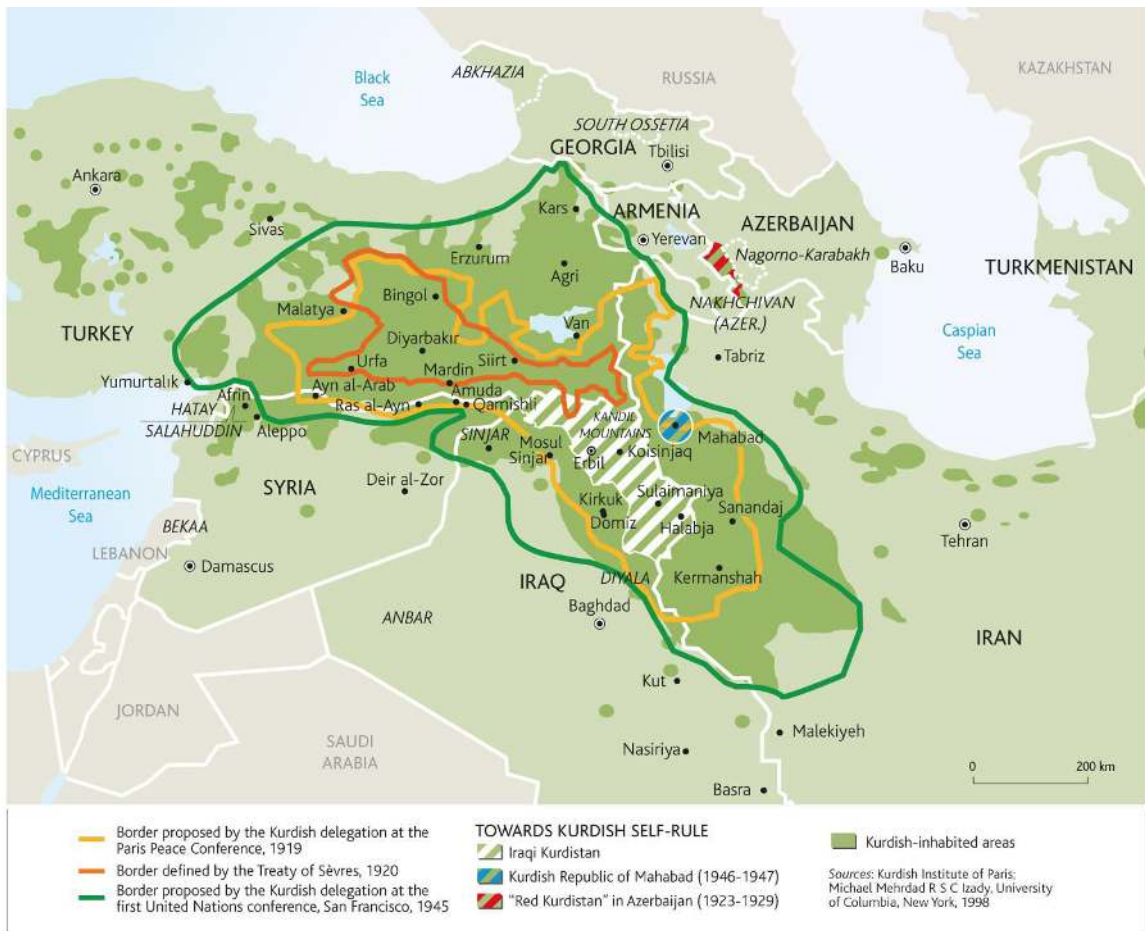




Post-ISIS States: IRAQ May - December, 2018

By
Dr. Gina Lennox



Kurdish Lobby Australia
Email: kurdishlobbyaus@gmail.com
Website: www.kurdishlobbyaustralia.com



Kurdish Lobby Australia

© 2018
Kurdish Lobby Australia



Table of Contents

Acronyms	3
General Observations	4
ISIS and Islamist Militancy.....	4
The United States, Russia and China in the Middle East	5
The United Nations	6
The Kurds	7
Ways Forward.....	7
What the Australian Government Can Do.....	9
Country Specific Overview: Iraq	11
The current situation.....	11
Ways Forward.....	15
Background: Iraq.....	17
Introduction	17
Threats to US interests in Iraq	17
Iraqi elections May 12 and why it is taking so long to form a government	19
Protests in Shia provinces	30
Impacts of US sanctions on Iran.....	34
Kurdistan Region of Iraq.....	35
IDPs and Refugees in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq	35
Oil and Gas	36
Elections for the Kurdistan Parliament.....	36
KRG Relations with Turkey and Iran	38
KRG Relations with the Kurdistan of Syria	40
KRG Relations with the new Gol	40
The Disputed Territories	42
Kirkuk	44
Sinjar (Shingal)	47
Mosul	48
Appendix A:	49
Decision and funding pathways for water projects for Schwan and Quarahanjiir districts in the disputed province of Kirkuk	49

You are welcome to share this report, but please do not make changes without permission from Kurdish Lobby Australia.



Acronyms

Asayish	Kurdish Police
AKP	Justice and Development Party (Turkey)
EU	European Union
Gol	Government of Iraq
Hashd	Hashd al-Shaabi, also called Popular Mobilisation Units or PMUs
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Iran)
KDP/PDK	Kurdistan Democratic Party (Iraq)
KDPI	Kurdistan Democratic Party (Iran)
KNC/ENKS	Kurdish National Council (KDP-linked coalition of parties)
KPC	Kirkuk Provincial Council
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government (Iraq)
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
MIT	National Intelligence Agency (Turkey)
NGO	Non-government organisation
OPCW	Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons
PKK	Kurdistan Workers Party (Turkey)
PMU	Popular Mobilisation Forces or <i>Hashd al-Shaabi</i> , some backed by Iran
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Iraq)
PYD	Democratic Union Party (Syria)
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
TSK	Turkish Armed Forces
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States of America
YPG	Peoples' Protection Units (Syria)
YPJ	Women's Protection Units (Syria)

All monetary figures are in USD.



General Observations

ISIS and Islamist Militancy

ISIS is one of many symptoms of the broken contract between autocratic governments and their people. To contextualise the ISIS threat, between 2012 and 2017, [ISIS was responsible for less than 30 percent of terrorist attacks](#) in Iraq and Syria, i.e. ISIS is one of [many](#) threats, but in 2014 came to be considered a primary threat because it was attracting thousands of foreign fighters and rapidly taking control of territory that traversed the Syria – Iraq border. ISIS has since lost most of its territory but remains capable of counteroffensives (e.g. in Suweida and Deir Ezzor in Syria) and insurgencies (e.g. in Baghdad and the disputed territories of Iraq). Many observers question why it is taking so long to defeat the remaining pockets of ISIS, suggesting that it is in US interests for ISIS to [survive](#). The counterarguments are that [ISIS has more freedom of movement between territories controlled by different forces](#); ISIS sympathisers and relatives, including those in high positions, enable ISIS to operate within or outside Sunni Arab administrative and tribal structures; the remaining ISIS fighters are hard-core and use all means, including human shields, tunnels, fog and sandstorms to counterattack; the US-led coalition attempts to minimize civilian casualties and the majority of SDF fighting in Deir Ezzor are poorly trained local Sunni Arabs. Possibly all and more factors have some validity, but unless there are changes to the political and economic status quo, ISIS or an offshoot has enough economic, military, political and social networks to remain a [threat](#) for years to come.

The West has ‘Middle East fatigue’, yet what is happening in the Middle East impacts Europe, Africa and Asia, North America and Australia. Of 41,970 foreign ISIS ‘members and affiliates’, 20 percent have returned to their countries of origin. In eastern Syria, 900 ISIS fighters, 550 ISIS women and 1,200 ISIS children from 44 countries are held in prisons or camps. The Kurd-led Syrian Democratic Council has asked these countries to take them back, but most countries are reluctant to do so because of challenges in identifying, prosecuting, deradicalising and reintegrating [them](#) and fearing that [prisons](#) will become recruitment centres. Instead, Human Rights Watch claims to have evidence that the US has transferred at least five foreign ISIS fighters, including an Australian national, Ahmed Merhi, from northern Syria to Iraq, where they will likely face torture, a summary trial and [execution](#).

The ISIS threat is also generational: [25 percent](#) of all foreign ISIS-affiliated individuals are women and minors. In Iraq, ISIS wives are being executed without evidence they committed a crime, other than to marry a member of [ISIS](#). Many thousands of children have been brainwashed by ISIS and [other extremists](#), with ISIS children living in camps and orphanages, or fending for themselves after their ISIS parents have been killed, [imprisoned](#), or if their [Yezidi mother](#)¹ is forced to abandon them.

¹ In Yezidi culture Yezidi must marry Yezidi and families who have had loved ones killed or raped by ISIS often refuse to accept the children of ISIS.



But ISIS is not the only group that aspires to a Sunni Arab caliphate, given Islamism has replaced [socialism and pan-Arabism](#) as a geopolitical tool. Many non-state militias have the same aspiration, among them between 44,000 and 71,000 radicalised militants, including 20,000 foreigners, in northern [Syria](#), some influenced by Saudi Wahhabism and others under the influence of Turkey, which is aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood. All these militants, along with their families, face the prospect of doing Turkey's bidding, and/or surviving the wrath of Assad's dictatorship. Competing with them is a third group – the tens of thousands of pro-regime Shia militants in Syria, foreigners among them, some of whom are being given land in former opposition strongholds.

Such large numbers of disparate non-state militias in Syria and Iraq that answer to individual commanders that aspire to power, and that frequently fight each other, along with the officially recognised, autonomous *Hashd al-Shaabi* (Shia militia) force in Iraq that nominally answers to a National Security Council, and its mentor, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) that answers to Iran's supreme leader, pose significant threats to national and regional stability and transformations.

The United States, Russia and China in the Middle East

The overt policies of the United States (US) and Russia, and to a lesser extent, China, have emboldened [autocracies](#) in the region. The Obama administration did not challenge the Assad regime's violence with concerted action and was slow to react to the threat of ISIS. The Trump administration's transactional approach – employing a heavy-handed use of sanctions and confrontational rhetoric for perceived foes, and mostly unconditional support for perceived allies in the Middle East (but not Europe), even if these allies are corrupt, autocratic, and/or threaten US interests, as does Turkey – does not appear to be part of a multilateral strategic framework. Instead, current US policy appears unilateral and reactive, and until 2018, too focused on the military defeat of ISIS. This has led Russia, Turkey and Iran to expand their footprints and co-ordinate. With the US redefining its goals in 2018 to include the withdrawal of the IRGC and its foreign proxies in Syria and Iraq, the US and its willing allies (that will likely include Australia) have committed to an indefinite military presence. This presence is being challenged in eastern Syria because it foils Russia's oil agreements with Assad, and relies on Syrian Kurdish forces, which Turkey sees as a threat. In Iraq, the US and allied presence is being challenged by IRGC-backed military commanders and parliamentarians. These challenges to the US and its allies, in combination with the [expansion](#) of Sunni and Shia militarism, increases the potential for more conflict, which many suspect is the US' underlying intention.

Meanwhile, Russia and China have taken advantage of the vacuum in US strategic leadership. Russia has expanded its military, economic and diplomatic footprint from Libya to India, via [Europe](#). In Syria, Russia has hijacked political negotiations so that the UN does Russia's bidding, for example, in working on Russia's constitutional



committee, only to be told by the Assad regime that UN input is unwelcome. In November, Russia proposed that the US give Iran sanction relief in return for Iran withdrawing the IRGC Quds force and its foreign proxies from [Syria](#). This transaction differs from the US' transactional approach because it is multilateral and focused, but the US rejected it. Russia is expanding its oil and gas interests in [Iraq](#) and [Iran](#), and intends to do so in Syria. Russia is further enhancing Turkey as an oil and gas conduit to Europe, and sells armaments to all four countries, with the sale of its S-400 missile defence system to Turkey undermining NATO. In all its undertakings, Russia is gaining political leverage.

In 2016, China [became](#) the largest direct investor in the Middle East (\$30 billion compared to US' [\\$7 billion](#)), and in 2017, the largest exporter to [Turkey](#). China even has a [consulate in Erbil](#) and since 2009 [Chinese state-owned oil companies like Sinopec have purchased Western oil companies](#) operating in the KRI. China would like Turkey and the Middle East to be part of its One Belt One Road initiative related to the development of infrastructure, trade and energy projects. Unlike many countries, Turkey, Iraq, Iran and the Gulf States can afford the Chinese government loans on offer, which come [without upfront political demands](#).

One US response to the expansion of Russian and Chinese investment is to interest Gulf States and the US [private sector](#) to invest in Iraq and Syria, the latter encouraged by the establishment of the US International Development Finance Corporation (IDFC) in October. The IDFC will allow more flexible lending practices and doubles the existing lending ceiling to \$60 billion for private investors, yet unless there is an internationally supported framework, private sector involvement could increase state nepotism, corruption and violence.

The United Nations

The United Nations (UN) has the capacity to develop an international framework for reconstruction but its response to the Syrian civil war highlights that the UN is in urgent need of reform. The UN does not abide by or enforce its own charter, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, all of which uphold the right of people to self-determination. Nor is the UN structured to cope with a multi-polar world. When the UN Security Council manages to pass a resolution, and a country does not comply, or when a country does not abide by a treaty it has signed, there are no consequences for non-compliance. The Assad regime has hijacked UN humanitarian aid and used it as a weapon of war, while aid is also 'taxed' by non-state [militias](#) at border crossings and checkpoints. The UN has allowed the Astana troika to hijack political negotiations, and UN peacemakers are not being deployed to where they are needed [most](#), such as along the Turkey-Syria border.



The Kurds

The Peshmerga military force of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), and Kurdish militias from Syria, Iran and Turkey were the first to militarily confront ISIS in 2014. They continue to play a significant role in the war against ISIS, despite the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) from Turkey being listed as a terrorist organisation by the US, UK, EU and Australia, but not by the UN, Russia, Israel, India, Norway or Switzerland. The Kurds' role in fighting ISIS has enhanced the status of Kurds in Iraq and Syria, yet this has led to [Kurds being subject to increased political and military attacks by all four countries](#). The people of the KRI have been economically deprived by the GoI since 2014, and militarily and politically attacked by Iraq, Iran and Turkey since then. Turkey's on-going air and ground offensives target Kurds inside Turkey (1984 – 2013, and since 2015), Syria (since 2014) and the KRI (since the 1990s, intensifying in 2018). Turkey has blocked Syrian Kurds from participating in all UN, Astana and Sochi political negotiations. Outside total surrender, the Syrian regime refuses to enter political negotiations with Syrian Kurds and their allies, and threatens a military offensive. Iran participated in the military takeover of Kirkuk and the disputed [territories](#), has militarily attacked Iranian Kurds in [Iran](#) and the [KRI](#), and continues to execute Iranian Kurdish political and religious [prisoners](#).

Ways Forward

When ISIS started to take control of cities in [December 2013](#), a military response was appropriate, although it was not until August 2014 that US airstrikes began. A military response, the [capture of ISIS financiers](#), strict border controls, the disruption of armament supplies and communication networks do curb terrorism, but unless these actions are accompanied by efforts to address the root causes of terrorism, war inflames extremist ideologies and methods. Hence, after 17 years of a 'war on terror' that has killed an estimated [480,000 people](#), half being civilians, and caused the indirect death and permanent injury of millions, there are [four times more Sunni Islamist militants](#) in more countries (70) in 2018, than in 2001.

If the political and economic status quo in the Middle East continues, there will be more war and terrorism, making investment in reconstruction (as opposed to humanitarian aid) a waste of resources. Hence, the way stabilisation and reconstruction is implemented in Iraq and Syria, and whom it empowers, is critical.

By October 2019, the US will have spent an estimated [\\$6 trillion](#) on the 'war on terror', but less than [6.2 percent](#) of its military expenditure on non-military efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Yemen (2001 – 2018). If countries were obliged to match public and private investment in non-military efforts with their military expenditure, there would be less war and terrorism. All countries, including Australia, need to take responsibility for rebuilding what their airstrikes destroyed in the war against ISIS. Apart from humanitarian aid, including [direct cash assistance to individuals](#), by



linking investments to reforms in governance, justice and building [social cohesion](#), the process can challenge the violence of terrorists and nation states.

