121,363	1,450	143,614	1,300
October	123,810	1,450	148,323	1,300
November	133,908	1,450	147,055	1,300
December	140,086	1,450	145,748	1,300

Source: Central Bank of Iraq website.

2. The Foreign Currency Sale Window and International Pressures

Purchases from the government through the window in 2022 increased compared to the previous year, reaching 53,355 million USD, with a monthly average of 4,446 million USD. This increase was attributed to improved oil prices, higher government oil revenues, and the resolution of the compensation issue with Kuwait, which allowed for an increase in oil revenue flows to the government. Sales in 2022, as shown in Table 3-10, amounted to 46,806 million USD, with a monthly average of 3,901 million USD, an increase of 810 million USD over the previous year's monthly average. The expansion in sales aimed to satisfy domestic demand for the dollar, which was driven by increased government spending despite the non-approval of the general budget. A total of 6,549 million USD was allocated to reserves, representing the difference between purchases and sales.

According to the same table, window purchases from the government during 2023 reached 64,000 million USD, an increase of 10,645 million USD compared to the previous year. This figure significantly exceeded sales for the same year, with the difference reaching 30,501 million USD, equivalent to five times the difference recorded in 2022. Table 3-10 also indicates that the decline in cash sales was not substantial compared to the previous year; rather, the most significant decrease occurred in "remittance sales," resulting from the implementation of the new system.

These substantial sales over the two years, totaling 80,305 million USD, raised concerns within the United States, particularly following the tax deposits embezzlement scandal known as the "Theft of the Century," involving amounts totaling approximately 2,500 million USD. This situation was further complicated by extensive trade with countries under international sanctions, including Iran

Table 3-10: Window Purchases and Sales for 2022 and 2023 (Million USD).

Month	2022				2023			
	Govt. Purchases	Remittance Sales	Cash Sales	Total Sales	Govt. Purchases	Remittance Sales	Cash Sales	Total Sales
January	5,405	3,132	969	4,101	5,500	647	1,106	1,753
February	3,050	2,862	798	3,660	4,000	978	1,030	2,008
March	5,200	3,134	859	3,993	2,500	2,522	1,163	3,685
April	4,950	3,270	710	3,980	5,500	2,938	844	3,782
May	5,750	2,845	604	3,449	4,000	2,631	998	3,629
June	5,000	4,507	810	5,317	2,000	2,827	673	3,500
July	4,500	3,411	543	3,954	3,000	2,619	479	3,098
August	6,500	4,715	834	5,549	7,500	2,109	738	2,847
September	2,500	3,971	753	4,724	7,000	1,956	420	2,376
October	3,500	4,094	758	4,852	10,000	2,469	312	2,781
November	1,000	1,478	577	2,055	3,900	1,761	293	2,054
December	6,000	312	860	1,172	9,100	1,689	297	1,986
Total	53,355	37,731	9,075	46,806	64,000	25,146	8,353	33,499

Source: Central Bank of Iraq website.

and Russia, especially following the Russian-Ukrainian war and the US intent to tighten restrictions on these countries. Consequently, the Federal Reserve and the US Department of the Treasury required Iraq to implement the SWIFT system to precisely track the movement of funds. This measure obstructed window operations, particularly sales through remittances, which finance trade movements and constitute approximately 90% of the window's daily sales. This obstruction compelled merchants to turn to the cash market to meet their commercial demand for the dollar, causing the exchange rate to rise sharply in late 2022 and early 2023. However, following an agreement with the US Treasury and the Federal Reserve regarding arrangements for monitoring the financial transfer platform, the rise in the dollar's value was controlled. Sales through remittances that complied with the transfer system's conditions increased during November and December 2022 and the first quarter of 2023.

3. Monetary Base and Money Supply under the Tripartite Budget

Sterilization operations conducted by the Central Bank of Iraq (CBI) through the foreign currency sale window, aimed at absorbing the dinars generated by extensive government spending following the approval of the tripartite budget for the years 2023, 2024, and 2025, have proven ineffective in curbing the increase in the monetary base and the expansion of the money supply. As shown in Table 3-11, the issued currency consistently increased throughout 2022 and 2023, with a more pronounced rise in the latter year. At the beginning of 2022, the monetary base was 111,139 billion dinars, rising to 145,242 billion dinars by the end of the

Table 3-11: Monetary Base and Money Supply for 2022 and 2023 (Billion Dinars).

Month	2022			2023		
	Monetary Base	Narrow Money	Broad Money	Monetary Base	Narrow Money	Broad Money
January	111,139	119,550	139,567	149,052	150,067	171,852
February	111,798	121,578	141,848	150,021	149,914	171,451
March	114,404	122,636	143,176	152,727	149,373	170,464
April	114,739	125,249	146,019	153,331	151,623	173,116
May	117,864	125,098	146,009	155,604	153,622	173,486
June	118,490	128,861	150,010	156,141	155,769	177,771
July	121,065	130,607	151,762	147,706	154,956	176,784
August	122,159	132,909	153,983	149,789	152,569	174,315
September	121,648	132,769	153,728	155,669	152,418	173,950
October	124,699	136,166	157,418	163,754	155,427	176,305
November	129,344	140,357	161,714	156,538	158,635	178,890
December	145,242	146,399	168,203	165,612	160,322	180,977

Source: Central Bank of Iraq website.

year, representing a growth rate of 30.7%. During this period, the narrow money supply increased by 22.4%, while the broad money supply grew by 20.5%.

In comparison, 2023 witnessed a further increase in the monetary base, which commenced at 149,052 billion dinars and concluded at 165,612 billion dinars, reflecting a growth rate of 11.1%. The narrow money supply expanded by 6.8%, and the broad money supply by 5.3%. These growth rates are lower than those of the previous year due to the reduction in the monetary base, attributable to reduced government borrowing from the banking system and the CBI's sterilization policy.

The escalation in government expenditure, prompted by the Emergency Support Law for Food Security and Development enacted in 2022 and preceding years, resulted in an expansion of the currency supply. This expansion, intensified by the money multiplier effect, contributed to an increased money supply that influenced inflation and price levels. These inflationary pressures were further exacerbated by "imported inflation," which arose from the depreciation of the parallel exchange rate against the dinar following the official exchange rate adjustment in early 2023. Despite efforts to curb excessive currency issuance through increased dollar sales aimed at withdrawing dinars from circulation, these measures proved insufficient. Consequently, the monetary authority must employ additional instruments alongside dollar sales to absorb the surplus liquidity within the economy.

Amid these challenging conditions, marked by undisciplined government spending, unregulated foreign trade, and international pressures linked to US interests in the Middle East and Far East, the CBI has faced significant difficulties. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has intensified global food prices, while Iraq contends with pressures to restrict trade with sanctioned countries and adhere

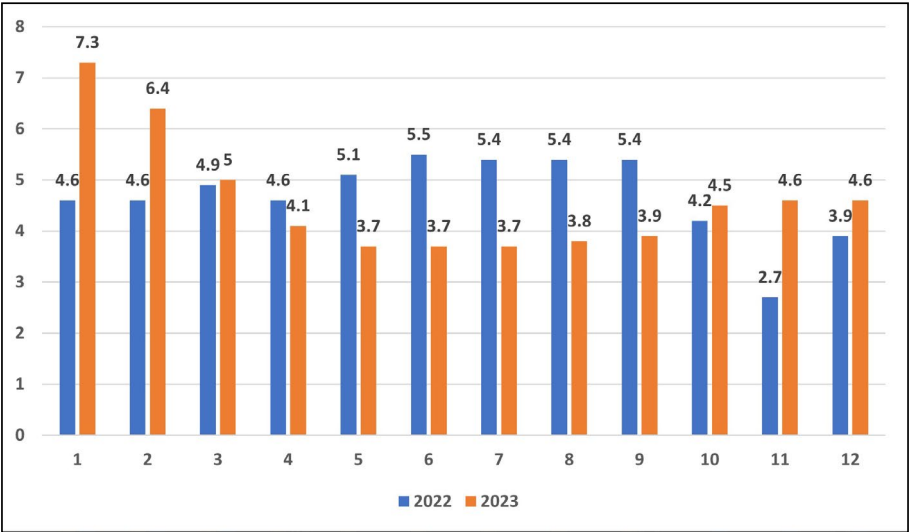
to stringent SWIFT system protocols for financial transactions. Although the CBI’s independence from the government has been limited since 2012, it has endeavored to regulate the money supply and domestic liquidity through the sterilization policy previously mentioned.

4. Inflation, Government Spending Trends, and Monetary Issuance

The interdependence among economic variables is significant, with each factor influencing the others. Excessive government expenditure inevitably results in an expansion of the money supply, which subsequently exerts pressure on the foreign currency sale window to satisfy domestic demand for foreign exchange. This demand is driven by monetary expansion and increased imports. CBI’s sterilization policy, aimed at regulating domestic liquidity, has been ineffective in alleviating this pressure. Ultimately, the final consumer bears the consequences of these fluctuations through elevated inflation rates.

As illustrated in Figure 3-4, inflation rates increased during the first quarter of 2023. The most pronounced rise occurred in January, with inflation reaching 7.3% compared to the same month in the previous year. The lowest inflation rates were observed between May and July, at 3.7% relative to the corresponding months of the prior year. The annual average inflation rate for 2023 was 4.6%. These inflationary surges were primarily attributable to specific categories of goods and services. The most notable increase was observed in the “Food and Non-Alcoholic Beverages” category, particularly in vegetables, grains, meat, oils, and fats. Other significant contributors included the “Electricity and Water Supply,” “Fuel,” “Restaurants and Hotels,” and “Miscellaneous Goods and Services” categories.

Figure 3-4: Core Inflation in the Years 2022 and 2023 (Base Year 2012) - Percentages.



Source: Central Bank of Iraq Website.

It is noteworthy that the increases in the “Electricity and Water Supply” category occurred over the seven-month period from March to September, coinciding with rising temperatures. Similarly, the “Education” category experienced increases during the first half of the year, alongside modest rises in other commodity groups.

VI. Energy Sector

Iraq possesses a substantial hydrocarbon resource base, predominantly comprising oil and natural gas. As of 2021, Iraq ranks fourth globally in oil reserves, with an estimated 145 billion barrels, representing 9.4% of global reserves and 11.7% of OPEC’s proven crude oil reserves.

1. Iraqi Oil: Production and Revenues in 2023

In 2023, Iraq’s crude oil production declined to 4.275 million barrels per day (bpd), compared to 4.439 million bpd in 2022. Concurrently, production in the Kurdistan Region decreased to 258,000 bpd from 438,000 bpd, primarily due to the closure of the northern export pipeline to Turkey. Production levels in Iraq may further decrease in 2024 as the country moves toward compliance with a reduced OPEC+ quota effective January 2024. Iraq’s quota will decrease from 4.220 million bpd to 4 million bpd. This suggests that Iraq has only met the initial voluntary reduction target. It is improbable that Iraq will achieve the second voluntary reduction target of an additional 220,000 bpd, as a production level of 4 million bpd is insufficient to satisfy both federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Region simultaneously, even if oil exports via the Port of Ceyhan resume.

Iraq requires exports of 3.5 million bpd to meet budgetary revenue needs and approximately 800,000 bpd for refining in domestic refineries, whether in the Kurdistan Region or other Iraqi refineries. Additionally, some power plants operate on liquid fuel due to gas supply interruptions from Iran. Should Iraq commit to the additional 220,000 bpd reduction, it faces two options: first, a loss exceeding 6% of oil exports, reducing exports to less than 3.3 million bpd (below the 3.5 million bpd planned in the tripartite budget) resulting in decreased oil revenues unless offset by price increases. This scenario diminishes the economic viability of resuming Kurdistan and Kirkūk oil exports through the Turkish Ceyhan outlet, as it would necessitate further reductions in production and exports from central and southern fields, which are less costly and yield higher prices. Alternatively, Iraq would lose approximately 28% of its petroleum product output, necessitating imports to compensate for the deficit, amounting to an additional 12 million liters of gasoline and diesel daily.

Iraq’s plans to augment oil production capacity encounter domestic challenges, including limited export capacity due to aging and deteriorating infrastructure and water acquisition issues. Moreover, disputes over production control in the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region have impacted crude oil output. The Kirkūk-Ceyhan pipeline closure in March 2023 prompted Iraq to increase production in other fields to offset northern output losses.

The oil and gas sector remains crucial for both the federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) concerning political stability, national unity, economic development, and transparency. Divergent interpretations of constitutional articles governing the oil and gas sector have resulted in a lack of unified policy and weak coordination, adversely affecting contractual, productive, and marketing aspects. Furthermore, the federal government's lack of data on Kurdistan Region production has led to unclear total production figures reported to OPEC and international institutions, often underestimating actual production or exports. This policy has weakened Iraq's position within OPEC, undermined its interests, and compelled it to accept production cuts mandated by OPEC agreements.

The absence of a unified marketing policy between the federal government and the KRG diminishes the Region's oil value in global markets; substantial flows into the European market may negatively impact Iraqi oil's market value. Consequently, Iraq's production potential is currently constrained by the closure of the northern export pipeline to Turkey, inactive since March 2023 following a landmark international arbitration decision.

The dispute between the federal government and the KRG intensified following the 2022 Federal Court ruling, which:

1. Annulled the Oil and Gas Law enacted by the Kurdistan Region in 2007, deeming it unconstitutional.
2. Obligated the KRG to transfer all oil production from fields in the Kurdistan Region and other areas to the federal government, enabling federal authority over exploration, extraction, exportation, and sales.
3. Granted the federal government the right to challenge contracts concluded by the KRG with foreign entities concerning oil exploration and sales.
4. Required the KRG to permit the Iraqi Ministry of Oil and the Federal Board of Supreme Audit to review all oil contracts for auditing, determine the Region's financial rights, and establish its budgetary share.

In March 2023, Iraq prevailed in its lawsuit against Turkey. The Paris-based Court of Arbitration ruled that the Turkish firm BOTAŞ must compensate Iraq with 1.5 billion USD for damages incurred from 2014 to 2018 due to the independent sale of oil through Turkey. The compensation amount for the post-2018 period remains undetermined and is expected to be settled within two years. Following this ruling, Turkey prohibits crude oil exports from Kurdistan via the Ceyhan port without federal government approval in Baghdad. This restriction halted approximately 500,000 bpd from Kurdistan and Kirkūk fields, compelling operators in the Kurdistan Region, such as Gulf Keystone Petroleum and the Norwegian firm DNO, to:

1. Significantly reduce production in Kurdistan oil fields due to limited storage capacity.

2. Curtail expenditures for foreign companies operating in the Region, resulting in declining stock values.
3. Experience delays in supply flows, evidenced by supertankers departing the vicinity of Turkish pipelines.
4. Resort to exporting oil to Turkey via tankers; 40,000 bpd were exported from the Khurmālah oil field (one of the three fields in Kirkūk), while some remaining production was refined in Kurdistan refineries and sold locally.

Following Turkey's announcement that it was nearing the completion of repairs on the Iraq-Turkey pipeline, major oil companies operating in the Kurdistan Region declared that they would not produce oil even if exports from the region via the Turkish pipeline were resumed. These companies stated that they required assurances regarding the protection of their contractual rights and the settlement of both past and future financial entitlements before proceeding. The Association of the Kurdish Oil Industry, which represents these interests, includes six international investors producing within the region's fields. Their demands can be summarized as follows:

1. The companies refuse to modify current commercial terms and the signed economic model after the federal Ministry of Oil requested converting production-sharing contracts into profit-sharing contracts.
2. Foreign companies demanded payment guarantees for past and future oil exports, as losses from export revenues have exceeded 7 billion USD since the closure of the Iraqi-Turkish pipeline at the end of last March.

Among other obstacles preventing the resumption of oil production and its export from Kurdistan via the Turkish Port of Ceyhan is the dispute between the center and the Region regarding the cost of producing and transporting Kurdistan oil. This cost reaches approximately 33 USD per barrel, compared to 7 USD in the central and southern fields, necessitating the addition of approximately 3.8 billion USD to the Region's 2024 budget. Despite restrictions on Iraqi production due to infrastructure bottlenecks and OPEC+ policy, the Ministry of Oil is proceeding rapidly with several projects designed to increase production capacity in the short and medium term. One such project is the West Qurnah field, whose production capacity is scheduled to increase from the current 540,000 bpd to 740,000 bpd with the installation of a new processing facility by 2026. Iraqi oil fields have developed a total capacity exceeding 5 million bpd, which is significantly higher than what the country can actually produce. One limiting factor has been the OPEC quota; however, even if this quota did not exist, Iraq would remain constrained by limited export infrastructure and a poor investment environment. These conditions have forced some major foreign companies to sell their stakes in Iraqi oil fields and depart. Most recently, ExxonMobil sold its 22.7% stake in the West Qurnah-1 field to the al-Başrah Oil Company.

In 2023, Iraq signed the final contracts for the fifth licensing round, which included six border fields between Iraq and both Kuwait and Iran, comprising four oil fields and two gas fields. Three fields were awarded to the Emirati Crescent

Petroleum and the Chinese Geo-Jade Petroleum. These contracts are expected to add approximately 250,000 bpd of crude oil and 1,000 million standard cubic feet per day (mmscfd) of natural gas to Iraqi production.

Furthermore, in 2023, Iraq signed the Gas Integrated Real Estate Project with the French company TotalEnergies. The contract includes four projects:

1. The first project involves developing the Arṭawī oil field, increasing its production from 85,000 bpd to a peak of 210,000 bpd.
2. The second project involves establishing the Arṭawī gas complex with a capacity of 600 mmscfd to utilize flared gas from oil fields and produce LPG.
3. The third project involves the Common Seawater Supply Project with a capacity of 5 million barrels of water per day, which is essential for developing production capacity in southern fields that rely on water injection.
4. The fourth project involves the construction of a 1,000 MW solar power generation plant.

In terms of marketing, most Iraqi crude oil is marketed through export outlets in the Gulf of al-Baṣrah, which were never able to maintain more than an annual average of 3.54 million bpd in 2023. The two operational export outlets in southern Iraq are the al-Baṣrah Oil Terminal, a system composed of four Single Point Mooring (SPM) buoys. Meanwhile, the third export outlet in al-Baṣrah, the Khawr al-'Amyah terminal, suffered from inadequate maintenance and war damage and has been out of operation since 2018 when leaks were discovered in the subsea pipeline. Iraq's export capacity from southern ports is approximately 4.6 million bpd, but operational capacity is much lower due to aged infrastructure and bottlenecks that limit the country's production and export increases.

According to official statistics from the Ministry of Oil, total oil exports for the year 2023 reached approximately 1,232,170,126 barrels, with a daily average of 3,422,000 barrels, representing a 5.36% increase over 2022 exports.

The Asian market accounts for approximately 70% of Iraqi oil exports via Gulf ports, while the remainder is exported through Ceyhan to Europe and America. Iraq prefers exporting to Asia to maximize revenues because transport and insurance costs are borne by the buyer; thus, these costs do not appear in the pricing formula for oil exported to Asia. Conversely, Iraq bears part of the transport and insurance costs when exporting to European markets, reaching approximately 3 USD for Europe and 3.3 USD per barrel for the American market due to distance and the transit fees imposed on tankers crossing the Suez Canal.

China ranked first among countries importing Iraqi crude oil, at approximately 1,185,000 bpd, while Iraq is the third-largest oil exporter to China after Russia and Saudi Arabia. India ranked second, importing approximately 1,000,000 bpd from Iraq in 2023. The quantities of Iraqi oil exported to European markets in December 2023 reached approximately 18,500,000 barrels, compared to November exports of approximately 19,500,000 barrels. Iraqi oil exports to the

United States increased from 241,000 bpd in the first third of 2022 to 383,000 bpd in the first third of 2023 due to the geographical redistribution of Iraqi exports. Iraq lost part of its share in the Indian market to Russia, which became India's top supplier due to significant price discounts on Russian Urals crude, placing Iraq in second place.

Iraq exports approximately 11% of its oil exports to America (4% of total American oil imports), and ranks as the fourth-largest oil supplier to the United States after Canada, Mexico, and Saudi Arabia. According to official data, annual revenues from crude oil sales reached 87.6 billion USD in 2023, a 31.79% decrease from the 2022 revenues of 115.4 billion USD.

2. The Petroleum Refining Industry in Iraq: A Step Forward

Despite Iraq being one of the largest producers of crude oil globally (exceeding 4,000,000 bpd), the country experiences a deficit in petroleum products. This shortage results in an expenditure of approximately 5 billion USD to fulfill domestic market demands through imports, including 3.5 billion USD allocated solely for gasoline and diesel.

During the first half of 2023, Iraq's imports of petroleum products amounted to 2,262,000,000 USD, with 1,623,000,000 USD attributed to imported gasoline, representing 72% of the total imported petroleum products. The substantial gasoline imports, reaching 32,000,000 liters per day, are associated with the obsolescence of Iraqi refineries and the consequent misalignment between the production mix of these refineries and current consumption patterns. For example, gasoline yield per barrel of crude oil at the al-Başrah Refinery is 33 liters, whereas modern refineries produce 73 liters per barrel. Additionally, modern refineries generate only 6 liters of fuel oil per barrel of crude, compared to 79 liters at the al-Başrah Refinery. This discrepancy accounts for the high volume of Iraq's low-value fuel oil exports, which reached 1,978,000,000 USD, constituting 86% of total petroleum product exports during the first half of 2023.

In 2023, the refining capacity of Iraqi oil refineries reached 1,110,000 bpd; however, actual production was lower, at 623,000 bpd. Several refineries operate below their design capacity due to various factors, including the geographic mismatch between refinery locations and oil fields, with the majority of oil production concentrated in the south, while over half of refining capacity is situated in northern Iraq and the Kurdistan Region. Notably, there is no strategic internal pipeline connecting the north and south, despite proposals by the Ministry of Oil over a decade ago. Another challenge faced by refinery operators is the deteriorating quality of crude oil, which has occasionally caused clogging in refining units. Furthermore, refining capacity has declined due to aging equipment, inconsistent maintenance during prolonged sanctions, and damage from conflict and looting.

In response, the government has initiated a program to enhance refinery capacity, aiming to eliminate fuel imports and achieve near self-sufficiency in petroleum products by 2025, with plans to transition to exportation thereafter.

This initiative includes increasing the refining capacity of the North Refineries Company (which encompasses the refineries of Kirkūk, al-Qayyārah, al-Šīnīyah, Ḥadīthah, al-Kisk, and Šalāḥ-al-Dīn 1 and 2) from 210,000 bpd to 500,000 bpd. Efforts are supported by the reconstruction of the North Refinery with a capacity of 150,000 bpd and the expansion of the al-Dīwānīyah Refinery through the addition of a new refining unit with a capacity of up to 70,000 bpd, increasing its total production to 90,000 bpd with investments totaling 125 million USD. Concurrently, work is underway to augment the South Refineries Company's total production capacity to approximately 280,000 bpd by developing and adding new units to its affiliated refineries. Additionally, the commencement of operations at the Karbalā' Refinery in 2023, the most advanced refinery in Iraq, is expected to process 140,000 bpd of heavy crude oil to produce "white products," thereby reducing Iraq's imports of gasoline and diesel.

3. Gas Industry

Iraq possesses approximately 132 trillion standard cubic feet (tscf) of proven natural gas reserves, ranking twelfth globally as of 2021. Despite this, Iraq produced only 9.586 billion standard cubic feet (bscf) of natural gas while importing 9.738 bscf in 2021.

Iraq has experienced a dual gas crisis for many years. On one hand, it ranks twelfth globally in gas reserves, with 132 trillion standard cubic feet (tscf) of proven natural gas reserves, yet it produced only 9.586 billion standard cubic feet (bscf) in 2021, placing it fortieth globally in terms of production. Consequently, Iraq imported 9.738 bscf in 2021. Furthermore, Iraq flares nearly half of this gas (referred to as associated gas) due to a lack of appropriate technologies for its investment. In 2022, Iraq ranked as the third-worst country globally regarding natural gas flaring, which reached approximately 17.8 bscf, compared to 17.7 bscf in 2021.

Iraq imports between 6 to 7 million tons of Iranian gas annually and will continue to rely on gas imports at least until 2027, even if gas projects in the south are completed. Current gas projects include:

- al-Nāšīrīyah Gas Investment Project: with a capacity of 200 million standard cubic feet per day (mmscfd).
- al-Ḥalfāyah Field Investment Project: with a capacity of 300 mmscfd.
- Arṭāwī Field Project (al-Başrah Gas Company): with a capacity of 400 mmscfd.
- Arṭāwī Field Project (South Gas Company): with a capacity of 300 mmscfd.

When completed within three to four years, these projects are expected to bring total production to 1,200 mmscfd, potentially achieving 80% self-sufficiency in gas. Additionally, if the French company TotalEnergies' project is implemented, it is expected to invest 600 mmscfd across five major oil fields: al-Luḥays, Majnūn, West Qurnah 2, Arṭāwī, and al-Ṭūbā fields. This will be executed in two phases: the

first phase within three years with a capacity of 300 mmscfd, followed by a second phase two years later with an additional 300 mmscfd.

Iraq produces 30.5 million cubic meters (mcm) per day of dry gas used as fuel for electricity generation, which satisfies only 38% of current domestic needs, while 62% of dry gas is imported from Iran. Conversely, Iraq flares about 34 mcm per day of associated gas. If Iraq succeeds in increasing gas complex capacities as planned for 2027, dry gas production for power plants will rise to 83 mcm per day, increasing the self-sufficiency ratio. However, current progress appears far from these figures; while the 2020 plan aimed to supply 63 mcm to power plants, less than half was actually delivered. Moreover, future electricity needs are constantly rising due to economic and population growth, necessitating continued reliance on Iranian gas specifically.

Iraq could achieve gas self-sufficiency by investing in al-Manşūrīyah gas with a capacity of 282 mmscfd and 'Akkās gas with a capacity of 388 mmscfd. This figure would increase by investing in the Khashm al-Aḥmar and Injānā fields in Diyālā, which were referred for investment under the fifth licensing round, as well as the potential for investing in more associated gas as crude oil production increases.

The year 2023 witnessed the addition of 200 mmscfd from invested fields under the operations of the al-Başrah Gas Company, alongside promising increases from the fields of the Maysān and Dhī-Qār oil companies. Additionally, in 2023, Iraq announced the launch of its first project funded by carbon bonds, with a capacity of 12 mmscfd, targeting flare gas investment in the East Baghdad field. Iraq is currently working to bolster its carbon bond balance through the optimal investment of associated gas and the reduction of gas flaring across all oil fields.

4. Electricity

Iraq predominantly depends on fossil fuels for electricity generation. In 2020, thermal power plants consumed approximately 22,000,000 tons of gaseous and liquid fuels, including 12,847,000 tons of natural gas. Conversely, the contribution of hydroelectric plants declined to 4%. Despite increases in power generation over recent years, electricity services remain inadequate; although Iraq produces around 22,000 MW, peak demand in July 2022 surpassed 36,000 MW. Capital expenditure on the electricity sector amounted to 40 billion USD between 2007 and 2021, accounting for roughly 50% of Iraq's general budget investment during this period.

Due to insufficient locally produced gaseous fossil fuels, Iraq has been compelled to import electricity and high-cost petroleum products for power generation, including gas and electricity imports from Iran. Locally produced gas satisfies only 43% of domestic consumption, leading to increased reliance on Iran for natural gas. Demand for piped natural gas escalated from 1,060 million standard cubic feet per day (mmscfd) in 2017 to 1,940 mmscfd in 2022, with an annual cost exceeding 4 billion USD for imports ranging between 6 to 7 billion tons of Iranian gas.

Iraq requires substantial capital investment in the electricity sector, projected to reach 170 billion USD by 2050 to meet anticipated demand, which is expected to reach 70,000 MW by that year. In 2021, Iraq allocated over 15 billion USD to the energy sector, with expectations for significant increases in 2023, particularly for constructing new power plants and enhancing distribution and transmission networks. To finance these needs, Iraq plans to resort to foreign borrowing, anticipating loans of approximately 1.5 billion USD in 2023, in addition to ongoing loans nearing 2 billion USD. Consequently, Iraqi debt, comprising both internal and external components, stands at approximately 70 billion USD (Istepanian & Raydan; 2022, p. 8ff).

Several foreign companies are engaged in various projects within Iraq's electricity sector. Notably, the German company Siemens signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Iraqi Ministry of Electricity in January 2023. This MoU outlines the development of an integrated plan for the electricity system, addressing existing challenges and the construction of new generation plants. Siemens is also tasked with providing a comprehensive study on utilizing associated gas to support and increase electricity production, as well as maintaining and rehabilitating operational units originally established by Siemens. Furthermore, the MoU includes implementing renewable energy projects, specifically solar and wind power, and constructing transformer stations throughout Iraq. Siemens will contribute to establishing transformer stations and transmission lines, adding 6,000 MW to the electrical grid.

The Iraqi government aims to achieve 33% of its energy production from clean sources by generating 6,000 MW of solar energy by 2030. Agreements have been made to establish solar power plants in collaboration with Saudi and Emirati companies, the Chinese company PowerChina, and the French company TotalEnergies. In 2023, TotalEnergies signed an initial contract valued at 27 billion USD to complete four major energy projects in Iraq, including the construction of a 1,000 MW solar power plant.

Cooperation with Germany and France aligns with Iraq's strategy to achieve energy security and reduce dependence on any single country by attaining high levels of self-sufficiency in locally produced electricity. This strategy also involves diversifying electricity import sources by expanding interconnections beyond reliance on a single country, including electrical interconnections with Kuwait, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Through these interconnections, Iraq has the potential to become an energy hub, creating a promising electricity market linking neighboring countries extending to Turkey and beyond, as well as North Africa.

VII. What About 2024?

Iraq achieved a financial surplus in 2022 due to the global increase in oil prices. However, in 2023, the situation changed as oil prices declined, with al-Başrah Crude stabilizing at approximately 70 USD per barrel, the price set in the 2023 budget. Consequently, the fiscal year ended with an actual deficit of 6,755 billion

dinars, compared to the planned deficit of 64,357 billion dinars. This deficit presents a significant challenge to the Iraqi economy. It is imperative to reconsider the budget size to align with financial capabilities by substantially reducing operational expenditures and increasing investment expenditures, provided this does not compromise the private sector or infrastructure investment. Additionally, expediting the approval of the 2024 general budget tables is necessary, alongside continuing traffic congestion relief projects and sustaining service and engineering efforts. These efforts should be expanded to encompass all governorates, with attention to efficiency and quality of work.

The disparity between the nominal exchange rate and the parallel exchange rate remains substantial, exceeding 100 points despite government and Central Bank interventions. This gap persists due to smuggling, fraud, money laundering, and speculation. The Central Bank should address this issue through more effective strategies, such as implementing a suitable mechanism to finance trade with Iran and requiring small traders to utilize official platforms instead of the parallel market.

Issues concerning the oil sector and other revenues from the Kurdistan Region, which did not remit any revenue in 2023, require urgent resolution. Furthermore, addressing unofficial border crossings is critical, as they significantly contribute to the deterioration of the exchange rate.

In 2023, the government demonstrated a focus on the gas sector, aiming to reduce waste through flaring and instead utilize gas for electricity generation.

Economic challenges persist, particularly regarding the federal budget, where the execution rate reached 72%. This necessitates a review of the 2024 budget tables to align with the capacities of implementing units, ensuring that social and investment expenditures are not compromised.

The government should expand the provision of small, low-interest loans to create jobs for the unemployed workforce and stimulate the private sector, which has the capacity to generate employment and absorb the growing number of unemployed individuals. Additionally, the government must address the issue of increasing public employment, a deferred problem. The private sector is well-positioned to tackle unemployment; therefore, efforts should focus on public-private partnerships and finding solutions for stalled projects through this mechanism, while promoting economic diversification rather than relying solely on oil revenues.

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4. Security

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Since the beginning of 2023, the Iraqi security environment has been characterized by a fragile security stability interspersed with political tensions. These tensions manifested in high-intensity protests, particularly in the city of Kirkūk, following the Kurdistan Democratic Party's demand for the building housing the Advanced Headquarters for Operations Command. Similarly, demonstrations erupted in Baghdād and several other governorates, including the burning of the Swedish Embassy after copies of the Holy Qur'an were burned in Sweden by an Iraqi immigrant. Concurrently, there has been an escalation in the activities of organized crime gangs and drug trafficking and smuggling mafias, which pose a threat to the security and stability of Iraqi society. This section aims to illuminate the most significant internal and external security threats and the resulting losses and sacrifices impacting Iraqi national security.

I. Internal Threats

The patterns of internal threats to Iraqi national security in 2023 differed from those of previous years. Some relate to sectarian conflicts with political dimensions, others to political struggles between forces possessing armed wings or factions, and typical threats involving the terrorist organization ISIS and organized crime gangs. The following analysis examines these and other significant internal threat patterns:

1. The ISIS Threat

ISIS terrorist operations in Iraq declined significantly after the organization lost most of its first-tier leadership between February 2022 and April 2023. The last of these was Abū-al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥusaynī al-Qurashī in April 2023 (al-Jazīrah, 2023, August 3), who was not replaced until August 2023 by the new leader, Abū-Ḥafṣ al-Hāshimī al-Qurashī, who has thus far refrained from delivering a leadership speech. Furthermore, strikes conducted by the Iraqi Armed Forces in cooperation with the International Coalition forces against ISIS deprived the organization of most of its combat capabilities. This led to a regression in ISIS operations in Iraq, as illustrated in the table below.

According to the figures in the table above, 2023 witnessed 173 terrorist operations across Iraq. This represents a major decline of approximately 68% compared

Table 4-1: Decline of ISIS Terrorist Operations in Iraq (2020-2023).

Year	Number of Operations
2020	1,459
2021	1,113
2022	484
2023	173

Source: Compiled by the researcher based on issues of al-Naba’ magazine published by the ISIS Central Media Office.

to the organization’s operations in 2022, which totaled 484. This regression in the momentum of terrorist operations, both quantitatively and qualitatively, resulted from the Iraqi Armed Forces adopting intelligence-led methods to monitor and identify the movements of ISIS elements across all Iraqi governorates. This was part of a new security strategy implemented in parallel with field movements and airstrikes. This occurred despite the fact that the costs necessary for the organization’s survival and terrorist activities have become much lower after losing territory and halting its self-proclaimed “state” building activities (Margolin, 2023). The following chart illustrates this rapid decline in terrorist operations from 2020 to the end of 2023.

The indicators derived from analyzing the decline of ISIS operations in Iraq during the (2020-2023) period signal the isolation and separation of the organization from most of its social incubators, which rejected and expelled it. ISIS has been forced into remote rural areas and mountainous regions with rugged geographical terrain far from security surveillance. It remains under the pressure of attacks and pursuit operations by the Iraqi Armed Forces and other security agencies, which have increased and expanded the government’s security footprint in areas where the organization previously moved and considered incuba-

Figure 4-1: Decline in ISIS terrorist operations (2020-2023).

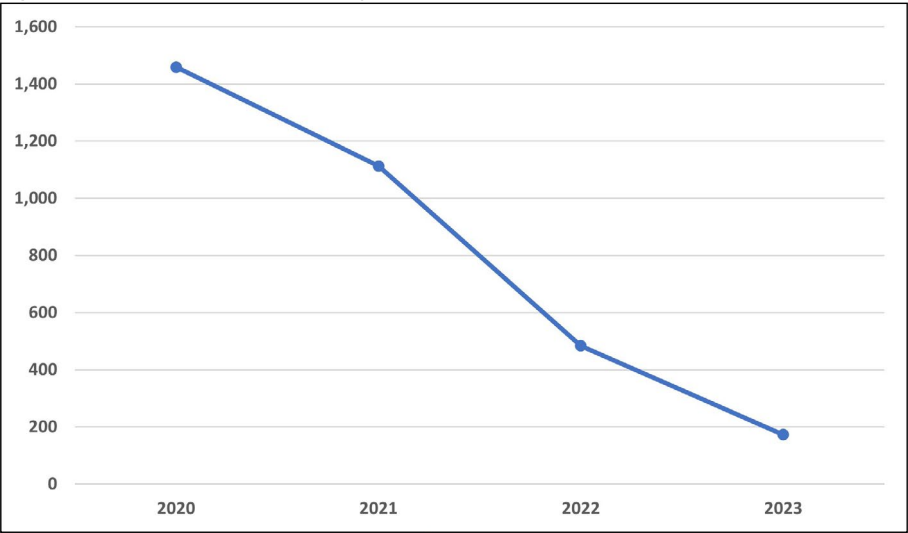


Table 4-2: Number of ISIS Operations by Governorate in Iraq for 2023.

Month	Baghdād (al-Ṭārimīyah)	Ṣalāḥ-al-Dīn	Diyālā	Kirkūk	Nīnawá	al-Anbār	Total
January	7	3	4	5	1	1	21
February	5	2	5	3	2	3	20
March	1	2	2	7	0	3	15
April	1	3	3	5	2	8	22
May	3	1	1	3	3	1	12
June	2	1	3	5	1	3	15
July	0	2	0	3	0	2	7
August	0	6	4	5	0	3	18
September	1	0	3	1	0	9	14
October	0	1	1	0	0	0	2
November	3	0	3	3	0	5	14
December	1	2	1	2	1	6	13
Total	24	23	30	42	10	44	173

Source: Prepared by the researcher based on news websites and issues of al-Naba' newspaper published by the ISIS Media Office.

tors for its terrorist elements. All these factors have undoubtedly contributed to the contraction of ISIS activity in Iraq.

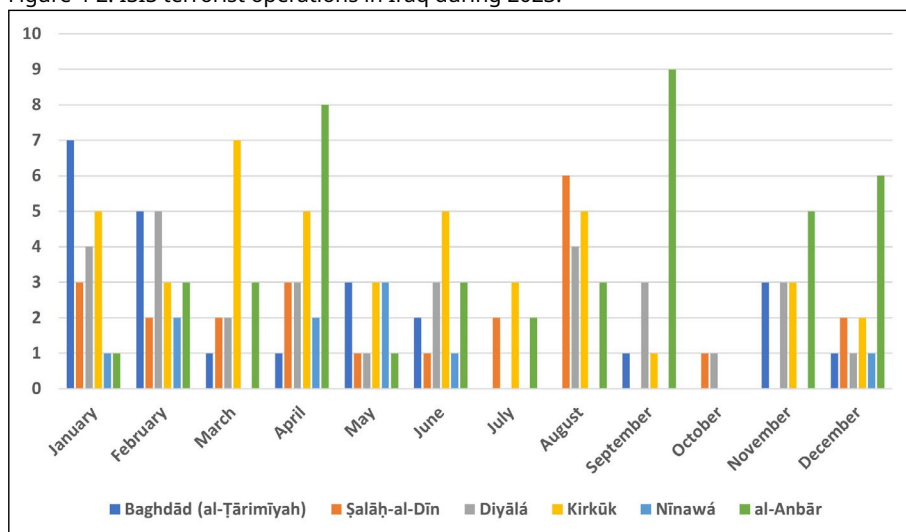
Furthermore, reference must be made to the 16th report issued by the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) regarding the threat posed by ISIS to international security, released in February 2023. The report stated that the total war chest of ISIS remains significant, comprising approximately 25 to 50 million USD. This indicates that ISIS funding today is minimal compared to its peak during the (2014-2017) period.

Analysis of ISIS Combat Patterns

The combat patterns exhibited by ISIS in Iraq throughout 2023 were characterized by the implementation of an "Exhaustive Alert" strategy. This approach involved the distribution of ISIS operatives into cells or "security detachments," each comprising no more than ten individuals. These cells employed guerrilla warfare tactics, including sniper assassinations, kidnappings, the deployment of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) and car bombs, as well as the destruction of thermal cameras. Additionally, ISIS targeted economic infrastructure, burned agricultural crops, and destroyed electricity transmission towers in rural areas beyond the surveillance capabilities of Iraqi security forces, aiming to establish strongholds and "no-go zones" within these regions (Lead Inspector General, 2022, p. 11).

ISIS terrorist activities during 2023 were concentrated in the governorates of Baghdad (al-Ṭārimīyah), Ṣalāḥ-al-Dīn, Diyālā, Kirkūk, Nīnawá, and al-Anbār. The distribution of ISIS terrorist operations by governorate in Iraq during 2023 is presented in Table 4-2.

Figure 4-2: ISIS terrorist operations in Iraq during 2023.



An analysis of the data in Table 4-2 indicates that ISIS primarily concentrated its operations in al-Anbār Governorate, with 44 terrorist activities, followed closely by Kirkūk Governorate, which experienced 42 operations. This focus is attributable to the geographical characteristics of these governorates, which ISIS exploited to establish detachments and sleeper cells. Furthermore, there was a notable increase in the frequency of ISIS operations in the Baghdad Belt areas, particularly in the al-Tārimīyah district north of the capital, which recorded 24 terrorist operations in 2023. This pattern reflects ISIS's attempt to infiltrate the capital via al-Tārimīyah.

Figure 4-2, derived from Table 4-2, illustrates that the density of ISIS terrorist operations in Iraq during 2023 was concentrated between February and the end of June, coinciding with the Holy Month of Ramadan. Notably, for the first time, ISIS failed to conduct any operations in the capital, Baghdad, during Ramadan, despite its previous persistence in launching such attacks, which it referred to as the "Ramadan Raid." This period corresponded with a counter-escalation by Iraqi forces against ISIS, supported by the International Coalition, culminating in the killing of ISIS leader Abū-al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥusaynī al-Qurashī in April 2023 (al-Jazīrah, 2023, August 3).

Counter and Pursuit Operations

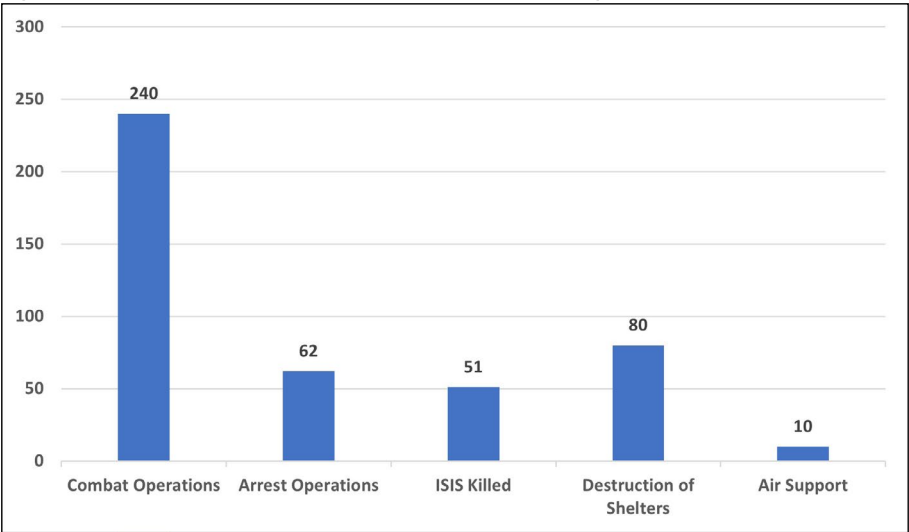
Throughout 2023, the Iraqi Armed Forces, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), the Counter-Terrorism Service (CTS), the Peshmerga, and other intelligence and security agencies sustained efforts to pursue, inspect, and dismantle remnants of ISIS terrorist cells. These efforts were operationalized through six phases of Operation "Righteous Swords," aimed at clearing Iraqi territory of terrorist remnants, securing borders, and enhancing security in border regions. These operations were coordinated under the Joint Operations Command, relying

Table 4-3: Activities of the Counter-Terrorism Service during 2023.

Combat Operations	Arrest Operations	ISIS Killed	Destruction of Shelters	Air Support
240	62	51	80	10

Source: Prepared by the researcher based on the CTS press conference on December 27, 2023.

Figure 4-3: Activities of the Counter-Terrorism Service during 2023.



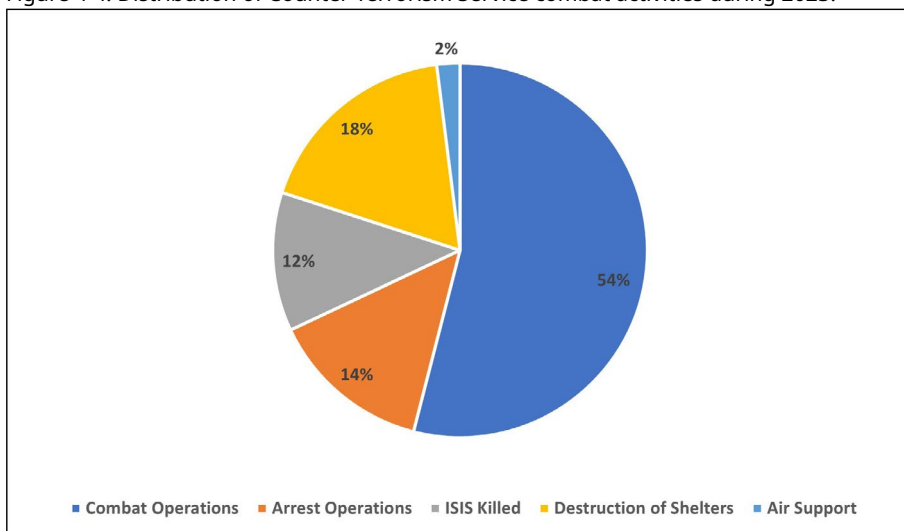
on precise intelligence and involving commands from the Border Forces, the PMF, and the al-Jazīrah, al-Anbār, and West Nīnawá commands.

Based on accurate intelligence, from early January to the end of April 2023, the Iraqi Armed Forces and the Iraqi Air Force eliminated 119 ISIS operatives and destroyed 303 tunnels, caves, and safehouses. Additionally, the CTS conducted 240 operations during 2023, resulting in the deaths of 51 terrorists, the arrest of 30 others, and the destruction of 80 ISIS safehouses. The Iraqi Air Force and Army Aviation provided critical support through ten airstrikes targeting ISIS headquarters and safehouses, significantly bolstering CTS operations. Coordination between the CTS and the Counter-Terrorism Directorates in Erbil and al-Sulaymānīyah, alongside the Peshmerga and Asayish, facilitated 31 joint missions that led to the arrest of 32 ISIS operatives (al-Quds al-ʿArabī, 2023, December 27).

The operations conducted by the Iraqi Armed Forces, CTS, and PMF in 2023 were characterized as preemptive strikes targeting ISIS elements and safehouses located in rugged terrain beyond the reach of Iraqi security surveillance. According to General Matthew McFarlane, commander of the International Coalition in Iraq and Syria, these efforts contributed to a significant decline in ISIS activities (al-ʿArabī al-Jadīd, 2023, April 24).

Figure 4-3 depicts the activities of the Counter-Terrorism Service during 2023, highlighting the CTS’s strategic emphasis on preemptive strikes to disrupt ISIS movements and operations. This strategy effectively constrained ISIS activities

Figure 4-4: Distribution of Counter-Terrorism Service combat activities during 2023.



to limited zones of interest, forcing the organization to retreat to remote, rugged areas. Some ISIS elements were reportedly ordered to relocate to Africa, where the organization continues to exploit political, security, and social vulnerabilities in several countries.

Figure 4-4 illustrates the percentage distribution of CTS combat activities during 2023. Preemptive combat operations accounted for 54% of CTS activities, arrests constituted 14%, destruction of ISIS headquarters represented 18%, and ISIS fatalities comprised 12%. These figures indicate a substantial reduction in the ISIS threat compared to previous years. The preemptive operations undertaken by the CTS demonstrate the Iraqi security agencies' commitment to pursuing and neutralizing ISIS remnants.

The "Israeli" Aggression on Gaza and Its Impact on ISIS Operations in Iraq

The "Islamic Resistance factions" persist in targeting International Coalition bases with drone and missile attacks in Iraq and Syria. Many analysts anticipated that the "Israeli" aggression on Gaza, and the support extended by certain European Union countries and the United States for the genocidal actions perpetrated by Zionist forces against the Palestinian population in Gaza and the West Bank, would present an "opportunity" for ISIS. It was expected that the terrorist organization would exploit the global focus on the Gaza conflict, which erupted on October 7, 2023, to reorganize its sleeper cells and initiate attacks in Iraq.

However, ISIS's response, as articulated in the editorial of its al-Naba' newspaper (Issue 412, October 12, 2023) titled "Supporting the Muslims," was limited to addressing the hardships confronting Muslims. The editorial emphasized that the bond of brotherhood, central to faith, obligates "the believer to support his brother in the calamities befalling him, the most severe of which is the infidel's

transgression against him through killing, captivity, or displacement.” This statement implicitly expressed support for Palestinians without explicitly referencing the “al-Aqṣá Flood” operation. Consequently, the publication refrained from praising Palestinian factions or calling upon Muslims to support the Hamas movement (BBC, 2023, December 27). Notably, in Issue 22 of *al-Nabaʿ* (March 15, 2016), ISIS had “rebuked” Hamas, branding it an apostate movement for participating in democratic systems and failing to implement Islamic Sharia (al-Ḥurrah, 2023, November 3). In contrast, al-Qaeda urged Muslims to engage in combat alongside Palestinian militants (al-Najjār, 2023, October 21).

Based on these observations, the Iraqi theater has not experienced an unusual escalation in ISIS operations since October 7, 2023. Conversely, the Syrian theater witnessed an increase in significant operations, exemplified by the large-scale ISIS attack on November 8, 2023, in the (al-Raqqah, Ḥimṣ, Dayr-al-Zawr) triangle, resulting in the deaths of 34 Syrian personnel. This development is attributable to vacuums created by the redeployment of Iran-backed factions (operating under the designation “Islamic Resistance factions”) toward the Syrian borders with Lebanon or the Golan Heights as part of a “proportional escalation” strategy against the Zionist entity within the framework of the “Unity of Arenas” strategy. This redeployment generated substantial vacuums in specific areas, particularly in the Syrian Desert, thereby enhancing ISIS elements’ mobility and providing an opportunity to reorganize and launch attacks against vulnerable targets, a scenario that may extend to the Iraqi arena (Fawzī, 2023, November 16).

2. Organized Crime

Organized crime in Iraq continued to pose a significant threat to security and stability throughout 2023, as criminal groups and networks demonstrated resilience and adaptability despite intensified efforts by security agencies. These groups engaged in activities including drug trafficking and distribution, human trafficking (al-Quds al-ʿArabī, 2022, November 13), migrant smuggling, arms dealing, and the illicit trade of petroleum products. The expansion and proliferation of these networks were driven by administrative and financial corruption, ongoing internal and regional geopolitical instability, the effects of climate change, and economic stagnation following the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to available data, Iraq ranked eighth globally among 193 countries in the 2023 Global Organized Crime Index, with a score of 7.13. This score reflects an increase of 0.08 points from the previous year. Regionally, Iraq ranked second among 46 Asian countries. This represents a concerning negative indicator, necessitating enhanced efforts by security agencies to confront and dismantle organized crime networks.

A. Drug Crimes

Drug trafficking organizations in Iraq have evolved in response to security agencies’ efforts, often possessing armed capabilities and influence that enable them to confront these forces. Such confrontations frequently result in casualties among officers and soldiers (al-Jazīrah, 2023, March 22), as well as the death

or suicide of mafia leaders following intensified sieges. Security sources identify heroin, hashish, Captagon pills, and crystal meth as the most prevalent narcotics currently in circulation (al-Jazīrah, 2023, January 5). To combat drug-trafficking networks, the Iraqi Ministry of Interior has implemented a new strategy focused on establishing a comprehensive information database detailing traffickers' locations, activities, and transit routes. This database aims to facilitate timely and targeted operations against traffickers (al-Jazīrah, 2023, March 22).

Despite these measures, the General Directorate for Drug Affairs reported the seizure of approximately 586,000 kilograms and pills of narcotics within Iraq during January 2023. This period also saw the arrest of 1,417 individuals suspected of trafficking, promoting, transporting, and smuggling drugs, alongside the confiscation of 63,369 kilograms of various narcotics and 522,186 psychotropic pills (al-Madā, 2023, February 15). Additionally, the Ministry of Interior hosted the "First Baghdād International Conference on Drug Control" from May 9 to 10, 2023, under the slogan "With Cooperation and Unity of Purpose, We Eliminate Drugs."

The most commonly used drugs in Iraq include crystal meth and hashish, predominantly found in the central and southern regions, while Captagon pills are widespread in western and northern Iraq and are particularly popular among youth. According to the Ministry of Interior, most crystal meth enters Iraq from the east, specifically into the al-Baṣrah and Maysān governorates, whereas Captagon and hashish are primarily smuggled through the al-Qā'im border crossing in the west (Iran International, 2022, August 17). Iraqi officials report that narcotics are concealed in vehicles, counterfeit fruit shipments, and even transported via drones. Notably, women, who are subject to less stringent searches and controls than men, have increasingly become involved in drug trafficking.

The Iraqi Ministry of Health indicated that since early 2022, approximately 4,500 drug addicts, predominantly aged 15 to 30, have received treatment. However, due to a shortage of addiction treatment centers, many young individuals remain vulnerable (Shafaq News, 2022, December 11). In July 2023, the Iraqi government announced a "Drug-Free Iraq" initiative, categorizing the proliferation and trafficking of drugs as a terrorist threat.

By December 31, 2023, the Ministry of Interior reported that the General Directorate for Drug Control had apprehended approximately 15,000 suspects throughout the year. The total number of detainees at the ministry level reached 19,035 on drug-related charges, with seizures amounting to approximately 4 tons of narcotics and over 15 tons of psychotropic substances. Security forces engaged in multiple confrontations with drug gangs, resulting in the deaths of 16 traffickers and the loss of 4 officers, with 23 others wounded. Authorities also confiscated over 1,000 weapons and 1,350 vehicles belonging to traffickers. The total number of convictions in drug-related cases exceeded 9,000, including those involving international traffickers. For the first time in the ministry's history, more than 140 international drug traffickers were arrested under Article 27 (Mawāzīn News, 2023, December 31). Table 4-4 presents the most significant drug-trafficking seizure operations conducted in 2023.

