

THE GOALS BEHIND CORRUPTION INVESTIGATIONS IN IRAQ

By:

Aram Jamal

President of the Kurdish Institute for
Elections KIE

Sarbast Mustafa

President of the STEP organization for
Democracy and Elections

July-2026

The recent campaign targeting a number of members of the Iraqi Council of Representatives and government officials, following the arrest of the Deputy Minister of Oil, **Adnan Al-Jumaili**, on charges related to financial corruption, has generated widespread debate regarding the nature of this campaign, its political implications, and whether it represents a genuine shift in the state's anti-corruption policy or merely reflects an effort to rearrange the balance of power within the political system in preparation for a new political phase.

From the perspective of timing, the campaign carries particular significance. It comes at a moment when the government is facing mounting pressure due to worsening economic conditions, persistent public criticism over the absence of meaningful structural reforms, and increasing international demands for greater transparency and more effective anti-corruption measures. These pressures have been further compounded by the government's financial difficulties resulting from declining oil revenues associated with the Gulf conflict. Consequently, launching a campaign of this magnitude conveys a message that the government seeks to demonstrate its capacity to enforce the rule of law and restore public confidence.

Corruption in Iraq has become embedded within the very structure of the political system rather than remaining merely an administrative deviation. The consociational power-sharing system established after 2003 did not simply distribute political offices; it institutionalized the allocation of public resources, government contracts, economic opportunities, and spheres of influence within state institutions. Therefore, any genuine anti-corruption campaign necessarily requires confronting the centers of political decision-making rather than limiting prosecutions to civil servants or executive officials. In this sense, the current campaign constitutes an initial test rather than a definitive achievement.

Regardless of the scope of authority exercised by a deputy minister, such an official does not operate independently of a complex network of political, partisan, and economic decision-making. If corruption files are indeed as extensive, deeply rooted, and pervasive as widely believed, it is reasonable to assume that responsibility for managing or protecting such networks extends well beyond individual executive officials.

This is where the central political dilemma emerges. Does the government genuinely possess the capacity to investigate individuals who constitute the real centers of power within Iraq's major political parties? Could the investigations, should the legal evidence warrant such action, ultimately reach leaders who command armed factions or head major political parties? Or will the campaign stop short of crossing the red lines necessary to preserve the political equilibrium upon which the current government itself depends?

It is important to recognize that, following the dominance of political parties over the Iraqi state and its ministries after 2003, many government ministries and public institutions effectively evolved into economic sectors controlled by those parties. The ruling parties gradually transformed into powerful financial cartels that monopolized commercial activities, government procurement, public contracts, and supply chains through companies affiliated with their economic offices, party leaders, or commanders of armed political factions. This process facilitated the emergence of a predatory class of businessmen and merchants whose wealth depends almost entirely on exploiting state resources, with many simultaneously engaged in partisan political activity. This development has occurred at the expense of Iraq's national bourgeoisie, which had already suffered marginalization during Saddam Hussein's rule and has since been further weakened under the post-

2003 political order characterized by sectarian power-sharing, exclusion, monopolization, and systemic corruption that marginalized legitimate national private capital.

For this reason, Iraq's experience over the past two decades provides limited grounds for optimism. Iraqis have witnessed numerous anti-corruption committees, commissions, and campaigns, yet most have ultimately concluded with political settlements or the closure of cases once they reached influential political figures. Consequently, public opinion will not evaluate the government's success by the number or prominence of those arrested, but rather by whether individuals previously regarded as politically untouchable are ultimately held accountable.

Nevertheless, the campaign deserves broad public support, particularly from intellectuals, professional associations, labor unions, and civil society organizations. It represents an important effort to restore the authority and prestige of the state in the face of the expanding influence of informal power centers and to demonstrate that executive authority remains vested in the government. It also seeks to affirm the government's ability to utilize judicial institutions and oversight bodies independently of partisan considerations. Furthermore, these measures provide the Prime Minister with greater political room for maneuver in dealing with both allied and rival political forces, given that corruption has become one of the principal instruments through which influence is redistributed within Iraq's political system.

With regard to the Coordination Framework, the government's message appears to be twofold. On the one hand, it reaffirms the continuation of political partnership and signals no intention to engage in a comprehensive confrontation with the forces represented within the Framework. On the other hand, it suggests that political protection for officials accused of corruption may no longer be as absolute as it once was and that the government's continued survival requires a greater degree of discipline among the constituent members of the ruling coalition.

