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# THE TROUBLE WITH HALBOUSI

## THE RISE OF, AND RESISTANCE TO, IRAQ'S SUNNI STRONGMAN

**Simona Foltyn**

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# The Trouble With Halbousi: The Rise of, and Resistance to, Iraq's Sunni Strongman

Simona Foltyn

## About the Author

Simona Foltyn is a journalist and filmmaker who has been based in Baghdad since 2018. She specialises in accountability and investigative reporting, with a focus on armed conflict, social justice, corruption and abuse of power. Her work has been published by *PBS NewsHour*, *Al-Jazeera English*, *France24*, *The Guardian*, *Foreign Policy*, *Politico*, *The Intercept* and others. From 2019–21, she was *Al-Jazeera's* Iraq correspondent. She has partnered with Type Investigations and the Pulitzer Centre for Crisis reporting. Simona holds a Master's in Public Affairs from Princeton University and a Bachelor in Political Science from Georgia State University. She speaks six languages, including Arabic.

## Abstract

The paper examines the rise of and the recent opposition to Iraqi parliament speaker Mohammed al-Halbousi in his home province Anbar and, more broadly, within Iraq's Sunni political scene. Halbousi is a young, ambitious politician who has served as member of parliament, governor of Anbar province and has recently been re-elected for a second term as the speaker of parliament, the most powerful Sunni position in Shi'a-majority Iraq, where senior government positions are apportioned on an ethnic and sectarian basis. But his striking ascent has been overshadowed by his reputation of a cunning and ruthless politician who has used 'money and force' to consolidate his grip on power. This paper sheds light on Halbousi's extraordinary trajectory, examining the reasons for mounting discontent and the implications for stability and representation in Sunni areas.





## Executive Summary

The first half of 2023 saw a public push to unseat Iraq's Sunni strongman, Mohammed al-Halbousi, who has served as speaker of parliament since 2018. Sunni deputies called for a vote to replace him, while his home province of Anbar witnessed mobilisation by a new political alliance, backed by influential Shi'a politicians, that sought to capitalise on popular discontent to challenge Halbousi's Progress Party in provincial elections slated for December 2023.

In light of these developments, this paper examines Halbousi's rise and the levers he has utilised to consolidate power. It dissects different forms of discontent expressed by tribes, civil society actors and Sunni and Shi'a politicians. Finally, the paper discusses the implications for representation and stability in Sunni areas as well as Halbousi's enduring legacy on Iraq's nascent parliamentary democracy.

Throughout his rapid ascent, Halbousi defied some norms that have governed Sunni politics. In the span of only four years, the 42-year-old former US contractor rose from member of parliament to governor of Anbar province to speaker of parliament, the most powerful Sunni position in Shi'a-majority Iraq. He is the only Sunni politician to have held the post for more than a term since the 2003 US-led invasion that deposed Sunni dictator Saddam Hussein. And he managed to achieve what few thought was possible after the eradication of the Ba'ath party: to establish de-facto one-party rule in Anbar province.

But his striking ascent was overshadowed by the reputation of Machiavellian politician who has captured the state through an effective combination of co-optation and coercion, buying supporters on the one hand, cracking down on competitors on the other. A litany of complaints by tribesmen, politicians and civil society members accuses him of land grabs, financial blackmail, corrupt bidding schemes for government contracts and systemic judicial and police harassment. Halbousi's methods follow a well-worn playbook widely deployed in post-2003 Iraq, but few politicians, and no Sunnis since 2003, have mastered it as successfully.

Described as smart and driven, Halbousi has taken advantage of a series of crises that have buffeted Iraq over the recent decade. He began his political career during the war against ISIS, when the Sunni political establishment was in disarray, and positioned himself as a liberal technocrat who could spearhead reconstruction. To become speaker, he secured the backing of Shi'a leaders whose power had expanded following the war against ISIS, while also building relations with Sunni countries in the region. Aided by two weak prime ministers, Halbousi extended his authority deep into the executive and tightened his grip over key institutions.

In consolidating his grip on institutions, Halbousi crossed red lines when it comes to power and resource sharing. Anbar is a tribal society, and the authority he wields in the province stands in stark contradiction to the weight of his tribe, which ranks among the least influential in Anbar. Local elders have thus come to see Halbousi as a power-hungry usurper who has sought to supplant traditional governance structures. Sunni politicians feel he has monopolised decision making and failed to represent Sunni interests, while Shi'a elites can't tolerate his attempts to meddle in Shi'a affairs. The opposition against Halbousi should thus be understood as an attempt to rebalance power at multiple levels of government.

## Methodology

The paper's findings are distilled from around three dozen interviews conducted in the first half of 2023 with Sunni and Shi'a politicians, Sunni tribal leaders in Anbar, members of civil society, diplomats and current and former government officials. The interviews were carried out by the author in person and mostly in Arabic. Anonymity has been granted to those who requested it in order to speak candidly, and whenever necessary to protect interviewees from retribution. The paper's background and findings are further informed by the author's five years of journalistic reporting in Iraq.