Table 4-4: Key Drug-Trafficking Seizure Operations during 2023.

No.	Date	Operation	Governorate
1	30/5/2023	Killing of the wanted trafficker Ḥātim al-Zuwaydāwī, known as "Escobar of al-Muthannā," in the al-Samāwah desert. The operation was supervised by Interior Minister 'Abd-al-Amīr al-Shammari.	al-Muthannā
2	14/7/2023	Seizure of a Captagon production factory for the first time in the country, equipped with 27.5 kg of raw materials and specific stamps for the pills.	al-Muthannā
3	19/8/2023	Major General Khālīd al-Muḥannā announced the arrest of over 12,000 traffickers and promoters, along with tons of narcotics, since the start of the year.	Ministry of Interior / Baghdad
4	21/8/2023	Announcement of the seizure of 3 tons of narcotics and psychotropic substances since the beginning of the year.	Ministry of Interior / Baghdad
5	7/9/2023	Completion of steps to form an independent security agency for drug control, similar to the Counter-Terrorism Service.	Ministry of Interior / Baghdad
6	8/10/2023	Announcement of the arrest of 12,000 suspects for drug promotion in the past nine months.	Ministry of Interior / Baghdad
7	27/12/2023	Seizure of approximately 3 kg of drugs in a building in the city of Kirkūk.	Kirkūk
8	28/12/2023	Disposal of approximately 18 tons of narcotics, over 10 million pills, and 68 bottles of cocaine.	National Committee for Drug Control / Baghdad
9	30/12/2023	Arrest of 9 traffickers after clashes and pursuits, with 5 kg of crystal meth and various weapons and explosives seized.	General Directorate for Drug Affairs / Maysān, al-Najaf, and Kirkūk
10	30/12/2023	Arrest of a foreign female suspect in possession of 1.5 kg of crystal meth.	Border Guard Command / Wāsiṭ

Source: Compiled by the researcher.

B. Petroleum Products Smuggling Networks

Petroleum product smuggling networks constitute a critical challenge to the Iraqi government and represent one of the most perilous forms of organized crime undermining the nation's economic policies. In response, the government has implemented comprehensive measures to combat these illicit activities, which have proliferated nationwide, inflicting substantial harm on Iraq's oil-dependent economy and adversely affecting the welfare of its citizens (al-'Arabī al-Jadīd, 2022, November 4). The administration led by Prime Minister al-Sūdānī has prioritized strengthening security agencies tasked with monitoring and intercepting smuggling operations. This approach is grounded in strategic planning aimed at effectively confronting smuggling through various initiatives, including the restructuring of the Energy Police under an administrative framework designed to enhance oversight, control, and surveillance of oil pipelines.

Table 4-5: Key Seizure Operations of Petroleum Product Smuggling during 2023.

No.	Date	Operation Description	Governorate(s)
1	23/1/2023	Seizure of a refinery used for smuggling petroleum products.	Bābil
2	27/1/2023	Seizure of 20 vehicles and arrest of 29 suspects. Confiscation of over 500,000 liters prepared for smuggling, stored in vehicles and tanks seized during warehouse raids.	Baghdād, al-Najaf, Kirkūk, Nīnawā, al-Dīwānīyah, Diyālā, and Bābil
3	31/1/2023	Energy Police seized 13 tankers and arrested 13 suspects.	Baghdād
4	10/2/2023	National Security seized a refinery for smuggling petroleum products in al-Ḥillah. Seizure of three million liters and several forged documents inside the refinery.	Bābil
5	13/2/2023	Seizure of 800,000 liters used for unofficial trade and 28 vehicles used for the same purpose.	al-Anbār, al-Baṣrah, Karbalā', Maysān, Dhī-Qār, and al-Dīwānīyah
6	11/3/2023	Seizure of a vehicle prepared for smuggling and arrest of its driver.	al-Baṣrah
7	23/3/2023	Raid on a garage used for smuggling and arrest of a suspect with his vehicle. Discovery of 11 tanks of various capacities containing products of unknown quality.	Baghdād
8	3/4/2023	Arrest of several suspects and seizure of their vehicles.	Baghdād, Ṣalāḥ-al-Dīn, and al-Baṣrah
9	6/4/2023	Prevention of the smuggling of 484,000 liters; seizure of a smuggling garage, 19 tankers, and 15 arrests.	Baghdād, Nīnawā, Kirkūk, Ṣalāḥ-al-Dīn, Diyālā, al-Dīwānīyah, al-Muthannā, and al-Najaf
10	28/4/2023	Seizure of a smuggling hideout.	al-Muthannā
11	2/6/2023	Thwarting a smuggling operation involving two trucks and arrest of their drivers.	Dhī-Qār / Qa'at Sikar District
12	April–August 2023	National Security Service seized over two million liters over 4 months and arrested 124 suspects. 15 hideouts used for storage and smuggling were also seized.	Baghdād and Governorates
13	November 2023	Thwarting the smuggling of 460,000 liters; arrest of 28 suspects and seizure of 17 tankers and 4 hideouts.	al-Baṣrah, al-Anbār, Ṣalāḥ-al-Dīn, Diyālā, Kirkūk, Nīnawā, and Bābil
14	24/11/2023	Seizure of a petroleum product smuggling hideout.	Baghdād

Source: Compiled by the researcher.

Additionally, the strategy incorporates personnel rotation based on principles of integrity and competence, alongside enhanced coordination with intelligence services. The government established nine brigades across all governorates, restructured Energy Police directorates in the northern, central, and southern

regions, and fortified border checkpoints to seal smuggling routes (al-Şabāh, 2023, January 29).

These efforts have yielded significant results. On November 4, 2022, security forces, under the Prime Minister’s directive, dismantled the largest oil smuggling network in al-Başrah Governorate. Investigations revealed the involvement of senior officials, including the Director General of the Energy Police at the Ministry of Interior, a director of the Energy Police in al-Başrah Governorate, and multiple officers and personnel. Authorities confiscated 49 tanks and cargo vehicles intended for smuggling, seized 93 illicit storage sites, and 496 tanks used for unauthorized petroleum storage. Furthermore, 11 unlicensed stations were shut down (al-‘Arabī al-Jadīd, 2022, November 4).

On March 22, 2023, the Iraqi National Security Service announced the arrest of 105 individuals implicated in petroleum smuggling in Diyālā Governorate, including officers and security personnel. The seized quantities of smuggled petroleum products in Diyālā amounted to two million liters (Independent Arabia, 2023, March 22). In January 2023, the Energy Police seized 3,348,000 liters of petroleum products prepared for smuggling, conducted 4,374 raids and inspections, confiscated eight illicit trading hideouts, arrested nine suspects, and seized 52 tankers and 41 vehicles violating regulations (Khabar Press, 2023, January 31). Table 4-5 details the key operations targeting petroleum product smuggling networks during 2023.

3. Criminal Offenses

According to Table 4-6, which is derived from the Numbeo Crime Index, Iraq was ranked 61st among 142 countries in 2022, with a crime index of 47.0 and a safety index of 53.0. By mid-2023, Iraq’s ranking shifted to 74th, with a crime index of 46.0 and a safety index of 54.0. This change indicates a slight decrease in crime points, reflecting a relative improvement compared to 2022, resulting in a rise of 13 ranks according to the Numbeo Crime Index. However, by the end of 2023, Iraq’s ranking improved to 71st, with a marginal change in the crime index to 46.1 and a minor adjustment in the safety index to 53.9. These indicators collectively position Iraq outside the ten most dangerous countries, a list in which it previously held the 8th rank before 2022 (Mawāzīn News, 2023, December 31).

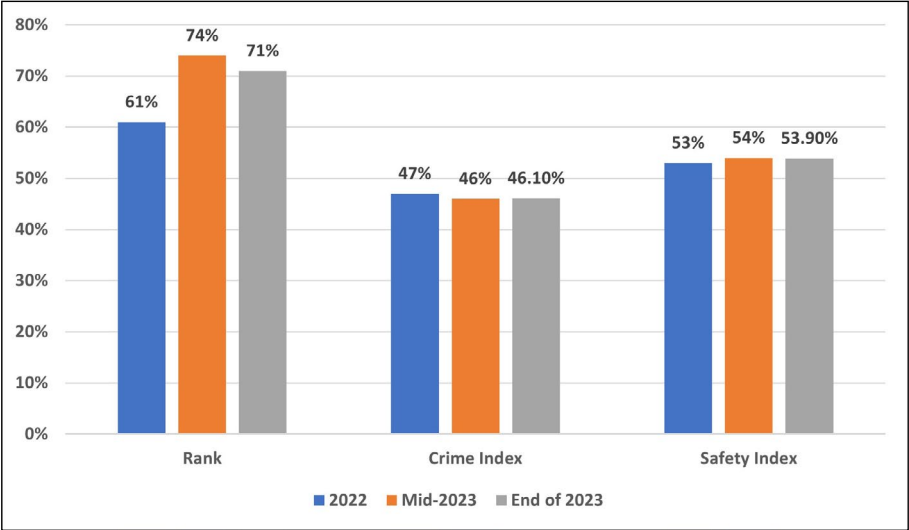
Based on these indicators, crime in Iraq remains a persistent concern, posing significant threats to the social fabric and impeding socio-economic development. The impacts and repercussions of crime manifest across borders and vary in form and severity, influenced by diverse economic, political, and social factors. Understanding the multifaceted nature of crime in Iraq is crucial for national

Table 4-6: Crime Rate Ranking Indicators in Iraq During 2023.

Year	Rank	Crime Index	Safety Index
2022	61	47.0	53.0
id-2023	74	46.0	54.0
End of 2023	71	46.1	53.9

Source: Compiled by the researcher based on the Numbeo Crime Index.

Figure 4-5: Crime Classification Indicators in Iraq for 2023.



Source: Organized by the researcher based on the Numbeo Crime Index.

polymakers to implement effective strategies aimed at crime reduction and the promotion of safer environments. Consequently, it is essential to comprehend the diverse types of criminal activities in Iraq, as well as their scale and impact. The following figure illustrates the crime classification indicators in Iraq for 2023.

Iraqi society, like any other, has experienced various forms of crime throughout its history. Following 2003, the country underwent significant social, economic, psychological, and political transformations resulting from internal and external shifts in value systems, behaviors, and methods, which contributed to an escalation in crime rates. These changes have adversely affected the security and stability of society across its various components and segments. Table 4-7 presents the most prominent criminal offenses that occurred in Iraq during 2023, attributed to the aforementioned factors.

Table 4-7: Key Criminal Offenses in Iraq During 2023.

No.	Date	Crime Location	Crime	Number of Victims	Response
1	2/11/2022	Kurdistan Region / Erbil	A woman killed her husband with an "iron hammer" and burned his body due to family problems.	1	
2	29/11/2022	Kirkūk	Murder of Aḥmad Āzād, the top intermediate student in Kirkūk (Kurdish studies), after he went out to buy an electronic device as a gift following a 2,600 USD reward from KRG Prime Minister Masrūr Bārzanī.	1	Killer arrested in Chamchamāl on 8/12/2022.
3	24/1/2023	al-Kūt	A young man under the influence of drugs shot and killed his mother and three siblings.	4	

Table 4-7 (continued)

4	31/1/2023	al-Diwānīyah	Iraqi activist Taybah al-'Alī was killed by her father due to "family disputes."	1	
5	17/2/2023	Baghdād	Two girls were kidnapped in a "tuk-tuk" and murdered in eastern Baghdād.	2	A gang of three was arrested.
6	23/2/2023	Baghdād	A girl was murdered and decapitated in al-Ṣadr City, eastern Baghdād.	1	Killer was arrested.
7	17/3/2023	al-Nāṣirīyah	University professor 'Aqīl al-Shāmī was assassinated by gunfire near his home in central al-Nāṣirīyah.	1	A suspect was arrested on 19/3/2023.
8	08/4/2023	Kirkūk	A young man killed a woman inside her home and fled.	1	Killer was arrested.
9	13/4/2023	al-'Amārah	A young man was killed by three individuals who hid his body.	1	Killers were arrested.
10	14/4/2023	al-Baṣrah	Rape and murder of a 7-year-old girl.	1	Killer was arrested.
11	15/4/2023	al-Baṣrah	Three family members were killed in Abū-Ṣakhīr sub-district.	3	
12	16/4/2023	al-Nāṣirīyah	A young man was shot dead by his brother inside their home.	1	Killer was arrested.
13	25/9/2023	Baghdād	A delivery driver shot and killed the blogger known as "Noor BM."	1	Killer was not arrested.
14	28/12/2023	Kirkūk	A masked gunman killed a security member and wounded his colleague.	1	Killer was not arrested.

Source: Compiled by the researcher.

4. Threat of Weapons Outside State Control

In 2023, weapons outside the control of the state, commonly referred to as "uncontrolled weapons," continue to present significant social and security challenges. These threats manifest primarily in two forms:

A. Tribal Weaponry

This category encompasses weapons extensively utilized in tribal conflicts (Ghazwān, 2022). Despite the confiscation of approximately 7,000 light and medium weapons in 2022, there remains no official census quantifying firearms within Iraqi society. Estimates generally range between 13 and 15 million units of light and medium weaponry. Predominant among these are Kalashnikov rifles, Russian-manufactured PKC and RPK machine guns, as well as mortars and RPG launchers, which have been frequently employed in tribal disputes in southern and central Iraq (al-'Arabī al-Jadīd, 2023, March 6). The exacerbation of tribal conflicts involving medium and heavy weaponry is attributed to the absence of effective governmental presence and security enforcement. Moreover, most armed confrontations involving major tribes do not reach police stations.

Dhī-Qār Governorate is notably prominent in tribal dispute cases, owing to its tribal social structure and limited governmental provision of services. On April 13, 2023, an armed tribal conflict erupted in al-Iṣlāḥ District, east of al-Nāṣirīyah in Dhī-Qār, resulting in four fatalities and over ten injuries. Security forces apprehended more than twelve individuals responsible for inciting the conflict after

deployment of five regiments from the Federal Police, local police, the Army, and the Counter-Terrorism Service to restore order. Several tribal disputes occurred in Dhī-Qār during 2023, including:

- January 1, 2023: An armed dispute lasting several hours in al-Chibāyish District among members of a single tribe using light and medium weapons.
- Early January 2023: A conflict erupted between two tribes in Sayyid Dakhīl District, southeast of al-Nāṣirīyah. Rapid Response Forces secured the area and confiscated light and medium weapons and hand grenades.
- February 2023: An RPG attack targeted the residence of a prominent tribal prince in al-Shatrah, precipitating a security crisis marked by a daylight military parade by gunmen in view of security agencies.

Between 2021 and 2022, Dhī-Qār recorded approximately 100 tribal disputes, which form part of broader conflicts in Maysān, al-Baṣrah, and other cities, including Baghdād (al-Jazīrah, 2023, April 15). The capital experienced armed disputes and “Daggah” (tribal warnings involving gunfire) in various areas such as al-Ṣadr City and al-Shu’lah. The most recent incident occurred in the al-Fuḍaylīyah area on November 29, 2023, involving light and medium weapons. On May 10, 2022, the Tribal Affairs Directorate of the Ministry of Interior reported the seizure of over 7,000 units of light and medium weaponry, emphasizing that the majority of these arms were held by various tribal groups.

The issue of uncontrolled weapons has expanded beyond rural southern and central Iraq into urban centers where tribal members have migrated, transforming cities into new arenas for disputes that jeopardize social stability. Addressing this phenomenon necessitates urgent and sincere efforts to promote the rule of law as the primary mechanism for peaceful dispute resolution, rather than reliance on firearms and violence (Kāzīm, 2023).

B. Threat of Armed Sects

The resurgence of armed sects in Iraq has been evident since the discovery and arrest of clandestine armed organizations such as “Abnā’ Allāh,” “Jund al-Samā’,” and “al-Mawlawīyah.”⁽¹⁾ Seized documents and weapons from these groups confirm their significant threat to national security. The issue has evolved from theoretical concerns about extremism and violence to practical manifestations, as these sects have transformed into armed factions stockpiling weapons to challenge the state (al-Ṭāṭī, 2019). Notable developments in 2023 include:

- April 2023: Emergence of the group “Aṣḥāb al-Qaḍīyah,” extremists claiming affiliation with the Sadrist Movement, although the Movement officially disavowed them, who regard Sayyid Muqtadā al-Ṣadr as the awaited al-Imam al-Mahdī. On April 14, 2023, authorities arrested 65 members. Subsequently, on June 11, 2023, the al-Karkh Misdemeanor

(1) The topic was examined comprehensively in the fifth chapter of this volume (Society) as a distinct case study.

Court sentenced 51 members to one year imprisonment and the group's leader to two years.

- May 2023: The "al-Qurbān Group" in Dhī-Qār generated widespread public concern. On May 17, 2023, a member committed suicide by hanging inside a Ḥusayniyah in al-Nāṣiriyyah, marking the fourth such incident at this location. On May 20, 2023, the Federal Intelligence and Investigation Agency arrested four members in Sūq al-Shuyūkh District, initiating legal proceedings against them.

B. Miscellaneous Weapons

This category encompasses light, medium, and heavy military weapons and equipment possessed by various armed groups. Such weaponry is employed intermittently for diverse purposes and motivations. Notable incidents involving the use of these weapons include the following:

- On November 7, 2022, Stephen Edward Troell (aged 45) was fatally shot by unidentified assailants in the al-Karrādah district of central Baghdād. Security agencies promptly apprehended the perpetrators, who were subsequently prosecuted. On August 31, 2023, the al-Karkh Criminal Court sentenced one Iranian national and four Iraqi nationals to life imprisonment for their involvement (RT Arabic, 2023, August 31).
- The Iraqi government initiated an investigation on July 7, 2023, into the disappearance of Elizabeth Tsurkov, an "Israeli"-Russian citizen who went missing in Iraq on March 21, 2023. Tsurkov is a fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute (Philadelphia), a research fellow at the Regional Thinking Forum (an "Israeli"-Palestinian research center), and a doctoral candidate in the Politics Department at Princeton University. The Zionist entity accused the Iraqi Kata'ib Hezbollah of abducting her, while a government spokesperson indicated that they were awaiting the results of the investigation and declined further comment. On November 13, 2023, Tsurkov appeared in a video speaking Hebrew, appealing to the families of hostages in Gaza to persist in efforts to halt the conflict and urging her family to advocate for her prompt release.
- On September 2, 2023, the city of Kirkūk experienced violent ethnic clashes resulting in at least four fatalities and 16 injuries. The unrest was triggered by the transfer of the Advanced Headquarters for Joint Operations Command in Kirkūk to the Kurdistan Democratic Party. Police and security forces were deployed to prevent further violence and successfully restored order, allowing the city to gradually return to normalcy.
- On October 6, 2023, unidentified gunmen on a motorcycle fired multiple rounds at the residence of Maysān Governor 'Alī Dawwāī; no casualties were reported.
- On December 20, 2023, a security source reported the interception of a vehicle transporting four missiles intended for launch toward the 'Ayn al-Asad base, situated behind the railway in the Hīt district of al-Anbār

Governorate. The “29th Brigade” subsequently detonated the missiles after securing them.

- Since October 17, 2023, armed Iraqi factions have claimed responsibility via Telegram statements for the majority of attacks targeting US forces at the ‘Ayn al-Asad base, al-Ḥarīr base, the vicinity of the US Embassy in Baghdād, and several US bases in Syria. This escalation represents heightened security tensions amid the Iraqi government’s efforts to manage the consequences of the Zionist war against the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip, ongoing since October 7, 2023. Between October 17 and December 17, 2023, approximately 97 attacks occurred in Iraq and Syria, causing minor injuries to dozens of US soldiers, according to US military officials. These events prompted US forces to conduct airstrikes against multiple headquarters and targets affiliated with the Popular Mobilization Forces. Prime Minister al-Sūdānī condemned both the attacks on US interests and the subsequent American responses as violations of Iraqi sovereignty, directing authorities to apprehend the perpetrators (Monte Carlo, 2023, October 23).
- November 8, 2023: An armed conflict erupted in the al-Jihād Neighborhood in central al-Baṣrah, resulting in the deaths of two individuals and injuries to three police officers during security forces’ efforts to regain control.
- December 7, 2023: The assassination of the cleric Fāḍil al-Marsūmī, founder of the al-Dā’ī Party, occurred near the al-Tājīyāt traffic department, carried out by unidentified gunmen.
- December 25, 2023: Armed clashes took place in the al-‘Āmil Neighborhood in the capital, Baghdād.
- December 27, 2023: An unidentified drone launched two successive bombardments near the Chamchamāl District in al-Sulaymānīyah Governorate, with reports indicating possible civilian casualties.
- December 31, 2023: The Kurdistan Regional Government reported that two suicide drones targeted a Peshmerga headquarters; the attack caused only material damage, with no human casualties reported.

Based on the aforementioned incidents and data presented in Table 4-8, it is evident that the complexities associated with controlling such weaponry (al-Nāḗī, 2023, March 5) pose a significant challenge to the Iraqi government’s authority at this stage. This remains the case despite the Iraqi Minister of Interior, ‘Abd-al-Amīr al-Shammari, announcing on September 21, 2023, the establishment of weapon registration offices across all Iraqi governorates. Iraqi citizens persist in maintaining firearms within their homes, a practice rooted in the post-US invasion culture and the prevailing fragility of the security environment. This situation compels individuals to consider self-defense against theft, potential assaults, as well as tribal tensions and disputes.

Table 4-8: Attacks by the Iraqi Islamic Resistance Factions on US Bases and the Zionist Entity.

No.	Date	Target Location	Type of Attack
1	18/10/2023	'Ayn al-Asad Base / al-Anbār	Two suicide drones (suicide drones)
2	18/10/2023	Harīr Base / Erbil	Suicide drone
3	19/10/2023	al-Tanf Base / Syria	Three suicide drones
4	19/10/2023	'Ayn al-Asad Base / al-Anbār	Two suicide drones
5	20/10/2023	Victoria Base / near Baghdād International Airport	Two Katyusha rockets
6	20/10/2023	Harīr Base / Erbil	Two suicide drones
7	21/10/2023	'Ayn al-Asad Base / al-Anbār	Suicide drone
8	22/10/2023	'Ayn al-Asad Base / al-Anbār	Suicide drone and Grad rockets
9	23/10/2023	al-'Umar Field and al-Shaddādī / Syria	Two suicide drones
10	24/10/2023	'Ayn al-Asad Base / al-Anbār	Two Grad rockets
11	26/10/2023	'Ayn al-Asad Base / al-Anbār	Suicide drone
12	27/10/2023	'Ayn al-Asad Base / al-Anbār	Suicide drone
13	2/11/2023	Harīr Base / Erbil	Suicide drone
14	3/11/2023	Port of Eilat (Umm al-Rashrāsh) / Zionist Entity	Ballistic missile
15	3/11/2023	Kharāb al-Jīr Base / Syria	Grad rockets
16	6/11/2023	'Ayn al-Asad Base / al-Anbār	Two suicide drones
17	6/11/2023	al-Tanf Base / Syria	Suicide drone
18	7/11/2023	Harīr Base / Erbil	Three suicide drones
19	9/11/2023	Harīr Base / Erbil	Two suicide drones
20	11/11/2023	Harīr Base / Erbil	Two suicide drones
21	12/11/2023	Port of Eilat (Umm al-Rashrāsh) / Zionist Entity	Ballistic missile
22	13/11/2023	Green Village Base / Syria	Suicide drone
23	15/11/2023	'Ayn al-Asad Base / al-Anbār	Katyusha rockets
24	17/11/2023	Harīr Base / Erbil	Suicide drone
25	17/11/2023	'Ayn al-Asad Base / al-Anbār	Two suicide drones
26	17/11/2023	Tall Baydar Base / al-Ḥasakah / Syria	Two suicide drones
27	19/11/2023	Harīr Base / Erbil	Suicide drone
28	21/11/2023	'Ayn al-Asad Base / al-Anbār	Suicide drone
29	22/11/2023	Harīr Base / Erbil	Suicide drone
30	23/11/2023	'Ayn al-Asad Base / al-Anbār	Two suicide drones
31	23/11/2023	Harīr Base / Erbil	Two suicide drones
32	2/12/2023	Harīr Base / Erbil	Suicide drone
33	3/12/2023	'Ayn al-Asad Base / al-Anbār	Suicide drone
34	3/12/2023	Green Village Base / Syria	Suicide drone
35	4/12/2023	al-Rumaylān Airbase / Syria	15 Grad rockets
36	6/12/2023	Harīr Base / Erbil	Suicide drone
37	8/12/2023	US Embassy in Baghdād	7 Katyusha rockets

Table 4-8 (continued)

38	9/12/2023	US Forces at Erbil Airport	Four suicide drones
39	11/12/2023	al-Shaddādī Base / Syria	Grad rocket salvo
40	12/12/2023	Conoco Base / Syria	Katyusha rockets
41	13/12/2023	'Ayn al-Asad Base / al-Anbār	Suicide drone
42	16/12/2023	Conoco Base / Syria	Suicide drone
43	16/12/2023	al-'Umar Base / Syria	Suicide drone
44	16/12/2023	al-Mālikīyah Base / Syria	Suicide drone
45	20/12/2023	'Ayn al-Asad Base / al-Anbār	Grad rocket
46	21/12/2023	Port of Eilat (Umm al-Rashrāsh) / Zionist Entity	Ballistic missile
47	23/12/2023	Karish Gas Platform / Mediterranean Sea	Suicide drone
48	25/12/2023	US Base at Erbil Airport	Suicide drone
49	26/12/2023	'Ayn al-Asad Base / al-Anbār	Three suicide drones
50	27/12/2023	US Base at Erbil Airport	Suicide drone
51	27/12/2023	Eliad Settlement / Zionist Entity	Rocket
52	28/12/2023	US Base at Conoco Field / Syria	Grad rockets
53	29/12/2023	US Base at Kharāb al-Jīr Airport / Syria	Grad rockets
54	29/12/2023	al-Shaddādī Base / NE Syria	Grad rockets
55	29/12/2023	Harīr Airbase / Erbil	Suicide drone
56	30/12/2023	al-Shaddādī Base / NE Syria	Grad rockets
57	30/12/2023	Harīr Base / Erbil	Suicide drone
58	31/12/2023	al-Rumaylān Base / Syria	Suicide drone
59	31/12/2023	US Base at Kharāb al-Jīr Airport / Syria	Suicide drone
60	31/12/2023	US Base near Erbil Airport	Suicide drone
61	31/12/2023	Occupied Golan Heights	Suicide drone
62	31/12/2023	'Ayn al-Asad Base / al-Anbār	Suicide drone
63	31/12/2023	Port of Eilat (Umm al-Rashrāsh) / Zionist Entity	Suicide drone

Source: Compiled by the researcher.

II. External Threats

During 2023, Iraqi national security witnessed a number of transnational external movements, most of which originated from regional neighboring countries (Iran and Turkey), under the pretext of the presence of armed opposition forces for both countries on Iraqi territory. Turkey justifies its actions by citing the presence of the opposition Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which it classifies as a terrorist force, in northern Iraq. Meanwhile, Iran cites the presence of the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI), the Komala Party, the Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK), and the Kurdistan Independence Party (PSK), which Iran classifies as terrorist forces working to fragment the country and separate Kurdish regions from the Islamic Republic of Iran. In addition to the above, the American bombardment of several Popular Mobilization Forces sites at the end of 2023 constituted a threat to national security and Iraqi sovereignty no less dangerous than other threats.

1. Turkey

Since the beginning of 2023, the Turkish Armed Forces have continued to execute a military operation dubbed “Claw-Sword,” which included airstrikes on Kurdish militant bases in northern Iraq (al-Jazīrah, 2022, November 21). PKK sites in towns such as Sūrān, Sīdakān, al-Zāb, Qandīl, Sinjār, and Makhmūr are subject to continuous strikes by the Turkish army using “Bayraktar” drones. Turkish aerial operations were not limited to the borders and the Qandīl Mountains; they also carried out strikes at a depth of 281 kilometers inside Iraq, targeting areas under federal authority such as Sinjār and al-Mawṣil. Alternatively, Bayraktar drones track PKK leaders and target them during their movements south of the border region. Turkey did not stop at “neutralizing” the prominent leader and deputy head of the “Autonomous Administration” affiliated with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Farhād Shiblī (known as Farhād Derik), along with several of his assistants in a strike carried out by a Turkish drone in the Iraqi town of Kalār, south of al-Sulaymānīyah Governorate. It went further when, on the night of April 8, 2023, it bombarded al-Sulaymānīyah Airport in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq with Bayraktar drones, claiming to target the Commander-in-Chief of the Syrian Democratic Forces, Maḥmūd ‘Abdī. Commenting on the incident, the US Central Command stated in a press release that three Americans were in the targeted convoy in al-Sulaymānīyah, and no one was injured (Nās News, 2023, April 8). Table 4-9 details the key assassination operations against the Turkish and Iranian Kurdish opposition in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq during 2023.

On September 16, 2023, Turkish forces conducted raids targeting the Skayrī area in Duhok Governorate, northern Iraq, citing the presence of sites affiliated with the PKK, which Ankara designates as a “terrorist organization.” Subsequently, on September 18, 2023, Turkish drones resumed attacks by bombing the ‘Arbat agricultural airport near the city of al-Sulaymānīyah in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, resulting in the deaths of three Peshmerga members and injuries to three others. This incident followed the killing of three fighters from the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBŞ), affiliated with the PKK, in a Turkish drone strike in northern Iraq the previous day. On September 20, violent clashes ensued between the Turkish military and PKK militants in Iraqi border villages within Duhok Governorate in the Kurdistan Region; these confrontations lasted for three hours and caused fires in local farms. On October 4, 2023, Turkish aircraft launched concentrated airstrikes on PKK strongholds located in Maṭīnā, Gārā, Hākūrk, Qandīl, and Asos in northern Iraq.

On November 21, 2023, Turkish forces engaged PKK members in northern Iraq, reportedly killing ten of them. Further Turkish airstrikes on December 12, 2023, resulted in the deaths of five PKK members in the Qandīl region. Approximately 5,000 fighters, designated as the “People’s Defense Forces” (HPG), are deployed in the northwest of Sinjār and on Mount Sinjār, as well as in the north-east and within the city of Sinjār. The PKK forces are commanded by the party leader, Jamīl Bāyīk, while other PKK units are stationed in military bases in the Qandīl Mountains and along the Iraqi-Turkish-Iranian border triangle, specifically

Table 4-9: Key Assassination Operations Against Turkish and Iranian Kurdish Opposition in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq During 2023.

No.	Date	Assassination Operation	Location	Method
1	8/4/2023	Assassination attempt on the leader of the SDF, Maẓlūm 'Abdī.	al-Sulaymānīyah Airport	Bayraktar drone
2	13/7/2023	Assassination of PDKI members: Siyāmand Shābūbī, 'Adil Sarbāz, and Luqmān Hājī.	Erbil Governorate	Shot by the Iranian Intelligence.
3	28/7/2023	Killing of four PKK elements.	Shārbāzhīr District, al-Sulaymānīyah	Drone
4	18/8/2023	Killing of PUK member Niyāzī Jalāl.	al-Sulaymānīyah	Armed attack on his home.
5	24/8/2023	Killing of a senior official and two PKK fighters.	Sīdakān area, Erbil Governorate	Turkish drone
6	9/9/2023	Killing of two PKK militants.	Māwat area, al-Sulaymānīyah Governorate	Turkish drone
7	6/11/2023	Killing of two PKK members.	Būskīnī village, Rānīyah District, al-Sulaymānīyah	Turkish drone
8	14/11/2023	Killing of a senior security official from the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBŞ).	Snūnī sub-district, Sinjār	Turkish drone
9	17/11/2023	Killing of 13 PKK members.	Hākūrk area, Northern Iraq	Turkish Air Force bombardment.
10	12/12/2023	Killing of five PKK elements.	Qandīl area, Northern Iraq	Turkish Air Force bombardment.
11	25/12/2023	Killing of Erdiṇç Bolcal (alias 'Alī Khabāt), leader in the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) affiliated with the PKK.	Northern Iraq	Intelligence operation.
12	27/12/2023	Assassination of PKK leader Zaynab Eyverī (alias Ārīn Ārī).	Penjwīn area, al-Sulaymānīyah Governorate	Intelligence operation.
13	28/12/2023	Killing of several water well drilling workers.	Sinjār District, Nīnawā Governorate	Turkish Army drone

Source: Compiled by the researcher.

in the Hākūrk Mountains and the heights of the Gārā Mountains in Duhok Governorate. Notably, Turkey periodically bombards various areas of al-Sulaymānīyah Governorate, accusing PKK elements of operating within the governorate under the cover and support of the Iraqi Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

In response to these developments, the Iraqi government formulated a plan to redeploy the Iraqi Armed Forces along the borders with Iran and Turkey, aiming to counter the justifications and pretexts employed by both countries to legitimize cross-border bombardment operations. It was reported that Minister of

Defense Thābit al-'Abbāsī traveled to Ankara and met with his Turkish counterpart, Yaşar Güler, to discuss Turkish violations of Iraqi airspace (al-'Arabī al-Jadīd, 2023, February 18).

On October 20, 2023, the PKK, which maintains a presence in several areas of northern Iraq, announced the complete withdrawal of its forces from the Makhmūr camp, a site housing displaced Kurds from Turkey. The camp had previously been subjected to multiple Turkish drone strikes targeting PKK elements and leaders. Following this withdrawal, the PKK relocated its militants to the Qandīl Mountains and other areas within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

2. Iran

Since early 2023, Iran has intensified its cross-border military operations along the northeastern frontier, targeting the headquarters of Iranian Kurdish opposition parties located in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The Iranian government alleges that these groups have incited the unrest that began in Iran on September 16, 2022, following the death of activist Mahsā Amīnī. In response, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) conducted missile and drone attacks against the headquarters of the Democratic Party and Komala in the Koya (Koysinjaq) district of Erbil and the Zergwez area of al-Sulaymānīyah Governorate.

These bombardment operations placed the government of Prime Minister al-Sūdānī in a difficult position, as it was supported by the Coordination Framework, a coalition closely aligned with Iran. Iran justified its military actions by asserting that it was targeting "Israeli" Mossad headquarters in Iraq at times, and separatist Iranian Kurdish movements at others. The situation was further complicated by the announcement from IRGC Ground Forces Commander General Muḥammad Pakpūr regarding the deployment of armored units and special forces for a military incursion into Iraqi territory (al-Ṭāṭ, 2022).

By late December 2022, Prime Minister al-Sūdānī's government formulated a roadmap to address the issue of Turkish and Iranian shelling along the Iraqi border areas in the Kurdistan Region (North Press Agency, 2022, December 27). This initiative culminated in March 2023 with an Iraqi-Iranian agreement to close the headquarters of Iranian Kurdish dissidents in the Kurdistan Region and to disarm several opposition parties stationed in northern Iraq, including the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI), and the Komala Party.

On August 28, 2023, the implementation of this security agreement commenced. The "First Region Border Command," operating under the Iraqi Border Guard Command, was assigned to secure the borders with Turkey and Iran, supported by logistical resources. However, it remains uncertain whether the First Region Border Command (comprising four border brigades, a customs police directorate, and a training school) possesses adequate capacity to fulfill this mission. The command is responsible for securing approximately 350 km along the Turkish border and 750 km along the Iranian border within the Kurdistan Region, totaling over 1,100 km, with a force of roughly 9,000 soldiers and

officers. Therefore, the Iraqi government initiated the formation of two additional brigades for this command and equipped them with the necessary weaponry and equipment to undertake a task that typically requires three to five military divisions, given the challenging mountainous terrain.

On September 16, 2023, Iraqi Border Guard forces engaged in combat with members of the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), who attempted to seize border points previously controlled by Iranian Kurdish opposition forces along the Iranian border; the Border Guard successfully reclaimed these positions. Later, on September 19, 2023, Iraqi authorities announced the evacuation of Iranian Kurdish opposition headquarters located within the border strip to a distance exceeding 20 km inside Iraq, in accordance with the security agreement between Baghdād and Tehran. Opposition elements stationed at these sites were disarmed, relocated, granted refugee status, and replaced by Iraqi Border Guard forces.

3. US Attacks on PMF Bases

Numerous attacks conducted by Iraqi factions under the designation "Islamic Resistance in Iraq" have targeted headquarters and bases hosting US forces in Iraq, resulting in various injuries among American soldiers, according to US military officials. Table 4-10 presents the frequency and distribution of strikes by these Iraqi Islamic Resistance factions on US military bases in Iraq and Syria from October 17 to December 17, 2023.

All statements from armed Iraqi factions expressed support for the "al-Aqṣá Flood" operation initiated by the Palestinian Hamas organization against the Zionist occupation on October 7, 2023. However, their positions ranged from cautious observation to active endorsement of involvement. Approximately 2,500 US troops are stationed in Iraq, with an additional 900 in Syria, as part of the campaign against ISIS.

Table 4-10: Number and Distribution of Iraqi Islamic Resistance Strikes on US Military Bases in Iraq and Syria (October 17 - December 17, 2023).

No.	Base/Camp	Number of Strikes	Location
1	'Ayn al-Asad Airbase	23	al-Anbār Governorate
2	Harīr Airbase	11	Erbil Governorate
3	Victoria Base / Baghdād Airport	1	Baghdād
4	Support Base / Erbil Airport	10	Erbil
5	US Embassy / Baghdād	1	Baghdād
6	al-Tanf Base	7	Syria
7	al-Rumaylān Airbase	6	Syria
8	Tall Abyaḍ	3	Syria
9	al-Shaddādī Camp	10	Syria
10	al-'Umar Field Camp	13	Syria
11	Green Village Camp	12	Syria

Source: Compiled by the researcher.

The most significant US bombardment operations targeting Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) headquarters and camps in Iraq are summarized as follows:

- November 21, 2023: A US AC-130 aircraft targeted a PMF vehicle in the Abū-Ghurayb area near Baghdād, resulting in one fatality and four injuries among members of the PMF 45th Brigade. This strike followed a short-range ballistic missile attack on US forces at the 'Ayn al-Asad base in al-Anbār, which had injured eight American soldiers after a series of drone and Katyusha rocket attacks in preceding weeks.
- November 22, 2023: US forces resumed strikes on PMF headquarters in the al-Sa'īdāt area of the Jurf-al-Naṣr sub-district, causing eight fatalities and several injuries among PMF fighters. The Iraqi government condemned the escalation as a dangerous development and an unacceptable violation of Iraqi sovereignty, emphasizing that enforcement of the law and accountability for violations are exclusively the responsibility of the Iraqi government, a right no foreign entity may exercise. In addition, the Iraqi government issued a statement calling on the coalition forces to avoid acting unilaterally and to respect Iraq's sovereignty, emphasizing that no violation of this sovereignty would be tolerated in any form (RT Arabic, 2023, November 22).
- December 3, 2023: A US airstrike targeted a PMF headquarters in the al-Dibs district of Kirkūk, resulting in five fatalities and five injuries. This attack occurred one day after a telephone conversation between the US Secretary of State and the Iraqi Prime Minister, during which the latter reaffirmed Baghdād's rejection of any aggression on Iraqi soil.
- December 26, 2023: US aircraft bombed three facilities used by Katā'ib Hezbollah and al-Nujabā' in the Bābil and Wāsiṭ governorates in retaliation for an attack claimed by the Islamic Resistance on the Erbil Airbase on December 25, 2023. These strikes were authorized by President Biden and were strongly condemned by the Iraqi government as a clear and unconstructive hostile act.

A comparison of the frequency and intensity of attacks by the "Islamic Resistance in Iraq" with the US military response indicates that the US administration seeks to avoid overreaction or escalation. This strategy aims to maintain relative stability in US-Iraq relations and prevent any dangerous deterioration of the situation.

4. The Quran Burning Crisis

Since January 2023, the Holy Quran has been burned twice in Sweden, the most recent incident occurring in June 2023 by Salwān Mūmīka, an Iraqi refugee residing in Sweden. Subsequently, on July 20, 2023, Mūmīka desecrated the Quran by trampling on it in front of the Iraqi Embassy in Stockholm under the protection of Swedish police, although he did not follow through on his threat to burn the text. These actions incited widespread outrage among the Iraqi people, resulting in protest demonstrations at al-Taḥrīr Square and in front of the Swedish

Embassy in Baghdād. The situation escalated to the storming and burning of the Swedish Embassy. In response, the Iraqi government condemned the “burning of the embassy,” characterizing it as a “security breach.” Concerning the desecration, the government denounced such “provocative gestures” as constituting “incitement to a culture of violence and hatred.” On July 20, 2023, the Iraqi government resolved to expel the Swedish Ambassador from Baghdād, while Sweden summoned the Iraqi Chargé d’Affaires in Stockholm to protest the embassy burning, which it deemed “completely unacceptable.” Notably, nine protesters and security personnel sustained injuries during the storming and burning of the embassy due to stone-throwing between the involved parties.

5. Analysis of the External Threats Environment

Based on the foregoing, clear indicators suggest that external threats (such as the increasing Turkish military presence and missile/aerial bombardment in northern Iraq, Iranian missile/aerial and artillery shelling in the northeast, and the Quran-burning incidents in Sweden and elsewhere) may either recede or diminish. However, evidence indicates that the repercussions and impact of these activities or operations on internal security and stability remain a significant concern. This is particularly evident in areas of the northern Kurdistan Region, including Sinjār and the Iraqi-Turkish-Syrian triangle, which experience daily quasi-warfare between the Turkish army and the PKK and its supporters. This situation fosters apprehension and undermines confidence in the feasibility of improving Iraq’s relations with its other neighbors and international partners.

It is noteworthy that the Iraqi-US relationship, one of the most critical axes of Iraqi foreign policy, remains ambiguous in the 2023 context due to US-Iranian tensions. This ambiguity is compounded by the Biden administration’s extension of the national emergency declared under Executive Order 13303 concerning Iraq’s stability. Amid the rise of Iraqi political forces closely aligned with the “Axis of Resistance” and the Zionist aggression on the Gaza Strip following the October 7, 2023 operation, attacks on US interests and bombardments of Iraqi bases, camps, and airports hosting US and International Coalition forces have resumed. These developments cast a shadow over the Iraqi security landscape, which remains ensnared in a vicious cycle of fragility and crises within a tense regional environment that threatens to expand the war in Gaza to other parts of the Middle East. Meanwhile, US targeting of Popular Mobilization Forces headquarters indicates that Washington’s primary strategic objective is to weaken Iran-backed armed factions while simultaneously bolstering and securing its interests in Iraq. Consequently, the strategic interests of all parties will be adversely affected if regional security and stability in the Middle East continue to deteriorate.

III. Future Agenda and Requirements for Sustaining Iraqi National Security

The year 2023 demonstrated a certain level of security stability, indicating effective management of this critical issue by the relevant governmental bodies. This

progress reflects the directives and oversight of the Prime Minister as articulated in his government program, which was ratified by the Iraqi Council of Representatives on October 27, 2022, and implicitly encompassed within its 23 pillars. Accordingly, the government's military and security policy throughout 2023 sought to restore trust between citizens and the state by enhancing public services and addressing administrative and financial corruption, while persistently targeting the remnants of defeated ISIS factions. These efforts are intrinsically linked to security management and serve to reinforce the Iraqi citizenry's confidence in the performance of various security agencies.

However, the relative security stability observed in 2023 remains highly vulnerable to future fluctuations. This vulnerability stems from the evolving security dynamics and geopolitical landscape of the Middle East following the Zionist aggression against the Gaza Strip commencing on October 7, 2023. This conflict has heightened security tensions concerning the presence of foreign military forces in Iraq, prompting increased demands from certain political factions within the ruling coalition to terminate foreign military presence, particularly that of the United States. Concurrently, there has been an escalation in missile and drone attacks targeting Iraqi military installations hosting US and International Coalition forces.

If sustainable national security necessitates the integration of economic, defensive, diplomatic, and developmental dimensions into a comprehensive framework, then there is an urgent imperative for continuous review and updating. This process ensures a contemporary understanding of the evolving threats and their interrelations within the broader context of comprehensive security. Based on an analysis of the internal and external security challenges faced in 2023, their classification and risk assessment for 2024 provide an objective foundation for prioritizing responses to these threats. This assessment follows the methodology outlined in Annexes No. 2 and No. 4 of the Iraqi National Security manual, as detailed below.

Security Risk Classification

Security Risk Rating (SRR) is a system employed to categorize the severity of security threats based on their potential impact on national security (Faster Capital, n.d.). The Pivotal Risk Rating System (PRRS) can be utilized to calculate the SRR for various security threats. The PRRS comprises a four-tier classification system: Low, Medium, High, and Very High.

Given that risk is a dynamic concept that fluctuates over time and according to the nature of the threat, serving as an indicator of the threat's magnitude to vital national interests (National Security Advisory, n.d., Annex 4, Article 9, p. 78), it is essential to classify security risks to establish processing priorities. Drawing on the aforementioned description of pivotal threats within the Iraqi security environment, both internal and external, the value and severity of security threats are calculated in accordance with the methodology presented in Annex 2 of the

Iraqi National Security Strategy (National Security Advisory, n.d., Annex 2, p. 32), as follows:

The security threat value (T) is determined by assigning hypothetical numerical values and applying the following formula: $T = I \times C \times V$

Where each variable is assigned a value ranging from 1 to 10:

- **Intent (I):** Denotes the presence of intent to execute the threat.
- **Capability (C):** Denotes the ability to execute or the likelihood of the threat materializing.
- **Vulnerability (V):** Denotes the susceptibility of relevant institutions to confront the threat.

The Risk Level is determined by multiplying the Impact Value (ranging from 1 to 5) by the Probability Value (ranging from 1 to 5). Based on the researcher’s analysis of data and reports, risk levels are categorized into three groups:

- Level 1 (Critical/High): Values of 25 (Critical) or 20 (High), requiring immediate or near-term intervention.
- Level 2 (High): Values ranging from 15 to 16, warranting medium-term attention.
- Level 3 (Medium): Values ranging from 9 to 12, to be addressed in the long term.

A. Internal Security Threat Risk Levels

Based on the data presented above, Table 4-11 delineates the risk levels associated with internal security threats encountered by Iraq in 2023.

Table 4-11 and Figure 4-6 demonstrate that the highest risk level is attributed to organized crime in all its forms (including drug gangs, petroleum product smuggling, human trafficking, weapons trafficking, etc.) and the threat posed by weapons outside state control. These threats represented the foremost priorities in terms of risk values for Iraqi national security in 2023. However, the threat from the ISIS terrorist organization declined to the second tier, while armed sects and criminal offenses were positioned at the third tier in terms of risk value.

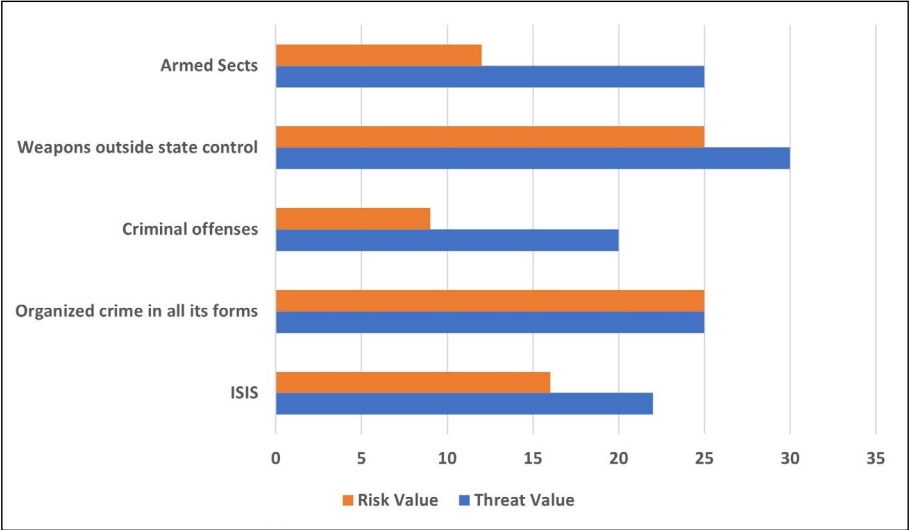
The strategic focus for 2024 should be on addressing internal security threats and challenges in accordance with their risk priorities. It is important to note

Table 4-11: Internal Security Threats and Their Risk Levels during 2023.

No.	Internal Threats	I	C	V	Threat Value	Risk Level		
						Impact	Probability	Risk Value
1	ISIS	10	5	7	22	4	4	16
2	Organized crime in all its forms	10	9	6	25	5	5	25
3	Criminal offenses	7	8	5	20	3	3	9
4	Weapons outside state control	10	10	10	30	5	5	25
5	Armed Sects	10	6	9	25	3	4	12

Source: Compiled by the researcher based on Annex 2 of the Iraqi National Security Strategy.

Figure 4-6: Internal Security Threats and Their Risk Levels during 2023.



that prioritizing based on risk levels does not imply neglecting other threat levels simultaneously. Rather, prioritization pertains to the allocation of human and financial resources, as well as the urgency and scale of responses to confront specific threats or challenges.

B. External Security Threat Risk Levels

Concerning external security threats, Table 4-12 indicates that the highest risk level in 2023 was associated with the threat of Turkish bombardment, alongside US aerial strikes targeting Popular Mobilization Forces headquarters. These escalated notably at the end of 2023, following the Zionist aggression on the Gaza Strip.

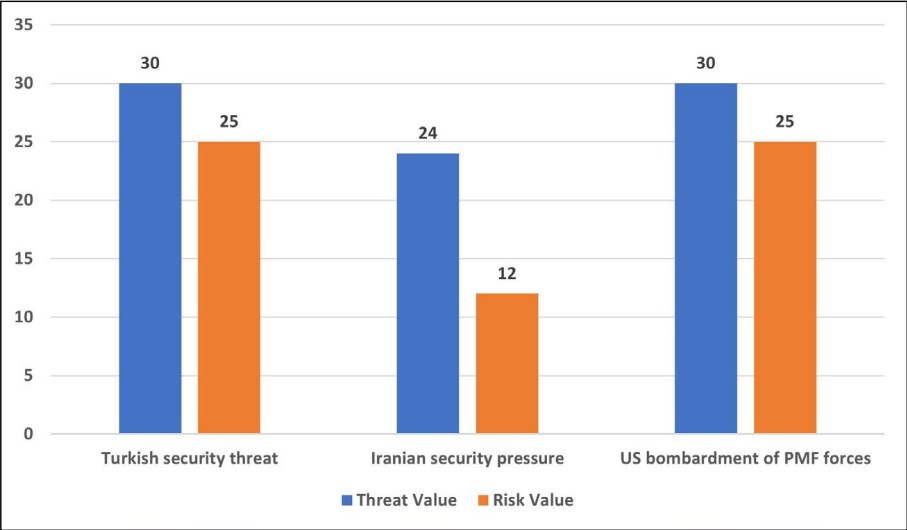
Figure 4-7 illustrates that the threat of Iranian bombardment of the camps belonging to Iranian Kurdish opposition parties in the Kurdistan Region occupied this level of priority regarding the risk to Iraqi national security in 2023. This followed a decrease in intensity as a result of the security agreement between the two countries regarding the deployment and securing of the Iraqi-Iranian border by Iraqi Border Guard forces.

Table 4-12: External Security Threats and Their Risk Levels during 2023.

No.	External Threats	I	C	V	Threat Value	Risk Level		
						Impact	Probability	Risk Value
1	Turkish security threat	10	10	10	30	5	5	25
2	Iranian security pressure	7	10	7	24	4	3	12
3	US bombardment of PMF forces	10	10	10	30	5	5	25

Source: Compiled by the researcher based on Annex 2 of the Iraqi National Security Strategy.

Figure 4-7: External Security Threats and Their Risk Levels during 2023.



IV. Sustainable Security Requirements for 2024

Despite the relative security and stability observed in the Iraqi security environment throughout 2023, certain security incidents and renewed attacks on US bases and interests in Iraq by armed groups indicate that the security situation remains fragile. Therefore, there is an urgent necessity for sustainable Iraqi security that integrates security, military, economic, political, social, and religious-ideological dimensions. The scale of challenges and threats confronting Iraq's security environment necessitates comprehensive, integrated plans aimed at achieving medium- and long-term security. This objective cannot be attained without addressing the critical risks identified in 2023 through the allocation of appropriate human and material resources according to their severity, as demonstrated in Table 4-13.

Based on the primary findings of the 2023 security landscape, it is evident that risks classified as "Very High," indicating the need for immediate and prioritized intervention, include organized crime in its various forms, weapons outside state control, the Turkish security threat, and US bombardment of Popular Mobilization Forces. The ISIS terrorist organization threat and Iranian security threat were categorized as "High," representing the second priority level. Armed sects were ranked as "Medium," while criminal offenses were classified as "Low," indicating the lowest priority for response and mitigation.

Dilemmas and Challenges in Risk Mitigation

Establishing priorities for addressing critical risks in 2024 will inevitably encounter dilemmas and challenges in implementing treatment programs and plans for each threat. These challenges became apparent during 2023, as follows:

Table 4-13: Critical Risks during 2023.

Low	Medium	High	Very High
Criminal Offenses	Armed Sects	ISIS Threat	Organized Crime
			Weapons Outside State Control
			Turkish Security Threat
		Iranian Security Threat	US Bombardment of PMF Forces

Source: Compiled by the researcher.