The process of stabilisation (demining, security, justice, reconciliation and reintegration), and political and economic reform need to be done in tandem. For initial stabilisation, based on the responsibility to protect, the UN, US-led coalition, NATO and others need to be prepared to deploy [multinational peacemakers](#) to external and internal borders, implement no-fly zones, and use multilateral levers to limit patronage and disband non-state militias in two ways. One way is by integrating militants (as opposed to whole militias) into full time or part time security forces that answer to a ministry of an elected government. The second way is for other militants to be demobilised and reintegrated into civilian life. Both paths pose challenges. Some militants should face court for having committed war crimes and crimes against humanity. Opponents to the formation of sub-national regional and community forces argue that these would jeopardise national [unity](#). This argument is problematic. In federations like Australia, state forces are not destabilising, and in Iraq and Syria it was the sectarianism of a central government, along with foreign patronage, that contributed to the proliferation of [non-state militias](#), including ISIS. The greatest challenge to full or partial demobilisation and reintegration into civilian life is the need for gainful employment, when Iraq has a [youth unemployment rate of 33 percent](#), and Syria has an unemployment rate of [55 percent](#).

A primary contributor to social and physical stabilisation is meaningful employment for demobilised militants, IDPs, refugees and host communities. One would think reconstruction could provide this. For justice, the rule of law needs to distinguish between those in power (nation state leaders, ISIS emirs, non-state militia commanders) and their fighters who commit/ted atrocities, the administrators who enable/d them or instigate/d oppressive laws, administrative staff, and in the case of ISIS, relatives and sympathisers who support a caliphate and ISIS' fanaticism, as distinct from those who support a caliphate but oppose fanaticism. Such distinctions are not currently being made in Iraqi courts.

Political reforms are required to address power being held by one person (Turkey), a family or tribe (Saudi Arabia), a minority (Syria), or a sectarian majority (Shia Iraq). Kurds advocate (con) federalisation, yet a federal structure is not a magical panacea. An effective system of governance requires merit-based appointments, as Muqtada al-Sadr and others are striving for in Iraq, dedicated to the separation of powers and the strengthening of civil society and a diverse private sector.

The present assessments of what reconstruction will cost are estimates, especially if costs only relate to building infrastructure, and do not take into account social, political and economic reconstruction. Hence, the international community needs to make conditional commitments for sustained input over decades, leveraged to achieve top down and bottom up culturally appropriate, consultative and sustainable [reforms](#) that put people before profit. All agencies involved, including the UN, must be transparent and accountable. Without clear guidelines and



oversight, asking the private sector or an authoritarian regime with a poor track record in human rights to become involved is risky, as demonstrated by the lawlessness in Turkey-occupied Aleppo.

When fighting the current or next wave of terror, rogue dictator or regime in the Middle East, if the West wants Kurds as allies, the West needs to provide Kurds protection from aggressive national governments, support negotiations and guarantee outcomes. If these governments refuse to negotiate, or if negotiations fail to achieve outcomes within country-specific time frames, then the international community should support an independent, federal nation state of Kurdistan, as it did Israel, and countries arising from Yugoslavia. The other biggest question relates to boundaries. One hopes it will not take another world war to decide.

What the Australian Government Can Do

Australia has made significant policy contributions to the UN, and as an ally of the US could have insisted on the development of non-military strategies for the aftermath of the military invasion of Iraq in 2003. In 2018, based on the aforementioned recommendations and those outlined for Iraq (p. 15 – 16), the Australian Government could conduct informed and consistent diplomacy, and work with like-minded countries (e.g. [France](#), [Germany](#), [Sweden](#) and [the Netherlands](#)) to:

- Reform the UN Security Council and other bodies so one party cannot block an action, non-compliance to a resolution or signed treaty has consequences, and principles like peoples' right to self determination and the 'responsibility to protect' are strengthened;
- Stop countries selling armaments to those that systematically misuse them, whether by targeting civilians, and/or arming extremists that commit atrocities, as Turkey is doing;
- Involve the broadest cross section of society in any internationally supported political negotiations and actions, including [women](#), minorities, non-government organisations (NGOs), professionals, academics, and respected tribal and community leaders, as well as political parties and armed forces;
- Formulate multilateral non-military strategies to overcome the political and economic malaises in the Middle East, a priority being a strategic framework for reconstruction in Iraq and Syria, making it clear that war crimes, crimes against humanity, sectarianism and support for non-state militias fall outside this framework. Within this framework, support the development and/or enactment of a constitution, and appropriately scaled reforms in security, the rule of law and other institutions, and the development of civil society and a sustainable private sector;
- Address the proliferation of non-state militias through previously mentioned recommendations and those listed for Iraq;



- Insist that Assad and his colleagues, and where appropriate, non-state militia commanders, be tried for war crimes and crimes against humanity. In the case of Assad and his colleagues, use this as a lever for them to compromise in political negotiations, meanwhile conducting backroom diplomacy with Russia, arguing that Assad and his colleagues have become a liability for Syria to stabilise, rebuild and be free of foreign military forces;
- Incorporate Iran into a regional peace process by acknowledging Iran's role in fighting ISIS, and the contribution of Gulf States to the phenomenon of Sunni Arab extremism, addressing Iran and Israel's security concerns, and incentivising Iran to make political, economic and military reforms. The last would include acknowledging that Britain and the US worked against Iranian democratic movements between 1906 – 1925, and in 1953 and 1979, and supporting the Iranian opposition and minorities to agree on a platform;
- Recognise that people have the right to self-determination and the right to oppose tyranny, via arms if all other avenues are blocked, as is the case for Kurds in Turkey. In this advocacy, lead by example by delisting the PKK as a terrorist organisation based on rulings of the [Permanent People's Tribunal](#), the [Belgian Court of Appeal](#), and the American Declaration of Independence, in view of incentivising Turkey and the PKK to enter a bilateral ceasefire, and for these and other parties to embark on internationally mediated political negotiations so Turkey can benefit from a more stable eastern Turkey and eastern Syria, as Turkey has benefited from an internationally recognised KRI.
- Advocate and lead by example, the principle of matching non-military expenditure to military expenditure in any given country, for example matching the cost of [Operation Okra](#) in Iraq and Syria, estimated to reach [AUD\\$940.7 million by 2018 – 2019](#). Given that Australia has cut its overseas aid budget [to the lowest it has ever been](#), the Australian Government could support less capital intensive projects that invest in human capital, including in-country literacy programs, academic scholarships, training and mentorships in-country and in Australia, and support the development of labour, health, safety and environmental codes that meet international standards. To involve the private sector, the Australian Government could develop loan and insurance schemes and compliance mechanisms for the private sector to operate in risky environments within an internationally agreed framework that emphasises consultation, capacity building and employment. Australia's private sector could make valuable contributions to sustainable water resource management, agricultural technologies, land conservation, petroleum extraction and flare capture, construction of well-insulated housing, and so on.

That the Australian Government has committed funds to stabilise eastern Syria and [AUD\\$20 million in aid](#) over three years for Save the Children and other NGOs to work with Yezidi people, including the disabled, traumatised women and children, and people who have lost proof of landownership, in the disputed district of Sinjar in Iraq, and build water, sanitation, hygiene and health facilities, neighbourhood centres and neighbourhood security is most welcome.



Country Specific Overview: Iraq

The current situation

Iraq is the world's third largest exporter of oil, but literacy has dramatically [decreased](#) between [2000](#) and [2018](#) and in a country of 40 million people, 22.5 percent of all Iraqis live below the **poverty** line, defined as living on less than \$88 a month. In some provinces like [Basra](#), 50 percent of the population live below the [poverty line](#). The unemployment rate is [18 percent](#), with a [youth unemployment rate of 33 percent](#). Only a fraction of a bloated public sector of [4.5 million](#) does productive [work](#). Because of mismanagement, waste and corruption, the Gol has failed to provide adequate essential services like water, electricity and sewage. Iraq has more than enough oil to supply its needs, but a lack of refineries means it imports refined oil and gas for electricity from Iran.

Disillusionment and a lack of water, electricity and jobs led to **protests** in eight provinces between July 8 and mid September 2018. Protests continued in [November](#) and [December](#). During the initial period, Iraqi Security Forces and *Hashd al-Shaabi* killed at least 20 protesters and 300 civilians and security forces were injured. Hundreds were [arrested](#). Basra was the epicentre: a neglected Shia-majority province that produces most of Iraq's oil. Protesters demanded a complete overhaul of the government, and rejected Iranian and *Hashd al-Shaabi* involvement in politics. Ironically, these anti-Iran protests delivered a government compatible with Iranian interests, as the responses of the US-preferred prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, discredited him in the eyes of Shia Arabs. He had already been discredited in the eyes of Kurds by agreeing to the military takeover of the disputed territories in October 2017 and refusing to negotiate thereafter, and in the eyes of Sunni Arabs by allowing Shia militias to stay in Sunni Arab-majority provinces after ISIS was defeated, and by not even starting to rebuild destroyed Sunni Arab cities.

Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilisation Units or PMUs) are mainly Shia militias that are 'fluidly' [divided](#) between those loyal to Iran's Supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, and maverick Iraq cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) Quds Force back a number of *Hashd* who have permeated Iraq's [military](#) and internal security (i.e. the Ministries of Defence and the Interior), the economy and the 2018 parliament having formed political parties, charities and companies to profit from reconstruction, emulating their IRGC mentor. These IRGC-backed *Hashd* have attacked and threaten to attack US forces in Iraq and their parliamentary representatives argue that all foreign military forces must leave Iraq. Those employed by the Ministries of Interior and Defence have been trained by the US, NATO and Australia. There is potential for armed conflict between IRGC-backed *Hashd* and others that express loyalty to Iraq.

All segments of Iraqi society fought and made sacrifices in the war against [ISIS](#), yet **ISIS** remains a threat in Anbar, Baghdad and the disputed territories, these being Kirkuk province, and districts in the provinces of Nineveh, [Diyala](#) and Salahuddin. In



October 2017, the Kurdish Peshmerga were forced to withdraw from these disputed territories and were replaced by non-local Iraqi forces not under a unified command structure, with different factions vying for control of administrations and lucrative checkpoints. For instance, IRGC-linked *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* militants collect \$300,000 a day from taxing traffic and goods at checkpoints in Diyala. The security forces appear to lack the numbers to secure these territories, which has led non-local *Hashd* militias to recruit former [ISIS](#) fighters, yet the Gol continues to reject the return of Peshmerga. The militarisation of these territories has led to fractured administrations unable to provide adequate services, partly because individuals, militias and political parties siphon money from projects.

The Gol is **Arabising the disputed territories**, replacing Kurdish governors, mayors and council members, and dismissing and demoting other Kurdish officials and public sector staff, forcing Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) courts out of the territories, closing down Kurdish organisations, evacuating Kurdish villages, and confiscating Kurdish and Turkmen land, which is being given to Arab families.

Between October 2017 and November 2018, the Gol refused to negotiate with the KRG to resolve the status of the disputed territories, boundaries, the status, salaries and deployment of Peshmerga and the right of the KRG to explore, produce and export oil, gas and other products. The Gol reduced the KRG's share of the national budget, did not allow oil to be exported from Kirkuk to Turkey, and erected customs checkpoints between the KRI and the rest of Iraq, undermining the economies of the KRI and disputed territories. The new Gol has agreed to dismantle customs checkpoints and export a reduced amount of oil from Kirkuk to Turkey via the KRG oil pipeline, now partly owned by Rosneft, though the neglected province of Kirkuk is unlikely to benefit. It has also increased the KRG's share of the budget but not to the pre-2014 level of 17 percent, despite the KRI hosting one million Iraqi IDPs.

In the **national parliamentary elections** on May 12, only 44.5 percent of eligible voters took part.² People were disillusioned with their political leaders and government, while government mismanagement in issuing new identity cards and malfunctioning of the electronic voter system led to hundreds of thousands being unable to vote. For the first time since 2005, the Dawa Party did not receive the majority of votes. That honour went to Muqtada al-Sadr's *Sairoon* list of religious and secular parties. The *Fatah* list, comprising mainly IRGC-linked *Hashd* MPs, came second. Haider al-Abadi's *Nasr* list came third, while Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition, led by the Dawa Party, tied fourth with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). For the first time since 2005, there were deep, perhaps irreconcilable divisions between the dominant Shia lists, these being *Sairoon* and *Fatah*/State of Law Coalition. During the six months of negotiations to form a government Kurds and Sunni Arabs waited on the sidelines for *Sairoon* and *Fatah* to outline their policies regarding the KRI and Sunni Arab provinces. In early October, the parliament

² This was the lowest turnout since 2005, but not far behind the US turnout of 49 percent in the 2018 mid-term elections, which was the highest turnout for any US elections since [1914](#).



elected veteran Kurdish politician Barham Salih as president, and without forming a [government](#), Salih nominated independent economist, Adel Abdul al-Mahdi, as prime minister. *Sairoon*, *Fatah*, Iran and US approved these appointments. That a president, prime minister and government could change as a result of an election, and that Iraq's spiritual leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, advocates major [reforms](#) are cause for hope. However, too much hope is being invested in a prime minister that is not connected to either *Sairoon* or *Fatah*, and a president that does not have the backing of KDP, given major disagreements between *Sairoon* and *Fatah*. These disagreements include:

- The appointment of ministers (*Sairoon* wants non-aligned technocrats; *Fatah* is pushing for *Fatah* members to hold major ministries);
- Relations with Iran and the US (*Sairoon* advocates an independent path; *Fatah* is pro-Iran, and wants all foreign troops to withdraw from Iraq);
- The future of *Hashd al-Shaabi* (*Sairoon* wants them disarmed or incorporated into existing security and police; *Fatah* wants at least half to remain a parallel autonomous force, like an Iraqi version of the [IRGC](#)); and
- The role of religion in the state (*Sairoon*, like Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, advocates a separation; the two largest parties in *Fatah*, Badr and *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq*, support clerical rule, although this is rarely mentioned).

Having two strong opposing alliances could provide opportunities for debate and compromise, but more likely will pose significant challenges for the GoI to function at all, let alone implement reforms, resolve disputes with the KRG, rebuild cities and develop a productive economy. The first signs of political inertia were major disagreements on the appointment of eight out of 22 ministers, particularly the Ministers for Interior and Defence, and the rejection of the [2019 draft budget](#) by MPs from Nineveh, Anbar, the KRI and Basra, because of unfair allocations of revenue, and no funds being earmarked for reconstruction and [IDPs](#). Basra MPs yet again called on the GoI to allow Basra to become a semi-autonomous region, when decentralisation is threatened by provincial council elections having been indefinitely [delayed](#), and talk of abolishing these councils.

To counteract the demands of *Fatah*, the State of Law coalition and IRGC-backed [militias](#) Sadr can mobilise his significant support base and/or militia, appeal to other parties, including KRI's 58 MPs (i.e. more than *Sairoon's* 54 MPs) and/or ask Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani to issue a *fatwa*. But *Fatah* also has militias to call upon. In a country where 60 percent of the population is under the age of [25](#), and 33 percent of young people are unemployed, political differences could translate into social instability and/or armed conflict.

Iraq will be hit hard by **US sanctions on Iran**. Iran is Iraq's third largest trading partner (after Turkey and China), with Iran supplying refined oil, food and construction materials and about one third of Iraq's [electricity needs](#), this reaching 24,000 megawatts in 2018, and growing at seven percent per [year](#). With [Iraq announcing it would continue trading with Iran](#) in euros, Iranian rials and Iraqi



dinars, in November, the US gave Iraq a short 45-day waiver to continue importing gas for electricity, despite Iraq needing two to five years to become self sufficient in [electricity](#). In defiance, Iran President [Hassan Rouhani](#) claimed bilateral trade will increase from \$12 billion in 2018 to \$20 billion, aided by Iran building a railway from the Iranian port city of Shalamcheh to Basra, with the intention of extending the railway through Syria to the port of Latakia on the [Mediterranean Sea](#). The US claimed it would extend the sanction waiver if Iraq disbands *Hashd al-Shaabi* and reduces Iran's political influence. The UK, France and Germany have offered Iraq some [support](#), and sanctions could force the GoI to consider non-Iranian investments. For example, Jordan has recently built a \$10 million [dairy plant in Basra](#), and the US and Germany have signed memorandums of understanding to invest in gas-related electricity generation, with the US also wishing to invest in oil.

