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Reversing the Corrosive Politics of Exclusion

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Cover photo: Syrian security personnel monitor crowds as government supporters gather in 2025 following the killing of hundreds of people in a government attack on Druze communities in Suwayda, Syria. (Omar Albaw/Middle East Images/ AFP via Getty Images)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The three case studies below show four forms of the same dynamic.

- In Syria, exclusion is the product of a centralizing new order that has refused to share power with outsiders (including the Druze) and uses force when negotiations stall.
- The extreme violence perpetrated against the Druze in Syria in July 2025, in turn, reinforced exclusionary authoritarians on the Druze side.
- In Iraq, exclusion comes from an entrenched political class that has captured formal democratic institutions and uses them to block challengers.
- In Lebanon, exclusion is also structural but stems from a different ill: An armed nonstate actor has hollowed out the state and politically marginalized another sect.

The mechanisms differ, but all impose a strategic cost on the United States and the people of the Middle East. All have displaced people, undermined partner forces, facilitated Iranian intervention, and fostered conditions for extremism.

This problem set calls for policies that condition aid and support on inclusionary policies and a robust reporting mechanism from the U.S. Department of State to Congress produced using clear metrics for resilience, security conditions, participation, integration, and flourishing.

“The pattern is clear: Where pluralism collapses, extremism metastasizes, people are displaced, partner forces fracture, and rival powers exploit the results.”

I. Introduction

The collapse of pluralism across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is a core driver of regional instability, producing repeated waves of uprisings, wars, and refugee flows. It is, by direct extension, part of the security problems that have consumed U.S. foreign policy in the region for decades. The societies that once incorporated Christian, Muslim, Yazidi, Druze, Kurdish, Jewish, and Bahá’í communities have been hollowed out by war, displacement, and politically exclusionary regimes. This erosion has stripped the region of its natural social stabilizers — diversity, tolerance, and local legitimacy — leaving vacuums for militias, sectarian ideologues, and foreign interference. The pattern is clear: Where pluralism collapses, extremism metastasizes, people are displaced, partner forces fracture, and rival powers exploit the results. The Islamic State managed to take hold in Iraq, exploiting the extreme exclusion of the country’s Sunni community. Hezbollah’s grip on Lebanon was not established inside a functioning, inclusive state. Iran’s regional network was constructed on the wreckage of an order, ostensibly U.S.-dominated since the end of the Cold War, that failed both their minorities and majorities alike.

Not all power-sharing schemes lead to stability, to be sure. They could merely transplant existing fragmentation onto national institutions. In MENA, however, there is little alternative, given the sheer pluralism and complexity of societies plus the poor track record of and public distrust in government. Inclusion must be the goal. It is also possible to place excessive pressure on new or weak governments to open their political systems. All policy should reflect local realities, but the United States should be wary of a past record of complacency and being overly deferential to authoritarian exclusionary governments.

For the U.S., incorporating inclusion as a key element of MENA policy is therefore both a strategic necessity and a moral imperative. States that protect minorities and majorities alike are more stable, less conflict-prone, less authoritarian, and less hospitable to penetration by forces such as Iran, whose regional strategy has complicated U.S. interests in the Levant and Gulf. Multiple U.S. presidents have attempted to “disengage” from the

Middle East, shifting their focus toward other regions, and yet, each was pulled back after the breakout of conflicts, oftentimes stemming from the exclusionary nature of local regimes.

Pluralism, minority rights, and inclusive governance should be a central pillar of U.S. MENA policy. They should be embedded in diplomacy, reconstruction, and development assistance, thereby linking U.S. values to strategic objectives in the region.

II. Exclusion Beyond the Sectarian Frame

Although they can be especially vulnerable, ethnic and sectarian minorities are not the only victims of exclusion in the region. Many political systems have emerged as closed kleptocratic orders, blocking participation and reform and ossifying the rule of narrow elite coalitions. These systems exclude not only minorities but majorities as well, especially the reform-minded, technocratic, and young. The result is the same regardless of who rules: a brittle order that cannot build legitimacy through proper governance, cannot accommodate dissent, and ultimately survives by repression, patronage, or foreign protection and largesse.

This report therefore approaches exclusion as a varied phenomenon operating in four distinct ways, each illustrated by one of the case studies that follow:

- Sectarian and ethnic exclusion by the state: The recognizable systematic marginalization of religious or ethnic communities from national decision-making, illustrated by the case of Syria's Druze under the post-Assad order.
- Structural-institutional exclusion: The capture of supposedly democratic institutions by an elite coalition that uses electoral law, judicial manipulation, patronage, and coercion to block meaningful competition, illustrated by Iraq's "limited access order."
- Intra-communal exclusion: The suppression of internal pluralism within a single sect or community, where a dominant faction crowds out alternative leadership and silences dissent within its own ranks, illustrated by the Druze of Suwayda under Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri.
- Inter-communal exclusion: Where non-majority factions that don't necessarily control a state marginalize others like Lebanon's Sunnis under conditions of Hezbollah dominance.

These four components are analytically different but intertwined. Iraq's institutional exclusion is enforced through sectarian patronage networks and pro-Iranian militias. Syria's political-sectarian exclusion is reinforced by intracommunal repression. Lebanon's Sunni marginalization stems from an institutional order captured by an armed faction that has hollowed out the state itself. U.S. policy that makes inclusion a priority would address all four.

III. A Critical Time to Center Inclusion

The strategic window for an inclusion-driven U.S. approach is wide but narrowing. The fall of the regime of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024 has brought fluidity into Syrian politics for the first time in over 60 years. Iran's regional network has been degraded, and Hezbollah — facing a punishing war with Israel — has lost its strategic depth in Syria. The Islamic Republic itself has been battered by the 2004 and 2026 conflicts. Iraq's clientelistic order is straining as oil revenues fail to keep up with population growth and worsening corruption. In each of these arenas, the question of who is included in political life and on what terms is being renegotiated.

This is not a moment for minute adjustment. The next several years will define the regional order for a generation. U.S. policy should work against the same exclusionary logic that produced the previous cycle of state failure, civil war, and extremism. If Washington instead uses its considerable remaining leverage to push for inclusive settlements with Damascus, Baghdad, Beirut, and elsewhere, it can produce outcomes that are durably in line with U.S. interests, which include the ability to redeploy assets and focus to other geographies when necessary.

IV. U.S. Interests Served by an Inclusion-Driven Policy

An inclusion-driven foreign policy would secure the following U.S. interests:

- **Stability:** Inclusive societies are less prone to conflict or extremism and more able to absorb shocks without generating refugee flows, terrorist safe havens, and collapses in foreign relations that have repeatedly drawn the United States into unwanted interventions.
- **Counter-Iran leverage:** Tehran's regional strategy depends on exploiting exclusionary politics — targeting marginalized communities, creating militias in weak states, and replacing weak central authority with parallel structures. Inclusion is the lasting counter to this model.
- **Partnership:** A clear U.S. posture on inclusion strengthens ties with reform-minded regional actors who share the values of pluralism. It also isolates spoilers, especially internal exclusion practices that generate the very instability the United States is then compelled to attempt to manage.
- **Soft Power:** This policy would position the U.S. as both a moral and strategic leader in the region when both Russia and China are gaining traction while advancing models that are openly built around exclusion.
- **Legacy:** Build a durable policy foundation that connects U.S. values with long-term security objectives in MENA, reducing the recurring need for emergency interventions and crisis-driven deployments.

V. Policy Objectives

Advancing an inclusion-driven U.S. foreign policy would be based on the following policy objectives:

- **Institutionalize Pluralism in U.S. Foreign Policy:** Integrate political inclusion and minority protection into U.S. stabilization frameworks.
- **Develop Policy Frameworks:** Inform legislation, executive policy, and funding mechanisms to make inclusion a component of U.S. aid and post-conflict programs.
- **Build Strategic Partnerships:** Work with existing organizations (Diar-na.org, JIMENA, UNESCO, the Jewish Heritage Society, etc.) and regional NGOs to connect heritage preservation with policy-relevant data and tools for diplomacy.
- **Advance Regional Dialogue and Reconciliation:** Convene Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues to include faith leaders, minority representatives, and policymakers to develop local inclusion frameworks.
- **Shape Public and Elite Discourse:** Produce annual and thematic reports connecting pluralism with peace, counter-extremism, economic resilience, and long-term U.S. interests in the region.



Syrian interim President Ahmed al Sharaa visits a polling station in Damascus during a 2025 election in which local committees selected members of an interim parliament. The process was criticized as undemocratic because al Sharaa appointed one third of parliament members and all members of the national Higher Committee, which oversaw local committee members; the Higher Committee and local committees selected the remaining two-thirds of parliament. (Louai Beshara/AFP via Getty Images)

VI. Initial Policy Outcomes

The initial policy outcome would be legislation mandating an annual report to Congress from the U.S. Department of State, jointly produced by the Office of International Religious Freedom (IRF) and the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA). The report would use specific indicators and metrics — including internationally recognized ones dealing with human rights and religious liberty — to assess the condition, resilience, and flourishing of ethnic and religious minority communities. Findings would shape and set funding priorities for the State Department and associated U.S. government entities. The report should highlight countries at the highest risk of social and communal fragmentation, and prioritize them for funding support for mitigation strategies.

The case studies that follow — in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon — examine three distinct expressions of the exclusion problem and three distinct opportunities for U.S. leverage. Each demonstrates that the costs of inaction are not abstract and that the tools required for a different outcome are already within Washington's reach.

VII. Syria

The post-Assad political order is characterized by a high degree of concentration of power in the hands of commanders of the former Islamist rebel group Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS). The top decision-making circle is a small one, made up of three members: interim President Ahmad al Sharaa, Minister of Foreign Affairs As'ad al Sheibani, and Interior Minister Anas Khattab. The ranks of second- and third-tier decision-makers are dominated by HTS,^{1,2,3}

1 On the role of Hazem, Ahmad al-Sharaa's brother, see Reuters, "Syria Is Secretly Reshaping Its Economy as the President's Brother Takes Charge," July 24, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/investigations/syria-is-secretly-reshaping-its-economy-presidents-brother-is-charge-2025-07-24>

2 On the role of Maher al-Sharaa, another brother, see "Maher 2.0: Fears of Nepotism as al-Sharaa Gives Brother Top Role," The New Arab, April 7, 2025, <https://www.newarab.com/news/maher-20-fears-nepotism-al-sharaa-gives-brother-top-role>

3 On Maher Marwan, cousin and brother-in-law of the president, see "Damascus Under Scrutiny: Controversial Appointment and Rising Lawlessness Raise Alarming Questions," Syrian Observer, May 7, 2025, <https://syrianobserver.com/syrian-actors/damascus-under-scrutiny-controversial-appointment-and-rising-lawlessness-raise-alarming-questions.html>

and former commanders of an Islamist rebel group that allied with HTS, Ahrar al Sham.⁴ These decision-makers are all Sunni Arab men with an Islamist background. Thus, broad political exclusion continues to define governance in Syria. This research focuses on political exclusion of Syria's Druze community, a religious minority making up about 3% of the Syrian population.⁵ The unique nature of the political exclusion endured by the Druze, both by the central state, and by their local leadership in Suwayda, shows the detrimental effects of multiple forms of exclusion on the national and subnational levels. These two levels of noninclusive governance prevail in countries that have gone through a civil war, which fractured central state control while producing exclusionary rebel governance.

