

1 Feb 20: Kurdistan Region Delegation Walks Out of Government Formation Talks. An Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) delegation walked out of a meeting regarding government formation with Prime Minister (PM)-designee Mohammed Tawfiq Allawi in Baghdad. One member of the delegation conveyed his offense to reporters and condemned Allawi's attitude. It is unclear what prompted the walk-out.

2 Feb 20: Nasiriyah Protest Leader Organizes Protests to Support His Candidacy for Prime Minister. Dr. Alaa al-Rikabi, a prominent protest leader in Nasiriyah, Dhi Qar Province, led a delegation of protesters from al-Haboubi Square to a meeting with protesters 100 km northwest in Samawah, Muthanna Province. Rikabi reportedly asked protesters in Samawah to show support for his candidacy for prime minister in their Friday protests. Rikabi also reportedly urged Samawah protesters to reject PM-designee Allawi. Demonstrators in the southern cities of Karbala and Nasiriyah previously carried signs of Rikabi and chanted in support of his candidacy on February 16.

3 Feb 20: Largest Sunni Party Rejects PM-designee Allawi. Mohammed al-Karbouli and Raad Dahlaki, deputy leaders in the Sunni Iraqi Forces Alliance bloc stated separately that their party will not support PM-designee Allawi. Dahlaki told reporters that he believed the Iraqi people collectively rejected Allawi. The Iraqi Forces Alliance is the largest Sunni bloc in Parliament with 32 seats.

4 Feb 21: Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) Appoints New Chief of Staff, Consolidating Iranian Proxy Control. Deputy Chairman of the PMF Abu Ali al-Basri announced that Abdul Aziz al-Muhammadawi (AKA "al-Khal" or "Abu Fadak") will succeed Abu Mehdi Al-Muhandis as chief of staff of the PMF. The succession is not official until the prime minister confirms it. Muhammadawi reportedly had a personal relationship with Major General Qassem Soleimani, was a member of the Badr organization – an Iranian proxy group – from 1983-2004, and helped establish the U.S.-designated terrorist group Kata'ib Hezbollah in 2006. The chief of staff oversees deputies for intelligence, logistics, administration, welfare, and operations. The decision replaces Hadi al-Ameri as temporary chief of staff and finalizes a restructuring the PMF began in September 2019 to replace the position of deputy Popular Mobilization Commission (PMC) chairman with a chief-of-staff position.

5 Feb 22: ISIS is Likely Responsible for a Wave of seven IEDs in Baghdad, Escalating its Attack Tempo. The IEDs all detonated outside the city center; they targeted a market in al-Maalaf neighborhood in southern Baghdad as well as unidentified targets in al-Shaab neighborhood in northeast Baghdad, al-Habibi and al-Mashtal neighborhoods in eastern Baghdad, al-Zafaraniya neighborhood in southeastern Baghdad, and al-Shula neighborhood in northwestern Baghdad. The attacks wounded 13 people. ISIS did not claim responsibility, but the attack pattern is similar to a set of five IEDs that ISIS detonated across Baghdad and claimed on February 8.

6 Feb 22: Moqtada al-Sadr Returns from Iran and Threatens Protests if Parliament does not Approve New Government. Nationalist Shi'a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr returned to Iraq from Iran and issued a statement threatening to hold protests surrounding the Green Zone in Baghdad if Parliament rejects PM-designee Allawi's proposed cabinet. Sadr said the protests would occur "this week" – likely referring to the week of February 23 to 29 – if the government does not hold a parliamentary session, blocks the cabinet, or undermines the cabinet's political independence.

7 Feb 22: Protests Spread to Iraqi Kurdistan. Thousands of protesters gathered in Sulaymaniyah city and held smaller demonstrations in Dohuk and Arbil Provinces after the leader of the Kurdish opposition New Generation party called for protests on February 16. Demonstrators called for an end to the traditional dominance of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in Iraqi Kurdistan. Protesters also condemned governance failures and carried banners reading "fix the unemployment problem" and "public services quickly," according to AFP.