In the **Kurdistan Parliament** elections on September 30, KDP gained 45 seats, more than double the 21 seats of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). New Generation (8 seats) and a coalition that includes the Islamic Union Party (Yakgirtu) (5 seats) announced they would form an Opposition. After the success of KDP in the national and regional elections, Masoud Barzani went to Baghdad to talk with Iraq's political leaders, but KDP will need to form an inclusive KRG if it is to unite KRI's MPs in Baghdad to resolve disputes with the GoI.

Without US intervention, ISIS could have taken Erbil in August 2014, and IRGC and Iraqi forces would have advanced into the KRI in October 2017. Yet the **US has not pre-empted crises and has employed insufficient leverage on the GoI** due to its focus on ISIS, confrontational approach to Iran and unconditional support for individuals like former Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi, and before him, Nouri al-Maliki. The US was unprepared for the military take over of the disputed territories, despite being warned, and naively thought it would mean a return to the pre-2014 status quo. US acquiescence after the fact, in view of enhancing Abadi's chances in the national elections, was at the expense of its staunchest ally in Iraq. The US response backfired when Kurds refused to support Abadi becoming prime minister. With the election of a new GoI, the US may have even less capacity to influence Iraq's future. US sanctions on Iran, third parties, key militia commanders and *Fatah* MPs is unlikely to convince *Fatah*, *Hashd* or Iran to be more accommodating of US interests, and could well backfire, given sanctions will exacerbate Iraq's electricity and water shortages, and increase the potential for instability.

Yet in crises, there are also opportunities, as [Seyed Ali Alavi](#) identified in August: 'in the new Iraq, ... peoples' daily financial struggles transcend tribal and sectarian fault lines. This is a great challenge and also a significant opportunity for policy makers ... to direct the country towards a non-sectarian and non-tribal governance.'



Ways Forward

In the stabilisation phase, the US-led coalition and others need to:

- Vet those in the Iraqi security forces it trains and equips; and
- Link their training and equipping to the GoI:
 - Making it illegal for *Hashd* parliamentarians to maintain [links with their militias, lead military operations or be involved in companies profiting from reconstruction](#);
 - Insisting non-demobilised *Hashd* undergo training in the same colleges as other Iraqi Armed Forces and police in view integrating the 50 odd *Hashd* militias in the autonomous force into better paid Iraqi Armed Forces, police and emergency forces; and
 - Making merit-based selections and promotions.

In the stabilisation and reconstruction phase, the international community needs to:

- [Make use of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's](#) advocacy for reform and non-sectarianism, and his networks to help resolve differences between *Sairoon* and *Fatah*, and disband the *Hashd* militias that his 2014 *fatwa* legitimised. Given Sistani's age of 88 years, this is a limited window of opportunity.
- Support [local](#) political and community leaders, women and individuals in non-government organisations (NGOs) that advocate a non-sectarian path and sustainable solutions, for example, to address reconciliation, employment, [pollution](#) and Iraq's severe water shortage;
- Help expand civil society, with international NGOs forming partnerships with local NGOs, district and provincial administrations to work on reconciliation, water and land management, conservation, and so on, with NGOs providing another avenue of employment;
- Link inputs to Iraqi political leaders and ministries undertaking:
 - The implementation and clarification of the constitution to create a functioning federation, including procedures for regions and provinces to gain autonomy, and to resolve disputes with the KRG;
 - A clear separation of powers, including an independent judiciary to interpret the constitution and depoliticise the [rule of law](#) with in-country and overseas training and mentorships for judges, lawyers and the public sector, all vital in attracting foreign investment and for reconciliation and reintegration, given the GoI is executing ISIS suspects on minimal evidence;
 - Fiscal, monetary and credit policy [reform](#) to reduce the corrupting influences of the black market and to attract foreign investment. This includes making the banking and legal environment compliant with international standards and streamlining foreign investment at the



national, regional and provincial levels.³ In mid-September, the World Bank and EU signed an \$18 million technical assistance program to [strengthen public financial management and accountability of Iraqi institutions](#). It complements a 2017 \$41 million World Bank initiative and will be overseen by a committee. This committee needs to be monitored;

- Institutional reforms at the federal, provincial and district levels to address waste, corruption and convoluted decision and funding pathways. To fight corruption, [Hashim al-Rikabi](#) suggests that the GoI could introduce E-Governance (on-line auctions to procure services and goods), a one-stop-shop for ministries that overlap in a service provision, civil society participation in policy formation, and random inspections;
- The development and enactment of an integrated water resource and ecology management plan that assesses current and future upstream and downstream capacities and [needs](#), treats effluent, and reduces waste and demand, for example, by introducing new crops and agricultural methods, finding alternatives to potable water being used by the oil industry, and implementing user pay systems (especially for industry) by installing water and electricity [meters](#). Improving Iraq's management of water resources and ecology also benefit Gulf State [water supplies](#), with water shortages being a major destabilising factor in the region;
- The completion of milestones in appropriately scaled projects, with final payment requiring the project to be operational and maintained by local staff to prevent situations like 13 donor-supplied desalination plants in Basra not being put into operation since their completion in [2006](#);
- The expansion of the private sector, with in-country and overseas training and mentorships in running a business and priority technologies, and by overseas companies forming partnerships with local businesses, employing local people, ensuring all activities conform to international standards for labour, health, safety and the environment;
- The resolution of disputes with the KRG within a specified time frame, with external stakeholders offering mediation and guarantees;
- Link inputs to the KRG making real progress in reforming its own governance, judiciary, bloated public service, Peshmerga, supply of essential services and a diversified private sector, especially for agriculture and food processing. If negotiations with the new GoI fail to produce constructive outcomes, or if Iraq descends into civil war, support an independent federal nation state of Kurdistan within or beyond current borders, and provide this state protection and incentives to become a multicultural democratic beacon in the region.

Enacting the above recommendations would help curb ISIS, Iran's influence, instability and armed conflict, and could well keep Iraq unified. Without a long-term commitment, the US and its allies will lose the capacity to influence Iraq.

³ For instance, the GoI refused to provide Kirkuk Provincial Council with the necessary guarantees to attract foreign investment despite no potable water or sewage treatment plants being built since the 1980s.



For those who want a more detailed understanding of what has happened in Iraq between May and December 2018 please read on.

Background: Iraq

Introduction

'Background: Iraq' covers:

- Threats to US and allied interests in Iraq;
- Iraq and the US-led coalition having yet to eliminate ISIS in the border regions, or contain an ISIS insurgency in Baghdad and the disputed territories;
- Elections on May 12 resulting in two recently formed Shia lists (*Sairoon* and *Fatah*) with opposing agendas winning the most seats in parliament;
- Widespread protests beginning in July calling for a complete overhaul of the government and an end to Iranian influence;
- The Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and issues related to IDPs, oil and gas, elections for the Kurdistan Parliament on September 30 and KRI's relations with Turkey, Iran, northern Syria and the GoI; and
- The militarisation, ISIS resurgence and Arabisation of the disputed territories.

Threats to US interests in Iraq

IRGC-backed militias and members of the new Iraq Parliament threaten US interests in Iraq, as do Iran and Russia. In December 2017, former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi claimed ISIS in Iraq had been defeated. On [April 30](#) 2018, the US announced the end of major combat operations and that all ground operations were to be transferred from Special Operations to the Combined Joint Task Force-Operation 'Inherent Resolve' to train and assist Iraqi security forces in co-ordination with NATO and other allied partners. The NATO mission will be fully operational by [early 2019](#). To build Iraq's military capacity NATO and allied partners will work through institutions like the Iraqi Ministry of Defence, the National Defence University, the Staff College and other schools. But IRGC-backed *Hashd* military commanders and many *Fatah* parliamentarians regularly demand all foreign military forces to leave Iraq. If this becomes a reality, the US-led coalition could continue to train and unify KRI Peshmerga in the north, but this would likely need GoI approval.

Both militarily and politically the US appears to have been unprepared for crises, such as the military takeover of Kirkuk, *Hashd* commanders becoming power brokers in the new parliament and the resurgence of [ISIS](#). The only [non-military strategies](#) appear to be wanting US companies to develop Iraq's oil, energy and water [resources](#), encouraging Gulf State investment in reconstruction, and the US reintroducing sanctions on Iran, with the US using an extension of the 45-day waiver for Iraq to abide by US sanctions if Iraq disbands the *Hashd* and stops Iran meddling in government affairs. Such strategies, in the absence of more subtle levers, appear



imperialistic and do not appear to be part of a comprehensive framework that addresses the [political and economic status quo](#).

Meanwhile, [Iran plays the long game](#) and Russia has adroitly increased its leverage. Since 2005, Iran has moved individuals loyal to Iran, who fought on Iran's side in the 1980 – 1988 war, into positions of power. These people include Hadi al-Amiri (Commander of the Badr Brigade, and leader of the Badr political party and *Fatah* list), Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (Deputy Commander of *Hashd*, Commander of *Kata'ib Hezbollah*, *Fatah* MP and US-designated terrorist) and Abu Mustafa al-Shaybani (Commander of *Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada*, which fought the US coalition after 2003 and now fights alongside pro-Assad forces). These people have recruited other Iran loyalists into key institutions.

Russian oil and gas giants Gazprom, Lukoil and Rosneft invested in Iraq in the 1990s and since 2010 and in the KRI since 2012. From 2014, Russian armaments sales to Iraq have increased. In 2014, [Moscow](#) supplied Iraq 10 Su-25 jets and 'a large amount of air defence systems'; in 2015, Russia established a joint co-ordination centre with Iraq, Iran and Syria, and after a US company stopped maintaining 140 MIAI Abrams tanks following at least nine being used by IRGC-led *Hashd* in the takeover of [Kirkuk](#) in October 2017, Iraq has purchased 73 Russian T-90S [tanks](#), as well as Mi-28s and [Mi-35s](#). These moves give Russia more political leverage in Iraq and in disputes between the GoI and KRI.

ISIS

The [Centre for Strategic and International Studies](#) claims that between 10,000 and 15,000 ISIS fighters remain in Iraq. *Hashd* Deputy Commander [Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis](#) assesses it is more like 20,000 ISIS fighters. No one refers to the many thousands of ISIS administrators, health workers and so on that are now imbedded in the Sunni Arab population. The war against ISIS continues along Iraq's borders with Syria, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, the border secured by the [US-led coalition](#) and Iraq Army. For instance, in the second week of May, [US and Iraqi intelligence, working with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces \(SDF\) in Syria](#), lured five top ISIS commanders into Iraq and captured them alive.

Away from the front lines, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq and the UN Human Rights Offices in Nineveh, Kirkuk, Salahuddin and Anbar have documented [202 mass graves](#) left by ISIS, and predict there could be many more. Iraqi civilians and security forces continue to be subjected to ISIS attacks, mainly in Baghdad and the disputed [territories](#). In Kirkuk, the number of ISIS attacks has doubled since 2017, although the number of overall casualties in Iraq is decreasing. In [May](#), 1,906 Iraqis were executed, killed by bombs or found in mass graves, and 265 were wounded. In [June](#), 772 Iraqis were killed or found in mass graves, and 294 were wounded. In [July](#), 675 people were killed or found dead, and 807 were wounded. In [October](#), 637 people were killed or found in mass graves and 254 people were wounded.



[Muhandis](#) claims about 200 ISIS militants are responsible for attacks in and around Baghdad. Examples include at least [30 people](#) being killed or injured by a bomb blast north of Baghdad on May 16; at least [20 people being killed](#) and 110 being wounded when two bombs went off near an ammunitions cache in a mosque in Sadr City on June 6, and bomb blasts killing seven civilians and wounding [17](#) on November 4.

In the north, since the military takeover of Kirkuk and other disputed territories by Iraqi forces and Hashd al-Shaabi, forcing a withdrawal of Peshmerga, ISIS has [regrouped](#) in the [Hamrin Mountains](#) and [Salahuddin](#) province and sows fear and distrust with attacks on people and infrastructure in Kirkuk province, Diyala, [Nineveh](#), and [around Tuz Khurmatu](#) in Salahuddin. Further details are provided later.

Otherwise, Peshmerga and *Asayish* (police) are responsible for security in the KRI, and in the disputed districts of Qarahanjir and Shwan in Kirkuk province, and Makhmour, on the border of Kirkuk and Erbil province. The only ISIS [attack inside the KRI](#) since [an attack in 2015](#) occurred on July 23, 2018, when three ISIS gunmen stormed the Erbil governorate building, took several hostages and seized control of the third floor. Peshmerga snipers killed two gunmen and the third, who was wounded, gave himself up. In the cross fire four policemen and a civilian hostage were [wounded](#), the civilian and third gunman later [dying](#).

[Before the elections on May 12](#), ISIS called for attacks on candidates but candidates continued campaigning, even in Anbar. [ISIS also warned](#) that polling stations would be targeted. Between April and early May, ISIS claimed responsibility for two attacks on the Iraqi Turkmen Front party in Kirkuk, an attack on the headquarters of the Sunni *al-Hal* Party that killed seven people in Anbar, the bombing of a parliamentary candidate's home in Tuz Khurmatu on May 2 and the assassination of [Faruq Zarzur al-Jubouri](#), a candidate in Ayad Allawi's *al-Wataniya* (National Coalition) party, at his home at Qayyara, 70 kilometres south of Mosul on May 7. On election day, security forces killed two ISIS suicide bombers attempting to disrupt voting in Baquba (Diyala); an ISIS [bomb](#) killed four *Hashd* militants in Salahuddin, and in Kirkuk province, ISIS launched a [bomb attack](#) that killed three people on their way to vote and an attack at a [checkpoint](#) that killed four Iraqi security officials and two *Hashd* militants.

Iraqi elections May 12 and why it is taking so long to form a government

The national elections on May 12 established a new parliament, president and prime minister, but voter turn out was [44.5 percent](#), down from 63 percent in 2014, and in Baghdad, only [32 percent](#) of eligible voters voted. In the KRI there was a turnout of [48 percent](#). Factors contributing to the low turn out included voters boycotting the elections because of their disillusionment with the *Gol*, and scepticism that a new government would do any better, people [not receiving their new identity card](#), a vehicle ban on election day that was lifted in the early afternoon because of the low turnout, the electronic system rejecting thousands of voters' finger prints and identity



cards, [voters' names](#) not appearing on the electoral lists, fear of ISIS attack, and after people waited for hours in long queues, machines shutting down at 6 pm.

In the election, [143 parties in 27 coalitions or 'lists'](#) competed, and there were at least three precedents. They were that at least 11 parties or lists were formed in 2017 – 2018. The Shia cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr's [Sairoon list](#) included religious and secular parties – Sadr's Integrity Party, the Communist Party, Youth Movement for Change, Party of Progress and Reform, Iraqi Republican Group, and the State of Justice Party. A third precedent was that the mainly [Shia lists](#) of *Nasr* and *Fatah* campaigned in the KRI, or among Sunni Arabs, Christians, Yezidis and Shabak.

Leading up to the elections, between April 14 and May 11, at least [five candidates](#) were assassinated, four survived assassination attempts, another two died in car accidents and others were injured.⁴ Of the 7,000 candidates, nearly [2,600](#) were female. Sexual harassment and public defamation of some female candidates led two female candidates in Abadi's *Nasr* (Victory) list, [Rawshan Abdulsalam](#) and Himan Ramzi, to withdraw from the campaign.

Candidates did not campaign in [IDP camps](#), and there were polling stations in only 70 of [133 IDP camps](#). Out of [three million IDPs](#), [400,000 were eligible to vote](#), but only [285,000 registered](#), many bitter from losing family members and homes to ISIS and critical of the GoI. The voting cards of [8,000 Mosul](#) IDPs in the KRI did not arrive in time, and Iraqi intelligence in Mosul revoked [20,000 peoples'](#) ID cards, claiming these people were linked to ISIS. People were [buying and selling voter cards](#) and there were threats on people to vote a [certain way](#). With only [48 percent](#) of the [18](#) million eligible voters having updated their ID cards, the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) announced it would accept old ID cards at the 56,000 polling stations around the country, which turned out not to be the case.

In Kirkuk, 940,000 eligible voters could choose from 291 candidates to fill 13 seats. [KRI political parties](#) claimed that federal forces imposed restrictions on voter registrations and their election [campaigns](#). Despite the IHEC claiming that those displaced from Kirkuk and Tuz Khurmatu and residing in the KRI could vote for their home province, no polling stations were set up for them. When advanced voting for security forces opened in Kirkuk on May 10, long queues, and malfunction of the electronic voting system meant [34 percent](#) of 36,400 personnel were unable to vote.