History of the Druze in Syria

The Druze of Syria trace their origins to the 11th century, when followers of the Fatimid caliph al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah established a distinct religious community, emerging out of Shiite Islam. This heterodox community migrated into the mountainous regions across the Levant to escape persecution. Over the centuries, they became firmly rooted in Syria, especially in the southern region of Suwayda, where most of the country's 600,000-700,000 Druze still live. With the outbreak of the 2011 uprising, thousands of Druze participated in protests in Suwayda, the outskirts of Damascus, and elsewhere. However, as the uprising militarized starting in late 2011, few Druze joined anti-regime armed groups, with most adopting a position of self-preservation. In Suwayda, where Druze were able to gain the most autonomy owing to their territorial concentration, numbers, and growing weakness of Damascus, Druze formed factions mostly focused on self-defense while avoiding military service in the ranks of the Assad regime. In smaller Druze enclaves, and particularly around Jabal a-Sheikh, Druze men were less able to avoid conscription and served in the Syrian army and pro-Assad militias.⁶

Suwayda's de facto partial autonomy from Damascus also allowed civil society to flourish. Starting in 2023, amid a rapid deterioration in living standards, Suwayda activists launched daily protests calling for the downfall of the regime at Karama (Dignity) Square in Suwayda City, a protest movement that continued until Assad was toppled in late 2024.⁷ As rebel forces advanced on Damascus from the north, Suwayda factions stormed the remaining vestiges of regime presence there, particularly the mukhabarat (secret police) branches and remaining Syrian army presence, forcing their agents to flee.^{8,9,10} Celebrations erupted in Suwayda, raising the revolution's green-striped flag, soon to be the official flag of Syria.^{11,12}

4 Observations of international mediators engaging with the top Syrian leadership, October 2025–March 2026.

5 "Syria's Druze Minority Caught Between Islamist Government and Israel," France 24, April 30, 2025, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250430-syria-s-druze-minority-caught-between-islamist-government-and-israel>

6 Iyad Al Abdullah, Abdullah Amin Al-Hallaq, "Syria's Druze," Al Jumhuriya, Jan. 30, 2017. <https://aljumhuriya.net/ar/2017/01/30/36883-2/>

7 Yaman Zabad, "Protests in al-Suwayda in Syria: Security Challenges and Persistent Demonstrations," Omran for Strategic Studies, June 10, 2024, <https://omrandirasat.org/en/research/protests-in-al-suwayda-in-syria-security-challenges-and-persistent-demonstrations/>

8 Syria: Zia Al-Sahnawi, "Sweida demonstrations revive northern revolutionaries and military defections in the south," Al Araby, Dec. 6, 2024. <https://tinyurl.com/8j4skzt>

9 Al-Hadath reel showing the liberation of prisoners from Suwaydas central prison <https://www.instagram.com/reels/DDPg5T2shCm/>

10 BBC Arabic, "The Armed Opposition Announces Control over Daraa and Advances toward Homs," December 6, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/articles/cdd666359njo>

11 Baladi News, "Celebrations of the People of Suwayda about the Liberation of Syrian Cities," December 6, 2024. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2577755392614827>

12 Hossam al-Younes, "Celebrations of the First Friday of Liberation in Suwayda 2024," December 19, 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=88HyWmXQ1yc>

After the Fall of Assad

The euphoria of those early days would prove short-lived, as the new authorities' approach to Suwayda soon revealed that Assad's ouster had not ended the political exclusion of the Druze — only transformed it. Since taking power on Dec. 8, 2024, Syria's new authorities pursued several ventures intended to signal inclusivity while maintaining a tight grip over decision-making. Multiple delegations of Druze religious notables and activists met in Damascus with the leadership of the Syrian state. However, in the tumultuous year and a half since Assad's fall, Syria's new leaders focused on power consolidation rather than greater inclusion. Thus, other political, ethnic, and religious groups were excluded from decision-making circles in Damascus.

The first ominous signs regarding the future adversarial relationship between Damascus and Suwayda emerged during the first three months after Assad's fall. Capitalizing on organizing during the civil war, in December 2024, Suwayda civil society activists chose one of their own, Mohasina al-Mahithawi, as their candidate for the governor position.^{13,14} Her candidacy was then unwillingly accepted by Sheikh Hikmat al-Hijri, the supreme religious authority of the Druze in Syria (Sheikh al-Aql), indicating the weight of civil society in the governorate at the time.¹⁵

Instead of accepting the nomination, in February 2025 Damascus appointed a Sunni official from Idlib, Dr. Mustafa Bakkour, as the governor of Suwayda, diverging from its habit of appointing local governors. Bakkour's appointment triggered sensitivities, since he was previously the Syrian Salvation Government (the HTS's civil arm) official in charge of the Harem area, which includes the Druze villages on Sumaq Mountain. The Druze in those villages were forced to adopt Sunni Islam under pressure from extremist groups, including ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. The treatment of the Druze by HTS improved after 2020, but the Druze in Idlib still avoid openly stating they have not abandoned their faith and only outwardly converted.^{16,17} Thus, in the eyes of Suwayda residents, Bakkour's appointment signaled what type of Druze the new Syrian government wants to deal with: subdued and publicly renouncing their faith.^{18,19}

Damascus was willing to accept less centralized control over Suwayda compared to other governorates of Syria, but Syria's leadership still insisted on significantly more centralized control than key Suwayda figures were prepared to accept. A U.S. official working on the Syria file commented on Damascus' appointments in Suwayda: "They thought that if they send HTS officials to be in charge of governance, security, and services, they could get away with it. They don't want to share power."²⁰ Rabih, a Suwayda-based journalist, met Bakkour after his appointment. During the meeting, Bakkour stated that if Damascus heeded the calls from Suwayda to appoint their elected candidate, "people of Homs and Idlib will then also ask to appoint their governors," a slippery slope that Damascus, seeking to centralize power, wants to avoid.²¹

13 Rami Zeineddin (@RamiZeineddin) on X, December 31, 2024. <https://x.com/RamiZeineddin/status/1874166626787975547>

14 Author interview with Rabih, a journalist based in Suwayda, March 20, 2026; author interview with Samia, March 28, 2026.

15 Author interviews with Samia and Farid, activists from Suwayda, March 28, 2026, and March 26, 2026, respectively; author interview with a U.S. official working on the Syria file, April 2, 2026.

16 Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and the Druze of Jabal al-Summaq," April 7, 2024, <https://www.aymennaltamimi.com/p/hayat-tahrir-al-sham-and-the-druze>

17 Patrick Haenni and Jerome Drevon, *Transformed by the People: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's Road to Power in Syria* (Hurst Publishers, 2025).

18 Author interview with Rabih, a journalist based in Suwayda, March 20, 2026.

19 On Bakkour's previous role as an HTS governance official (within its Salvation Government) for the area of Harem, see <https://akmckeever.substack.com/p/update-syrian-caretaker-government>

20 Author interview, April 2, 2026.

21 Author phone interview with Rabih, March 20, 2026.

On March 29, the Syrian president appointed a new government. All the ministries concerning “sovereign” matters, such as the ministries of interior, defense, foreign affairs and justice, were handed to HTS personalities.^{22,23} The Druze minister, economist Amjad Badr, was appointed minister of agriculture despite a lack of experience in the agricultural field. The authority of Badr, like that of other non-HTS ministers, was undermined by HTS-linked officials appointed within all branches of the executive and judiciary, to direct the work of public sector employees,²⁴ as well as directorates established by a presidential decree, answerable directly to the president’s office.²⁵

Badr’s marginalization became publicly visible months later in a video that went viral in early 2026. In the video, a senior government official, Adviser to the President on Tribal Affairs Jihad Issa, better known by his nom de guerre Abu Ahmad Zakkour, called an official whom he addressed as a “sheikh” to send immediately “a brother responsible for agriculture” to Deir Ezzor to develop an emergency plan to revive agriculture there, insisting Badr, is not suitable. He said the person who ought to be sent should be “influential” and also someone who “has a mind like our experience in Idlib,” meaning, within the coterie of the Islamist groups that ran the rebel enclave.²⁶

On May 10, 2026, Badr was fired through a presidential decree and replaced with his deputy, Bassel Sweidan.²⁷ The replacement merely formalized and made visible the real center of power at the ministry. Even as a deputy, Sweidan was among the the ministry’s most powerful individuals. Sweidan is the former head of HTS’ War Spoils Directorate, which managed and profited from agricultural lands and other properties expropriated from regime officials and suspected regime supporters.^{28,29,30} As of the writing of this report, the Syrian government lacks any Druze ministers.

In September 2025, Damascus appointed Suleiman Abdul Baqi, a former pro-regime militiaman who later cooperated with HTS, as director of security for Suwayda.³¹ Abdul Baqi, too, is not a decision-maker, and the number of Druze he has recruited stands at around 40.³²

Negotiations Between Damascus and Suwayda

During the first months after Assad, Damascus engaged with Druze civil society activists, faction commanders, and religious leaders as well as representatives on their behalf. However, this engagement did not lead to agreement on how to integrate Suwayda and its armed factions into the Syrian polity. As talks progressed, it became apparent that al-Hijri presented the most far-reaching demands to Damascus.³³ The demand that Druze

22 Ultra Syria, “Hayat Tahrir a-Sham Dominates the Ministerial Portfolios in the New Government,” March 31, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/mvp7vsz5>

23 Author interviews with Suwayda-based journalist Rabihi, March 20, 2026, and Farid, an activist from the Suwayda countryside, March 26, 2026.

24 Hanin Ramadan, “The Sheikh in Syrian State Institutions: The Shadow Rule between the Religious and Administrative One,” al-Hal.Net, October 26, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/yc74sd67>

25 Aljumburiya.net, “A Year into the ‘Authority’ Government: What Did the Independent Bodies Linked to the Presidency Leave for the Ministries?” April 2, 2026. <https://tinyurl.com/3b3shz2p>

26 @7alpress on X, Jan. 31, 2026. <https://x.com/7alpress/status/2017582106872865122>

27 Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, “New Syrian Cabinet and Governor Appointments: Translation & Overview,” May 10, 2026. <https://www.aymennaltamimi.com/p/new-syrian-cabinet-and-governor-appointments>

28 Habib Shehade, “We Left With Only the Clothes on Our Backs’: Forced Displacement and Land Seizures Affect Villages in the Hama Countryside,” Rozana, <https://tinyurl.com/yjzvd4bf>

29 “Syria/Rural Hama: Forced Displacement and Unlawful Seizure of Property Against Alawites Following the Fall of al-Assad,” Syrians for Truth and Justice, February 9, 2026, <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-rural-hama-forced-displacement-and-unlawful-seizure-of-property-against-alawites-following-the-fall-of-al-assad/>

30 See also the investigative-comedic report by Manar Haj Kassem, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CPIRssUkQw>

31 Asharq Al-Awsat, “Syria introduces the post of head of internal security in Sweida Sulaiman Abdul Baqi,” Sept. 16, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/mpbw3k7h>

32 Author interview with an independent mediator who engaged Damascus and the Druze leadership, March 31, 2026; author interview with Rabihi, a journalist based in Suwayda, March 20, 2026.

33 Author interviews with Suwayda activists and journalists Asif (April 2, 2026), Rabihi (March 20, 2026), and Roni (March 31, 2026); and Farid (March 26, 2026).



Sheikh Hikmat Salman al-Hijri, spiritual leader of the Druze community in Syria, speaks to a crowd at Qanawat, the headquarters of the Druze spiritual presidency, in 2024 in Suwayda, Syria. (Ali Haj Suleiman/Getty Images)

alone be tasked with internal security in their areas became a matter of consensus in Suwayda after the massacres of Alawis in March 2025 and killings of Druze on the outskirts of Damascus in April-May 2025.³⁴ However, al-Hijri made more ambitious demands, which included some form of self-governance for Suwayda, including the right to appoint local civilian officials, chief among them the governor. Activists, Druze faction commanders, and prominent traditional personalities supported these demands in principle but saw them as unrealistic, given Damascus' clear aversion to any political power sharing, and preferred to focus on demands relating to internal security.³⁵

Following the fall of the regime, a small circle of militia commanders coalesced around al-Hijri, who rejected any compromise with Damascus. Some of these militia commanders are wanted by the Syrian government for crimes perpetrated during the civil war in service of the Assad regime and by Jordan for smuggling captagon across the border.^{36,37,38} The motivations of al-Hijri, according to people who know him personally, stem from a deeply ingrained fear of Sunni Islam and belief that past persecution and slaughter by Sunni powers under the Mamluks and Ottomans is inevitable under the current rulers of Damascus.³⁹ Al-Hijri and the militia leaders and advisers close to him were buttressed by military and financial support they received from Israel, decreasing their willingness to compromise.^{40,41,42,43} Seeking to avoid conflict in Suwayda, home to thousands of Druze militia members supported by Israel, Damascus was willing to offer control over internal security for the Druze but would not accept political decentralization or changes to the interim constitution. In rejecting deals concerning internal security offered by Damascus, al-Hijri and militias in his circle were able to impose their maximalist position on Suwayda.⁴⁴ Thus, a deal that would have given a greater degree of autonomy than any other Syrian region (at the time) was within reach, did not materialize.

In July 2025, Damascus resorted to force to resolve this political dispute. This decision negatively distinguishes Damascus' handling of Druze from any other constituency in Syria. Damascus deployed thousands of Syrian army soldiers and General Security Service (GSS) members to Suwayda. After being ambushed by Druze militias inside Suwayda who rejected dealing with Damascus, the soldiers and GSS members, alongside Sunni tribal

34 Santiago Montag and Omar Hamed Beato, "Syria's Druze Are Wary in the Wake of Attacks," *New Lines Magazine*, May 22, 2025, <https://newlinesmag.com/spotlight/syrias-druze-are-wary-in-the-wake-of-attacks/>

35 Author phone interviews with Asif, a human rights activist from Suwayda, March 31, 2026, and Rabi, a journalist based in Suwayda, March 20, 2026.

36 Author interview with an independent mediator working on the Suwayda file, March 31, 2026.

37 On Muhannad Mozhar, a prominent militia commander aligned with al-Hijri, as the commander of a kidnapping gang, see this 2024 report, *Noon Post*, <https://www.noonpost.com/244983/>

38 On the criminal record and Interpol red notice for Awdat Fuaz Abu Sarhan, another prominent militia commander close to al-Hijri, see *Zaman al-Wasl*, <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/171126>

39 Author phone interview with a U.S. official who worked on the Suwayda file, April 2, 2026; author phone interview with Rabi, a journalist who has met al-Hijri on multiple occasions, March 20, 2026.