1. **Divergent Definitions and Perspectives:** Discrepancies exist between the government and various political forces or armed factions regarding the definition of security threats. Examples include differing views on the Sinjār issue and the withdrawal of foreign forces from Iraq.
2. **Varying Sensitivity Levels:** Differences in risk sensitivity are observed between security, military, and intelligence entities and political parties within the state's decision-making apparatus. For instance, a political entity may exhibit less sensitivity to risks causing economic damage, whereas military formations may be more sensitive to risks threatening national security.
3. **The Challenge of Frequent Review:** The necessity for continual updates to the classification of critical risks, should new security gaps emerge or changes occur in the internal or regional security environment, presents a challenge that requires consideration of diverse factors.

V. Recommendations

- Allocate human and material resources, develop strategic plans, and enhance intelligence efforts to combat organized crime mafias, including drug trafficking, petroleum product smuggling, and human trafficking.
- Monitor and implement the outcomes of the scientific conference organized by the National Committee for Weapon Regulation on September 21, 2023, and support weapon registration offices across all governorates.
- Initiate structured and serious dialogue with political forces possessing armed wings to disarm them or integrate them into the Popular Mobilization Forces or other security services within specified timeframes.
- Intensify negotiations between the federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government to resolve issues related to the deployment of PKK forces in northern Iraq and to remove obstacles hindering the deployment of the Iraqi Army along the Turkish border, thereby removing the justifications for the Turkish military presence in certain areas of the Kurdistan Region.

- Strengthen diplomatic efforts with Turkey and Iran to halt armed violations of Iraqi territorial integrity and to pressure both neighboring governments to reach effective solutions for border security concerns.
- Continue operations to track and eliminate ISIS remnants while enhancing intelligence efforts and special operations to dismantle remaining leadership and disrupt internal and external funding sources.
- Collaborate with religious authorities to develop awareness programs addressing intellectual deviations and violent extremism associated with certain sects to mitigate their social impact.
- Support the police, public prosecution, and judiciary in implementing practical measures to reduce crime, reform Iraqi prisons by providing alternatives to incarceration, and ensure victim protection and compensation.
- Reactivate strategic dialogue between Baghdād and Washington to establish a timeline for concluding the International Coalition's mission, considering the advice of Iraqi security entities (Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Interior, Intelligence, Counter-Terrorism Service, National Security, Popular Mobilization Forces) regarding the necessity of foreign troop presence in light of regional developments in 2024.

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5. Society

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In 2023, as in previous years, Iraq experienced a series of social events that significantly influenced the dynamics of its society. Some of these events continued to exert adverse effects at multiple levels. Manifestations of conflict, disputes, and various forms of violence persisted, disrupting community peace and undermining security and stability. While certain social phenomena and issues are not novel in their nature or expression, their trends, encroachment, and extent of spread have evolved. This is particularly evident in the cases of tribal conflicts, domestic violence, and begging. These challenges have transcended traditional social obstacles, evolving into social crises that demand prompt and practical interventions to mitigate their consequences and the serious threats they pose to societal security.

The distinguishing feature of social problems and phenomena in Iraqi society (especially traditional ones) is their complex structure, which is influenced by unfamiliar and sometimes contradictory factors. Addressing these issues requires considerable time and specialized expertise to develop effective solutions. Although numerous legal frameworks exist to regulate individual interests and relationships within Iraqi society (providing mechanisms for managing problems and identifying appropriate remedies) the necessary willpower to address social crises and counteract their sources and expansion factors has been insufficient.

I. Tribal Conflicts

Tribal conflicts remain a significant concern for citizens in affected areas and for security agencies employing various strategies to contain and limit their proliferation. The values of tribal fanaticism continue to influence behavior in many regions, particularly rural areas. Despite increased openness to external influences facilitated by diverse communication methods, traditional values, customs, and norms persist among many groups, including tribes. Tribal authority and logic continue to dominate members and local communities, including in the capital, Baghdād. This reality was underscored by events in several Iraqi cities in 2023, notably in parts of Dhī-Qār Governorate and elsewhere.

Historical data confirm that Iraqi society experiences numerous tribal conflicts annually, predominantly concentrated in southern regions. Some tribes maintain

extensive arsenals, enabling sustained armed confrontations with rival tribes. These conflicts often result in substantial human and material losses, perpetuating cycles of reciprocal revenge. Some tribal affiliates exploit these disputes to extort governmental bodies and companies operating in conflict zones.

Despite governmental efforts to resolve these conflicts amicably, such initiatives have frequently encountered resistance from tribe leaders unwilling to reconcile or close these disputes definitively. Tribal conflicts have increasingly encroached upon urban areas (Kāzim, 2023), transforming parts of cities into new conflict zones. This trend necessitates decisive and effective measures to contain and curb their expansion.

Tribes in Iraq have occasionally allied with or opposed the central government over issues related to land, water, influence distribution, and material interests. Tribal entities often eschew formal dispute resolution mechanisms, favoring traditional settlements (*al-faṣl al-'ashā'irī*) or armed force. The contemporary tribal stance is largely governed by the scale and nature of interests and resource competition. The prominent Iraqi sociologist Ali al-Wardī characterized the tribal personality as one prone to shifting loyalties, even towards former allies, without hesitation (Ḥammūd, 2012, p. 97); though this does not apply universally.

In early 2023, the Ministry of Interior implemented a series of legal and security measures aimed at mitigating tribal conflicts and their detrimental impact on societal security. These measures included a comprehensive campaign to centralize weapon control under state authority, which faced considerable challenges. The Ministry's Director of Relations and Media stated that the Ministry has managed to eliminate tribal conflicts and 'Daggas' (tribal warnings) to a large extent across various regions of the country, further noting that the Ministry of Interior played a primary and important role in resolving these disputes and maintaining civil peace by activating official procedures with the judiciary (al-Nājī, 2023).

The al-Baṣrah Governorate Police Directorate spearheaded efforts to establish specialized offices for registering and confiscating unlicensed weapons, extending these initiatives beyond al-Baṣrah to other governorates throughout the year. Major General Qāsim al-'Attābī, Commander of al-Baṣrah Police, reported in March 2023 the operation of 58 special units dedicated to registering light weapons at police stations, managed by designated committees. Nonetheless, skepticism persists among citizens regarding the enforcement of weapon restrictions, attributed to protection afforded to arms dealers, issuance of fraudulent possession licenses, and general mistrust in governmental institutions. Consequently, citizens are reluctant to relinquish weapons absent incentives and assurances (al-Nājī, 2023).

Regarding specific incidents, Dhī-Qār Governorate experienced multiple tribal disputes. On the first day of 2023, an armed conflict erupted in the al-Chibāyish District between members of the same tribe, involving light and medium weaponry, which police eventually quelled. Subsequently, a tribal conflict occurred in the Sayyid Dakhīl District, southeast of al-Nāṣirīyah (the governorate center);

Rapid Response Forces intervened, contained the situation, and confiscated light and medium weapons as well as hand grenades.

April 3, 2023, marked a significant escalation of violence in al-Iṣlāḥ District, located east of al-Nāṣiriyyah, where an armed conflict erupted between two tribes following months of escalating tensions and provocations (al-Jazīrah, 2023, April 15). The dispute originated from a Facebook post criticizing the performance of the District Director and persisted for over six months, resulting in numerous fatalities and injuries. Due to the inability of security and governmental authorities to quell the violence, the religious authority (Marjaʿiyyah) in al-Najaf al-Ashraf, under the leadership of Grand Ayatollah Sayyid ʿAlī al-Sīstānī, intervened to mediate the crisis. Both tribes subsequently issued a statement affirming their compliance with the mediation efforts.

Political activist Ḥusayn al-ʿĀmil notes that during the first nine months of 2023, local authorities in Dhī-Qār successfully resolved 120 tribal disputes, while 10 remained unresolved. This indicates that the governorate experiences at least 15 tribal conflicts monthly, alongside similar incidents in neighboring governorates such as al-Baṣrah and Maysān. al-ʿĀmil attributes the persistence of these conflicts to the complexity of judicial procedures in resolving underlying disputes, which compels victims to seek redress through tribal channels (al-Hurrah, 2023, April 10).

In mid-April 2023, fear permeated the residents of Dhī-Qār as tribal conflicts extended into urban centers, transforming homes and residential neighborhoods into battlegrounds where tribal gunmen exchanged fire, endangering lives and property. Several prominent figures from al-Iṣlāḥ District appealed to Prime Minister Muḥammad Shiyāʾ al-Sūdānī to intervene in the conflict between the al-ʿUmar and al-Rumayḍ tribes, which had resulted in numerous casualties. Their statement emphasized that the district, home to over 50,000 inhabitants, endured nightly terror, criticizing the delayed response of local government and security forces in addressing the violence. They warned of an “imminent catastrophe” unless the government acted decisively to enforce the law, arrest perpetrators impartially, and curb the proliferation of weapons in streets, villages, and homes (al-Madā, 2023, September 30).

The Commander of Sumer Operations announced the formation of intelligence committees tasked with tracking and apprehending individuals carrying weapons during the tribal conflicts in al-Naṣr and al-Iṣlāḥ districts. The plan also includes monitoring uncontrolled weapons and launching a comprehensive campaign against drug traffickers and users (Sky News Arabia, 2023, May 4).

Tribal conflicts in southern and central Iraqi cities have entered a new phase, with parties employing drones for surveillance of rival positions. This development undermines government-sponsored reconciliation efforts and security advancements. There is a widespread perception among public and official circles that security forces hesitate to conduct raids or arrests due to concerns about provoking “tribal enmity.” Furthermore, the judiciary is perceived as slow to act

in tribal cases involving civilian fatalities. Member of Parliament Hādī al-Salāmī remarked that many political forces do not speak about tribal weapons, asserting that all Iraqi governments after 2003 have failed to contain the crisis of tribal weaponry and its threat to civil peace (al-'Arabī al-Jadīd, 2023, April 21).

Baghdād and Maysān also witnessed three major tribal incidents in 2023. In the al-Baladiyāt area of eastern Baghdād, an armed group set fire to a residence following a prior dispute. Another tribal altercation in the al-Fuḍaylīyah area involved bladed weapons, resulting in three injuries. In Maysān, unidentified assailants killed a tribal sheikh in the al-Mājidīyah area, located in the governorate's center (Mawāzīn News, 2023, August 15).

Despite these challenges, the Iraqi Ministry of Interior announced on March 7, 2023, the resolution of approximately 450 tribal disputes over several months. The Director General of Tribal Affairs reported that a comprehensive study identified "uncontrolled weapons" as the primary cause of these conflicts. Additional causes include disputes over agricultural lands converted into oil investment sites and the lucrative drug trade, which generates substantial profits and incites internal tribal strife (al-Sā'ah, 2023, June 20).

In Dhī-Qār, the head of the Tribal Affairs Department confirmed that many armed disputes arise from disagreements over water, land division, crop trespassing, or family vendettas. He revealed that his department had successfully settled several major disputes by September 2023 (al-Madā, 2023, September 30).

Regarding awareness and civil peace, a conference was convened on February 13, 2023, in al-Baṣrah under the patronage of the leader of the al-'Ubayd tribe in Iraq and the Arab world. Attended by tribal notables and sheikhs, the conference advocated for peaceful coexistence and emphasized the role of tribes in restricting weapons to the state, condemning the practice of "Daggah" (tribal warning) and the use of unlicensed arms (al-Nājī, 2023).

Additionally, the Ministry of Interior, with the presence of Minister 'Abd-al-Amīr al-Shammari, organized an intensive workshop at the Federal Police Command involving several tribe leaders and notables. The session was dedicated to discussing the necessary measures to combat phenomena and behaviors considered alien to Iraqi society, particularly the proliferation of unlicensed arms. During the workshop, the Minister emphasized that tribes had previously contributed to the fight against ISIS terrorist gangs and asserted the necessity for all individuals to surrender unlicensed weapons to the state, as such arms now pose a threat to societal peace. He urged the assembled tribe leaders to sign a "pact of honor" renouncing violence and behaviors that misrepresent the Iraqi people, while also encouraging them to abandon the use of weaponry language, especially during tribal disputes.

The Directorate of Tribal Affairs convened a tribal conference for tribe leaders from the governorates of Ṣalāḥ-al-Dīn and Kirkūk, attended by the Director of Tribal Affairs, Major General Nāṣir al-Nūrī. Held in the Bayjī District, the conference emphasized the importance of national unity and the imperative to maintain

civil and societal peace. This objective was to be achieved by rejecting disagreements and conflicts among members of the honorable tribes and prioritizing the language of reason and logic.

The Directorate of Tribal Affairs within the Ministry of Interior has reported a decline in the incidence of “tribal warnings” (Daggah) and the discharge of live ammunition during social events. The Directorate has emphasized a concerted effort to ratify the Community Peace Law. According to the Director General of Tribal Affairs, comprehensive studies have been conducted to identify the underlying causes of tribal conflicts in the southern governorates. These causes include the widespread availability of uncontrolled weapons among tribal members, the lucrative drug trade, and disputes arising from encroachments on investment companies, often driven by corporate interests. The Director General further noted that weaponry is frequently regarded as an integral aspect of the identity of tribes leaders and members. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Interior, in collaboration with Iraq’s tribe leaders, has drafted the Community Peace Law, which aims to reform tribal customs and redirect their course. The law includes provisions that prohibit assaults on state employees, particularly medical professionals, and ban the firing of live ammunition during social gatherings (INA, 2023, August 31).

Tribal conflicts in Iraq represent persistent challenges that require substantial attention due to their multifaceted risks and consequences at various levels. The introduction of new economic and political factors related to these conflicts has contributed to their increased complexity. Therefore, addressing the significant challenges posed by tribal disputes necessitates adherence to the rule of law and the prioritization of rational discourse. These approaches constitute the most effective solutions for managing diverse forms of social conflict in Iraq; failure to do so may perpetuate the problem, thereby threatening societal security and stability and undermining civil peace throughout the country.

II. Domestic Violence

Violence is a pervasive phenomenon present in virtually all human societies; however, its nature, forms, and characteristics are influenced by various subjective and social factors. Consequently, the manifestations, trajectories, and prevalence of violence differ across societies and historical periods. Despite its diverse expressions, violence remains an illegitimate behavior. A study by the prominent psychologist Albert Bandura demonstrated that parents often model violent behavior to their children during aggressive encounters. The findings revealed that many parents encourage their children to exhibit conflictual and violent behaviors toward peers and to resist victimization (al-Umar, 2010, p. 110). This observation corresponds with the patterns of domestic violence observed within Iraqi society.

The incidence of domestic violence in Iraq appears to be escalating continuously, at times alarmingly. According to the Ministry of Interior’s Agency for Police Affairs, 573 cases of violence were recorded during the first week of 2023

(al-Sūmarīyah, 2023, January 8). Furthermore, data from the Relations Department of the Supreme Judicial Council indicated that, in the first half of 2023, domestic violence lawsuits totaled 10,143. These included 500 cases involving violence against children, 7,947 cases concerning violence against women, and 1,696 cases related to elder abuse (al-Sā'ah, 2023, September 20).

These figures suggest a notably high volume of domestic violence lawsuits within the initial six months of 2023. This trend reflects several broader realities regarding the domestic violence system and its governing circumstances. Primarily, there appears to be an increased social awareness of domestic violence and the importance of reporting such incidents to security or relevant authorities for legal intervention. Additionally, the escalation of cases reaching the judiciary implies that domestic conflicts have intensified beyond resolution within familial or kinship networks, necessitating formal legal recourse. This persistence of perpetration within families underscores a troubling shift in social relations in contemporary Iraqi households. Traditionally, Iraqi social values emphasize respect and care for the elderly both within and outside the home; however, domestic violence data reveal a contrary trend. Specifically, over 16.7% of domestic violence lawsuits during the six-month period targeted elderly individuals, indicating a significant departure from established familial norms.

It is important to acknowledge that these statistics do not encompass all instances of domestic violence, as some cases are resolved through reconciliation facilitated by security agencies or community policing, while others remain confined within family boundaries without external intervention. Nonetheless, the evolving patterns and trajectories of domestic violence present substantial challenges that warrant qualitative research to identify the underlying causes and sources of these social changes.

Major General 'Adnān Ḥamūd Salmān, Director of the Family and Child Protection from the Domestic Violence Directorate, reported to the Iraqi News Agency that husband-on-wife assaults constitute 57% of domestic violence cases in Iraq. Wife-on-husband assaults account for 17%, parental assaults on children represent 6%, and elder abuse, including assaults on grandparents, comprises 2%. The remaining 18% includes various forms of violence, such as sibling assaults and verbal abuse. Additionally, Salmān noted that the al-Karkh and al-Ruṣāfah districts of Baghdād each record a daily average exceeding 90 domestic violence lawsuits (INA, 2023, September 15).

These data highlight that domestic violence lawsuits in Baghdād predominantly involve assaults against wives. Notably, the 17% incidence of wife-on-husband assault, although comparatively lower, is regarded as socially unacceptable and reprehensible within Iraqi society. This perspective stems from prevailing social values that confer explicit privileges to husbands over wives, particularly concerning familial roles and relationships. Therefore, the presence of such cases signals a negative transformation in the nature and dynamics of domestic social relations.

Table 5-1: Selected Activities of the Community Police Related to Domestic Violence (January-November, 2023).

Activity	Number
Child Rescues	21
Elderly Rescues	60
Cases of Child Abuse Treated	344
Cases of Female Abuse Treated	1,833
Cases of Male Abuse Treated	590
Returned Runaway Girls	174
Returned Runaway Children	56

Table 5-2: Selected Community Police Activities Related to Domestic Violence Awareness.

Activity	Number
Foot Patrols	1,238
Printed Materials	31,145
Lectures	157
Workshops & Seminars	155
Forums	16

Activities of the Community Police in Baghdad and other Iraqi governorates from January to November 2023 revealed various manifestations of domestic violence. Table 5-1 demonstrate that the Community Police's activities are comprehensive and multifaceted, extending beyond a purely security-oriented framework to incorporate both preventive and remedial approaches. This is particularly evident in addressing the various forms of violence and abuse experienced by vulnerable family members, including children, women, and the elderly. Notably, the relatively high number of cases involving male abuse is significant given the prevailing social values, customs, and traditions that govern interpersonal relations within Iraqi society. Consequently, community awareness initiatives have been integrated into the Community Police's operations, encompassing educational efforts on domestic violence. As illustrated in Table 5-2, these activities ranged from the widespread distribution of printed materials to a substantial number of lectures, workshops, and seminars aimed at highlighting the dangers of domestic violence and its detrimental effects on Iraqi families and society.

The governorate of Karbalā' also experienced an increase in various types of domestic violence cases when comparing statistics from the first quarter of 2022 to the second quarter of 2023. The Human Rights Office in the governorate attributed this rise to economic instability, the misuse of social media, and the proliferation of narcotics among community members during 2023. Approximately 372 domestic violence cases were documented by government agencies in Karbalā' Governorate (Shafaq News, 2023, April 25). In Dhī-Qār, the High Commission for Human Rights reported a variation in domestic violence cases against women and children between 2022 and 2023, with the latter year recording approximately 1,500 cases. This increase is interpreted as a positive indicator of improved reporting (Rudaw, 2023, October 23). Overall, despite a rise in cases

within the capital, Baghdād, the total number of recorded domestic violence cases across Iraq declined during 2023 (Shafaq News, 2023, November 3).

The murder of the Iraqi blogger Taybah al-'Alī by her father on January 31, 2023, reignited debates surrounding the Domestic Violence Law in Iraq, coinciding with renewed efforts to pass the legislation in the Iraqi Parliament. Domestic violence crimes in Iraq are characterized by a distinct nature, often centered on issues of honor. In such cases, individuals are frequently compelled to conform to the expectations and demands of their social group, which confers a sense of power related to honor, even when this involves the killing of a family member.

It is widely acknowledged that the family and the domestic relations system constitute the fundamental axis of human life and existence. Nevertheless, familial relationships can sometimes be marked by tensions and conflicts that lead to despair, frustration, resentment, anxiety, and guilt. Despite the prevalence of healthy family relationships in human societies generally (and specifically within Iraqi society) domestic violence remains, as noted by Anthony Giddens, a significant element in family life across all societies, albeit to varying extents. The perpetuation of domestic violence in Iraq is likely to persist within a framework of traditional values and concepts unless perpetrators are subject to deterrent measures that extend beyond conventional punitive approaches to include broader social deterrence mechanisms.

III. Suicide

Since 2003, Iraqi society has experienced profound disruptions that have significantly transformed aspects of its social structure. Consequently, various crises and social phenomena have emerged, posing substantial challenges to social stability. Among these phenomena, suicide has notably undermined confidence in the value systems that historically governed the relationship between Iraqi individuals and their diverse cultural backgrounds. Previously ranked among countries with the lowest suicide rates globally, Iraq has witnessed a marked annual increase in suicide incidences. This rise has extended even to regions traditionally considered conservative and insulated from many adverse contemporary social changes, including suicide and divorce.

According to security agencies in al-Najaf al-Ashraf Governorate, nine suicide incidents were documented in the first quarter of 2023: one in January, six in February, and two in March, with five cases occurring within a 48-hour span. In Baghdād, a pharmacy student died by suicide through a self-inflicted gunshot in the 'Alāwī al-Ḥillah area under unclear circumstances. Additionally, a young man and his wife attempted suicide in the village of al-Dhahab al-Abyaḍ in the Abū-Ghurayb district west of Baghdād.

Data from the Iraqi Ministry of Interior revealed numerous suicide attempts across various Iraqi regions. On January 25, 2023, the Community Police intervened to save a girl in Baghdād who attempted suicide by wrist-cutting due to domestic abuse. On February 1, Federal Police units rescued a 22-year-old man

Table 5-3: Community Police Activities Related to Suicide Incidents.

Activity	Number
Printed Materials	10,519
Lectures in Schools	57
Lectures in Universities	1
Lectures in Gov/Non-Gov Institutions	7
Workshops & Seminars	9
Tribal Sessions	2
Suicide Preventions	20

attempting to jump from the al-A'immah Bridge in Baghdād. On May 10, Federal Police saved a 21-year-old woman who also attempted suicide from the same bridge. On June 1, Federal Police, supported by intelligence efforts, prevented an individual from jumping off the al-Sinak Bridge in Baghdād. On June 4, the Community Police in Nīnawá Governorate saved a young man from self-immolation during a field tour in one of the city's alleys. On June 7, the Community Police rescued a girl attempting to jump into the Tigris River in Ṣalāḥ-al-Dīn Governorate. Three days later, the River Police saved a woman who had jumped from the 14 Ramaḍān Bridge into the river.

On July 6, 2023, the Federal Police thwarted a suicide attempt by a 23-year-old man from the al-A'immah Bridge. Five days later, a Federal Police patrol rescued another individual attempting to jump from the same bridge in the city of al-Kāzimīyah. On August 11, the Bābil Police Command announced the rescue of a woman from Baghdād who jumped into the Euphrates River from the al-Musayyab Bridge in the northern part of the governorate. On October 1, the River Police saved a girl who attempted suicide by jumping from the al-Quray'āt Bridge. On December 1, 2023, the Bābil Police Command reported the arrest of a theft suspect who attempted suicide while surrounded by a joint security force in the al-Musayyab district.

In the first quarter of 2023, Wāsiṭ Governorate recorded a suicide incident involving an 18-year-old man who hanged himself inside his home in the al-Nu'māniyah district. In Diyālā Governorate, a 13-year-old boy died by hanging on the roof of his house. In Dhī-Qār Governorate, an 18-year-old man hanged himself inside his home in the al-Shaṭrah district after his family refused his request to marry a particular girl. In the same governorate, a 23-year-old man attempted suicide by self-immolation using gasoline in front of his home in the Ur sub-district; his family extinguished the fire and transported him to the hospital despite severe burns, attributing the act to psychological distress. Additionally, a man in his fifties died by suicide through a self-inflicted gunshot with a Kalashnikov in the al-Karghūliyah area of the al-Madā'in district. Furthermore, an employee of the Najaf Sewerage Directorate died by suicide via a self-inflicted rifle shot inside his home near the North Bridge, reportedly due to overwhelming debt.

In Karbalā' Governorate, a drug trafficker committed suicide by shooting himself after being surrounded by security forces. Similarly, a 25-year-old man

died by firearm suicide in the Qal'at Safīf area on the outskirts of the Mandalī sub-district (95 km east of Ba'qūbah). Additionally, a commissioner assigned to the Electricity Police Directorate took his own life by shooting himself while on duty at his workplace in the Mu'askar al-Rashīd area in central Baghdād. In the Kifrī district, a 27-year-old woman died by pistol suicide inside her home under circumstances that remain unclear. In Dhī-Qār, a 70-year-old woman with a mental illness committed suicide by self-immolation using kerosene inside an orchard belonging to her family in the al-Gharrāf district, north of al-Nāshīryah.

An individual serving in the Directorate of Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism died by firearm suicide inside his home in the al-Āmil neighborhood of Baghdād. Likewise, an employee died by injecting himself with insecticide at his sister's residence in the Arīdū neighborhood in central al-Nāshīryah; familial disputes with his wife were cited as the motive. Furthermore, an Iranian citizen in his thirties committed suicide by self-immolation using gasoline under the Thawrat al-'Ishrīn overpass in central Najaf. Sources indicated that the act was prompted by a religious authority's office in Najaf refusing to meet him; he was subsequently transported to the hospital in critical condition. In al-Ṣadr City, east of Baghdād, a woman in her thirties died by hanging.

A 40-year-old man suffering from a psychological condition died by firearm suicide inside his home in the al-Rī'āsah area of eastern Baghdād. A 30-year-old employee of the al-'Atabah al-Ḥusaynīyah also committed suicide by shooting himself due to family problems in the al-Hindīyah district of Karbalā'. On December 8, 2023, an 18-year-old high school student died by hanging using a rope attached to a tree in a garden near his home in the al-Fāw district, in the far south of al-Baṣrah. On the 20th of the same month, a high-ranking police officer died by suicide under mysterious circumstances in the city of al-Dīwānīyah. Reports indicated that the director of the al-Jazīrah police station, a colonel, shot himself inside his residence.

Regarding statistical data, 'Alī al-Bayyātī, a member of the High Commission for Human Rights in Iraq, noted that the country records approximately 600 to 700 suicide cases annually. A human rights organization announced on August 25, 2023, that 37 suicide attempts were recorded in Diyālā Governorate since the start of the year, 46% of which resulted in death. Ṭālib al-Khazrajī, head of the Diyālā Human Rights Organization, specified that 17 cases ended in death (12 females and 5 males), while 20 attempts were thwarted at the last moment (16 females and 4 males). He noted that women lead the suicide statistics in Diyālā for 2023. He identified four primary drivers for these incidents: economic status, family problems, and the influence of social media and news outlets (Baghdād Today, 2023, August 25).

Iraq ranked 150th out of 187 countries globally for suicide rates in 2023 and 13th in the Arab world. According to the World Health Organization, one in four Iraqis suffers from psychological fragility in a country with only three psychiatrists per million people, compared to 209 in France. This disparity necessitates urgent measures to address the causes and consequences of suicide.

Regarding the discussion of these risks, Lieutenant General 'Ādil 'Abbās al-Khālīdī, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Interior for Police Affairs, chaired a consultative meeting on June 25, 2023. The meeting focused on analyzing the crime of suicide and its underlying causes to develop interventions that prevent individuals from reaching a state of despair. He stated that the Ministry is collaborating with specialized entities to create a comprehensive plan to support those with suicidal ideation.

To establish a scientific and practical framework for combating this phenomenon, the Council of Ministers approved the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention in Iraq (2023–2030) during its 39th session on September 26, 2023. Although the specific features and implementation timeline of this strategy remain unclear, the government's recognition of the danger and its efforts to limit the spread of suicide represent a significant step in addressing its negative social impacts.

IV. Begging

The issue of begging in Iraq has expanded and intensified, influenced by the country's prevailing economic and social conditions. A significant aspect of this phenomenon is the involvement of foreigners from various nationalities, particularly those smuggled across borders or those who remain in the country after their visit visas have expired.

On February 9, 2023, mobile units from the Residence Affairs Directorate initiated a campaign targeting begging by foreigners violating Residency Law No. 76 of 2017 at intersections and public streets in Baghdād. This operation resulted in the arrest of 13 individuals engaged in begging, who were subsequently subjected to legal proceedings and deportation. On March 2, detachments from the Federal Intelligence and Investigations Agency under the Ministry of Interior conducted a security operation against beggars in multiple areas of Baghdād Governorate, arresting 93 individuals of various Arab and foreign nationalities, all of whom were referred to the Residence Affairs Directorate. On March 4, Community Police units in al-Dīwānīyah Governorate rescued two children subjected to abuse by their father, who compelled them to beg. On March 22, the Ministry of Interior launched a comprehensive campaign to apprehend begging gangs in Baghdād and other governorates, resulting in numerous arrests and the initiation of legal actions.

In al-Baṣrah Governorate, as part of a broad campaign to eradicate begging, criminal investigation units arrested a substantial number of individuals on March 2, 2023, in the governorate center. This group comprised 50 children, 30 women, and 15 men operating as family units; notably, all were from outside the governorate and were residing in hotels in the al-'Ashshār area. They were referred to the judiciary, which ordered their detention under Article 5 of the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Law. On May 23, the al-Bayyā' police apprehended several foreign beggars of diverse nationalities in Baghdād, including 20 females and 3 males, and confiscated expired passports. On May 30, Kirkūk Emergency Police

units arrested 40 beggars and transferred them to specialized centers. On June 4, based on precise intelligence, agency units arrested an individual managing a begging mafia in Baghdād.

Regarding awareness and procedural measures to combat begging, the High Commission for Human Rights office in al-Başrah reviewed four laws criminalizing begging and urged the Ministry of Interior to take urgent action. The Commission's statement highlighted that begging has become widespread in public spaces, intersections, and social media platforms. It emphasized that professional begging constitutes a social malady and a criminal offense under Penal Code No. 111 of 1969 and the Juvenile Welfare Law No. 76 of 1983. The statement also underscored the enforcement of the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Law No. 28 of 2012 and the Residency Law for Foreigners No. 76 of 2017. Iraqi law, specifically Articles 390, 391, and 392, prescribes penalties including imprisonment and fines for begging.

Given the severity of this issue, the Iraqi government has adopted a national policy aimed at addressing begging. This policy seeks to dismantle the connections between begging and other issues, particularly those that threaten national security, and to curb its proliferation by addressing its various sources and causes. The increase in begging has prompted security authorities to implement a series of preventive and corrective measures, especially in response to the rise of fraud and scams on social media through "electronic begging."

V. Displacement and Migration

1. Displacement

Despite nearly a decade having elapsed since the start of the largest displacement operation in contemporary Iraqi history, the issue remains unresolved. Political and material challenges continue to impede the efforts of the central government and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to reach a consensus acceptable to all stakeholders. Nonetheless, significant measures are being undertaken to achieve a final resolution to a matter that has consumed considerable financial and human resources. Displacement is frequently influenced by a complex interplay of social and personal factors; consequently, governmental and non-governmental initiatives aimed at facilitating the return of displaced persons often encounter resistance due to individuals' reluctance to return. Given this context, the situation remains ambiguous and subject to multiple potential outcomes.

Data from the Ministry of Migration and Displaced categorizes displaced families into three groups: those returning to their areas of origin, those settled in displacement areas (having integrated and expressing no desire to return), and those remaining displaced. According to Ministry data, the number of families still displaced totals 494,893 out of 892,311 displaced families originating from seven Iraqi governorates. The distribution is detailed in Table 5-4.

Table 5-4: Displaced Families by Origin and Those Continuing in Displacement (as of December 31, 2023).

No.	Governorate	Total Displaced Families	Families Continuing in Displacement
1	Nīnawá	308,031	162,171
2	al-Anbār	284,949	112,586
3	Şalāḥ-al-Dīn	148,778	62,728
4	Diyālá	69,606	23,904
5	Kirkūk	42,548	15,993
6	Baghdād	29,732	9,853
7	Bābil	8,667	7,658
Total		892,311	394,893

Table 5-5: Percentage of Families Continuing in Displacement Relative to the Total Displaced from Origin.

No.	Governorate	Percentage of Families Still Displaced
1	Nīnawá	52.6%
2	al-Anbār	39.5%
3	Şalāḥ-al-Dīn	42.16%
4	Diyālá	34.34%
5	Kirkūk	37.58%
6	Baghdād	33.13%
7	Bābil	88.35%
Overall Percentage		44.255%

The data presented in Table 5-5 indicates that the proportion of families remaining displaced remains relatively high despite substantial governmental and international efforts to resolve the issue. The overall percentage stands at 44.255%, with notably elevated rates in Bābil and Nīnawá. Some displaced individuals reside within host communities, while others remain in camps administered by the Ministry of Migration and Displaced. More specifically, the number of families who have returned from displacement areas to their areas of origin totals 524,155. Additionally, 4,264 families have officially settled in displacement areas and no longer intend to return. Thus, a total of 546,419 families have fully resolved their displacement status, either through return or integration into new communities. Consequently, approximately 61.2% of the original displaced families have been removed from the “displaced” classification.

The data presented in Table 5-6 indicate that no families from the governorates of Nīnawá, Kirkūk, al-Anbār, and Şalāḥ-al-Dīn have officially settled in displacement areas. Conversely, all displaced families from Karbalā, Wāsiṭ, al-Muthanná, Dhī-Qār, Maysān, and al-Başrah have settled in their respective host locations. Displaced families from Diyālá, Baghdād, Bābil, and al-Dīwānīyah are divided between those who have returned to their homes and those who have chosen to settle in displacement areas.

Table 5-6: Total Returnees and Families Settled in Displacement Areas by Governorate.

No.	Governorate	Returnees	Settled	Total
1	Nīnawá	167,524	-	167,524
2	Kirkūk	25,848	-	25,848
3	Diyālā	42,452	982	43,380
4	al-Anbār	201,940	-	201,940
5	Baghdād	17,133	468	17,601
6	Bābil	190	50	240
7	Karbalā'	-	1,654	1,654
8	Wāsiṭ	-	167	167
9	Ṣalāḥ-al-Dīn	87,062	-	87,062
10	al-Dīwāniyah	6	164	170
11	al-Muthanná	-	56	56
12	Dhī-Qār	-	176	176
13	Maysān	-	112	112
14	al-Baṣrah	-	489	489
Total		-	542,155	546,419

Internal displacement in Iraq began with the incursion of the ISIS terrorist organization into several governorates in 2014 (particularly Nīnawá, al-Anbār, and Ṣalāḥ-al-Dīn) and persisted through 2018. However, the phenomenon of displacement in Iraq is anticipated to continue due to a different factor: water scarcity. Numerous families migrated from the marshes in 2023 as a result of water shortages. Prime Minister Muḥammad Shiyā' al-Sūdānī emphasized this issue during the International Climate Conference held in al-Baṣrah from March 12 to 13, 2023, noting that over seven million citizens have been affected and thousands displaced by drought. Similarly, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Iraq, Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, confirmed the displacement of 68,000 individuals in central and southern Iraq due to drought. On World Food Day, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Food Programme reaffirmed their support for Iraq in addressing climate change, water scarcity, and food insecurity, highlighting Iraq's ranking as the fifth most vulnerable country to climate change impacts. This situation signals the potential for new waves of displacement from these regions.

2. Migration

Regarding migration, the Ministry of Migration and Displaced launched a major campaign on January 18, 2023, aimed at curbing illegal migration and educating the public about its negative social consequences. Minister Īvān Fā'iq informed the Dutch Ambassador to Iraq, Hans Sandee, that a High National Committee had been established to monitor the conditions of Iraqis abroad and facilitate their return and reintegration. She also stated that the Iraqi government rejects forced return measures against Iraqis whose asylum applications have been denied.

In this context, the Council of Ministers approved a national plan to curb illegal migration by addressing the socio-economic problems that drive it, including job creation for youth. Karīm al-Nūrī, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Migration, noted that the comprehensive national plan includes restrictions on travel to Belarus, which serves as a primary transit point for illegal migration. He emphasized ongoing communication with the European Union to establish regulations and plans to reduce these migration flows (Non14, 2023, October 15).

Furthermore, several European Union countries have tightened border restrictions and increased the deportation of asylum seekers. Reports suggest that the German government reached a confidential agreement with Iraq in this regard. According to the German Ministry of the Interior, 26,000 Iraqis in Germany were required to leave by the end of October 2023. European reports indicated that the number of deportations to Iraq recently doubled, rising from 77 cases in 2022 to 164 by late October 2023. Iraq has also increased the rate at which it identifies rejected asylum seekers compared to previous years (Shafaq News, 2023, December 24).

Overall, migration remains a humanitarian issue with causes that vary by country and period. While solutions are possible for those displaced by war or terrorism, the most significant emerging threat to Iraqi society is displacement caused by water scarcity, a multifaceted phenomenon whose negative consequences the Iraqi government must acknowledge and address.

VI. Civil Society Developments

The activity of civil society in many contemporary nations is frequently linked to the nature of the prevailing political system and the margin of freedom available for operations across various life sectors. Based on this premise, the performance of civil society in Iraq during 2023 was not ideal, despite exceptional efforts aimed at altering the stereotypical image held by many members of Iraqi society regarding civil society organizations.

Debate persists regarding the role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Iraq. According to the spokesperson for the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers, Ḥaydar Majīd, the number of officially registered organizations has reached approximately 5,000. Additionally, there are more than 100 branches of foreign organizations currently operating within the country (al-Jazīrah, 2023, January 15).

To meet the requirements for development and to elevate the status of civil society in Iraq, the Department of NGOs in the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers announced in January 2023 that December 27 of each year would be designated as Civil Society Organizations Day. This day is to be celebrated annually at the national level to highlight the importance and social effectiveness of these organizations.

Despite the significant challenges facing civil society in Iraq, the activities of the Department of NGOs were notable during 2023. These activities included

participation in vital government meetings related to the work of NGOs, such as the National High Commission for Narcotics and Psychotropic Substances Affairs, the Directorate of Mine Action, and the High Committee for the Relief and Support of Displaced Persons. Furthermore, the department engaged in international and regional representation, attending the 33rd session of the Civil Society Institutions Committee of the League of Arab States via video conference in early February 2023, and the 34th session in late August. Other engagements included meeting with the head of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) mission in Iraq in late January 2023.

The department also participated in conferences, seminars, and workshops across various regions of Iraq. These included the first International Youth Conference held by the al-Rafidain Center for Dialogue (RCD) on February 28, 2023, in the city of al-Najaf al-Ashraf. Additionally, a workshop was conducted in cooperation with al-Anbār Governorate on January 16, 2023, titled "Combating Money Laundering and Terrorism Financing and the Sustainability and Protection of NGOs." The department also took part in a seminar held by the Council of Representatives in late February titled "Combating Drugs is a Collective Decision."

On the procedural level, the Department of NGOs, in cooperation with the IOM, launched the second round of a community program dedicated to preventing violent extremism in mid-May 2023. This initiative provides small grants to organizations implementing local projects in Ḥalabjah, al-Ḥawījāh, southern and western al-Mawṣil, Tal 'Afar, al-Fallūjah, and al-Zubayr as part of the "Waṣl" Civil Society Fund. Furthermore, in accordance with the NGO Law No. 12 of 2010, the department launched a program in late May 2023 to evaluate organizations operating in Iraq according to international standards. This was done in cooperation with the PAO organization and under the supervision of international experts. The program aims to prepare 20 national evaluators and develop their capacities to conduct assessments across all Iraqi governorates, thereby contributing to sustainable development goals and assisting organizations in securing appropriate funding sources for their community activities.

Between commendations for the role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and skepticism regarding the objectives of others, the Parliamentary Civil Society Organizations Committee confirmed on Saturday, October 11, 2023, that civil society organizations have contributed to disseminating a culture of anti-corruption and exposing corrupt practices in Iraq. However, the committee also noted the existence of certain organizations engaged in suspicious activities and promoting values incongruent with Iraqi social norms. According to committee member Jāsim 'Aṭwān, some civil society organizations have played a crucial role in fostering anti-corruption principles and bringing corruption cases to public attention, leading specialized authorities to investigate these cases and undertake necessary legal measures. Conversely, he highlighted that other organizations lack substantive activity or engage in questionable endeavors, necessitating stringent oversight of their operations.

In a sudden development within the same context, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research issued a directive to all universities on November 22, 2023, prohibiting engagement with several NGOs involved in various activities, some of which possess an international dimension. These organizations include the Independent Media Center in Kurdistan Region, the Women's Empowerment Organization, Emma Organization, Iraq Queen Organization, al-Amal Association, Masārāt Foundation for Cultural and Media Development, the Italian UUP organization, and the UNFPA.

The Ministry of Higher Education's decision coincided with recommendations issued to universities forbidding cooperation with any organization until its security status is verified by the National Security Service, based on advice from the National Security Advisory. This was preceded by a decision to ban the General Union of Students in the Republic of Iraq (the oldest student organization in the country) from operating within universities. The ministry's justification for these measures appears to rest on the belief that these organizations operate according to foreign agendas aimed at disseminating concepts inconsistent with the values and principles of Iraqi society.

Certainly, civil society requires a sphere of freedom to fulfill its humanitarian missions and provide voluntary services to both society and the state. However, political and ideological orientations continue to influence the relationship with civil society organizations, especially in a country like Iraq experiencing various forms of social conflict. The numerous challenges and obstacles facing civil society in Iraq are inherent to the nature of humanitarian work. Historical experience suggests that the work of NGOs often expands and develops more robustly in challenging environments and through disagreement with government institutions rather than through constant alignment. Civil society cannot function merely as an extension of the government or its departments; therefore, dissent with government institutions can be a positive dynamic, as it encourages monitoring of government performance to reform, evaluate, or compensate for institutional shortcomings whenever possible.

VII. Case Study: Ahl al-Qaḍīyah

The phenomenon of extremism, in its diverse forms and manifestations, constitutes a defining characteristic of the contemporary era. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in societies that are inward-looking or predominantly adhere to traditional frameworks such as tribe, religion, and regionalism in their social interactions. This characterization aptly describes Iraqi society, which is marked by affiliations to family, neighborhood, tribe, social class, or sect. According to Dr. 'Abd-al-Jalīl al-Ṭāhir, these sub-sectoral affiliations significantly influence both the psychological constitution of individuals and the broader social structure.

The emergence of extremist groups within Iraqi society is a foreseeable consequence of the prevailing divisions and fragmentation across various religious and non-religious affiliations. This situation is exacerbated by a pervasive atmosphere

of frustration and helplessness experienced by many community members. Numerous events since 2003 have demonstrated that such pockets of frustration and social tension can precipitate social chaos and insecurity.

The group known as *Ahl al-Qaḍīyah*⁽¹⁾ is not a novel religious faction; it first appeared in 2007 amid the peak of sectarian violence in Iraq. Sayyid Muqtadā al-Ṣadr has repeatedly condemned the group's ideologies and has disavowed any association between the Sadrist Movement and this group. On April 14, 2023, he announced a one-year suspension of the Sadrist Movement following the proliferation of this group. In a statement posted on his Twitter account, he emphasized that attempting to reform Iraq while failing to reform the Sadrist Movement itself would be sinful, highlighting the gravity of leading a movement infiltrated by *Ahl al-Qaḍīyah*. (al-'Arabī al-Jadīd, 2023, May 30)

At the official level, the Iraqi judiciary declared on April 14, 2023, the detention of numerous members affiliated with this group. The judicial media office reported that the al-Karkh Investigation Court in Baghdād ordered the detention of 65 individuals associated with *Ahl al-Qaḍīyah*, a group accused of "promoting ideas that incite sedition and disrupt societal security." Subsequently, the al-Karkh Criminal Court sentenced 51 members to one year of imprisonment, while the group's leader received a two-year sentence. These rulings were based on Article 372/5 of the amended Penal Code No. 111 of 1969, as stated by the investigating judge. According to Article 372/5, any individual who publicly insults a symbol or person revered, sanctified, or respected by a religious sect is subject to a prison sentence not exceeding three years.

Social responses to the *Ahl al-Qaḍīyah* group have been heterogeneous. The religious establishment regards the group as a violation of religious doctrine and a deviation from its fundamental principles. Political and security institutions classify them as outlaw entities, potentially influenced by foreign agendas aimed at fomenting discord within Iraqi society. Public social reactions were tempered by the timing of the group's emergence during the month of Ramaḍān, which limited widespread public awareness of the situation. Despite limited information, the social implications of such extremist groups provoke legitimate anxiety and fear of renewed conflict that could destabilize the community, especially given Iraq's traumatic experiences during the rise of the terrorist organization ISIS.

In summary, the appearance of the *Ahl al-Qaḍīyah* group on the Iraqi sociopolitical stage appears to be a manifestation of the persistent "extremism industry" that operates ubiquitously and continuously.

VIII. Agenda for 2024

Contemporary human societies exhibit diverse environments; however, they share numerous social challenges that differ in nature, scale, and scope. Iraqi

(1) *Ahl al-Qaḍīyah* (People of the Cause): Religious faction that emerged from the Sadrist Movement, which holds the conviction that Sayyid Muqtadā al-Ṣadr is al-Imām al-Mahdī. This belief is grounded in old narratives that propose the potential for one individual's soul to inhabit another's body, a phenomenon described as "ḥulūl."

society has inherited several social problems from the previous regime, with some issues exacerbated or newly emerged due to ongoing social, cultural, and technological transformations. Certain social problems in Iraq have become chronic and intractable, attributable to their complexity, overlapping origins, and the limited capacity or willingness of some actors to implement effective solutions. The most pressing social problems anticipated for the forthcoming year in Iraqi society are summarized as follows:

1. **Tribal Conflicts:** Tribal conflicts remain among the most persistent social maladies in Iraq. Despite recurrent assertions by public and security authorities that the sociopolitical climate is conducive to resolving these conflicts by addressing their root causes, the reality contradicts such optimism. The complexity of these disputes, compounded by the emotional and narrow tribal loyalties influencing some actors, undermines resolution efforts. Moreover, authorities are frequently distracted by peripheral conflicts or may themselves be involved in these disputes. Thus, tribal conflicts are expected to persist prominently as long as tribalism (*‘aşabîyah*) continues to govern social interactions and as long as individual and group interests are prioritized over the public good and national interest.
2. **Domestic Violence:** Among the numerous social problems in Iraqi society, domestic violence remains the most prevalent across various regions. Its manifestations may temporarily diminish but tend to resurface, often with increased intensity, influenced by the family's economic and social conditions. The legal framework regulating marital relations and family behavior also plays a significant role. Socialization processes in Iraqi society often rely on nomadic cultural concepts that emphasize dominance and violence rather than tolerance, affection, and respect grounded in sound educational principles. This cultural context contributes to the persistence and spread of domestic violence across rural and urban segments of the society.
3. **Divorce:** While domestic violence is a significant factor contributing to divorce, divorce itself is a multifaceted social phenomenon influenced by diverse individual and social factors. The issue of divorce has not received adequate attention from relevant authorities, as evidenced by the rising divorce rates annually across various Iraqi regions, notably in the capital, Baghdād. This trend indicates that divorce remains a growing concern within Iraqi society.
4. **Begging:** Begging constitutes one of the most pervasive negative phenomena in Iraqi society, particularly in Baghdād and certain religious areas. Security agencies face considerable challenges due to the professionalization of begging by certain groups at traffic intersections and markets. The problem is exacerbated by deviant and illegal behaviors associated with many beggars, especially children and young girls. Organized gangs appear to exploit beggars for illicit activities, linking begging to criminal enterprises such as human trafficking. Given prevailing social conditions, begging is likely to persist and reproduce in Iraq.

5. **Drug Abuse and Trafficking:** Despite substantial efforts by security agencies, drug abuse and trafficking remain significant concerns. The repercussions of these issues extend beyond security implications, with widespread social apprehension regarding their expansion into broader segments of the population. Addressing this persistent problem necessitates effective and comprehensive solutions.

IX. Key Tasks for 2024

The forthcoming year presents numerous and complex challenges that legislative, judicial, and executive bodies must prioritize and address. Among the most pressing issues facing Iraqi society are the following:

1. **Containment of Tribal Conflicts:** Efforts should concentrate on containing tribal disputes and preventing their proliferation within Iraqi cities, particularly in the capital, Baghdād. Security agencies must be directed to perform their professional duties independently of narrow affiliations and loyalties, which exacerbate conflicts and undermine efforts to address the root causes of social discord in Iraqi society.
2. **Combating the Phenomenon of Begging:** It is imperative to address the escalating issue of begging, which increasingly challenges both the rule of law and social norms. This problem has become a source of public concern due to the growing number of beggars, some of whom are victims of human trafficking networks. These networks have, regrettably, begun to challenge certain security agencies owing to their connections with influential social actors.
3. **Countering Drug Abuse and Trafficking:** A concerted effort is required to combat drug consumption and trafficking, with particular emphasis on securing borders to prevent the smuggling of narcotics from neighboring countries into Iraq. This initiative must be complemented by addressing the economic and social determinants that contribute to drug use, especially among the youth.
4. **Expediting the Resolution of the Case of ISIS-Linked Families:** Accelerated measures are necessary to resolve the situation of families associated with ISIS, specifically those arriving from the al-Hawl camp in Syria to the al-Jada'ah camp in al-Mawşil. This issue has consumed substantial financial, material, and human resources. Additionally, appropriate solutions must be developed for the children of ISIS members currently residing in various camps throughout Iraq.
5. **Addressing the Drivers of Rising Divorce Rates:** The factors contributing to the increasing divorce rates in Iraqi society must be thoroughly examined and addressed, particularly the emerging social challenges within contemporary Iraqi families. It is essential to direct the Family and Child Protection Directorate, the Women's Social Protection Department, and the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs to fulfill their responsibilities in this

domain. This includes combating domestic violence and its evolving manifestations within Iraqi households.

X. Strategies for Addressing Problems and Challenges

It is widely acknowledged that every problem or dilemma has a potential solution. Nonetheless, living without encountering problems is unattainable, as they are inherent to human nature and daily existence. Solutions, however, may be difficult to identify, particularly for complex issues that necessitate prolonged intervention. Similar to all human societies, Iraq faces both longstanding and contemporary challenges in various forms and dimensions. The problems confronting Iraqi society represent a confluence of historical and modern complexities, resulting in overlapping and structurally intricate issues. Therefore, addressing these challenges requires practical, realistic, and multifaceted approaches. The principal strategies for addressing these problems and challenges are outlined as follows:

1. **Directing Qualitative Research:** Government ministries and institutions, especially the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, should be mandated to undertake qualitative research on the multifaceted social problems within Iraqi society. It is advisable for sociology and law departments at Iraqi universities to develop Master's and Doctoral theses that comprehensively examine social issues such as tribal conflicts, divorce, and human trafficking, while proposing viable solutions.
2. **Ratifying the Domestic Violence Law:** The ratification of the Domestic Violence Law is imperative, following amendments to certain legal provisions that are inconsistent with the nature of domestic violence in Iraqi families. Efforts should focus on harmonizing diverse perspectives to criminalize specific forms of domestic violence, curtail its prevalence, and penalize offenders. Upon ratification, establishing an independent body to enforce the law or empowering Community Police with the authority to implement its provisions is recommended.
3. **Strengthening General Deterrence:** In accordance with the principle of general deterrence, judicial authorities should impose stringent sentences on individuals who threaten security and social peace in Iraq. This is particularly relevant for those who incite tribal conflicts and unrest, which often divert security forces from other responsibilities. Security agencies must diligently execute judicial rulings and ensure the reinstatement of the "Tribal Warning" (Daggah) law, addressing recent lapses in its enforcement.
4. **Developing a New Social Policy:** It is essential to formulate a new social policy that is both practical and applicable, grounded in the human rights enshrined in the Iraqi Constitution and international treaties ratified by Iraq. This policy should incorporate contemporary mechanisms aimed at protecting vulnerable populations, including victims of domestic violence, orphans, widows, and divorced women.

5. **Legislating Deterrent Laws for Emerging Crimes:** The enactment of new laws with deterrent provisions is necessary to combat modern manifestations of begging and human trafficking. Additionally, the development of new security-social agencies to implement these laws alongside existing security structures is crucial to limiting the proliferation of these crimes and ensuring effective law enforcement.

XI. Conclusions

Iraqi society, akin to other human societies, confronts a range of challenges and social issues arising from the multifaceted process of social change. Although social problems share a universal humanitarian character in the contemporary world, the distinct social values, norms, and customs within Iraqi society have produced problems that differ in nature, origins, and manifestations compared to other societies. This is particularly evident in the persistent issue of tribal conflicts in Iraq over the past three decades. This longstanding yet recurrent problem has significantly impacted Iraqi society and its institutions due to the complex interrelations among its causes and involved parties. Therefore, effective resolution necessitates deconstructing its fundamental components. While dialogue, understanding, and tolerance are essential foundational elements for addressing this issue, the enforcement of law and the professionalism of its executive bodies constitute complementary measures for any social or economic interventions. This underscores the need for security agencies to restore their authority amidst frequent provocations from various factions that often engage in conflicts with them or other groups within Iraq.

Domestic violence represents another issue marked by relative specificity within Iraqi society, attributable to its unique causes and contributing factors. This problem, which has expanded and diversified in its manifestations, often stems from the social structure that historically legitimized the use of force by the father or male figure within the Iraqi family. Despite contemporary legislation favoring the protection of vulnerable groups both within and outside the family, manifestations of domestic violence persist prominently, openly challenging the legal and social frameworks of society.

Regarding other social problems confronting Iraqi society, these appear largely consistent with those encountered by other human societies, particularly in terms of their origins, nature, and consequences. Overall, the prevailing conditions in Iraqi society call for a proactive and impactful presence of social work, especially in addressing issues related to vulnerable populations such as children, the elderly, persons with disabilities, and specific groups of women including widows and divorcees. Both formal and informal social work practices can play a crucial role in safeguarding society from emerging challenges through early intervention, preventive measures, and proposing effective treatments to mitigate various adverse phenomena and social problems.