⁴ [Najm al-Hasnawi](#), running in Maliki's State of the Law coalition, was gunned down and killed in a tribal dispute in Baghdad. ISIS assassinated [Faruq Zarzur al-Juburi](#), a candidate in Ayad Allawi's *al-Wataniya*, at his home at Qayyara. A Turkmen Front candidate survived a car bombing in Kirkuk. The financial director of a Shia militia, Qassim Al-Zubaidi, survived being shot at several times in Baghdad. Another assassination attempt on a candidate occurred in Basra. At [a rally in Erbil](#), unknown gunmen wounded a New Generation candidate, Rabun Maarouf. On May 9, unknown gunmen attacked the car of a [PUK candidate](#), Avin Mohammad Hassan al-Zahawi, when she was travelling to Khanaquin. On May 11, 18 Hashd militants led by *Fatah* candidate, Sherko Abdulaziz, attacked [KDP candidate](#), Irfan Saadullah, in Khanaquin. A candidate for the *al-Hikma* (Wisdom) party, Hadi Hussein al-Aqabi, died in a car accident as he travelled to a rally in Baghdad, and a candidate from al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition, Fawziya al-Jashma'i, died in a car accident in Babylon province.



On polling day, 900 foreign observers monitored voting and Iraqi security forces were out in strength. As well as the previously mentioned ISIS attacks, in [Diyala](#) province, two people were injured from *Hashd* shooting into the air, and in Mosul, *Hashd* beat up two KDP members on their way to vote. In Kirkuk, some [Kurds](#) felt intimidated by *Hashd* militants firing into the air and the heavy security presence at polling stations. The electronic systems did not work in some stations and before voting had finished there were numerous claims of electoral fraud. Thus, when news spread that PUK had won six parliamentary seats in Kirkuk, [Amiri's Badr militants](#) lay siege to the IHEC office in Kirkuk city, demanding a manual recount, as did the Iraqi Turkmen Front, Goran, and the GoI-appointed Sunni Arab governor. A curfew was put in place, and [Abadi](#) ordered the arrest of all Kirkuk IHEC staff for alleged violations during the advanced voting of security forces. KDP claimed that [120 out of 170](#) ballot boxes for Yazidi in IDP camps in Dohuk were not counted, and in Sulaimani, when news spread of PUK's success and that known votes for Goran and the Coalition for Democracy and Justice at specific polling stations were not recorded, these parties claimed electoral fraud and called for a manual recount.

Preliminary results published on May 13 – 14 surprised everyone, including Iran and the US. Muqtada al-Sadr's *Sairoon* (Alliance of Revolutionaries for Reform) achieved the most votes, even in Baghdad. *Sairoon* had campaigned on putting Iraq above all outside influences, and for social justice and a secular, technocrat, non-sectarian government. One [campaign slogan](#) was 'Corruption is terrorism'.⁵ Amiri's *Fatah* coalition came in second. Abadi's *Nasr* came third overall, and fifth in Baghdad, only winning a majority of seats in one province – Nineveh, where *Nasr* won seven seats, closely followed by KDP winning six [seats](#). This was the first time a mainly Shia list won in a [Sunni Arab-majority province](#).

In the KRI, the 'old guard' – KDP and PUK – received the most votes, when new parties expected to do much better. Apart from allegations of ballot box tampering and hacking of the electronic voting system, traditional loyalties for the more established parties likely inspired a greater voter turnout for them. Other [factors](#) behind Goran's lower than expected results could have been that Goran's support base was split by two new parties, and some supporters may have been disappointed by Goran's boycott of the Kurdistan Parliament and its inconsistent stance towards the referendum on independence. Nevertheless, the electoral fraud allegations were so numerous that [Goran](#) and [five other KRI parties](#) called for a manual recount in Sulaimani, Halabja and Kirkuk. When six [Arab lists](#), including Maliki's State of Law Coalition and Amiri's *Fatah*, called for an annulment and re-run of the whole election, the [six KRI parties](#) called for the same. After the [IHEC](#) rejected a manual recount, the [UN asked](#) for an investigation and a manual recount of contested results.

⁵ It is not uncommon for a party-dominated ministry to [siphon](#) ministry funds to their party. Between 2005 and 2014, [\\$312 billion](#) left the country and \$228 billion went missing or was wasted in government-funded infrastructure projects. This excludes the billions missing from oil contracts.



The post-election environment in Kirkuk was particularly volatile. Despite [Kurds dropping from eight seats in 2014 to six seats in 2018](#), these seats going to PUK, as KDP had boycotted the election claiming Kirkuk was 'occupied', and despite Arab and Turkmen parties achieving three seats each, up from two seats each in the 2014 election, on May 16, [protesters](#) and [gunmen](#) besieged several polling stations and Arab and [Turkmen Front supporters](#) staged a sit in around a warehouse where ballot boxes were being stored. On May 21, Arab and Turkmen representatives warned the IHEC they would launch country-wide protests or violent action if their electoral [grievances](#) were not addressed. Tensions were further heightened when a bomb killed three Turkmen on May 31. Protests [continued](#) outside the IHEC offices, and on July 1, an [ISIS suicide bomber](#) targeted the warehouse in an explosive-laden car. Police shot him at the gate, whereupon he triggered the explosion that killed one policeman and injured 15 police and six civilians.

When *Sairoon's* victory was confirmed, Sadr [tweeted](#):

We are *Sairoon* (Marching) with *Hikma* (Wisdom) and *Wataniya* (Patriotism) so that the *Iradah* (Will) of the people be our aim and to build *Jilan Jadidan* (a New Generation) and to witness *Taghir* (Goran/Change) for the better and for the *Al-Qarar* (Decision) to be Iraqi. So we raise the *Bayariq* (Banners) of *Al-Nasr* (Victory), and let Baghdad, the capital, be *Hawiyatuna* (Baghdad Is Our Identity) and for our *Hirakuna* (Movement) Democratic (KDP) towards the formation of a paternal government from technocratic *Kawadur* (Cadres) without partisanship.

The tweet failed to mention those considered to be aligned with Iran: Amiri's *Fatah*, Maliki's State of Law Coalition and PUK. [Sadr](#) supporters chanted, 'Iran is out, Iraq is free', but on May 14, IRGC Quds Force Commander Major General [Qassem Soleimani](#) arrived in Baghdad to ensure that a future coalition government would be respectful of Iranian interests, meaning that Amiri's *Fatah* and Maliki's State of Law coalitions would be [included](#), preferably joined by Abadi's *Nasr* and Al-Hikma's *Hakim*, to prevent *Sairoon* forming a government. Iran opposed *Sairoon's* communist elements, its wish to chart an independent course, and stated intention to disband [Hashd](#). Meanwhile, Abadi announced that a [pre-condition](#) of *Nasr* forming a government with another list was that he remains prime minister. Noteworthy was Soleimani's advice at the time: that no Shia list nominates their own leader as [prime minister](#).

US Presidential Envoy for the US-led coalition, Brett McGurk, was also in Baghdad to ensure the new government would be US and Sunni Arab friendly, especially as the US is relying on Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States to invest in reconstruction. The US had mixed reactions to the victory of *Sairoon*. [Sadr](#) is its leader, although he did not run in the elections. Sadr comes from a family of famous clerics who rebelled against the British mandate in 1920 and Saddam Hussein in the 1980s. His clerical father and uncle were both executed by the Baathists. Between 2003 and 2008, Sadr's Mahdi Army fought the US occupation and a bloody sectarian war. In 2008, Sadr disbanded the Mahdi Army and went to Iran, returning to Iraq in 2011. Since 2016 Sadr has led a grass roots opposition movement. Although he calls for all



foreign troops to leave Iraq except for those approved to train Iraqi forces, some of his positions align with US interests. He opposed *Hashd* military commanders running in the election, wants ministers to be non-aligned technocrats, and advocates that all *Hashd* militia be absorbed or demobilised, for Iraq to have better relations with Sunni Arab states, and for [Kurdish issues](#) to be solved via the constitution. Sadr has inspired the worst of sectarianism, but in recent years claims to oppose all its forms. In 2014, Sadr's *Saraya al-Salaam* (Peace Brigades) defended the Sunni-majority town of [Samarra](#) from ISIS, and in October 2017, the Peace Brigades were the only [Hashd](#) that did not attack and loot houses in the military takeover of Kirkuk. But some [observers](#) are cautious in their assessment of the 44-year old Sadr, saying he is complicated, mercurial and even [dangerous](#), given his ability to mobilise crowds and militants. Some conjecture that his long-term objective is to succeed Grand Ayotollah Ali al-Sistani in Najaf, and create a Shia centre to rival [Qom](#).

On [August 9](#), after a manual recount of contested ballot boxes resulted in one seat change, this being *Fatah* winning another seat in [Bagdad](#), causing some to say the recount was [rigged](#), the official results for the 329-seat parliament, including 9 seats reserved for minorities, were released. The final results were:

- Muqtada al-Sadr's *Sairoon* list —54 seats (16.4%), up from 34 seats in 2014.
- Hadi al-Amiri's *Fatah* list —48 seats (14.5%), established in 2017, Badr gaining 22 seats, [Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq](#) 15 seats, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq three seats, and five other parties gaining one to two [seats each](#).
- Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's *Nasr* list— 42 seats (12.7%), established in 2018.
- Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) —25 seats (7.6%), the same as in 2014.
- Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law Alliance (SLA)—25 seats (7.6%), down from 92 seats in 2014, although if *Nasr* is included, down 24 seats.
- Ayad Allawi's al-Wataniya—21 seats (%), the same as in 2014.
- Ammar al-Hakim's *Hikma* (National Wisdom Movement)—19 seats (5.7%), down from 29 seats in 2014.
- Patriotic Union of Kurdistan—18 seats (5.5%), down from 21 seats in 2014.
- Osama al-Nujaifi's *al-Qarar al-Iraqi* (Uniters form Reform)—14 seats (4.2%), down from 23 in 2014.
- Goran list (from Kurdistan)—5 seats (1.5%), down from 9 seats in 2014.

Among the 25 lists or parties that gained less than five seats were:

- (Sulaimani-based) New Generation: 4 seats (1.2%), established in 2017.
- (Sulaimani-based Barham Salih's) Coalition of Democracy and Justice: 2 (0.6%), established in 2017.
- Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU): 2 seats (0.6%), down from 4 seats in 2014.
- Kurdistan Islamic Group (Komal): 2 seats (0.6%), down from 3 seats in 2014.
- Turkmen Front of Kirkuk: 3 seats, (0.9%) up from 2 seats in 2014, with other Turkmen candidates ran in KDP and *Nasr*.



The results were hailed as a vote for change, as the top three lists had formed in 2017 – 2018, as had another eight lists that managed to get between two and 19 seats. Yet at least 22 percent of eligible voters had voted for *Fatah* and Maliki's State of Law Coalition, and therefore, [close](#) links with Iran. Otherwise, voting generally remained consistent along religious or ethnic lines. KDP got the most seats of any single party; 17.6 percent of voters supporting KRI parties, these winning 58 seats in six provinces, down from 65 seats in 2014, and [Sunni lists](#) garnered 56 seats.

Some resented *Sairoon's* electoral success. On [May 16](#), [May 26](#), [June 6](#) and [June 10](#) there were attacks on a *Saraya al-Salaam* military base, a Sadrist cultural centre in Maysan (bordering Iran, where *Sairoon* won double the votes for *Fatah*), the Iraqi Communist Party headquarters in Baghdad and an arms depot in Sadr City. There was also an act of [arson](#) at an IHEC warehouse in Baghdad containing [ballot boxes from Sadr City](#), where *Sairoon* is popular. This impacted the manual recount for [Baghdad](#). On December 7, Hussein Hajimi, a *Saraya al-Salaam* commander who was close to Sadr, was gunned down in [Baghdad](#).

In [2010](#), it took nine months to form a government. In 2018, government formation took more than six months due to electoral anomalies, the manual recount, [Sairoon refusing](#) to join an alliance with Maliki's State of Law coalition, Iran working to exclude *Sairoon* from the new government, [US insisting](#) that Abadi be the next prime minister, widespread protests and [two rival alliances](#) – the Reform and Construction alliance of *Sairoon-Nasr-Hakim-Wataniya*, and the *Al-Binaa* alliance of *Fatah*-State of Law coalition – deadlocked in their competition to form a government.

Back on [May 28](#), without a [quorum](#), the Iraq Parliament voted to cancel all results from the diaspora (because of allegations of [vote buying in Syria and Jordan](#)), IDPs and Peshmerga, and on May 31, the IHEC (an 'independent' body whose members are appointed according to a quota from each major party), cancelled results from [1,021 polling stations](#) in nine provinces. They included 391 polling stations in the KRI, and 86 polling stations in Kirkuk. Not so contentious was the parliament's vote in support of a manual recount of 10 percent of all [votes](#).

In early June, Iraqi [President Fuad Masum](#) referred the unconstitutional cancellation of votes to the Federal Supreme Court, but the Iraq Parliament voted in support of the cancellation of [votes](#), and also voted to [sack the IHEC](#). (*Sairoon boycotted* the parliamentary session.) On June 10, the High Judicial Council selected nine judges to replace the IHEC commissioners. On June 21, the [Federal Supreme Court](#) ruled that the cancellation of votes was unconstitutional but that a manual recount was within the constitution, and that on June 30, the Iraq Parliament would become a caretaker government. From [July 3](#), a [manual recount](#) of contested boxes began in [Erbil](#), Sulaimani, Kirkuk, Nineveh, Salahuddin, Anbar, Basra, Maysan, Thi Qar, Muthanna, Qadissiya and [Wasit](#). KRI opposition parties were not happy that only [200](#) of the 3,000 ballot boxes in Sulaimani were recounted, and demanded a [full recount](#) in Sulaimani and Erbil, but their demand was not met.



Meanwhile, having received the majority of votes, *Sairoon* had first right to form a government. Within days of the election, Sadr entered talks with Abadi, but found Abadi's demands [unacceptable](#). On [May 17](#), Sadr and Ammar al-Hakim, head of the Shia *Hikma* list, announced a partnership, and on June 8, they signed an agreement with Ayad Allawi's Sunni [al-Wataniya list](#). But under pressure from Qassem Soleimani, on June 12 [Fatah and Sairoon announced an agreement](#). Alarm bells rang for those wanting to curb Iran's influence. Optimists pointed to Amiri and other *Fatah* leaders having experience dealing with the Americans, and having moderated their anti-US rhetoric. The alliance faltered after *Fatah* refused to disengage from Maliki's State of Law coalition, and members of the Communist Party [resigned](#) from *Sairoon*. Tensions increased and there was the potential for violence, as all major coalitions were able to draw on loyal militias, but there was only one [incident](#) on June 20, that resulted in IRGC-backed *Hezbollah* wounding two police and a civilian in Baghdad. Nine days after the incident, Sadr ordered the dissolution of *Saraya al-Salaam* throughout Iraq except for Sadr city, Samarra and Karbala, 'for the sake of public interest'. All militants were ordered to hand their weapons to the [state](#). In the meantime, on [June 23](#), *Sairoon* and *Nasr* were back to forming an alliance, with Abadi no longer insisting on becoming prime minister. Then on July 7, Iran's attempts to form the old 'National Alliance' of five Shia lists [broke down](#), and a few days later Sadr asked Abadi to resign from the Dawa Party if he wanted to be PM.

Through six months of negotiations, Sunni Arab and KRI parliamentarians did not commit to either bloc, as neither communicated their policies on matters concerning Sunni Arabs and the KRI. Priorities for [Sunni Arabs](#) were that non-local Shia *Hashd* leave Sunni Arab majority provinces, that the new government commit to consultation and embark on reconstruction of destroyed cities, fast track the return of IDPs and refugees, and compensate where necessary (e.g. for destroyed homes). To draw Sunni candidates to *Fatah*, [Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis](#) ordered all *Hashd* militants to withdraw from Sunni Arab cities. Abadi was affronted and on August 21 [ordered](#) that all movements must be co-ordinated with Joint Operational Command.