40 See the Washington Post report of December 23, 2025 revealing this assistance: "Israel's Covert Activities in Syria," <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2025/12/23/israel-covert-activities-syria-druze/>. The provision of support was confirmed to the author by two activists inside Suwayda with close ties to the militias operating there. According to the independent mediator engaging Damascus and the Druze leadership and a U.S. official working on the Syria file, the backing from Israel convinced al-Hijri and his circle they could afford to adopt uncompromising positions, since Israel would prevent the use of force to solve the political dispute. Author interviews, March 31 and April 2, 2026.

41 An important figure connecting al-Hijri to Israel is Tareq al-Mghawash, once the commander of a small faction, "The Shield of Monotheism," which numbered about 300 fighters. "Parties and Armed Factions in Suwayda," *Al Jazeera Net*, May 1, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/2s4bkuyv>

42 Al-Mghawash admitted being in direct coordination with Israel in an August 2025 interview with the pan-Arab daily *Asharq Al-Awsat*: "Operations Room" in Suwayda: We Are Coordinating with Israel and the US for a UN Inquiry Commission," August 4, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/56ybnt7>

43 Another is Wael Abu Faour, a senior commander close to al-Hijri, in charge of receiving Israeli airdropped assistance. See the *Asharq al-Awsat* report of October 26, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/6993zdpu>

44 For example, militias loyal to al-Hijri threatened to torch any vehicles supplied by the government to the Rijal al-Karama Druze faction, previously the largest single faction in Suwayda, which had reached an agreement with Damascus to integrate into the internal security inside Suwayda. See "Is Suwayda Heading for a Showdown With Damascus?," *Syria Direct*, <https://syriadirect.org/is-suwayda-heading-for-a-showdown-with-damascus/>. In another representative case, al-Hijri would not accept the May 1 deal, to which several Suwayda Druze factions had signed up, concerning their integration into the GSS.



fighters, launched, over the span of six days, two waves of deadly attacks against civilians, and a campaign of organized systemic looting across Suwayda's countryside and cities.

The U.N. Commission of Inquiry found that in the first wave, government forces engaged in systematic, targeted, extrajudicial executions. Men and boys identified as Druze were intentionally separated from women and children and executed. In the second wave, the tribal pro-government fighters systematically looted and burned down homes, public infrastructure, executing or abducting any remaining civilians who had not fled the earlier violence or who had attempted to return.

Throughout the entire six days, perpetrators hunted down, cornered, and shot Druze civilians directly in the streets. They also invaded private residences, murdering victims inside their homes alongside their family members. Government forces and tribal forces also beheaded, torched and mutilated the bodies of their victims. The U.N. report also documented cases of rape, including gang rape, and other forms of sexual violence of Druze women and girls perpetrated by both government forces and tribal fighters.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ See paragraph 32 in the U.N. Commission of Inquiry report issued on March 27, 2026, "UN Syria Commission Releases Report on July Massacres and Other Grave Violations," Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/03/un-syria-commission-releases-report-july-massacres-and-other-grave-violations?site=HRC>

According to the report into the event, this rampage left at least 1,342 Druze civilians and combatants dead. Israel bombed the intruding forces, and later targets in Damascus too, compelling the withdrawal of government forces. This withdrawal allowed Druze militias to assault Bedouin areas in Suwayda, killing at least 70 people.⁴⁶ Government forces and Bedouin Sunni militias aligned with the government occupied, looted, and torched 35 Druze villages on the outskirts of Suwayda city, displacing about 116,000 Druze into the governorate and about 68,000 Bedouin out of the governorate.⁴⁷

Suwayda is currently in a liminal state: Trade and movement to Damascus have resumed, but Syrian state institutions are largely absent from the governorate. Instead, militias and civilians aligned with al-Hijri have set up a system of rebel governance, creating an internal police force, a national guard, and a civilian administration (the Supreme Legal Committee) that collects taxes from the population.⁴⁸ Checkpoints placed by Damascus restrict quantities of crucial goods that can enter Suwayda, particularly mazout and fuel.⁴⁹ Checkpoints set up by militias loyal to al-Hijri and the Syrian government both collect “taxes” on the passage of goods, significantly increasing prices in Suwayda. No substantive negotiations have taken place between al-Hijri and Damascus, and Damascus appears to believe it would be able to resolve the Suwayda file through negotiations with Israel concerning a new security agreement between the two countries.⁵⁰

Exclusionary Decision-Making in Suwayda After the Massacres

The Druze are excluded from decision-making not only in Damascus but also inside Suwayda. In the eight months after Assad's fall, civil society continued to play a political role: Activists organized, factions with differing orientations negotiated with Damascus, and multiple power centers operated simultaneously. While hardline militia commanders aligned with al-Hijri hindered a deal with Damascus, other voices were heard and able to engage in politics.

This changed following the July 2025 massacres, which bolstered al-Hijri's position while severely undermining any other centers of power. The two other sheikhs al-Aql of the Druze community of Syria, Yousuf Jarbou and Hammoud al-Hannawi; factions like Rijal al-Karama; and anti-Assad activists who advocated for integration were discredited in Suwayda public opinion. Rabih said, “The Druze community has always been diverse with multiple centers of powers, families, balances of power, but this all changed.” Al-Hijri's opposition to dealing with the government, his refusal to let its forces enter the governorate, and the massacres that occurred because they did enter “made everyone unite around al-Hijri,” stated Rabih.⁵¹

In the early months of the negotiations, the interests of civil society and the militias surrounding al-Hijri diverged clearly. Civilians in Suwayda were tired of being ruled by militias. After the fall of the Assad regime, many former mukhabarat and militiamen from Suwayda who had served the regime joined or formed militias. These militia members had a record of criminality during the era of the civil war, much of it directed at Druze civilians inside

46 U.N. Commission of Inquiry report issued on March 27, 2026, “UN Syria Commission Releases Report on July Massacres and Other Grave Violations,” Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/03/un-syria-commission-releases-report-july-massacres-and-other-grave?sub-site=HRC>

47 See the UNICEF update of August 25, 2025, “Flash Update: Escalation of Hostilities in Sweida Governorate,” <https://www.unicef.org/syria/documents/flash-updates-escalation-hostilities-sweida-governorate-2025>

48 “Controversy and Resentment Following the ‘National Guard’-Affiliated Suwayda Council's Decision to Impose Monthly Fees,” Syria TV, April 4, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/mr2yt5yp>

49 Author phone interviews with Joud, an NGO employee, February 2 and March 26, 2026, and with Farid, an activist from Suwaydas countryside, March 26, 2026.

50 Author interview with an international mediator engaging with Damascus and the Druze leadership in Suwayda, March 31, 2026.

51 Author phone interview, March 20, 2026.

Suwayda due to their political opposition to the Assad regime or simply the families of Druze civilians who were believed to be able to afford a ransom.⁵² During the massacres, those former criminals fought to defend the Druze. Asif, a human rights activist from Suwayda, said, “When you are facing an existential threat, you cannot be picky. These are the people who defended the [Druze] Mountain and continue to defend it.”⁵³

Decision-making is highly centralized within Suwayda, with a limited number of militia commanders, financiers, al-Hijri, and his son Salman making all important decisions.⁵⁴ According to interviewees, while humanitarian initiatives are active inside Suwayda, the once-vibrant political civil society is now largely divided and dormant, unable to influence any major decision. This stems from several factors. First, multiple activists were murdered in the July 2025 massacres. Second, civil society, which supported the 2011 uprising, became discredited in the eyes of Suwayda residents, as a government claiming to represent the 2011 uprising slaughtered the Druze.⁵⁵ Third, multiple activists have left Syria, believing there is no future for them there. Fourth, issues that civil society traditionally advocated for appeared less important to those activists. Farid, an activist from the countryside of Suwayda whose home was looted and torched and whose family was displaced stated, “Freedoms are no longer the concern, but the fate of the Druze, the problem is an existential one, freedoms, administrations, so priorities of the elites changed immensely.”⁵⁶

Al-Hijri also has taken measures to repress opposition speech. Militia members loyal to al-Hijri arrested members of gatherings calling for reintegration into Syria, beating, humiliating, and arresting attendees who are often elderly Druze holding pan-Arab ideas.^{57,58} Individuals operating within al-Hijri’s militias have threatened activists inside and outside Suwayda for public statements, posts on social media, and even opinions shared inside communal WhatsApp groups.⁵⁹

The militias loyal to al-Hijri formed multiple organs following the July 2025 massacres, presenting them as the nucleus for the future state of Bashan, the independent Druze state they wish to establish in Suwayda. Those militias quietly set up the Security Office, the most powerful institution. It is styled after Assad regime mukhabarat branches and uses similar methods, including recruiting informants among the population, committing extrajudicial killings, and torturing detainees.⁶⁰ The office was formed out of the small “Shield of Monotheism” Druze militia, headed by Tareq al-

52 Walid al-Nofal and Shadi Dbeisi, “Is Suwayda Heading for a Showdown With Damascus?,” Syria Direct, March 15, 2025, <https://syriadirect.org/is-suwayda-heading-for-a-showdown-with-damascus/>

53 Author phone interview, April 2, 2026.

54 Author phone interviews with an independent mediator engaging Damascus and the Druze, April 1, 2026, and Joud, an NGO employee and activist, March 26, 2026.

55 The interviewees Asif, Samer, Farid, Rabih, Samia, and Roni, who all participated in the 2011 uprising, recounted being blamed by their relatives and Druze friends for what the fall of Assad brought onto the Druze community, while at the same time seeing very little solidarity from Sunni Arab activists, once their friends, during the massacres or their aftermath. The first four activists described regretting their alignment with the 2011 revolution and the sacrifices they had made for it. Asif and Samer were both detained by the Assad regime and severely tortured for participating in protests. Samer and Rabih now support the establishment of an independent Druze state, while others still support reintegration in some manner with Syria.

56 Author phone interview March 26, 2026.

57 Author phone interviews with Joud, an NGO employee and activist in Suwayda, March 26, 2026, and with Samia, an activist from Suwayda, March 28, 2026.

58 As-Suwayda 24, “National Guard members assault As-Suwayda residents during the commemoration of the death of Sultan Pasha al-Atrash,” March 26, 2026. <https://tinyurl.com/mj9ax8s7>

59 A prominent Druze writer living in France was threatened by a top official working with al-Hijri over messages in a WhatsApp group criticizing some practices of individuals aligned with al-Hijri inside Suwayda. Because he is not present inside Suwayda, the senior official threatened to harm his family if he did not stay quiet. Author interview with Qassam, a Syrian human rights activist based in France, April 4, 2026.

60 Author interview with NGO employee Joud, March 26, 2026.

Mghawesh.^{61,62} The Security Office arrests political opponents and militia leaders who don't fall in line with al-Hijri⁶³ and has tortured at least two militia commanders to death, both of whom refused to join the national guard structure of pro-Hijri militias suspected of communicating with Damascus.⁶⁴ The office is also suspected of carrying out several assassinations and attempts to kidnap political opponents in Suwayda.⁶⁵

Self-censorship on political matters, including expressions of support for dialogue with Damascus, occurs due to repression by al-Hijri's militias,⁶⁶ but also owing to fear of social opprobrium due to the widespread Druze furor toward Damascus since the massacres.⁶⁷ However, on matters relating to war profiteering and predatory behavior by al-Hijri's militias, aid theft, and corruption, self-censorship in public speech is the result of fear of repression from the militias, since societal anger about these practices is widespread and is expressed in private.⁶⁸ Samia, an activist from Suwayda, described it thus: "People fear being killed — the national guard have no problem killing people with different opinions."⁶⁹

Conclusion

The Druze of Suwayda suffer from exclusion from Damascus, which seeks to ensure all authorities are concentrated in the hands of trusted individuals from HTS and aligned Islamist factions. Since the July 2025 massacres, as al-Hijri and his militias consolidated power, the Druze have lost the ability to influence policies undertaken by Druze leaders, as a small group of militia commanders surrounding al-Hijri and his relatives make all decisions and repress those seen as disobedient. In the aftermath of mass killings, public opinion in Suwayda largely aligned with al-Hijri. However, a year has passed since the massacre, during which the Druze of Suwayda have lived in a liminal state. They remain separate from Damascus, deprived of most state services, while al-Hijri's promises about establishing an independent Druze state^{70,71} fail to materialize. According to a U.S. official and an independent mediator working on the Syria file, the U.S. and Israel do not support the establishment of a Druze statelet in Suwayda. Israel has not pushed for this in U.S.-mediated negotiations with Damascus.⁷² The Druze of Suwayda are increasingly exhausted, particularly the displaced from the 35 villages that were occupied by government forces. They want any solution that guarantees their safety.⁷³

61 "Red Lines and Death Threats: Freedom of Expression Wanes in Suwayda," Syria Direct, <https://syriadirect.org/red-lines-and-death-threats-freedom-of-expression-wan-es-in-suwayda/>

62 "Parties and Armed Factions in Suwayda," Al Jazeera Net, May 1, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/2s4bkuyv>

63 The office has harassed members and a commander of the Rijal al-Karama factions. See Syria TV, "Commander of the 'Rijal al-Karama' Movement Demands Dissolution of the Security Office Affiliated with al-Hijri in Suwayda," February 21, 2026. <https://tinyurl.com/5dz8ct46>

64 Author interview with Suwayda-based journalist Rabih, March 20, 2026. The two, Raed al-Matni and Maher Falhout, were arrested alongside six other militia commanders, who were later released. Rabih pointed out: "The Security Office literally removed al-Matni's skin. They abused Matni so badly to scare everyone else." Despite the brutality of the treatment, and Raed originating from the prominent al-Matni family, "nothing changed politically." According to Rabih, this stems from the existential threat felt by the Druze of Suwayda: "People don't want to enter internal struggles that may be exploited by Damascus to invade." He insisted that if this crime had occurred prior to the July 2025 massacre, the armed men of the al-Matni clan would not have kept silent.