## Background

The 2005 constitution established a parliamentary democracy in Iraq, governed by three presidencies: the prime minister, or president of the council of ministers, the president of the republic, and the speaker of parliament, or president of the council of representatives. Though not enshrined in the constitution, a customary ethno-sectarian power sharing system dictates that the premiership goes to the Shi'a, the presidency to the Kurds and the speakership to the Sunnis. This makes the speaker of parliament the most senior Sunni position in the country and, at least in theory, a conduit to safeguard Sunni interests through influence over the legislative process. In reality, representation of Sunnis in Iraq's post-2003 political order has been undermined by several endogenous and exogenous factors.

Shortly after the 2003 US-led invasion, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) began to eradicate leaders of Saddam Hussein's old regime, arresting or dismissing politicians and security officials who had been members of the Ba'ath party.<sup>1</sup> Self-imposed exclusion from the post-2003 political system compounded the leadership vacuum among Sunnis. When the foundations of the current political order were cast in the immediate aftermath of the 2003 US-led invasion, many Sunnis shunned the political process, seen as illegitimate by virtue of being overseen by an occupying authority. They joined the armed resistance and didn't take part in the constitution-drafting process or the 2005 elections.

In the absence of competition, the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood that had been banned under Saddam's relatively secular dictatorship, emerged as the sole representative of Arab Sunnis (Seloom, 2018). The party opposed the Sunni armed uprising against the occupation and took part in the Iraqi Governing Council.<sup>2</sup> In 2010, some

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<sup>1</sup> The practice was enshrined into Iraqi law through the 2008 Accountability and Justice Act, which set up a commission that continues to adjudicate cases until today. This process is often seen as a tool to target political opponents rather than an effective mechanism to bring perpetrators of crimes to justice. The 2022 political agreement that led to the establishment of the current government states that the commission should be dissolved, and remaining cases transferred to the judiciary.

<sup>2</sup> IIP members were appointed to senior government positions including former vice-president Tariq al-Hashimi, former speaker Osama al-Nujeifi and former finance minister Rafi al-Essawi. All three later joined Iraqiya.

of the IIP's top leaders joined Iraqiya, an alliance led by Ayad Allawi, which beat then-prime minister's Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law party, nearly robbing him of a second term.<sup>3</sup> Some of its leaders were subsequently targeted with raids and arrest warrants under Iraq's sweeping anti-terror laws in what was seen as an attempt by Maliki to centralise power and eliminate Sunni opponents who planned to contest the 2013 provincial elections (Dodge, 2013).

The crackdown, which coincided with the 2011 Sunni uprising in neighbouring Syria, galvanised Sunnis in Iraq who felt disenfranchised by the post-2003 Shi'a-dominated system. Salafi-jihadist groups, revitalised by Gulf funding, seized the opportunity to capitalise on the unrest. Prime minister Nuri al-Maliki responded with arrests of Sunni leaders and by crushing protests in Sunni areas, further fuelling discontent. Sunni insurgent groups consisting of former Ba'athists, al-Qaeda and tribal leaders rebelled against the central government, demanding Maliki's removal (Ali, 2014). The instability played into the hands of ISIS, which hijacked the armed uprising to capture a third of Iraq's territory in 2014.

The four-year war against ISIS left Sunni society feeling defeated, with devastating knock-on effects for Sunni representation. The Sunni leadership, some of whom had supported the Sunni insurgency against the central government, fled the country and abandoned their constituents. Sunni areas were left destroyed by heavy fighting, with millions uprooted. Thousands of young men were sent to the gallows in rapid-fire trials that the United Nations says fell short of basic judicial standards, while others, including politicians, were held for years without formal trial.

With the old guard gone and the Sunni political scene left rudderless, others began to fill the void. 'In the 2014 election, the Shi'a began to dictate the Sunni side. The Sunni component was weak, it had collapsed, and we became followers rather than leaders,' said one former speaker of parliament. The Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), Shi'a-led paramilitaries that had been formed with Iranian support to fight ISIS, used the war to establish a permanent physical presence in Sunni provinces, while their political affiliates translated the battlefield gains into electoral success, emerging as the second-biggest party in the 2018 elections (Foltyn, 2018).

The repeated waves of exclusion from the political process outlined above reverberate until today. Many Sunnis say they have been reduced to mere 'participants rather than partners' and claim there's an imbalance in the allocation of government and security posts in Shi'a-majority Iraq.<sup>4</sup> They lament that their bargaining power has been further weakened by lack of unity and a shared cause, with the new generation of Sunni leaders are often described as businessmen rather than politicians who are all too willing to monetise political allegiance. 'The personal interests trump the interest of the sect,' said one interlocutor. 'We are guided by the greed for authority, material gain and individuality.'<sup>5</sup> Speaker Mohammed al-Halbousi is very much the product of this environment.

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<sup>3</sup> Iraqiya won 91 out of 325 seats, while Maliki's State of Law party won 89 seats, but Maliki managed to form the largest post-election bloc in parliament and remain prime minister.