To negotiate for the [KRI](#), PUK and KDP formed a united front of 43 seats, and announced they would not align with any Shia bloc unwilling to enact or clarify articles of the constitution related to the status of the disputed territories, borders, the right of the KRI to independently explore, produce and export oil and gas, and the status of Peshmerga, their salaries and deployment to the disputed territories. They also wanted the [removal of Hashd from these territories](#), a guarantee that the governor of Kirkuk is a [Kurd](#), and to renegotiate the KRG's share of revenue. [Other KRI parties](#), with 15 seats, held the same priorities, but claimed they would only join a united front after the satisfactory completion of the [manual recount](#). In an effort to win over Kurds, on August 27, [a Nasr spokesperson](#) claimed the alliance would agree for Peshmerga to return to Kirkuk, but on August 29, Abadi claimed there was to be no compromises on [Kirkuk](#), the disputed province would remain under Federal Authority. The [US applied pressure on the KRI parties](#) to join the *Sairoon-Nasr* bloc, expecting the Kurds to overlook Abadi's military takeover of the disputed territories and reluctance to negotiate. The KRI parties did not comply.



On August 20, Qassem Soleimani returned to Baghdad to ensure government formation was in the interests of Iran, but at the end of August Abadi made a fatal mistake. He dismissed the head the National Security Council, and thus the nominal head of the official autonomous *Hashd* force, [Faleh Faisal al-Fayadh](#), for being too involved in negotiations to form a government. (In October, the [Administrative Court](#) suspended Abadi's decision. Fayadh immediately resumed his [duties](#).) Two days after Fayadh's dismissal, Fayadh and six other *Nasr* parliamentarians defected to [Fatah](#), giving *Fatah* one more seat than *Sairoon*. This jeopardised Abadi's bid to become prime minister. What sealed Abadi's fate was his poor response to protests in Basra and seven other provinces beginning in July, causing *Sairoon* to return to negotiations with [Fatah](#), and Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's announcement that no former prime minister or political leader (Abadi, Maliki, Amiri or Fayadh) should become the next [prime minister](#).

In the first 10 days of September, the [Sunni National Axis Alliance](#), which had formed in August, split following confusion over government formation, and Sadr threatened to form an [opposition](#) if a consensus was not reached on non-aligned technocrats being appointed ministers. On September 15, the new parliament finally elected a 37-year old Sunni Arab and former Anbar governor, [Mohammad al-Halbousi](#), as parliamentary speaker. Given his close relations with *Hashd* and [Fatah](#), he is considered [pro-Iran](#). Some accused an unnamed organisation of [bribing MPs](#) to vote for Halbousi. The following day, *Sairoon* MP Hassan Karim al-Kaabi and KDP MP [Bashir Haddad](#) were elected deputy speakers.

The next step was to select a president, a post traditionally taken by PUK. For the first time, the KDP and PUK could not agree on a single candidate. KDP argued that because the KRI presidency had been suspended, this position held by KDP, it was not automatic that PUK should have the Iraq presidency. PUK nominated Barham Salih, and KDP nominated [Fuad Hussein](#). Both the USA and Iran backed Barham Salih, a former KRI prime minister, who had split from the PUK before the national elections, only to return. The US put pressure on Masoud Barzani to [support](#) Barham Salih. Barzani suggested the matter be put to a vote among [KRI federal parliamentarians](#). Salih wanted the whole parliament to vote. Shia parties approved seven presidential candidates (six Kurds and an Arab)⁶ and if Kurds could not back a single candidate, these would be subject to a parliamentary [vote](#).

After Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's mediation, on September 18, *Sairoon* and *Fatah* announced they jointly backed [Adel Abdul al-Mahdi](#) as prime minister. Abdul-Mahdi was seen as a compromise candidate and an independent. He is an economist, who studied at the Sorbonne and worked in France, a former communist, oil minister and [vice-president of Iraq](#), and a former member of the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council. He has good relations with Kurds, having lived in Kurdistan during the Baathist era, and like Sadr, did [not run](#) in the elections.

⁶ The candidates were Sardar Abdullah, Sarwa Abdul-Wahed, Abdullatif Rashid, Omar Barzanji, Barham Salih, Fuad Hussein, and [Abdulkarem Abtan al-Jabouri](#).



On October 2, the Iraqi Parliament elected Barham Salih as president and without the constitutional requirement of forming a government, Salih nominated Adel Abdul al-Mahdi as prime minister. Abdul-Mahdi had 15 days to form a government and 30 days to submit cabinet nominations. He immediately came under pressure from *Sairoon* to select independent technocrats as ministers, free of quotas, and from *Fatah* to select *Fatah* preferred candidates, with *Fatah* also demanding to know Abdul-Mahdi's position on the [presence of US forces](#). (A month earlier, ten IRGC-backed militias, including Badr and *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq*, which contribute 37 of *Fatah's* 48 MPs, called for the expulsion of all foreign troops from [Iraq](#).) On October 10, Abdul-Mahdi took the unusual step of launching a website so people could apply for ministerial posts by submitting why they were suitable and what they would do if [accepted](#). Some 36,000 applications were received. This prompted the lists to put forward [candidates](#) for 22 ministerial posts. In the past, these were divided so that Shia received 12 posts, Sunni Arabs six, Kurds four and [Christians one](#).

On October 21, [New Generation](#) announced it would form an active opposition in the unicameral Iraq Parliament and four days later, Osama al-Nujaifi's Sunni Arab *Qarar* alliance, announced the [same](#). The same day – October 25 – Adel Abdul al-Mahdi was sworn in as prime minister and [220](#) of the 329 members of parliament elected or approved 14 of 22 ministerial nominations. Only three could be considered [technocrats](#).⁷ Abdul-Mahdi claimed five were selected from [website applications](#). No decision was made on the remaining eight ministers, including the Ministers for Justice, Defence and the Interior, because *Sairoon*, *Nasr*, *Wataniya* and Sunni Arab parliamentarians left the parliament claiming the other candidates were not independents, or were corrupt, sectarian or [Baathist](#). The de-Baathification Commission later cleared [Faisal al-Jarba](#), nominated for Defence, despite him not being the Sunni Arabs' preferred candidate. They considered him pro-Iran. Even more contentious was the *Fatah*-backed nomination of Faleh Faisal al-Fayadh as Minister of Interior, to which [Sairoon](#) fiercely objected because of Fayadh's support for *Hashd* remaining an [autonomous force](#). He also has a record of overseeing atrocities committed during his time as Prime Minister Maliki's [security advisor](#). *Sairoon* had not put forward a *Sairoon* candidate for any ministry and the head of *Sairoon's* political committee announced that unless quotas were abandoned, and independent technocrats selected, *Sairoon* would not participate in the government or [opposition](#).

⁷ [Of the 14](#), the three 'technocrats' I refer to are Fuad Hussein (Finance), Luay al-Khattib (Electricity), and Mohammed Ali al-Hakeem (Foreign Affairs), the last being a former ambassador to the UN. Otherwise, Thamir Ghadhban (Oil), Dr. Alaa al-Alwani (Health), and Abdullah Luaibi (Transport) had previously served as ministers. Bangin Rekani (Housing and Reconstruction), was the second Kurdish appointment, and Sunni Arab appointments included Salih Abdullah Jabouri (Industry) and Saleh al-Hassani (Agriculture). Later, the Accountability and Justice Commission, responsible for de-Baathification, contested two appointments: Naim al-Rubaye (Communications), and Ahmed Al-Obeidi (Youth and Sports). The remaining appointments were Bassem al-Rubaye (Labour and Social Affairs), Mohammed Hashim (Trade), and Jamal al-Adili (Water Resources). There were complaints that too many were nominated by *Fatah*. In the past, the Minister of Justice was a Kurd and the Minister of Defence was a Sunni Arab but Sunni lists were unable to agree on a [single candidate](#). In mid November, they nominated Salim al-Jabouri as their preferred candidate, but this was ignored.



In the same parliamentary session, Abdul-Mahdi outlined his priorities in a 122-page document. These were security, the economy (expanding agriculture, tourism, oil and the military sectors, and developing public-private partnerships), government services, infrastructure (promising that Basra's water problem would be fixed by the summer of 2019), administrative reforms and settling disputes with the KRG. For security Abdul-Mahdi announced that armed forces would withdraw from all cities and be replaced by a strengthened police force. No [mechanisms were identified](#).

Then came the rejection of the 2019 draft [budget](#) (devised by Abadi's Council of Ministers) by Sunni Arab, KRI and Basra parliamentarians. Although the draft budget increased spending by [23 percent](#) on the 2018 budget, there was no allocation for IDPs or reconstruction of destroyed Sunni Arab cities, and per capita, Sunni Arab provinces received less than Shia Arab provinces. For instance, war affected Nineveh received a one percent share of the budget but has 10 percent of the Iraqi [population](#). The KRI's share of the budget remained 12.67 percent, Abadi having reduced it from 17 percent, despite the KRI hosting more than one million IDPs among a host population of five million. Basra MPs were dissatisfied with Basra's share given the province has never received a single petrodollar and suffers from chronic shortages in services, infrastructure and jobs.

Sairoon and *Fatah* remained in conflict about the appointment of ministers, particularly for Interior, and to a lesser degree, Defence, as these positions have a bearing on the future of *Hashd al-Shaabi*. With *Fatah* continuing to lobby for Fayadh as Minister of Interior, in late November Sadr accused *Fatah* of attempting to purchase ministries with 'foreign' [funds](#), and announced that the Ministers for Interior and Defence had to be military leaders who had fought against [ISIS](#) and had [no party affiliations](#). In taking a strong stance, some feared Sadr would be the [next target](#) of Qassem Soleimani's hit squads that have been operating inside Iraq since the May elections. These squads had already assassinated two individuals (Adel Shaker El-Tamimi and Shawki al-Haddad) and made an attempted assassination on Rady al-Tai, all three men being critical of Iran's interference in the [formation](#) of the new government.

On December 4, Abdul-Mahdi re-presented the nominations for the eight remaining ministers to parliament, including *Fatah*'s choice of Faleh Fayadh as Minister of Interior, Faysal Jarba for Minister of Defence and a Kurdish independent and judge, Dara Nuradin as [Minister of Justice](#).⁸ The parliament did not have a [quorum](#), and after some rowdy behaviour in the chamber, the prime minister and other parliamentarians [walked out](#).

⁸ PUK objected to the Minister of Justice not being from PUK and PUK being given [no ministry](#). Abdul-Mahdi's other [nominations](#) were Qusay Abdulwahab Suheil (Higher Higher Education), Saba Khayradin Tani (Education), Abdulamir Hamdani (Culture), Nouri Natiq Dlemi (Planning), and a Christian, Hanna Immanuel Gorgis (Immigration).



With Abdul-Mahdi refusing to override the alliances, instead calling on them to resolve their disagreements about Fayadh and other ministers, Sadr gave Abdul-Mahdi 12 months to prove himself. By December, even the *Fatah*-led *al-Binaa* alliance was [divided](#) about the nomination of Fayadh as Minister of Interior, with former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki refusing to [compromise](#).

Who are appointed Ministers of Interior and Defence relates to the most explosive difference between *Sairoon* and *Fatah*: what to do about an estimated [122,000](#) to [150,000](#) *Hashd* militants from disparate militias. In November 2016, about half of all *Hashd* were officially recognised as an autonomous force nominally under the authority of the National Security Council, with their salaries being paid by the Ministry of Finance. Twenty *Hashd* commanders were elected as *Fatah* MPs. Some IRGC-linked commanders have formed construction and import companies, run protection rackets and collect customs fees and taxes at [checkpoints](#), emulating their mentor. In addition, about 20,000 *Hashd* militants, [including commanders who are now Fatah MPs](#), should face a court for having committed war crimes and crimes against humanity against Sunni Arabs during the war against ISIS.

Sairoon wants all *Hashd* disarmed or incorporated into existing security forces, while *Fatah* wants to keep the officially recognised force as an Iraqi version of the IRGC, with the potential to [supercede other Iraqi Security Forces](#) in military strength, and political and economic connections. IRGC-backed *Hashd* demand a greater role in security and on October 29, the new Gol announced that the IRGC-backed *Hashd* infiltrated Ministry of [Interior](#) would oversee security for five Shia provinces (Diwaniyah, Wasit, Maysan, Dhi Qar and Muthanna). In November, the new Gol granted the officially recognised *Hashd* a [salary rise](#), which put their pay on par with the Iraq Army (\$200 a month for a soldier), while [Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq](#) insisted they have a formal security role along Iraq's border with Syria. This is against US interests as IRGC-linked militias allow supplies to get through to the IRGC and their proxies in Syria, and cross into Syria to fight alongside pro-Assad forces. Outside the officially recognised autonomous *Hashd* force are between 50,000 and 90,000 *Hashd* militants that need to be disarmed and be given alternative employment. In addition, there is the potential for confrontation between IRGC-backed *Hashd* loyal to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, and those loyal to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and Muqtada al-Sadr, and between IRGC-backed *Hashd* and the Iraq Army. The latter was highlighted in October, when [Hashd attacks killed four Iraqi soldiers](#) near Akkas gas field and Qaim, near the border with Syria. *Hashd* were instrumental in defeating ISIS in Qaim, and had formerly controlled the gas field and border. Tensions increased after the US insisted that the Iraq Army secure the border.

[John Jenkins](#) argues it is not Abdul-Mahdi, Salih or Halbousi that will make the decisions. The real power brokers are IRGC-backed figures: the head of *Fatah* and Badr, Hadi al-Amiri, the head of *Kata'ib Hezbollah*, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, and the head of *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq*, Qais al-Khazali. To counteract their demands, Sadr can



mobilise massive crowds. He also has a militia, but so do his opponents. *Sairoon* can gain the support of other Shia, Sunni Arab and KRI parliamentarians, and the US Congress can pass more sanctions on IRGC-backed individuals and militias,⁹ but this may not be enough to curb Iran's political, military, economic and social penetration, including IRGC-funded television [channels](#).

In the past, the system of power sharing led to corruption, patronage and stasis, with convoluted decision and funding pathways, as shown in Appendix A, making it near impossible to get essential projects off the ground. The aforementioned deadlocks in the new GoI will hamper the ability to govern, let alone embark on stabilisation and reconstruction and carry out major structural reforms.

Protests in Shia provinces

Another factor that killed Abadi's chances of becoming prime minister was his response to protests in Basra, which started on [July 8](#). Within days the protests had spread to seven other provinces. In the previous months, there had been daily small-scale demonstrations in the [Shia-majority south](#) about the lack of electricity, drinking water, health services and jobs. For instance, in the last ten days of May, [protests](#) about electricity shortages were held in Baghdad, Najaf, Kerbala, Nasiriyah, Kut and Basra, with some neighbourhoods receiving only three hours of electricity a day.

Factors contributing to the poor services were national and provincial government mismanagement, inaction and corruption, and for electricity and water, actions of neighbouring countries. Although Iraq has spent [USD\\$40 billion](#) on electricity infrastructure since 2005, it only generates between [55 percent](#) and [68 percent](#) of the electricity required to service industry and the population. This means that Basra, a province of 1.5 million [people](#), relies on [1,000 megawatts](#) of electricity generated by gas imported from Iran. In early July, at the height of Iraq's very hot summer, Iran cut this supply because the GoI owed Iran an estimated \$1 billion.

The [Shatt al-Arab River](#) is the source of potable water for Basra but the river has been severely contaminated by Iraq and Iran discharging untreated sewage and other wastes upstream, and has become more saline as a result of reduced water flows due to years of drought,¹⁰ upstream dams being built on rivers feeding the Shatt al-Arab (22 in Turkey and 42 in Iran, as well as dams in Syria and the [KRI](#)), the oil industry consuming vast amounts of water, and 13 donor-supplied desalinization

⁹ On September 19, the [US House of Representatives](#) passed a bill to impose sanctions on *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* (AAH), and a splinter group, *Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba* (HHN). AAH was responsible for the deaths of US soldiers and UK hostages, and HHN fights for the Assad regime. Although sanctions could prevent AAH parliamentarians being given positions of power, they could also be seen as US meddling. [Michael Knight](#) recommended delaying sanctions until the government was formed. On November 13, the US State Department sanctioned four Iraqi agents of *Hezbollah*, whose operational, intelligence and financial activities in [Iraq](#) are co-ordinated by the [IRGC](#) Quds Force.

¹⁰ Drought is also impacting Iraqi farmers, who cultivated [50 percent less land in 2018](#) than in 2017.



plants completed in 2006 having yet to be put into operation. The situation will only get worse with the expansion of irrigation agriculture and hydroelectric [power](#).

