
Iraq: 20 years after the US occupation?

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Summary : Twenty years ago, the United States declared war on Iraq. A war that would turn into a military quagmire and a resounding political failure. Adel Bakawan, director of the French Research Centre on Iraq, looks back at the events that led to the American invasion and its consequences for the Iraqi political system. Since then, the country has been struggling to maintain its territorial, societal and state unity, as demonstrated by the recent elections and the new political alliances.

In 2003, the United States of America invaded Iraq and put an end to a political system developed in the 1920s by the British. The White House assembled a set of arguments to justify the invasion, including stating that they desired to establish in Iraq a democratic state at the service of its citizens: transparent, sovereign and open to the world.

The creation of this model aimed to become, through its relevance and reliability, a reference for societies throughout the Middle East, dreaming of a better world. Twenty years later, not only has Iraq failed to become a reference in the Middle East, its main preoccupations today are the maintenance of its territorial integrity and its societal and state unity.

In October 2019, an unprecedented protest movement blocked the country. Adel Abdel Mahdi, the then Prime Minister, was forced to resign in November. Five months later, Mustafa Kazimi was tasked with forming a transitional government to prepare for early elections. Thus, on October 10, 2021, the Kazimi government organised elections. The electoral results were as follows: for the Shia, Muqtada Sadr's list (73 seats); for the Kurds, Barzani's list (31 seats); amongst the Sunnis, Halboussi's list (46 seats). As a result, the three winners of the Shiite, Kurdish and Sunni spaces appeared on the political scene.

Looking to utilise their favourable position, the three winners set up an alliance to form the government and adopted a new paradigm of governance by deciding to abandon the formula of governance based on the national coalition and to move to a governance model based on the national "majority". In other words, this meant bringing together a part of the Shia, the Kurds and the Sunni to form the government whilst another part went into the opposition. For a long year, this alliance tried to implement its projects, mobilising all of its resources nationally and internationally, without ever succeeding.

However, it must be admitted that the coalition bloc recognised as the "Coordination Framework", which brought together pro-Iran political and militia forces and categorically rejected this new paradigm, perfectly managed the power struggle with the Sadrist bloc. Thanks to this rational and pragmatic management, the Framework succeeded in imposing itself and isolating Muqtada Al-Sadr by weaving an alliance with the latter's partners, the Kurds through Barzani and with the Sunnis through Halboussi. An alliance that enabled Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, the pro-Iran's framework candidate, to form a government in October 2022, after a political deadlock.

Could he be the silver bullet to solve the country's crisis which has impeded all prospects of operationality of the Iraqi state? Could he put into practice his government's program, which resembles more a roadmap co-developed with the Kurds and Sunnis than a program? Will the new pro-Iran government, also supported by the international community, be able to manage and control the 80 heavily armed, professionally trained and heavily funded militia organisations? A man tied to no corruption scandals, will Mohammed Shia al-Sudani be the one to put an end to widespread corruption? After 20 years of systemic exclusion, will the leaders of the Coordination Framework create favourable conditions for a reintegration of the Sunni into the Iraqi state? Since the referendum on the independence of Kurdistan on 25 September 2017, tensions are increasing between the Kurds and the Shia. With Sudani's government, has the opportunity finally come to rebuild the bond between these two factions and thus exit this structural crisis? Could Sudani handle the unmanageable Muqtada Al-Sadr? Will the protest movements finally be heard? On the international stage, will Sudani, who is already dreaming of a second term, give himself the means to manage the expectations of antagonistic actors such as Turkey, the countries of the UN General Assembly, Iran, the United States of America and the European Union?

This article will try to highlight this set of questions that act, guide and determine, each at their own level, the crisis, to exit the Iraqi tragedy.

"The guardians of the system"

On August 29, 2022, thousands of supporters of Muqtada Al-Sadr tried to storm the palaces of the President of the

Republic, the Prime Minister and the Office of the Coordination Framework. The situation was serious and rumours of a Sadrist coup were circulating. Embassies were starting to take action. International capitals were growing more and more concerned by the hour and wondering what would happen next.

At this crucial moment, the popular mobilisation forces (militia organisations such as Kataeb Hezbollah, Assaïb Ahl al-Haq, Badr, etc.) arrived in the Green Zone and opened fire, killing and wounding hundreds of Iraqi. What was striking was that the slogan used by these militia organisations were: **we are the guardians of the system!**

This slogan is highly significant because it highlights an inconvenient Iraqi situation, namely an Iraqi state rebuilt by the Americans in 2003 which is now ruled and protected by militias. However, it must be noted that since then, the international community has been putting pressure on the new Prime Minister to, if not dissolve parliament, at least to control these militia forces which enjoy a dominant political representation within all the institutions of the State.



Fighters from the Saraya Salam (Peace Brigades) militia loyal to influential Iraqi Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr deploy in Baghdad, Iraq, Tuesday, Aug. 30, 2022. Murtadha Ridha/AP/SIPA

An impossible mission

This seems to be an impossible mission to carry out. Mohammad Shia Al-Sudani is objectively not in a position to engage in a confrontation with these various militia groups, which are much stronger than the Iraqi army.

It was also impossible to ask Sudani's government to oppose the domination of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Some countries in the international community have probably not yet grasped that the Iraq of 2023 is no longer the Iraq of 1980 and that no government can be formed in Baghdad without Tehran's blessing. Certainly, Iraq can play a role of mediation, but a role conceived, designed and validated by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

However, this bitter observation does not mean that Sudani's government has little room for manoeuvre. On the contrary, coming from the Sudani government, an effective fight against corruption, a visible improvement in services, a significant reduction in poverty, unemployment and inequality could appease the protest movement, on the one hand, and the Sadrist tendency on the other.

It is also possible that this government could ask Shiite militia forces to leave Sunni cities and move to military bases under the Defense Army, which could largely satisfy the Sunni elites.

With the Kurds, Mohammad Shia Al-Sudani begins a relatively comfortable mandate, because, from the first day, he received the unanimous support from the various dominant actors of Kurdistan (Barzani and Talabani). This support is the result of a prior agreement between Erbil and Baghdad to resolve as soon as possible their differences regarding disputed territories, the management of natural resources and Kurdistan's share in the annual budget of the federal state.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, in 2023, Iraq is still caught between threats, crises and incurable diseases: widespread corruption, systematised militia-sation, Daesh's terrorist operations that will not leave any time soon, an endless war between the Turkey and the PKK taking place on Iraqi soil, Iran treating Iraq like it was one of its provinces, a disengaged international community and finally a fratricidal war between Shia that is about to break out.

It is in this context that Iraq finds itself as one of the most fragile states in the world and in a setting of recurring crises. It is in this setting that Mohammed shia al-Sudani forms his government.

It would be a mistake for the international and regional actors to expect impossible expectations on this government and this would have devastating consequences. A responsible attitude on the part of these actors would be to lower the expectations and wait for feasible actions in favour of a relatively conceivable improvement, before we witness the implosion or definitive explosion of the Iraqi state.