<sup>4</sup> Shi'a politicians often dismiss Sunni complaints over marginalisation, which they regard as a refusal to accept their status as a minority in the post-2003, Shi'a-led political order.

<sup>5</sup> Although the pursuit of personal interests drives politicians across the ethno-sectarian divide, Shi'a politicians, for example, tend to be constrained by an overarching goal to preserve the sect's majority rule. As an example, the interlocutor pointed towards the 2022 government formation process, during which Shi'a leaders within the Coordination Framework momentarily put aside individual interests to safeguard Shi'a dominance.



## Rise to Power

Mohammed al-Halbousi entered the political scene in 2014. An engineer by training, he was part of a new generation of Sunni leaders who built their political base with money. Before he ran for office, he was a little-known businessman who earned his living first through US contracts, and later, after American troops withdrew in 2011, by lobbying his connections in parliament to secure government-funded infrastructure projects. Observers say it was financial aspiration that drew him towards politics. ‘He thought, why do I have to deal with MPs to get a contract. I’ll become an MP and take the fifty percent kickback,’ said an official close to Halbousi.

Shared business dealings brought Halbousi close to Mohammed al-Karbouli, the younger brother of political and business heavyweight Jamal al-Karbouli, who gave Halbousi a chance to run on his party list. ‘He was my brother’s friend. He’s a clever person, and I thought: let’s build a new generation,’ Karbouli said in an interview with the author. With no prior experience in politics, Halbousi was an unlikely candidate to make it into parliament. Sunni politicians from the old guard who resent Halbousi’s rapid rise remember him from that time as a ‘youngster wearing shorts and eating sunflower seeds in the kitchen’ and ‘carrying Jamal al-Karbouli’s bag.’

Halbousi largely succeeded because ‘the political space was empty,’ interlocutors explained. ISIS had already occupied large swathes of Anbar and other Sunni provinces when the 2014 vote took place, amid widespread allegations of fraud. One official with detailed knowledge of the Sunni political landscape and Halbousi’s trajectory described the election in Anbar as follows: ‘Mohammed was an unknown person, he was a contractor, not a politician or a public figure. It was the time of war. The situation was very bad. Three-quarters of the Sunnis didn’t vote. Jamal [Karbouli’s] party took advantage of displacement by buying their votes and falsifying the results.’<sup>6</sup>

Halbousi won a seat and set his eyes on the financial committee, an important body in the legislature where decisions over funding allocations are made before the budget is put to a vote. ‘He made a plan that he must be on the financial committee. He was a merchant, and in the beginning, he wanted to make more money,’ said the official. Halbousi’s post on the financial committee allowed the young parliamentarian to begin building his own patronage network, granting projects to politicians in return for influence and kickbacks. While in parliament, Halbousi also earned the favour of the PMF by supporting their bid to become part of the state. This, in turn, helped pave the way for the next step.

In 2017, Halbousi became governor of Anbar. The Sunni political establishment and the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) that had dominated Anbar had lost legitimacy. Halbousi, a young, liberal, up-and-coming politician, positioned himself as the antidote to Anbar’s downfall and secured the majority of votes in the provincial council. He also secured support from leading Shi‘a decision-makers in Iraq and the region, most notably the leadership of the PMF. ‘There was an agreement to send Halbousi to Anbar, to back him with force. In return, he agreed with [the PMF] that he would bring the Sunnis as a flock of sheep,’ said one Sunni lawmaker from Anbar.

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<sup>6</sup> In comparison, voter turnout in Anbar during the 2010 elections was 61%. According to the election commission, the 2010 vote could only be held in 70% of Anbar (Reuters, 2014).

At first, local Anbari leaders welcomed his appointment as governor. ‘I was his strongest supporter,’ said Arkan Khalaf al-Tarmuz Abu Mara‘i, a tribal sheikh who served as the head of the provincial council’s reconstruction committee at that time. But Abu Mara‘i was taken aback when Halbousi reportedly instructed him to curtail competition and oversight for reconstruction projects. ‘He asked me to no longer monitor projects,’ recalled Abu Mara‘i, who became one of Halbousi’s fiercest opponents. With powerful Shi‘a backers by his side, Halbousi felt he no longer needed his Sunni supporters and started rebelling against his backers, gradually shutting Karbouli and other senior figures out of decision-making.

The international community helped further Halbousi’s political ambitions. Anbar’s cities were among the first to be liberated from ISIS, opening the floodgates for international aid. Halbousi only served as governor for a year, but he took credit for the completion of reconstruction projects implemented by the United Nations Development Programme. At the same time, he established a monopoly over the allocation of government-funded projects in the province, which remains in place until today. Interviewees systematically described how Halbousi and his affiliates began channelling lucrative government contracts to loyalists in return for a 15 percent share.