8 Feb 23: Pompeo Calls PM-designee Allawi in Allawi's First High Level Diplomatic Engagement since Designation. U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called PM-designee Allawi, marking the latter's first diplomatic phone call with a top foreign diplomat since his designation on February 1. Pompeo congratulated Allawi on his designation and welcomed assurances that Allawi would hold early elections in Iraq, according to the State Department readout. Pompeo also urged Allawi to "resolve differences" with Kurdish and Sunni political blocs to ensure continued political success. The two also discussed the U.S.-Iraqi partnership, with Pompeo stressing the need to protect U.S. personnel and forces in Iraq as well as peaceful protesters.

9 Feb 24: Iranian Proxy Leader Fails to Negotiate Parliamentary Speaker's Support for PM-designee Allawi. Hadi al-Ameri, the Conquest Alliance and Badr Organization leader, reportedly met in Baghdad with Mohammed al-Halbousi, an Iraqi Forces Alliance member and the speaker of Parliament, on February 24. Ameri met with Halbousi for several hours but failed to convince him to support PM-designee Allawi, according to anonymous sources speaking to the Iraqi outlet Shafaq.

10 Feb 24-25: Coronavirus Spreads to Iraq from Iran. Iraq's Ministry of Health reported the first case of coronavirus in Iraq in an Iranian religious student who returned to Najaf from Iraq. The Health Ministry announced four new cases in Kirkuk Province the next day among a family who recently visited Iran. The Ministry has since banned travel to China, Iran, Thailand, South Korea, Japan, Italy, and Singapore.

11 Feb 24: Sadr Condemns Sunni and Kurdish Blocs in Televised Interview. Sadr gave an hour-long televised interview to al-Sharqiyah wherein he condemned political blocs for obstructing the passage of PM-designee Allawi's cabinet. Sadr called on Kurdish and Sunni leaders to stop insisting on the appointment of ministers based on sectarian or ethnic quotas. Sadr emphasized that his support for Allawi is conditional on Allawi's ability to hold snap elections.

12 Feb 24: Allawi Releases Government Platform with No Stance on U.S. Troop Presence Despite Pressure from Iran's Proxies. Iraqi news outlets published leaked details from PM-designee Allawi's government program, which contained plans to hold early elections and address several economic concerns, but made no mention of the removal of U.S. forces from Iraq. Allawi's absence of a public stance regarding the U.S. troop presence signals that he is resisting pressure from Iranian proxy militias and Moqtada al-Sadr to expel U.S. forces.

13 Feb 25: Moqtada al-Sadr Cancels Protests, Citing Coronavirus Fears. Nationalist Shi'a Cleric Moqtada al-Sadr tweeted a warning to his followers not to protest, stating that the health and life of Iraqis "is more important to [him] than anything." His concern may be genuine, but it is also possible that he calculated that Allawi does not have the votes needed to gain parliamentary confidence and that a protest is therefore unnecessary.

14 Feb 25: Allawi Faces Renewed Protests. Thousands of protesters conducted a new wave of mass demonstrations augmenting existing demonstrators in the provincial capitals of Baghdad, Dhi Qar, Basra, and Qadisiyah. Demonstrators demanded the cancellation of Allawi's designation as prime minister. Protesters also rejected the February 27 Council of Representatives (CoR) session as illegitimate. The new wave launched specifically on February 25 to mark an anniversary of the start of popular, anti-government demonstrations that began on October 25, 2019.



Major Cities	Demonstration	ISIS	Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)
Iraqi Security Forces	Iranian Proxy Militias	Possible Israeli Airstrikes	Iraqi Council of Representatives
	Religious Figures		Iraqi Prime Minister and Cabinet

Graphic by Brandon Wallace
©2020 by the Institute for the Study of War

Key Takeaway: Iran's inability to contain the Coronavirus allowed the disease to spread to Iraq, whose health institutions are poorly equipped to manage the potential pandemic. Iraq is vulnerable due to the hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons, congested anti-government demonstrations, and routine pilgrimages by religious observers across the region, particularly from Iran. Failure to contain the virus could lead to greater anti-Iranian sentiment among Iraqis. Iraq imports billions of dollars in cross border trade from Iran per year. Restricted movement will lead to increased prices on basic necessities.

To learn more about the situation in Iraq and other international issues, see ISW's new podcast, *Overwatch*, available on Spotify, Sticher, iTunes, and all your favorite podcast apps.