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6. Human Rights

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Over two decades following Iraq's political transition, the issue of human rights remains prominently positioned on both national and international agendas. Iraq has yet to attain a status among nations that effectively guarantee human rights and ensure their implementation within established legal and constitutional frameworks. The political process continues to face considerable challenges, with corruption posing a fundamental threat to critical sectors of the state's structure, philosophy, and ethical values. Similarly, the security sector is encumbered by these difficulties, as organized crime is currently experiencing one of its most active periods within the country. Moreover, the ongoing presence of armed groups operating outside the law and their expanding influence within the state constitute significant impediments to advancements in the human rights domain.

The protracted delays in establishing a comprehensive legislative system that adequately guarantees a legal environment respectful of human rights further impede qualitative progress. Collectively, these factors jeopardize Iraq's capacity to fulfill its national and international human rights obligations. Addressing these challenges remains a paramount concern for the government to achieve sustainable development goals, secure international support, and restore confidence in Iraq as a civilized nation coexisting and progressing alongside the global community toward development, prosperity, and the overarching interests of humanity.

The nation confronts substantial challenges concerning human rights violations, as documented in official national records. The High Commission for Human Rights remains inactive, with a new Board of Commissioners yet to be appointed; currently, the commission operates under the acting leadership of the Minister of Justice. Additionally, conditions within Iraqi prisons persistently fall short of internationally accepted standards. Furthermore, the country has experienced a surge in what has been described as "low-quality content" and its subsequent effects on freedom of expression, alongside perceived infringements on public morals and societal norms. These matters will be examined in detail throughout this chapter.

I. The High Commission for Human Rights

On August 8, 2022, the Parliamentary Human Rights Committee disclosed that the Council of Representatives had formally concluded the term of the Board of

Commissioners of the High Commission for Human Rights in Iraq. The members' mandate, which commenced in July 2017, officially expired in July 2021. Following the dissolution of the board at the end of its statutory term, the formation of a new board was anticipated. However, the failure to establish a new board or extend the previous one resulted in a significant structural void, as the Council of Representatives was unable to appoint a new commission during the intervening period. Additionally, the parliamentary order referring the commission members to retirement stipulated that the referral was effective from August 3, 2021. Consequently, the commission's operations between August 3, 2021, and August 8, 2022, lacked legal legitimacy, a gap that persisted due to the legislature's failure to elect a new body. This suspension of the commission's activities is regarded as an obstruction of its mandate and a diminution of human rights protections in Iraq, particularly amid ongoing violations.

Although the Iraqi government suspended the commission's activities in July 2021 owing to political disputes among parliamentary blocs concerning the selection of a new Board of Trustees, most former members have continued to engage in civil society activities and the monitoring of social and human rights issues (al-'Arabī al-Jadīd, 2023, September 20).

Subsequently, on January 3, 2023, the Council of Ministers resolved to assign Rāfil Yāsīn Khudāyir, President of the Federal Board of Supreme Audit, to oversee the administrative and financial affairs of the High Commission for Human Rights. The Prime Minister's Media Office indicated that, pursuant to Article 103 of the 2005 Constitution of the Republic of Iraq, the Council of Ministers designated the head of the audit board to manage the commission's affairs in its capacity as an independent oversight body affiliated with the Council of Representatives (Burāthā News, 2023, January 3).

In a related development, on February 28, 2023, the Council of Representatives voted to establish a committee tasked with selecting new members for the Board of Commissioners. The parliament's media office reported that the council approved a committee of experts for this purpose, chaired and supervised by the Deputy Speaker of the Council of Representatives, Shākhwān 'Abd-Allāh Aḥmad (al-Madā, 2023, February 28). The committee convened its inaugural meeting on March 19, 2023, to select new members, underscoring the importance of forming a new commission to promote a culture of respect for human rights and to ensure the sustainability of the democratic process and institutional independence. Applications for the new board were accepted in accordance with Article 8 of the High Commission for Human Rights Law No. 53 of 2008, from April 1 to May 1, 2023.

'Alī al-Bayyātī, a former Board member, commented on the X platform (formerly Twitter) regarding what he characterized as a "hidden conflict" between the government and the commission since the October 2019 protests. He noted that this conflict began with an unsuccessful attempt to annex the commission to the Council of Ministers via the Federal Court. He further stated that subsequent pressures included harassment and threats directed at staff, as well as delays in

forming the board, culminating in the administration of the commission being transferred to the minister of the very ministry the commission is mandated to monitor for human rights performance (al-'Arabī al-Jadīd, 2023, September 20).

In a further serious development, a document circulated on social media revealed that during its thirty-seventh session on September 12, 2023, the Council of Ministers issued Decision No. 23516 of 2023. This decision terminated the assignment of the President of the Federal Board of Supreme Audit and assigned the Minister of Justice, Khālīd Shwānī, with managing the administrative and financial affairs of the High Commission for Human Rights alongside his ministerial responsibilities. The document, signed by the Secretary-General of the Council of Ministers, Ḥamīd al-Ghizzī, provoked widespread condemnation from human rights organizations. Iraqi activists and civil society groups criticized the government's decision, interpreting it as the commencement of increased state control and oversight over institutions engaged in human rights work within the country.

In a post on the platform X, al-Bayātī contended that the recent decision was neither coincidental nor arbitrary but rather a deliberate and systematic strategy. He asserted that the intent behind this action is to undermine the democratic framework in Iraq by incapacitating institutions dedicated to democracy and human rights. Activist 'Adhrā' Ḥamīd highlighted that the conflicts and pressures experienced by the High Commission, culminating in the suspension of its operations in 2021, were predominantly a consequence of the Board of Commissioners' endorsement of the widespread protests that began in October 2019. This position led numerous religious political entities and armed groups to deem the commission unnecessary. She further remarked that the current government is imposing increasing restrictions on civil society organizations and intimidating activists, attempting to portray the human rights agenda as externally influenced. Despite its designation as an independent entity that should function autonomously, she emphasized that the High Commission is presently subjected to overt governmental control (al-'Arabī al-Jadīd, 2023, September 20).

The Minister of Justice assumed responsibility for managing the commission, implementing various tasks and activities. On Tuesday, December 12, 2023, the Ministry of Justice reported notable advancements in Iraq's human rights agenda following the execution of the government program. The ministry outlined a strategic plan aimed at mitigating prison overcrowding. At the legislative level, several draft laws addressing human rights issues in Iraq, including the Freedom of Expression Law and the Social Security Law, were proposed. At the executive level, governmental and ministerial actions supported the human rights agenda through relevant ministries in alignment with the government platform. Furthermore, the ministry emphasized its efforts to enhance correctional facilities by initiating projects such as prison expansions to uphold human rights standards. Since the new government's inception, the Minister of Justice has prioritized the prisoners' situation through site visits and the establishment of monitoring teams from the Human Rights Directorate and correctional departments to assess prison

conditions across all governorates. The ministry highlighted the development of a strategic plan to address prison overcrowding, ensuring the consideration of human rights aspects (INA, 2023, December 12).

On January 10, 2023, during the Second Conference for the National Plan for Human Rights in Iraq (organized by the Ministry of Justice to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) Prime Minister Muḥammad Shiyā' al-Sūdānī urged the Council of Representatives to expedite the appointment of members to the High Commission for Human Rights. He underscored the commission's role as a constitutional and legal foundation for reinforcing fundamental human rights principles and integrating them into governmental operations (Shafaq News, 2023, December 10). He also emphasized the government's responsibility concerning human rights, encompassing the right to a dignified life, the right to break the cycle of inherited poverty, and the rights to education, health, and essential services.

II. Freedom of Expression and the Proliferation of "Low-Quality Content" on Social Media

In January 2023, the Ministry of Interior established a committee to monitor what was described as "low-quality content" (*al-muḥṭawá al-hābiṭ*) on social media platforms. This initiative targeted posts perceived to have low moral value, deemed offensive to public taste and general morals. Consequently, several individuals active on these platforms were referred for trial and investigation under Penal Code articles criminalizing acts that violate public decency. Additionally, the ministry launched the "Balligh" (Report) platform, enabling the public to report digital media content that offends public taste or conveys negative messages undermining modesty and community security (Baghdād Today, 2023, February 18).

Based on complaints received through the Ballaigh platform, the committee referred at least 16 cases to judicial authorities for criminal investigation. Sentences involving imprisonment have been imposed on six individuals, including women, for their social media posts, while eight others remain under investigation. Reports from Agence France-Presse (AFP) indicated that some prosecuted individuals were known for creating content related to music, comedy, fashion, and other lifestyle topics.

This issue sparked extensive debate within social, cultural, and human rights circles. A majority of the public regarded it as a necessary regulatory measure within the state's administrative authority to maintain social order and prevent the misuse of social media to insult public taste and proper behavior. They argued that it was essential to curb the spread of moral decay and nudity, which, although perhaps isolated cases, could appear as a general phenomenon if left unchecked on digital platforms. Conversely, some human rights organizations characterized these measures as violations of the freedom of opinion and expression guaranteed by the Iraqi Constitution, affecting journalists and media workers. These

organizations noted that the restrictions imposed by authorities, justified by the protection of public order and morals, actually infringed upon fundamental freedoms. Furthermore, critics pointed to perceived selectivity in the campaign, alleging that certain figures known for offensive posts remained immune from prosecution or arrest. Some attributed this to favoritism and mutual interests between corrupt elements within government security institutions and these individuals, some of whom were women with suspicious links to influential state figures who allegedly pressured security and judicial institutions.

In a related context, the “Draft Regulation for Digital Content” in Iraq, issued by the Communications and Media Commission (CMC) in early 2023, generated extensive controversy due to its potential to limit freedom of expression. In response, the commission clarified that the circulated document was merely a “draft” intended to regulate digital content in a manner that protects youth from certain social media afflictions while ensuring general freedoms. Meanwhile, a coalition of human rights and civil society organizations active in the digital sphere issued a statement on March 16, 2023, addressed to the CMC Board. They expressed grave concern regarding the draft regulation, asserting that its legal provisions threatened the right to freedom of opinion and expression and restricted freedoms in the digital public space. They argued that the project contradicted both the Constitution and Iraq’s international human rights obligations. These organizations maintained that regulating digital content requires a comprehensive approach and deeper dialogue among various stakeholders to prevent such regulations from becoming a legal pretext for stifling digital freedoms.

Beyond its alleged conflict with the Iraqi Constitution, which defines the powers of various public authorities, the draft regulation contained several articles violating Iraq’s international commitments, specifically Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Critics highlighted an extreme lack of clarity regarding the terminology used, particularly the failure to distinguish between “purposeful content” and “low-quality content.” Such ambiguity grants implementing authorities overly broad powers to determine permissible content based on subjective criteria conflicting with democratic values such as pluralism, openness, and tolerance. The draft also prohibited a wide range of digital content in a manner that harms the right to freedom of expression and unjustly restricts the work of journalists and media outlets (SMEX, 2023, March 20).

III. Human Rights: International Perspective

Human rights in Iraq encounter substantial challenges due to multiple factors that have contributed to the deterioration of rights conditions. International organizations, through their issued documents, reports, and international instruments, delineate these conditions based on their respective standards and perspectives, often relying on reports or field visits conducted by their personnel. It is important to note that Iraq frequently contests these reports and documents, perceiving them at times as lacking objectivity and accuracy or as being politicized

with specific political agendas. Nonetheless, the reality of human rights in Iraq, as viewed through the lens of these documents, is presented objectively as follows:

1. Women's Rights

Organizations advocating for women's rights have persistently called for the enactment of legislation addressing domestic violence in Iraq. However, parliamentary efforts have stalled, and the law remains unenacted due to significant divergences in viewpoints between civil and religious factions concerning various provisions, as well as debates regarding the law's feasibility and objectives. Moreover, crimes involving violence against women have received limited protection through safeguarding measures and effective judicial mechanisms. Government-operated shelters in the Kurdistan Region restrict women's entry and exit exclusively to judicial orders. The limited number of shelters managed by local non-governmental organizations have lacked widespread support and have frequently faced criticism, familial opposition, or raids by authorities (HRW, 2024).

Gender-based violence persists as a longstanding issue in Iraq. Women's rights organizations regularly document incidents of so-called "honor crimes" and other manifestations of gender-based violence. The recent murder of a 22-year-old physician by her father in January 2023 underscores the urgent necessity for Iraq to prioritize measures against gender-based violence, including the promulgation of domestic violence protection legislation aligned with international standards.

Women who enter into marriages through contracts conducted outside personal status courts by religious clerics encounter significant obstacles in accessing governmental services and social protections due to the absence of legal registration. Such unregistered marriages often serve as mechanisms to circumvent legal prohibitions on child marriage, polygamy, or forced marriage, and to evade alimony obligations in cases of divorce absent a civil marriage contract. Consequently, these women face barriers to childbirth in government hospitals and to participation in social welfare programs, which sometimes stipulate marital status or age criteria. Additionally, they experience difficulties in obtaining birth certificates for their offspring or pursuing legal claims for alimony or child support following divorce. Children born from marriages conducted outside judicial oversight, or those born out of wedlock (including offspring resulting from rape) may be deprived of birth certificates and, by extension, other essential civil documentation. This deprivation restricts their access to governmental services and social protections. Failure to resolve these documentation issues may preclude affected individuals from school enrollment or employment opportunities and may ultimately compel them toward unregistered marriages later in life.

2. Enforced Disappearance

On April 4, 2023, the United Nations Committee on Enforced Disappearances in Geneva released the findings from its November 2022 visit to Iraq. The Committee acknowledged the cooperation extended by the Iraqi government during the visit and recognized the significant challenges Iraq faces in addressing enforced

disappearances. However, it expressed profound concern over the widespread occurrence of enforced disappearances throughout much of Iraq across various time periods, emphasizing the persistence of impunity and re-victimization. The Committee noted that this visit marked a renewed phase of engagement with Iraq, one of the earliest signatories to the Convention, while underscoring that substantial efforts remain necessary. Among the ongoing issues identified was the alleged enforced disappearance of children, notably Yazidi children born as a result of sexual violence against their mothers in ISIS camps. The Committee reported cases where mothers returning to Iraq were compelled to leave their children in orphanages with the intention of reclaiming them promptly; however, upon return, they were informed that their children had been placed with other families, with allegations implicating certain state officials. Concurrently, hundreds of families continue to search for relatives believed to be detained in camps located in Turkey, Syria, or Iran, where external contact is nonexistent.

The Committee urged Iraq to promptly criminalize enforced disappearance as a distinct offense. It highlighted that, since enforced disappearance is not yet recognized as an autonomous crime under Iraqi national legislation, prosecution under this category is currently unfeasible. The Committee called on the state to formulate a comprehensive strategy for the investigation and search of all disappearance cases and to enhance national forensic capabilities to guarantee victims' access to exhumation and forensic services. Additionally, Iraq was advised to establish an independent task force charged with systematically verifying records of all detention facilities against detainee registries, ensuring that all detainees are documented and that their families are duly informed of their whereabouts (OHCHR, 2023b).

Prior to the report's publication, multiple incidents involving the kidnapping and enforced disappearance of activists and members of civil and protest movements were documented. On February 1, 2023, an unidentified armed group abducted human rights defender Jāsim al-Asadī near Baghdād. al-Asadī is a distinguished environmental scholar and expert in water and marsh conservation in southern Iraq, as well as the co-founder and president of Nature Iraq, an NGO dedicated to the preservation of the country's marshlands. While traveling on the highway from al-Hillah to Baghdād, his vehicle was intercepted by two cars; armed individuals in civilian attire restrained him and forcibly placed him into one of the vehicles. His family reported the incident to Iraqi security forces, expressing the belief that his human rights advocacy motivated the abduction and noting the absence of contact from the perpetrators. Security forces announced ongoing efforts to locate al-Asadī. At the time, he was en route to Baghdād to meet officials, including the Minister of Water Resources, following his leadership in a major campaign to protect the southern marshes (a UNESCO World Heritage site) and his development of an irrigation plan. He also contributed to opposition efforts against the construction of the Makhūl Dam, which threatened over 183 archaeological sites and the displacement of thousands of families (Baghdād Today, 2023, February 4).

Concerning secret detention, the Committee recommended that Iraq clarify the situation by establishing an independent fact-finding commission to verify the existence of clandestine detention sites using all available technical means, including satellite imagery and drones. To address victims' needs and rights, the Committee urged Iraq to implement legislative and judicial measures to ensure that any individual harmed as a direct consequence of enforced disappearance is officially recognized as a victim entitled to the rights outlined in the Convention. Effectively addressing enforced disappearance in Iraq, in all its manifestations and scales, necessitates urgent and coordinated state intervention alongside a firm commitment to preventing and eradicating such practices (OHCHR, 2023b).

3. Children's Rights

In June 2023, the Iraqi Council of Representatives presented the Child Protection Bill, marking a pioneering legislative effort to safeguard the rights of children within the country. This legislation addresses critical concerns including child labor, exploitation, and abuse, while explicitly codifying fundamental rights such as life, health, education, and nationality within the national legal framework.

Furthermore, on July 13, the Ministry of Planning inaugurated the National Platform for Childcare. This initiative, developed collaboratively with the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and supported by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), was launched to coincide with Universal Children's Day. The platform functions as a comprehensive data repository, aggregating information from both national and international sources to monitor various aspects of childhood. It serves as an electronic gateway offering statistical indicators and analytical reports on the status of children in Iraq, thereby providing valuable insights for stakeholders, policymakers, and strategists committed to enhancing child welfare (Ministry of Planning, 2023, July 13).

In a related development, UNICEF, in partnership with the Iraqi government, published its 2022 Annual Report in February 2023. The report delivers an extensive overview of health, education, economic, and social indicators pertinent to children in Iraq. It reflects a strategic transition from immediate humanitarian aid toward sustainable long-term development. However, the report highlights concerning statistics: over 10% of Iraqi children have not received essential vaccinations; 28% of girls and 15% of boys of secondary school age remain unenrolled; and 46% of children fail to complete secondary education. Additionally, 81% of children under 14 experience violent disciplinary measures, and 7% of children aged 5 to 17 engage in child labor. Approximately half of Iraqi children live in conditions of multidimensional poverty (UNICEF Iraq, 2023).

Significantly, on November 19, UNICEF praised the Iraqi government for endorsing the Declaration on Children, Youth, and Climate Action. This endorsement underscores the government's firm commitment to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and was timed to precede World Children's Day and the COP28 climate conference. The declaration was signed by the Minister of Environment, Nizār Āmīdī, in the presence of relevant ministries and representatives of children

and youth. This action represents a critical advancement in Iraq's response to the global climate crisis and aligns with priorities identified by children and youth worldwide.

4. Displaced Persons and Refugees

Seven years after Iraqi forces reclaimed the last territories held by ISIS, approximately 1.5 million Iraqis remain internally displaced, with the majority residing in the Kurdistan Region. Despite the closure of many refugee camps, the Ministry of Migration and Displaced abruptly closed the al-Jada'ah 2 camp (a temporary site near al-Mawṣil and the last official displacement camp in federal government territory) in April 2023. This closure occurred without prior notice, raising significant concerns regarding the safety of residents upon their return to areas of origin. Meanwhile, 60% of the population of Sinjār have remained displaced in camps and private residences since 2014, following the initial ISIS onslaught and subsequent counter-attacks. The primary barriers to their return include ongoing security deterioration in Sinjār due to Turkish airstrikes and competition among armed groups for regional control. These challenges are further compounded by delays in city reconstruction, inadequate basic services and infrastructure, and the Iraqi government's failure to provide compensation for homes and businesses damaged during military operations.

In a related context, Human Rights Watch reported on May 9, 2023, that Iraqi authorities have failed to disburse financial compensation, mandated under Iraqi law, to thousands of Yazidis and other residents of the Sinjār district for property destruction caused by the "Islamic State" or during military battles against them. At least 200,000 residents of Sinjār continue to live in displacement camps in northern Iraq, rendering a return to their homes unfeasible. Human rights observers have emphasized that Iraqi authorities must allocate the funds already designated for compensation to facilitate the return of displaced persons and support their efforts to rebuild their lives (HRW, 2023, May 9).

5. Death Sentences

Throughout 2023, death sentences in Iraq persisted, with a minimum of 20 individuals condemned to death following the establishment of the al-Sūdānī government. This continuation occurs despite Amnesty International's unequivocal opposition to the death penalty in all circumstances, irrespective of the crime's nature, the perpetrator's characteristics, or the state's execution methods. Internationally, the death penalty is recognized as a violation of the right to life. Consequently, the organization has urged Iraqi executive authorities to cease issuing death sentences and to suspend all executions as an initial measure toward the death penalty's total abolition.

Previously, Amnesty International addressed the Iraqi government, specifically Prime Minister Muḥammad Shiyā' al-Sūdānī, concerning the overall human rights situation in Iraq. The organization emphasized that the new administration must diverge from prior governments, which failed to deliver justice and compensation, and must confront widespread human rights violations. It called on the

government to demonstrate tangible progress in accountability processes, which have stagnated since the 2019 protest crackdown, and to prioritize enduring issues such as displaced persons' access to livelihoods, gender-based violence, and death sentences resulting from trials lacking legal safeguards.

In response, the Prime Minister's Office declared on April 2, 2023, its commitment to these issues. The Prime Minister publicly pledged on at least two occasions to uphold public freedoms and human rights. Nevertheless, within months of assuming office, the Ministry of Interior initiated a "low-quality content" monitoring program on social media, leading to courts sentencing six individuals to imprisonment for exercising freedom of expression. The Deputy Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty International asserted that the government's true dedication to human rights is reflected in its actions rather than its promises. She observed that while the government prosecuted individuals for posting videos involving dancing or joking, perpetrators of serious offenses such as kidnapping, torture, and assassination since October 2019 remain unpunished.

Concerning the human rights context in the Kurdistan Region, recent international reports, including the US Department of State report from March 2023, have reiterated concerns. The report condemned human rights violations and restrictions on public freedoms and journalistic activities, noting an increase in such incidents since late 2022 and early 2023. Additionally, it highlighted judicial interference by senior executive officials and documented mistreatment of protesters and detainees by Asayish and internal security forces. The report also noted that prison populations exceed capacity by 157%, resulting in substandard conditions. Drawing on data from the Independent Human Rights Commission in the region, the report detailed the deteriorating conditions of detention facilities, including overcrowding, water shortages, and inadequate hygiene and health standards. It further alleged the use of torture during detainee investigations. The US Department of State criticized judicial interference within the Kurdistan Region, citing senior regional government officials' involvement in sensitive political cases. The report also sharply criticized the regional government for its treatment of the press and freedom of expression, highlighting arrests and harassment of journalists. Moreover, it pointed to discriminatory practices in information dissemination, where journalists and media outlets aligned with the government and political parties receive privileged access, while others are excluded (Pukmedia, 2023, March 25).

6. Human Trafficking

Human trafficking has become a notably prevalent crime in Iraq in recent years, with incidents reported almost daily amidst persistent criticism of the governmental measures and strategies aimed at mitigating these serious offenses. The Department of Relations and Media at the National Office of the High Commission for Human Rights announced on May 20, 2023, a collaborative agreement with international organizations to combat trafficking within the country. This

partnership seeks to develop strategic plans for coordinated field operations and educational outreach initiatives (Zagros News, 2023, May 20).

Efforts to prevent trafficking in persons have been intensified through the Central Committee for Combating Trafficking, overseen by the Ministry of Interior. This committee comprises representatives from the Ministries of Health, Foreign Affairs, Finance, Migration and Displaced, Labor and Social Affairs, and Justice, as well as the Supreme Judicial Council, the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers, and the High Commission for Human Rights, in addition to three representatives from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). A report issued by the US Embassy in Baghdad on March 23, 2023, indicated that although the Iraqi government does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking, it is demonstrating significant and increasing efforts relative to previous periods, taking into consideration the challenging nature of this task under the ramifications of COVID-19. Iraq remains classified as “Tier 2,” with initiatives including the prosecution of a greater number of traffickers and ongoing investigations into officials allegedly complicit in these crimes. Notably, the KRG convicted traffickers under its own anti-trafficking legislation for the first time and established additional specialized units within two new independent administrations in the region (US Embassy in Iraq, 2023, March 27).

According to the Global Organized Crime Index, Iraq’s crime ranking increased in 2023 compared to 2021. Iraq was ranked 8th globally among 193 countries, 2nd among 46 countries in Asia, and 1st among 14 countries in Western Asia. The index reported that Iraq’s criminality score rose to 7.13 in 2023 from 7.05 in 2021. Human trafficking and human smuggling were identified as the most prevalent forms of organized crime, occupying the highest positions on the list (al-Sūmarīyah, 2023, December 11).

The government has identified a growing number of victims and has continued to refer some to non-governmental organizations for care. Measures have also been implemented to reduce the vulnerability of Iraqi migrants traveling to Europe and refugees residing in Syrian camps to trafficking. Additionally, a plan of action was finalized to prevent the forced recruitment and use of child soldiers in armed conflict. However, both federal and regional governments have failed to meet minimum standards in several critical areas. Significant deficiencies persist in victim identification and referral procedures, exacerbated by a lack of institutional understanding of the true nature of trafficking. Furthermore, the government lacks adequate protection services for victims of all trafficking forms and does not operate specialized shelters. Investigations and convictions of traffickers have also declined compared to previous years (al-Sūmarīyah, 2023, December 11).

IV. Case Study: Climate Change and Its Impact on Human Rights Conditions

Climate change poses a significant threat to the comprehensive and effective realization of various human rights, including but not limited to the rights to life, water and sanitation, food, health, housing, self-determination, culture, and development. States have a human rights obligation to mitigate the anticipated adverse effects of climate change and to ensure that affected populations, particularly those in vulnerable circumstances, have access to compensation and effective adaptation mechanisms to maintain a dignified standard of living.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has unequivocally affirmed in its reports that climate change is an established phenomenon primarily driven by anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions. The increasing incidence of extreme weather events, natural disasters, sea-level rise, floods, heatwaves, droughts, desertification, water scarcity, and the proliferation of tropical and vector-borne diseases constitute some of the deleterious consequences of climate change. These phenomena have direct and indirect implications for the full enjoyment of human rights globally, as corroborated by IPCC findings and United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution 41/21 (OHCHR, 2023a).

Populations disproportionately affected by the adverse impacts of climate change include individuals and local communities already experiencing disadvantage due to geographic location, poverty, gender, age, disability, or ethnic and cultural identity; notably, these groups have historically contributed minimally to greenhouse gas emissions. Specifically, individuals and communities residing in low-lying coastal zones, tundra, Arctic ice regions, arid lands, and other ecologically fragile environments face heightened risks. According to a 2018 IPCC report, the global community had a decade to limit warming to 1.5°C to prevent catastrophic outcomes. Absent swift intervention, extreme weather events and rising sea levels threaten the lives and rights of millions. Empirical evidence indicates that climate change undermines the right to life by exacerbating hunger, malnutrition, and associated health disorders, particularly in developing countries. Between 2000 and 2004, an estimated 262 million individuals were annually affected by climate-related disasters, with over 97% residing in developing nations (UNDP, 2007). The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) estimates that approximately 7 million deaths occur worldwide each year due to air pollution, with 4 million of these fatalities concentrated in the Asia-Pacific region (UNEP, 2019).

Shifts in climate patterns are projected to reduce agricultural productivity, thereby increasing the risk of hunger and food insecurity in impoverished regions. Vulnerable populations in developing countries are especially susceptible due to their dependence on climate-sensitive resources for sustenance and livelihoods. Moreover, gradual environmental changes present significant long-term challenges. Alterations in rainfall and temperature patterns are disrupting agricultural seasons, profoundly affecting crop yields and livestock health. These

changes directly impact food systems and exacerbate ongoing food crises globally, potentially fostering instability and creating conditions conducive to the emergence of armed conflicts (CESCR, 1999).

According to projections from a 2015 report by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), climate change is anticipated to reduce agricultural output by up to 30% in Africa and 21% in Asia. The primary driver of poverty resulting from climate change is the adverse impact on agricultural livelihoods (FAO, 2015).

Research indicates that the interaction between climate change effects and economic, social, and political challenges is likely to increase the probability of violent conflict in 46 countries, which collectively house 2.7 billion people. Evidence of this phenomenon is already apparent in several regions where climate change has contributed to armed conflicts and violence. Variations in rainfall patterns in countries dependent on natural resources, particularly among African pastoralist communities such as those in the African Sahel, have inflicted severe damage on local populations, prompting some to resort to violence and armed conflict. A comparable situation has been observed in the Chad region, where rising temperatures, irregular rainfall, and desertification have diminished exploitable land. It is important to note that climate change not only instigates armed conflicts but also prolongs them, thereby exacerbating civilian suffering, especially among women, children, and the elderly (ICRC, 2019).

The FAO identifies three overlapping primary causes of increasing food insecurity: armed conflict, economic crises, and significant climate changes, particularly prolonged droughts affecting certain countries. Nigeria exemplifies this issue, where a protracted conflict between herders and farmers has resulted in over 60,000 deaths in the past 15 years. This conflict typifies many disputes among farmers in African nations whose economies are heavily reliant on natural resources (Rahmūnī, 2019, p. 675).

Moreover, the adverse effects of climate change threaten both collective and individual rights. For instance, climate change endangers the existence of inhabitants in low-lying island nations, placing their long-term presence at risk. It also deprives some indigenous peoples of their territories and resources, effectively undermining their right to self-determination. Small islands worldwide face threats from rising sea levels, tropical cyclones, storms, increasing atmospheric temperatures, altered rainfall patterns, diminished adaptive capacity, and ecosystem disruption. These factors collectively jeopardize the right to self-determination, thereby imposing a responsibility on the international community to support the inhabitants of these regions, protect them from submersion, and implement measures to safeguard their future (Abū-Zayd, n.d.).

Furthermore, climate change significantly impairs labor efficiency and contributes to deficiencies in skills and quality training related to modern workplace developments. It also exacerbates the lack of decent work opportunities and safe, professional working conditions in many institutions, alongside perpetuating wage inequality between genders. These issues persist despite efforts to

integrate the public and private sectors to regulate worker status and guarantee rights. The vulnerability of various groups and labor sectors became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing climate shifts; farmers, fishermen, and workers in multiple sectors suffered from climate-induced impacts on water, soil, crops, and coastal cities, resulting in new labor market crises. Concurrently, social protection networks have become insufficient to cover all impoverished groups, and population growth, particularly in the poorest areas, places additional strain on social protection programs, compounded by the failure of insurance services to encompass all eligible populations (Fu'ād, n.d.).

V. The Gender Crisis (Gender Risks)

In 2023, a significant crisis emerged concerning the concept of “gender” or “social type,” particularly in its association with homosexuality, bisexuality, transgenderism, and the LGBTQ+ community. On August 15, 2023, a Member of Parliament proposed an amendment to the Anti-Prostitution Law No. 8 of 1988, seeking to impose the death penalty or life imprisonment for same-sex conduct and imprisonment for gender expression. Prior to this legislative initiative, the Iraqi Communications and Media Commission mandated that all media outlets replace the term “homosexuality” with “sexual deviance” in their publications and broadcasts, further prohibiting the use of the term “gender.”

In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, a court ordered the closure of the human rights organization Rasan on May 31, 2023, due to its activities related to homosexuality. Additionally, members of the Kurdistan Regional Parliament previously introduced a bill to penalize individuals or groups advocating for LGBTQ+ rights. Iraqi authorities have also applied various provisions of the Iraqi Penal Code to regulate morality and address behaviors deemed indecent or sexually deviant, actions that some critics argue restrict freedom of expression.

The discourse surrounding homosexuality and sexual deviance has generated profound disagreements within human rights communities. Predominantly, governmental and social perspectives equate the term “gender” with homosexuality, moral decline, and the endorsement of unethical practices among individuals of the same sex (al-Āmilī, 2023). In contrast, a minority of advocates interpret the concept differently.

VI. Agenda for 2024

The reality of human rights in Iraq continues to necessitate urgent governmental efforts to implement standards and guarantees that ensure the genuine practice of human rights in the country. Although these efforts are not insignificant, it appears that the journey toward an ideal situation and the provision of sufficient guarantees remains long. The country is expected to face numerous challenges in the coming year regarding human rights violations, which requires

proactive work to mitigate these challenges by utilizing available opportunities and resources.

Ways to Address Problems and Requirements

1. The authorities in Iraq should promptly appoint the Board of Commissioners for the High Commission for Human Rights to enable the institution to resume its functions in accordance with the Constitution and applicable legislation. The absence of this board constitutes a legislative deficiency that impairs the commission's operations and its ability to perform its fundamental duties. Delegating this responsibility to the Ministry of Justice or any other entity represents a clear constitutional and legal violation that undermines the commission's independence.
2. The Ministry of Justice must endeavor to implement international standards within prisons and cease ongoing violations. Additionally, the government and Parliament should be urged to enact the Alternative Sanctions Law to address prison overcrowding and prevent the financial losses that cost the state treasury billions, particularly concerning prison feeding expenses.
3. Efforts should be intensified to resolve issues related to illegal assaults on the rights of protesters, critics, and activists. The government is urged to conduct immediate, independent, and credible investigations into all alleged violations against demonstrators, activists, journalists, and critics. Furthermore, it must take more serious measures to ensure that victims have access to effective justice and judicial procedures that adequately address their needs, as current actions remain limited and insufficient.
4. Climate change constitutes a social, economic, security, and humanitarian challenge with severe implications for human rights at both individual and collective levels. Its adverse effects are disproportionately borne by the poorest regions and countries, and its impact extends beyond current generations to affect future ones. This highlights the critical importance of addressing human rights threats arising from climate change and necessitates that all governments, including Iraq, adopt appropriate measures aligned with comprehensive human rights objectives.
5. Immediate measures must be taken to mitigate the severity of climate change in accordance with the Paris Agreement to prevent exacerbation of its effects. This should involve strengthening international mechanisms, such as the Warsaw Mechanism, alongside national systems for monitoring, documenting, following up, and protecting those affected by climate change, including internally displaced persons and refugees.
6. Efforts must be completed to resolve the situation of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and deportees within Iraq by ensuring their adequate needs are met and facilitating their voluntary return to their original areas. This requires first providing essential services and infrastructure to regions affected by post-conflict challenges.

7. Iraqi authorities must earnestly fulfill their constitutional, national, and moral responsibilities to prevent violations of public freedoms. They should rigorously confront violators in accordance with the law, particularly concerning freedoms of peaceful assembly, expression, press, and information exchange. Serious efforts are necessary to combat these violations while respecting the moral, national, and religious values of individuals.

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7. Public Services

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Services are distinguished from goods in that goods are tangible items that can be produced, sold, or stored for later use, whereas services are intangible and perishable, typically produced and consumed simultaneously or nearly so (Haksever & Render, 2018, p. 35).

The provision of essential services such as electric power, health, education, and infrastructure significantly influences the well-being of individuals in Iraq. After years of inadequate service delivery, the government led by Muḥammad Shiyā' al-Sūdānī has prioritized the improvement of public services since securing the confidence of the Iraqi Parliament on October 27, 2022. This emphasis is evident in the government's program, which comprises 23 axes and includes 127 clauses or governmental commitments (Bakhīt, 2023, p. 4).

By the conclusion of 2023, six commitments had been fulfilled, accounting for 4.7% of the total promises outlined in the government program. Two projects or promises are unlikely to be completed for various reasons, representing 1.6% of the total, while one promise is anticipated to be fulfilled eventually. Eight projects, or 6.3% of the total, are partially completed. Approximately 50.4% of the commitments (64 promises) have been initiated and remain under implementation across various economic sectors, particularly within service sectors, with varying degrees of progress. Fifteen promises, constituting 11.8% of the total, are non-specific and lack measurable implementation indicators as of the end of 2023. In addition, one project in the human rights and women's empowerment sector was suspended without disclosure of its nature or the reasons for its cessation.

The challenges in implementing these commitments stem from several factors, foremost among them the extensive scope of the government program; the al-Sūdānī administration undertook a substantial number of promises to be executed within its term. Moreover, the complex political, economic, and social context of Iraq (marked by chronic issues, administrative bureaucracy, ineffective management, sectarian and party quotas, administrative and financial corruption, and fragile authority in certain regions) impedes the timely execution of the government's program as initially projected.

Table 7-1: Final Evaluation of the Performance of al-Sūdānī's Government by Sector through the end of 2023.

Axis 1: Social Protection & Poverty Alleviation (4 clauses)	Axis 2: Combating Unemployment & Job Creation (8 clauses)	Axis 3: Displaced Persons & Reconstruction of Liberated Areas (3 clauses)
2 - Implementation started	2 - Implementation started	1 - Under implementation
2 - Under implementation	2 - Under implementation	1 - Implementation not started
	2 - Implementation not started	1 - Completed
	1 - Completed	
	1 - Half-completed	
Axis 4: Electricity Sector (3 clauses)	Axis 5: Health Sector (5 clauses)	Axis 6: Reconstruction & Services Sector (4 clauses)
2 - Under implementation	3 - Implementation started	3 - Implementation started
1 - Completed	2 - Under implementation	1 - Under implementation
Axis 7: Combating Corruption & Waste of Public Funds (4 clauses)	Axis 8: Agriculture & Water Resources (6 clauses)	Axis 9: Trade Sector (4 clauses)
4 - Implementation started	1 - Completed	1 - Cannot be tracked
	2 - Cannot be tracked	1 - Under implementation
	2 - Implementation not started	2 - Implementation not started
	1 - Half-completed	
Axis 10: Industrial Sector (4 clauses)	Axis 11: Oil Sector (19 clauses)	Axis 12: Financial & Banking Sector (7 clauses)
4 - Implementation started	10 - Implementation started	1 - Implementation started
	2 - Cannot be tracked	2 - Likely will not be completed
	1 - Under implementation	2 - Under implementation
	5 - Implementation not started	1 - Half-completed
	1 - Half-completed	1 - Implementation not started
Axis 13: Transport & Telecommunications Sector (3 clauses)	Axis 14: Education Sector (5 clauses)	Axis 15: Investment Sector (3 clauses)
2 - Implementation started	1 - Implementation started	2 - Cannot be tracked
1 - Implementation not started	1 - Cannot be tracked	1 - Implementation not started
	1 - Implementation not started	
	2 - Half-completed	
Axis 16: Tourism Sector (2 clauses)	Axis 17: Population & Development (5 clauses)	Axis 18: Human Rights & Women's Empowerment (6 clauses)
1 - Cannot be tracked	2 - Implementation started	1 - Implementation started
1 - Implementation not started	2 - Under implementation	1 - Work halted
	1 - Half-completed	1 - Cannot be tracked
		3 - Implementation not started
Part 19: Foreign Relations (5 clauses)	Axis 20: Federal-KRG Relations (1 clause)	Axis 21: Security & Stability of Iraq (9 clauses)
3 - Cannot be tracked	1 - Under implementation	1 - Cannot be tracked
1 - Implementation not started		3 - Implementation started
1 - Implementation started		5 - Implementation not started

Table 7-1 (continued)

Axis 22: Implementation of Strategic Projects (5 clauses)	Axis 23: Legislation & Political Reforms (11 clauses)	Summary
3 - Implementation started	2 - Implementation started	6 - Completed
1 - Under implementation	1 - Likely will be completed	2 - Likely will not be completed
1 - Implementation not started	1 - Cannot be tracked	1 - Likely will be completed
	3 - Implementation not started	8 - Half-completed
	2 - Completed	40 - Implementation started
	2 - Under implementation	24 - Under implementation
		30 - Implementation not started
		15 - Cannot be tracked
		1 - Work halted
		127 - Total

Source: prepared by the researcher based on GOP Iraq (2024).

I. Electricity: Signs of Hope and Persistent Challenges

The electric power sector is widely recognized as the cornerstone of the development process, serving as the central axis around which all industrial, service, and agricultural sectors revolve. Iraq is currently confronting a crisis in electricity services due to a persistent imbalance between supply and demand; the combined supply from production and imports fails to meet the escalating demand (National Investment Commission, 2023, p. 74). Despite the establishment of a new political system in Iraq in 2003, which enjoys broad international support and the gradual lifting of sanctions, the electricity sector has not experienced substantial improvement. This is despite Iraq’s expenditure of over \$62 billion on electricity between 2003 and 2019. Contributing factors to this persistent supply-demand gap include terrorism, administrative and financial corruption, and inadequate planning and management (Kadhim & Vakhshouri, 2020, pp. 1-2).

Two decades following the 2003 occupation of Iraq, efforts to enhance the country’s electricity infrastructure have been insufficient, resulting in a sustained shortage. Citizens lack access to reliable electricity services and are compelled to rely on costly diesel generators to partially compensate for the deficit. Consequently, there is a pressing need to explore cleaner alternatives, such as renewable energy systems. However, the deployment and integration of these systems are impeded by structural challenges that extend beyond mere power generation issues and have paralyzed the electricity sector itself.

1. Supply Hours

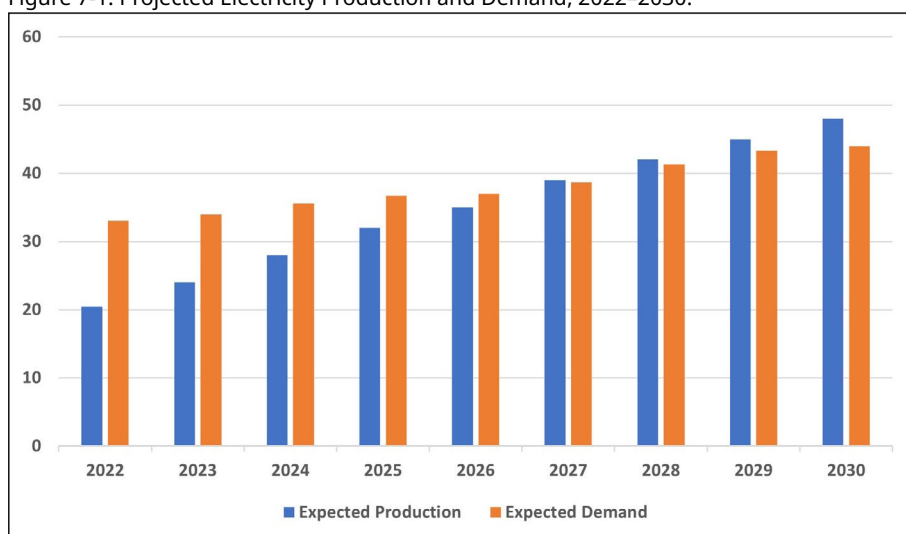
The government of al-Sūdānī has prioritized the electricity sector. Within its governmental agenda, three commitments were made to this sector: one was fulfilled last year, and two are currently underway. The Ministry of Electricity has initiated efforts to complete the construction of transformer stations and transmission and generation projects to bolster the grid, with a particular emphasis on clean energy, specifically solar power. Detailed plans with timelines were established to alleviate bottlenecks during the summer of 2023, especially in

Table 7-2: Projected Electricity Production and Demand, 2022–2030 (thousands of MW).

Year	Expected Production	Expected Demand	Gap	Production to Demand Ratio (%)
2022	20.5	33	-12.5	62.12
2023	24	34	-10	70.59
2024	28	35.6	-7.6	78.65
2025	32	36.7	-4.7	87.19
2026	35	37	-2	94.59
2027	39	38.7	0.3	100.78
2028	42	41.3	0.7	101.69
2029	45	43.3	1.7	103.93
2030	48	44	4	109.09

Source: Prepared by the researcher based on: Yassin, 2023; Istepanian & Raydan; 2022, p. 11.

Figure 7-1: Projected Electricity Production and Demand, 2022–2030.



Source: Prepared by the researcher based on Table 7-2.

the transmission and distribution sectors. Urgent maintenance and rehabilitation campaigns for all types of power plants were executed at maximum speed, resulting in a noticeable improvement in electricity supply hours across all Iraqi governorates.

According to data from 2023, Iraq generated electricity through 109 power plants, including gas, thermal, and hydroelectric facilities, achieving a peak production of approximately 24,000 MW (a 22% increase compared to the previous year). This production satisfies approximately 65% of the demand, estimated at 34,000 MW (with some sources estimating demand at 37,000 MW and peak demand reaching 40,000 MW). The Iraqi Ministry of Electricity also plans to implement combined cycle technology to generate electricity from waste heat, aiming to produce an additional 4,500 MW within the next two years.

Although precise future demand estimates are unavailable, most indicators suggest that demand will increase from 34,000 MW in 2023 to 35,600 MW in 2024. Production is expected to reach 28,000 MW, covering over 70% of total demand. Demand will continue to rise, reaching 36,700 MW in 2025, with production projected at 32,000 MW, achieving a coverage rate exceeding 87%. According to the Ministry of Electricity's plans, the electricity issue in Iraq will be resolved by 2027, when production is expected to reach 39,000 MW, roughly matching demand. These forecasts depend on the successful implementation of the ministry's plans and broader energy policies.

Among the most notable electricity-related developments in 2023 was the completion of the electrical interconnection with Turkey in April. The Ministry of Electricity anticipates that consumption fees will be reasonable. On June 11, 2023, work commenced on the interconnection grid with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, with a capacity of up to 500 MW. According to announced timelines, the interconnection system is expected to be completed by the end of 2024. Additionally, the interconnection with Jordan was finalized on September 30, 2023, enabling Iraq to receive 150 MW during the initial phase.

2. Iraq's Agreement with General Electric (February 2023)

Since 2003, the American corporation General Electric (GE) has maintained a significant presence in Iraq. In 2018, GE secured a \$15 billion contract, surpassing its German competitor, Siemens, to modernize the Iraqi electrical grid. Representing Iraq, the Ministry of Electricity entered into a five-year agreement with the GE group in February 2023 to construct new power generation facilities, expand the capacity of existing units, and develop new substations aimed at reducing grid congestion and enhancing the interconnection between the Jordanian and Iraqi electrical grids. This agreement follows a prior \$727 million contract signed in 2020 with the same company, which also encompassed the training of Iraqi personnel. Approximately two years before this latest agreement, a contract was signed with GE to maintain existing plants, preserving nearly 6,000 MW of capacity, with a contract value of approximately half a billion dollars.

The Iraqi government regards addressing the nationwide electricity shortage and fulfilling the population's increasing energy demands as an urgent priority to accelerate sustainable economic development. Efforts include enhancing efficiency and ensuring access to affordable, reliable, and sustainable energy (Benny, 2023). The memorandum further involves conducting studies to utilize associated petroleum gas (APG), constructing several secondary power stations with capacities of 400 kV and 132 kV to connect various Iraqi governorates, establishing a monitoring center for unit performance and operation, and promoting investment in energy infrastructure projects designed to improve electricity services.

In January 2023, Iraq also signed an agreement with the German company Siemens to add 6,000 MW to the grid using associated gas, maintain Siemens turbines operating in Iraq, develop solar and wind energy projects, establish transformer stations, and train Iraqi engineers. The Iraqi government continues

to collaborate with both General Electric and Siemens to prevent any single company from monopolizing the energy sector in Iraq (Mohammad, 2023).

3. Towards Sustainable Energy

Despite notable advancements in the development of renewable energy sources, including solar, wind, and geothermal power, as well as the emergence of electric vehicles, their contribution to the overall energy mix remains limited. Oil continues to fulfill the majority of transportation energy demands. The expansion of renewable energy (specifically wind, solar, and geothermal) has yet to substantially transform this landscape. Fossil fuels persist as the predominant energy sources globally, with oil accounting for 34% of global energy consumption, natural gas 23%, and coal 28%. The Middle East, particularly the Gulf region, holds nearly half of the world's easily accessible oil reserves, which significantly impedes the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy (Young et al., 2023, p. 8).

Iraq possesses considerable potential for renewable energy development, benefiting from high solar radiation levels, economically viable wind speeds in regions such as Dhī-Qār Governorate, and geothermal opportunities presented by hot springs. The generation of power from renewable sources could enhance Iraq's energy security and mitigate greenhouse gas emissions within the power sector, which constitutes nearly half of the country's total emissions due to its reliance on fossil-fuel-powered plants and extensive use of polluting diesel fuel. However, the integration of variable renewable energy systems, including solar photovoltaics and wind turbines, presents challenges to grid stability. These sources are intermittent and do not provide fully dispatchable electricity; power generation depends on weather conditions (i.e., sunlight and wind availability) rather than demand. Addressing these challenges requires flexible power systems, expansion and modernization of grid infrastructure, and the implementation of energy storage solutions. Additionally, substantial transmission capacity is necessary to transport electricity over long distances from renewable energy farms to consumption centers. Currently, the electrical grid is weak, characterized by underinvestment and significant energy losses, which constrain the integration of renewables and result in costly curtailment of renewable generation. Without grid-scale storage, renewable energy can only be supplied to the grid when capacity is available, leading to further curtailment. More broadly, systemic issues afflicting the energy sector will impede renewable energy integration. Large-scale projects face obstacles such as high transmission and distribution losses, an unfavorable commercial investment climate, and vested interests, while distributed renewable energy initiatives must overcome regulatory deficiencies, lack of consumer protections, and insufficient incentives (Young et al., 2023, p. 14).

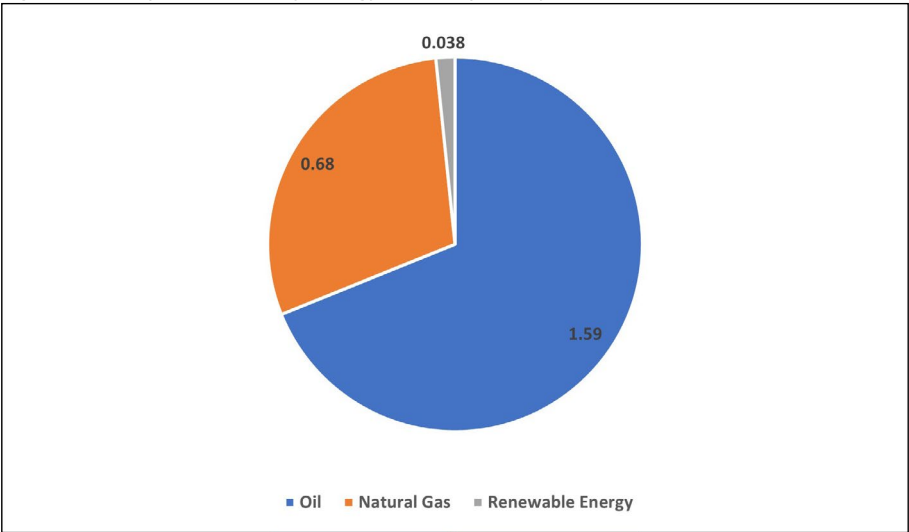
The year 2022 marked a significant milestone for sustainable energy in Iraq, with the approval of funding for multiple renewable energy projects totaling 1.4 trillion IQD (\$680 million), targeting a renewable energy production capacity of 10,000 MW by 2030. By 2025, approximately 2.75 GW of renewable energy from diverse sustainable sources is expected to be connected to the national

Table 7-3: Iraq's Total Primary Energy Consumption by Source for 2022.

Fuel Type	Exajoules	Percentage of Total Consumption (%)
Oil	1.476	68.83
Natural Gas	0.615	29.44
Hydroelectric Power	0.028	1.30
Solar Power	0.004	0.17
Other Renewable Energy	0.006	0.26
Total	2.31	100.00

Source: Prepared by the researcher based on: Energy Institute, 2023, p. 8.

Figure 7-2: Iraq's Total Primary Energy Consumption by Source for 2022.



Source: Prepared by the researcher based on Table 7-3.

grid. Notably, the UAE-based company Masdar is managing a 1 GW solar project comprising four solar plants: 100 MW each in Nīnawá and Maysān Governorates, 250 MW in al-Anbār Governorate, and 450 MW in Dhī-Qār Governorate. The Ministry of Electricity has also entered into an agreement with the Saudi firm ACWA Power to develop a 1,000 MW solar project in al-Najaf al-Ashraf Governorate (Istepanian & Raydan; 2022, p. 15). Furthermore, an agreement with the French company TotalEnergies aims to establish a 1 GW solar complex to supply the al-Baṣrah grid, with plans for ACWA Power to participate in this initiative (TotalEnergies, 2023). Additionally, a 750 MW solar project agreement has been reached with PowerChina (Iraqi Economists Network, 2023).

Data presented in Table 7-3 indicate that Iraq remains predominantly an oil-driven economy. In 2022, Iraq's total primary energy consumption reached 2.31 Exajoules, with oil accounting for 68.83%, natural gas 29.44%, and renewable energy constituting a marginal 1.65%, equivalent to 0.038 Exajoules. This energy consumption resulted in substantial carbon dioxide emissions, totaling 153.1 million tonnes in 2022, representing an increase of 16.7 million tonnes

compared to the previous year (Energy Institute, 2023, p. 12). Moreover, carbon dioxide equivalent emissions (including those from energy production, process emissions, methane, and flaring) amounted to 314.5 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent in 2022 (Energy Institute, 2023, p. 14).

4. Electricity Sector Challenges in 2023

The primary cause of the electricity shortage in Iraq is the dependence on a single energy source (fuel) while other countries increasingly adopt alternative and sustainable energy solutions, such as renewable energy, to address service deficiencies. Inefficiencies in electrical power plants contribute to various issues, including environmental concerns like pollution and operational difficulties related to distant fuel sources, which substantially reduce output capacity. Additionally, distribution inefficiencies within the electrical grid result in significant energy losses before reaching consumers. Overall, Iraq's electricity sector faces numerous challenges, the most critical of which include:

A. Gas Supply Issues

Variability in Iranian gas supplies to Iraqi power plants considerably affects the generation capacity of gas-fired plants. This shortage is primarily due to increased domestic demand in Iran during peak summer and winter seasons. Moreover, delays arise from Iraq's non-payment of dues for imported gas, with Iranian debts reaching \$1.8 billion in 2021, influenced by US sanctions. In July 2023, Iranian gas supplies decreased from 45 million cubic meters to 20 million cubic meters, causing the shutdown of multiple power plants in central and southern Iraq, including Baghdād. The affected facilities comprised al-Manşūrīyah, al-Şadr, al-Tājī, al-Rashīd, al-Khayrāt, al-Ḥillah, al-Najaf al-Ashraf, Shaṭṭ al-Başrah, al-Ḥaydarīyah, al-Najībīyah, and South Baghdād. The al-Rumaylah gas and investment plants were also impacted. Consequently, supply hours declined markedly after the electrical system lost approximately 5,000 MW. This issue reemerged in December 2023 due to maintenance on Iranian supply pipelines and decreasing temperatures in Iran, leading to reduced supply hours during December 2023 and January 2024 (Ministry of Electricity, 2023, July 4). Furthermore, the Ministry of Electricity incurs annual costs of approximately 8 trillion IQD to cover Iranian gas bills and gas transported via pipelines through the Kurdistan Region.