Halbousi’s brief but well-advertised stint as governor positioned him well for the 2018 parliamentary election. He founded his own party, called ‘Anbar is Our Identity,’ and won six seats, well behind other, more established politicians. But the lack of unity among Sunnis aided his aspirations to become speaker.<sup>7</sup> ‘There was a leadership vacuum among the Sunnis. The Shi‘a started to build what they need. They chose the one who is weak, who will be close to them, the one who has no cause,’ said a former speaker. Halbousi reportedly pledged his allegiance to the PMF’s chief of staff Abu Mahdi al-Mohandis and Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, vowing to support the institutionalisation of the PMF and safeguard their strategic presence in Sunni areas. In return, Halbousi became the youngest speaker in Iraq’s history at age 37.

Shortly after, changing winds brought another opportunity. In 2019, mass protests erupted across the Shi‘a south, with thousands of youth rising up against the political establishment in what became known as the Tishreen (October) revolution. The Shi‘a ruling elites became preoccupied with crushing the uprising. Adel Abdul Mahdi and Mustafa al-Kadhimi, the two prime ministers who led the country during this turbulent time, struggled to assert their authority as entities such as the PMF and various politicians took advantage of the chaos and their weak leadership to broaden their remit. Under Kadhimi’s rule, both President Barham Saleh and Speaker Halbousi expanded their reach into the executive branch of government.

Halbousi’s power reached its apex under Kadhimi, who yielded him the administration of Sunni areas. The speaker effectively controlled appointments to government posts and

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<sup>7</sup> The Sunnis put forth no less than nine candidates for the speakership. In the end, the race came down to Halbousi, who was backed by the PMF’s political affiliates, and Khalid al-Obaidi, who was nominated by an alliance formed between Muqtada al-Sadr and Haider al-Abadi.

security services, whose loyalty he then used to crush dissent. ‘He was stronger than the Prime Minister,’ said Khalid al-Obaidi, a former defence minister from the northern Sunni-majority province of Nineveh who currently serves on the parliament’s security and defence committee. ‘Anything Halbousi wanted to implement in Sunni governorates was done without Kadhim’s interference.’ Halbousi also developed close ties to Faeq Zaydan, the head of the judiciary, which interviewees cited as a factor that allowed him to exercise a degree of influence over courts in Anbar province and to keep critics in check through judicial harassment.

Halbousi’s grip over the executive helped him to capture the Sunni vote in the 2021 parliamentary elections. His Taqqadum (Progress) Party came second only to populist Shi’a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, winning a remarkable 37 seats.<sup>8</sup> His electoral success emboldened Halbousi to try to assume a kingmaking role in government formation talks by exploiting differences between rival Shi’a parties – a move that would backfire and instigate efforts to undermine his power base.

## A Strongman’s Playbook

Halbousi’s rise to power largely follows a well-worn playbook that has become the defining legacy of the US-led invasion. ‘Money and force’ have been used by politicians across the ethno-sectarian spectrum to cement their grip on power. But few Iraqi politicians, and not a single Sunni since Saddam’s overthrow, have mastered state capture quite as successfully as Halbousi.

### Coercion

Halbousi has used his informal executive powers to systematically crack down on opposition and to eliminate opponents who sought to challenge him. He has thrown rivals in jail, harassed critics with arrest warrants under Iraq’s sweeping anti-terrorism and anti-defamation laws and eliminated competitors from elections by exploiting de-Ba’athification provisions, according to interviews and documents reviewed by the author. Halbousi thus appears to have taken a leaf from a playbook that had in the past been dubbed sectarian and associated with Shi’a politicians like Maliki, but deployed it against members of his own sect.

Among the most brazen examples may be the 2021 arrest of his mentor-turned-rival Jamal al-Karbouli, who was detained and tortured by an anti-corruption squad set up by Kadhim.<sup>9</sup> Karbouli and others believe he was arrested on Halbousi’s orders. ‘They disappeared me for five months, with Kadhim’s agreement, so that Halbousi could win,’ said Karbouli, who was released without charge shortly after elections. Khalid al-Obaidi, who worked

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<sup>8</sup> After Sadr’s withdrawal from parliament in mid 2022, that number increased to 39.

<sup>9</sup> The anti-corruption unit, called committee 29, is widely believed to be used as a mechanism to go after political opponents (Rudaw, 2023).

alongside Karbouli as part of the al-Azm party, echoed the sentiment. ‘Our success in the elections depended on Jamal al-Karbouli. Months before the elections, they took Jamal and put him in prison. They were torturing him and showing pictures to Halbousi. This was because of Halbousi’s control over Kadhimi.’

At least two other Sunni politicians from Anbar said they were eliminated from the 2021 parliamentary elections on trumped up de-Ba’athification charges. Sheikh Ali Hamad al-Mohammed, a tribal leader in Fallujah, had successfully registered to run as an independent candidate after producing the required clearance letter from the Accountability and Justice Commission. But shortly before the vote, he was disqualified after Halbousi’s Sadrist deputy, Hassan al-Kaabi, sent a letter to the election commission ordering the supposedly independent body to eliminate al-Mohammed and several other independents on de-Ba’athification grounds. ‘People were eliminated because they competed with a member of Taqqadum,’ the sheikh said.