On July 8, protesters blocked roads to three oil fields (West Qurna 1, West Qurna 2, and Rumeila), preventing oil workers from getting to work. After [police](#) killed one protester and wounded another eight, protesters set fire to Lukoil gates and buildings, and the police cars outside the oil field, causing the evacuation of oil industry workers. Between July 10 and July 14, protests spread to another seven Shia-majority provinces, including Baghdad and Wasit, the capital of Muthanna province, Samawa, (where protesters torched the governor's [headquarters](#) and [Badr buildings](#) and stormed the Samawa courthouse, and after shots were fired at police, police killed two protesters), the capital of Dhi Qar province, [Nasiriyah](#), (where violence near the governor's home caused at least [36 security force personnel](#) to be injured), the capital of Maysan, [Najaf](#), (where protesters entered Najaf airport terminal and tarmac, causing a two day suspension of flights) and Kerbala (where protesters stormed provincial government buildings). South of Basra city, 40 protesters were wounded by rubber and live bullets, and near the border with Dhi Qar, 15 protesters and 25 police were wounded as a result of clashes after protesters pelted police with [stones](#). On July 16, the main gates of [Umm Qasr port re-opened](#) after a three-day shutdown (only to be closed again some weeks later). With protesters gathering along the highways to the Safwan border crossing with Kuwait and the Shalamchah border crossing with Iran, these border crossings were closed, and along the [highways](#), vehicles were being stopped for hours at a time at multiple checkpoints for security reasons. By [July 22](#), 14 protesters had been killed, and 353 protesters and [274 security force personnel had been wounded](#). Of the 348 protesters arrested, 314 were released, although more were arrested thereafter.

In Basra, protests continued throughout August with sit-ins and street marches. On August 31, eight protesters were wounded when security forces opened [fire](#). In the first week of September, Basra security forces killed 14 protesters and wounded forty-six. This included security killing at least five protesters after protesters set fire to a Basra Provincial Council building. At least [thirty](#) protesters and security forces were injured. A curfew was put in place but the next day there was more violence, when protesters [set fire](#) to buildings of *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq*, *Badr*, *Dawa*, *Hikma* and the Islamic Supreme Council, as well as the state-run *al-Iraqiya* TV channel, and the *Al-Ghadeer* and *Al-Nakhil* radio facilities. The port of Umm Qasr remained [closed](#). The next day protesters broke in and set fire to the [Iranian consulate](#) in Basra and stormed the [Lukoil-managed West Qurna water treatment](#) plant. A self-declared [Demonstrators' Council](#) demanded that the army replace the government, apparently not mindful of events in Egypt.

[Ignoring the curfew](#), on September 8, unknown assailants fired three Katyusha rockets at Basra airport, and protesters tried to break into buildings of *Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq* and Basra's presidential compound used by *Hashd*. *Hashd* responded by saying they would deal with saboteurs like they did [ISIS](#), and on September 12, *Hashd* commanders announced they would expand their Voluntary Reserves to ten



brigades, calling them the Arabic equivalent of Basij, the dreaded IRGC religious police. Basra's civil activists said it was an attempt to further [militarise society](#).

With talk of civil war between *Sairoon* and *Fatah*, Sadr called a special parliamentary session to come up with immediate solutions to Basra's water, electricity and job [crisis](#). In an emergency session of parliament on September 8, Abadi called the protests '[political sabotage](#)'. *Sairoon*, *Fatah* and *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* called for Abadi to [resign](#). On the same day, the US consulate in Basra was attacked, and on [September 29](#) the US embassy compound in Baghdad was attacked. On both occasions the US warned Iran that it would retaliate if its proxies attacked [US interests](#). At the end of September, the US shut down its Basra consulate.

Protests did not spread to Sunni Arab-majority provinces or the disputed territories, despite people in these areas experiencing the same or even worse shortages. This was likely due to these areas continuing to suffer from an ISIS presence and being heavily militarised. Also, Sunni Arabs fear being linked to [ISIS](#), and remember Maliki's harsh crackdown on Sunni Arab protests (2006 – 2014).

From the beginning of the protests, the caretaker GoI responded with promises and coercion. Iraq's Oil Minister Jabar al-Luaibi promised short, medium and long term measures, including building a desalination unit and the creation of [10,000 new civil servant positions](#) in the oil industry, which would only exacerbate the problem of an overblown public sector. Abadi visited Basra, promising \$3 billion to improve Basra's water, electricity and health services, and another [\\$675 million for housing loans](#). Tired of politicians' empty promises, protesters heckled Abadi. On July 21, [Saudi Arabia offered to supply Iraq electricity](#) at a quarter of the price Iraq pays for Iran's electricity, with the new source coming from a solar plant in Saudi that could produce 3,000 megawatts, but on [July 29](#), Abadi ordered the dismissal of the Minister of Electricity, who had been negotiating with the Saudis.

Coercive tactics included the government shutting down the Internet between [July 12 and 16](#), and thereafter blocking social media sites. Security forces, including *Hashd*, were heavy handed in their use of tear gas, live bullets and [batons](#), even on peaceful protesters. Videos showed *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* shooting into protesters in Najaf, Samawa and Baghdad. To protect oil fields and prevent confrontations, on July 15 Abadi ordered a curfew and a state of emergency in three provinces and deployed [six Emergency Response battalions and three Counter-Terrorism battalions](#), the latter not trained to deal with civilians. Police in Basra closed off streets, and [arrested 'hundreds' of protest organisers](#).

Throughout the protests, Abadi remained strangely silent, in contrast to *Hashd* commanders, Shia tribal leaders, Nouri a-Maliki (hoping to capitalise on Abadi's vulnerability), Muqtada al-Sadr and Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani coming out in support of the protesters' demands, although Sadr requested the protesters respect public property and for security forces not to use force, before calling for the privatisation of electricity and then for all negotiations to form a government to stop



in order to prioritise the protesters' demands. In contrast, [Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani](#) called for the formation of a new government as soon as possible.

Some suggested Iran was behind the protests, but protesters were critical of 15 years of Shia rule, Abadi, the Dawa Party and *Hashd* and blamed Iranian interference for a litany of government failures since 2005. This caused protesters to burn images of Khomeini and Khamenei, [and set fire](#) to buildings used by Dawa, the Supreme Islamic Council, Badr, *Kata'ib Hezbollah* and *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq*. [Iran accused](#) the US and Saudi Arabia of being behind the protests, with some Iraqis [suggesting](#) that the US had put pressure on the Gol not to pay Iran for the electricity in order to stir up anti-Iran sentiment and working through [NGO](#) activists. A member of *Nasr* accused *Hashd* of being behind the violence of some protests in order to discredit Abadi. A few protesters even criticised Sistani's passivity, prompting Sistani's office to issue a statement on July 27 insisting the Gol implement reforms.

With Basra producing [75 percent of Iraq's oil](#), but having infrastructure that was largely destroyed in the eight-year war with Iran, Basra's federal MPs vowed they would not support any new coalition government unless the protesters' grievances were [addressed](#). On July 25, Walid Kitan, the acting chairman of Basra Provincial Council, announced he had collected 15 signatures from the 25-member council for a fifth [push](#) for Basra to hold a referendum to become an autonomous region. The Gol has rejected every submission and has yet to establish procedures for a province or region to become autonomous, unlike the autonomy of the KRI, which was enshrined in the 2005 constitution.

Back on August 11, [Iran](#) resumed supplying electricity to Basra, but then came another calamity. In the last two weeks of August [30,000 people](#), mainly in Basra, were admitted to hospital suffering from diarrhoea and stomach pains caused by contaminated, highly saline water. The Barzani Charity Foundation delivered bottled water to [Basra](#) in two convoys of 20 trucks each, but by the last week in September, more than [95,000 people](#) had sought hospital treatment. A month later the figure rose to 120,000. In October and early November large numbers of fish died from a bacterial infection of their gills caused by living in the polluted environment of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The World Health Organisation tested the water and found a high level of coliforms, heavy metals and [ammonia](#).

Protests again erupted in Basra in mid-November. A leader of the original protests, and a young Shia cleric called Sheikh Wissam al-Gharawi was [assassinated](#) on November 17. He had started calling for people to take up arms because of government inaction. People suspected a militia was responsible. Protests again turned violent on December 2, when people took down a concrete wall at a Qurna oil field. In dispersing the [crowd](#), security forces wounded several people. After Sadr called for 'civil disobedience', security clashed with Sadr's Peace Brigades killing five.

The protesters are mainly young men, and Abadi's inability to respond appropriately forced *Sairoon* to turn to *Fatah* to form a government, which suited Iran. Yet the



protests pose multiple challenges for *Fatah* and the State of Law Coalition in particular, given that protesters are against Iranian influence, and want to change the whole system of [government](#).

Impacts of US sanctions on Iran

[US sanctions on Iran and those that trade with Iran severely impact Iraq](#), given Iran is Iraq's third largest trading partner, with Iraq importing \$6.6 billion worth of Iranian products in 2017, and from March to October 2018, \$6 billion worth of non-crude related goods, also relying on Iran to supply gas for at least [32](#) percent of its electricity needs. If Iraq were to comply with US sanctions, Iraq will suffer severe shortages of electricity; prices for food, construction materials and other goods will rise; business and pilgrim numbers will decline, and the black market will expand.

In August, Abadi claimed that Iraq did not agree with the US' unilateral sanctions but would comply. After Iran threatened to demand immediate compensation for the 1980 – 1988 war, Abadi said Iraq would 'abide' by sanctions by not using US dollars. Instead Iraq would use local currencies and the [euro](#). In his customary wavering, Abadi upset both Tehran and Washington. In October, the US came to an agreement with the GoI for US energy giant, General Electric, to supply \$15 billion worth of natural gas power generation equipment to generate 11 gigawatts of [power](#). The German company Siemens also signed a memorandum of understanding to build power generation units for the production of 14 gigawatts of electricity and to replace antiquated transmission and distribution lines that [lose 50 percent of power](#) before reaching the consumer. [Saudi companies](#) also want to invest in power generation. But it will take two to five years for Iraq to become self-sufficient in energy production. Even then, Iraq cannot capture enough gas from flares, so Iraq will remain dependent on importing gas from Iran and/or Kuwait.

In early November, the US gave Iraq a short 45-day waiver to comply with US sanctions, as opposed to Turkey and seven other countries being given a 180-day waiver. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani announced that bilateral trade with Iraq would increase to \$20 billion, and Iraqi leaders, including the new prime minister and president, extolled the importance of relations with their neighbour, especially as Iran was the first country to help Iraq fight ISIS, and the two countries have strong historical, religious, cultural and business ties, including [shared oil fields](#). The [US responded](#) by saying that it would consider delaying US sanctions on Iraq if Iraq dissolved all *Hashd* militias and stopped Iran meddling in Iraq's political affairs. Abdul-Mahdi responded by saying that *Hashd* formed a vital component of Iraq's security, and then approved an increase in salaries of those in the officially recognised *Hashd* force. The US could continue providing short waivers to Iraq as a lever, but with *Fatah* and the State of Law having a prominent position in the GoI, US' demands are unlikely to be met. US, NATO and other allied forces will come under increasing pressure to leave Iraq, which will lead to the US and others to consolidate relations with the KRG.



Kurdistan Region of Iraq

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is the safest place in Iraq. Between the late 1990s and 2014 the KRI developed a prosperous, peaceful, multicultural, multi-religious society. The region has enormous potential if the KRG can form a functioning parliament, undertake internal reforms, address social issues and resolve disputes with the GoI, and maintain good relations with neighbouring regions and countries. Divisions among KRI political parties weaken the capacity to do so, but at least the KRI has a cross section of secular and religious-based parties. While the new GoI has shown some conciliatory moves, there is no indication that it is willing to address priority issues such as the status of the disputed territories and the KRI's right to develop an oil and gas sector. Meanwhile, the KRI suffers collateral damage from Turkey's airstrikes and ground offensives targeting PKK, and from an IRGC presence and incursions along the border with Iran.

In September 2018, the results of an UN Population Fund-assisted survey of [KRI demographics](#) was released, the first since the 1987 census. Excluding the disputed territories, the KRI has 5.1 million people, with a median age of 21. Women of working age comprise 15 percent of the workforce with most being employed in the public sector, while 20 percent of people between 18 and 34 years of age were unemployed. The survey did not cover ethnicity or religion, and did not include the 1.076 million Iraqi IDPs and 276,121 Syrian refugees hosted in the KRI.

Between 2014 and 2018, more than 1,800 Peshmerga died and at least 10,000 were injured defending the KRI and disputed territories from [ISIS](#). The KRI remains the most secure territory in Iraq, with only two ISIS attacks between 2014 and 2018.

IDPs and Refugees in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

The KRG [official website](#) claims 30 percent of all Iraqi IDPs and 98 percent of Syrian refugees in Iraq reside in the KRI, and only 50 percent of 250,000 IDPs from Mosul living in the KRI have returned to Mosul. According to a [UN survey](#), 80 percent of IDPs living outside camps in Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaimani want to remain living in the KRI and not return home because of ongoing dangers such as ISIS attacks, the presence of Shia militias, tribal issues, and a lack of housing, other infrastructure and services. But the presence of more than one million mainly Sunni Arab IDPs has social, political and economic implications for the KRI. Integration is difficult as most IDPs are Arabic speakers and are reluctant to learn Kurdish, while their dress code and culture of gender segregation differs from Kurdish culture. Sunni Arabs can also have different political affiliations. With the GoI reducing the KRG's share of the federal budget without taking into account the increase in the population, the KRG relies on its own and international NGOs to provide for IDPs, with NGOs focusing mainly on those living in camps. For instance, [Israel](#) has set up a trauma unit in Dohuk and a childcare unit in Sinjar. [German Wings of Help](#) collects humanitarian aid in Europe and uses the Barzani Charity Foundation to deliver the aid. There are also



a number of US Church groups operating in the KRI. Aid going mainly to IDPs inside camps has unintended consequences. IDPs in the community rely on themselves and their hosts, and both feel their needs are neglected.

Oil and Gas

Early in 2018, the Federal [Supreme Court](#) was tasked to make a decision on whether the KRG has a constitutional right to explore, produce and export oil and gas independently of Baghdad, this right challenged by the former Minister of Oil, Jabar al-Luaibi, who demanded the KRG hand over all oil and gas matters to the GoI Ministry of Oil. The case was delayed until after the elections in May. In early June, the court delayed making a decision, requesting the KRG provide more information and detailed arguments for an autonomous oil sector by [June 27](#). On that date the court delayed its ruling until [August 14](#), claiming there was a lack of GoI legislation on the regulation of trade and revenues. On August 14, the court asked for another delay, claiming it needed expert advice. In November, the court claimed the advice of three experts was inadequate, and requested a further delay.

Not waiting for the court to make a decision, the KRI continues to export 400,000 barrels per day (bpd) through the KRG-built [pipeline to Ceyhan in Turkey](#), which the Russian oil giant, Rosneft, recently upgraded from a capacity of 700,000 [bpd](#) to one million bpd. On May 25, the [KRG and Rosneft](#) signed another agreement that built on a pre-referendum agreement, regarding exploration, production, transportation and trade in oil, and the preliminary engineering and design for the construction and operation of a gas pipeline to Turkey to supply the Turkish and European market. Since 2012, Russian oil giants Lukoil and Gazprom Nef have also been operating in the KRI. Russia claims these agreements are purely economic, but they position Russia to [politically](#) influence the KRG, GoI, [Turkey](#) and Europe. In contrast, US multinationals, ExxonMobil and Chevron, decreased or ceased operations in 2015 due to ISIS threats, but in December, the US is making overtures to increase [investment in the oil and gas sector](#), and resolve disputes regarding this sector.

Elections for the Kurdistan Parliament

Soon after the national elections, KRI Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani announced that the KRI would hold parliamentary and presidential elections on September 30. On July 11, the [Kurdistan Parliament](#) voted to suspend the position of president, and within two years of the next parliament, to reconsider whether Kurdistan should have a president, and if so, whether the president should be elected by the parliament or the people. To identify eligible voters and clean voter lists of duplicates and dead people – a major demand of all minor parties – the KRG used food rationing lists from December 31, 2017. Following the electronic voting debacle in the national election, it was decided to manually count ballot papers.