Satellite imagery from 2022 indicates that Iraq continues to flare a substantial volume of associated gas. Iraq flares 17.5 billion cubic meters, ranking second globally after the Russian Federation, which flares approximately 26 billion cubic meters (World Bank, 2023, p. 6). In 2021, Iraq was ranked third behind Russia and Iran, the latter flaring about 18.5 billion cubic meters (BP, 2022, p. 13). According to the Iraqi government, Iraq flares 1,200 MMSCFD (million standard cubic feet per day) of gas while importing 1,000 MMSCFD from Iran, at an annual cost of approximately \$4 billion.

B. Sabotage Incidents

Despite significant improvements in security following the defeat of ISIS and the liberation of Iraqi governorates, attacks on power transmission lines persist,

though at a reduced frequency compared to previous years. These sabotage acts, although infrequent, disrupt power transmission and adversely affect the overall performance of the electrical grid. For instance, at the end of July 2023, the Ṣalāḥ-al-Dīn Thermal-Ḥadīthah transmission line (400 kV) was targeted by explosives, which notably impaired grid performance. Some sabotage activities occur in challenging terrains, such as sand dune areas, complicating repair efforts and extending downtime.

C. Financial Allocations

The Ministry of Electricity requires substantial financial resources to enhance generation capacity to meet demand. The 2023 budget allocated approximately 15.5 trillion IQD to the Ministry, with 11.61 trillion IQD earmarked for operational expenses, leaving only about 3.89 trillion IQD for investments (Official Gazette of Iraq, 2023, p. 62, Table B). This allocation is insufficient to address the Ministry's needs for constructing new power stations, generation units, transformer stations, and transmission networks.

II. al-Fāw Water Desalination Project: Initiation and Initial Challenges

Water resources in al-Baṣrah Governorate face multiple challenges, including a shortage of potable water resulting from decreased inflows from the Tigris River, the encroachment of the salt wedge in the Shaṭṭ al-'Arab, population growth, inadequate water management, and inefficient usage. In response, the al-Fāw water desalination project commenced in August 2023, beginning with preparatory activities and preliminary works prior to transferring responsibilities to specialized firms.

This project represents Iraq's first seawater desalination initiative and is deemed a strategic priority for al-Baṣrah Governorate. Its objective is to alleviate water scarcity and supply potable water to regions north and south of al-Baṣrah city center, the Grand al-Fāw Port, east and west of Abī al-Khaṣīb, al-Nashwah, Shaṭṭ al-'Arab, al-Dayr, al-Fāw, and al-Zubayr, extending further to Khawr al-Zubayr, Ṣafwān, and Umm Qaṣr. The project is designed with a capacity of one million cubic meters per day, considering population growth and increasing demand for drinking water through 2060.

The General Directorate of Water at the Ministry of Planning incorporated this strategic project into the investment plan of the Ministry of Construction and Housing. This inclusion followed the Directorate's coordination with relevant authorities to prepare all necessary requirements, including land allocation and the mapping of transmission line routes spanning approximately 357 km. An executive body was established to oversee project procedures, supervise construction activities, and engage the Austrian firm ILF as an international consultant to conduct technical and economic feasibility studies and finalize technical specifications. Additionally, a specialized task force from the General Directorate of Water

was formed to support al-Baṣrah Governorate in ensuring the project adheres to established specifications and timelines.

Despite the project's initiation, both the local government of al-Baṣrah and the federal government have faced criticism from former members of the al-Baṣrah Governorate Council concerning the project's slow progress, noting that the approval process dates back to 2011. Critics also highlighted a 25% reduction in the project's production capacity to 750,000 cubic meters and costs amounting to 3 trillion IQD. Moreover, the project will operate independently from the al-Fāw power plant, a proposed 3,000 MW facility slated for investment, which implies increased operational costs for the desalination plant. These costs, encompassing energy, maintenance, and filter replacement, are estimated at 200 billion IQD annually and will be deducted from the al-Baṣrah Governorate budget (al-Marsā News, 2023, November 5).

The Chinese state-owned Shanghai Electric Group currently leads as the preferred contractor for the project. Negotiations are ongoing with the al-Baṣrah local government following authorization from the Council of Ministers for the governorate to contract and implement the project, subsequent to the transfer of financial allocations from the Ministry of Housing, Construction, and Municipalities.

III. Health Services

The health sector represents one of the most critical domains affected by the country's political, social, economic, and security contexts. Factors such as political tensions, the political quota system, social challenges, per capita income, poverty levels, malnutrition, security conditions, and the population's access to clean drinking water and sanitation exert both direct and indirect influences on the healthcare system. These elements often exacerbate the pressures faced by health institutions already contending with complex issues (Ministry of Health, 2014, p. 5).

A pivotal development in the health sector during 2023 was the implementation of the Health Insurance Law, enacted by the Iraqi Parliament in October 2020. This initiative commenced with the pilot launch of the health insurance registration form, which had experienced significant delays due to prevailing national circumstances. It is estimated that between 250,000 and 300,000 citizens have registered through this form. Under the scheme, registrants are required to pay mandatory health insurance premiums, with an insurance company licensed by the Ministry covering approximately 75% of surgical procedure costs, averaging 5 million IQD per operation. Individuals covered by the Social Welfare Network receive full protection. Additionally, employees contribute 1% of their monthly salaries in exchange for health coverage extending to themselves, their spouses, children under 18, and non-employed parents. Healthcare services are scheduled to commence six months following registration. Notably, certain Iraqi ministries, including the Ministry of Interior, had previously adopted health insurance laws for their personnel through alternative mechanisms.

Table 7-4: Health Reality in Iraq according to the 2022–2023 Statistical Abstract (Including the Kurdistan Region).

Hospitals and Health Institutions		Beds and Patients		Medical Professionals	
Total Hospitals	482	Hospital Beds	51,538	Specialist Doctors	13,810
Other Health Institutions	4,084	Inpatients	2,669,372	General Practitioners	27,017
Public Medical Clinics	358	Total Inpatient Days	5,825,179	Dentists	18,796
Total	4,924	Bed Occupancy Rate	45.4%	Pharmacists	21,316
Public Hospitals	271	-	-	Health Professionals	80,939

Source: Prepared by the researcher based on (CSO, 2022).

In 2023, subsequent to Iraq's transition out of the COVID-19 pandemic phase, except for the recent variant (JN.1), which presents symptoms resembling those of influenza, there was a relative improvement in health conditions. This improvement was evidenced by enhanced medicine supplies compared to prior years and the establishment of several new health centers across various governorates, equipped with modern medical technologies. According to 2021 data, the total number of public and private hospitals, inclusive of the Kurdistan Region, reached 482, with 151 located in the region and 109 in Baghdād Governorate. Other health institutions numbered 4,084, including 358 public medical clinics. The aggregate number of hospital beds was 51,538, with a bed occupancy rate of 45.4%, and approximately 2.7 million hospital admissions were recorded (CSO, 2022).

Despite these advancements, the health sector continues to face significant challenges, including insufficient bed availability in government hospitals and a pronounced shortage of operating theaters. Consequently, patients frequently endure extended waiting periods for surgical procedures, with wait times varying according to the specialist and type of surgery. Low-income patients, in particular, often experience delays due to their inability to afford private healthcare, even in urgent and critical cases where postponement is inadvisable.

IV. Municipal Services

The municipal services sector represents the third and lowest tier of government, positioned closest to local communities. Municipal governments are primarily responsible for the development and delivery of essential services to society. Some scholars argue that a municipality that fails to fulfill its service provision obligations effectively forfeits its legitimacy. Public trust in government is largely contingent upon the perceived quality of services provided to local residents, including healthcare, sanitation, transportation, and infrastructure (Herian, 2014, pp. 82-84). In Iraq, service delivery exhibits significant deficiencies in both coverage and quality. These shortcomings stem from the country's prolonged

exposure to conflict, sanctions, occupation, terrorism, mismanagement, and pervasive financial and administrative corruption. The following section summarizes the status of key municipal services during 2023.

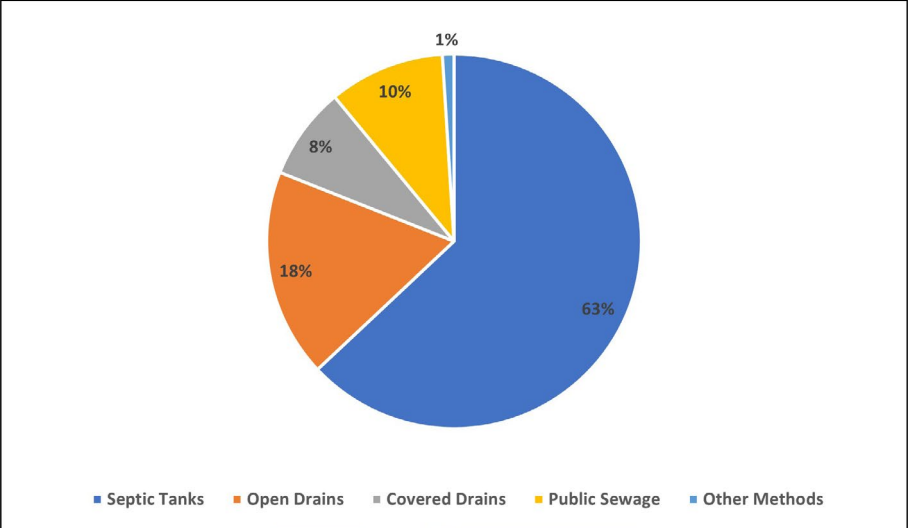
1. Sanitation Services

Sanitation constitutes a fundamental public service that necessitates the provision of adequate water quantity and quality to ensure the uninterrupted operation of sewage systems and solid waste management.

According to the most recent official data presented in the 2022–2023 Statistical Abstract, the public sewage network covers a relatively small proportion of the population, with coverage varying across governorates. On average, only 9.4% of the total population (excluding the Kurdistan Region), predominantly urban residents, have access to the public sewage network. Conversely, 63% of the population, mainly in rural areas, depend on septic tanks. Additionally, 8.4% utilize covered drains, 17.4% rely on open drains, and 1.3% lack specified sanitation facilities (CSO, 2022, p. 22).

The release of untreated wastewater poses a significant threat to freshwater quality; thus, the adoption of advanced wastewater treatment technologies is imperative. Treated wastewater should be repurposed for applications such as irrigation, vehicle washing, cleaning photovoltaic solar panels, and other technical uses. Further measures include the replacement of conventional water fixtures in kitchens and bathrooms with low-flow, water-efficient alternatives, complemented by public awareness campaigns promoting responsible water consumption. Moreover, the implementation of smart water meters for all subscribers would facilitate real-time monitoring of water usage and early detection of leaks, thereby enhancing water conservation efforts.

Figure 7-3: Types of Sanitation Services in Iraq.



Source: Prepared by the researcher based on (CSO, 2022).

2. Waste Collection Services

Iraq is currently confronting a substantial crisis in waste collection, which remains far from achieving sustainable resolution. Data from the Iraqi Ministry of Environment indicate that the average individual in Iraq generates approximately 1.2 to 2 kg of waste daily. Nationally, waste production is estimated at approximately 11 million tonnes annually (30,120 tonnes per day). Projections suggest this figure will escalate to 30.4 million tonnes per year by 2050, representing nearly a threefold increase attributable to human activities and population growth (al-Şāfi & al-Şarrāf, 2023, p. 3).

Recent detailed data for the period 2018–2023 reveal that the total waste collected, including the Kurdistan Region, was approximately 11.9 million tonnes in 2022, increasing to 12 million tonnes in 2023. The volume of ordinary waste collected in 2023 was approximately 11.9 million tonnes. The average per capita waste generation rate was 2.5 kg/day in 2022, slightly declining to 2.4 kg/day in 2023, as summarized in the table below.

The waste collection coverage in urban areas, approximately 91%, suggests that certain regions still experience uncollected waste. Nationally, only about 60% of the population benefits from these services. Although the number of transfer stations is declining, the number of disposal facilities is increasing. Of the 224 final disposal facilities, only 74 are classified as sanitary landfills, while the remaining 149 sites function as open dumpsites. This situation has intensified pollution of soil, rivers, and groundwater due to seepage from exposed dump sites. Additionally, the dispersion of uncollected waste in rural areas and its subsequent flow into waterways and rivers have significantly exacerbated pollution levels (Ministry of Construction, Housing and Municipalities, et al., 2022, p. 1).

Table 7-5: Summary of Waste Management in Iraq (2018–2023).

Indicators	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023*
Total number of municipal institutions	261	265	265	265	267	267
% of population served by waste collection	63.5	63.7	64.6	65.7	64.1	65
% of urban population served by waste collection	88.8	88.7	89.9	90.7	90.9	91
Amount of waste collected (million tonnes/year)	18.1	17.3	19.7	17.4	11.9	12
Amount of ordinary waste collected (million tonnes/year)	9.6	10.6	11.8	11.2	-	11.9
Average waste generated per capita (kg/day)	1.3	1.4	1.5	1.3	2.5	2.4
Number of sanitary landfills with environmental approval	64	67	74	72	74	74
Number of landfills without environmental approval	149	157	146	149	149	N/A

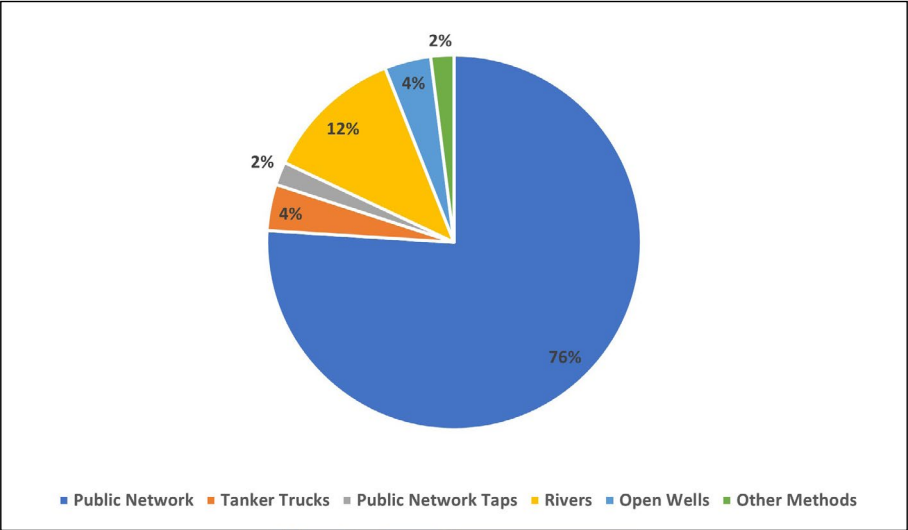
Source: Prepared by the researcher based on data from the Central Statistical Organization (CSO), Ministry of Planning. (*) Preliminary data.

V. Other Services

1. Potable Water

According to the most recent data presented in the 2022–2023 Statistical Abstract, approximately 76.3% of the overall population obtains water for domestic use through the public network. Within the Kurdistan Region, this proportion reaches 76.9% of the regional population. The highest access rate is observed in the capital, Baghdad, where 98.3% of inhabitants utilize the public network for domestic water supply. A mere 1.8% of the total population across Iraqi governorates access water for domestic purposes via public network taps. Additionally, 4.4% rely on tanker trucks, 12% source water from rivers, 3.4% from open wells, and 2.2% through other methods.

Figure 7-4: Methods of Obtaining Water for Domestic Purposes.



Source: Prepared by the researcher based on (CSO, 2022).

2. Traffic Congestion Relief Projects

In 2023, al-Sūdānī’s government prioritized efforts to mitigate traffic congestion in the capital. These initiatives, overseen directly by al-Sūdānī himself, garnered considerable attention from both political and social sectors, with al-Sūdānī assuming a role akin to that of the Governor of Baghdad or the Mayor of its Municipality. The initial phase, launched in March 2023, comprised fifteen projects focused on the development and construction of roads and bridges in areas identified as major traffic bottlenecks within Baghdad.

Subsequent to the first phase, additional projects were introduced to further address congestion issues. These were spearheaded by the Ministry of Construction and Housing in collaboration with the al-Ruṣāfah Municipality. Notable among these are two overpasses connecting the al-Ruṣāfah Municipality east of

Table 7-6: The First Phase of Traffic Congestion Relief Projects in Baghdād.

No.	Project Name	Details
1	Road linking Muḥammad al-Qāsim Expressway to Kirkūk-Baghdād Road	The road traverses the al-Basātīn and al-Suraydāt neighborhoods
2	Overpass linking Army Canal to Muḥammad al-Qāsim Expressway	Situated on the al-Rustamīyah side; includes widening of adjacent streets
3	Overpass on Army Canal (1)	Connects al-Dākhil Street to Palestine Street (al-Muhandisīn neighborhood)
4	Overpass on Army Canal (2)	Links the Jamīlah area with the extension of al-Jihād-Bāb al-Mu'aẓẓam Street
5	Street 77 Overpass	Connects Street 77 at the al-Quds-al-'Ubūr intersection
6	al-Za'farānīyah Overpass and Approaches (Gaza)	Connects al-Za'farānīyah to the al-Dawrah-Yūsufīyah Expressway; extends from Companies Street to Ḥārith bin Kaladah Street
7	Development of Qurṭubah Intersection	Located on Port Said Street
8	al-Maṣāfī Intersection Overpass	Links the Two-Story Bridge to the Suspension Bridge; includes a tunnel at the Aḥmad 'Urābī Square intersection
9	al-Dawrah-al-Sayyidīyah Intersection Overpass	Comprises two overpasses to improve the intersection on the al-Ḥillah-Baghdād road
10	New Central Bank Bridge	Connects Zaha Hadid Street (Ruṣāfah side) to the approaches of al-Nusūr Square (Karkh side)
11	al-Nusūr Square Development Project	Encompasses development of the square, two overpasses (one over the railway toward Umm al-Ṭubūl intersection), and tunnels
12	'Adan and al-Nusūr Squares Development Project	Includes two overpasses
13	al-Shālījīyah and al-Ṭūbjī Intersection Development	-
14	al-Ṭalā'ī Overpass	Connects the overpass to al-Bayjīyah Street (Street 80) near al-Turāth University, passing through Sheikh Ma'rūf al-Karkhī Cemetery and al-Muthannā Airport
15	Rasheed Camp Intersection Development	Enhances the intersection of Rasheed Camp with the al-Dawrah Expressway (Mission Complex) via an overpass and tunnel

Source: Prepared by the researcher based on data from the websites of the Roads and Bridges Department and the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministries.

the Canal, the Qurṭubah overpass, and the Fine Arts Intersection project, which became operational in early 2024. Furthermore, the design for the Fourth International Road, part of the congestion relief strategy, was completed. According to the Ministry of Construction and Housing, many projects from the initial phase are expected to be finalized by mid-2024, significantly contributing to the alleviation of traffic congestion in Baghdād Governorate. Plans for a second and third phase of projects are contingent upon securing financial resources for 2024.

The Ministry of Construction, Housing, Municipalities, and Public Works remains one of the most proactive ministries in this domain, primarily through its departments, notably the General Authority for Roads and Bridges and Municipalities, which have taken direct oversight of these critical projects. Nevertheless, these initiatives face several challenges, including the procurement of financial allocations for subsequent phases, jurisdictional overlaps among ministries and authorities, and the complexity arising from multiple landowners, particularly concerning the Baghdad Metro project.

Upon their anticipated completion starting mid-2024, these projects are projected to offer partial solutions to the intricate traffic challenges in Baghdad. Contributing factors such as rapid population growth and increased demand for private and public transportation, exacerbated by a rising number of women drivers, continue to intensify the problem. The completion of the Baghdad Metro is expected to substantially mitigate congestion by expanding transportation options available to city residents.

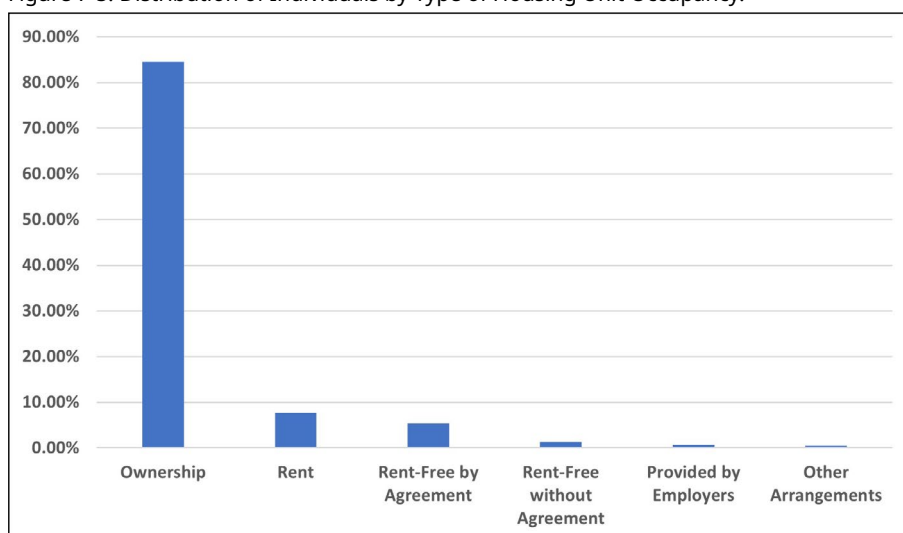
3. The Housing Problem

The housing issue is multifaceted, intersecting with various sectors and shaped by the broader national context. Since the 1950s, the Iraqi housing sector has encountered numerous challenges. From the mid-1980s onward, housing conditions have worsened due to the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), the 1991 Gulf War, United Nations sanctions (1990–2003), terrorism, occupation, and subsequent administrative and financial corruption post-2003. Despite multiple studies, strategies, and developmental initiatives during this period, these efforts failed to ameliorate the situation. Presently, the housing sector faces several critical problems, including the proliferation of informal settlements (slums), overcrowding, and deterioration of the housing stock. Recent estimates indicated a housing shortage ranging from 1 to 1.5 million units; however, the Ministry of Planning's 2023 estimates suggest this figure has escalated to 4 million units. Additionally, approximately 9% of Iraq's population resides in informal settlements, indicating a need to construct between 5 and 6 million housing units to address the crisis effectively (Shafaq News, 2023, December 7).

In 2010, the Iraqi government, in collaboration with the United Nations, formulated a new National Housing Policy aimed at addressing sectoral challenges. The policy identifies seven primary problem areas (al-Hafith et al., 2019, p. 3):

1. **Housing Unit Construction:** The rate of construction is insufficient to meet the demands of the rapidly growing population.
2. **Land Management:** There is a shortage of adequate residential land for housing projects, as much of the land is owned by various ministries or is privately held.
3. **Financial Resources:** Funding allocated for housing projects is inadequate.
4. **Infrastructure:** Existing infrastructure does not sufficiently support the housing sector's needs.

Figure 7-5: Distribution of Individuals by Type of Housing Unit Occupancy.



Source: Prepared by the researcher based on (CSO, 2022, p. 28).

5. **Housing Stock Maintenance:** A segment of the housing stock is deteriorating due to increased demand.
6. **Building Materials:** Local availability of building materials is limited; a significant proportion is imported and costly.
7. **Slums and Informal Settlements:** These are expanding rapidly, resulting in adverse social consequences.

Successive Iraqi governments have initiated various programs to bolster the housing sector. Data from 2021 indicate a substantial increase in building permits issued in Iraq (excluding the Kurdistan Region governorates), rising to 32,720 permits with an estimated value of approximately 2.94 trillion IQD, compared to 17,509 permits valued at 1.577 trillion IQD in 2020. This increase facilitated the addition of 13,182 new housing units in the private sector, alongside 15 new residential buildings, 394 commercial buildings, 9 industrial buildings, 4 social-purpose buildings, and one religious facility (CSO, 2022). According to the 2022–2023 Statistical Abstract, 84.5% of the population own their housing units, 7.7% rent, 5.4% occupy units rent-free by agreement with the owner, 1.3% reside rent-free without agreement, 0.7% receive housing from their employer, and 0.5% live under other arrangements.

In 2023, Iraq continued to face significant challenges in the housing sector, resulting in the expansion of informal settlements across all governorates, with a pronounced impact in Baghdad. The Ministry of Planning incorporated strategic objectives within its national development plans to address the housing shortage. Concurrently, the Ministry of Construction and Housing formulated a comprehensive, multi-tiered strategy under the national housing policies aimed at alleviating the crisis and ensuring the provision of adequate housing for citizens.

Table 7-7: Housing Sector Investment Opportunities for 2023 by Governorate (Excluding the Kurdistan Region).

Governorate	Number of Opportunities	Land Ownership
Kirkūk	15	Ministry of Youth and Sports, local governorate property, Ministry of Finance, Kirkūk Municipal Directorate
al-Baṣrah	6	Ministry of Youth and Sports
Nīnawá	6	State Real Estate, Tal 'Afar Municipal Directorate, Rabī'ah Municipal Directorate
Baghdād	5	Martyrs Foundation, Ministry of Youth and Sports
Diyālá	4	Martyrs Foundation, Ministry of Youth and Sports
Dhī-Qār	4	Martyrs Foundation, Ministry of Youth and Sports
Wāsiṭ	3	Martyrs Foundation, Ministry of Youth and Sports
Bābil	3	Martyrs Foundation, al-Midḥatīyah Municipal Directorate, al-Ḥillah Municipal Directorate
al-Anbār	2	Martyrs Foundation, Ministry of Youth and Sports
al-Dīwānīyah	2	Ministry of Youth and Sports
Karbalā'	2	Karbalā' Municipality
Ṣalāḥ-al-Dīn	1	Ministry of Youth and Sports
Total	53	

Source: Prepared by the researcher based on (National Investment Commission, 2023, pp. 172–176).

The National Investment Commission, in collaboration with investment commissions in governorates, sought to mitigate the housing deficit by promoting investment opportunities in this critical sector, exemplified by projects such as the new al-Jawāhīrī City in Abū-Ghurayb and al-Janā'in City in Bābil.

Ongoing efforts focus on the completion of both active and stalled housing projects to secure sufficient housing in alignment with developmental plans designed to reduce overcrowding and occupancy rates. Notable projects include Bismāyah City in Baghdād, the al-Jawharah Residential Complex south of Baghdād, New al-Ḥabbānīyah City in al-Anbār, Sindibād City in al-Baṣrah, al-Zubaydīyah City in Wāsiṭ, and the Dīfāf Karbalā' Residential City project. In addition, a contract was executed for the 'Alī al-Wardī City project, recognized as the largest residential development in Iraq, while al-Tharthār City has been incorporated into the strategic framework for urban development across Iraqi governorates. Additional initiatives aim to bridge the housing disparity among governorates and incentivize investors to develop new cities under the governorate development strategy, thereby generating employment opportunities. This endeavor necessitates coordination among ministries and land management authorities, including the Baghdād Mayoralty, local administrations, and urban planning departments, to facilitate land zoning, allocation to citizens, and the promotion of attractive investment prospects (National Investment Commission, 2023, pp. 184-186).

According to data from the Investment Commission, 53 investment opportunities were available in the housing sector across various Iraqi governorates in 2023. The Kirkūk Governorate led with 15 opportunities for residential complex

development, followed by al-Başrah and Nīnawá with six opportunities each. Conversely, certain governorates reported no investment opportunities, as indicated by the National Investment Commission.

4. Transport

The transport sector holds a significant economic and social function globally, serving as the primary means through which businesses operate and individuals conduct their daily activities. By providing essential infrastructure services (such as roads, maritime routes, railways, bridges, vehicles, aircraft, and ships) this sector acts as a catalyst for achieving socio-economic goals. Fundamentally, the transport sector facilitates individual mobility and the movement of goods and services (Ministry of Transportation, New Zealand, 2016, p. 4).

Iraq's land road network extends over 45,990 km, marking an increase of 411 km from the previous year. This network comprises 6,640 km of main roads, 8,829 km of secondary roads, and 18,226 km of rural roads. The private sector owns approximately 7.026 million vehicles, including around 1.604 million in the Kurdistan Region. Public and mixed sectors possess roughly 141,830 vehicles. As of 2021, the railway system spans 2,893 km, consisting of 1,697 km of main tracks and 676 km of branch lines, with no expansion recorded from the prior year. The locomotive fleet numbered 36, including 24 main locomotives and 12 shunting locomotives.

Construction has begun on the initial phase of the al-Shūmalī-al-Qāsim Expressway, intended to connect al-Najaf al-Ashraf Governorate to the international highway over a distance of 16.48 km. Progress is advancing rapidly, with foundations completed for three of the eleven bridges along this route. In 2023, the government prioritized the Iraq's Development Road, a strategic project linking the Gulf states to southern Turkey. This project encompasses a highway of 1,190 km (Path HWB) and a railway of 1,176 km (Path RW1), designed to support high-speed trains.

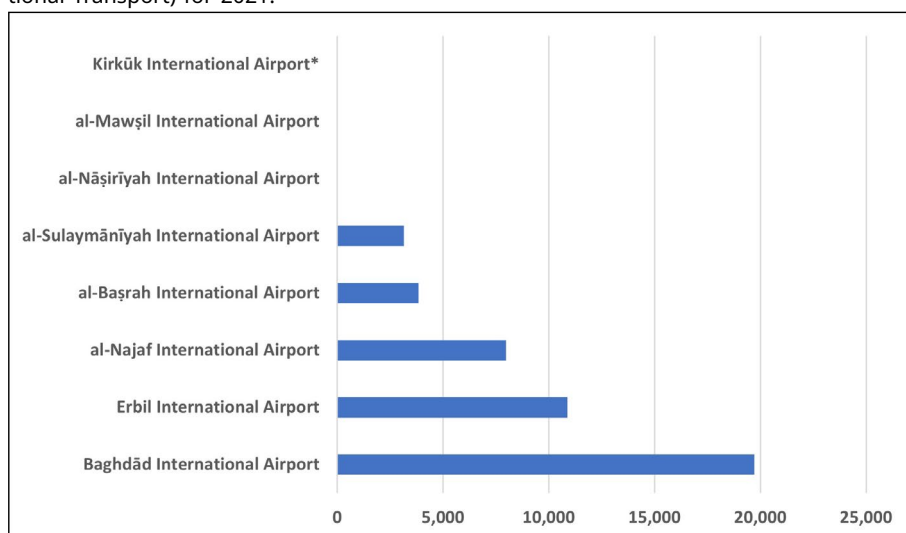
Regarding air transport, data from 2021 (Table 7-8) indicate that international arrivals and departures totaled 45,556 flights, transporting 4,215,398 passengers across the airports of Baghdād, Erbil, al-Najaf, al-Başrah, and al-Sulaymānīyah. Conversely, the airports in al-Nāşirīyah, al-Mawşil, and Kirkūk recorded no flight activity. Since 2015, Iraqi aviation has been prohibited from operating in European airspace due to non-compliance with the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) standards and other relevant international aviation bodies. This ban resulted from 230 recorded violations related to safety and operational standards, attributed to deficiencies in the management of the Civil Aviation Authority and Iraqi Airways. The government's 2018 decision to separate the Civil Aviation Authority from the Ministry of Transport further complicated the issue, as some experts argue that the Ministry is the official entity responsible for international correspondence. Efforts to lift the ban are ongoing; however, according to the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA), ten companies, including Iraqi Airways, remain sanctioned.

Table 7-8: Number of International Flights and Passenger Traffic for Iraqi Airports (International Transport) for 2021.

Airports	Number of International Flights (Arrivals + Departures)	% of Total Airports	Passenger Traffic (Arrivals + Departures)	% of Total Airports
Baghdād International Airport	19,711	43.3	1,848,660	43.9
Erbil International Airport	10,883	23.9	1,018,645	24.2
Najaf International Airport	7,978	17.5	871,388	20.7
al-Başrah International Airport	3,838	8.4	246,568	5.8
al-Sulaymānīyah International Airport	3,146	6.9	230,137	5.5
al-Nāşirīyah International Airport	0	0.0	0	0.0
al-Mawşil International Airport	0	0.0	0	0.0
Kirkūk International Airport (Opened on October 16, 2022).				
Total	45,556	100.0	4,215,398	100.0

Source: Bakhīt, 2023, p. 22.

Figure 7-6: Number of International Flights at Iraqi Airports for Various Carriers (International Transport) for 2021.



Source: Prepared by the researcher based on Table 7-8.

Concerning maritime transport, data from 2021 reveal that 1,739 cargo ships arrived at Iraqi ports, with 943 departures. Imported cargo amounted to 17,118 tonnes, while exports totaled 10,236 tonnes. Umm Qaşr Port leads in

cargo volume, followed by Khawr al-Zubayr Port and Abū Fulūs Port (CSO, 2022). Construction on the Grand al-Fāw Port progressed throughout 2023, with the second pier completed and overall completion at 85% for the five planned piers. The full port is expected to become operational by early 2025.

VI. Agenda for 2024

Following a comprehensive review of public services in 2023 based on available official data, the government's agenda for 2024 will continue to support various service projects across multiple economic sectors, as outlined below:

1. Electricity

The government will persist in adopting and supporting initiatives within the electricity sector, encompassing generation, transformation, and transmission, to enhance the national grid's capacity. This includes comprehensive maintenance operations in preparation for the summer of 2024 and subsequent years. Efforts will proceed according to strategic plans aimed at utilizing associated petroleum gas (APG) and reducing gas imports, which remain significant challenges for the sector. Furthermore, renewable energy projects, particularly solar power, will be initiated to strengthen the grid and mitigate carbon emissions. According to Ministry projections, electricity production is anticipated to reach approximately 28,000 MW during the upcoming summer.

2. Municipal Services

The government program prioritizes municipal services due to their direct impact on citizens' daily lives, maintaining them at the forefront of the agenda for the coming year. Support will be extended to sanitation projects and the continued establishment of water purification plants, especially in response to declining water inflows from neighboring countries, notably Turkey. Emphasis will be placed on enhancing water-use efficiency across various sectors through well-researched plans and strategies. Additionally, waste management will remain a complex issue, with particular attention to unhealthy disposal methods such as dumping in rivers, burning, or burial near urban areas, which contribute to water, air, and soil pollution.

3. Traffic Congestion Relief Projects

The government will expedite traffic relief projects in the capital, Baghdād, through continuous monitoring and round-the-clock operations to achieve advanced completion rates and facilitate early openings. These efforts aim to alleviate congestion problems experienced by residents of Baghdād and other Iraqi governorates. Projects are expected to commence in the second half of 2024.

4. Transport

The transport sector faces challenges due to outdated road networks, bridges, infrastructure, and public transportation means. Thus, it will be a key focus for the government in the upcoming year. The Baghdād Metro project is regarded

as one of the most critical initiatives for sector development. Additional efforts include constructing new roads and railways, upgrading existing infrastructure, importing modern trains, and improving airports, all of which are expected to significantly enhance sector performance. Tens of kilometers of expressways are projected to be added to the current network as they are completed successively.

5. The Housing Problem

Given the high population growth rate (estimated at nearly one million additional people annually) housing remains a top government priority. This issue is exacerbated by the substantial increase in real estate prices driven by speculation and money laundering activities. The government plans to introduce new residential complexes, develop housing strategies, encourage private sector participation, and provide soft loans. These measures are anticipated to stabilize the upward trend in real estate prices following the addition of tens of thousands of new housing units across various Iraqi governorates during the year.

VII. Problems of the Coming Year

The government continues to confront persistent challenges, many of which appear resistant to resolution. Among the most critical issues are the following:

1. Administrative and Financial Corruption

Although this issue predates 2003, it has expanded significantly, becoming a major impediment to service improvement. Iraq's consistently low rankings in international transparency and corruption indices have become a familiar matter that no longer surprises anyone. According to the 2023 Transparency International report, Iraq ranked 154th out of 180 countries, with a score of 23. In contrast, other Arab nations, such as the United Arab Emirates, achieved higher rankings, with the UAE placed 26th globally and a score of 68.

2. Political Quotas and Financial Mismanagement

This longstanding political problem has affected all previous governments to varying degrees. The current government struggles to address it effectively, rendering it a significant barrier to improved governance.

3. The Water Problem

Despite favorable rainfall this season, water scarcity remains a pressing concern. Addressing this issue requires managing water demand across domestic, industrial, and agricultural sectors through measures such as implementing smart meters, enhancing irrigation techniques, utilizing lined canals, recycling drainage water, maintaining diplomatic dialogue with Turkey and Iran, and expanding water storage capacity.

4. Environmental Challenges

Iraq faces accelerated climate change impacts, ranking among the five most vulnerable countries globally. Projections indicate a 2°C increase in average

annual temperature by 2050 and a 9% decrease in average annual rainfall, with the most significant reduction (17%) expected during December through February. Additional projections include increased heatwave frequency, fewer frost days, and diminished maximum rainfall over five-day periods. Water runoff is anticipated to decline by 22% nationwide. Desertification continues, with an annual loss of 100 km² of arable land and over 40% of the country now desertified (KAPITA, 2022, p. 14). Greenhouse gas emissions rose notably in 2021, totaling 389.91 million tonnes of carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide, compared to 360.88 million tonnes in 2020.

5. Increasing Numbers of Graduates

The expansion of Iraqi higher education, including 71 recognized private institutions for the 2023–2024 academic year alongside 40 public universities and institutes, has resulted in a substantial influx of graduates into a labor market unable to absorb them. This situation exerts considerable pressure on the government to create public sector employment opportunities, likely leading to widespread protests by graduates seeking government positions. Consequently, government efforts may shift from service provision to addressing graduate employment demands.

VIII. Obligations for 2024

In response to the challenges confronting the government in 2024 and subsequent years, several priorities must be adopted as key governmental objectives. These priorities include:

1. The government's continued adherence to the clauses outlined in its program, following the specific timelines to which it has committed.
2. Sustaining efforts to alleviate traffic congestion and advancing the completion of the Baghdad Metro project.
3. Ongoing enhancement of the electrical power grid by increasing generation, transformation, and transmission capacities, alongside comprehensive grid maintenance.
4. Progressing in the improvement of municipal services and elevating their quality in alignment with the goals of the government program.
5. Continuing housing initiatives and accelerating the addition of new residential units to augment supply and mitigate the housing crisis.

IX. Strategies to Address Problems and Obligations

1. Supporting the private sector to strengthen its role in the economy and involve it in service provision to reduce the burden on the public sector.
2. Continuing renewable energy projects due to their beneficial environmental impacts.

3. Implementing sound water policies grounded in scientific and realistic principles that reflect the nature of the country's supply and demand challenges.
4. Supporting the housing sector by encouraging private investment and regulating the sale of residential units to correspond with the population's income levels.
5. Accelerating the utilization of associated petroleum gas (APG) to fuel gas-fired power plants, thereby reducing dependence on imported gas and minimizing environmentally harmful emissions.
6. Enhancing the nation's refining capacity by expanding refining units and reducing the importation of petroleum derivatives, which impose a significant financial burden exceeding \$4 billion annually on the state treasury.
7. Increasing financial allocations for the services sector, given its critical importance to citizens' lives.
8. Completing projects that have been delayed for various reasons, particularly those hindered by insufficient financial allocations.

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8.

Anti-Corruption Efforts

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Corruption continues to afflict the Iraqi state and its institutions, depleting resources, diverting them from sustainable development initiatives, undermining the democratic system, and, if left unaddressed, facilitating the emergence of “deep state” entities. This section offers an analysis of corruption indicators for 2023, the efforts undertaken by pertinent anti-corruption bodies, and the most significant cases reported during the year. Furthermore, it includes a case study focusing on corruption within higher education institutions.

I. Corruption Indicators 2022–2023

The 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), published by Transparency International, indicates that the majority of countries globally have made minimal or no progress in combating public sector corruption. The global average CPI score has remained steady at 43 for the twelfth consecutive year, with two-thirds of countries scoring below 50, signifying pervasive corruption challenges. The Rule of Law Index concurrently reveals a global decline in judicial system performance. Nations with the lowest scores on this index also exhibit correspondingly low CPI scores, underscoring a clear correlation between access to justice and corruption levels. Both authoritarian regimes and democratic leaders who compromise judicial integrity contribute to increased impunity for corrupt acts; in some instances, they tacitly endorse such behavior by neglecting to penalize offenders. The ramifications of these dynamics are observable across various countries worldwide.

Iraq is ranked 154th out of 180 countries in the CPI, reflecting a modest improvement of three positions compared to the previous year (see Table 8-1). This ranking underscores the persistent deficiencies in integrity and transparency despite ongoing efforts to combat corruption.

Table 8-1: Iraq’s Ranking and Score in the Corruption Perceptions Index (2020-2023).

Year	Score	Rank
2020	21	160
2021	23	157
2022	23	157
2023	23	154

Source: Transparency International, 2023.

II. al-Kāẓimī's Government and the "Theft of the Century"

Corruption became a focal issue in early 2023. In late February, a leaked document revealed that the Federal Commission of Integrity (FCOI) initiated an investigation into the financial disclosures of former Prime Minister Muṣṭafá al-Kāẓimī. The inquiry pertained to the acquisition of property in the Karrādat Maryam area and the origin of 400,000 IQD deposited in an account at the Trade Bank of Iraq (TBI), which was omitted from his financial disclosure.

Subsequently, the Investigation Department of the Federal Commission of Integrity reported new evidence implicating several former government officials in the misappropriation of tax deposit funds. The al-Karkh Second Investigation Court, specializing in integrity cases, issued arrest and search warrants for four senior officials from the previous administration. These warrants targeted the former Minister of Finance, the former Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister, the former Personal Secretary to the Prime Minister, and the former Political Advisor to the Prime Minister. The charges, pursuant to Article 316 of the Penal Code, involve facilitating the seizure of tax deposit funds. Additionally, orders were issued to confiscate their movable and immovable assets under Article 184-A of the Criminal Procedure Code (Sky News Arabia, 2023, March 4).

Judge Ḍiyā' Ja'far stated that the letter concerning the lifting of asset seizures for defendant Nūr Zuhayr indicates that the defendant has remitted funds to the state treasury, resulting in the release of seizures on the associated property or company. He confirmed that the defendant has paid approximately 400 billion IQD out of a total debt of 1.6 trillion IQD, with the remainder scheduled for payment according to a timeline. Investigations remain ongoing, with new arrest warrants issued for two government figures. One individual has been formally charged and is nearing prosecution upon completion of evidence, while the other, linked to a significant government entity in the previous administration, is subject to international surveillance pending extradition proceedings (Mīl News, 2023, January 26).

III. Corruption in al-Anbār Real Estate

The Federal Commission of Integrity executed a significant and exceptional operation at the Real Estate Registration Directorate in al-Anbār Governorate, resulting in the arrest of the director and five officials on charges of manipulation and forgery concerning land plots. Approximately 70,000 real estate files, unlawfully titled, were confiscated alongside 400 forged identification cards linked to a professional union and valuable gold jewelry. The Commission reported that the total seized funds amounted to approximately \$1.6 million and nearly 600 million IQD. Dhārī al-Dulaymī, spokesperson for the Popular Movement and former member of the al-Anbār Investment Commission, attributed the corruption within the al-Anbār real estate file to the ruling party in the governorate (Baghdād Today, 2023, April 6).

IV. Corruption in Social Protection

In 2023, social protection coverage expanded to include approximately 2.2 million families, or about 9 million individuals. This expansion necessitated that the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs cross-reference data to recover funds from unauthorized social assistance recipients. Consequently, 927,526 applicants (over 10% of total beneficiaries) were disqualified after being identified as government employees. Additionally, benefits were suspended for 190,000 individuals due to violations of Social Protection Network regulations. A total of 175 billion IQD was recovered, and legal action was initiated against 542 families for forging identification documents.

During the governorate council elections, some candidates attempted to exploit the social protection system. The Commission subsequently filed lawsuits against several candidates and contacted the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) to pursue legal measures (Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, 2023).

Corruption in the Telecommunications Sector

On April 30, 2023, 'Alī al-Mu'ayyad, head of the Communications and Media Commission (CMC), announced that a final and binding judicial ruling had been secured in favor of the Commission against Korek Telecom. The ruling mandates that the company pay approximately \$800 million to the Iraqi state treasury. Sīrwān Bārzanī, owner of Korek Telecom, criticized the decision by the Iraqi CMC as unjust and unfair (Shafaq News, 2023, November 25). Following the expiration of the company's license in August 2023, the Commission implemented strict measures, including (INA, 2023, October 22):

- Suspending the sale and circulation of new SIM cards issued by the company.
- Urging citizens not to purchase new SIM cards from the company.
- Warning agents and points of sale against selling or circulating new SIM cards, with potential legal consequences.
- Severing interconnection between Korek Telecom and other mobile phone companies within ten days of the announcement, a measure enacted in early November 2023.

In late 2023, the CMC directed the Ministry of Communications to instruct the General Company for Communications and Informatics to block all telephone traffic for Korek Telecom, including international calls. However, the Transport and Communications Committee in the Council of Representatives mandated a temporary halt to these procedures to allow the company time to settle outstanding payments, thereby safeguarding public funds and subscriber rights. In early November 2023, the Iraqi CMC instructed mobile service providers Zain Iraq (Atheer) and Asiacell to sever interconnection with Korek Telecom due to the expiration of the latter's licenses.

V. The Role of the Federal Commission of Integrity

In late 2023, Judge Ḥaydar Ḥannūn, President of the Federal Commission of Integrity (FCOI), disclosed the Commission's most significant operations in combating corruption, extraditing wanted individuals, and recovering smuggled funds. Throughout 2023, these efforts resulted in the extradition of 12 wanted persons from six countries, predominantly Arab nations. Additionally, the Commission engaged in drafting a new anti-corruption strategy involving the private sector. The Federal Commission of Integrity's 2023 annual report presented several key indicators (FCOI, 2024):

- A total of 255 criminal cases were filed, with 101 referred to trial courts during 2023.
- Recovered funds amounted to 391.45 billion IQD and \$5 million. Furthermore, approximately 82.623 billion IQD and \$5 million were prevented from being wasted.
- Seizures made in flagrante delicto (caught red-handed) totaled 1.6 billion IQD, \$60,000, and various gold assets.
- In efforts to combat cross-border corruption, 19 international arrest warrants (Red Notices) were issued for fugitives outside Iraq. Moreover, 17 legal assistance requests were submitted concerning the seizure of funds smuggled abroad, involving financial transfers worth \$400,000, 22 real estate properties, 8 shares in foreign companies, and 9 bank accounts. One case involved corruption funds totaling \$11.4 million and 10 real estate properties. Travel bans were imposed on 9 ministers and equivalent officials, 26 defendants among "special grade" officials and directors general, and 193 other individuals.
- Judicial summons orders numbered 115, with 98 executed, while arrest warrants reached 158, with 113 executed. The Supreme Commission for Combating Corruption detained 40 individuals in referred cases.
- Registered reports totaled 24,847 in 2023, of which 18,868 (76%) were completed. Registered criminal cases reached 18,893, with 11,959 (63%) completed through judicial proceedings.
- Defendants in corruption cases included 55 ministers and equivalent officials, facing a total of 81 charges. The number of "special grade" officials, directors general, and equivalents reached 350 defendants across 598 cases.
- The Commission established a new administrative unit to monitor the implementation of the government's e-Governance project. This unit oversees procedures in ministries and non-ministerial entities to ensure e-Governance and digital transformation. In 2023, the Commission conducted 107 visits covering 51 administrative units across 13 ministries and independent entities.

Table 8-2: Number of Stalled Projects, Their Value, and Criminal Cases Initiated by the Commission of Integrity (2018–2023).

Year	Number of Stalled Projects	Value		Number of Criminal Cases
		IQD	USD	
2018	2,736	16,455,290,348,823	16,227,930,298	644
2019	1,600	12,261,957,481,362	1,941,398,559	363
2020	26	576,867,456,420	348,388,432	26
2021	290	1,882,277,319,387	1,142,332,885	64
2022	164	480,375,834,627	507,589,932	82
2023	529	1,614,315,296,039	1,106,614,566	34
Total	5,345	33,271,083,736,658	21,274,254,672	1,213

Source: FCOI, 2024, p. 17.

- The Commission also monitors stalled projects in governorates since 2018. In 2023, there were 529 stalled projects valued at 1.614 billion IQD and approximately \$1.106 billion. Since 2018, the cumulative number of stalled projects reached 5,345, with a total contract value of 33,271,083,736,658 IQD (over \$25 billion) (See Table 8-2).

VI. Agenda for 2024

Despite increasing demands within Iraq to address corruption, numerous challenges continue to hinder progress in this area. Oversight institutions often face setbacks due to fragile political frameworks and a lack of genuine commitment to establishing effective integrity systems. Aram Mahmood, former advisor to President Barham Salih, expressed a pessimistic view: “Given the inability, or unwillingness, of Iraqi institutions to adequately combat corruption, the need for an international entity to intervene becomes clear. For this reason, supporting the global campaign to establish an International Anti-Corruption Court is essential, not only specifically for Iraq, in order to hold the corrupt accountable when national courts fail to do so” (Mahmood, 2023).

Corruption remains a primary driver of conflict, sectarian divisions, and governmental dysfunction in many countries. Entrenched corruption debilitates state capacities and exacerbates issues such as poverty, climate change, mass migration, and violence. Rather than relying exclusively on domestic solutions, it is argued that an international court should be empowered to prosecute corrupt individuals whose actions threaten the future and lives of ordinary citizens (Mahmood, 2023). Nonetheless, significant expectations rest on the Iraqi judiciary and recent legislative reforms to undertake critical responsibilities in this domain.

Several unresolved cases await attention in 2024, including the “Theft of the Century.” The Iraqi public anticipates the investigation’s outcomes, which are expected to clarify the involvement of various actors, including senior officials whose participation has been widely speculated.

A key priority for the upcoming year is the urgent formulation of a new integrity and anti-corruption strategy, following the expiration of the previous strategy's implementation period. This strategy must incorporate recent developments within Iraq and address evolving methods of public fund misappropriation, whether by government officials or private sector actors, as evidenced in the "Theft of the Century," the al-Anbār and Nīnawá real estate cases, among others.

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9. Education and Higher Education

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The disruption of educational and instructional processes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, including preventive measures such as the closure of all educational institutions, continues to pose significant challenges to the educational trajectory in a developing country like Iraq. The total closure of schools lasted for 255 school days; since February 2020, approximately eleven million Iraqi students were unable to attend school. This prolonged interruption, resulting from both partial and total closures, exacerbated the educational gap between students' actual learning and the expected curriculum for their respective grades. Consequently, there was an increase in "learning loss," characterized by missed curricula and educational modules during students' progression through the educational system. This deficit adversely affected their academic skills and impeded their ability to acquire essential knowledge, thereby creating a scientific knowledge gap.

The COVID-19 pandemic generated a significant void in scientific education, particularly affecting scientific faculties that require students' physical presence in laboratories and hospitals, such as the Faculty of Science and the Medical Group. Students in these disciplines missed numerous practical lectures, especially those involving laboratory attendance, hospital field visits, and patient rounds. The interruption of traditional education and the subsequent reliance on e-learning significantly impacted all students, including those with high academic achievement.

Currently, the Iraqi educational system faces an expanding and cumulative knowledge gap. Not all students are equipped to bridge this gap due to the compounded nature of missed information. Many students lack familiarity with mathematical and graphical software typically taught in early stages of study, which has negatively influenced their academic performance in later stages and their capacity to complete graduation research. This gap has further widened due to laxity and negligence in studying certain subjects or their removal from the required curriculum. Various shocks and crises have fostered an environment conducive to such neglect, thereby exacerbating the scientific gap in a country already characterized by vulnerability and fragility. The insufficient accumulation of necessary knowledge has compounded these issues, resulting in increased rates of academic failure and dropout over time.

Moreover, the illiteracy rate among ten-year-old students has risen, and literacy rates have declined following the pandemic. According to a UNICEF survey assessing early-grade reading skills, the vast majority of Iraqi students in the second and third primary grades have not mastered age-appropriate materials. Another UNICEF survey conducted in 2022 reported that only 75% of children in primary schools and less than 50% in secondary schools had completed their studies.

A 2022 World Bank study revealed that Iraqi students were significantly behind their international peers even prior to the pandemic. The World Bank estimates that, on average, a student in Iraq will achieve only 41% of their productive potential upon reaching adulthood or higher educational levels. The years preceding the pandemic were marked by political and economic instability, beginning with the 1980s (the Iraq-Iran War) and continuing through the 1990s (a period characterized by economic blockade and international sanctions), which imposed numerous challenges across various sectors.

Following 2003, Iraq experienced multiple socio-economic and political transformations associated with the American occupation, affecting all sectors, including education. This period was marked by successive episodes of security, political, and social instability. These conditions deteriorated further after terrorist organizations seized large portions of Iraq between 2014 and 2017, resulting in a complete cessation of educational activities in certain regions and governorates. The subsequent military campaigns to liberate these areas led to the destruction of numerous schools, universities, and scientific facilities, thereby increasing dropout rates. In early March 2020, students faced an abrupt suspension of studies, which caused significant psychological distress regarding their academic futures, an impact that extended into subsequent academic years.