Halbousi’s hold over the military, police, national security and intelligence in Anbar became an effective tool to pressure rivals. ‘The police and national security – they all belong to Taqqadum,’ said al-Mohammed, who was slapped with an arrest warrant under Iraq’s Ba’ath-era anti-defamation laws after he blamed Halbousi for his unjust removal from the 2021 vote. Other tribal leaders interviewed by the author said they were subjected to police harassment after criticising Halbousi. Sattar al-Jumeili said he was summoned by the police chief a day after his tribe issued a statement criticising the speaker’s policies as authoritarian. ‘[The police chief] said “why are you interfering in matters of the state?”’ al-Jumeili recalled. ‘He was speaking on behalf of Halbousi, who was dissatisfied with our statement.’

Halbousi’s authoritarian methods extended to members of his own party. Ahead of the 2021 elections, he forced his MPs to sign undated resignation letters to be used against them in case they disobeyed. ‘He has begun to enslave the MPs,’ said Laith al-Dulaimi, who went public in early 2023 when Halbousi tried to ‘cash’ his undated resignation letter. Dulaimi said that before the election, the speaker forced him and other politicians to join his party list and sign the resignation letter, lest he be disqualified from the vote over de-Ba’athification charges. Halbousi’s use of coercion to keep his MPs in line has prompted some to rebel and defect to rival parties.

‘File warfare’ is another tactic Halbousi has mastered to keep rivals in check. The speaker is said to rarely sign documents himself, but reportedly maintains a pile of evidence of illegal dealings by other politicians. ‘As the speaker, he has the right to summon any head of department, even ministers. He exploits this personally. He has corruption files on all of them,’ said one source close to Halbousi. Initially, his war chest of corruption files featured mostly Anbar officials but later extended to Sunni and Shi’a politicians at the national level. ‘One of his assets is business cooperation with Shi’a leaders. He knows about their corruption, so it’s difficult to get rid of him,’ said one interlocutor.

To some, Halbousi’s coercive methods constitute fair play. ‘If I was him, I would have gone even further,’ said Ibrahim al-Awsaj, the long-standing mayor of Ramadi. ‘The person wants to stay in power, so he should use all the means. Like Machiavelli.’ Awsaj

ran in the 2021 elections, but says he was cheated of his seat because he competed against Taqqadum as an independent candidate. ‘I am the most politically affected by Halbousi, but I’m not complaining about it. I won a seat in parliament, but they kicked me out. It’s their right.’

## Co-optation

Halbousi built his economic empire in three stages, gradually building an effective patronage network that has allowed him to buy allegiance of officials, politicians and civil society actors. During his tenure heading parliament’s finance committee, he was able to influence budget allocations in return for kickbacks. Then, as governor of Anbar, he was able to assert a monopoly over reconstruction and investment projects. Contracts are reportedly granted only to a select few companies owned by relatives or loyalists who agree to pay a fifteen percent kickback, according to dozens of interviewees.

In the third stage, while he served as speaker during Kadhimi’s term, Halbousi’s influence spread to central government institutions responsible for allocation of public funds towards projects across provinces. One Sunni veteran politician and member of parliament described the process as follows: ‘Before any project is put to a vote, [Halbousi] sends for the governor of that province. He says ‘I will give you this project, which costs 100 billion Iraqi dinars. I will give you 200 billion, but I want from you 50 billion.’”

In addition to regular budget allocations, Halbousi is also said to have exploited the Reconstruction Fund for Areas Affected by Terrorist Operations (ReFAATO), established in 2015 to fund rehabilitation of critical infrastructure damaged in the war against ISIS.<sup>10</sup> But according to several interviewees, Halbousi used ReFAATO to divert funds to loyalists. ‘The fund is controlled by Mohammed Al-Halbousi,’ said an employee who spoke on condition of anonymity in fear of reprisals. ‘He has turned the fund into a way to buy the loyalty of the security forces. He gives them cars so he can call them and say, arrest this guy or that guy.’ The author has reviewed documents that allocate funding for the provision of vehicles to local security and intelligence organs.<sup>11</sup>

Halbousi’s use of state coffers to consolidate power is by no means unusual. What is unusual is the degree to which Halbousi has managed to embezzle public funds, violating unwritten but deeply entrenched principles of resource sharing that govern Iraq. In other words, there’s a perception that Halbousi has taken more than his fair share. In response, current prime minister Sudani’s government has taken several decisions to loosen the speaker’s grip on institutions. Investigations are ongoing into other alleged corruption schemes in Anbar. The passing of a three-year rather than a one-year budget, as was the practice until 2023, has undermined the speaker’s ability to use the budgeting process to buy political capital.

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<sup>10</sup> ReFAATO has been financed by the Iraqi government and international loans and grants, including from the World Bank and the German Development Bank KfW. Its 2023 budget alone amounts to \$770 million.