65 Walid al-Nofal, "Red Lines and Death Threats: Freedom of Expression Wanes in Suwayda," Syria Direct, April 1, 2026, <https://syriadirect.org/red-lines-and-death-threats-freedom-of-expression-wan-es-in-suwayda/>

66 Ibid.

67 Author interviews with Suwayda-based journalist Rabih, March 20, 2026, and activist from Suwayda Farid, March 26, 2026.

68 In an interview with the author on March 26, 2026, Joud described witnessing officials, who were appointed by al-Hijri to oversee centers hosting the displaced, steal aid, yet the displaced did not dare complain, fearing the consequences.

69 Author phone interview, March 28, 2026.

70 Sheikh al-Hijri has claimed in private meetings in Suwayda that the United States and Israel support the establishment of an independent Druze state in Suwayda (author interview with Roni, an activist from Suwayda, March 31, 2026, and author interview with Joud, a humanitarian NGO employee, March 26, 2026). Al-Hijri has publicly implied such support.

71 See, for example, a statement from September 2025 thanking the U.S., Israel, and the EU for standing by Suwayda, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kjQAlf57xMI>

72 Author phone interviews, March 31 and April 2, 2026.

73 Author interviews with Suwayda journalists and activists: Rabih, March 20, 2026; Farid, March 26, 2026; and Samia, March 28, 2026.

“Without foreign pressure, the Druze of Suwayda will remain in the current liminal and unbearable state of predatory rebel rule, which is protecting them from a state they believe does not accept their existence.”

The U.S. possesses immense leverage in Syria, as was exemplified in the U.S. mediation between Damascus and the Syrian Democratic Forces that facilitated ensuring the Hasakah governorate was granted a great degree of autonomy, including the appointment of the governor and other local officials by local powers. The U.S. should apply pressure on Damascus to take genuine steps toward reconciliation with Suwayda. This would include a formal apology, prosecution of those responsible for the massacres, and offering Suwayda what Damascus has given to Hassakeh. The U.S. and Israel should also publicly state their policy with regards to Suwayda: They do not support the establishment of an independent Druze state, contrary to al-Hijri's claims. The U.S. and Israeli governments should also apply pressure on al-Hijri to reach an agreement with Damascus that would guarantee that security in Druze areas is handled by the Druze alone, while allowing the return to state institutions to Suwayda. Without foreign pressure, the Druze of Suwayda will remain in the current liminal and unbearable state of predatory rebel rule, which is protecting them from a state they believe does not accept their existence.

VIII. Iraq

Introduction

Iraq's political system presents a facade of pluralism and democratic competition. Multiple parties contest elections, Parliament debates legislation, and power is ostensibly shared among the country's ethno-sectarian communities. The Iraqi Constitution, drafted under U.S. tutelage and approved by Iraqis in 2005, guarantees democratic elections and separation of powers. Hamza, a long-time Iraqi scholar of Iraqi politics, explains, “The Iraqi political order was not designed to be exclusionary, but it emerged gradually as a consequence of the consolidation of a system that is not rules-based.”⁷⁴ The exclusion characterizing the current system was a result of decisions made by Iraqi politicians seeking to preserve power when losing at the ballot box and U.S. administrations that failed to leverage the sway they held over post-occupation Iraq to prevent this slide away from a fragile democracy characterized by genuine political competition and significant popular participation.

The first major blow to Iraq's rules-based order followed the 2010 elections, when Ayad Allawi's party, supported by a cross-sectarian coalition of voters, won the largest number of seats in Parliament. To ensure power in the hands of the Shiite sectarian political elite, the Iraqi Federal Court issued a ruling reinterpreting the meaning of the constitution to allow the candidate who did not win the largest bloc, Nouri al-Maliki, to remain in power. The U.S. was still an occupying power in Iraq when the Obama administration accepted this constitution-bending decision. The move paved the way for the disintegration of the Iraqi army in 2014 when faced with a small invading ISIS contingent from Syria.⁷⁵ Participation rates dropped in parliamentary elections in both federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).^{76,77} Parties increasingly relied on clientelistic incentives to drive Iraqis to the polls, such as promises of temporary and permanent employment within the state, cash handouts, blankets, and provisions of electrical gen-

⁷⁴ Author phone interview, March 25, 2026.

⁷⁵ For more on how al-Maliki's policies facilitated the occupation of a third of Iraqi territory in just two weeks by ISIS, see Anna Louise Strachan, “Factors Behind the Fall of Mosul to ISIL (Daesh) in 2014,” K4D, https://gsdrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/033_Factors-behind-the-fall-of-Mosul-in-2014.pdf

⁷⁶ Munqith Dagher, “Don't Be Deceived by Reported Electoral Turnout: Analyzing Iraq's Elections by the Numbers,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 30, 2025, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/dont-be-deceived-reported-electoral-turnout-analyzing-iraqs-elections-numbers>

⁷⁷ Winthrop Rodgers, “No Real Alternative: The Failure of Opposition Parties in Iraq's Kurdistan Region,” Middle East Institute, June 20, 2024, <https://mei.edu/publication/no-real-alternative-failure-opposition-parties-iraqs-kurdistan-region/>

erators for local communities. Since then, “the rules continuously changed to fit the desires of the most powerful,” said Hamza. In effect, he said, Iraq’s elite “removed the possibility of changing government through elections.”⁷⁸

The efforts of Iraqis to change the system from outside and within have failed to leave a lasting mark. In 2019-2020, millions of Iraqis took to the streets to demand the downfall of the ruling order. Iranian-backed militias and security forces violently repressed these protests, known as the Tishreen Uprising. In the 2021 elections, almost 50 candidates claiming to represent Tishreen ran for office, but they failed to enact change from within parliament due to their inexperience, divisions, and cooptation and silencing by the ruling parties.

Iraq now functions as what U.S. economist Douglass North and colleagues refer to as a “limited access order,”⁷⁹ a system in which a coalition of elites uses control of the state to restrict access to political and economic power, maintaining their dominance through a combination of legal manipulation, patronage, violence, and media control. This section examines the mechanisms by which Iraq’s political class excludes outsiders from power and demonstrates that Iraq’s political elite has no interest in reforming this system, despite its inability to cope with Iraq’s economic and security challenges, since it ensures their continued political dominance and profiteering.

Control of the State

Electoral Law

Iraq’s ruling parties have repeatedly modified the electoral law to disadvantage newcomers. The modified Sainte-Laguë system, reinstated in 2023, uses a first divisor of 1.7 rather than the standard 1.0, making the first seat in each district significantly harder for small parties to win.⁸⁰ Under the law passed in 2023, the electoral district was the entire province, i.e., the country was divided into 18 large electoral districts. The previous law, passed after the 2019-2020 Tishreen anti-regime uprising, created 83 smaller electoral districts. These changes to the law disproportionately benefited large, established parties and harmed independent candidates and smaller parties who were unable to afford a provincewide campaign.^{81,82}

Judicial Rulings Serving the Elite

The Federal Supreme Court (FSC) has repeatedly issued rulings based on dubious interpretations of the Iraqi Constitution that favored the pro-Iranian Shiite parties.^{83,84} In March 2010, the FSC ruled that the “largest bloc” entitled to form a government need not be the list that won the most votes but instead could be a postelection coalition.⁸⁵ This ruling shifted government-formation rights from Allawi’s Iraqiya list, which won 91 seats,

78 Author phone interview with Hamza, an Iraqi intellectual, March 25, 2026.

79 Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis, Steven B. Webb, and Barry R. Weingast, “Limited Access Orders in the Developing World: A New Approach to the Problems of Development,” Policy Research Working Paper No. 4359 (World Bank, 2007), <http://hdl.handle.net/10986/7341>

80 Next Century Foundation, “2025 Iraq Parliamentary Election: Between Representation and Control,” November 7, 2025, <https://www.nextcenturyfoundation.org/2025-iraq-parliamentary-election-between-representation-and-control/>

81 In the 2021 elections, four independents won seats in Najaf under the previous system; simulations show only one would have won under Sainte-Laguë. See Ashleigh Whelan and Mohanad Adnan, “Electoral Law: Signaling a Short-Lived Run for Iraq’s Independent MPs?,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 16, 2023 <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/electoral-law-signaling-short-lived-run-iraqs-independent-mps>

82 Erik Gustafson, “Iraq’s 2025 Elections: Stability at the Cost of Reform?,” Enabling Peace in Iraq Center, November 24, 2025, <https://enablingpeace.org/iraqs-2025-election-stability-at-the-cost-of-reform/>

83 Selin Uysal, “Making Sense of Iraq’s Politicized Supreme Court Rulings,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 4, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/making-sense-iraqs-politicized-supreme-court-rulings>

84 Sajad Jiyad, “The Fight for Political Supremacy in Iraq’s Judiciary,” Chatham House, February 17, 2025, <https://kalam.chathamhouse.org/articles/the-fight-for-political-supremacy-in-iraqs-judiciary/>

85 “Toward a New Compromise in Iraq?” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 22, 2026, <https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2025/12/toward-a-new-compromise-in-iraq>



A man checks electoral lists at a polling station in the Christian neighborhood of Ebil, Iraq, during parliamentary election in 2025. (Ismael Adnan/picture alliance via Getty Images)

to al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition with 89.⁸⁶ Another consequential decision of the court is more recent: In February 2022, the FSC's Ruling 16 stipulated that a two-thirds quorum was required to elect the president, an unprecedented interpretation that allowed the Coordination Framework to block Muqtada al-Sadr's majority government project simply by boycotting parliamentary sessions.^{87,88}

The ruling parties also leverage their sway over lower courts to file cases against political opponents who were convicted and jailed.⁸⁹ In Shiite-majority Iraq, where a single party is not dominant, some courts still act independently. Karrar, an activist in Basra described it thus: "If an Islamic party raises legal cases against members of a new party, the court may handle it properly, but if it is pressured by the parties, the court may detain him for a long time." On the other hand, if any Tishreeni politician or activist files a complaint against an MP from a traditional party, "even if there is an arrest warrant, it won't be implemented," stated Karrar.⁹⁰ The ruling parties are increasingly turning to the courts, filing complaints about ministers under laws prohibiting insults, slander, and defamation. Several Iraqi journalists, analysts, and Tishreeni activists have been arrested and charged under this law, including Haidar Zaki, Muhammad Na'an'a, and Yassin Majed, who were arrested and in some cases sentenced to prison terms for criticizing governmental figures.^{91,92,93,94}

In Iraqi Kurdistan and Anbar, which are dominated by single parties, political opponents experience repression of speech, jailing, and harassment. In

86 "The Question of the 'Largest Bloc,'" The Media Line, March 2026, <https://themedialine.org/mideast-mindset/the-question-of-the-largest-bloc/>

87 Haley Bobesine, "Iraq: A Crisis of Elite, Consensus-Based Politics Turns Deadly," Middle East Institute, September 15, 2022, <https://mei.edu/publication/iraq-crisis-elite-consensus-based-politics-turns-deadly/>

88 Kamil Munshid, "The Iraqi Judiciary: A Chronicle of Courts Mired in the Quagmire of Politics," Jummar Media, April 1, 2025, <https://jummarmedia/8091>

89 Author interviews with Iraqi activists and politicians in al-Anbar, the KRG, and Shia-majority areas of Iraq, March–April 2026.

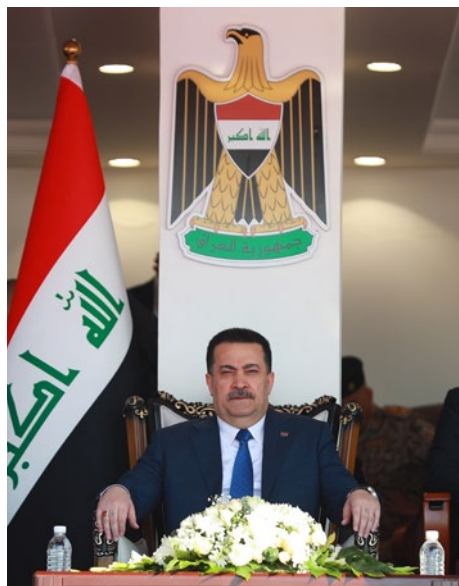
90 Author phone interview, April 5, 2026.

