

Iraq elections held as Washington's puppet state nears collapse

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Iraq's elections for its 329-seat parliament that will choose the president and prime minister—typically after months of horse trading between the multiple political blocs—are set for October 10. Voter turnout is expected to be lower than the 44 percent of the 25 million eligible voters that cast their ballot in the 2018 elections as calls to boycott the elections grow.

The elections take place amid increasing hostility towards the political setup established after the 2003 US-led invasion and overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime, simmering protests over endemic corruption, the terrible social and economic conditions and water and power outages. These conditions are exacerbated by low oil prices, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the fallout from the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, Washington's man in Baghdad who lacks both popular support and a political base, is seeking a second term as prime minister in Saturday's elections that have been brought forward to appease protesters.

The former intelligence officer became prime minister in May 2020. He did so after months-long mass protests, starting in October 2019 against inequality, poverty, corruption, the sectarian-ethnic political system and its rival external backers Washington and Tehran, that swept across Baghdad and Iraq's southern region, brought down the government of Adil Abdul-Mahdi.

The government sought to put down the protests, the largest since 2003 and known as the Tishreen (October) movement, with lethal force. It deployed the security forces and paramilitary groups to shoot down more than 600 protestors, further inflaming tensions until the pandemic and the accompanying restrictions emptied the streets.

The repression has continued under al-Kadhimi, with militias affiliated to the various political parties assassinating 34 political activists, local leaders and outspoken journalists and critics, including Hisham al-Hashimi, a critic of Iraq's militias.

Key demands of the youthful and largely leaderless protest

movement included early elections based on new legislation that would overturn Iraq's sectarian political system and an investigation into the killings by the security forces. Neither these nor any social demands have been met.

Al-Kadhimi's economic measures have devastated workers' incomes. The Central Bank devalued the country's currency that is pegged to the dollar by 23 percent as a means of raising government income, since oil prices are denominated in dollars and oil revenues provide almost all government income. His government has sought to halve the public sector wage bill by cutting salaries and slashing benefits, in a bid to secure loans from the International Monetary Fund.

The economy contracted by a massive 11 percent last year, equivalent to a 15 percent GDP per capita reduction, far higher than its regional counterparts. Some 31 percent of Iraq's 39 million population are now poor, according to a report by the World Food Programme (WFP). More than 1.4 million families receive social security assistance, while a further million have applied for social security. Unemployment is around 40 percent, up more than 10 percentage points on pre-pandemic levels. Young people are particularly badly affected as every year more than 180,000 graduates enter the job market with little hope of anything other than casual or day work.

Iraq, once a middle-income country, is a social tinder box. There have been sporadic demonstrations in the last six months, most recently on October 1, denouncing the political assassinations, demanding an overhaul of the entire political system, and calling for an election boycott. Graduates have rallied in front of government buildings, demanding jobs.

The established Iraqi parties have refused to introduce any changes that would encroach on their privileges, patronage and wealth. In November 2020, parliament enacted legislation that increased the number of constituencies from 18 to 83, giving better regional representation; eliminated the list-based voting system and replaced it with a Single, Non-Transferable Vote, thereby enabling voters to choose an

affiliated or an independent candidate; and reserved one quarter of the seats for women. It thus maintains the power of the existing, sectarian, and ethnic-based parties and the kleptocrats.

Iraq, with its strong trading and commercial links with Iran, has become a key political battleground in US imperialism's confrontation with Tehran. Washington, under both the Trump and Biden administrations, has insisted that Baghdad rein in the Iran-backed Shi'ite militias that have repeatedly fired rockets into the Green Zone, the heavily fortified area that houses the US Embassy, military forces and contractors.

Last month, the *New York Times* reported that the US would deploy around 2,000 troops to Iraq for a nine-month period despite the Biden administration's earlier announcements that it would end its combat mission by the end of the year with a task force remaining in a training and advisory capacity.

Although US combat troops withdrew from Iraq in 2011 after the Iraqi government refused to renew its agreement to station US troops in the country, a smaller force returned in 2014 as part of the coalition against the Islamic State (IS) group. It has remained there ever since despite the defeat of IS in 2017 and the call by Iraq's parliament for all US troops to leave the country after the Trump administration assassinated General Qassem Soleimani, the leader of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps's Quds Force. Soleimani, the second most powerful figure in Tehran, was killed—along with five Iraqi nationals including the deputy chairman of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces and commander of the Iran-backed Kata'ib Hezbollah militia, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, and four other Iranian nationals—at Baghdad airport in January 2020.

According to *The Gazette*, the force will provide security and protection, assist and advise Iraqi security forces, as well as air defence and training “partner” forces in the country. According to Pentagon spokesperson Commander Jessica L McNulty, US forces would support operations against IS, which the US claims still launches attacks.

Washington has been urging its regional allies, including Saudi Arabia, to renew their links with Iraq as a means of containing Iranian influence and bolstering al-Kadhimi's political legitimacy. Earlier this year, Egypt's military dictator Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and Jordan's King Abdullah met with Iraqi leaders in Baghdad, the first such meeting in years, to cement a “new Levant” that would also try to draw Syria back into the Arab camp. It follows the signing of 15 agreements with Baghdad for major reconstruction projects in sectors including oil, roads, housing, construction, and trade, as well as plans for an oil pipeline connecting Iraq's southern city of Basra with Egypt via Jordan's port of

Aqaba in the Red Sea. Egypt is seeking to trade its construction materials for Iraq's oil, as part of broader plans to become an energy and refinery hub in the eastern Mediterranean, following the discovery of significant offshore oil and gas reserves. In return, Iraq is expected to import natural gas from Egypt, reducing its reliance on Iranian gas for its electricity supplies.

The London-based *Amwaj.media* reported that Baghdad had hosted high level talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia aimed at ending the war in Yemen, which Saudi Arabia invaded in April 2015 to suppress a rebellion by the Iranian-backed Houthis and restoring diplomatic relations between Baghdad and Tehran. Riyadh closed its embassy in Tehran after protesters stormed the embassy over the execution of dissident Saudi Shiite cleric Nimr Al-Nimr in January 2016. An anonymous Iraqi source was reported as describing the talks as fruitful on both fronts, with Iranian and Saudi officials agreeing to curb their acrimonious media campaigns against each other and resume diplomatic relations.

At the end of last month, al-Kadhimi organized and hosted the Baghdad Conference on Partnership and Cooperation, attended by leaders from neighbouring countries and French President Emmanuel Macron, who conceived of the project. France has 800 troops in the country, second only in number to those of the US, and its energy giant TotalEnergies recently signed a \$27 billion contract to invest in oil, gas and solar production. Macron, who pledged that France would continue to deploy troops to counter terrorism even if the US withdrew its forces, views this as an opportunity to extend French influence in Iraq as part of a wider effort to expand its position in the Middle East, following his intervention in Lebanon after last year's port blast in Beirut.



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