<sup>11</sup> In June, prime minister Sudani replaced Mohammed al-Ani, the head of ReFAATO, due to corruption allegations. Al-Ani is widely seen as Halbousi’s economic arm.



## Regional Connections

While Halbousi's rise to power caused a backlash at home, it didn't alienate Sunni nations who saw him as a useful partner to do their bidding. Since the 2003 invasion deposed Saddam Hussein, Sunni countries have struggled to gain a foothold in Iraq as their rival Iran grew deep cultural, political and economic roots. Regional Sunni politicians eyed Anbar, the country's western-most province, as a buffer that could stem Iran's reach, potentially becoming an autonomous region similar to Iraqi Kurdistan. Traveling to Arab capitals like Damascus and Cairo, Halbousi harnessed these geopolitical interests and managed to successfully position himself as the go-to man in Iraq. 'He is seen as a reliable partner and I believe there is consensus in the Arab region on that,' said one regional diplomat.

Sunni countries have tried to mediate between Halbousi and his rivals to unite Iraq's Sunnis. 'The Sunni community is weak, and we are not ready for more division,' the diplomat said. In the leadup to the 2021 election, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey prodded their respective allies, Halbousi and Khamis al-Khanjar, to form a unified Sunni alliance. A deal was struck whereby Halbousi would remain speaker while Khanjar would lead the alliance, with government posts split in half. The UAE and Turkey, in turn, were offered access to Anbar's untapped energy sector. 'He agreed with Turkey and the Emirates on investments for phosphate and gas in Anbar,' said Qasim al-Fahdawi, a former electricity minister and former governor of Anbar.

These political and economic ties have been key to Halbousi's rise and remain an important lifeline in the face of waning domestic support.

## Forms of Discontent

In Iraq's consociationalist democracy, stability rests in the premise of sharing the spoils of governance across a wide range of groups and actors. The source of opposition to Halbousi's rule lies not so much in the commonly used methods of power consolidation outlined in the section above, but in the degree of power he has managed to accumulate through their meticulous execution. This has created a power imbalance at multiple levels of governance: within Anbar province, within the Sunni sect and between the Sunni and Shi'a ruling elites.

## Tribal Opposition

Anbar is a tribal society.<sup>12</sup> But Halbousi's rise to the most powerful Sunni politician belies the weight of his clan, which ranks among the least influential in Anbar. 'We have a unit of analysis when it comes to Sunnis, and that is the tribe,' said one interlocutor. 'One of Halbousi's problems is that there is a contradiction between his current status and the

<sup>12</sup> The province is dominated by the Dulaim confederation (*qabila* in Arabic), which consists of several tribes ('ashair), including the Abu Alwan, Abu Khalifa, the al-Mohamada, Abu Nimr, Abu Eitha, Abu Mara'i as well as other tribes like the Abu Fahad, the Abu Eissa and the Al-Jumeila who partly or entirely associate themselves with other confederations. The Halabsa (which Mohammed Halbousi belongs to) are a clan (fukhdh) under the Abu Alwan tribe.

community's unit of analysis. He isn't from one of the dominant tribes in Anbar or the Sunni community.'

This is best reflected in the composition of the local council in his hometown of Garma, located between Baghdad and Fallujah. Before the provincial councils were dissolved in 2019 through a parliamentary vote that Halbousi oversaw, the Jumeila tribe held eleven of the twenty seats. The Halabsa held only two, with the rest divided between other tribes. 'When Halbousi came [to power], he monopolised decision making and dissolved the local councils,'<sup>13</sup> said Sattar al-Jumeili, the leader of the tribe. 'He has displayed reckless behaviour. You are either with me or against me, there's no middle ground for solutions,' al-Jumeili said.

Because Halbousi lacked a natural power base in the form of a tribe, he was more reliant on coercive methods to assert himself as a leader. His use of police and judicial harassment has alienated many of Anbar's local leaders, who feel he is treading on the principles of power-sharing and traditions that govern this tribal society, a transgression that is seen as particularly offensive in light of Halbousi's young age. 'Many tribes oppose him because of the dictatorship he is practicing,' said Sheikh Ali Hamad al-Mohammedi.

Accusations over the illegal sale of public and tribal land have further alienated tribal sheikhs and stirred discontent among local farmers who face the possibility of eviction as plots previously dedicated for public use and farming are sold to investors. In the sub-district of Wafaa, thousands of plots of land are said to have been illegally sold to private individuals, prompting a special anti-corruption commission to launch an investigation that has so far resulted in the arrest of several low-level officials, who reportedly acted at Halbousi's behest.

In a second case near Ramadi, 200 hectares of prime real estate on the Euphrates have been leased for the construction of a housing complex. The land traditionally belonged to the Albu Mara'i and the Albu Risha tribes, but has been reclassified for investment use in what tribal sheikhs argue constitutes a fraudulent procedure.<sup>14</sup> In a third case, farmers around Halbousi's hometown of Garma have levelled similar accusations over land grabs. According to the sheikh of the Jumeili tribe, hundreds of farmers face the possibility of eviction because farmland administered by the ministry of agriculture is being transferred to the municipality for investment.