91 Dalshad Hussein, "Iraq's Impatience With Dissent," Al-Hurra, December 18, 2025, <https://alhurra.com/en/9119>.

92 "Armed force arrests political analyst for criticizing Iraqi Prime Minister on a TV program," *Al-Arab*, January 16, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/4748zdk5>

93 "Activist Yassin Bin Majid Sentenced to Three Years in Prison in Lawsuit Filed by Interior Minister," Iraq Observer, October 9, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/4ruaz3xz>

94 "Court Ruling Issued Against Media Personality Haider Zaki," Samarra Plus, May 12, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/2bkcw9df>



Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani observes the 105th Iraqi Army Day celebrations in Baghdad on Jan. 6, 2026. (Ameer Al-Mohammedawi/picture alliance via Getty Images)

Anbar, Muhammad al-Halbousi, the leader of the Taqqadum Party, uses his sway over the courts to bring legal cases against political opponents, such as Yazan Mash'an al-Juburi, and disqualify them from running in elections. He has also sent security forces to take the property of another candidate, Arkan al-Tarmouz.^{95,96,97,98}

In Iraqi Kurdistan, the two ruling parties do not co-govern but instead split their control over the territory, with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) controlling the courts, armed forces (Peshmerga), intelligence services, and police in Dahuk and Erbil and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) dominating Sulaymania institutions. KDP and PUK authorities utilize the Iraqi law banning defamation (as do authorities in Baghdad) but also leverage the 2008 KRG law to “prevent misuse of communication devices” to jail dissidents, including journalists, politicians, and activists.^{99,100,101,102}

Incapacitating Opposition MPs in Parliament

Traditional ruling parties control the parliaments of both the Iraqi federal government and the KRG parliament. In Baghdad, in 2021, al-Halbousi promised Tishreeni parties and MPs leadership positions in committees in exchange for voting for him, which some of them did, only for him to go back on his promise. Instead, Halbousi barred two Imtidad MPs from entering Parliament after they were attacked by an MP for the Asaeb al-Haqq militia and his security guards.¹⁰³ In 2019, al-Halbousi lifted the immunity of an MP suspected of corruption, in violation of parliamentary procedures. The MP, Talal al-Zouabi, happened to be a rival of al-Halbousi and ran against him for the speakership of the parliament.^{104,105}

Disqualifying Rivals via the Electoral Commission

The Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC), whose membership is distributed among ruling parties through the *muhassasa* (quota) system, has barred hundreds of candidates from elections.^{106,107} In the 2025 elections, more than 700 candidates were disqualified based on allegations of criminality, corruption, Baath Party ties, and violations of the vaguely phrased

95 “By Judicial Decision... ‘Yazan Mishaan al-Jubouri’ Permanently Out of the Electoral Race,” Shafaq News, September 18, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/bd83n8z2>

96 “Arkan al-Tarmouz Complains to the Interior Minister About Attempts to Block His Candidacy in Anbar: The Dominant Party Is Using Security Forces,” Al-Jeebal, June 4, 2025, <https://aljeebal.com/posts/6260>.

97 “Judiciary Issues Arrest and Search Warrants for the Sons of Arkan Khalaf Tarmouz,” Al-Anbar Satellite Channel, July 31, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/yxvj357x>

98 Arkan al-Tarmouz has a rich history of corruption, but corruption is endemic in Iraq, including among Taqaddum Party members and its leadership, which has not suffered consequences for it. See more in an episode of the Bashir Show, May 2, 2019, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sk-PlIsECBs>

99 “Kurdistan Region’s ‘Misuse of Communication Devices’ Law Has Become a Nightmare for Journalists,” Peregraf, August 31, 2021, <https://peregraf.com/en/investigation/3487>

100 “Iraq: Urgent Need for Free Speech Protection,” Human Rights Watch, June 15, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/15/iraq-urgent-need-free-speech-protection>

101 “GCHR’s Periodic Report on Human Rights Violations in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region,” Gulf Centre for Human Rights, March 18, 2025, <https://www.gc4hr.org/gchrs-periodic-report-on-human-rights-violations-in-the-iraqi-kurdistan-region/>

102 Author interview, April 4, 2026.

103 Azhar Al-Rubaie, “After Being Beaten and Humiliated by the ‘Coordination Framework’: Two Iraqi Opposition MPs Barred from Entering Parliament,” Daraj, November 16, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/2ewmmxw>

104 Fadel Al-Nashmi, “Immunity Lifted from Iraqi MP Accused of Corruption,” Asharq Al-Awsat, August 21, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/4y42nhy4>

105 Author phone interview, April 4, 2026.

106 Feyzullah Tuna Aygün, “Iraq’s Endless Electoral Law Debate,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 2, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraqs-endless-electoral-law-debate>

107 “The Centralisation of Authority Within Iraq’s Judiciary Undermines the Rule of Law,” London School of Economics, September 25, 2024, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2024/09/25/the-centralisation-of-authority-within-iraqs-judiciary-undermines-the-rule-of-law/>

requirement of “good conduct and reputation”¹⁰⁸ stipulated in Iraq’s electoral law.^{109,110}

Those excluded are often candidates who pose a genuine challenge to a candidate from an established party, be it Shiite, Sunni, or Kurdish.¹¹¹ Candidates linked to ruling parties are often reinstated after exclusion, while those from civil or opposition groups remain banned.¹¹² At the same time, the IHEC ignored a complaint filed by a group of Iraqi lawyers against the participation in elections of parties affiliated with militias since Article 9 of the Iraqi Constitution prohibits members of Iraq’s armed forces from running in elections.¹¹³ Thus, the formally independent electoral committee serves as a tool in the hands of the ruling parties to remove challengers.

Trading State Services and Jobs for Votes

Iraq’s public sector has become the primary mechanism for distributing patronage. According to former Finance Minister Fuad Hussein, the number of public sector employees and pensioners grew from 850,000 in 2003 to 6.5 million by 2019.¹¹⁴ In a 2025 interview, then-Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani confirmed handing out 700,000 new state sector jobs during his term in office, starting in 2022.¹¹⁵ Parties use their control of ministries and governorships to distribute jobs and state contracts in exchange for loyalty.^{116,117} Beyond employment, parties provide constituents with land plots, paved roads, updates to the electricity grid, and bureaucratic approvals in exchange for votes.^{118,119,120,121} Because opposition MPs lack sway inside the Iraqi state, they are unable to compete with the traditional parties that dominate the executive branch.¹²² According to the

108 An example of the use of the vague stipulation of a lack of “good conduct” is the IHEC’s ban on the Tishreeni MP Sajjad Salem from running in the 2025 elections. He was later reinstated following public outrage. The complaint against him, apparently originating from the Security Directorate of the Popular Mobilization Forces, the umbrella group for Iraq’s militias, was based on his statement that some of those who killed protesters in the 2019–2020 Tishreen protest movement operated Husseiniyat [halls for mourning the killing of Hussein, the third Shia Imam] and stands [mawakeb] distributing food and drink to the visitors of Hussein’s shrine in Karbala. Indeed, the militias responsible for killing hundreds of protesters in 2019–2020 openly run such Husseiniyat and stands. See “Exclusion of MP from Elections for the Second Time Sparks Controversy in Iraq,” Asharq Al-Awsat, October 8, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/3w69kxx7>

109 “Iraq’s Elections Under the Shadow of De-Baathification,” Shafaq News, August 26, 2025, <https://shafaq.com/en/Report/Iraq-s-Elections-under-the-Shadow-of-De-Baathification>

110 “Disqualified Candidates: Iraq’s Electoral Body Under Fire,” Shafaq News, August 13, 2025, <https://shafaq.com/en/Report/Disqualified-candidates-Iraq-s-electoral-body-under-fire>

111 Author phone interview with Ammar, an Iraqi journalist, April 6, 2026; author phone interview with Kawa, a former Kurdish member of the federal parliament, April 4, 2026; author phone interview with Karrar, an Iraqi activist based in Basra who was involved in several electoral campaigns, April 5, 2026.

112 “Iraq MPs Mull Election Boycott as Hundreds of Candidates Banned,” The New Arab, September 4, 2025, <https://www.newarab.com/news/iraq-mps-mull-election-boycott-hundreds-candidates-banned>

113 “Rare Complaint Over Exclusion of Iraqi Factions from Elections,” Asharq Al-Awsat, September 9, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/4rcpjdj>

114 “Politically Sanctioned Corruption and Barriers to Reform in Iraq,” Chatham House, June 17, 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/06/politically-sanctioned-corruption-and-barriers-reform-iraq/03-rethinking-iraq>

115 “Iraqi PM Says He’ll Reshape Economy if He Wins Second Term,” Bloomberg, November 7, 2025, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-11-07/iraqi-pm-says-he-ll-reshape-economy-if-he-wins-second-term>

116 “Corruption Is Strangling Iraq,” The Century Foundation, December 14, 2022, <https://tcf.org/content/report/corruption-is-strangling-iraq/>

117 Author phone interview with an activist based in Basra, April 5, 2026.

118 Hamid, a member of a Tishreeni political party, explained that the rise in the number of seats Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq won in the 2025 elections (27 seats, up from 17) stemmed from their dominance of the Iraqi state apparatus. “Asa’ib works politics in a smart way, they spent a lot of money on developing the party, they bought many votes. They hold important general-manager positions in the ministries. They can move things inside the state, because they have the militia’s backing; they implement contracts, hire people, so people follow who is most powerful.” Author phone interview, March 29, 2026.

119 “As Protests Explode, Iraq Must Get Serious About Reform,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 4, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/protests-explode-iraq-must-get-serious-about-reform>

120 Omar al-Jaffal and Mustafa Saadoun, “Post-2025 Elections in Iraq: Reproduction of Power or Entrenchment of Institutional Fragility?,” Arab Reform Initiative, February 26, 2026, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/post-2025-elections-in-iraq/>

121 “A Million Photos’ and Parties Open Their Coffers for Iraq’s Elections,” Asharq Al-Awsat, October 4, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/sdp35xu6>

122 Tishreeni political activist Hamid explained the difference between what an Asa’ib MP can achieve and a Tishreeni reformist one when approaching the state to advance the interests of a potential voter: “If an MP from Asa’ib wants to implement a project, the employees at the relevant ministry or municipality stand waiting for him,” ready to implement his orders, “and if a Tishreeni wants to enter, they may not even let him through the door. Same with getting a person out of prison: they can get people out and a Tishreeni MP can’t.” Author phone interview, March 29, 2026. Karrar, an activist from Basra, explained in an interview (April 5): “The Tishreeni MPs have no one inside the state, in security organs. This prevents the madani MPs from being able to assist their constituents. All the officials belong to traditional parties and they would purposefully block any attempts of these MPs to help their voters.”

2024 Arab Barometer survey, 80% of Iraqis believe that *wasta* (connections) are necessary to get a job and 83% believe bribes are necessary to obtain state employment. Equal shares (73%) report that each of these methods is necessary to obtain a legal document.¹²³

Ministers and governors also use their control of government institutions to garner votes, employing either rewards or punishments. Some employees are offered plots of land, monetary rewards, and paid vacations in exchange for their votes.¹²⁴ Alternatively, some ministries — particularly the ministries of defense and interior — face threats of being transferred to locations far from home if they do not vote for the party of the minister.¹²⁵ Ministers and governors also deploy ministry employees and government resources — vehicles, repair crews, and materials — to run electoral campaigns, canvass voters, and organize rallies on behalf of themselves.¹²⁶

The ballooning ranks of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), the umbrella of militias formally incorporated into state institutions in 2016, also serve as a source of votes. The PMF, which numbered about 60,000 members when the fighting against ISIS ended in 2017, had expanded to over 230,000 fighters by 2025.¹²⁷ The members of these militias are obligated to not only vote for the party affiliated with their militia but also to get the voting cards of their relatives at the threat of being fired if they do not deliver.^{128,129,130,131}

Control of Civil Society and Higher Education

The ruling parties have systematically captured institutions that might produce alternative elites. Universities have been staffed with party loyalists, particularly after the Tishreen protests.¹³² Naeem al-Aboudi, an ideological officer of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, was appointed minister of Higher Education in 2022.¹³³ He reinstated the Saddam-era "Intellectual Safety" system requiring ministry approval for all theses and research, blocking work that contradicts Iranian ideologies.¹³⁴ Labor law prohibits unions independent of the government-controlled General Federation of Iraqi Workers, while student unions outside the Kurdistan Region remain banned.¹³⁵

123 "Iraq Report," Arab Barometer VIII, December 2024, <https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/Iraq-Country-Report-EN.pdf>

124 Author interview with Iraqi journalist Ammar, April 6, 2026: "Ministers use WhatsApp groups with senior officials inside the ministry, like general directors and heads of departments, to track employees, to follow the voting. Those who vote get benefits, for example, five days of holiday, paid." Karrar, an activist from Basra, described the 2025 electoral campaign of Ziyad Ali Fadhill, the Iraqi minister of electricity, who ran in Basra: "He won many votes through giving benefits to the employees, especially in the months prior to the elections. He invested a lot in getting electricity to Basra, to the point there would be shortages due to the high load of electricity" diverted from other areas. He gave "monetary rewards (mukafaat), pieces of state land, converting temporary contract workers to permanent workers. He was spoiling the employees to get their vote." Author phone interview, April 5, 2026.