Running in the [election](#) were 773 candidates from 29 political parties competing for 111 seats, [11](#) of which are reserved for Turkmen (5 seats), Assyrians (5 seats) and an Armenian. Between [20](#) and [50](#) local and international organizations employed 623 monitors, 32 foreign observers, and 61 mobile teams to observe the election. On the day of the election, KRI parties were present at each polling station. Voting was mostly peaceful, but in Sulaimani and Koya some pollsters left their posts after they were threatened or pressured by police or party officials to accept double voting, forged identity cards, or ballot box stuffing. In a rare joint statement, KDP, Goran, the KIG, and the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) alleged PUK officials had destabilized voting in [Koya](#) by allowing PUK Peshmerga to unlawfully enter some polling [stations](#).

Peshmerga voted on 28 September, with a [90 percent turnout](#). Civilian voter turnout was 61 percent in Dohuk and Halabja, 58 percent in Erbil, and 53 percent in Sulaimani. Results were not published until October 20 because 1,045 complaints impacted 228 ballot boxes, with minor parties claiming that KDP and PUK had been involved in vote rigging and [coercion](#). Because of the widespread nature of the complaints, minor parties discussed boycotting the next parliament. After the Kurdistan Independent High Electoral Commission investigated the complaints, five out of nine commissioners approved the [results](#). The other four claimed the shortcomings were too numerous for the results to be [final](#). With the Coalition for Democracy and Justice having boycotted the [election](#), the [official results](#) were:

Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP):	45	
Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK):	21	
Change Movement (Goran):	12	(down from 24 seats)
New Generation:	8	
Kurdistan Islamic League (Komal):	7	
Towards Reform Coalition, including Kurdistan Islamic Union (Yakgrtu):	5	
Socialist Party:	1	
Communist Party (in Azadi List):	1	

11 minority quota seats

Turkmen (5):

Turkmen Development Party:	2
Nation List:	1
Turkmen Reform party:	1
Turkmen Front:	1

Christian (5):

Rafidain List:	1
Assyrian Syriac Chaldean Popular Council:	1
National Union Coalition:	3

Armenian (1):

Independent:	1
--------------	---



That the KDP was a clear winner indicates many people supported the referendum on independence, despite the consequences, but Goran, New Generation and the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) rejected the [results](#) claiming they were rigged, and New Generation, Towards Reform (including the KIU), and the [Communist Party](#) announced they would form an Opposition in the parliament.

Negotiations to form a government and select ministers are ongoing. PM Nechirvan Barzani wants to reduce the number of ministers from 22 to eleven, and in early December, [KDP](#) announced its wish to reinstate the presidency and for the president to be elected by parliament, both agendas being controversial. The party unilaterally put forward former President Masoud Barzani's 'strongman' son, Masrour Barzani, as prime minister, and Masoud Barzani's more diplomatic nephew, Nechirvan Barzani, as president. PUK and Goran expressed support for these nominations on the understanding they would be given important posts. New Generation objected to the perpetuation of the [status quo](#).

Observers warn of the dangers if KDP [monopolises power](#). Striking a balance in the next KRI government will impact whether federal KRI MPs can form a united front, and the capacity and credibility of the KRG to address regional priorities including finalising a constitution that supports minority rights, reforming public institutions, establishing an impartial legal system and unifying the Peshmerga. Currently there are 14 unified brigades in the Ministry of Peshmerga, with these brigades roughly comprising a third of all troops, with the KDP Peshmerga and PUK [Peshmerga](#) each comprising a third, although numbers vary widely. A 15th joint brigade was announced in November. Since 2017, US, UK and [German](#) military advisors have been working on unification but face resistance from commanders who are not formally trained and from troops who will be reduced in number.

One social issue that the KRG is attempting to address far more than the GoI is [violence against women](#). The Kurdistan Parliament has a [30 percent quota](#) for female parliamentarians, has passed laws related to violence against women, and there is a KRI General-Directorate for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, yet there is much to do. The General-Directorate announced that in the first nine months of 2018, 37 women had been murdered, 54 women had committed suicide and 90 had self-immolated, with another 113 women having been burnt deliberately or by accident. There are [no national statistics](#) to afford a comparison, but the GoI has [yet to pass](#) the 'Law to Protect Families from Domestic Violence', and those running women's shelters are [defamed](#).



KRG Relations with Turkey and Iran

Despite Turkey President Recep Tayyip Erdogan cutting all relations with President Masoud Barzani and Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani after the KRG conducted a referendum on independence in September 2017, and trade falling between Turkey and the [KRI](#) since then, KRI trade with Turkey exceeds KRI trade with Iran, [1,800 Turkish companies](#) continue to operate in the KRI, oil from the KRI continues to be exported to the Turkish port of Ceyhan, and the Ibrahim Khalil border crossing was only intermittently closed. Nevertheless, Turkey was determined to punish the KRI for daring to contemplate independence, and in late 2017 entered negotiations with the Gol in view of opening a new border crossing, oil pipeline and road, 12 kilometres west of the Ibrahim Khalil border crossing. [On-going](#) negotiations exclude the KRG, despite the proposed route going through the KRI (and Kurdish-majority areas in northern Syria). In September 2018, the Turkish government extended its flight ban to Sulaimani for three months because of PUK's relations with the PKK. To appease Turkey, [PKK-linked offices in Sulaimani](#) were shut down and restrictions were placed on PKK activities in [November](#), after US sanctions on Iran came into effect, thus impacting trade with Iran. Also in November, Turkey announced a preliminary agreement with the KRG to open a new border crossing between Hakkari and Erbil to relieve pressure on Ibrahim Khalil and for Turkey to increase its trade with the [Gulf States](#). A road has already been constructed. Many Iraqi Kurds fear it may be used by the [Turkish military](#).

An ongoing and escalating tension stems from Turkey's daily airstrikes and intensified ground offensives targeting PKK inside the KRI. Turkey's military have built at least [nine military bases](#) in the KRI, and are taking over villages. Its offensives generate daily tallies of the number of PKK militants 'eliminated', but between January and November 2018 these offensives also killed at least [12 KRI civilians](#), as well as Peshmerga and other armed forces, forced the closure of ten schools, the evacuation of 360 villages, caused [panic](#) in other villages, and [burnt](#) crops and livestock, all of which is denied by Turkey. Turkey's offensives have now reached the [Barzan region](#), where 18 out of 72 villages have been abandoned and Turkish soldiers have taken up positions in three of the abandoned villages. In November, the pro-Erdogan news outlet, [Yeni Safak](#), claimed that Turkish forces continue to operate up to 40 kilometres inside the KRI, and have destroyed 48 'terror' camps, and severed links between the PKK's Qandil base and the Yüksekova-Şemdinli-Çukurca line in Turkey. Any of this may or may not be true.

Turkey also threatens the disputed Yezidi territory of Sinjar (Shingal) in Nineveh. On August 15, a [Turkish drone and F-16](#) targeted a convoy in Sinjar, and killed Ismail Ozden, also known as Zeki Shingali, a member of PKK's executive committee credited with leading the rescue effort to save Yezidis trapped by ISIS on Sinjar Mountain in August 2014. Another [four Yezidi Protection Unit fighters](#) were killed in the strikes.¹¹

¹¹ In retaliation for the Turkish army having killed Ozen in Sinjar and Atakan Mahir in Dersim the PKK attacked [six military bases](#) in Turkey on November 9 and 10. One attack was an explosion at an army



A few days later, the GoI Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied having co-ordinated with Turkey, and called for Turkish forces to withdraw from Iraq.

Also on August 15, Turkey, Iraq and Iran allegedly agreed to coordinate border controls to fight illegal drug trafficking and 'terrorists'. On September 16, a meeting between Abadi and the Ministerial Council for National Security generated several orders including the deployment of Iraqi forces to the Iraq-Turkey border to prevent [breaches](#) and for the Foreign Ministry to document Turkey's violations of Iraqi airspace in order to make a submission to the [UN](#). After years of Turkey's intrusions, observers conjectured that the timing was due to Abadi wanting to demonstrate his alliance with the US, his dissatisfaction with Turkey's military presence, his wish to have better relations with Iran, and his need to gain the support of Iraqi Kurds to remain prime minister.

Iran has about 250 companies operating in the [KRI](#). After Turkey threatened to close down KRI oil exports to Ceyhan following the referendum on independence, and after Iran closed its [three official border crossings](#) with the KRI on 15 October 2017, the KRG made conciliatory moves towards Iran to increase trade, including the possibility of exporting oil and gas through Iran. Between March and November 2018, Iranian exports to the KRI increased 110 percent compared to the same period in [2017](#). On November 5, when US oil sanctions on Iran came into effect, the KRG stopped exporting oil to Iran, but other trade [continues](#). An ongoing tension between the KRG and Iran is the IRGC's military presence in the KRI, and IRGC cross border incursions that have caused civilian deaths and villages to be evacuated. Tensions reached a height with the IRGC's missile attack on Koya that killed 17 Iranian Kurdish political leaders and civilians on [September 8](#).

KRG Relations with the Kurdistan of Syria

Better relations between the KRG and the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria would benefit both regions but are hampered by the KRG wanting to maintain good relations with Turkey and the political rivalry between KDP and PKK, and by extension, the Democratic Union Party (Syria) or PYD in Syria, which Turkey accuses of being PKK's Syrian branch. These factors are highlighted by PYD's suspicions that members of KDP-Syria act in the interest of Turkey leading to their arrest and imprisonment in Syria. Consequently, three agreements signed by the KRG and PYD in 2012, 2013 and [2014](#) have not been ratified. In 2018, there have been meetings to repair [relations](#), and on December 3, some days after Iraqi security forces closed the land border crossing between northern Syria and the disputed territory of [Sinjar](#), a [bus line](#) between the KRI and northern Syria opened, with buses crossing via the

ammunitions depot in Hakkari's Şemdinli district, which Turkish authorities described as resulting from defective ammunition. The PKK claimed this explosion [killed 17 Turkish soldiers](#) and wounded another 37, and that the other attacks also resulted in a massive number of casualties, which the Turkish state does not want publicised.



temporary bridge over the Pishkhabour River. Before this, civilians had to cross by boat. The bridge is used to supply the SDF and humanitarian aid for IDPs in Syria.

KRG Relations with the new Gol

The new Gol has indicated a more conciliatory approach to the KRG compared to Abadi and his government. In November, an agreement was reached to resume oil exports from Kirkuk to Turkey via the KRG pipeline, and the Gol announced it would dismantle customs checkpoints illegally erected in 2018 between the KRI and Kirkuk, Mosul and Baghdad. In December, the Gol agreed to increase the KRG's budget share from 12.67 percent to [14 percent](#), although the KRG is demanding 17 percent and the Gol shows no commitment to resolving other disputes, except in rhetoric.

After October 2017, the Gol stopped all oil exports from Kirkuk through the KRG pipeline to Turkey and instead made an agreement with Iran to truck 30,000 bpd from Kirkuk to Iran. Supply was regularly interrupted because of security and logistical problems, although IRGC-backed *Hashd* managed to smuggle oil from Kirkuk into Iran on a [daily basis](#). The trucking of oil was a temporary measure until a 400-kilometre pipeline was built from Kirkuk to Tang Fani pumping station in Darreh Shahr in [southwest](#) Iran, its construction overseen by the [IRGC, which is responsible for Iran's investments in Iraq](#). The pipeline has not progressed, and on November 5, the introduction of [US sanctions caused](#) the Gol to cease Kirkuk oil exports to Iran.

Leading up to the reintroduction of these sanctions, the US put pressure on the Gol to negotiate with the KRG so Kirkuk oil could be exported to Turkey via the KRG pipeline, which Rosneft had [upgraded](#). The Gol and KRG came to an agreement and on November 16, oil exports of between 50,000 and 100,000 bpd to Turkey [resumed](#) under Federal Authority, that is, the State Organisation for Marketing Oil (SOMO). This development may give the KRG some bargaining power regarding re-negotiating the Gol's cut to its share of the federal budget.

The building of customs checkpoints and the charging of customs duties on highways leading from the KRI to Kirkuk, Mosul and Baghdad was unconstitutional, given they treated the KRI as a separate country. They impacted trade between Iraq and the KRI, and between [Turkey](#) and Iraq, and caused an increase in prices for goods in places like Kirkuk and Mosul, as imported goods were taxed twice or thrice, once at the border and again at the new [customs points](#).

The history behind these customs points begins in October 2017. The Pirde Bridge and other sections of the Erbil-Kirkuk highway were damaged when Peshmerga militarily prevented Iraqi forces from advancing on [Erbil](#). The highway was closed for 12 months. All traffic was forced onto side roads controlled by *Hashd* checkpoints. In July 2018, the KRG and Gol agreed to repair the highway, but the Gol insisted that a customs checkpoint be installed north of Kirkuk with all monies going into [federal revenue](#). The KRG objected and in August, the KRG and Gol agreed on a ['joint'](#)



[checkpoint at Altun Kopri](#) at which KRG *Asayish* (police) would check traffic going north from Kirkuk, and Iraqi police would check traffic going south from Erbil. In September, the GoI-appointed governor of Kirkuk ordered another customs checkpoint on the Sulaimani – Kirkuk highway with all revenues to be split between Kirkuk and [Baghdad](#). In early October, Abadi signed a decree formalising the customs checkpoints between Kirkuk and Erbil, and ordered two more customs checkpoints, one between Sulaimani and Baghdad, and another between Dohuk and Mosul. Following external pressure and the advocacy of Kurdish parliamentarians, on November 19, the GoI and KRG signed an agreement to remove all [internal customs points](#). The next day the Iraq Parliament approved their [removal](#).

The Disputed Territories

Because Abadi and his government were unwilling to negotiate the status of the disputed territories, or specific matters related to land, oil, security and governance within these territories, in early June 2018, the KRG wrote a formal letter to the [UN Security Council](#), requesting that the UN, and in particular, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq, play a greater role in implementing Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution to resolve the disputed status of Kirkuk province and other territories.

The resolution of their status has become more critical since October 2017, because of increased militarisation, insecurity and Arabisation, particularly in Kirkuk, [Diyala](#) and Tuz Khurmatu in Salahuddin. After ISIS was defeated, the GoI [disbanded local Sunni Arab tribal militias](#) that helped fight ISIS and militarily forced Peshmerga to withdraw from the disputed territories, which Peshmerga had defended since 2014. Since October 2017, security has been the responsibility of various local and non-local *Hashd* militias, the Iraq Army and police. Under their watch there has been an ISIS resurgence. [ISIS attacks having doubled](#) in Kirkuk province between 2017 and 2018.

Multiple factors contribute to the ISIS resurgence: former [Peshmerga](#) front lines are now deserted, allegedly due to a lack of manpower, and despite Iraq's Counter-Terrorism Units (CTU) running security, these being reinforced in Kirkuk by two combat brigades from the Iraqi Federal Police, *Hashd* militias and other security forces have no unified command structure, *Hashd*'s sectarianism has alienated the local population, and non-local *Hashd* and other forces do not have local intelligence networks. Meanwhile, 'every' Sunni Arab has ISIS-affiliated relatives. ISIS has penetrated every aspect of Sunni Arab society, and can recruit the unemployed. For instance, according to a reliable source who works with the GoI-appointed Sunni Arab governor of Kirkuk, the governor employs ISIS-affiliated relatives as his personal security guards.

ISIS is targeting everyone: [Hashd al-Shaabi](#), other security forces [and civilians](#). There are daily reports of ISIS blocking [highways](#) to [kidnap](#) and assassinate people, and steal commercial goods, and ISIS using IEDs and vehicle born explosives to kill people



or destroy infrastructure such as power lines, oil infrastructure and holy [sites](#). For instance, on June 19, ISIS captured 30 members of the Shamma tribe near Tuz Khurmatu, and on [June 23](#) gave an ultimatum to the GoI to release from prison all women with links to ISIS within three days, or six captives would be executed. Security forces found their bodies and the bodies of two other people on [June 27](#). In response, [Abadi](#) ordered 12 ISIS prisoners to be executed immediately. Electricity transmission lines in Kirkuk were sabotaged [18 times in July and August](#), three times in [September](#), and in the first week of [November](#) and on [December 1](#). These [attacks](#) cause power shortages and complete black outs for days at a [time](#) in Kirkuk, Nineveh, Diyala and Salahuddin.