In light of these grievances, tribes have taken the lead in mobilising opposition to Halbousi, with elders pre-selecting candidates for the forthcoming provincial elections to avoid unnecessary internal competition. Ironically, tribal leaders are looking to the central

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<sup>13</sup> The dissolution of provincial council was also a demand put forth by Tishreen protesters, who accused local politicians of corruption and poor service delivery. For Halbousi, the demand presented an opportunity to consolidate power in Anbar while placating protesters' demands.

<sup>14</sup> Albu Mara'i and Albu Risha tribal leaders say that as part of a 1961 agreement, they gave the land to the defence ministry to be used as a base for the army's eight brigade. But during Kadhim's reign, the land was transferred from the ministry of finance to the Ramadi municipality and opened up for investment. In a letter supplied to the author, the finance ministry's legal department appears to rule that the transfer of the land to the municipality was illegal. Still, licenses have been issued to three companies to build residential buildings and a park, with the project value estimated at \$2–300mn. The mayor of Ramadi said the process was legal.

government to ensure the vote is fair, with widespread expectations that it should lead to a reshuffle of power in the province. Some tribal leaders are threatening to resort to violence if these expectations are not met. 'If Halbousi is able to falsify the elections again, there will be a widespread tribal uprising and we will kick him out by force,' said sheikh Ali Hamad al-Mohammedi of Fallujah.

## Sunni Opposition in Parliament

Complaints abound from rival Sunni MPs that Halbousi has failed in his capacity as speaker to represent Sunni interests. These demands were part of the 2022 political agreement that led to the establishment of the current governing coalition and include:

1. the dissolution of the Accountability and Justice (de-Ba'athification) Commission
2. a general pardon for innocent Sunnis languishing in prisons
3. the return of Sunnis who were displaced during the war against ISIS, including to highly sensitive areas like Jurf al-Sakhar which are currently under the control of Shi'a armed groups
4. better representation in the distribution of senior government and security posts

Halbousi's detractors allege that he weaponised these Sunni issues in his personal quest for power. Rather than making his support for Shi'a issues conditional on passing laws that would protect the interests of his sect, he has offered Shi'a counterparts concessions in return for guarantees to remain in power. For example, Halbousi is said to have granted the PMF unbridled access to Anbar and other Sunni provinces in return for their backing. 'He was able to convince some parties and give them their interests, but unfortunately it was at the expense of their expansion to Sunni areas. The proof is that armed factions and the PMF are roaming freely in our areas. This was all in political agreement with Mr. Halbousi,' said one MP from a rival party.

Others, however, say the failure to implement Sunni demands is not for Halbousi's lack of trying, but due to the reality of a Shi'a-dominated, militarised political scene in which Sunnis are a defeated minority. 'He requested more than once as part of the political agreement that the PMF leave Sunni areas, which the Shiites have not complied with,' said one Sunni official. 'They remain there through the force of weapons.' Indeed, the above-mentioned set of Sunni demands have been repeatedly put forth during government formation talks with Shi'a and Kurds. 'The same promises are made every time, but they are never implemented after the government is formed,' said the official.

It is thus unlikely that Halbousi's failure to deliver for the Sunnis is driving opposition from fellow parliamentarians. A more probable factor is the power imbalance his success has created within the Sunni bloc and specifically a sense by rival parties that government positions allocated for the Sunnis have not been divided fairly. To remove Halbousi, more than half of Sunni MPs would need to be on board so as to trigger a vote of no confidence in parliament. But despite repeated announcements that such a vote was imminent, the

majority of Sunni MPs continue to back Halbousi due to political and business interests.

In addition to Halbousi's failure to represent Sunni interests, parliamentarians also say that Iraq's legislative branch has become less effective due to cronyism and mismanagement. In contrast to previous terms led by other speakers, parliamentary sessions start hours behind schedule because Halbousi reportedly struggles to arrive on time after late night outings. 'It's not in our interest for Halbousi to represent the Iraqi Parliament. Right now, parliament has no value,' said veteran MP Khalid al-Obaidi. 'The parliament committees are all idle,' he said, adding that their heads have been chosen based on loyalty rather than competence.

### Shi'a Opposition

In the wake of the 2021 elections, Halbousi angered the Shi'a players who aided his rise to power when he struck a deal with Shi'a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani. This so-called tripartite alliance aimed to form a majority government, thus breaking with the tradition of forming a consensus government that included all parties, with the Shi'a dividing the spoils between them first before bringing in the other sects. Sadr's rivals, who came together under the so-called Coordination Framework, saw the move as an attempt to undermine Shi'a majority rule (Foltyn, 2023).