125 "Ruling Parties Manipulate Voter Choices in Iraqi Elections," Al-Arab, November 1, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/47st36xe>

126 Author phone interview with Iraqi journalist Ammar, April 6, 2026; author interviews (2022–2023) with Sadrist Current officials in Baghdad, Amara, and Basra, who admitted to the use of Saraya al-Salam, the armed wing of the Current, to organize electoral rallies and run election campaigns.

127 "Iraq: Ballooning Numbers of 'Popular Mobilization Forces' Personnel," Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, January 23, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/5anst46a>

128 "Official: Popular Mobilization Forces members forced to bring 10 voter cards under threat of dismissal," Al-Deerah, June 4, 2026, <https://alderah.news/4091-10.html>

129 "Leaks Reveal Vote-Buying and Threats in Upcoming Iraqi Elections," Kurdistan 24, June 8, 2026, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/ar/story/844580>

130 "Iraq: Tribal Groups Force Members to Vote for Their Candidates in Parliamentary Elections," Daraj, September 7, 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/mrxkvzfe>

131 "Electoral Cards and Party Directives... Fears of 'Popular Mobilization Forces' Violations in Iraq," Al-Ain News, May 23, 2025, <https://al-ain.com/article/iraq-sudan-elections-hashd-al-shaabi>

132 Haydar al-Shakeri, "Five Years On: Legacy of Iraq's Tishreen Protest Movement," The New Arab, October 28, 2024, <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/five-years-legacy-iraqs-tishreen-protest-movement>

133 "Injecting New Blood: Militias' Gradual Takeover of Iraqi Higher Education," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/injecting-new-blood-militias-gradual-takeover-iraqi-higher-education-popular>

134 Ibid.

135 Iraqi Civil Society Solidarity Initiative, "Masaha Initiative Statement," 2022, <https://www.iraqicivilsociety.org/archives/13669>

Controlling the Media

The Iraqi Communications and Media Commission (CMC), now controlled by Coordination Framework affiliates, restricts press freedoms and the ability of voices opposed to the ruling order from reaching Iraqis, encouraging self-censorship.¹³⁶ Al-Sudani led an intense crackdown on freedom of speech in Iraq after becoming prime minister in 2022. He used the CMC to ban multiple hosts of political TV shows, critics, analysts, and journalists from appearing in the media.^{137,138,139,140} Ahead of the 2025 elections, the CMC pressured social media giants Facebook and TikTok to take down pages and accounts that publish content critical of the ruling parties and pro-Iranian militias.¹⁴¹ Repression of free speech further intensified in 2026, as the CMC banned six different journalists and commentators in the span of just two months.¹⁴² In late March 2026, the CMC announced that digital content would be subject to restrictions and supervision identical to the restrictions placed on traditional Iraqi media outlets, encouraging online content creators to self-censor.¹⁴³

In the KRG, the KDP and PUK use the intelligence, Asayiş (police), and courts, which are under their control, to repress media freedoms.^{144,145,146} For example, the NRT TV channel, affiliated with opposition political party The New Generation Movement, has been shuttered repeatedly and journalists arrested by security forces loyal to the two parties.^{147,148,149,150} They pressure private companies to avoid placing advertisements with opposition-aligned outlets to make them more costly to operate. Kawa, a Kurdish opposition politician, said that “this is another form of silencing you and punishing you.”¹⁵¹

Political Money

All the ruling parties in Iraq have garnered immense wealth through various schemes, including awarding contracts to companies associated with the party, diverting funds from the public sector through senior officials, access to dollars at a rate lower than the black-market rate, and investments in projects inside and outside of Iraq. In the case of militia parties, they’ve also amassed wealth through extortion from private citizens and

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- 136 “Profile: Communications and Media Commission,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 15, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-communications-and-media-commission>
- 137 “Iraqi Media Commission Silences Critics of the PMF by Barring Media Outlets from Hosting Them,” **Al-Arab**, June 6, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/2te77cx7>
- 138 “Iraqi Media and Communications prevent the appearance of media professionals and issue a warning to a third and an Arab channel (update),” *Shafaq News*, March 29, 2026, <https://tinyurl.com/4fpeefdn>
- 139 “Fines and Bans on Appearing: Media Commission Imposes Sanctions on Two Satellite Channels, a Politician, a Media Personality, and an Activist,” *Today News Iraq*, January 25, 2026, <https://www.todaynewsiq.net/108906--html>
- 140 “Media Commission Appeals Board Overturns Decision to Ban Salam Adel from Appearing for Three Months,” *+964 Media*, May 26, 2025, <https://964media.com/555939/>
- 141 “Facebook, X, and TikTok Restrict Iraqi Accounts After State Pressure,” *The New Arab*, October 22, 2025, <https://www.newarab.com/news/social-media-giants-restrict-iraqi-accounts-after-state-pressure>
- 142 “CMC Bans Political Commentators and Warns Media Outlets,” *Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights*, April 6, 2026, <https://iohriq.org/191-.html>
- 143 “Communications and Media Commission Confirms Digital Content Is Subject to Media Broadcasting Regulations,” *Baghdad Today*, March 28, 2026, <https://baghdadtoday.news/296046-.html>
- 144 “Press Freedom Under Strain in Iraq Amid Arrests and Intimidation,” *The Amargi*, January 9, 2026, <https://theamargi.com/posts/press-freedom-under-strain-in-iraq-amid-arrests-and-intimidation>
- 145 “Iraq: Authorities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq Must Immediately End Their Assault on Press Freedom,” *Amnesty International*, May 2, 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/05/iraq-authorities-in-the-kurdistan-region-of-iraq-must-immediately-end-their-assault-on-press-freedom/>
- 146 “300+ Press Freedom Violations in Kurdistan in 2025, Watchdog Says,” *Shafaq News*, January 17, 2026, <https://shafaq.com/en/Kurdistan/300-press-freedom-violations-in-Kurdistan-in-2025-watchdog-says>
- 147 “NRT Broadcaster Shutdown in Iraqi Kurdistan Reveals Brewing Political Tensions, Massive Press Crackdown,” *The New Arab*, February 5, 2026, <https://www.newarab.com/news/nrt-channel-shut-iraqi-kurdistan-press-crackdown-worsens>
- 148 “Iraqi Kurdish Authorities Shutter NRT Offices in Erbil and Duhok; 1 Journalist Still Held,” *Committee to Protect Journalists*, August 20, 2020, <https://cpj.org/2020/08/iraqi-kurdish-authorities-shutter-nrt-offices-in-erbil-and-duhok-1-journalist-still-held/>
- 149 “The Kurdistan Regional Government Halts Local Broadcasting of the NRT Channel,” *Iraqi Civil Society Solidarity Initiative*, August 28, 2017, <https://www.iraqicivilsociety.org/archives/7718>
- 150 “Iraqi Kurdistan Govt Takes Independent NRT TV Off Air,” *The Insight International*, February 15, 2015, <https://theinsightinternational.com/iraqi-kurdistan-govt-takes-independent-nrt-tv-off-air-2015-02-15>
- 151 Author phone interview with Kawa, an opposition Kurdish politician, April 4, 2026.

businesses, theft and smuggling of oil and, drug running, and sale of looted goods. Some of these funds go into the pockets of the party leadership and militiamen, while other funds are invested in electoral campaigns and vote-buying.^{152,153,154,155,156,157,158,159}

Vote-Buying

Vote-buying is endemic in Iraq. Prices for electoral cards in the 2025 elections ranged from \$50 to \$500 depending on location and candidate.^{160,161} The mechanism involves brokers, known as *rakaez*, taking a commitment from voters, at times paying half up front and half after confirmation, often by photographing the ballot inside the voting booth.^{162,163} Vote-buying skyrocketed in the 2025 elections, with candidates spending millions of dollars to win seats.¹⁶⁴ The total spent by candidates to purchase votes or motivate voters in the 2025 election cycle ranged between \$1.5 billion and \$3 billion, according to different estimates.¹⁶⁵

In the 2025 elections, the ruling parties relied extensively on a legal form of vote-buying, alongside the “traditional” illegal ones of exchanging goods and cash for a vote. The ruling parties hired about 2 million election “observers” who oversaw the casting of votes of a total of 12 million voters.¹⁶⁶ Those individuals were hired to cast their vote and guarantee the votes of their family members for the hiring party.¹⁶⁷ According to a former Arab Iraqi MP discussing the sums needed for the 2025 parliamentary elections, “To be able to run, you need at least \$3 million, and this money comes from the coffers of the party.” Due to disagreements with the party, the former MP lost its support. “If I want to run as an independent, I need to spend on my own. I have this sum, but it’s personal money, I want to spend it on my family, my children’s education.”¹⁶⁸

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- 152 Michael Knights, “Iraqi Oil and the Iran Threat Network,” CTC Sentinel, April 2025, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/iraqi-oil-and-the-iran-threat-network/>
- 153 Michael Knights, “Rise of the E-Militias: Designated Terrorist Groups Infest Iraq’s Digital Economy,” CTC Sentinel, November 2025, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/rise-of-the-e-militias-designated-terrorist-groups-infest-iraqs-digital-economy/>
- 154 Bilal Wahab, “Rules of the Iraqi Game,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 5, 2017, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/rules-iraqi-game>
- 155 Khaled Kassab, “The Militia Economy in the Middle East,” Al-Majalla, February 9, 2024, <https://en.majalla.com/node/310276/business-economy/militia-economy-middle-east>
- 156 Haydar al-Shakeri, “The Underbelly of Iraq’s ‘Economic Boom,’” Institute of Regional and International Studies (IRIS), September 2023, <https://avis.edu.krd/iris/publications/underbelly-iraqs-economic-boom>
- 157 Elizabeth Tsurkov, “Iran’s Fair-Weather Friends,” Foreign Affairs, March 9, 2026, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/iran/irans-fair-weather-friends>
- 158 Ali Muhammad, “Iraqi Economic Offices: Bolstering the Financial Coffers of Parties and Militias,” Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, February 15, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/yfj9ktzv>
- 159 Mashriq Reisan, “Party Economics Dominate Ministries: Will Demonstrations by Educators Reignite Protests in Iraq?” Al-Quds Al-Arabi, April 12, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/574hjpec>
- 160 “\$500 per Card... The Vote-Buying Machine Is Turning,” *Al-Akhbar*, October 6, 2025, <https://www.al-akhbar.com/arab/862466/>
- 161 “A Million Photos’ and Parties Open Their Coffers for Iraq’s Elections,” Asharq Al-Awsat, October 4, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/sdp35xu6>
- 162 “Iraq Elections: Vote-Buying Rife Under the Cover of Voter Cards,” Sky News Arabia, July 6, 2021, <https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1449470>
- 163 Omar al-Jaffal and Mustafa Saadoun, “Post-2025 Elections in Iraq: Reproduction of Power or Entrenchment of Institutional Fragility?,” Arab Reform Initiative, February 26, 2026, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/post-2025-elections-in-iraq/>
- 164 Elizabeth Tsurkov, “Why Iran-Backed Militias Did Well in Iraq’s Elections,” Al-Majalla, November 25, 2025, <https://en.majalla.com/node/328431/politics/why-iran-backed-militias-did-well-iraqs-elections>
- 165 Omar al-Jaffal and Mustafa Saadoun, “Post-2025 Elections in Iraq: Reproduction of Power or Entrenchment of Institutional Fragility?,” Arab Reform Initiative, February 26, 2026, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/post-2025-elections-in-iraq/>
- 166 Munqith Dagher, “Don’t Be Deceived by Reported Electoral Turnout: Analyzing Iraq’s Elections by the Numbers,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 30, 2025, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/dont-be-deceived-reported-electoral-turnout-analyzing-iraqs-elections-numbers>
- 167 Elizabeth Tsurkov, “Why Iran-Backed Militias Did Well in Iraq’s Elections,” Al-Majalla, November 25, 2025, <https://en.majalla.com/node/328431/politics/why-iran-backed-militias-did-well-iraqs-elections>
- 168 Author phone interview, November 1, 2025.