[Villages](#) are easy targets. ISIS kills people – averaging [8.4 mukhtars \(village heads\) a month](#) between January and November, or forces villagers to evacuate, before taking control of the [village](#). By July, ISIS had taken control of at least [75 villages](#) in Kirkuk, Diyala and Salahuddin, and were launching attacks in the [centre](#) of [Kirkuk city](#). For instance, [four roadside bombs and mortar attacks](#) in Turkmen neighbourhoods on July 18 killed at least one person and injured more than thirty.

Sunni Arab villagers in Hawija and elsewhere are not spared and repeatedly claim that *Hashd* are not providing adequate [security](#). Security is not helped by the conduct of *Hashd*. *Hashd* smuggle oil and other goods, close roads, set up checkpoints and illegally ‘tax’ vehicles and goods, allow [Arabs to confiscate homes and land from Kurds and Turkmen in Kirkuk](#), and loot property and kidnap Kurds for ransom in [Diyala](#). *Hashd* militias clash with each other, Iraqi security forces or civilians over who should run checkpoints. Thus, on August 1, clashes erupted between *Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq* and Khazraj tribal fighters in Dujail in Salahuddin over Khazraj civilians setting up a checkpoint after *Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq* kidnapped and killed three Khazraj tribal leaders. Following the clash, protesters and [Salahuddin Provincial Council](#) demanded *Hashd* leave the province. They have not done so. In an incident in Diyala, disputes between the Iraqi army and *Hashd* over the control of checkpoints (and revenue) led to *Hashd* [militants kidnapping five soldiers](#). In retaliation, soldiers kidnapped ten *Hashd* militants. Despite the lawlessness, *Hashd* leaders are seeking an expanded role as national guards to stabilise the disputed territories.

To address the lack of security, the US, Kurds, Sunni Arabs and some [Turkmen leaders](#) call for Peshmerga to return to the [disputed territories](#) and for them to undertake [joint operations](#) with Iraqi security forces. When Abadi was prime minister he was adamant that the disputed territories would remain under sole Federal Authority. Instead, Abadi announced a renewed offensive on ISIS, calling it the ‘[Revenge of the Martyrs](#)’. The operation involved clearing dozens of villages northeast of Kirkuk, an increase in Peshmerga – US-led coalition operations in Makhmour and Tuz Khurmatu and isolated examples of co-ordination. For instance, on [July 4](#), Iraqi forces and Peshmerga, backed by Iraqi airpower, launched a joint operation on ISIS between Kirkuk and Diyala, and on [July 16](#), another joint operation was launched near [Makhmour](#). Despite regular reports of [ISIS fighters](#) being killed or



arrested, ISIS attacks continue, yet [Sadr](#) and most *Hashd* commanders and *Fatah* parliamentarians are against a Peshmerga return unless they come under Federal Authority. This was not the case prior to 2017. The KRG and Peshmerga will only agree to a return if Peshmerga have an equal partnership in co-ordinating operations. Abdul-Mahdi has yet to clarify his position, but is unlikely to override *Sairoon* and *Fatah*. A Peshmerga return to the disputed territories will only be possible if external pressure increases, *Hashd* militias are disbanded, and/or the need escalates.

Kirkuk

Oil rich [Kirkuk](#) continues to suffer from decades of neglect, and since October 2017, an ISIS resurgence, [military rule](#) including the imposition of [martial law](#), and Arabisation overseen by the Gol-appointed Sunni Arab Governor, Rakan Saed al-Jabouri,¹² who had the support of Abadi's Council of [Ministers](#), and is supported by Iraqi Armed Forces and police, *Hashd al-Shaabi* and some members of Kirkuk Provincial Council.

Between 2005 and 2018, except for a few projects related to irrigation agriculture, the Gol has not completed one major project in Kirkuk province, such as a promised oil refinery, dams for potable water, and water and sewage treatment plants. The Gol paid Kirkuk Provincial Council petro-dollars between 2011 and 2013, but between 2014 and 2017 provided no revenue for the council. The council relied on petro dollars given by the KRG. Nor is Kirkuk likely to benefit from the recent resumption of oil exports to Turkey, as this would require the payment of petro-dollars and for the oil industry to stop polluting the air and land, and to find alternatives to consuming vast quantity of surface water,¹³ for which it makes no payment or restitution, despite its water consumption increasing the aridity of Kirkuk. This combination of factors means the people of Kirkuk, like the people of oil-rich [Basra](#), can go for days without water and only have intermittent electricity. After the Kermanshah earthquake damaged a gas pipeline to Iraq in November, (and injured [700 people](#) in Iran) people in Kirkuk, Baghdad and Diyala had even less [electricity](#).

Since the [military takeover of Kirkuk in 16 October 2017](#), the sectarian policies of the Gol-appointed governor mean that:

¹² In May, [Jabouri](#) was elected to the Iraq Parliament, but Kirkuk Provincial Council has not met to elect a new governor because KDP council members were forced to flee Kirkuk and have not returned because their houses were confiscated, some Arab council members insist that provincial elections must be held before a new governor is chosen, and some Turkmen insist on a new method for allocating roles.

¹³ In researching water resource management in Kirkuk in 2016, North Oil Company engineers told me that at least two barrels of water were required for every barrel of oil extracted, in order to extract oil and refill the reservoir to maintain pressure. The river water was a potable water source.



- An estimated [148,000 IDPs remain displaced](#) from Kirkuk province and Tuz Khurmatu, with many who escaped the military onslaught either being unable to return because their houses and offices have been confiscated or because they have been threatened with violence, including [assassination](#);
- Between October 2017 and August 2018, more than [200 Kurds](#) were removed from their posts in the provincial and district councils, and in [security](#), hospitals and state-owned companies. They include [48 Kurds in](#) the Kirkuk Provincial Council and GoI directorates such as the Security Director, Health Director General, Agriculture Director General, the District and Suburban Police Director, and the elected [mayors](#) of Kirkuk city, Dibis, Daquq, and Tuz Khurmatu. In September, another [six Kurds were dismissed from Kirkuk City Council](#) and there were further dismissals in [October](#). Arabs and Turkmen replace them. Other [Kurds](#) have been [demoted](#). The current High-Security Committee does not include a single Kurd, in contrast to the previous committee's diverse ethno-religious composition.
- All official positions must be equally distributed between Kurds, Arabs and Turkmen, with Christians taking the remaining positions, when this does not reflect the ethnic composition of Kirkuk or the outcome of the May [elections](#).
- The Kurdish language cannot be used at official functions or when speaking to the [press](#), despite the language being an official language in the constitution. For example, in August, the [GoI Ministry of Oil prohibited the use of the Kurdish language](#) at the state-owned North Gas Company and threatened to punish those in violation of 1968 Law No. 64 related to the Protection of the Arabic Language.
- Since October 2017, 14 KDP offices and the offices of 29 other Kurdish organizations have been turned into military bases or garages, and in October 2018, the acting governor gave Kurdish workers' syndicates and other organisations a month to vacate their offices in Kirkuk city to make way for unspecified Iraqi [organisations](#).
- Agricultural land and 500 villages owned by Kurds and Turkmen have been, or are under threat of being [confiscated](#) and given to Arab families by governor decrees, governor-supported actions of the North Oil Company and Arab families making a claim based on Saddam Hussein's orders, as opposed to deeds of landownership. In early July, [North Oil Company](#), backed by the [governor](#), ordered the evacuation of 600 families in three Kurdish villages because of their proximity to oil fields. After another governor's decree allowed Arab families to settle on 250,000 acres of land owned by Kurds and Turkmen, a Kurdish and Turkmen delegation went to Baghdad to plead with the Ministry of Agriculture to stop the Arabisation of their farmland. On August 23, the [Ministry of Agriculture](#) put the Kirkuk governor's decree on hold, pending an inquiry, but in September and October the governor decreed that another 38 villages be handed over to [Arabs](#). In November, another governor decree allocated [1,600 parcels of land to Sunni militias](#) from Nineveh, Anbar, Salahuddin and Kirkuk (i.e. rewarding the invaders), and that other land in Daquq be given to [50 Arab families](#). These families were escorted by Iraqi Federal Police to claim the land. Some Arab families



are new arrivals to the [province](#), but many were brought to Kirkuk during the Baathist era of Arabisation. When these lands were returned to the original Kurdish or Turkmen owners after 2005, many Arab families were compensated 20 million Iraqi dinar each in accordance with Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution. They often remained on the land as share farmers. In other incidences, Arabs take it upon themselves to claim houses and land. At the end of October Arabs tried to reclaim Kurdish land in Daquq. They were driven away by people wielding sticks and [stones](#). In the village of Qutan, only [two of 40 Kurdish families remain](#). Arab families forced the others out. Of the two families who remain, one family's home was torched and the other family was threatened with violence. They were told they were allowed to stay until ownership was established, as long as they do not cultivate.

- Kurdish farmers are not being given government [subsidised seed and fertilisers](#).
- Kurdish farmers are being made to sign non-cultivation clauses and in the summer of 2018, their electricity was cut so they could not irrigate;
- The names of Kurdish villages have been [changed](#) to Arabic names; and
- The Directorate of National Education changed the Turkish names of four Turkmen schools to Arabic names. Turkmen are appealing the [decision](#).

Iraqi Security Forces and *Hashd* militias are responsible for numerous sectarian actions. These include:

- Accompanying Arab families to claim land owned by [Kurds and Turkmen](#), or ordering Kurds and Turkmen to leave their villages and allowing Sunni Arabs to [stay](#), others [leaving](#) of their own accord and going to Kirkuk city, Erbil or [Sulaimani](#) to avoid *Hashd* violence.
- [Hashd al-Shaabi](#) using threats and coercion to place their members in administrative positions. (In Diyala, Badr now controls the provincial council.)
- Iraq's Counter-Terrorism Units (CTU) harassing Kurds at checkpoints and raiding their homes;
- Arbitrary killings and arrests. For example, on September 10, four [decapitated](#) bodies of Kurds from Khanaqin, including [three Peshmerga](#), were found in a gorge in the province of Hawija. On the same day, *Hashd* in the district of Daquq arrested ten Peshmerga (five KDP and five PUK) and four Sunni Arabs, and proceeded to torture them over several [days](#).
- [Arresting](#) at least 16 Kurdish journalists between October 2017 and August 2018, and on October 15, [arresting](#) activists for calling a one hour strike to protest the militarisation of Kirkuk and the discriminatory practices of the militaries on the anniversary of the military takeover the next day;
- *Hashd* illegally taxing people at checkpoints and taking public [land](#);
- Ordering Kurds in Kirkuk city to leave their [homes](#); and
- [Suspicious that arson](#) was the cause of a fire that gutted 400 shops in Qaysari Bazaar in the centre of Kirkuk city (168 shops owned by Kurds and the rest owned by Turkmen and Arabs) on November 29.



The GoI was to allow Kirkukis to vote in the next provincial elections for the first time since 2005 on condition that Kirkuk Provincial Council did not call a referendum on whether Kirkuk should join the KRI, or come under Federal Authority. A third alternative, that Kirkuk become its own autonomous region, was not considered in the constitution. Provincial elections were scheduled for December but have been indefinitely delayed, with talk of provincial councils being dismantled altogether.

Sinjar (Shingal)

The UN, EU, US, Australia, UK, Canada, France, Scotland, Iraq and Armenia have formally recognised the massacre, kidnapping and sexual enslavement of Yazidis by ISIS in August 2014 in the disputed district of Sinjar, called Shingal by Kurds, located in Nineveh province, as a [genocide](#). With this recognition comes the responsibility to prosecute the perpetrators and protect victims, yet more than [300,000 Yazidi](#) remain displaced, and reside in the KRI, and more than 3,000 Yazidi continue to live in tents on Shingal [mountain](#). Factors contributing to their on-going displacement include the militarisation of the district, fear of ISIS, [Turkish incursions](#) and a lack of reconstruction. Contributing to the insecurity is the presence of multiple militaries with different agendas. They include PKK¹⁴ and PKK-trained [Shingal Protection Units](#) (YBS) since 2014, Peshmerga until October 2017, and thereafter, Iran-backed *Hashd al-Shaabi*, as well as Iraqi security forces since March [2018](#), and from June [2018](#), [US forces](#).

After arriving in October 2017, *Hashd* militias recruited local Yazidis, took control of strategic roads, and appointed a new district director and new heads of all district directorates. Many Yazidi [resent](#) their presence and some Yazidis have left the district since they [came](#).

The US movement into Shingal is part of Operation Roundup, which involves securing the Syria-Iraq border in co-ordination with the SDF and US, French and Italian forces stationed in southern Hasakah on the Syrian side of the border. In June, the US established a temporary base on the highly strategic [Shingal Mountain](#), from where Saddam Hussein launched 39 missiles into Israel during Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 – 1991, following credible reports that the IRGC is supplying *Hashd* with sophisticated [missiles](#). In the second half of November 2018, the unreliable Turkish media outlet, [Yeni Şafak](#), claimed that PKK commanders were in Shingal, and that the US was supplying [PKK](#) with mine detectors, light arms and medical aid. If there is a speck of truth in these claims, it makes the US State Department's announcement of a \$3 to \$5 million bounty for information on three [PKK commanders](#) an anomaly.

¹⁴ At the end of March 2018, PKK announced they were withdrawing from the district to pre-empt a threatened offensive by Turkey, but since then Turkey has launched intense air and ground attacks on PKK in the Qandil – Amedi area, and there are reports that PKK have returned to Shingal.



In August 2018, Abadi ordered the return of 55 Sunni Arab families to Shingal, with Iraqi security forces escorting them back to their villages. The Yezidi resented this as they consider these people were complicit with ISIS in August 2014. In late October 2018, the KRG, GoI and Nineveh Provincial Council negotiated the return of the original KDP-backed Shingal [administration](#) and there is hope that the road to Dohuk will be re-opened, after disputes between the KRG and GoI caused its closure. This will enable [reconstruction](#).

The Yezidi were disappointed that only one Yezidi MP made it into the new Iraq Parliament, and would like a ministerial post in the Kurdistan Parliament. Good news came in November, when the EU agreed to contribute one million euros to Nadia Murad's Sinjar Action Fund, and the Yezidi NGO, [Yazda](#), partnered with USAID, IOM, and Heartland Alliance to provide legal, mental health, psychological and livelihoods support, basic medical services and agriculture development. Australia is also providing AUD\$20 million in aid over the next three years. Yezidi leaders consider [security and jobs](#) are vital to encourage Yezidis, especially youth, to return to the district and Yezidi leaders have asked for US-led coalition protection for the coalition to train a cohesive Yezidi security force.

Mosul

Eighteen months after Mosul city was liberated the city remains largely in [ruins](#), banks have yet to [open](#), there is a youth unemployment rate of 80 percent, and [380,000 people](#) who escaped during ISIS rule have yet to return. Mass graves continue to be uncovered and ISIS continues to kill civilians and security forces. For instance, in a three-day period in June, [ISIS attacks](#) killed and injured at least 40 civilians and security force personnel on roads outside Mosul city. On October 22, a car bomb in Qayyara (south of Mosul) killed six people and wounded [thirty](#). Four days later, ISIS executed five civilians accused of gathering intelligence and passing it on to the [Iraq Army](#). In early November, a car bomb near a restaurant [killed at least five people and wounded 14](#). In late November, a roadside bomb [killed four teenage children and wounded another seven who were travelling](#) in a bus on their way to school.

The GoI has little control over the *Hashd al-Shaabi* in Nineveh. *Hashd* smuggle oil and make arbitrary [arrests](#). In mid August, Abadi ordered all *Hashd* to leave Nineveh, announcing that the Iraq Army's Joint Operations Command would replace them, but *Hashd* refused to [leave](#). Locals complain that all the security forces are corrupt, the governor is weak, and the GoI is not taking the ISIS resurgence [seriously](#). If more IDPs return, there is a critical need for [reconciliation](#) between ISIS sympathisers and those who opposed ISIS, and the reintegration of IDPs. Organised sports and cultural programs help, but employment is paramount. UNESCO is working on saving Mosul's cultural heritage, France has earmarked [20 million euros](#) for the city and others will also contribute. An internationally agreed on framework that prioritises peoples' needs and identifies appropriately scaled projects would help.



Appendix A:

Decision and funding pathways for water projects for Schwan and Quarahanjiir districts in the disputed province of Kirkuk