The Coordination Framework deployed a carrot and stick approach to thwart Sadr's plans. Through negotiations, they tried to bring Sadr back into the fold to form a consensus government with all Shi'a parties, while affiliated armed groups attacked Sadr's Kurdish and Sunni allies and their backers. The so-called resistance factions targeted the Kurdistan region, Halbousi's residence as well as the United Arab Emirates, which had supported the tripartite alliance in a bid to curtail Iran's influence over the government. The approach was effective, and eventually the alliance fell apart. In June 2022, Sadr ordered his 73 MPs to resign from parliament.

Halbousi quickly pivoted back to the Coordination Framework, which had become the biggest bloc in parliament. The new ruling alliance needed Halbousi's party to form a government and reconfirmed him as speaker. But Halbousi's decision to side with Sadr hadn't been forgotten. Many Shi'a leaders feel that Halbousi has become too unreliable a partner, who could easily pivot back to Sadr if the latter chose to re-enter politics. Moreover, Shi'a politicians are uncomfortable with Halbousi's sway over the executive. His ability to influence budget allocations has allowed him to control politicians across the country, even in Shi'a areas, which is seen as a threat by many the Shi'a political establishment.

Though there's consensus among the Shi'a ruling alliance that Halbousi has become too powerful, there's disagreement within the Coordination Framework on how to contain him. While some Shi'a politicians want him removed, others still see him as a useful asset. 'Some have the philosophy, "why should we change a speaker when he's cooperative and makes concessions? We are a party that benefits from his existence,"' said the former speaker.

Even if the majority of Sunni deputies favour Halbousi's removal, they still require the support of the Shi'a to pass a vote in parliament. Halbousi's ability to strike deals with members of the Coordination Framework may thus ensure his survival. According to a senior Sunni politician, Halbousi managed to secure assurances from Nuri al-Maliki and Hadi al-Ameri that their respective parties would back him in a vote of no-confidence in return for political and business concessions.

### Grassroots Opposition

The struggle to unseat Halbousi has so far primarily played out in the political arena. While there has been some popular mobilisation mostly along tribal lines, with small protests taking place in Baghdad and Anbar, it is unlikely that the current governance crisis will result in widespread popular unrest in Sunni areas. Anbaris, like Iraqis in other provinces, are disillusioned with the political system and have given up on protest movements as a catalyst for change. 'It's impossible for Anbar to witness demonstrations. Maybe the generation that will follow in ten years,' said one activist. 'In Iraq, in general, Sunni demonstrations cannot succeed.'

The devastating fallout from the 2012–14 anti-government protests remains etched in the collective memory of Sunni communities. A decade on, the fear that demonstrations could once again be infiltrated by political parties or extremists and labelled as an effort by extremists to seize power only to be crushed by the central government still serves as a powerful deterrent for mass mobilisation. 'People are not satisfied, but they believe that any Sunni opposition will be accused of extremism or harnessed by extremist elements so that innocent people pay the price that the governing parties want them to bear,' said the former speaker. The government's crackdown on the 2019 Tishreen movement, including efforts by Halbousi and Anbar authorities to prevent Sunni participation in the Shi'a-led movement, crushed any latent remnants of civic activism in Anbar.<sup>15</sup>

More recently, residents of Anbar province say they have been subject to police and judicial harassment for venting their anger over poor services on social media. Activists accuse Halbousi of deploying an electronic army to surveil and crack down on online criticism because it is seen as a challenge to his one-party rule. Activists also say there's a concerted effort to discredit anyone who speaks out against Halbousi by tarnishing their reputation. Some civil society actors have thus opted for a less confrontational approach to advocacy by setting up discrete communication channels with authorities. But there appears to be little appetite among the general public to challenge existing power structures.

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<sup>15</sup> Anbar courts charged six activists from Anbar under Iraq's anti-terrorism laws when they tried to join the Tishreen protests in Baghdad. Some fled to Iraqi Kurdistan, while others have since joined Taqquadum in what appears to be an example of successful co-optation.



## Conclusion

Mohammed al-Halbousi's trajectory has been both ordinary and expectational; ordinary in the methods he has deployed to consolidate power, and exceptional in their implementation, allowing the young businessman to become the most powerful Sunni politician in post-2003 Iraq. But his success has created power imbalances at multiple levels of government, unleashing a backlash from rival tribes and politicians who have found themselves on the margins of a consociationalist system where stability is rooted in the premise of dividing the spoils of governance through balanced access to government positions.

The opposition to Halbousi isn't necessarily aimed at unseating him, but rather at correcting these imbalances. Over the past months, steps have been taken to weaken Halbousi from the top and the bottom. Prime Minister Sudani has begun clawing back some of his executive powers and has loosened Halbousi's control over institutions by dismissing some of his loyalists who were complicit in embezzling public funds. In Anbar, Shi'a politicians have supported local Sunni campaigns to unseat him as part of a bargaining process to strike a new deal that will check the speaker's powers. Halbousi still enjoys support from regional powers, which may help his survival, as does the lack of consensus on a viable alternative.

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Iraqi Parliament Speaker Mohammed al-Halbousi attends an emergency session of the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union (APU) in Amman, Jordan, 8 February 2020.

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