Buying Politicians

The established ruling parties buy off politicians who may pose a threat to them. When an activist, tribal figure, writer, or journalist becomes prominent in a locality — even before announcing their intention to run for office — ruling parties will approach them and attempt to recruit them to run for a parliamentary seat or offer to serve as mediators, buying votes on their behalf (“*rakiza*”). Those who refuse are seen as potential challengers who are then threatened and harassed.¹⁶⁹

Reformists who manage to reach parliament are subject to the same approaches. Many of the 48 Tishreeni MPs who won seats in 2021 were bought off by the traditional parties. Diyaa’, a young Iraqi intellectual from eastern Iraq, said about the Tishreen MPs, “They were tempted by the offers of competing parties, they behaved in a clientelistic manner, just like Iraqi voters do.”¹⁷⁰ With the exception of the Imtidad Party, which won nine seats, all other candidates ran as independent MPs and needed to either unite as a bloc, which they failed to do, or join the ruling parties. Hamza explained, “Individual MPs can’t operate on their own. They had to align themselves with the bigger blocs for their political survival, so you have to give up on political slogans and positions of Tishreen. Many of the MPs were co-opted” by the ruling parties.¹⁷¹

Vote-buying also occurs inside Parliament, particularly the votes of MPs for the position of speaker of parliament and prime minister. Kawa, a former Kurdish member of the federal parliament in Baghdad, said, “when you vote for a certain nominee, you get offered millions of dollars, but also threats from the other side and getting killed.” According to him, when al-Maliki and Haidar al-Abadi competed for the premiership in 2018, “they would give hundreds of thousands of dollars to MPs” to vote for their candidate. In 2018, there was a competitive race for the position of speaker of parliament. Kawa stated that “Halbousi got his position through paying hundreds of thousands of dollars from each MP who voted for him.”¹⁷²

Buying Media

The ruling parties have used their funds to establish loyalist TV channels, such as al-Furat (Hikma), al-Ghadir (Badr), al-Itijah (Kataeb Hezbollah), al-Ahed (Asaeb Ahl al-Haq), Afaq (al-Maliki), and Rudaw (KDP), among many others.¹⁷³ Other channels started by private investors sell specific shows or hosts to parties in exchange for money, and even the entire channel for a monthly rate.¹⁷⁴

Increasingly, parties have begun to invest in social media accounts, bot networks, and loyal influencers. These outlets spread disinformation to besmirch their political opponents, whether from traditional parties (unless they possess a militia) or reformist candidates.^{175,176} Hamid, an activist in a Tishreeni political party, explained the effect of the social media outlets and

169 Author interview with Nasim, an activist living in al-Anbar, March 31, 2026. He described an acquaintance of his who intended to run with Muthanna al-Samarrai’s party but then switched to al-Halbousi’s rival party, having been offered better benefits by al-Halbousi. Author interview with Karrar, an activist from Basra, April 5, 2026. He described activist friends in the city being approached by parties, which “offer them millions to promote their candidates. Anyone whose star shines gets offered incredibly tempting offers.”

170 Author phone interview with Diyaa’, March 30, 2026.

171 Author phone interview with Hamza, March 25, 2026.

172 Author phone interview with Kawa, April 4, 2026.

173 Michael Knights, Crispin Smith, and Hamdi Malik, “Discordance in the Iran Threat Network in Iraq: Militia Competition and Rivalry,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, October 2021, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/discordance-in-the-iran-threat-network-in-iraqi-militia-competition-and-rivalry/>

174 Author phone interview with Ammar, an Iraqi journalist, April 6, 2026, and with Kawa, a Kurdish opposition politician, April 4, 2026; author interview over an encrypted messaging app with an investor in an Iraqi TV channel, December 2025.

175 Winthrop Rogers, “Ahead of Elections, Iraqi Kurdistan’s ‘Shadow Media’ Ramps Up,” Inkstick Media, August 28, 2024, <https://inkstickmedia.com/ahead-of-elections-iraqi-kurdistan-shadow-media-ramps-up/>

176 Author phone interview, April 4, 2026.

networks run by the Iranian-backed militias: “People who oppose the militias are afraid of expressing their opinion because of electronic armies of the militias. They have many content creators; they have studios that create content that is in line with their ideology. The young Tishreenis are affected by social media and these pro-militia pages.”¹⁷⁷

The Militias’ Role in Preserving Elite Power

Assassination and Intimidation

Pro-Iranian militias have systematically assassinated activists and critics. Prominent victims include Hisham al-Hashimi, Ihab al-Wazni, Safaa al-Saray, Hamza Dahamat, and Reham Yaqoub.¹⁷⁸ The confessed killer of al-Hashimi, an Interior Ministry officer named Ahmed Hamidawi al-Kinani who was hired by Kataeb Hezbollah, was exonerated in March 2024 by the militia-influenced judiciary.¹⁷⁹ Protest leaders who survived have been forced into hiding or exile.¹⁸⁰ The violence exacted by the militias to crush Tishreen protests, with more than 600 killed and 20,000 injured, continues to deter disgruntled Iraqis from protesting.^{181,182}

A Fractured, Inexperienced, Corruptible Opposition

The odds were stacked against the 50 or so independent, pro-reform MPs who managed to enter the Iraqi parliament in the 2021 elections, buoyed by voters supportive of the Tishreen movement and speaking in its name. The Tishreen MPs were ultimately marginalized by the ruling political parties.

Still, reformist MPs have agency. These MPs and the Tishreeni party, Imtidad, failed to form a unified bloc, which would have given them greater ability to influence parliamentary proceedings and at least try to hold the ruling parties to account.¹⁸³ These divisions stemmed from successful efforts of the ruling parties to buy off MPs within these parties and personal and ideological disagreements between the MPs and lack of experience¹⁸⁴ in building coalitions and political parties.¹⁸⁵ Diyaa’ reflected on the failure of Tishreeni MPs to unite, saying, “among the 48 Tishreeni MPs, many weren’t liberal, not seeking the secularization of the state. Some of them didn’t have a political identity: Because of the political situation and anger created by Tishreen, they were able to enter parliament. They didn’t have a joint vision.

177 Author phone interview, March 29, 2026.

178 “The Ongoing Assassinations of Iraqi Activists,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 1, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/ongoing-assassinations-iraqi-activists>

179 “Hisham al-Hashimi’s Killer Escapes Justice,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 22, 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hisham-al-hashimis-killer-escapes-justice>

180 “Iraq’s Protest Leaders Forced Into Hiding by Pro-Iran Militia Death Threats,” Arab News, May 11, 2021, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1857306/middle-east>

181 Haley Bobesine, “Iraq: A Crisis of Elite, Consensus-Based Politics Turns Deadly,” Middle East Institute, September 15, 2022, <https://mei.edu/publication/iraq-crisis-elite-consensus-based-politics-turns-deadly/>

182 Author interviews with Tishreeni activists, 2021–2023 and 2025–2026.

183 Ashleigh Whelan and Mohanad Adnan, “Electoral Law: Signaling a Short-Lived Run for Iraq’s Independent MPs?,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 16, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/electoral-law-signaling-short-lived-run-iraqs-independent-mps>

184 Multiple interviewees pointed to the political immaturity of the Tishreeni MPs who entered parliament in the 2021 elections. Hamza, the Iraqi public intellectual, assessed that “Imtidad was poorly organized. They set up the movement to win an election. The movement wasn’t established as a political party, one of whose activities is to run for elections. They didn’t have political expertise on how to run a political party, but on how to protest. These are different skills and it takes time to develop them. They made promises that aren’t realistic to their electoral base. They didn’t develop the institutions of the party to hold off all the pressure” placed on them by the traditional ruling parties and their base. Author phone interview, March 25, 2026.

185 Author interviews with Iraqi civil society activists, journalists, and intellectuals, March–April 2026. Diyaa’, an Iraqi intellectual, explained in an interview with the author (March 30, 2026) one of the structural problems facing the Tishreen-affiliated parties: “The parties that were formed after Tishreen had a structural problem in their formation. The party should have an identity, but the parties after Tishreen didn’t have one. They established parties based on reaction to the ruling party. This is a structural failing. They bring in members not based on an identity, so people don’t remain committed to it. These parties would recruit members who are furious and want revenge against the ruling system. When the anger subsides, people leave the party.”

This significantly contributed to their inability to form a bloc and helped the ruling parties to divide them.”¹⁸⁶

By 2025, Imtidad did not compete; its former MPs who ran individually saw their combined votes collapse from 236,000 to just over 20,000.^{187,188}

IX. The Sunnis of Lebanon

The Path to Marginalization

The status of Lebanon’s Sunnis is an excellent gauge for the direction of Lebanese politics, and its trajectory will have important implications for Lebanon’s trajectory and U.S. interests.

The case of Lebanon’s Sunnis is complicated, partly due to the structure of Lebanon itself, which makes the country somewhat distinct in the region. For one, Lebanon does not have a majority sect. Its main sects, Sunnis, Shiites, and Maronite Christians, are roughly equal¹⁸⁹ in number. Syria and Iraq saw decades of minoritarian Baathist rule that created specific pathologies in politics and society. Foreign invasion in Iraq and a civil war in Syria brought down both regimes, but some of the exclusionary pathologies of the Baathist regimes persisted. The minority-majority dynamics created specific problems unique to those polities, and they pose specific policy challenges that do not map to Lebanon.

Sunnis constitute by far the majority¹⁹⁰ sect of the region, but they can only be understood as one of several minorities in the Lebanese context. They are best analyzed not in opposition to a repressive majority but in competition with other sects, especially the Lebanese Shiites who have emerged as the most powerful sect in the country under Hezbollah. This is not the first time the Sunnis find themselves lagging a rival. This same dynamic with Lebanon’s Christians essentially triggered Lebanon’s civil war¹⁹¹ (1975-1990). To understand the Sunnis’ current marginalization, we need to examine their path since that war.

The postwar arrangement in 1990 granted the Sunnis more formal power¹⁹² by enhancing the prerogatives of the prime minister position, historically designated for Sunnis. In reality, the emerging constellation was more complicated. Rafik Hariri emerged as a postwar Sunni hero and influential prime minister, drawing on his personal fortune and deep relations¹⁹³ with France, the United States, and Saudi Arabia. However, this did not translate into Sunni dominance in Lebanon. Hafez al-Assad’s Syria, which controlled the country, made sure Hariri and the Sunnis were contained. Iranian support for the Shiite Hezbollah grew, while Syria cultivated President Emile Lahoud to block¹⁹⁴ Hariri’s policies. Indeed, when Hariri proved troublesome to the Syrian regime, it had him killed with Hezbollah’s help. His assassination on Feb. 14, 2005, sparked Sunni-Christian-Druze mass mobilization against

¹⁸⁶ Author phone interview, March 30, 2026.

¹⁸⁷ “Iraq 2025 Election: Reform Candidates Pushed Out by a System That Rejects Change,” Chatham House, December 5, 2025, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/12/iraq-2025-election-reform-candidates-pushed-out-system-rejects-change>

¹⁸⁸ Author phone interview, March 29, 2026.

¹⁸⁹ Minority Rights Group, “Lebanon,” updated December 2025, <https://minorityrights.org/country/lebanon/>

¹⁹⁰ BBC News, “Sunnis and Shia in the Middle East,” December 19, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25434060>

¹⁹¹ William L. Ochsenswald, Paul Kingston, and The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “Lebanese Civil War,” Encyclopaedia Britannica, last updated March 17, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Lebanese-Civil-War>

¹⁹² Joseph Bahout, “The Unraveling of Lebanon’s Taif Agreement: Limits of Sect-Based Power Sharing,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 16, 2016, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2016/05/the-unraveling-of-lebanons-taif-agreement-limits-of-sect-based-power-sharing>

¹⁹³ Encyclopaedia of World Biography, s.v. “Hariri, Rafic,” Encyclopaedia.com, accessed July 13, 2026, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/hariri-rafic>

¹⁹⁴ Neil MacFarquhar, “Behind Lebanon Upheaval, 2 Men’s Fateful Clash,” *New York Times*, March 20, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/20/world/middleeast/behind-lebanon-upheaval-2-mens-fateful-clash.html>

Syrian dominance of Lebanese politics and international outrage, triggering the pullout¹⁹⁵ of Syrian occupying forces from Lebanon in April 2005 (albeit not the end of its intelligence and security presence there).

Hariri's murder did not end a mythical era of Sunni dominance since that never existed, but it did plunge the community into crisis. To Sunnis, Lebanon without Hariri was not navigable, such was his stature and presence in public life and the community. However, the Lebanese Sunnis had not been mobilized as a sect, nor did they have any strong sense of belonging to a unified political community, as Hariri was not a sectarian leader in the traditional Lebanese mold. This placed them in stark contrast to the increasingly mobilized Shiites, whom Hezbollah had given a strong communal identity as a sect including inside Lebanon's institutions.¹⁹⁶

Hariri's killing triggered Lebanon's first Sunni mobilization around his assassination at the hands of the country's main Shiite group, Hezbollah, which had managed to monopolize Shiite political life. A Sunni identity emerged in opposition to Hezbollah. Leading this Sunni mobilization was Hariri's son Saad, who took an aggressive stance¹⁹⁷ against his father's killers in Hezbollah and Syria. Buoyed by victimization and a surge of Western and Arab support, this Sunni current challenged Hezbollah in political institutions and championed the establishment of a "Special Tribunal" to investigate Hariri's murder, which was a threat to Hezbollah.