I. The Educational Process during the Academic Year (2022-2023)

1. The 2023 Academic Year and the Textbook Crisis

The Ministry of Education declared the commencement of the 2023 academic year on October 12, 2022, mandating full in-person attendance for students. The Ministry underscored the obligation of all school administrations and teaching staff to ensure complete in-person engagement. Furthermore, it appealed to all sectors of Iraqi society, including institutions and parents, to collaborate with the Ministry in fostering a conducive environment that guarantees consistent and stable school attendance.

The academic year 2022-2023 unfolded amid a continuing shortage of school textbooks. The Ministry of Education was unable to print numerous new textbooks due to the failure to approve the federal budget for that year, compelling reliance on textbooks returned by students from previous academic years. Consequently, some students did not receive textbooks; the Ministry attributed this to insuf-

ficient financial allocations. This situation compelled parents to bear the costs of printing textbooks, as had occurred in the preceding year, while the Ministry pledged to print and distribute physical textbooks to students in the forthcoming 2024 academic year. In lieu of physical textbooks, the Ministry provided digital versions by publishing links to electronic curricula for primary, intermediate, and secondary education levels on its official website.

The textbook crisis is not novel in Iraq; however, it intensified in the previous year compared to earlier periods. This escalation was particularly evident following warnings issued by the Parliamentary Education Committee and other stakeholders concerning the inability to print textbooks due to the absence of financial allocations, a consequence of delays in approving the federal general budget. Administrative delays in contracting printing presses within the designated timeframe also contributed significantly to the problem. These authorities cautioned that delays in the delivery of certain textbooks were inevitable for the reasons stated.

The challenges of textbook shortages and inadequate school infrastructure, which necessitated the implementation of double and triple shifts in most Iraqi schools, have adversely affected the educational landscape in the country. The Parliamentary Education Committee urged the Ministry of Education to expedite contracts with printing presses to finalize the textbook titles required for printing and preparation for the subsequent academic year. This directive follows the budget approval and allocation of necessary funds, emphasizing adherence to delivery schedules to ensure textbooks reach directorate warehouses before September 1, 2023, and are subsequently distributed to schools.

2. Blended Learning and Teaching Staff

According to the Ministry of Education's 2023 statistics, Iraq faces a significant shortage of educational personnel. The demand is categorized as follows: 3,199 kindergarten teachers, 66,353 primary school teachers, and 18,191 secondary, intermediate, and preparatory school teachers. The Ministry's data reveal a total deficit of approximately 87,743 educational staff members.

Despite the increasing number of primary and secondary schools, population growth rates surpass the expansion of educational facilities, necessitating the establishment of 8,000 additional schools. To mitigate school shortages, the Ministry typically implements dual and triple shifts. Ministry data indicate that average class sizes are 45 students in primary education, 41 in intermediate education, and between 37 and 40 in preparatory education. Such overcrowding impedes effective teaching, complicates the transmission of scientific knowledge, and diminishes classroom interaction.

UNESCO has proposed the universal adoption of e-learning as a strategy to alleviate overcrowding by supplementing in-person attendance and minimizing learning loss through various electronic applications and platforms. While countries differ in technological readiness, remote learning infrastructure, and financial investment, particularly given the digital divide, Iraq utilized, during the

Table 9-1: Overcrowding Rates in Various Educational Stages.

Stage	Need for Teachers	Overcrowding Rate (Students/Class)
Kindergarten	3,199	25
Primary	66,353	45
Secondary	18,191	40
Total	87,743	

Source: Ministry of Education, Directorate of Planning and Educational Statistics.

COVID-19 pandemic, remote learning via specific applications and platforms, complemented by television programming. Nevertheless, these electronic systems and remote learning methods were insufficient to deliver the requisite knowledge to students. Many scientific subjects across all grade levels require practical, applied, and interactive components, which these platforms could not fully provide. Additionally, disparities in students' scientific understanding and cognitive abilities meant that not all students could assimilate information simultaneously; some required more detailed explanations and extensive responses. The effectiveness of e-learning was further hindered by limited technical proficiency among students and teachers, compounded by challenges such as frequent power outages and unreliable internet connectivity, which deteriorated due to increased demand during lockdowns.

Moreover, the large class sizes compelled teachers to dedicate substantial time to delivering, uploading, and distributing lectures, as well as responding to student inquiries. Consequently, teachers often worked from morning until evening, resulting in considerable fatigue, particularly for those with familial responsibilities.

While remote learning may be effective in technologically advanced countries with robust digital infrastructure and high-speed internet, Iraq's challenges (including unstable electricity supply, fragile infrastructure, and slow internet speeds) rendered such approaches difficult. Many students were unable to access remote learning technologies or communicate effectively with educational institutions due to the unaffordability of devices, computers, books, software, and requisite skills, as well as limited internet connectivity in various regions.

The success of remote learning depends on the availability of resources in students' and teachers' homes, such as internet access, digital devices, and parental support, especially for younger children. Human Rights Watch reported that Iraqi schools were inadequately prepared to provide remote education to all students at the onset of the pandemic, due to systemic discrimination, inequality in education, and lack of basic government services such as household electricity and affordable internet access. Consequently, many educational institutions demonstrated significant deficiencies in adapting to emergencies and digital advancements.

To enhance the e-learning environment and school preparedness, the Ministry of Education has prioritized Artificial Intelligence (AI). It has promoted the engagement of gifted students in AI applications, robotics, and the Scratch programming

language through the One Million Arab Coders initiative, selecting students to advance their programming skills and raise AI awareness.

In the 2023 academic year, the Ministry launched the Digital Education Portal, supported by a team specializing in electronic project implementation within the General Directorate of Educational Planning and Educational Television. Additionally, Iraqi school teams excelled in the 14th Arab Robotics Championship held in Qatar. The teams, comprising gifted and distinguished students from al-Başrah, Wāsiṭ, and al-Anbār governorates, secured first-place awards for Best Creative Solution, Best Explorer, and the Promising Innovator Award among 15 participating Arab countries. The championship aimed to foster creativity, engineering skills, electronics, programming, and AI, while promoting innovation in educational robotics.

Furthermore, the Education Management Information System (EMIS) was introduced across most Iraqi education directorates. EMIS serves as a comprehensive database for school administrations to collect, process, analyze, and report data reflecting the educational system's status, including information on schools, students, teachers, and staff. This system is essential for monitoring and evaluating progress toward developmental and strategic educational objectives, such as Education for All. EMIS software records data on student numbers, classes, sections, grades, attendance, teacher counts, and infrastructure. The EMIS lifecycle encompasses the following stages:

- a. **Data Collection:** Designing collection tools and distributing data to and from educational institutions.
- b. **Data Processing:** Organizing, processing, and refining data.
- c. **Data Analysis:** Aggregating data, performing calculations, and interpreting results.
- d. **Report Generation:** Publishing and distributing information to relevant stakeholders upon request.

3. School Enrollment Rates

A. Kindergarten Stage

During the 2022-2023 academic year, enrollment in the kindergarten stage demonstrated a significant increase compared to the 2021-2022 academic year, rising from 150,158 to 172,716 pupils. This represents a positive growth rate of 15.023%. The Gender Parity Index (GPI) for this stage was 1.04, indicating gender parity in kindergarten enrollment for the 2023 academic year. However, disparities between genders become more pronounced in subsequent educational stages.

B. Primary Stage

Enrollment in the primary stage during the 2022-2023 academic year showed a modest increase, with the total number of pupils reaching 6,368,094 compared to 6,314,551 in the previous academic year. The growth rate between these years was 0.85%. The Gender Parity Index for the primary stage in 2023 was 0.94,

Table 9-2: Number of Students Enrolled in Public Schools (2021-2022), (2022-2023).

Type of Education	Gender	2022	2023	Change (%)	Gender Parity Index
Kindergarten	Male	73,603	85,845	16.63	
	Female	76,555	86,871	13.48	
	Total	150,158	172,716	15.023	1.04
Primary	Male	3,260,927	3,300,173	1.20	
	Female	3,053,624	3,067,921	0.47	
	Total	6,314,551	6,368,094	0.85	0.94
Secondary	Male	2,058,365	2,063,331	0.24	
	Female	1,814,393	1,917,337	5.67	
	Total	3,872,758	3,980,668	2.79	0.88
Vocational	Male	19,640	80,374	309.24	
	Female	10,373	21,356	105.88	
	Total	30,013	101,730	238.95	0.27
Technical Institutes	Male	7,346	7,189	-2.14	
	Female	4,680	4,908	4.87	
	Total	12,026	12,097	0.59	0.64

Source: Ministry of Education, Directorate of Planning and Educational Statistics.

suggesting that gender parity persists through the primary level, albeit with a slight decline relative to the kindergarten stage.

C. Secondary Stage

During the 2022-2023 academic year, enrollment in the secondary stage increased slightly, reaching 3,980,668 students compared to 3,872,758 in the previous academic year, reflecting a growth rate of 2.79%. Female dropout rates at this stage exceed those of males, while male enrollment also declines significantly.

The Gender Parity Index at the secondary stage decreased to 0.88, indicating an expanding gender disparity as students advance through educational levels. Sociocultural factors, including early marriage, restrictions on women's mobility, and domestic violence, contribute to limiting women's continuation in education beyond the primary level. These influences are particularly evident in vocational education and technical institutes, where the Gender Parity Index declined markedly to 0.27 and 0.64, respectively.

4. School Buildings

In 2023, the total number of ongoing and completed public schools under the investment agenda and the Regional Development Program reached 6,706. Among the governorates, Baghdād ranked highest with 1,023 schools, whereas al-Najaf al-Ashraf had the fewest, with 138 schools. The number of private primary

and secondary schools totaled 2,884, with Baghdad leading at 902 private schools, followed by al-Baṣrah with 566, and Dhī-Qār in third place with 238. Maysān had the lowest number of private schools, totaling 27.

There were 1,031 stalled school projects, including 844 schools under the Ministry of Education's "Project No. 1." The overall deficit in school buildings for primary, secondary, and vocational education stages amounted to 8,578 schools. The government disclosed that over 120 schools had been completed under the Chinese agreement. In 2020, the government entered into an agreement with two Chinese companies to construct 1,000 schools across the governorates to address infrastructure shortages; however, the Parliamentary Education Committee previously reported that the completion rate for these schools had not exceeded 10%. The committee indicated that the first phase involved 1,000 schools distributed based on three criteria: population ratio, the presence of "caravan" (temporary) and mud schools, and schools operating on double or triple shifts. While 30 schools have been completed across various governorates, approximately 120 to 128 schools are expected to be completed by the end of 2023.

According to a government source, 721 new schools were constructed across Iraq in 2023, with renovations or additions made to 2,201 others. Baghdad led with 82 new schools and 583 renovations or additions. Nīnawá followed with 105 new schools and 207 renovations, while Kirkūk ranked lowest, with 32 new schools and 244 renovations.

The Ministry spokesperson characterized 2023 as the "Year of School Buildings," highlighting the resumption of "Project No. 1" and collaboration with the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers concerning the Chinese model schools. Under the direction of the Prime Minister, the Ministry established communication with the Iraq Development Fund to construct an additional 1,000 schools, alongside an agreement with the National Investment Commission. The spokesperson further noted that 2023 marks the "recovery of school infrastructure," although 2024 is anticipated to present the most significant challenges. By the end of 2024, 1,000 schools are scheduled to become operational, with strict monitoring and the withdrawal of contracts from underperforming companies. The Ministry underscored the necessity for 10,000 schools to adopt a standardized single-shift system throughout all governorates. It reported the completion of nearly 1,000 schools and the rehabilitation of 2,000 additional schools during 2023. "Project No. 1," which had experienced prolonged delays, is anticipated to deliver 600 schools. By the conclusion of 2024, the Ministry is expected to receive a substantial number of schools financed through the Chinese loan. The Development Fund will allocate its largest portion to the Ministry of Education for the construction of approximately 5,000 schools. Furthermore, it was noted that around 2,500 schools will be finalized by the end of 2024, with the overall challenges projected to be resolved by the end of 2025.

The substantial increase in the number of incoming students, alongside the fact that nearly 2,000 schools are at risk of collapse, has intensified the operational challenges faced by the educational institutions. These challenges have

Table 9-3: Number of School Buildings for 2023.

Governorate	Existing Schools	New Schools	Renovations
Baghdād	1,023	82	583
Nīnawá	671	105	207
Dhī-Qār	641	130	80
Ṣalāḥ-al-Dīn	565	61	122
al-Baṣrah	471	24	15
al-Anbār	468	79	169
Bābil	465	49	111
al-Dīwānīyah	441	12	138
Kirkūk	386	32	244
al-Muthanná	347	19	56
Wāsiṭ	338	28	134
Maysān	280	44	64
Diyālá	264	17	44
Karbalá' al-Muqaddasah	208	22	155
al-Najaf al-Ashraf	138	17	79
Private Schools	2,884	0	0
Total	9,590	721	2,201

Source: Ministry of Education, Directorate of Planning and Educational Statistics.

been exacerbated by a severe shortage of school buildings, necessitating the implementation of double-shift systems and a deficit in essential resources such as books and desks. It has been observed that school administrations have adopted dual and triple-shift schedules to maximize student accommodation, as the availability of facilities has not kept pace with the growing student population.

The Ministry of Planning has identified several issues and obstacles impeding the execution of school projects in Iraq, primarily contractual, technical, and financial in nature, alongside encroachments by local residents on certain buildings. The Ministry recommended a thorough review of contracting procedures and an investigation into the causes of delays by companies in fulfilling their contractual obligations. Additionally, it emphasized the importance of ongoing project evaluations and coordination with security authorities to safeguard projects and personnel involved in implementation. Moreover, the Ministry proposed the establishment of joint committees comprising beneficiary entities to assess depreciation rates and financial losses resulting from prolonged project suspensions, as well as the initiation of appropriate legal actions against underperforming companies.

5. Learning Loss in Iraq

The rate of learning loss, also referred to as educational wastage (encompassing both dropouts and failures), reflects the functional efficiency of the educational system. Data from the Statistics Department of the General Directorate of Educational Planning for the 2022-2023 academic year indicate a notable

increase in learning loss rates in both primary and secondary education across the education directorates in Baghdād and other governorates, compared to the previous academic year (2021-2022). This increase was particularly pronounced in the central and southern governorates, as well as in Nīnawá and al-Anbār, as demonstrated in Table 9-4 and Figure 9-1.

The escalation in learning loss (dropout and failure) in Iraq is attributable to decades of conflict and insufficient investment, which have debilitated the educational system and significantly impeded children's access to quality education. The deterioration of political and social conditions, coupled with declining educational quality and ineffective contemporary interventions, has exacerbated and broadened this issue nationwide. A UNICEF report published in 2021 revealed that approximately 3.2 million Iraqi children of school age are not attending school.

Nīnawá Governorate exhibited the highest learning loss rates at both primary and secondary levels. The primary stage dropout rate reached 14.25%, with a failure rate of 15.80%. At the secondary level, the dropout rate was 9.07%, and the failure rate was 10.45%. This was followed by al-Baṣrah Governorate, where the primary dropout rate was 9.35% and the failure rate was 11.16%; the secondary stage dropout and failure rates were 9.47% and 7.59%, respectively. Subsequently, Baghdād/al-Ruṣāfah II recorded a primary dropout rate of 8.20% and a failure rate of 9.19%, while the secondary stage dropout and failure rates were 9.37% and 9.38%, respectively. Bābil Governorate followed, with a primary dropout rate of 8.55% and a failure rate of 3.41%, and secondary dropout and failure rates of 6.49% and 8.92%, respectively. Additional governorates are detailed in Table 9-4.

Several primary factors contribute to educational wastage, including:

- A severe shortage of school infrastructure, the implementation of dual and triple shifts, and overcrowded classrooms.
- The worsening economic conditions of numerous Iraqi families, which hinder their ability to afford educational expenses, leading to early student dropouts as children enter the labor market to support their families.
- The instability of Iraq's security and political environment, including the control of extremist groups over extensive areas in the northern and western governorates, which resulted in the suspension of education in these regions for nearly three years.

The Ministry of Education's curriculum development initiative commenced five years ago; however, the inherent challenges of this process were ill-suited to Iraq's context, particularly given the country's numerous official holidays that disrupt the academic calendar. Consequently, study materials have been condensed to mitigate governmental accountability when educators fail to complete prescribed curricula, thereby contributing to student dropouts. The recent instability and evolution of educational curricula have not aligned with the Ministry's intended reforms, notably in the development and training of teaching staff for the new curricula.

Regarding child labor, although the Labor Law prohibits employment of individuals under 18 years of age, in practice, hundreds of thousands of children are engaged in the labor market within industrial and commercial sectors without effective legal enforcement.

Economic hardship remains the predominant factor influencing school dropout rates, with statistics indicating that nearly 12 million Iraqis live below the poverty line. This economic strain has compelled thousands of children to discontinue their education over the past two years. Families' inability to cover educational costs, including stationery and transportation, has contributed to rising dropout rates. Additional factors include low student motivation, unappealing school environments, limited family support due to financial constraints, repeated academic failure, and curricula and teaching methods that do not align with students' interests and aptitudes. High poverty levels have diminished familial emphasis on education, prompting children to leave school to support household heads. This situation correlates with increased child labor, begging, and elevated incidences of crime, delinquency, and substance abuse. Dropout causes are also linked to deficiencies within the primary education system, its failure to meet educational objectives, and the repercussions of conflict and insecurity, which have led to forced migration, increased orphanhood, and loss of parental care.

According to data from UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank, dropout rates are highest among females, at approximately 12%, compared to 6% among males. This disparity accounts for the low gender parity observed in intermediate and secondary education stages.

COVID-19 and Increased School Dropout Rates

An analysis of the data reveals a significant rise in student dropout rates, particularly during the 2020-2021 academic year, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic's profound impact. The dropout rate among females is notably higher than that of males, with females exhibiting a rate of 11.4% compared to 5.4% for males, more than twice as high. UNESCO's reports emphasize that extensive school closures disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, especially girls, who are approximately two and a half times more likely to discontinue their education than boys.

In Iraqi society, women and girls face substantial burdens beyond their capacity, as prevailing circumstances compel them to undertake extensive domestic responsibilities, adversely affecting their academic and professional development. It has been reported that with many people losing their jobs and businesses due to lockdowns and curfews, many families forced their daughters into marriage to alleviate financial burdens, especially since many were unable to continue remote study due to the lack of suitable conditions. Many of them had no choice but to either marry at an early age or stay at home and endure significant pressure and deprivation.

Post-pandemic literacy levels among ten-year-old students have declined. According to a UNICEF survey assessing early-grade reading skills, the majority of

Table 9-4: Learning Loss in the Primary and Secondary Stages during the Years 2022-2023.

Year	2022				2023				Change %			
Stage	Primary		Secondary		Primary		Secondary		Primary		Secondary	
Directorate	Fail-ure	Drop-out	Fail-ure	Drop-out	Fail-ure	Drop-out	Fail-ure	Drop-out	Fail-ure	Drop-out	Fail-ure	Drop-out
Nīnawá	15.8	14.3	10.45	9.07	19.3	3.6	21.6	4.2	22	-67	71	-31
Şalāh al-Dīn	3.42	3.67	1.21	1.9	9.3	1.3	13.8	1.2	172	-69	368	-20
Kirkūk	3.64	2.66	5.35	3.25	4.7	1.7	22.5	3.6	29	-26	471	10
Diyālā	2.57	0.93	1.7	2.31	22.8	0.5	20.1	1.2	787	-17	716	-43
al-Ruşāfah 1	4.34	3.37	4.2	4.62	8.6	2.7	16.8	3.5	98	-15	290	-26
al-Ruşāfah 2	11.16	9.35	7.59	9.47	15.5	3.7	23.9	4.6	39	-51	146	-44
al-Ruşāfah 3	3.01	4.31	6.27	6	14	3.9	30.2	6	365	-14	795	0
al-Karkh 1	1.67	3.39	2.77	2.74	10.8	3.2	18.8	4.7	547	-11	960	117
al-Karkh 2	2.51	4.73	3.95	5.29	15.8	3.2	22.7	4	529	-61	747	-51
al-Karkh 3	1.94	3.62	4.17	4.91	17	3.6	29	5.7	776	-1	1280	41
al-Anbār	6.72	6.1	4.14	3.21	21.2	4.5	17.6	1.6	215	-24	200	-24
Bābil	3.41	8.55	8.92	6.49	10.7	6	20.2	4.3	214	-75	331	-64
Karbālā'	5.9	4.81	5.88	5	17	3.3	27.7	3.5	188	-26	370	-25
Najaf	7.42	5.58	6.46	5.26	15.5	4.3	16.9	4.3	109	-17	141	-13
al-Diwāniyah	2.36	3	4.72	5.49	11.7	2	22.5	3.6	396	-42	753	-80
al-Muthanná	5.26	2.11	3.48	2.58	15.2	2.6	24.1	5	189	9	392	46
Wāsiṭ	0.96	3.97	1.72	3.42	3.9	2.5	12.4	2.1	306	-153	1113	-138
Dhī-Qār	4.85	3.49	3.74	6.36	4.6	1.7	15.2	1.9	-5	-37	236	-92
Maysān	3.85	3.92	3.45	3.28	14.9	1.8	21	4	287	-55	456	19
al-Başrah	9.19	8.2	9.83	9.37	13.3	2.6	22	3.9	45	-61	132	-60

Source: Ministry of Education, Directorate of Planning and Educational Statistics.

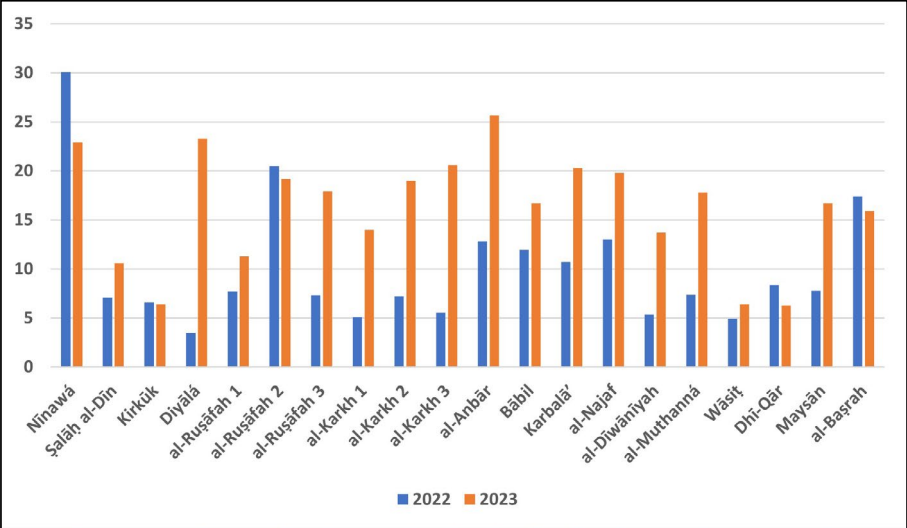
Iraqi students in the second and third grades have not mastered age-appropriate materials. Furthermore, a 2022 UNICEF survey found that only 75% of primary school children and fewer than 50% of secondary school students completed their education.

UNICEF reports indicate that dropout rates hinder efforts to compensate for lost learning time during the pandemic, thereby widening the gap in knowledge and skills relative to previous cohorts. This issue is particularly acute for students with comprehension difficulties, who fall increasingly behind their peers and are more likely to leave school prematurely.

A 2022 World Bank study highlighted that even prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, a segment of Iraqi students lagged significantly behind their peers in human capital development. Projections suggest that, on average, Iraqi students will realize only 41% of their productive potential as adults or upon reaching higher education levels.

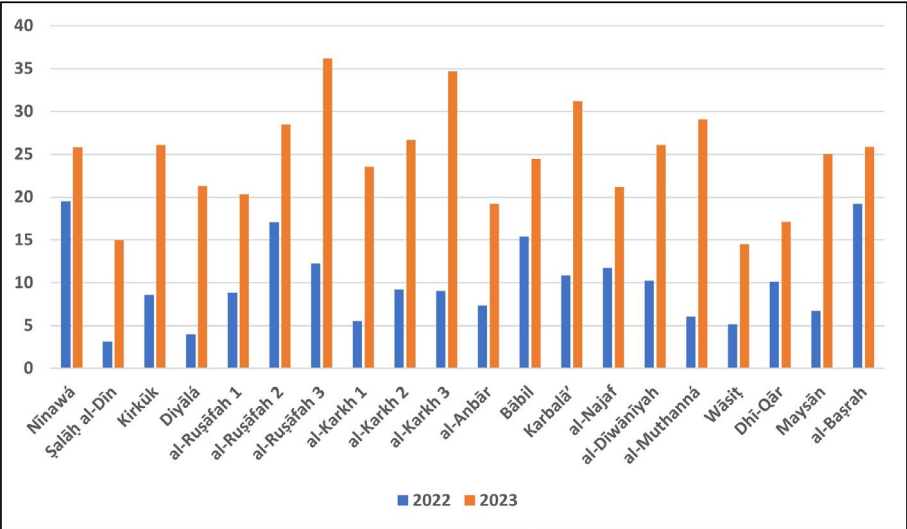
Spatial disparities exist in dropout rates across Iraqi governorates. Nīnawá Governorate exhibits the highest dropout rate at 14.18%, followed by Bābil Governorate at 10.43%, and al-Başrah Governorate at 8.31%. These increases

Figure 9-1: Learning Loss in the Primary Stages during the Years 2022-2023.



Source: Ministry of Education, Directorate of Planning and Educational Statistics.

Figure 9-2: Learning Loss in the Secondary Stages during the Years 2022-2023.



Source: Ministry of Education, Directorate of Planning and Educational Statistics.

are attributed to economic insecurity and political instability both nationally and within these regions.

The rise in dropout rates correlates with escalating poverty and deteriorating living conditions. The poverty rate increased from 22% at the end of 2019 to 31.7% by the end of 2022, exacerbating educational challenges and contributing to higher dropout rates. This trend is further evidenced by a decline in secondary school graduation rates during the 2020-2021 academic year compared to

previous years, underscoring the pandemic's adverse effects on student progression. Additionally, the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), which reflects social fragility, has risen in response to increasing poverty. Indicators within the MPI that worsened in 2022 amid the pandemic include educational attainment, waste disposal, access to potable water, and school enrollment. These findings underscore the bidirectional relationship between poverty and education, a dynamic deeply entrenched in Iraqi society both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

6. Challenges of the Educational Sector

1. A primary challenge confronting the educational sector is the insufficient financial allocation within the general budget, coupled with a disproportionately high operational expenditure. Notably, salaries for teachers and staff constitute over 90% of expenditures, whereas less than 10% of Iraq's investment budget is dedicated to education.
2. The shortage of school infrastructure represents a critical concern; Iraq urgently requires at least 10,000 new schools to eliminate double shifts, considering that average class sizes range from 50 to 70 students. Furthermore, reports suggest that 15,000 new school buildings are necessary to meet international standards for optimal classroom sizes.
3. The deficit in educational infrastructure substantially hampers the provision of quality educational services, with an average of approximately 400 students per school and multiple schools often sharing facilities.
4. The crisis in textbook availability, outdated curricula, limited opportunities for teacher professional development, inadequate support for school counselors and learning programs, and insufficient initiatives for at-risk youth.
5. Allegations of corruption adversely affect the delivery of public services.
6. The notable deficiency in electronic readiness and capacity building among staff for processing and analyzing statistical data.
7. Vocational education plays a limited role, compounded by the obsolescence of technical education and insufficient capacity development for vocational training instructors.
8. Administrative governance is weakened by poor collaboration between public and private educational institutions, delayed decentralization of authority to governorates, lack of administrative decentralization between central and local levels, and inadequate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

7. Requirements for Advancing the Educational Sector

To confront current challenges and meet future aspirations for the education sector in Iraq, it is necessary to work on the following:

1. Increase focus on investment expenditure, giving priority to educational investments over the medium term.

2. Provide social protection for children. To effectively support families with children and enhance access to education, it is vital to adopt a child-sensitive, inclusive approach that targets the core vulnerabilities children face.
3. Curricula must be evaluated on an annual basis. In this regard, a broad survey can be conducted to gather the views of teachers, parents, and the community regarding their expectations and observations. In light of these and the recommendations of educational experts, curriculum objectives should be redefined to meet the needs of society and the state.
4. The supervision and inspection system for the examination system must be improved.
5. The government must enhance the salaries of educational workers to protect them from resorting to illegal means of increasing their income.

II. Higher Education

1. Quantitative Analysis of Higher Education Institutions

A. Number of University Students

The academic year 2022-2023 commenced on October 2, 2022, with the Ministry emphasizing the commitment of educational institutions to full in-person attendance. The Ministry, fulfilling its academic and legal responsibilities, alongside its public and private universities and faculties (exceeding one hundred in number and comprising over fifty-three thousand faculty members) continues to implement its scientific and educational programs and policies, serving a student population exceeding one million.

During the 2022-2023 academic year, there was a notable increase in student admissions to public universities through the central admission process (both first and second rounds), totaling 205,486 students. This figure represents a 21.95% increase compared to the 168,505 students admitted in the 2021-2022 academic year. Similarly, admissions to private universities rose significantly, reaching 143,227 students in 2022-2023, compared to 98,025 students in the previous academic year, reflecting a growth rate of 46.11%.

B. Number of Graduating Students

The number of graduates from public universities increased substantially in the 2022-2023 academic year, totaling 271,176 students, which marks a 63.27% increase from the 166,086 graduates in 2021-2022. Graduates from private universities also increased, reaching 62,352 students in 2022-2023, compared to 52,657 in the prior academic year, indicating an 18.41% growth.

C. Quantitative Developments in Private University Education

Private university education experienced significant quantitative growth in 2023, primarily due to its enhanced capacity to accommodate students who were unable to secure admission to public universities. This included students with lower academic averages as well as high-achieving students who did not gain admission to faculties aligned with their scientific aspirations, particularly

Table 9-5: Admitted and Graduated Students in Iraqi Universities (2022, 2023).

Year	Admitted		Graduated		Relative Importance of Private Admissions (%)	Relative Importance of Private Graduates (%)
	Public	Private	Public	Private		
2022	168,505	98,025	166,086	52,657	36.78	24.07
2023	205,486	243,227	271,176	62,352	54.21	18.69
Change (%)	21.95	46.11	63.27	18.41	11.68	-22.34

Source: Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Statistics Department.

in medical and engineering disciplines. According to Table 9-5, data indicate that the proportion of students admitted to private universities increased from 36.78% in the 2021-2022 academic year to 54.21% in 2022-2023. Geographically, private universities exhibit a concentration pattern, with over 50% located in Baghdad. Although equitable distribution across governorates (especially those lacking university education) is desirable, factors such as population density, high demand, and infrastructure availability have led to investment clustering in Baghdad, which currently hosts 31 private universities. The southern governorates collectively contain 26 universities distributed among Maysān, Dhī-Qār, al-Baṣrah, Bābil, Karbalā' al-Muqaddasah, and al-Najaf al-Ashraf. The remaining governorates, including al-Samāwah, Wāsiṭ, Diyālā, al-Anbār, Nīnawā, Kirkūk, Ṣalāḥ-al-Dīn, and the Kurdistan Region, host 26 universities.

Private universities offer diverse scientific departments and specializations, commonly including financial and administrative sciences, law, computer science, software engineering, and operations research. Recently, there has been increased interest in pure sciences, medicine, pharmacy, and engineering fields. Despite this expansion, private education faces challenges such as shortages in faculty members—both in quantity and quality—lack of annual stability, and difficulties in meeting required quality standards.

2. Central Admission

The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research initiated the electronic central admission application process for universities for the 2022-2023 academic year on September 4, 2022. The Ministry advocated for the use of the central electronic application system for private universities and faculties, underscoring the legal and procedural frameworks governing university admissions through the Private University Education Department portal. Students were cautioned against reliance on paper-based applications, seat reservations, or advance payment of tuition fees or partial amounts.

Central admission regulations were established for both the general application channel and the Martyrs' Families channel. Eligibility criteria required applicants to be graduates of the current year or Iraqi returnees possessing an Iraqi preparatory certificate or its equivalent, born in 1998 or later. Graduates from the Applied and Biological branches of the preparatory stage were mandated to select fifty choices, including a minimum of ten institutes. Literary branch graduates were required to select no fewer than twenty-five choices, with at least

ten institutes. For the Fine Arts branch, applicants were to select ten choices, including at least two institutes.

Applications for first-round graduates and second-round candidates were accepted via the Studies, Planning, and Follow-up portal until October 4, 2022. Additionally, on September 2, 2022, the Ministry launched the electronic application form for the top graduates of vocational schools for the 2021-2022 academic year. The Department of Studies, Planning, and Follow-up identified top students eligible for admission to public technical faculties (morning study) for the 2022-2023 academic year, based on their preferences for faculties and departments corresponding to their specializations.

The Ministry announced the central admission results on October 30, 2022, reporting the admission of over two hundred thousand students to universities for the 2022-2023 academic year. The results, published on the Ministry's official website and the Studies, Planning, and Follow-up portal, indicated the admission of 197,724 students through the general and direct admission channels, 7,616 through the Martyrs' Families channel, and 146 through the Elite channel.

Admissions to the Medical Group via the central admission channel totaled 7,749 students. Minimum grade thresholds were established at 99.29 for the Faculty of Medicine, 98.71 for Dentistry, and 98.29 for Pharmacy. Admissions to other faculties were as follows:

- Engineering: 23,162
- Science: 25,690
- Law: 3,571
- Administration and Economics: 18,041
- Medical and Health Technologies: 1,941
- Nursing: 3,176
- Veterinary Medicine: 2,145
- Agriculture: 3,594
- Arts: 7,018
- Languages: 2,613
- Education and Basic Education: 39,810
- Medical Institutes: 13,599
- Technological Institutes: 8,468

Universities were instructed to commence student registration procedures based on the published central admission results.

On October 1, 2022, the Ministry released the central admission results for top graduates of vocational branches or their equivalents, admitting 1,709 students. Concurrently, results were announced for the "Top 10%" channel, encompassing graduates from institutes affiliated with technical universities and the Ministries of Education, Oil, Culture, Communications, Transport, and Health. The

Department of Studies, Planning, and Follow-up reported the admission of 1,442 students from this category for the 2021-2022 academic year.

On October 16, 2022, the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research decided to reopen the application portal for the Private Morning Public Education channel (Parallel), increasing its seats by 15% of the central admission plan. This decision aimed to accommodate students who had not been admitted or had not previously applied, specifically targeting graduates of the 2021-2022 academic year and providing them with an additional opportunity to apply for the 2022-2023 academic year.

3. Development of International Rankings

In 2023, Iraqi public and private universities demonstrated a notable presence in various international rankings. Key highlights include:

1. **Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings 2022:** This edition assessed 1,799 universities across 104 countries. Eight Iraqi universities attained competitive positions, with University of Bābil ranked between 601 and 800, the University of Technology between 801 and 1000, and the University of al-Anbār between 1001 and 1200. Additionally, the universities of Baghdād, al-Baṣrah, al-Kūfah, al-Mawṣil, and al-Mustanṣiriyyah were placed in the 1501+ category. THE rankings evaluate performance based on five indicators: Teaching (30%), Research (30%), Citations (30%), International Outlook (7.5%), and Industry Income (2.5%).
2. **Shanghai Ranking (Global Ranking of Academic Subjects):** The University of Baghdād was featured in the Chemical Engineering specialization.
3. **QS World University Rankings:** Lists five Iraqi universities.
4. **Scimago Institutions Rankings:** Features 22 Iraqi institutions.
5. **GreenMetric:** Includes 66 Iraqi universities and faculties.
6. **URAP Ranking:** Lists four Iraqi universities, alongside Webometrics, which recorded the participation of 89 Iraqi universities and faculties.
7. **UI GreenMetric World University Rankings 2022:** Seventy-three public and private Iraqi universities were ranked among 1,050 institutions from 85 countries, marking an increase from 66 institutions in 2021. Ranking criteria comprised Infrastructure (15%), Energy and Climate Change (21%), Waste (18%), Water (10%), Transportation (18%), and Education and Research (18%). The University of al-Anbār led Iraqi universities, securing the 146th position globally.
8. **Webometrics Ranking of World Universities:** Over one hundred Iraqi universities and faculties achieved competitive results in the first half of 2023. Out of 11,993 institutions worldwide, the ranking assesses virtual presence through websites, measuring Visibility (50%), Transparency (10%), and Research Excellence (40%). The University of Baghdād ranked 1561st, followed by the universities of Diyālā, al-Mustanṣiriyyah, al-Mawṣil,

Bābil, al-Baṣrah, al-Qādisīyah, al-Kūfah, the University of Technology, the University of al-Anbār, and al-Furāt al-Awsaṭ Technical University.

9. **Scimago World Ranking 2023:** Evaluated 8,433 institutions globally, featuring 47 Iraqi institutions, including 28 universities such as the University of Technology, Baghdād, Bābil, and al-Mustaṣirīyah. Scimago employs a composite indicator based on Research Performance (50%), Innovation Outputs (30%), and Social Impact (20%), requiring a minimum of 100 papers published in the Scopus database within the evaluation year.
10. **THE Impact Rankings (Sustainable Development):** The number of Iraqi institutions increased to 53 from 44 in the previous edition. University of al-Baṣrah led Iraqi entries (ranked 401-600 globally), followed by Bābil University and the University of Baghdād (both ranked 601-800). al-Mustaṣirīyah University and the University of al-Kūfah were ranked between 801 and 1000. This ranking evaluates 1,591 institutions based on the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including quality education, good health, well-being, partnerships, industry, and innovation.
11. **THE Asia University Rankings 2023:** Among 669 universities from 31 countries, eight Iraqi universities were ranked: University of Bābil (199), University of Technology (251-300), University of al-Anbār (301-350), with the universities of Baghdād, al-Mawṣil, and al-Mustaṣirīyah placed between 501 and 600. al-Baṣrah University and the University of al-Kūfah were ranked 601 and above. Ranking criteria include Teaching (25%), Research (30%), Citations (30%), International Outlook (7.5%), and Knowledge Transfer (7.5%).

4. Administrative Changes

During the 2022-2023 academic year, significant administrative transitions occurred within the leadership of both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education. In early November 2022, ministerial portfolio handover ceremonies were conducted. Dr. Naʿīm al-Abbūdī succeeded Dr. Nabīl ʿAbd-al-Šāḥib as the head of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. Concurrently, Dr. Ibrāhīm al-Jubūrī assumed the role of Minister of Education, succeeding ʿAlī al-Dulaymī, within the framework of the new government led by al-Sūdānī.

It is important to recognize that the frequent administrative changes in ministerial and leadership positions in Iraq are closely associated with electoral outcomes. Appointments to senior ministerial and administrative roles are predominantly determined through consultations among political parties and bloc leaders, reflecting the institutional framework and the efficacy of these bodies. The management of these two ministries is distinct from others due to the necessity of recruiting highly qualified personnel. This is especially pertinent for the Ministry of Higher Education, which is tasked with aligning with scientific advancements, facilitating the transfer of contemporary technologies and their applications, fostering creativity and innovation, and advancing the nation's scientific standing through education and research.

The responsibilities entrusted to the Minister are extensive and substantial, encompassing various dimensions and expanding in response to the growth of higher education institutions. These institutions now encompass both public and private sectors, offering programs ranging from technical diplomas to doctoral degrees across diverse specializations to address real social needs. The considerable increase in the number and geographic distribution of these institutions throughout Iraq has rendered the ministry's management increasingly complex, particularly given the limited operational and capital funding allocated to education within the federal budget. Consequently, the proportion of educational funding remains insufficient to fulfill obligations or support expansion.

Success for any minister overseeing the Ministry of Higher Education is contingent upon the meticulous selection of university leadership, including presidents and deans of institutes, centers, and faculties. These leaders are not ordinary staff members; rather, they must be chosen based on scientific qualifications that satisfy objective criteria necessary for these critical roles, enabling them to effectively guide their institutions toward achieving the Ministry's established objectives.

5. International Cooperation

In 2023, Iraq engaged in multiple areas of international cooperation through partnerships with global organizations and participation in scientific programs and competitions. The key activities are summarized as follows:

A. Cooperation with UNESCO

- **Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET):** in collaboration with the Iraqi Ministry of Education and supported by the European Union, the UNESCO TVET program aimed to enhance vocational education and employability within Iraq. The initiative targeted five pilot schools located in Arbīl, al-Mawṣil, Baghdād, Karbalā', and al-Baṣrah, with the objective of transforming these institutions into centers of vocational excellence. Following a request from the Directorate of Vocational Education for expanded support, UNESCO extended its assistance beyond the initial five schools. A comprehensive five-day workshop convened educators from various Iraqi regions to explore innovative pedagogical approaches. The workshop emphasized improving trainer competencies, adopting competency-based learning methodologies, and integrating Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools into curriculum development. The interactive format, which included group discussions, micro-teaching sessions, and practical applications, fostered active participation. Pre- and post-assessments demonstrated significant gains in participants' knowledge and skills. This collaborative effort between UNESCO and the Directorate of Vocational Education aims to empower educators and equip vocational schools with the necessary tools to prepare learners for future workforce demands, thereby contributing to Iraq's socio-economic development. The second phase of the TVET program involved the development of

vocational curricula for four departments: Construction, Tourism, Agriculture, and Computer Technology. These departments were selected from Baghdād, Nīnawá, and Karbalā'. It is important to note that the initial phase of vocational education commenced in 2012 and spanned ten years in partnership with UNESCO, encompassing vocational, technical, and higher education sectors, as well as collaboration with the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. In this regard, the Ministry of Higher Education confirmed ongoing progress with its universities and departments on strategic projects in cooperation with UNESCO, including the National Education Strategy, a job creation initiative through strengthening the technical and vocational education system, and the second phase of the TVET reform project.

- **UNESCO Seat:** On February 2, 2023, Iraq secured a seat within UNESCO.
- **National Capacity Development:** On May 17, 2023, the Ministry of Education conducted a consultative session with UNESCO concerning the implementation plan for national capacity development. This project seeks to establish a high-quality information system to effectively advance all educational sectors, aligned with the National Education Strategy (2022-2030).
- **IEA Educational Achievement Program:** The Ministry of Education participated in the 63rd General Assembly of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) held in Croatia. Iraq's involvement is particularly noteworthy given the association's focus on enhancing student academic achievement and educational system performance through international assessments. The assembly addressed Iraq's participation in evaluations and discussed proposals related to sample selection. Additional focal points included monitoring trends in civic knowledge among preparatory students and addressing ongoing and emerging challenges in youth education, given that the International General Assembly functions as a global platform for exchanging data on student achievement and educational system efficacy. During the assembly, the ministerial delegation visited several schools in the Croatian city of Split to observe their educational systems and technological infrastructure, with the aim of applying insights to the development of Iraq's educational framework.

B. Cooperation with UNICEF

- **Educational Sector Spending and Financing:** On October 28, 2022, the Ministry of Education conducted a training workshop entitled "Spending on and Financing the Education Sector in Governorate General Directorates," in collaboration with UNICEF. The Ministry underscored that education remains a paramount priority within the government's agenda. Nevertheless, advancement is contingent upon increased governmental expenditure, particularly given substantial population growth, escalating demands, and the depreciation of the national currency. It was observed

that successive administrations have allocated merely 2% of the nation's total general budget to this critical sector.

- **Health-Promoting Schools:** In partnership with health departments and UNICEF, the directorates of al-Başrah, Kirkūk, and Bābil completed training workshops focused on "Health-Promoting Schools." These workshops addressed strategies for managing health risks encountered by pupils, students, and coordinators, delineated the responsibilities of health coordinators, and discussed methods for preventing communicable diseases as well as the early identification of hearing and vision impairments.
- **Quality Standards and Inclusive Education:** The Ministry, in collaboration with UNICEF and supported by the German Development Bank (KfW), organized a workshop aimed at examining and developing quality standard programs for Iraqi schools. The initiative seeks to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education while fostering lifelong learning opportunities for all. The workshop reviewed international education quality standards and evaluated observations concerning the UNICEF and British Council standards presently implemented in Iraqi schools.
- **Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS):** UNICEF and the Ministry of Education jointly launched the National Assessment Report for Mathematics and Science for the Fourth Primary Grade, marking the first assessment of its kind. Funded by the German government through KfW, the report intends to assess the quality of education at the fourth-grade level and to provide evidence-based data to enhance planning and budgetary decisions. The Ministry conducted the assessment with technical assistance from UNICEF and the Cambridge Education Foundation.

The assessment encompassed a sample of 11,966 fourth-grade pupils (including 6,138 girls) across 320 schools in 15 Iraqi governorates. It incorporated questionnaires directed at mathematics and science teachers, supervisors, and school principals. The UNICEF representative in Iraq commended the Ministry of Education for prioritizing this assessment to improve decision-making and planning, noting that it is the first step toward ensuring quality education for every child in Iraq, an objective that UNICEF is committed to achieve with support from the Iraqi government.

Among the 5,959 pupils who participated in the mathematics assessment, only 39.5% achieved passing scores. Girls slightly outperformed boys, constituting 17.5% of the passing rate compared to 17% for boys (with 5% unspecified by gender). In the science assessment, 34.1% of the 6,007 pupils passed; boys scored marginally higher (17.4%) than girls (16.7%).

Pupils instructed by teachers aged 50 and above attained the highest scores in both subjects. The findings indicated a need to strengthen students' reading abilities and their capacity to apply mathematical and scientific concepts.

A quarter of the test items were derived from the international TIMSS assessment tool. The Ministry has pledged to participate in the 2023 Global TIMSS Assessment for the fourth grade. Recommendations from the assessment include enhancing teaching quality through modern educational resources and improving reading comprehension.

- **International Grading Standards:** The Director General of Curricula and Chairman of the International Testing Committee led the Iraqi delegation, which included specialists in science and mathematics, to a training workshop held in Prague, Czech Republic. This workshop, conducted during the 6th Research Coordinators Meeting, focused on the principles of grading and the recording of marks obtained by pupils in examination booklets.

C. Participation in Global Competitions

- **International AI and Programming Competition for Children:** Iraq participated in the international online competition for Artificial Intelligence and programming organized by Semapedia, targeting children aged 9 to 15. As a regional partner, IoT Kids involved 2,000 students worldwide to enhance their coding skills through practical application. The Ministry of Education announced that Iraqi students from schools in Baghdād, Nīnawá, and Wāsiṭ, through the efforts of the IoT Kids center, secured seven awards in the 2022 Annual Global Programming and AI Competition. According to the Ministry's media office, nearly 2,000 pupils presented projects aimed at improving the world by employing programming and AI techniques.
- **ICD Conference in Berlin:** The Open Educational Faculty participated in the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy (ICD) conference held in Berlin, titled "Cultural Diplomacy in the Arab World: Cultural, Social, and Political Dimensions." The conference emphasized guiding societies toward cultural trends that foster peace and stability, moving away from the recent prevalence of war and violence in the region. It highlighted the role of educational institutions, universities, and civil society organizations in achieving sustainable development across various sectors.
- **Guinness World Record Attempt:** The Ministry of Education, alongside 8,000 pupils from public schools adhering to international standards, participated in an attempt to enter the Guinness World Records. Following successful completion of international tests in Spelling Bee and Soroban, the event took place at the Jidh' al-Nakhlah International Stadium under the supervision of the World Record Organization.
- **"Ahlan Simsim" Program:** In collaboration with the International Rescue Committee (IRC), the Ministry of Education launched the third season of the "Ahlan Simsim" (Welcome Sesame) program, introducing new content across all General Directorates of Education. This initiative builds upon

the success of the previous two seasons in encouraging first-grade primary students to attend school.

- **The British Council:** The Ministry of Education, in coordination with the British Council, conducted a workshop for 54 trainees from the General Directorates of Education in Baghdād to prepare them for an electronic course specializing in English language learning skills.
- **The World Bank:** The Minister of Education outlined reform parameters within the educational system during meetings with World Bank members. Discussions focused on providing financial grants to address student capacity challenges, supporting projects aimed at replacing mud schools, and investing in human resources.
- **UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM):** The General Directorate of Cultural Relations reported intensive consultations with the UNHCR delegation in Iraq to enhance the education system by supporting programs based on successful performance indicators. The Ministry disclosed details of a consultative session with the IOM to support the EURCAP project, which aims to reduce irregular migration. Participants discussed awareness strategies to highlight the dangers of migration by promoting slogans that encourage youth to embrace their national identity. The Ministry actively participated in IOM sessions supporting EURCAP, contributing to improved migration management in Iraq through the development of communication and information exchange tools.
- **International Academic Evaluation Team:** The International Academic Evaluation Team visited the University of Baghdād and the University of Technology to review their specialized programs. Discussions centered on their indicators in the Times Higher Education (THE) rankings, international partnerships, and twinning programs. Performance indicators, quality, and scientific research were also evaluated in accordance with global ranking standards.
- **World Federation for Medical Education (WFME):** The World Federation for Medical Education (WFME) has officially recognized the National Council for Accreditation of Medical Faculties in Iraq by including it on the international list of bodies eligible for accreditation. According to the Federation's official website, Iraq is among the countries whose specialized councils and bodies have fulfilled the necessary criteria for international accreditation, thereby positioning them on the global map of councils pursuing WFME international accreditation.
- **Elsevier:** The Ministry of Higher Education has announced a formal agreement and partnership with the international organization Elsevier, following a rigorously examined academic and scientific pathway. This collaboration in global publishing reaffirms the Ministry's commitment to managing and advancing scientific research trajectories, thereby

enabling its universities, faculty members, and researchers to achieve international publication. In this regard, the Minister emphasized that the Iraqi academic institution is advancing its strategy and programs to actively participate in the global research environment and its accredited institutions, particularly Elsevier, which has officially declared its partnership with the Ministry. This collaboration aims to enhance academic excellence and provide access to Scopus publications for all students, faculty members, and researchers within Iraq's higher education institutions.

- **The Bologna Process:** On December 2, 2022, the Minister of Higher Education decided to adopt the Bologna Process within technical universities. This decision aligns with the vision of developing and qualifying technical and vocational education and training and highlights direct cooperation with UNESCO. The system initially comprises four undergraduate programs in technical universities, commencing in the 2022-2023 academic year, serving as a precursor to the broader implementation of this educational system across all universities. To promote alignment with global educational systems, ensure compliance with quality standards and academic accreditation, and address labor market fluctuations, this decision, unprecedented in Iraq, was reached following extensive studies, meetings, and joint scientific workshops with UNESCO experts. It is expected to strengthen the position of Iraqi universities within the global academic community and the international academic system, particularly the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

6. Challenges of Higher Education in Iraq

Higher education institutions in Iraq encounter several significant challenges, which can be summarized as follows:

A. Challenges in Public Education

1. The rapid establishment of numerous public universities and faculties has occurred without adequate consideration of infrastructure needs and human resource capacities.
2. Financial allocations for infrastructure development remain insufficient.
3. There is a lack of defined criteria for the appointment and distribution of faculty members and staff based on specialization and qualifications within universities.
4. Funding to support scientific research is notably lacking.
5. The transition of the preparatory school system from a dual track (Scientific and Literary) to a diversified track (Biological and Applied) has caused considerable confusion in admission patterns, adversely affecting enrollment rates and minimum grade requirements for many university programs.

6. A substantial number of students studying abroad at their own expense, particularly those with lower academic performance, have exerted pressure on the Ministry to open academic files for them.
7. Higher education institutions exhibit insufficient integration with the labor market, resulting in an oversupply of graduates whose skills do not align with market demands.

B. Challenges in Private University Education

1. The Need for stringent mechanisms governing the establishment of new private universities and faculties.
2. Regulations delineating the relationship between private education investors and the administration of private universities and faculties are absent.
3. Implementation of regulations regarding the student-to-teacher ratio in most private universities and faculties is inadequate.

7. Requirements for Advancing the Higher Education Sector

The reform and development of higher education aim to enhance the status of universities and institutions, enabling them to compete internationally and fulfill their mission of serving society and contributing to its progress. The following are the primary proposed measures for reform and development:

A. Public Higher Education

1. Coordination with the Ministry of Planning to identify labor market demands for undergraduate and postgraduate degree holders.
2. Collaboration with UNESCO to devise immediate and precise solutions addressing challenges faced by public and private universities, faculties, and institutes at the undergraduate level.
3. Maximizing and reinforcing sustainable funding sources to support educational institutions in achieving their objectives, reducing reliance on government funding alone.
4. Selecting university leadership based on competence, integrity, academic qualifications, and administrative experience, and implementing these selections effectively.
5. Achieving integration with the Ministry of Education by upgrading curricula and exchanging expertise to ensure knowledge continuity among preparatory school graduates, and addressing disparities in grade averages between students in the Biological and Applied tracks.
6. Implementing program accreditation across all open specializations as a fundamental requirement for program continuation; this includes aligning market needs with the program's capacity to admit students.
7. Promoting cooperation and integration with private universities and faculties, recognizing them as essential partners in the advancement of higher education in Iraq.

8. Consolidating and enforcing the concept of university autonomy through programs that uphold academic values aligned with esteemed social traditions, while ensuring adherence to laws, regulations, and social justice.
9. Supporting and encouraging Iraqi universities to engage with government institutions as well as private and mixed sectors.
10. Attracting international students to study in Iraq, expanding foreign relations, and fostering cultural exchange.
11. Establishing expert boards and utilizing the expertise of retired faculty members with high academic titles.
12. Developing vocational education institutions and significantly increasing student enrollment to prepare graduates with practical skills.
13. Adopting the "Productive University" model to facilitate interaction between the university's teaching and research capabilities and society's productive sectors.
14. Reviewing all curricula based on sustainable development goals and academic achievements required by the labor market.
15. Reconsidering university admission policies to maximize alignment among labor market demands, actual needs, and student preferences.
16. Establishing university cities outside urban areas, modeled after international "Smart Universities," ensuring full integration.
17. Providing a conducive environment for university professors in terms of services and housing that reflects their academic status.

B. Private Higher Education

1. The Ministry should actively encourage and support private universities and faculties in broadening their activities under its supervision and monitoring, aligning with the central higher education plan in Iraq.
2. The Ministry should promote scientific collaboration by facilitating the secondment of teaching staff and employees and fostering expertise exchange between private universities, faculties, and relevant research institutions domestically and internationally.
3. Service rendered at private universities and faculties should be formally recognized as equivalent to university service for calculating salary premiums, promotions, and retirement benefits upon appointment to state departments, the public sector, or public universities.
4. The Ministry should provide support to private universities and faculties through several measures:
 - a. Integration of private universities and faculties into the Central Admission system for 50% of their admission quotas, with the Ministry covering tuition and admission fees comparable to those of other admitted students.

- b. Bearing half of the financial burdens incurred by private universities and faculties according to admission plans and applicable financial regulations, aimed at covering institutional expenses, particularly for the increasing number of faculties, and salaries of teaching staff and employees to align them with public universities.
 - c. Permitting private universities and faculties to expand their investment activities beyond their specific scientific fields, subject to Ministry supervision and regulations.
- 5. Amendment of Article 34, Paragraph 3 of the Private Universities and Faculties Law No. 13 of 1996 to obligate the Ministry to appoint professors and employees of private universities and faculties to public universities or state departments if the institution's founding license is revoked or canceled. The current provision addresses only the disposition of students and assets, excluding faculty and staff status.
- 6. Inclusion of teaching staff and employees of private universities and faculties under the Retirement Law instead of the Social Security Law.
- 7. Authorization for private universities and faculties to approve academic promotions for their faculty members.
- 8. Empowerment of private universities and faculties to obtain interest-free soft loans.
- 9. Inclusion of private universities and faculties in mechanisms used by public universities for study and research fellowships, official assignments, and development courses, with allocated seats.
- 10. Establishment of a mechanism to determine the number and qualifications of students admitted to "evening studies" in public universities, ensuring alignment with the philosophy of higher education and scientific research in Iraq to enhance private education.
- 11. Inclusion of professors from private universities and faculties in health insurance schemes equivalent to those of public university counterparts.
- 12. Assurance of appointment for top graduates from various specializations in private universities and faculties, on par with their peers from public universities.

10. International Relations

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The “Foreign Relations” portfolio represents a critical factor contributing to the fragmentation of the Iraqi political landscape post-2003. This complexity arises from two challenging dynamics: firstly, the American strategy positioning Iraq within the US regional and global agenda; secondly, the inherent weaknesses within the diplomatic apparatus, necessitating leadership by individuals committed to a unified Iraq.

Since its establishment, the government of Muḥammad Shiyā' al-Sūdānī has endeavored to implement a policy of foreign openness toward both regional and international powers. This strategy aims to secure global support for the newly formed government, which emerged following a protracted political crisis exceeding one year. The direction of the al-Sūdānī government is cautiously oriented toward normalizing relations with regional and international actors. The foreign relations portfolio serves as a crucial indicator of the government's administrative success, particularly given the dynamic nature of regional interactions that influence domestic policy and shape foreign policy orientations.

al-Sūdānī's government has committed significant efforts to effectively manage this portfolio. Iraqi foreign policy under this government is founded on principles of balance and non-alignment with any particular bloc, a stance partially realized after a period of international isolation. Consequently, Iraq's diplomatic engagements with various global actors remain among the most complex challenges confronting al-Sūdānī and his cabinet. This task is especially demanding due to the necessity of maintaining neutrality and equilibrium between Iran and the United States amid escalating tensions. Additionally, Iraq has hosted the Saudi-Iranian dialogue since 2022 and has pursued openness toward the Gulf states, Egypt, and Jordan across multiple sectors.

The “Productive Relations Diplomacy” adopted by the al-Sūdānī government emphasizes balance between East and West, and between Iran and the Arab world. This approach positions Iraq not as a participant in conflicts but as a mediator facilitating communication. al-Sūdānī perceives Iraq as an integral regional actor, asserting that the stability of neighboring countries is contingent upon Iraq's stability, with bilateral relations governed by mutual interests.

I. The Official and Unofficial Iraqi Position on the Events in Gaza

Defining a singular Iraqi stance on the recent events in Gaza is challenging, despite the official and public opposition to Israeli aggression and the genocidal war in Gaza. Iraq comprises multiple influential leaders and entities that shape both the events and public perception. The State, as an institution, represents only one actor among others, including armed factions under the "Islamic Resistance" and unarmed civil entities and political parties. Each group's position influences the American perception of Iraq, a country supposed to be a close regional ally.

The official government position was articulated by Prime Minister al-Sūdānī at the Cairo Peace Summit. His rhetorically powerful discourse resonated domestically, garnering political and popular support due to his choice of language in describing the events and identifying involved parties. However, the question of Iraq's practical intervention, such as military support to the Palestinian resistance, necessitates a nuanced reassessment of the situation (al-Shamīrānī, 2023). To elucidate Iraq's stance on Gaza, the following analysis is presented:

Iraq's position on the Palestinian cause, both officially and popularly, consistently supports the Palestinian people's right to self-determination, their struggle for freedom, and the establishment of a sovereign state. The Iraqi government viewed the military operations launched by the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) against the occupying entity on October 7, 2023, as a natural consequence of decades of systematic oppression endured by Palestinians (ʿAbd-al-Zahrah, 2023).

Amid ongoing brutal aggression by the Zionist occupation in Gaza, including massacres of thousands of Palestinian civilians, Iraq called on the international community and global organizations to intervene to halt these atrocities, lift the unjust siege on Gaza City, establish safe corridors for civilians, and facilitate urgent humanitarian aid. Baghdad hosted the 35th Emergency Conference of the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union to address the Zionist aggression and halt attacks on civilians. Participants urged international and regional bodies to fulfill their responsibilities by immediately ceasing hostilities and enabling humanitarian aid delivery to alleviate suffering in Gaza. They also categorically rejected any forced displacement of Gaza's population through military means, viewing such actions as a negation of the Palestinian cause and rights. At the Cairo Peace Summit, Iraq vocally championed the Palestinian cause, demanding an immediate ceasefire and lifting of the siege. Additionally, Iraq provided humanitarian aid and allocated funds for medicine and food supplies (ʿAbd al-Zahrah, 2023).

Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuʿād Ḥusayn condemned plans to deport Gaza's population to the Egyptian Sinai, warning that expanding the conflict zone would threaten Iraq and the broader region. He emphasized that supporting Palestinian self-determination requires concerted Arab, Islamic, and international efforts (al-Jazīrah, 2023, October 19).

On October 16, 2023, Prime Minister al-Sūdānī met with the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, Aḥmad Abū-al-Ghayṭ, to discuss pressing Arab issues, including the situation in occupied Arab territories amid Zionist aggression and the severe humanitarian crisis facing Palestinians in Gaza, according to a statement from al-Sūdānī's office. He reaffirmed Iraq's steadfast commitment to Palestinian statehood and the protection of Palestinian sanctities against attempts to erase historical identity and ongoing settlement activities by the Zionist entity (Rudaw, 2023, October 16). He underscored the necessity for the international community to take serious and responsible measures to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe threatening Palestinian existence in their occupied homeland (Shafaq News, 2023, October 16).

The protracted conflict in Gaza raises concerns about potential regional escalation involving neighboring countries, including Iraq. The Zionist war on Gaza has had significant repercussions across Arab and Islamic nations, with Iraq experiencing internal impacts beyond official positions.

II. Important Diplomatic Visits

1. Visit of the United Nations Secretary-General

On March 1, 2023, the United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, arrived in Baghdād to reaffirm the United Nations' commitment to supporting Iraq's endeavors in advancing peace, human rights, and sustainable development for all Iraqis (Euronews, 2023, March 1). Guterres said that this visit represented solidarity with the people and democratic institutions of Iraq, emphasizing the organization's dedication to strengthening the country's institutions. He expressed confidence that the Iraqi population would surmount existing challenges through inclusive and open dialogue, conveying his admiration for the Iraqi people and his aspiration for a future characterized by peace, prosperity, and robust democratic institutions (UN News, 2023, February 28). Notably, this visit coincided with the twentieth anniversary of the US occupation of Iraq in March 2003.

The following day, Iraqi Prime al-Sūdānī welcomed Secretary-General Guterres. During their meeting in Baghdād, Guterres underscored the international community's support for Iraq. Discussions encompassed bilateral relations between Iraq and the United Nations, prospects for cooperation concerning displaced persons, and the international community's role in addressing these issues. Additionally, they addressed climate-related challenges and the necessity for international assistance, alongside Iraq's developmental efforts. Guterres commended the government's priorities, particularly its focus on anti-corruption measures, its contribution to reducing regional tensions, and its role in maintaining stability (DW, 2023, March 1). The visit occurred within the broader context of supporting the Iraqi government's initiatives at various levels. It was regarded as an expression of Iraq's balanced role in promoting international peace and security (al-'Arabīyah, 2023, March 1).

Subsequent to the visit in Baghdād, the Secretary-General traveled to the Kurdistan Region on March 2, 2023. This visit served as a motivating and encouraging measure aimed at bridging divides between the Kurdistan Region and the federal government, as well as among Kurdish political parties. The meeting with the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government, Masrūr Bārzānī, highlighted the comprehensive reforms undertaken by the ninth cabinet of the KRG, the significance of safeguarding the Region's security and stability, and the imperative of implementing the Sinjār Agreement. This includes the removal of illegal armed groups and facilitating the return of displaced persons to their original areas (KRG, 2023, March 2).

Guterres's visit to Iraq is of considerable significance, reflecting the international organization's special interest in the country. This visit followed a period during which Iraq's affairs had diminished in prominence at the United Nations, largely due to emerging global events, notably the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian crisis. Although the visit was conducted at the official invitation of the Iraqi government, it opened new avenues for refocusing international attention on Iraq as a pivotal state within the region, capable of influencing future developments. Observers anticipate that the visit will yield positive outcomes, revitalizing the role of the international organization both regionally and specifically within Iraq.

2. al-Sūdānī's Visit to Egypt

A. Objectives of the Visit

The visit of Prime Minister al-Sūdānī to Egypt on March 5, 2023, prompted inquiries into both the explicit and implicit aims of his inaugural trip to Cairo since assuming office. This visit encompassed political and economic facets, alongside underlying messages. During the visit, al-Sūdānī conferred with Egyptian President 'Abd-al-Fattāḥ al-Sīsī, who reiterated Egypt's commitment to supporting Iraq's security and stability, emphasizing comprehensive assistance to the Iraqi people, particularly in counter-terrorism efforts and the reinforcement of security and stability. Furthermore, al-Sīsī highlighted Egypt's dedication to enhancing and diversifying bilateral cooperation across political, economic, commercial, and cultural domains, as well as expediting the execution of joint projects between the two nations. The visit was underpinned by several principal objectives (al-Ghūl, 2023; al-Yawm al-Sābi', 2023, March 5):

- **Economic Objectives:** The visit sought to strengthen Iraqi-Egyptian relations and activate joint agreements aimed at fostering economic partnership and integration. A primary focus was the development of investment opportunities, notably within the energy sector. Egypt's considerable expertise in energy, desertification mitigation, agriculture, self-sufficiency, infrastructure development, and the construction of modern urban centers (al-Sharq Now, 2023, March 5) presents valuable opportunities for Iraq, particularly as it endeavors to reconstruct its war-damaged cities. Among these, energy cooperation emerged as the foremost economic priority of the visit.

- **Political Objectives:** al-Sūdānī's visit to Cairo evidently encompassed objectives extending beyond purely economic considerations, as it is an oversimplification to define the relations between Iraq and Egypt solely on economic grounds. The visit conveyed political messages aimed at specific Arab nations. Iraq seeks to foster rapprochement with Egypt, which has refrained from interfering in Iraq's internal affairs in recent times, in contrast to certain Gulf states that have engaged in supporting particular Iraqi factions against others. Consequently, the Iraqi-Egyptian rapprochement enhances Baghdād's autonomy in addressing the interference of both Arab and non-Arab countries in Iraq's domestic matters. The visit also intends to reinforce Iraq's pursuit of neutrality in its regional relations, with Cairo serving as a strategic fulcrum for Iraq's reemergence as a significant participant in collective Arab affairs. Furthermore, Iraq aims to advance its relations with the Arab world following the adoption of policies by parties and forces allied with Iran that favor Tehran to the detriment of Arab states.

On June 12, 2023, al-Sūdānī undertook a second visit to Egypt within approximately 100 days, carrying a comprehensive agenda to advance bilateral cooperation (al-Jazīrah, 2023, June 14).

B. Economic Outcomes of the Visit

The visit culminated in the signing of 11 Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) spanning various sectors, including:

- Diplomatic training and expertise exchange.
- Tourism and cultural collaboration.
- Promotion of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).
- Accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO).
- Government administration development.
- Youth, sports, housing, and reconstruction initiatives.
- Enhancement of labor and social affairs.

Additionally, the Iraqi-Egyptian Business Forum convened, hosting numerous business representatives from both countries (al-Manār, 2023, June 13).

In terms of investment, al-Sūdānī emphasized leveraging Egyptian expertise in reconstruction efforts (Sky News Arabia, 2023, June 12). Iraq extended invitations to Egyptian firms to participate in its reconstruction campaign, supported by a dedicated three-year budget allocated for services and infrastructure.

These MoUs represent an initial phase for Egypt to explore the Iraqi market and assess the feasibility of private Egyptian enterprises entering Iraq's economy. However, translating these agreements into concrete projects necessitates substantial Iraqi efforts to instill investor confidence (M. Aḥmad, 2023a). Given Iraq's recent political crises, which nearly precipitated civil conflict, investors remain cautious, closely monitoring the durability of current political stability before committing significant capital. Consequently, Egypt seems to be conducting

feasibility studies regarding market entry, particularly as Egyptian investment in Iraq remains minimal.

C. Political Outcomes of the Visit

The economic dimension was the primary focus of the Iraqi Prime Minister's visit to Cairo; however, the political dimension is also significant, particularly concerning Egyptian-Iranian relations. Iraq is actively engaged in efforts to mediate between these two countries by sponsoring a potential high-level Egyptian-Iranian dialogue. This mediation role follows Iraq's previous sponsorship of Saudi-Iranian dialogues, which contributed to the restoration of relations between Riyadh and Tehran. Through these efforts, Iraq aims to enhance regional relations amid challenges arising from shifts in international relations and their profound effects on regional states and bilateral ties (Ş. Aḥmad, 2023a).

Iraq continues to pursue this mediation between Iran and Egypt, positioning itself as a partner committed to regional peace and security. The country endeavors to foster understanding and resolve conflicts through peaceful means (al-'Arabī TV, 2023, June 13). Iraq is working to elevate the representation levels of the Iranian and Egyptian delegations to facilitate a breakthrough that could restore diplomatic relations between the two nations. Such an outcome would yield economic and political benefits for Iraq and support the initiatives of al-Sūdānī's government to reposition Iraq within the region, especially given the regional and international approval the current government enjoys.

In this context, Iraq is adopting a strategic orientation that emphasizes strengthening its relations with regional countries. This approach enables Arab states to establish a "balance" in their economic and political orientations. Concurrently, Iraq's efforts to reconcile differing views between Cairo and Tehran on contentious issues primarily aim to achieve a general de-escalation in regional relations between Arab countries and Iran. This objective aligns with Iraq's national interests, as regional calm would positively impact Iraq's internal stability. Political stability is a fundamental prerequisite for any country's developmental progress across various sectors. Furthermore, Iraq's mediation between Egypt and Iran is grounded in the premise that its role is limited to facilitating the resolution of obstacles in several areas, notably Iran's regional project and its interference in the affairs of Arab countries.

III. Relationship with the US

The Iraqi-American relationship under the administration of al-Sūdānī has embarked on a new trajectory emphasizing institutional development and a shift toward a comprehensive developmental framework, moving beyond the security-focused agenda that dominated the past two decades. The government, led by al-Sūdānī, prioritizes the implementation of a comprehensive development program aimed at strengthening the Iraqi economy through open dialogue with all international partners (M. Aḥmad, 2023a), particularly the United States. This strategic focus was underscored during a telephone conversation between US

President Joe Biden and Prime Minister al-Sūdānī, which focused on fostering a robust Iraqi economy capable of fulfilling the needs of its citizens and state, as well as enhancing Iraq's role in sectors such as energy, transportation, trade, and other developmental areas (Shafaq News, 2022, October 26). The principal dimensions of Iraqi-American relations can be delineated as follows:

1. Economic Cooperation

Under the direct supervision of al-Sūdānī, an Iraqi delegation headed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Deputy Prime Minister traveled to Washington in March 2023. The delegation engaged in a series of productive meetings with officials from the US Department of the Treasury and the Department of State to reinforce bilateral relations and strategic partnership across economic, financial, monetary, environmental, and energy sectors, in alignment with the Strategic Framework Agreement. These discussions catalyzed efforts by the Iraqi government to transition its economy toward a standardized model that rapidly acquires expertise to address the consequences of conflict and to pursue innovative approaches in managing the peace-building phase, with particular emphasis on the economy, energy, and electricity sectors (ʿAllāwī, 2023). Both parties reaffirmed their commitment to consolidating strategic relations across a broad spectrum of bilateral issues, reflecting their national interests and shared commitment to regional stability (US Department of State, 2023, February 15).

The delegations exchanged perspectives on advancing an ambitious agenda aimed at achieving energy independence to maximize Iraq's economic prosperity and safeguard its sovereignty. Iraq is presented with a historic opportunity to invest in energy infrastructure projects designed to enhance electricity services for its population, secure national energy self-sufficiency, and mitigate environmental impacts on both global climate and public health within Iraq. The United States has the intention to continue providing technical assistance to improve water management practices in Iraq and has invited Iraq to nominate experts for participation in exchange programs with American counterparts specializing in this field. Both delegations agreed to prioritize the adoption of modern technologies in groundwater management and irrigation efficiency (Embassy of the United States in Iraq, 2023, February 15).

Iraq has begun looking toward prioritizing American business initiatives, with the government demonstrating serious intent in this regard. The US Special Presidential Envoy for Climate, John Kerry, articulated a desire to strengthen climate cooperation between the United States and Iraq, particularly given Iraq's support for global climate initiatives and emission reduction efforts. During discussions with the International Monetary Fund, the Iraqi delegation affirmed that it has implemented a series of reforms targeting the banking sector, aiming to align its operations with international standards to fortify the economic structure of Iraq (Rudaw, 2023, April 18).

2. Security Cooperation

In an interview published in the Wall Street Journal on January 15, 2023, al-Sūdānī justified the continued presence of US forces in Iraq, refraining from specifying a withdrawal timeline. He emphasized the ongoing necessity of foreign military support, particularly highlighting that the eradication of ISIS remains an ongoing process. He referred to the US and NATO teams as primarily engaged in training and assisting Iraqi units in counterterrorism efforts, while largely abstaining from direct combat involvement (Sputnik Arabic, 2023, January 15).

In early August 2023, a senior Iraqi military delegation, headed by Minister of Defense Thābit al-Abbāsī, traveled to Washington to engage in discussions with the Pentagon on matters that were not fully disclosed. The joint statement released by both parties underscored a mutual commitment to sustaining bilateral military cooperation across various domains, with particular emphasis on combating ISIS, preventing its resurgence, and enhancing the training of Iraqi military personnel. This visit occurred amid a tense regional and domestic context, suggesting that high-level military dialogues between Iraq and the United States are influenced by broader geopolitical dynamics (Makkī, 2023). The joint statement included general commitments such as the ongoing fight against ISIS, capacity building for Iraqi forces, the United States' respect for Iraqi sovereignty, and Baghdād's pledge to safeguard US and International Coalition personnel, advisors, convoys, and diplomatic facilities. Although no new contracts were finalized during the visit, existing agreements concerning F-16 aircraft and Abrams tanks were reviewed, focusing on maintenance, services, and the continued presence of American experts and advisors in Iraq.

In mid-August, Prime Minister al-Sūdānī reiterated Iraq's position by asserting that the country currently does not require foreign combat forces. He noted that advanced negotiations are in progress to delineate the future framework of cooperation with the International Coalition. US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, who led the American delegation in discussions with Iraqi officials, acknowledged that the US military role in Iraq is expected to change as Iraqi forces enhance their capabilities. He characterized the talks as a progression toward a long-term strategic defense partnership (Baghdād Today, 2023, September 24).

These official statements reveal the perspectives of both Iraqi and American authorities. Iraq envisions the US presence as confined to advisory and training roles at a minimal level, opposing the establishment of American bases within its territory. Theoretically, following the elimination of the ISIS threat, Iraq no longer necessitates an extensive US military presence. Furthermore, training and maintenance activities are restricted to specific American military equipment, notably F-16 aircraft. Consequently, the justification for maintaining US bases in Iraq without clearly defined tasks agreed upon with the Iraqi government remains ambiguous. This ambiguity has been exploited by political factions and armed groups aligned with the Iranian "Axis of Resistance," who advocate for the complete withdrawal of US forces from Iraq.

IV. Relationship with France

On January 26–27, 2023, Prime Minister al-Sūdānī and French President Emmanuel Macron convened at the Élysée Palace in Paris to formalize the most extensive agreement in the history of bilateral relations between Iraq and France. This accord, titled the “Strategic Partnership Agreement between Iraq and France,” encompasses multiple sectors, including economic development, security, counter-terrorism, extremism, organized crime, cultural exchange, environmental protection, and the advancement of human rights and education. The agreement further entails initiatives such as the training of Iraqi diplomats, the attraction of French investments in clean energy and industry, and the procurement of French military equipment. Additionally, the partnership promotes French corporate investments. It also emphasizes effective governance in natural resource management, particularly water resources, the development of renewable energy, enhancement of power plant generation capacity, and the improvement of transmission and distribution grid management to reduce losses and facilitate the construction of new power stations (France 24, 2023, January 27). al-Sūdānī’s visit aimed to broaden cooperative frameworks and transform the positive bilateral relationship into a productive partnership that positively impacts Iraq’s economic and service sectors (al-Jazīrah, 2023, January 27).

The primary objectives of al-Sūdānī’s visit to France included (M. Aḥmad, 2023b):

- **Strengthening the Strategic Partnership:** The visit culminated in the signing of the Strategic Partnership Agreement, comprising over 50 articles addressing cooperation and exchange across various domains. Several Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) were also signed, covering economic and security sectors, counter-terrorism, organized crime, extremism, cultural exchange, environmental protection, human rights, and education.
- **Diversifying Iraq’s Foreign Relations:** A significant aspect of the visit involved diversifying Iraq’s regional and international foreign relations by fostering cooperation, balance, and avoiding alignment with specific geopolitical blocs. This strategy includes establishing strategic partnerships with multiple global powers, notably France, and redefining Iraq’s relationship with the US-led International Coalition against terrorism through a French intermediary. This approach suggests that Iraq may be pursuing an “international strategic alternative” to the United States, with which it maintains strategic alliances in security, military, and economic fields. Although achieving this objective in the short term may be challenging due to the existing depth of US-Iraq relations, it represents a procedural step toward replacing the United States with another international partner, thereby alleviating concerns from the regional supporter, i.e. Iran (Ṣ. Aḥmad, 2023b).

- **Enhancing Counter-Terrorism Efforts:** According to statements by the Iraqi Prime Minister during his visit to Paris, France has been a pioneer in supporting Iraq against terrorism, aiding in the reclamation of Iraqi territory, and contributing to regional and global security. This cooperation extends to armaments, training, and intelligence sharing. France also expressed readiness to assist in the restoration and reconstruction of areas damaged by ISIS.
- **Supporting European Energy Security:** The Iraqi Ministry of Oil reported that Iraq generated over \$115 billion from crude oil exports in 2022, totaling 1.209 billion barrels. Economic analyses suggest that Iraqi oil could serve as an alternative to Russian oil for European countries experiencing energy shortages. The French company TotalEnergies, which signed partnership agreements with the Iraqi government in 2021 valued at over \$20 billion, represents Iraq's gateway to the European oil and gas market. These agreements focus on investments in the gas, oil, and electricity sectors, which are expected to positively influence Iraq's internal economy, given that al-Sūdānī intends to allocate substantial opportunities for French companies within Iraqi reconstruction initiatives (al-'Ahd News, 2023, May 1).
- **Improving the Efficiency of Iraqi Security Agencies through Training and Armament:** al-Sūdānī's efforts to enhance cooperation with France in security, military, and armament sectors aim to reduce Iraq's reliance on the United States in these areas. Iraq seeks to replace its US military cooperation with a French military cooperation, aligning with Tehran's interest in diminishing Iraq's long-term strategic dependence on the United States.

In conclusion, Paris seeks to re-establish its presence in Iraq, presenting an opportunity that should be maximized, provided that the international balance is maintained and relations with Paris do not undermine ties with London and Washington. al-Sūdānī emphasizes "Productive Diplomacy" over formal diplomatic relations. The openness policy adopted by al-Sūdānī's government has enhanced Iraq's regional and international role, countering perceptions of external isolation. The comprehensive and diverse agreements signed with France exemplify this approach and are poised to facilitate significant advancements in development and investment. The diversification of partnerships with France, following similar engagements with Germany, constitutes a core priority of al-Sūdānī's government program and is expected to play a pivotal role in transitioning Iraq to a new status across multiple domains in the foreseeable future.

V. Relationship with Germany

On January 14, 2023, Prime Minister al-Sūdānī concluded a one-day visit to Germany. The Iraqi government expressed optimism about advancing the electricity sector through a contract brokered by al-Sūdānī with the German company

Siemens. However, some observers minimized the contract's significance, suggesting that constraints imposed by Iran and the United States could impede progress in this sector (Shafaq News, 2023, January 12). Addressing energy and service challenges remains a critical concern for the Iraqi population. Recognizing this early, the Prime Minister sought to engage Germany in establishing a new energy trajectory for Iraq, which is anticipated to yield positive outcomes for the country, a move regarded as a step in the right direction.

The Iraqi Minister of Electricity, Ziyād 'Alī Fāḍil, signed a joint Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Siemens, represented by its CEO, Christian Bruch. This memorandum outlines a roadmap for developing Iraq's electricity system, including the construction of new power plants and the implementation of renewable energy projects. The spokesperson for the Iraqi Ministry of Electricity, Aḥmad al-'Abādī, confirmed that the memorandum is expected to add 6,000 MW to the national grid. He emphasized the memorandum's significance, noting that it was signed with one of the most reputable global energy companies. According to al-'Abādī, the MoU will address transmission and distribution challenges within the system and contribute to the establishment of transformer stations and transmission lines (al-'Arabī al-Jadīd, 2023, January 14).

Relations between Iraq and Germany have demonstrated progressive development, as reaffirmed by al-Sūdānī on May 15, 2023. On this date, he received a delegation comprising several heads and representatives of German companies and businessmen, in the presence of the German Ambassador to Iraq, Martin Jäger. al-Sūdānī highlighted the importance of translating the agreements reached during his January 2023 visit to Berlin into practical cooperation and partnership across various sectors. He underscored that Iraq's security and economic stability serve as encouraging factors, supported by an official and popular consensus among all parties for the success of Iraq's economic landscape (Kurdistan 24, 2023, May 15). Discussions also encompassed available investment opportunities and collaborative efforts with German companies in Iraq, resulting in the reactivation of projects that had been suspended for over fifteen years. This development has created favorable conditions for international companies to establish a presence in Iraq and contribute to the reconstruction of its infrastructure.

VI. Relationship with the United Kingdom

In alignment with the Iraqi government's initiatives to strengthen relations with European countries across diverse areas of cooperation, and to explore mechanisms for enhancing Iraq's capacity to address economic challenges, climate change impacts, and transborder crimes, the Iraqi and British Ministries of Interior formalized a Joint Declaration of Intent on August 21, 2023. This agreement followed a meeting between al-Sūdānī and the British Minister of State for Security, Tom Tugendhat, along with his delegation, during which they discussed bilateral relations between the two countries and strategies to enhance cooper-

ation in all sectors, particularly security, military affairs, counter-terrorism, and anti-corruption efforts (Mawāzīn News, 2023, August 21).

Prime Minister al-Sūdānī acknowledged the United Kingdom's support during Iraq's conflict with the terrorist organization ISIS. He underscored the critical importance of collaboration with the British government to address transborder crimes, including smuggling, human trafficking, and the trafficking of drugs and psychotropic substances. Additionally, he emphasized the necessity of cooperation in recovering stolen assets and extraditing individuals wanted by the Iraqi judiciary on corruption charges. al-Sūdānī highlighted that combating corruption is a widely supported public demand and cautioned that its threat extends beyond Iraq, posing risks globally. He further noted that the government has developed a national strategy to combat human trafficking for 2023–2026 and a national strategy against drugs and psychotropic substances for 2023–2025. In response, Tugendhat expressed the United Kingdom's readiness to support Iraqi security forces by providing advanced technologies. He commended the various branches of Iraq's security apparatus for their efforts in countering terrorism, eliminating ISIS, and maintaining national security (Mawāzīn News, 2023, August 21).

These developments illustrate that the success of Iraqi foreign policy is grounded in a new strategic vision characterized by effective regional and international engagement. Central to this vision is the avoidance of alignment with regional axis politics and the resolution of outstanding issues with neighboring countries. This approach reflects a pragmatic understanding of the global distribution of power, which includes maintaining a security alliance with the United States, recognized as a leading global military power, while simultaneously establishing multiple strategic partnerships in energy, trade, and investment with other influential actors such as the Russia, major European powers, and active Asian nations. Furthermore, this strategy encompasses bilateral and multilateral cooperation across social, cultural, health, educational, sports sectors, among others.

VII. Relationship with Neighboring Countries

In the realm of foreign relations, Iraq has sought to harmonize its interactions with Arab and regional neighbors to restore its regional and international standing, a status influenced by its geographical position. Iraq's foreign policy emphasizes bridging perspectives among neighboring states and prioritizes dialogue to promote regional security and stability. This regional stability is integral to global security, given the close interdependence between Iraq's internal security and that of the broader region.

1. Iran

Relations between Iraq and Iran have experienced significant advancements in recent years, particularly following the accession of President Ebrahim Raisi, who has demonstrated a focused commitment to enhancing ties with neighboring countries, especially Iraq. Within this context, the President of the Republic of

Iraq, 'Abd-al-Laṭīf Jamāl Rashīd, undertook an official visit to Iran on April 29, 2023, responding to an invitation from the Iranian President Raisi (Rudaw, 2023, April 29).

During this visit, the two presidents engaged in bilateral discussions concerning the relationship between their countries and strategies to strengthen it. They explored opportunities for joint cooperation in sectors such as energy, water resources, environmental protection, climate change, and tourism, aiming to serve mutual interests and reinforce regional security and stability. Several critical issues were addressed, including the imperative to unify efforts to mitigate regional and international tensions. Additionally, discussions encompassed Iraq's settlement of outstanding debts to Iran related to energy imports (al-Jazīrah, 2023, April 30). The Iraqi President underscored his nation's interest in expanding bilateral relations, highlighting the diverse capacities of both countries to enhance economic, political, cultural cooperation, and trade exchanges (al-Marṣad, 2023, April 30).

The Iranian President, in turn, commended the bilateral relations, emphasizing that they transcend conventional state-to-state interactions. He noted progress in infrastructure, oil, gas, and energy sectors, asserting that any destabilization within Iraq is perceived as a threat to Iran's overall security. He expressed opposition to foreign, particularly American, presence in the region, advocating for regional dialogue as a means to strengthen security and resolve conflicts (CNN Arabic, 2023, April 29). Furthermore, he affirmed Iran's commitment to allocating Iraq its rightful share of water resources and expressed willingness to collaborate on this matter, noting that during the meeting of the two delegations, it was decided to continue discussions between the Iraqi Ministry of Water Resources and the Iranian Ministry of Energy to reach solutions (Iraqi Presidency, 2023, April 29).

2. Turkey

The relationship between Iraq and Turkey has been of critical importance for many years, given the strategic political and military characteristics shared by the two neighboring countries, alongside their diplomatic cooperation through international agreements and their civilizational and cultural affinities (Makkī et al, 2022, pp. 53-58; al-'Ammār, 2022, pp. 142-144). In recent years, trade relations between Iraq and Turkey have experienced substantial growth, particularly in terms of imports and exports. Iraq ranks fourth globally and first within the Arab world in importing Turkish goods (Daglioglu, 2022, p. 24), whereas Turkey ranks third globally among countries importing Iraqi products. Both nations aim to further enhance their bilateral trade exchange (Rudaw, 2022, December 11). Iraq primarily seeks to fulfill its food and industrial requirements from Turkey, including grains, precious stones, plastics, rubber, building materials, furniture, wheat flour, poultry, eggs, and textiles. Conversely, Turkey depends on Iraqi exports, notably oil and gold (Islīm, 2022).

Prioritizing the welfare of Iraqi citizens, economic and security matters dominated the agenda during Prime Minister al-Sūdānī's visit to Turkey on March 21, 2023. The visit aimed to advance Iraq's economy into European markets.

Discussions concentrated on strengthening Iraqi-Turkish relations across various sectors, particularly the economic domain, as Iraq anticipates implementing ambitious projects in energy and transportation to establish itself as a global trade hub connecting Asia and Europe (Sulaymān, 2023). Key outcomes of the visit to Ankara included (Baghdād Today, 2023, March 22):

A. Water Management

Prime Minister al-Sūdānī directly addressed Iraq's water quotas with Turkey, elevating the issue from a diplomatic concern to one of sovereignty. He emphasized that the primary objective was to negotiate with the Turkish authorities to alleviate Iraq's stagnant water situation amid a severe water crisis exacerbated by reduced water shares and persistent drought, which threatens the nation with scarcity (al-Awqāṭī, 2023; Middle East Online, 2023, March 20). The visit resulted in an increased flow of the Tigris River during a critical period. al-Sūdānī secured emergency water releases from Turkey, effectively doubling the river's flow from approximately 200 to 400 cubic meters per second for one month, equating to an increase of about 520 million cubic meters, nearly half a billion cubic meters. This augmentation is projected to raise Iraq's water reserves by approximately 7% within a single month (Shafaq News, 2023, March 22).

B. Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) Issue

Following months of military confrontations in northern Iraq by Turkish forces, the meeting between Erdoğan and al-Sūdānī reaffirmed all facets of bilateral relations and underscored a mutual commitment to combating terrorist organizations, highlighting the significance of this issue for Iraq (Kurdistan 24, 2023, March 21).

C. New Energy Transport Initiative

al-Sūdānī discussed the Development Road project and the "Dry Canal," describing it as a global corridor for energy transportation from regional countries and Iraq to the international market. He noted that this initiative would generate substantial opportunities for both Turkey and Iraq, positioning the region as a global center of attraction. He extended an invitation to regional countries for a conference in Baghdād to deliberate on the energy transport project via Turkey. Additionally, he mentioned the establishment of a railway line for goods, initially handling 3.5 million tons and subsequently increasing to 7.5 million tons, alongside an energy transport component.

D. Investment Incentives

al-Sūdānī presented investment incentives to Turkish businessmen to establish significant enterprises in Iraq. If realized, this would position Turkey among the countries most invested in Iraq's stability to ensure the continuity of their companies' operations. Furthermore, Iraq obtained approval to transport goods, including oil and gas exports, through Turkey to Europe, as Iraq endeavors to enter the global energy market and secure its position in Europe amid competition with Russia in Asia (Shafaqna Iraq, 2023, March 23).

E. The Kurdistan Region's Oil Export Case

On March 25, 2023, Iraqi oil sector officials informed Reuters that Iraq had prevailed in a longstanding arbitration case against Turkey concerning oil exports from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. As a result, Iraq suspended crude oil exports from the autonomous Kurdistan Region and the northern Kirkūk fields following the arbitration court's decision favoring Baghdād. Turkish shipping officials notified Iraqi personnel at the Ceyhan oil export hub that no vessel would be permitted to load Kurdish crude without authorization from the Iraqi government (BBC, 2023, March 25). The arbitration case, dating back to 2014, involved Iraq's allegation that Turkey violated the joint agreement between the two nations by permitting the Kurdistan Regional Government to export oil via the pipeline to the Turkish port of Ceyhan. The lawsuit contended that Turkey and the BOTAS company breached their obligations under the Iraq-Turkey pipeline agreement by transporting and storing crude oil from Kurdistan and loading it onto tankers at Ceyhan without authorization from the Iraqi Ministry of Oil (al-Jazīrah, 2023, March 26). As a result, Iraq halted the pumping of oil through the pipeline originating from the northern Kirkūk fields. Prior to the suspension, Iraq had been pumping 370,000 barrels of Kurdish crude daily and 75,000 barrels of federal crude daily through the pipeline.

Michael Knights, a specialist in Gulf security affairs, asserts that the court ruling in Iraq's favor will significantly impact both US allies and policy requirements. He further noted that the ruling could damage President Erdoğan's pride amid declining economic confidence in Turkey. While Turkey ceased importing oil from the Kurdistan Region in northern Iraq in compliance with the international court's ruling, Knights anticipates that the Kurds and their commercial partners in the oil sector will lose incentives to export crude, rendering any threat to halt production justifiable. Should both parties close the Iraq-Turkey pipeline, the global oil market could lose nearly half a million barrels within weeks (BBC, 2023, March 25).

The ruling issued by the international arbitration body unequivocally obligates all parties to respect international agreements and covenants. It reaffirms that the Ministry of Oil, through the Iraq Oil Marketing Company (SOMO), is the sole entity authorized to manage export operations via the Turkish port of Ceyhan. The Ministry indicated that it would engage with relevant authorities in the Kurdistan Region and Turkish officials to discuss mechanisms for exporting Iraqi oil via Ceyhan, ensuring the sustainability of oil exports and fulfilling SOMO's obligations with international companies at the port (France 24, 2023, March 25).

The oil issue remains a fundamental point of contention between the central government in Baghdād and the authorities of the Kurdistan Region. Erbil maintains that the central government seeks to seize control of the Region's oil wealth, whereas Baghdād demands involvement in managing oil resources extracted from Kurdistan.

F. Iraq and the Turkey Earthquakes

Turkey is considered one of the most earthquake-prone countries in the region due to its geographical location, often described by the phrase “the fate of geography,” which gained prominence following the devastating earthquake that struck Turkey and northern Syria on February 6, 2023 (Badr, 2023). On that day, two earthquakes measuring 7.7 and 7.6 in magnitude struck southern Turkey and northern Syria, followed by thousands of violent aftershocks, resulting in hundreds of deaths, thousands of injuries, and the collapse of numerous residential buildings in both countries. The Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced an increase in the death toll of Iraqi victims resulting from the earthquake. Ministry spokesperson Aḥmad al-Ṣaḥḥāf reported that 11 Iraqis were confirmed dead in the disaster, which claimed over 37,000 lives across Turkey and Syria (al-Ḥurrah, 2023, February 6), with another eight individuals missing and their fates unknown. The Iraqi Embassy in Ankara facilitated the evacuation of 51 Iraqi citizens from Turkish cities, arranging a land transfer from the southern city of Adana to a shelter center in the capital, Ankara, after displacement from affected areas. The embassy also dispatched a delegation to Adana to issue travel passes for Iraqis from impacted residential areas and to arrange flights for their return to Iraq (al-ʿArabīyah, 2023, February 13).

In addition, The Iraqi Air Force deployed 26 aircraft to deliver humanitarian aid to Turkey and Syria. These planes transported 113 tons of aid to the Syrian airports of Damascus and Aleppo and to Gaziantep in Turkey, while also repatriating many Iraqi families who survived the earthquake in both nations. Additionally, the Iraqi Ministry of Education dispatched 27 aid trucks for earthquake victims (Mahdī, 2023). The Iraqi Council of Ministers recommended relocating the country’s consulate from Gaziantep to the Turkish province of Mersin and authorized the Foreign Minister to sign a memorandum for Iraq to join the Executive Committee of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (Shafaq News, 2023, February 21).

Following the devastating earthquake that claimed tens of thousands of lives, seismic activity has become a significant concern for Iraqis, particularly residents of northern cities who experienced aftershocks and questioned the structural integrity of buildings and residential towers. These structures have been constructed at an accelerated pace since 2003, especially in Baghdad, the Kurdistan Region, and other cities. This concern is heightened by Iraq’s location on the Arabian Plate, which borders both the Iranian and Anatolian plates, resulting in year-round seismic activity. Cities such as al-Sulaymānīyah, Mandalī, and Khān-aqīn are particularly vulnerable to tremors due to their proximity to the eastern Iranian Plate.

3. Saudi Arabia

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia undeniably constitutes a pivotal actor within the region. Therefore, al-Sūdānī government has endeavored to cultivate bilateral relations across multiple domains, including energy, electrical interconnection,

and security cooperation in counterterrorism efforts. This initiative reflects Iraq's commitment to reinforcing its Arab roots and fulfilling its essential leadership role in the region by establishing balanced relations with neighboring states.

A. Political Level

On February 9, 2023, al-Sūdānī emphasized the significance of the relationship between Riyadh and Baghdād, underscoring the necessity of strengthening ties and translating signed agreements into concrete projects. He articulated his administration's aspiration for an alliance with Saudi Arabia, grounded in the considerable Islamic, Arab, and economic influence both nations wield. He further noted that their shared geography and commonalities facilitate the formation of a central political and economic axis in the region, which could establish a stable regional order and serve as a foundation for global stability (al-Muṣṭafā, 2023).

The Prime Minister's remarks correspond with those of Foreign Minister Fu'ād Ḥusayn, who, during a joint press conference in Baghdād alongside his Saudi counterpart, Fayṣal bin Farḥān, highlighted Saudi Arabia's prominent role within the Islamic framework. Ḥusayn acknowledged Saudi Arabia's vital contributions in this sphere. In turn, Prince bin Farḥān affirmed the Kingdom's commitment to sustaining momentum in bilateral relations and enhancing coordination, particularly in economic and developmental sectors. He also expressed the readiness of Saudi enterprises to invest in Iraq to bolster its economy (Shafaq News, 2023, February 11).

During his visit to Baghdād and discussions with Fu'ād Ḥusayn, Fayṣal bin Farḥān articulated Saudi Arabia's dedication to consolidating a policy aimed at ensuring the stability of Iraq and the broader region. He asserted that any discord in Iraqi-Arab relations would adversely affect the entire Arabian Gulf and undermine Iraq's central government. Such instability could amplify the influence of armed factions and transform Iraq into a battleground for terrorist groups threatening the security of both Saudi Arabia and Iraq (al-Jazīrah, 2023, February 2).

Saudi Arabia's approach does not seek to dominate Iraqi decision-making; rather, it advocates for a robust, independent, and sovereign Iraqi government free from external interference. Riyadh underscores Iraq's fundamental role in promoting regional stability and collaborates closely with Baghdād to advance this objective through dialogue, mutual interest promotion, and dispute resolution. Stability remains the paramount goal of the relationship between these two significant regional capitals. This objective is pursued through trust-building and communicative diplomacy, regarded as the most cost-effective and sustainable strategy (CNN Arabic, 2023, February 2). The Saudi Council of Ministers has also reiterated the Kingdom's support for the Iraqi government's efforts to achieve sustainable growth and prosperity for its people (CNN Arabic, 2023, February 3).

B. Economic Level

During the "Saudi-Iraqi Economic Forum," which commenced on May 25, 2023, and was organized by the Federation of Saudi and Iraqi Chambers, economic cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Iraq emerged as a significant milestone

within the Arab world. The forum, attended by over 300 Saudi and Iraqi companies as well as various governmental and private entities, provided a platform to strengthen economic relations. Saudi Arabia, recognized as the largest Arab economy, reported a GDP of \$833.5 billion, while Iraq's GDP reached \$209.9 billion according to the 2022 Unified Arab Economic Report. At the event, Saudi and Iraqi investors advocated for the expedited establishment of the "Saudi-Iraqi Investment Company," aimed at financing projects valued at \$3 billion and facilitating Iraqi companies' access to loans from Saudi funding sources. Additionally, both parties agreed upon a cooperation roadmap to promote the development of joint trade and investment (al-Ānī, 2023).

It is noteworthy that bilateral trade experienced substantial growth, reaching \$1.5 billion in 2022, representing a 50% increase compared to 2021. This growth underscores the depth and sustainability of economic relations and highlights the necessity of further enhancing trade by utilizing the Judydat 'Ar'ar border crossing and accelerating the opening of the Jumaymah crossing, despite existing disparities in infrastructure efficiency between the two nations (Ukāz, 2023, May 25). The oil and gas sectors play a pivotal role in shaping international relations and the region's future. Saudi Arabia and Iraq, alongside the UAE and Kuwait, constitute the primary regional actors influencing global production levels and serve as a strategic center of gravity through their active participation in OPEC+ (al-Ānī, 2023).

Significantly, oil cooperation includes the involvement of Aramco in developing an Iraqi field currently producing 60 million cubic feet of gas, with the objective of increasing production to over 400 million cubic feet. This initiative aims to supply the national grid with the gas required for power generation, as Iraq anticipates the participation of Saudi companies in developing these fields to meet domestic demand.

The forum also resulted in several energy-related agreements, most notably an agreement with Saudi Arabia to transfer up to 1000 MW of electricity to Iraq. Furthermore, Saudi companies are scheduled to establish solar power plants in Najaf governorate, which will constitute the largest solar facility in Iraq. Both parties also concurred on establishing industrial cities along their shared borders to foster industrial and trade development (al-Sharq al-Awsat, 2023, May 25). Regarding electrical interconnection, a joint team is actively working to implement the 1000 MW Saudi-Iraqi interconnection project and renewable energy initiatives of equivalent capacity, in accordance with the signed principles of agreement (CNN Arabic, 2023, June 9).

Finally, continuous cooperation in trade, investment, transport, and logistics remains essential. This includes facilitating movement through land, air, and sea ports, streamlining travel and cargo procedures, resuming direct flights, and intensifying the exchange of views on regional and international issues of mutual concern to support security and stability in the region and globally.

4. Kuwait

On November 23, 2022, al-Sūdānī undertook his inaugural official visit to a Gulf nation by traveling to the State of Kuwait, where he engaged in a series of high-level meetings and discussions. During this visit, he met with several Kuwaiti officials, notably the Crown Prince of Kuwait, Sheikh Mish'al al-Aḥmad al-Ṣabāḥ. According to the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the purpose of the visit was to address several outstanding bilateral issues to advance the mutual interests of both countries through constructive and sustained cooperation at multiple levels, while overcoming obstacles to these objectives (Shafaq News, 2022, November 23a).

al-Sūdānī also visited the Kuwaiti National Assembly and held discussions with its Speaker, Aḥmad al-Sa'dūn, regarding the distinguished relations between the two brotherly nations. Both parties emphasized the importance of cooperation at parliamentary, governmental, and social levels, as well as bilateral coordination on regional and international matters of shared concern (Shafaq News, 2022, November 23b) to enhance stability and prosperity for both peoples. al-Sūdānī reaffirmed Iraq's commitment to fostering balanced relations with its neighbors based on mutual respect and the preservation of sovereignty, aiming to resolve various issues in a manner that supports shared interests and regional stability. In response, al-Ṣabāḥ highlighted the strength of the distinguished ties between the two countries and their peoples, underscoring Kuwait's dedication to supporting Iraq's stability and prosperity. He also commended Iraq's pivotal role in the region and its efforts to promote sustainable security (Nas News, 2022, November 23).

5. UAE

Continuing the trajectory established by former Iraqi Prime Minister Muṣṭafā al-Kāzīmī, al-Sūdānī expressed his intention to further rapprochement with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states by undertaking an official visit to the UAE accompanied by a high-level government delegation. The Iraqi Prime Minister engaged in discussions with UAE President Sheikh Muḥammad bin Zāyed Āl Nahyān, focusing on the development of fruitful cooperation across various sectors and levels, alongside regional and international issues of mutual interest (Shafaq News, 2023, February 9).

In a subsequent meeting, al-Sūdānī conferred with his Emirati counterpart, Muḥammad bin Rāshid, to deliberate on multiple cooperation files and to establish solid foundations for a sustainable partnership in the economic, investment, energy, cultural, and educational sectors. During this meeting, Āl Maktūm articulated his country's aspiration for economic openness toward Iraq, while both parties underscored the importance of high-level coordination to address various economic challenges. Prior to commencing his visit on February 9, 2023, al-Sūdānī declared his pursuit of a "sustainable partnership" with the UAE and his intention to explore avenues for exchanging expertise across diverse fields. He emphasized that the UAE ranks among Iraq's most prominent trade partners and that the economy constitutes the primary focus of the visit, alongside several

other matters of mutual concern. The significance of this visit is reflected in the following points (al-Ānī, 2023, February 11; Rudaw, 2023, February 10):

- It affirms Iraq's genuine desire to maintain and enhance trade and economic cooperation while attracting increased Emirati investment in large-scale projects that stimulate economic activity within Iraq. al-Sūdānī engaged with Emirati company leaders and businessmen to discuss investment opportunities and economic cooperation, highlighting governmental incentives to initiate major strategic and infrastructure reconstruction projects across various Iraqi cities (Kurdistan 24, 2023, February 11).
- The visit addresses several critical shared issues, notably the recovery of Iraqi funds. This matter represents a pressing concern for al-Sūdānī, who acknowledged Emirati cooperation in responding to the requirements of this file.
- The visit holds particular importance in the context of dollar smuggling and money laundering, specifically concerning the use of Dubai as a conduit for currency smuggling by certain banks and major capital holders. One objective of the visit was to obstruct currency smuggling routes and to reach an understanding with Emirati officials to enhance oversight of funds originating from Iraq and their destinations, ensuring stringent monitoring and assistance to Iraq in safeguarding its economic and financial assets.
- This visit culminates ongoing communication and steady growth in relations grounded in cultural and civilizational ties, aiming to establish robust pillars for Iraqi-Gulf relations generally, and Iraqi-Emirati relations specifically.

6. Significance and Dimensions of the 25th Gulf Cup

The 25th Gulf Cup football tournament, inaugurated in the Iraqi city of al-Baṣrah, on January 6, 2023, served as a catalyst for enhancing Iraqi-Gulf Arab relations. This event facilitated broader and more comprehensive communication channels. Following the successful organization of the tournament, Iraq achieved notable security, political, economic, and diplomatic successes. Analysts have underscored that the tournament reinstated Iraq within the Arab community and challenged prevailing misconceptions about the nation's security situation. During the World Economic Forum in Davos, Foreign Minister Fu'ād Ḥusayn met with his Saudi counterpart, Fayṣal bin Farḥān, affirming Iraq's commitment to leveraging the Gulf Cup as a means to unite Arab nations, characterizing the tournament as an instance of "unconventional diplomacy." Sports, often conceptualized as "popular" or "public diplomacy," play a significant role in fostering communication and connections among societies and peoples (al-Jubūrī, 2023, January 14).

This event transcended a mere sporting occasion, encompassing political, social, and economic dimensions, which are delineated as follows (al-Naṣrāwī, 2023, January 19; Sky News Arabia, 2023, January 20):

- **Political Dimensions:** The tournament marked a significant rapprochement between Iraq and its Gulf neighbors, strengthening bilateral ties. It mitigated numerous disputes, as evidenced by the enthusiastic Arab audiences who attended the carnivals in al-Baṣrah and the evident affection of Iraqis toward their Arab neighbors. This shifted Arab perceptions regarding Iraq's security and stability, countering the "yellow journalism" that previously portrayed a collapse of the security apparatus and a distorted national image. The tournament also surpassed prior tensions, demonstrated by the official Iraqi participation in various associated events and reciprocal visits, including the Prime Minister hosting sports delegations from participating countries. The championship was perceived as an Arab-Gulf homage to Iraq, aiding in the nation's recovery from the challenges faced since 2003 (ʿAbd-al-Ḥusayn, 2023, February 1). It reinstated Iraq's presence in Arab and international forums, with anticipated impacts extending beyond the realm of sports. Moreover, extensive media coverage by Arab and Gulf channels positively portrayed Iraq and al-Baṣrah, showcasing neighborhoods and diverse social segments, thereby highlighting Iraq's civilizational and cultural heritage. Notably, the Iraqi government facilitated entry by allowing thousands of fans to enter through multiple ports and exempted international attendees from visa requirements (Nas News, 2023, January 6).
- **Economic Dimensions:** The sporting event revitalized significant market sectors, including transportation, housing, and retail. It also opened promising avenues for Gulf capital investment, particularly in al-Baṣrah. Concurrently, the tournament's scale and stadium readiness stimulated Iraq's aspirations to host the Arab Cup. Therefore, the Arabian Gulf Cup in al-Baṣrah functioned not merely as a transient sports festival but as a conduit for diverse political, social, cultural, and economic messages (al-Mālikī, 2023, January 7).
- **Social Dimensions:** Iraqis exemplified genuine hospitality by warmly welcoming visitors, opening their homes, and demonstrating generosity that impressed all guests. The 25th Gulf Cup contributed to strengthening social relations between the Iraqi government and populace and the governments and peoples of the Arabian Gulf countries after a prolonged hiatus.
- **Cultural Dimensions:** The opening ceremony significantly showcased Iraq's historical heritage, blending past and present to create an artistic presentation befitting the event. Both Iraqi and Arab fans expressed their affection for Iraq, and the participation of Emirati artist Aḥlām highlighted the robust relations between the two nations.

7. Syria

On July 16, 2023, Prime Minister al-Sūdānī undertook an official visit to Syria. This visit marked the first by an Iraqi Prime Minister since 2010 and the first by an

Arab official of comparable rank since the onset of the Syrian change movement in 2011. During a joint press conference with Syrian President Bashshār al-Asad, al-Sūdānī emphasized that security and stability in both Syria and Iraq necessitate enhanced bilateral coordination to address shared challenges. He further highlighted that economic relations between Baghdād and Damascus would be a primary focus of their discussions (Baghdād Today, 2023, July 16).