As the March 14 coalition led by Hariri continued to press for the Special Tribunal, Hezbollah and the Syrian regime adopted a deliberate strategy of reducing the number of anti-Hezbollah officials inside Lebanese state institutions through a string of assassinations, attempting to derail the Tribunal and demoralize the new Sunni movement. This campaign was not confined to Sunnis, with Christians and Druze targeted as well. However, the Sunnis saw this as a Shiite-driven assassination campaign targeting their own leadership.¹⁹⁸

Sunni victimization buoyed the pro-Hariri camp until May 2008, when a pro-Hariri Cabinet dismantled Hezbollah's independent fiber optic network¹⁹⁹ and replaced a pro-Hezbollah security chief.²⁰⁰ The militia responded by attacking²⁰¹ a series of media and political positions aligned with Hariri. Hezbollah fighters also took over Sunni commercial districts, loudly announcing their presence and harassing civilians. Up to 110 people were killed, and the anti-Hezbollah coalition abrogated its decisions, agreeing²⁰² instead to grant Hezbollah a veto over Cabinet decisions.

The May 2008 events were the most consequential spate of violence in shaping the post-2005 order in Lebanon. They cemented Hezbollah's dominance of the Lebanese political system and the humiliation and marginalization of the Sunnis, plunging them into a political crisis and affirming their exclusion from Lebanese policymaking. From then on, Lebanese politics would be defined by Hezbollah dominance (with Shiite backing) and Sunni marginalization. During this period, Shiites tended to champion Hezbollah

195 Issam Kayssi, "Where March 14 Came Up Short," Diwan (blog), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 14, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2025/03/where-march-14-succeeded-and-failed>

196 Lina Khatib, "How Holding Sway Is Institutionalized and Securitized," in *How Hezbollah Holds Sway over the Lebanese State* (London: Chatham House, June 2021), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/06/how-hezbollah-holds-sway-over-lebanese-state/06-how-holding-sway-institutionalized-and>

197 David Schenker, "The Murdered Fathers Club," *Weekly Standard*, December 19, 2009, republished by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/murdered-fathers-club>

198 Interviews by authors with local Sunni leadership in Beirut

199 "Lebanon Told Allies of Hezbollah's Secret Network, WikiLeaks Shows," *Guardian*, December 5, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/05/lebanon-warned-allies-hezbollah-telecoms>

200 Joshua Hammer, "Precarious Lebanon," *Smithsonian Magazine*, July 2008, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/precocious-lebanon-8822/>

201 Ramzi Abou Ismail, "Sixteen Years Later, May Is Still Dark," *Now Lebanon*, May 9, 2024, <https://nowlebanon.com/sixteen-years-later-may-is-still-dark/>

202 Encyclopedia Britannica, "Hassan Nasrallah," accessed July 13, 2026, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hassan-Nasrallah>

and perceive themselves as ascendant. By contrast, Sunnis saw themselves as humiliated by Shiite military power to which they had no answer.

The Implications of Exclusion

Several noteworthy consequences emerged from Sunni exclusion in Lebanon that are relevant for U.S. policy. One phenomenon is the rise of Sunni Islamist²⁰³ militant groups in Lebanon that sought to fill the gap and briefly challenged the state (albeit with much less confidence and success than Hezbollah). These introduced a potential destabilizing element. Elsewhere such as in Iraq and Syria, Sunni militancy came to pose a grave threat to the existing order. Fortunately for Lebanon, where the United States still had equities in the security forces, this threat never fully took off. However, this was not owing to any attempts to bring Sunnis back into the fold but rather the strength of the traditional urban notable families that had always moderated²⁰⁴ Sunni politics and incentivized supporters away from violence.

The Sunnis of Lebanon did not have a militia, Islamist or otherwise, and except for their flirtation²⁰⁵ with Palestinian militant groups in the civil war, no history of wholesale militant communal mobilization. Militants were further kept down by Hezbollah's infiltration or cooptation²⁰⁶ of Lebanese security forces in their focus on rooting out Sunni militants (while tolerating Shiite ones). U.S. support fit the era of obsessive focus on Sunni militants everywhere at the expense for appreciation of the inclusionary context that sprouted these movements.

Thus, no Sunni Islamist threat emerged, but only because of incidental circumstances, some more brittle than others. That did not, however, mean that Sunni marginalization in Lebanon was harmless. The group coalesced into a pro-U.S. orientation²⁰⁷ after Hariri's assassination, making for natural allies with Washington. Unlike many other sectarian leaders in the region, this sentiment was not greatly out of sync with Sunni popular sentiment during the standoff with Hezbollah. Points of contention remained, such as U.S. support for Israel and the invasion of Iraq, but this did not translate into broader hostility. Opinions only began to shift in May 2008, when the United States was perceived as abandoning the Sunnis to Hezbollah's mercies. The marginalization of Sunnis and their legitimate leadership therefore deprived the United States of a key ally in a crucial country, made more valuable by its natural extension into the broader Sunni Arab world.

The United States was not the only party that lost a valuable ally as Sunni power disintegrated in Lebanon. In recent years and especially since the emergence of Iranian power after the invasion of Iraq, many Sunni Gulf Arab countries had come to see Lebanon as a frontline state with Iran. To that end, Saudi Arabia in particular had invested financially and politically in Saad al-Hariri's anti-Hezbollah coalition. Eventually, Hariri's camp had to accept a series of humiliating political compromises with Hezbollah,²⁰⁸ essentially deferring to the party's strategic agenda in the face of its humiliation in the May 2008 fighting. This naturally lowered the value of Hariri to Saudi

203 Babak Dehghanpisheh and Suzan Haidamous, "Closer Ties Emerge Between Sunni Militants from Lebanon and Syria, Officials Say," Washington Post, January 26, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/closer-ties-emerge-between-sunni-militants-from-lebanon-and-syria-officials-say/2013/01/26/451f0bec-66f9-11e2-9e1b-07db1d2ccd5b_story.html

204 Hassan Mneimneh, "Sunni Lebanon: An 'Oddity' at Risk," Fikra Forum, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 8, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sunni-lebanon-oddity-risk>

205 Al Majalla, "Timeline: The Rise and Fall of Sunni Influence in Lebanon," last updated December 13, 2023, <https://en.majalla.com/node/306181/politics/timeline-rise-and-fall-sunni-influence-lebanon>

206 Lina Khatib, "Influence over Military and Security Institutions," in *How Hezbollah Holds Sway over the Lebanese State* (London: Chatham House, June 2021), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/06/how-hezbollah-holds-sway-over-lebanese-state/05-influence-over-military-and-security>

207 Hassan Mneimneh, "Sunni Lebanon: An 'Oddity' at Risk," Fikra Forum, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 8, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sunni-lebanon-oddity-risk>

208 Now Lebanon, "Lebanon's national-unity cabinet formed," November 9, 2009, <https://web.archive.org/web/20091122192633/http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArticleDetails.aspx?ID=125341>

Arabia, which withdrew support and humiliated him by temporarily detaining²⁰⁹ him in Riyadh in 2017 and forcing his resignation from a Cabinet that included Hezbollah. While Saudi Arabia cannot be singlehandedly blamed for the decimation of Sunni political participation, this trend highlighted how Sunni exclusion decreased U.S. geopolitical options and pro-U.S. alliances in MENA against a crucial rival, even as Hezbollah continued to receive robust support from Iran.

Sunni marginalization also removed the moderating effects of pluralism on the tenor of Lebanese politics, in this case allowing the flourishing of a specific form of Iranian-backed Shiite militancy that ultimately triggered an open-ended Israeli war in Lebanon and allowed Iran inroads into every facet of Lebanese life. The decimation of Sunni politics by necessity involved the hollowing out of Lebanon's institutions, leaving the country with little means of opposing Hezbollah, even as Sunni Prime Minister Nawaf Salam made a series of Cabinet decisions targeting its militia. The Lebanese Armed Forces, fearing internal sectarian strife, have proven unwilling²¹⁰ to confront Hezbollah.

These failures have enduring relevance. Lebanon's post-2008 balances of power have been rattled due to the 2024 and 2026 Israel-Hezbollah wars, which have left Hezbollah degraded by a war caused by the very political imbalance this analysis describes. The question of Hezbollah's arms is now at the center of Lebanese policy as Israel is fighting an open-ended war against it. The Sunni prime minister has taken a hard line against Hezbollah and has injected new relevance into the office. Whether this is squandered is partly up to the United States, and whether it treats sectarian inclusion as a core strategic interest that can be wielded against adversaries.

X. Case Study Conclusions

Syria

The Druze of Suwayda are caught between two types of exclusion from the central government and repressive rule under al-Hijri. They are open to a deal that would solve this, but they cannot shape one. What is needed is pressure on Damascus toward genuine reconciliation: an apology to community, prosecution of those responsible, and drawing on lessons from the autonomy granted to Hasakah. The United States and Israel should jointly state they oppose an independent Druze state and press al-Hijri to accept Druze-run local security alongside state institutions.

Iraq

Iraq's political elite have constructed a comprehensive system of exclusion that operates through legal manipulation of electoral rules, captured judicial institutions, control of the electoral commission, patronage-based employment, media restrictions, and violence. This system lacks popular legitimacy.²¹¹ Sustained U.S. engagement, including sanctions on key personalities pilfering from Iraqi state coffers; conditioning security cooperation; economic partnerships; and diplomatic support on measurable governance reforms, represents the most plausible path toward opening Iraq's political order. Without such a foreign intervention, Iraq's parasitic ruling elite

209 Samia Nakhoul, Laila Bassam, and Tom Perry, "How Saudi Arabia Turned on Lebanon's Hariri," Reuters, November 11, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/exclusive-how-saudi-arabia-turned-on-lebanons-hariri-idUSKBN1DB0QG/>

210 Michael Young, "A Mission for Lebanon's Army," Diwan (blog), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 31, 2026, <https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2026/03/a-mission-for-lebanons-army>

211 Munqith Dagher, "Don't Be Deceived by Reported Electoral Turnout: Analyzing Iraq's Elections by the Numbers," Washington Institute for Near Policy, December 30, 2025. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/dont-be-deceived-reported-electoral-turnout-analyzing-iraqs-elections-numbers>

will drive Iraq into insolvency and greater internal instability and outflow of migration.

Lebanon

The Lebanese case demonstrates that Sunni inclusion is a core structural element of any durable U.S. strategy on Hezbollah. The opportunity presented by Hezbollah's degradation in the war with Israel will close quickly if the prime minister, a Sunni reformer willing to make risky political decisions, is not visibly and materially backed by Washington. The United States should treat the rehabilitation of the premiership, Cabinet, and Lebanese Armed Forces as a discrete strategic objective.

XI. Policy Recommendations

These cases are noteworthy because underlying dynamics were in theory visible to policymakers before exclusion became extreme. Analysts spotted the deterioration in Suwayda long before the July 2025 massacres. Iraq's electoral law manipulation, the Federal Court's expanding role, and the PMF's growth were tracked in real time. The hollowing out of Lebanon's Sunni leadership after May 2008 was no secret, either. In none of the cases was there a coherent U.S. response partly because there was no institutional mechanism to elevate these issues and no funding architecture to act on them once they were spotted. The reforms proposed in this report address these gaps directly.

Congress must pass legislation mandating an annual report to Congress from the U.S. Department of State, jointly produced by the Office of International Religious Freedom (IRF) and the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA).

Each case study reveals visible warning signs tracked by specialists but not driving a risk assessment that could trigger a coordinated U.S. response. A standardized annual report, jointly produced using clear metrics for resilience, security conditions, participation, integration, and flourishing, would highlight these patterns effectively.

In Syria, the report would track political and ethnic inclusion under the new order, including the status of negotiations between Damascus and Suwayda, the conduct of government and government-aligned forces in minority areas, and the autonomy framework granted to Hasakah as a benchmark for what is possible elsewhere. In Iraq, reporting would track the manipulation of electoral law, IHEC disqualifications, defamation laws against journalists and opposition politicians, and the growing political dominance and penetration of state institutions by the pro-Iranian militias. In Lebanon, it would track the institutional health of the three premierships (divvied up among Lebanon's three major sects), the Lebanese Armed Forces' willingness to enforce state authority against Hezbollah's arms, and state capture by Hezbollah. The indicators are not new, but they need to be aggregated, presented to Congress, and used to set funding priorities.

Funding Mechanisms must be Tied to Inclusion Metrics

U.S. and partner assistance has often gone to actors and institutions that reinforced exclusion. A statutory requirement that the IRF/NEA report's findings shape Department of State funding priorities would tie U.S. dollars to measurable outcomes.

In Syria, this would mean conditioning reconstruction assistance and engagement with Damascus on concrete steps: a formal apology for the July 2025 massacres, holding those responsible accountable, and discussion of an autonomy framework for Suwayda. In Iraq, it would mean sustained pressure on political elites through targeted sanctions on corrupt offi-

cial, and conditioning security, economic, and diplomatic cooperation on measurable governance reforms. In Lebanon, it would mean conditioning Lebanese Armed Forces assistance on enforcement of state authority over Hezbollah's arms, materially and visibly backing the prime minister against any revival of the Cabinet veto architecture imposed in May 2008, and coordinating with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf partners to reinvest in Lebanese Sunni political life without repeating Hariri-era dependencies.

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