In their meeting, al-Sūdānī and al-Asad examined various dimensions of bilateral relations and mutual concerns. The dialogue encompassed strategies to strengthen and develop cooperation and partnership between the two nations, alongside exploring opportunities to expand exchanges in economic sectors, transport, trade, tourism, and water resources. Additionally, they addressed the impacts of climate change and strategies to mitigate drought conditions affecting both countries due to declining rainfall. The leaders also discussed securing their shared borders in response to security threats, including those posed by ISIS militants. Joint security coordination in counter-terrorism efforts was also a significant topic, aimed at enhancing the security and stability of both populations (Anadolu Agency, 2023, July 16).

al-Sūdānī proposed establishing mechanisms for coordination, monitoring, and follow-up to combat drug trafficking, particularly concerning the flow of narcotics such as Captagon from Syria. Accusations have been made that the Syrian regime facilitates these activities to obtain hard currency amid Western sanctions linked to the Syrian civil war (al-Ḥurrah, 2023, July 16). Both parties recognized the necessity of cooperation to address water scarcity and the drying of rivers. Furthermore, al-Sūdānī reaffirmed Iraq's rejection of all Israeli aggressions against Syria and Lebanon. al-Asad regarded the visit as an opportunity to institutionalize relations and achieve substantial progress in bilateral cooperation, as reported by the Syrian regime's news agency, SANA. al-Sūdānī underscored Syria's special significance to the Iraqi people and expressed pride in the resilience demonstrated by Syrians in the face of severe terrorist attacks. He also voiced support for lifting the sanctions imposed on Syria by the United States and European nations since 2011 (al-Jazīrah, 2023, July 16).

An American report noted that al-Sūdānī and al-Asad discussed issues impacting both Iraq and Syria, including terrorism, water management, drug smuggling, displaced persons, Israeli military actions, US sanctions, and economic development. The report further indicated that despite opposition from Iraq's Western allies to Arab states engaging with Damascus, officials in Baghdād contend that such engagement aligns with Iraq's national interests amid Damascus's increasing reintegration into the regional framework. It highlighted that with al-Sūdānī and his pro-Tehran government in power since October 2022, and as most Arab states normalize relations with al-Asad following years of isolation, Iraq-Syria relations have notably advanced. The report also pointed out that following Syria's readmission to the Arab League and visits by senior officials from GCC countries, Egypt, and Jordan to Damascus, al-Sūdānī's visit to the Syrian capital now generates minimal controversy (Shafaq News, 2023, July 25).

8. Russia

The diplomatic relations between Iraq and the Russian Federation have spanned several decades, with Moscow demonstrating a supportive stance toward Baghdād following the events of June 2014 by expediting the delivery of military equipment, including fighter jets (al-Ma'lūmah, 2023, October 7). Both Russia and Iraq possess substantial oil reserves and share mutual interests that create a favorable environment for investment and trade within the energy sector. This cooperation is particularly evident through the active involvement of major Russian corporations such as Rosneft, Lukoil, Bashneft, and Gazprom in Iraq's burgeoning oil industry (al-Jazīrah, 2023, February 8). In 2023, Russian investments in Iraq amounted to approximately \$19 billion. As Russia and its principal geopolitical ally, China, have increased their trade and investment activities in Iraq, some analysts suggest that these efforts aim to challenge Western predominance in the Middle East, beginning with Iraq. Russian influence has evolved through three distinct phases, commencing in the Kurdistan Region of northern Iraq in 2017 and culminating by the end of 2023 with Lukoil assuming control over the majority of oil- and gas-rich areas in southern Iraq (Ja'far, 2024, January 7).

To strengthen bilateral ties across various sectors, Prime Minister al-Sūdānī undertook an official visit to Moscow on October 10, 2023. The visit focused on critical issues related to global peace and energy cooperation. During this visit, Moscow reaffirmed its support for Iraq's stability and the Development Road project, which seeks to connect Middle Eastern ports to Turkey and Europe via an integrated network of roads, railways, and energy infrastructure (Shafaq News, 2023, October 3).

The discussions between Russian and Iraqi officials encompassed political, security, and economic matters. Strategic topics included global peace and the energy sector, which constitutes a foundational element of the economic partnership, given that both Iraq and the Russian Federation rank among the world's leading oil producers. The talks addressed the implications for oil market stability and its global consequences, alongside Iraq's commitment to resolving its debts and financial obligations. President Putin expressed anticipation for further dialogue on Middle Eastern security and initiatives to enhance Iraq's internal security. Moscow reiterated its endorsement of the Development Road project and emphasized the importance of diversifying Iraq's economy to reduce its heavy dependence on the oil sector (Ja'far, 2024, January 7).

The parties also deliberated on the precarious situation in occupied Palestine. Iraq urged Russia to advocate within the United Nations Security Council for urgent measures to halt ongoing attacks on Palestinian territories and the targeting of civilians. Russia reaffirmed its support for Iraq's stability, the improvement of its investment climate, and economic growth (Khabar Press, 2023, October 10). Additionally, Russian Presidential Assistant Igor Levitin conveyed Russia's readiness to participate in the implementation of the Development Road project during his visit to Baghdād on October 3, 2023. He highlighted that Iraq's initiation of the Development Road alongside the al-Fāw Grand Port project represents a sustain-

able economic strategy aimed at transitioning toward a diversified economy and achieving integration with other regional economic corridors (Shafaq News, 2023, October 3).

An analysis of al-Sūdānī's visit to Russia suggests that it aligns with Iraq's broader strategy of engaging with influential global actors. While the Prime Minister articulated a clear vision regarding the Development Road and investment opportunities, it is noted that Iraq must exercise caution in its diplomatic messaging toward the United States. Iraq has maintained a neutral position in the Ukrainian crisis, and some observers interpret the visit as a routine diplomatic engagement without significant strategic messages. Conversely, others argue that Iraq's neutrality in the Ukrainian conflict may enhance its bilateral relations with Russia, a major global energy market player and a significant supplier of military equipment, including S-400 missile systems.

9. Sweden

The bilateral relations between Iraq and Sweden encompass diplomatic, social, and political dimensions. Iraq maintains an embassy in Stockholm, while Sweden operates an embassy in Baghdād and a consulate in Erbil. The presence of approximately 150,000 Iraqi migrants and individuals of Iraqi descent in Sweden constitutes one of the largest foreign communities within the country.

Diplomatic tensions escalated significantly when Iraq threatened to sever ties with Sweden entirely. On July 20, 2023, the Iraqi government formally requested the Swedish Ambassador to depart from Iraqi territory and simultaneously recalled the Iraqi Chargé d'Affaires from Stockholm. These measures were enacted in response to repeated incidents in Sweden involving the burning of the Holy Quran, desecration of Islamic sacred symbols, and the burning of the Iraqi flag by a refugee of Iraqi origin, Salwān Mūmīkā. Additionally, Iraqi authorities suspended the operational license of the Swedish telecommunications firm Ericsson within Iraq, citing these provocations (al-'Arabīyah, 2023, July 20). The Iraqi government emphasized that such actions contravene international conventions and norms concerning respect for religious beliefs, threaten peace, and foster a culture of violence and hatred (Sky News Arabia, 2023, July 20).

Sayyid Muqtadā al-Ṣadr, leader of the Sadrist Movement, urged the international community to criminalize the burning of the Holy Quran and other holy texts, categorizing such acts as terrorist offenses. He previously called for a decisive response from the Iraqi government regarding Sweden's authorization of the Iraqi flag's burning, asserting that Sweden had violated diplomatic protocols and political norms, thereby exhibiting hostility toward Iraq (BBC, 2023, July 20). In the early hours of July 20, 2023, supporters of the Sadrist Movement protested by setting fire to the Swedish Embassy in Baghdād following Stockholm's issuance of a permit to burn a copy of the Holy Quran. The Iraqi government condemned the embassy attack, labeling it a security breach requiring judicial investigation. It reaffirmed its commitment to safeguarding all diplomatic missions and pledged to address any assaults against them (al-'Arab Newspaper, 2023, July 20).

In response to the embassy burning, Sweden summoned the Iraqi Chargé d'Affaires in Stockholm. Swedish Foreign Minister Tobias Billström issued a strong statement condemning the attack on the embassy as entirely unacceptable and criticized Iraqi authorities for their significant failure to uphold their responsibilities in this matter (Sky News Arabia, 2023, July 21).

VIII. Agenda for 2024

1. Problems of the Upcoming Year

The onset of 2023 appeared promising for Iraq, a country that has endured significant challenges over the past two decades, including violence, terrorism, and severe political, ethnic, and sectarian divisions. Optimism surrounded Prime Minister Muḥammad Shiyā' al-Sūdānī following his appointment in late October 2022. For the first time in years, the Iraqi Parliament confirmed a Prime Minister supported by a majority coalition comprising Shi'i, Sunni, and Kurdish political factions united under the State Administration Alliance framework. Additionally, al-Sūdānī inherited from his predecessor, Prime Minister Muṣṭafā al-Kāzīmī, a treasury estimated at approximately \$85 billion and over 100 tons of gold, alongside a relatively stable security environment after years of turmoil (al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ, 2023, December 23).

Early 2023 signaled renewed hope for Iraq's reintegration into the community of normal states and its Arab neighbors. This optimism was bolstered by al-Sūdānī's diplomatic visits and the successful hosting of the Arabian Gulf Cup football tournament in al-Baṣrah governorate, the first such event in 42 years. The national team's exceptional performance culminated in their fourth championship title, their first since 1988.

Despite the government's international judicial victory against Turkey in March 2023 concerning violations related to the transfer of oil from the Kurdistan Region to the Ceyhan port, the ruling's aftermath resulted in Iraq losing over \$5 billion due to halted oil pumping.

In May, the Federal Court declared the Oil and Gas Law in the Kurdistan Region null and void, exacerbating the region's oil-related challenges. This decision precipitated a renewed political crisis between Baghdad and Erbil, both of which had previously sought to resolve differences through the State Administration Alliance, wherein Shi'i and Kurdish factions collaborated to support al-Sūdānī's government. Concurrently, the Federal Court ruled that the extension of the outgoing Kurdistan Regional Parliament's term was unconstitutional. This parliament had been dominated by Erbil through representatives of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) led by Mas'ūd Bārzānī.

Despite the emerging political tensions between Baghdad and Erbil, the Federal Parliament successfully overcame its customary disputes in June and approved the Federal Budget Law for 2023 and the subsequent two years by

majority vote. This marked the first instance since 2003 of a multi-year budget approval, as previous practice involved annual budget votes.

Also in June, the burning of the Holy Quran in Sweden by a Christian migrant of Iraqi origin sparked widespread public outrage and a diplomatic crisis with Sweden. The incident culminated in the storming and burning of the Swedish Embassy in Baghdād. In response, the Iraqi government summoned the Swedish Ambassador and recalled its own ambassador from Stockholm (RT Arabic, 2023, September 30).

In August, media outlets and political analysts reported an increase in American troop presence in Iraq, alongside discussions of potential US military mobilizations along the Iraqi-Syrian border. Speculation suggested possible US military actions against Iran-aligned armed factions; however, both Baghdād and Washington denied these claims. The following month, the escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in Gaza heightened tensions in Iraq. Despite Iraq's geographical distance from the conflict zone, rocket attacks by pro-Iranian armed groups targeted locations housing American forces in Iraq and Syria, effectively returning the country to a state reminiscent of wartime conditions it had only recently begun to overcome (al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ, 2023, November 9).

In November, the United States conducted missile strikes targeting the headquarters and bases of armed factions located in Jurf al-Sakhar within the Bābil Governorate, areas west of Baghdād, and the Kirkūk Governorate. These operations resulted in at least 20 fatalities among the factions and were executed in retaliation for attacks against the "Ayn al-Asad" base in al-Anbār Governorate and the "Ḥarīr" base in Erbil Governorate within the Kurdistan Region. This sequence of events placed al-Sūdānī's government in a politically precarious position with both its domestic political partners and its ally, Washington. By mid-December, the al-Sūdānī government announced the successful apprehension of several individuals implicated in the attacks, following diplomatic pressure from Washington on Baghdād to ensure their judicial accountability (France 24, 2024, January 24).

Moreover, the prevailing political instability indirectly contributed to an escalation in external violations of Iraq's national sovereignty. These incursions were justified by claims of pursuing armed opposition groups utilizing Iraqi territory as a staging ground for military and security operations in neighboring states, thereby exacerbating challenges faced by the Kurdistan Region and further complicating the Iraqi government's position. Furthermore, the ongoing tensions between the United States and Iran have both direct and indirect repercussions for Iraq, given its strategic relations with both nations. Iraqi Foreign Minister Fu'ād Ḥusayn addressed this issue in an interview, emphasizing Iraq's interest in mitigating regional tensions. He acknowledged the presence of Iranian influence in Baghdād but clarified that this does not equate to Tehran controlling decisions on critical national matters. Ḥusayn also highlighted Iraq's historical lack of sovereignty due to multiple military interventions since the American invasion, noting that Baghdād only began to regain a measure of autonomy following the conclusion of the conflict against ISIS in 2017. While significant progress toward

sovereignty has been made, it remains incomplete. He further explained that the influence of neighboring countries, particularly Iran, persists within Iraqi society, underscored by enduring intellectual and ideological connections with Tehran (MDEAST News, 2023, February 16).

In addition, political developments in Turkey and Iran continue to cast long-term implications for Iraq's political and security landscape. Both countries have targeted Kurdish opposition groups based in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq through missile and drone attacks, with Tehran even threatening a ground incursion. Tehran attributes the support for the protest movement that emerged in Iranian cities in September 2022 to Iranian-Kurdish opposition groups, some of which have been granted asylum in the Kurdistan Region for over 15 years. Conversely, Ankara accuses the PKK of conducting terrorist attacks on Turkish soil and supporting Syrian-Kurdish opposition factions. Leadership in both Iran and Turkey have leveraged these security concerns to divert attention from domestic challenges. Public opinion polls indicate substantial resentment among the Iraqi populace toward neighboring countries for their recurrent disregard of Iraq's sovereignty. Consequently, Iran and Turkey are likely to find their influence over Iraq's internal affairs increasing, as domestic political dynamics increasingly reflect the sentiments of a discontented public (Slim, 2023).

In fact, Iraq currently fails to assume a pivotal role in regional affairs, remaining part of the problem rather than the solution. In 2024, Iraq faces significant challenges, notably the presence of the PKK in northern Iraq and the complexities surrounding the Jurf al-Sakhar (Sputnik Arabic, 2021, December 29) issue. The absence of effective strategic planning constitutes a critical obstacle, impeding Iraq's emergence as an influential and effective actor on both regional and international stages. This is exemplified by the inability of Iraq and its Ministry of Foreign Affairs to achieve key national objectives, particularly the restoration of Iraq's standing in regional and international contexts (al-'Alī, 2020, p. 67).

A principal factor contributing to the weakness of Iraqi foreign policy is the lack of a coherent philosophy or strategic framework endorsed by relevant institutions. This deficiency is exacerbated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' narrow focus on immediate and transient interests in managing the state's external relations. Since 2003, Iraqi foreign policy has been subsumed within a political contest among various parties, with ministerial appointments determined by electoral quotas rather than professional qualifications. Consequently, political consensus in foreign policy formulation is lacking, and there is no clear vision addressing the challenges confronting the state (al-Sa'īdī et al., 2018, p. 216). Moreover, strategic plans developed in Iraq have often been abandoned due to multiple factors. Many such plans are externally influenced, drafted by individuals lacking competence, and devoid of practical feasibility. Numerous plans remain unimplemented because their objectives exceed the available material and human resources (al-Filālī, 2010, p. 23).

The absence of internal political consensus continues to undermine Iraq's external posture on regional issues and their developments (Ḥusayn, 2018, pp.

13-14). Despite ongoing conflicts within and beyond Iraq's borders, persistent struggles have engendered security tensions, instability in regional roles, and territorial expansion, resulting in new roles and interference in Iraq's internal affairs (Aṭwān, 2007, p. 158). The foremost challenges confronting foreign policy planners stem from domestic political and institutional instability, which undermines Iraq's discourse abroad and diminishes its influence. These challenges are compounded by external pressures, conflicting agendas, a fragile economy, and the lack of military capabilities necessary for deterrence vis-à-vis neighboring states (Bāqir, 2016, p. 110).

Economically, Iraq remains heavily dependent on oil revenues, rendering it vulnerable to macroeconomic fluctuations and limiting its capacity to implement policies countering cyclical changes. Current forecasts suggest that prevailing oil prices are unsustainable amid shifting international dynamics. Factors that previously elevated oil prices, such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the waning impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, may evolve with the conflict's resolution or the emergence of new global health crises, potentially precipitating a global economic recession and reduced oil demand. Such developments would inevitably depress oil prices and diminish oil revenues, which constitute over 95% of Iraq's general budget revenues.

2. Obligations of the Upcoming Year

Several scholars argue that Iraq confronts substantial and critical obligations concerning political and governmental decision-making, as well as the management of state administrative responsibilities (al-'Alī, 2022). By the conclusion of 2023, the Iraqi populace anticipates the eradication of terrorist strongholds within the country, particularly following the successes achieved by security forces against sleeper cells and targeted operations against individuals sought by the judiciary (al-Hājj, 2021). Looking ahead to 2024, it is projected that the security situation will remain largely unchanged, with security forces continuing to conduct operations against ISIS. There is a pronounced necessity to reassess intelligence efforts and strive toward the permanent dismantlement of ISIS, especially given its engagement in specialized operations that demand a sophisticated counter-response. The overall security landscape in 2024 will be contingent upon the stability of the political environment; any deterioration could precipitate renewed attacks targeting the American Embassy and the Green Zone. Such developments could place al-Sūdānī's administration in a precarious position reminiscent of the challenges faced by the government of former Prime Minister Muṣṭafā al-Kāzimī (al-Dabbāgh, 2023).

Regarding foreign policy, Prime Minister al-Sūdānī has articulated a commitment to a balanced approach, particularly in relation to the antagonism between the United States and Iran. He further underscored the importance of established and robust relations with Arab nations, including members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), as well as Jordan and Egypt, with a primary focus on economic and energy sectors. Additionally, the Prime Minister pledged to sustain amicable

relations with neighboring countries Iran and Turkey and to position Baghdad as a central venue for Saudi-Iranian dialogue (Sputnik Arabic, 2023, March 6).

Therefore, Iraq has historically played, and continues to play, a pivotal role in regional affairs. Iraqi mediation has been instrumental in alleviating tensions and resolving longstanding disputes within the region. Political sources report that Iraq has hosted five rounds of negotiations between Iranian and Saudi officials aimed at normalizing relations severed since January 2016. Moreover, discussions have been held concerning facilitating a US-Iranian dialogue, either in Baghdad or through Iraqi diplomatic channels. This is complemented by strategic relations with Jordan and Egypt, as well as strategic and economic cooperation with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. Furthermore, relations with Turkey have assumed critical importance. Collectively, these factors afford Iraq the opportunity to assume a significant role in economic, political, and security cooperation, counterterrorism efforts, and the cultivation of cooperative relations with the United States, the European Union, and other major industrialized nations (Dhannūn, 2022). Prime Minister al-Sūdānī and numerous allies within the Coordination Framework have expressed their endorsement of the United States' "military advice, assistance, and enablement" mission in Iraq. Similarly, they have supported the long-term capacity-building mission for Iraqi security forces conducted by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (IMF, 2022).

3. Ways to Address Challenges and Obligations

The Iraqi government faces substantial challenges in managing its regional and international foreign relations, necessitating a coordinated effort to address these issues and mitigate their internal and external consequences before advancing regional cooperation. A fundamental element of Iraqi foreign policy is its unique geostrategic location, which serves as a critical determinant (Maḥmūd, 2020). Effectively leveraging this position in alignment with national interests and mutual benefits with regional and international actors is essential to maintaining a balanced approach in diplomatic engagements. Iraq should function as a convergence point for neighboring states and, by extension, the broader international community, rather than as a locus of conflicting interests or international disputes (Bāqir, 2016, pp. 107-110).

Given Iraq's central geopolitical status, its strategic approach should focus on restructuring relationships with regional countries and adopting assuring policies. This entails confronting several challenges, foremost among them the issue of "capability." Restoring Iraq's status and influence requires sufficient political, economic, and military resources, followed by ensuring continuity in policy implementation. Additionally, administrative weaknesses, the complexity of overlapping problems, and an inability to maintain a balancing role present further obstacles. Addressing these challenges demands strength, determination, a robust economic foundation, and national confidence. Without these elements, Iraq remains vulnerable to external threats and incapable of safeguarding its sovereignty (al-'Alī, 2020, p. 69).

Iraq holds significant resources, wealth, and geostrategic importance to international interests. Therefore, it must pursue a policy of neutrality in its political and economic relations and cooperation with neighboring countries. Iraq has no vested interest in aligning with Iran against Turkey or vice versa, nor with Saudi Arabia against Iran. By adopting neutrality, Iraq can harness its capabilities to promote peace, security, and coexistence among nations, principles enshrined in the United Nations Charter (al-'Alī, 2020, p. 69).

Hence, Iraqi security strategists should prioritize strengthening ties with Arab and regional partners in military, security, and intelligence domains. This can be achieved through joint security agreements that ensure the stability and security of Iraq and its neighbors against terrorism (Group of Researchers, 2012, pp. 77-78). The current geopolitical and security challenges do not permit Iraq to align exclusively with any faction within existing or emerging regional rivalries. Therefore, Iraq must endeavor to maintain balance, sources of strength, and strategic flexibility in its regional relations while working to resolve outstanding disputes and avoid conflicts.

Iraq's engagement with Iran should be based on equality and mutual respect, free from violations by either party. Achieving this requires Iraq to reclaim its rightful position within regional and international systems, compelling Iran to acknowledge Iraq's strategic significance. In addition, Iraq should avoid becoming a battleground or participant in Iranian-Gulf-American conflicts, instead pursuing policies aligned with its strategic interests. Similarly, relations with Turkey must safeguard Iraq's interests, particularly concerning water rights from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and territorial integrity. Furthermore, Iraq should enhance its involvement in international agreements on human rights and democracy and strengthen relations with major global powers to support national reconstruction efforts (Bāqir, 2016, pp. 107-108).

In foreign relations, achieving balance between Iran and the United States remains challenging due to ongoing conflicts and failed international efforts to revive the nuclear agreement. Consequently, Iraq requires a clear and independent foreign policy vision that prioritizes national interests. This necessitates a sovereign government capable of autonomous decision-making in foreign affairs and international relations.

The deficiency in strategic planning within Iraq has constituted, and continues to constitute, a significant and perilous challenge to the nation's security, impeding its development as a prominent and effective power at both regional and international levels. The following measures are essential to address this deficiency (al-'Alī & al-Shujayrī, 2021, pp. 197-199; Mūsá, 2022):

- Strategic planning necessitates capabilities characterized by foresight and the ability to anticipate future developments (al-'Azzāwī, 2009, p. 14). Iraq requires a planning vision aimed at addressing the security and economic challenges currently undermining its institutional framework. This can be achieved by formulating a government program with well-defined pillars

and adopting planning mechanisms to confront forthcoming challenges. Effective strategic thinking and planning must precede efforts to resolve Iraq's issues, thereby regulating and enhancing the performance of the comprehensive strategic system within existing capacities. This is particularly critical given that crises have become a defining feature of Iraq's internal strategic environment, making planning a vital survival tool to navigate these crises, by employing mechanisms that adapt to rapid, successive, and often abrupt regional and international changes, for it has become imperative to mitigate these risks and attain relative stability in Iraq's security situation across multiple levels (Fathī, 2022).

- To achieve the necessary reforms for drafting a rational and serious foreign policy that meets current challenges, the forthcoming government should first establish a specialized unit within the Prime Minister's Office of Consultants. This unit would assist in drafting, monitoring implementation, and evaluating Iraqi foreign policy in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the legislative authority. Second, there must be a commitment to appointing distinguished and competent ambassadors to remain at the Ministry's headquarters to rectify the disorder that has characterized the Ministry's operations in recent years. Third, significant attention should be devoted to the Foreign Service Center, including the selection of qualified teaching staff to enhance the training and development of diplomatic personnel, alongside efforts to advance scientific research in strategic, geopolitical, and economic domains, as practiced in neighboring countries. Fourth, resources and personnel must be allocated to modernize the Ministry's outdated library, transforming it into a sophisticated and updated center for research and information.
- Iraqi diplomacy must be restructured and founded upon professional principles and a comprehensive understanding of the challenges confronting Iraq (such as terrorism, counterterrorism efforts, and globalization) to empower the Iraqi people to reconstruct their nation through effective diplomacy that is cognizant of its realities and environment (al-Jumayli, 2013, p. 13).
- Iraq must crystallize and activate a proactive and influential role within international conferences and forums.
- Iraq needs to reclaim its lost sovereignty and the independence of its political decision-making, establish the foundations of domestic stability, and adopt a clear methodology in engaging with international actors. Consequently, foreign policy planners must immerse themselves in international relations and secure a diplomatic presence in international forums to foster mutual trust (Ḥamīd, 2022).
- There is an urgent necessity to revitalize the economic dimension of Iraqi foreign policy, particularly economic diplomacy, for several reasons. First,

international economic relations and diplomatic activities have undergone profound transformations driven by globalization over the past two decades, affecting global trade, capital flows, and the widespread dissemination of information technology. Therefore, foreign policy must adapt to these developments to break Iraq's isolation and facilitate its strategic integration into the rapidly evolving global economy. Second, although the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has articulated a strategy emphasizing support for reconstruction and economic development, it has not demonstrated significant efforts in this domain in recent years. The Ministry has played a negligible role in addressing Iraq's financial obligations related to debts and compensation, attracting foreign capital and technology necessary for reconstruction, or guiding and supporting Iraq's commercial and economic relations with neighboring countries and the broader international community. This situation is unsurprising given the absence of an economic department within the Ministry tasked with these critical functions. Moreover, the Ministry's personnel seldom possess the requisite training and experience in economic diplomacy, compounded by weak relationships with other ministries, state institutions, private sector entities, and civil society organizations, which are relationships essential for effective economic diplomacy. Addressing this substantial deficiency requires establishing an economic department within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and equipping it with the necessary resources to fulfill its mandate (Hasan, 2010). Additionally, the Iraqi economy must be fostered through knowledge and technology by integrating it into the global economic system and attracting investment from major industrial nations, thereby aligning their interests with Iraq's and enabling the country to achieve substantial benefits and expedite its restoration to its rightful international status.

Despite the political and economic challenges currently confronting Iraq, three primary areas have been identified as critical to fostering economic diversification, growth, and stability (al-'Alī et al., 2022, p. 61):

1. Maintaining peace as a fundamental catalyst for growth. In the short term, Iraq should prioritize the application of sound governance principles by ensuring the timely completion and publication of government audit reports. This encompasses the enhancement of the legal framework, the advancement of digitalization within government institutions, the streamlining of anti-corruption efforts, and the implementation of the National Strategy for Integrity and Anti-Corruption (2021-2024), alongside the simplification of the institutional structure responsible for its enforcement (World Bank, 2020).
2. Leveraging Iraq's export potential to diversify the economy beyond oil production. This strategy involves progressing toward increased trade and regional integration. Iraq's geographic position qualifies it to serve as a regional hub for logistics services; however, its logistical performance

significantly lags behind that of its regional counterparts, resulting in a bottleneck effect.

3. Revitalizing the agricultural sector to establish it as a cornerstone of a diversified, private-sector-driven economy. The agricultural production sector, food industry, and associated service sectors (including logistics, finance, manufacturing, and technology) possess substantial potential for expansion and employment generation.

In conclusion, structural reform within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a substantive shift in the formulation and execution of foreign policy must be prioritized by the forthcoming government. It is important to emphasize that the success of foreign policy is intrinsically linked to the overall efficacy of the government's public policies. The greater the consistency, integration, clarity, and determination characterizing these policies, the higher the likelihood of success for Iraqi foreign policy.

IX. Conclusions

- There exists a profound and substantial desire within Iraq to sustain and enhance its partnership and cooperation with the United States, aiming to achieve sustainable development objectives. Iraq endeavors to solidify strategic relations encompassing a comprehensive range of bilateral issues that serve their mutual interests in regional stability, with particular emphasis on economic collaboration, energy sector advancement, and climate change mitigation.
- Prime Minister al-Sūdānī undertook swift visits to several regional countries, including Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. His travels extended to Europe, where he visited its most powerful countries: Germany (the mightiest in economic capabilities), and France (the mightiest in military affairs). Additionally, his visit to Russia focused on critical matters concerning global peace, energy issues, and the Development Road project. These diplomatic engagements aim to fortify Iraq's foreign relations while maintaining full independence in a manner that aligns with its national interests. Throughout these visits, al-Sūdānī prioritized numerous agendas, foremost among them the security and economic sectors, reflecting the challenges confronting Iraq.
- Concerning Iraq's stance on the events in Gaza, the country has urged the international community and relevant organizations to intervene to cease military operations, lift the siege on Gaza City, establish safe corridors for civilians, and facilitate the delivery of urgent humanitarian aid. Furthermore, Baghdād hosted the 35th Emergency Conference of the Arab Parliamentary Union to deliberate on the Gaza situation and advocate for an immediate cessation of attacks targeting civilians.
- The visit of the United Nations Secretary-General to Iraq was of considerable significance, demonstrating the international organization's partic-

ular interest in the country. This visit opened new avenues for redirecting global attention toward Iraq as a pivotal state in the region capable of playing a crucial role in future developments. It also symbolized Iraq's balanced role in promoting international peace and security.

- Iraq secured a favorable ruling in an arbitration case against Turkey concerning a protracted dispute over oil exports from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Subsequently, Turkey ceased the pumping of Iraqi crude oil through the pipeline leading to the Turkish port of Ceyhan.
- Under the administration of al-Sūdānī, Iraq approaches its relationship with Saudi Arabia based on principles of cooperation and partnership between states. This relationship emphasizes security, mutual interests, areas of convergence, and shared strengths, while also acknowledging Saudi Arabia's political and spiritual significance within the Islamic world.
- al-Sūdānī's visit to Cairo encompassed numerous critical issues pertinent to bilateral relations, particularly the enhancement of economic cooperation. Concurrently, it underscored a contemporary Iraqi vision aimed at formulating a balanced foreign policy between Iran and Arab nations. This strategy seeks to foster a conducive environment for regional countries to overcome crises historically characterized by regional rivalries and conflicts.
- al-Sūdānī's visit to Damascus and his meeting with al-Asad addressed matters impacting both Iraq and Syria, including terrorism, water resource management, drug trafficking, displaced populations, regional security threats, American sanctions, and economic development.

X. Recommendations

- Constructing a balanced and coherent foreign policy in both regional and international contexts necessitates a unified stance across various official and unofficial levels. It is imperative to prevent fragmentation of opinions or orientations between the government, as the executive authority, and the diverse political and parliamentary factions. A fundamental and critical aspect in this domain is the clear definition of foreign policy priorities, achieving consensus among all political entities, and adopting these priorities as the foundation for a consistent Iraqi strategy endorsed by all political groups. This strategy should emphasize the paramount interests of the state, foremost among which is national sovereignty. The principle of sovereignty must be upheld and reinforced, rejecting any external interference in internal affairs, as this constitutes the cornerstone of the state's success and resilience.
- It is hoped that Iraq will, in the forthcoming period, establish constructive relations that safeguard its interests and those of its populace through a coherent foreign policy, which has yet to be fully actualized.

- Given Iraq's central and pivotal geopolitical position, its strategic approach should focus on restructuring relations with regional countries and adopting reassuring stances toward them while addressing numerous internal and external challenges. The Iraqi people collectively must formulate a national action program that restores Iraq's status and prestige and fosters balanced relations with global countries, including the United States. A robust Iraq serves the interests of all, whereas a weakened Iraq remains a source of regional and global instability.
- Iraqi decision-makers are urged to implement strategic plans that align with international developments, promote social advancement, and restore the country's standing in the global arena. This requires the formulation of precise strategies grounded in clear objectives that address critical issues. To realize these aims, strategic plans must be adaptable and subject to ongoing review within a forward-looking framework. A vision without action is merely a dream, and action without vision is futile; however, the combination of vision and action possesses transformative potential.
- The Iraqi government is called upon to adopt a unified, serious, and official political discourse that resolutely confronts the internal and external challenges facing the nation. This necessitates conducting a rigorous and realistic analytical assessment of the environment to identify priority factors influencing vital interests, thereby defining Iraq's supreme objectives. The primary focus must remain on the welfare and service of the Iraqi state and its citizens, free from narrow or external allegiances. All Iraqi capabilities, resources, and energies should be mobilized to address anticipated challenges, distinguishing between those requiring resolution and those necessitating confrontation.
- The Iraqi government should endorse a fixed strategy, limit non-governmental external activities, and reinforce the official governmental role, embodied by the Prime Minister, the Cabinet, the Foreign Minister, and ambassadors. Absent such a strategy and effective action, the balance may shift in favor of foreign entities seeking to exert influence within Iraq to advance their own agendas, resulting in diminished governmental influence abroad and stagnation in international relations.

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al-Rafidain Center for Dialogue (RCD)

al-Rafidain Center for Dialogue RCD is an Iraqi independent think tank that works on encouraging dialogues in educational, political, cultural, and economic affairs, among all elites, in order to enhance the democratic experience, achieve societal peace and help governmental and societal institutions actualize their role and enhance their performance by providing them with experiences and strategic visions. RCD represents a free forum for dialogue characterized by objectivity and impartiality and it invests its outcomes to help decision-makers and guide public opinion towards establishing a state based on institutions.

al-Rafidain Center for Dialogue is considered one of the distinguished think tanks in Iraq that brings together on its platform the active political, economic, and academic elites who guide visions and influence decision-making and public opinion. The Center was established on February 2, 2014, in the city of al-Najaf al-Ashraf as a virtual group in the virtual world, comprising a number of academics, intellectuals, and politicians. The idea later evolved to acquire legal status by registering RCD in the NGO Affairs Directorate of the General Secretariat of the Iraqi Council of Ministers.

Vision

The center is a cultural hub where the opinions of elites and decision-makers from all their political, religious, and national spectrums converge. It provides a positive dialogic environment that enhances the creation of common ground among those opinions and contributes to building a prosperous country.

Mission

RCD's mission is to encourage and develop objective and serious dialogues between Iraqi elites and decision-makers in a manner that enhances the democratic experience and achieves societal peace and sustainable development in Iraq through the following objectives:

1. Enhancing societal peace through constructive dialogue among Iraqi elites.
2. Strengthening national responsibility, supporting the state's democratic experience, and building its institutions.
3. Assisting state institutions in solving problems by providing suggestions and consultations in various fields through its diverse publications and informed experts.

4. Expanding common ground between political and social entities through neutral dialogue that strengthens the relationship between the citizen and the state.

Means

1. Organizing seminars and panel discussions in the fields of RCD's concerns and following up on their outcomes with media coverage to promote them inside and outside Iraq.
2. Issuing books and strategic reports, conducting research and studies, and publishing them in print and electronically.
3. Forging partnerships with local and international research and academic institutions and think tanks with shared objectives.
4. Collaborating with esteemed universities to hold scholarly events and forums.
5. Establishing research departments and specialized committees to promote scientific research.
6. Holding dialogues between differing parties to promote social integration.

Structure

al-Rafidain Center for Dialogue RCD consists of an administrative structure formed in accordance with its internal regulations, which includes: the Board of Directors, consisting of the founder, Mr. Zayd al-Ṭālaqānī, as Chairman of the Board and eight members; a CEO and his deputy; a Board of Advisors; and a number of scientific and administrative departments, which are: the Department of Research and Development, the Department of Administrative, Legal, and Financial Affairs, and the Department of Protocols and Public Relations, in addition to an Advisor for Cultural Affairs and International Cooperation.

Like any giving and fruitful institution, al-Rafidain Center for Dialogue has been exposed to a considerable number of challenges, harassments, and targeting that have attempted to undermine it, yet it has insisted on continuing its triumphant march with sustained giving and strength of will.

RCD addresses several local, regional, and global issues through its diverse publications in the following fields:

1. Political Science and International Relations.
2. Economics and Development.
3. Sociology.
4. Intellectual Affairs and addressing social phenomena.
5. Strategic and Military Affairs.
6. Technology and Cybersecurity.
7. Constitutional, Social, and Legal Issues.

8. Geography.
9. State and Society.
10. Environment and Climate Change.
11. Artificial Intelligence and Digital Transformations.

RCD's Research and Scientific Connections Locally, Regionally, and Internationally

As a research center that works to promote dialogue with the other, al-Rafidain Center for Dialogue is keen to build bridges of cognitive and research cooperation by establishing connections with Arab and foreign research centers and institutions around the world. This is done through cooperation agreements signed with institutions and centers of significance at the Iraqi, Arab, regional, and global levels, including Foreign Service Institute of the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Center for Banking Studies of Central Bank of Iraq, Salahaddin University-Erbil, International Crisis Group ICG (Belgium), Geneva Institute for Water, Environment and Health GIWEH (Switzerland), French Institute for Research and Analysis of International Policy CFRP, China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations CICIR, Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, Russian International Affairs Council RIAC, Governance and Policy Think Tank GPTT (Iran), The Arab Institute for Democracy (Tunisia), Center for Afghanistan, Middle East & Africa CAMEA at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad ISSI (Pakistan), and other important institutions.

al-Rafidain Center for Dialogue RCD has managed to be a pioneer in holding forums through its largest annual forum (RCD Forum), an international forum held annually in the capital, Baghdad. It discusses the most prominent topics and developments at the local, regional, and global levels, provides a free space for discussing opinions in the fields on which it is based among elites of high importance at the local and international levels, and dedicates its outcomes to building the state and its institutions and promoting the culture of dialogue and coexistence at all levels.

RCD receives support and funding from its sponsoring institutions through public agreements and in accordance with applicable Iraqi laws and regulations, and it is keen to announce the sources of this support and funding with transparency and clarity. This support for the RCD's activities is represented by contributions from the administrative body (Board of Directors), internal and external donations, grants, endowments, and unconditional gifts, in addition to financial grants from international organizations, United Nations agencies, Iraqi and international donors, humanitarian and development bodies, and private companies such as Central Bank of Iraq CBI, the Iraqi Ministry of Oil, Communications and Media Commission, European Union Mission, British Petroleum BP, Trade Bank of Iraq TBI, Iraqi Economic Council IEC, Wādī al-Khayr Company for Agricultural Investments, al-Thiqah International Bank, al-Nāfidhah Company

for Internet Services and Information Technology, Iraqi Business Council, Wajh al-Qamar Company for Investments and Contracting, Madīnat al-Ma'ālī Company for Investments and Contracting, and Ta'lim Platform.

Additionally, RCD receives support from reputable, legally licensed Iraqi institutions, most notably al-Waṭanī by Earthlink, which is the first and leading company in Iraq specializing in fiber optic technology (FTTH) and the largest provider of internet services in Iraq, and Asiacell, the first telecommunications company in Iraq and the main provider of high-quality mobile communication and internet services, with a subscriber base that has reached 19.7 million. And Maṣrif al-Ālam al-Islāmī (Islamic World Bank), one of the most important Iraqi banks in the field of economic development, which is a private joint-stock company founded by an elite group of locally and regionally renowned businessmen.

Publications

I. Authored Books

No.	Book Title	Author	Year of Publication
1	The Iraqi Economy After 2003	Zayn-al-'Ābidīn M. 'Abd-al-Ḥusayn Ṣādiq 'A. Ḥasan	2018
2	The Iraqi Marshes: Regional Analysis Through Interdisciplinary Lenses	'Abd-'Alī Ḥ. al-Khaffāf Ḥusayn 'A. al-Zayyādī Khālīd G. al-Farṭūsī	2019
3	Lectures on the Iraqi Affair	Group of Authors	2019
4	Building Iraq: Reality, Foreign Relations, and the Dream of Democracy	Luqmān 'A. al-Faylī	2020
5	The Political Economy of Education in Iraq	Prof. Dr. Kāmil 'A. al-Fatlawī Prof. Dr. Ḥasan L. al-Zubaydī	2020
6	Between Two Generations: A Series of Dialogues Between a Young Iraqi and His Older Brother	Luqmān 'A. al-Faylī	2021
7	Central Bank of Iraq: Roles, Tasks, and Future Options	Group of Authors	2021
8	Iraq 2020: RCD's Strategic Report	Prof. Dr. Ḥasan L. al-Zubaydī (ed.) Prof. Dr. Aḥmad S. al-Ma'mūrī (ed.) Prof. Dr. Miqdām 'A. al-Fayyāḍ (ed.)	2021
9	Summary on State Succession: A Legal Study in Light of the Provisions of International Agreements	Dr. Abū-Ṭālib H. al-Ṭāliqānī	2021
10	The Philosophy of the Frameworks of the Interrelationship between Ethics and Law: A Critical Legal Study of Reality and the Post-Secular World	Prof. Dr. Iyād M. Ṣayhūd	2021

No.	Book Title	Author	Year of Publication
11	The Social Contract According to Shaykh al-Nā'inī in Iraq	Prof. Emer. Dr. 'Abd-al-Amīr Zāhid	2022
12	New Visions for Managing the Oil Extraction Industry in Iraq	Prof. Dr. Jawād K. al-Ka'bī	2022
13	Contemporary Iraqi Problems	Prof. Dr. Walīd 'A. Jabr	2022
14	Iraq 2021: RCD's Strategic Report	Prof. Dr. Ḥasan L. al-Zubaydī (ed.) Prof. Dr. Aḥmad S. al-Ma'mūrī (ed.) Prof. Dr. Miqdām 'A. al-Fayyāḍ (ed.)	2022
15	China and Technology Companies: Arms of Espionage and Sources of Superiority and Digital Hegemony	Prof. Dr. Ḥasan L. al-Zubaydī Dr. Karrār A. al-Budayrī Dr. Aḥmad Amīn	2022
16	Financial and Administrative Corruption in Iraq: A Geopolitical Vision	Prof. Dr. Ḥusayn 'A. al-Ziyādī	2023
17	ISIS's Violations of International Humanitarian Law	Dr. Fāḍil 'A. al-Gharrāwī	2023
18	Energy Sources and the Future of Mankind	Dr. Ḥusayn al-Shahristānī	2023
19	Studies in Contemporary Islamic Movements in Iraq	Group of Authors	2023
20	Islamic Presence in Europe and Its Future: A Study in Light of Contemporary Orientalist Sources	Hibah Ḥ. al-Rumāḥī	2023
21	Najaf 2050: A Future Vision	Prof. Dr. Ḥasan L. al-Zubaydī (ed.) Prof. Dr. Miqdām 'A. al-Fayyāḍ (ed.)	2023
22	Evaluation of the Iraqi Government's Work During a Full Year 2022-2023	Group of Authors	2023
23	Iraq's Two Inflamed Decades: The Proliferation of Crises and the Intractability of Solutions (5 Volumes)	Prof. Dr. Ḥasan L. al-Zubaydī (ed.) Prof. Dr. Aḥmad S. al-Ma'mūrī (ed.) Prof. Dr. Miqdām 'A. al-Fayyāḍ (ed.) Asst. Lect. 'Ammār K. al-Ṭufaylī (ed.)	2024
24	Iraqi Kirkuk and the Conflict of Sub-Identities	Dr. Dahḥām M. al-'Azzāwī	2024
25	The Economic Importance of the Grand Faw Port and Its Reflection on the Reality of Sustainable Development in Iraq	Prof. Dr. Ḥamīdah Sh. al-Īdāmī Asst. Prof. Dr. Amjad R. al-Zāhidī	2024
26	Iraq 2022: RCD's Strategic Report	Prof. Dr. Ḥasan L. al-Zubaydī (ed.) Prof. Dr. Aḥmad S. al-Ma'mūrī (ed.) Prof. Dr. Miqdām 'A. al-Fayyāḍ (ed.) Prof. Dr. As'ad K. Shabīb (ed.)	2024
27	Iraqi Military Establishment 2003-2020	Dr. 'Imād H. al-Rubayṭī	2024

No.	Book Title	Author	Year of Publication
28	Iraq 2023: RCD's Strategic Report	Prof. Dr. As'ad K. Shabīb (ed.) Prof. Dr. Aḥmad S. al-Ma'mūrī (ed.) Prof. Dr. Miqdām 'A. al-Fayyāḍ (ed.)	2025
29	1999 Popular Uprising in Iraq After the Martyrdom of Sayyid al-Ṣadr: Preludes, Trajectories, Results	Prof. Dr. As'ad K. Shabīb (ed.) Prof. Dr. Miqdām 'A. al-Fayyāḍ (ed.) Prof. Dr. Aḥmad S. al-Ma'mūrī (ed.)	2025
30	Republics of the Former Soviet Union: New Facts on Old Land	Prof. Dr. As'ad K. Shabīb (ed.) Prof. Dr. Miqdām 'A. al-Fayyāḍ (ed.) Asst. Lect. 'Ammār K. al-Ṭufaylī (ed.)	2025
31	US Policy in the Middle East During the Trump and Biden Administrations 2017–2024	Prof. Dr. As'ad K. Shabīb (ed.) Prof. Dr. Miqdām 'A. al-Fayyāḍ (ed.) Asst. Lect. 'Ammār K. Ḥamīd (ed.)	2025
32	Najaf in the Pre-Islamic Era: Excavations in the Memory of a Region	'Abd-al-Amīr al-Mu'min	2025
33	Iran's Role in defining the Parameters of Strategic Balance in the Middle East: The Case of the Nuclear Program	Prof. Dr. As'ad K. Shabīb (ed.) Prof. Dr. Miqdām 'A. al-Fayyāḍ (ed.)	2025
34	Iraq 2024: RCD's Strategic Report	Prof. Dr. As'ad K. Shabīb (ed.) Prof. Dr. Miqdām 'A. al-Fayyāḍ (ed.) Asst. Lect. 'Ammār K. Ḥamīd (ed.)	2025
35	Green Policies: Redefining Progress in the Age of AI	Prof. Dr. As'ad K. Shabīb (ed.) Prof. Dr. 'Amir 'A. al-Wā'ilī (ed.)	2025
36	The 2025 Parliamentary Elections in Iraq: Dynamics of Presence and Influence, and Future Outlooks	Prof. Dr. As'ad K. Shabīb (ed.) Lect. Dr. Khālīd 'A. al-Rammāḥī (ed.)	2026
37	The Contemporary Arab State and the Sectarian Problem	Muḥammad Maḥfūẓ	2026
38	Justice and Natural Law: Approaches in Ancient Civilizations	Prof. Dr. Khālīd S. al-Mahdāwī (ed.) Asst. Lect. 'Āmir 'A. al-Mūsawī (ed.)	2026

II. Translated Books

No.	Book Title	Author	Year of Publication
1	War Without End: The Iraq War in Context	Michael Schwartz	2019
2	Political Philosophy: An Introduction	Jason Brennan	2019
3	Resource Rents and Economic Growth	Peter Kaznacheev	2019
4	Iraq: A Political History from Independence to Occupation	Adeed Dawisha	2019
5	Patriotic Ayatollahs: Nationalism in Post-Saddam Iraq	Caroleen Marji Sayej	2020

No.	Book Title	Author	Year of Publication
6	Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs to Know	Daniel Byman	2021
7	Illusions of Victory: The Anbar Awakening and the Rise of the Islamic State	Carter Malkasian	2021
8	Waging Insurgent Warfare: Lessons From the Vietcong to the Islamic State	Seth G. Jones	2021
9	The Iraqi Federation: Origin, Operation and Significance	Farah Shakir	2021
10	Global Trends 2040	US National Intelligence Council	2021
11	The Arab Shi'a: The Forgotten Muslims	Graham E. Fuller Rend Rahim Francke	2021
12	Rulers, Religion, and Riches: Why the West Got Rich and the Middle East Did Not	Jared Rubin	2021
13	Soldiers and Citizens: An Oral History of Operation Iraqi Freedom from the Battlefield to the Pentagon	Carl Mirra	2021
14	Security in the Persian Gulf Region	Fatemeh Shayan	2021
15	Between State and Non-State: Politics and Society in Kurdistan-Iraq and Palestine	Gülistan Gürbey (ed.) Sabine Hofmann (ed.) Ferhad Ibrahim Seyder (ed.)	2022
16	Shi'i Islam and Politics: Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon	Jon Armajani	2023
17	Understanding Religious Violence: Radicalism and Terrorism in Religion Explored via Six Case Studies	James Dingley (ed.) Marcello Mollica (ed.)	2023
18	The Political Economy of EU Ties with Iraq and Iran: An Assessment of the Trade-Peace Relationship	Amir M. Kamel	2023
19	Rethinking Turkey-Iraq Relations: The Dilemma of Partial Cooperation	Mehmet Akif Kumral	2023
20	Stealth War: How China Took Over While America's Elite Slept	Robert Spalding Seth Kaufman	2023
21	Cyber War & Cyber Peace: Digital Conflict in the Middle East	Eliza Campbell (ed.) Michael Sexton (ed.)	2023
22	Seven Pillars: What Really Causes Instability in the Middle East?	Michael Rubin (ed.) Brian Katulis (ed.)	2023

No.	Book Title	Author	Year of Publication
23	Russia Rising: Putin's Foreign Policy in the Middle East and North Africa	Dimitar Bechev (ed.) Nicu Popescu (ed.) Stanislav Secrieru (ed.)	2023
24	The Ambassadors: American Diplomats on the Front Lines	Paul Richter	2023
25	How the World Became Rich: The Historical Origins of Economic Growth	Mark Koyama Jared Rubin	2024
26	Institution Building in Weak States: The Primacy of Local Politics	Andrew Radin	2024
27	Information, Power, and Democracy: Liberty is a Daughter of Knowledge	Nico Stehr	2024
28	The Rise and Fall of OPEC in the Twentieth Century	Giuliano Garavini	2024
29	Iraq against the World: Saddam, America, and the Post-Cold War Order	Samuel Helfont	2025
30	Iraq: Power, Institutions, and Identities	Andrew J. Flibbert	2025
31	Earth for All: A Survival Guide for Humanity	Sandrine Dixon-Decleve et al.	2025
32	Jihad in Islam: A Historical and Juridical Study of the Question of Offensive Jihad	Ayatollah Sheikh Ni'mat-Allāh Ṣāliḥī Najafābādī	2025
33	Cold War in the Islamic World: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Struggle for Supremacy	Dilip Hiro	2026

III. Dissertations Series

No.	Title	Researcher	Year of Publication
1	Iran's Position on the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait 1990–1991: A Historical Study	Rimāḥ S. al-Ma'mūrī	2021
2	Consequence of Violating the Rules for Justifying Criminal Judgments in Iraqi Legislation: A Comparative Study	Asst. Lect. Yūsuf F. Ḥirz-al-Dīn	2021
3	Sovereign Wealth Funds: A Comparative Legal Study	Dr. Lanjah Ş. Amīn	2021
4	Political Development and Its Political Crises in Iraq After 2003	Dr. Farazdaq 'A. al-Tamīmī	2021

No.	Title	Researcher	Year of Publication
5	Dynamics of Rising and Hegemonic Powers in Southeast Asia: An Analytical Study According to the Balance of Interests Theory	Asst. Lect. 'Ammār K. al-Ṭufaylī	2021
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14	Party Systems and Public Policy Formulation: A Comparative Study (Germany and Iraq)	Dr. Sumayyah Gh. Zanjīl	2025

IV. Publications in English

No.	Publication Title	Publication Category	Year of Publication
1	Najaf 2050: A Future Vision	Prof. Dr. Ḥasan L. al-Zubaydī (ed.) Prof. Dr. Miqdām 'A. al-Fayyāḍ (ed.)	2025
2	The Iraqi Marshes: Regional Analysis Through Interdisciplinary Lenses	Prof. Dr. 'Abd-'Alī Ḥ. al-Khaffāf Prof. Dr. Ḥusayn 'A. al-Zayyādī Prof. Dr. Khālīd G. al-Farṭūsī	2025

No.	Publication Title	Publication Category	Year of Publication
3	Iraq 2021: RCD's Strategic Report	Prof. Dr. Hasan L. al-Zubaydī (ed.) Prof. Dr. Aḥmad S. al-Ma'mūrī (ed.) Prof. Dr. Miqdām 'A. al-Fayyāḍ (ed.)	2025
4	Iraq 2022: RCD's Strategic Report	Prof. Dr. Hasan L. al-Zubaydī (ed.) Prof. Dr. Aḥmad S. al-Ma'mūrī (ed.) Prof. Dr. Miqdām 'A. al-Fayyāḍ (ed.) Prof. Dr. As'ad K. Shabīb (ed.)	2026
5	Iraq 2023: RCD's Strategic Report	Prof. Dr. As'ad K. Shabīb (ed.) Prof. Dr. Aḥmad S. al-Ma'mūrī (ed.) Prof. Dr. Miqdām 'A. al-Fayyāḍ (ed.)	2026
6	Iraq 2024: RCD's Strategic Report	Prof. Dr. As'ad K. Shabīb (ed.) Prof. Dr. Miqdām 'A. al-Fayyāḍ (ed.) Asst. Lect. 'Ammār K. Ḥamīd (ed.)	Forthcoming





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The Annual Strategic Report of the al-Rafidain Center for Dialogue (RCD) constitutes a significant contribution to the Center's research endeavors aimed at comprehending the profound transformations experienced by Iraq across political, economic, security, and social domains throughout the year. Given the numerous challenges confronting the Iraqi state, this report serves as an analytical and documentary record that traces the trajectories of events and offers an in-depth interpretation of facts, grounded in rigorous scientific methodology and reliable sources. The report is the product of the efforts of a distinguished group of researchers and writers specializing in Iraqi affairs, each contributing to various chapters within their areas of expertise, thereby reflecting intellectual diversity and analytical depth.

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