For the armed factions, the message is even more sensitive. The government seeks to emphasize that state-building requires all actors to submit to the authority of the law and that economic and financial activities are no longer beyond the reach of oversight, even when they involve groups possessing substantial political or security influence. Nevertheless, the credibility of this message will ultimately depend upon the government's ability to apply the law consistently and impartially, without selective enforcement.

At the regional level, the campaign conveys signals to neighboring states that Baghdad is committed to consolidating the image of a stable state capable of effectively governing its institutions. It also demonstrates Iraq's intention to improve the investment climate, strengthen confidence in its economy, and simultaneously preserve its balanced foreign policy by avoiding alignment with competing regional blocs.

At the international level, external factors cannot be overlooked. During the past two years, the United States and the broader international community have intensified pressure on Iraq to strengthen financial governance, combat money laundering, curb illicit dollar smuggling, and tighten oversight of public expenditures. Although no publicly available evidence indicates that Washington is directing the current wave of arrests, it is evident that the international environment has become considerably less tolerant of corruption networks that are sometimes linked to financial evasion or the circumvention of international sanctions. Accordingly, the campaign may also be understood as a response to an evolving regional and international environment that increasingly favors comprehensive institutional reform, without necessarily implying direct foreign intervention in judicial decision-making.

The most fundamental question, however, remains whether the Prime Minister is capable of pursuing this process to its logical conclusion. The answer depends not merely upon his personal determination but upon his ability to confront an entrenched network of interests that has accumulated over more than two decades and become deeply embedded within the structure of Iraq's political system itself. Fighting corruption in Iraq is no longer solely a legal battle; it is fundamentally a struggle over the nature of the state and its future. The coming days will therefore reveal whether these arrests mark the beginning of dismantling Iraq's entrenched system of corruption or simply constitute another episode in the ongoing competition among rival centers of power within the ruling elite. Corruption in Iraq is not merely a collection of legal cases awaiting judicial resolution; it is an intricate network of political, economic, and security influence that can only be dismantled when the rule of law becomes stronger than partisan immunity, armed power, and political patronage.

It is essential to recognize that this campaign cannot be separated from the broader struggle among competing centers of power within Iraq's political system. Corruption files have frequently served as powerful instruments of political pressure and mechanisms for reshaping political balances. Consequently, the campaign's success in convincing the Iraqi public of its impartiality will depend largely upon its comprehensiveness and its avoidance of targeting only individuals affiliated with one political faction or officials who have merely lost their political protection. It is difficult to exclude the possibility that certain actors within the ruling establishment may derive political benefit from the campaign. Political systems founded upon negotiated balances and coalition politics often employ corruption investigations as tools for redistributing influence, exerting pressure upon rivals, or reorganizing relationships within governing coalitions. Accordingly, observers will closely monitor whether the arrests are applied equitably across all political factions or selectively directed against specific groups while sparing others.

For this reason, any campaign of this magnitude is bound to produce both winners and losers. The primary beneficiary, at least at this stage, is the Prime Minister himself, provided he succeeds in demonstrating that the state has regained the initiative and that the government is no longer constrained by the logic of political immunity. The second potential beneficiary is the Iraqi public, but only if the measures prove to be impartial, comprehensive, and applicable to all without exception. Conversely, if the campaign is directed solely against particular political rivals, the principal beneficiary will merely be the faction that succeeds in redistributing power within the political system, while the credibility of Iraq's anti-corruption agenda will suffer significant damage.

In conclusion, the current wave of arrests appears to constitute a genuine test of the Iraqi state rather than merely a security or judicial campaign. If it proceeds in accordance with transparent legal standards and encompasses all those implicated regardless of political or partisan affiliation, it may represent a turning point in Iraq's fight against corruption. Nevertheless, we believe that combating systemic corruption in Iraq is an extraordinarily complex undertaking. Corruption has become deeply embedded within the fabric of the state and has evolved into a permanent structural feature of governance. At this stage, the problem is no longer limited to corrupt individuals who can simply be replaced; rather, it concerns an integrated system that continuously reproduces corruption.

Corruption has consequently become an instrument of governance and political influence, an integral component of institutional functioning, and a mechanism through which access to public office—particularly senior and special-grade positions—is secured. Moreover, the principal networks of corruption enjoy political, legal, military, or de facto protection. Accordingly, combating corruption requires a comprehensive national strategy encompassing political, economic, legal, and socio-cultural dimensions.

From an executive perspective, however, combating financial corruption resembles the process of cleaning a staircase: unless the cleaning begins from the top and proceeds downward, the lower steps will inevitably remain dirty and continue to accumulate debris. Similarly, unless accountability begins with the most powerful figures, the structural corruption that continues to erode the Iraqi state will persist. Given that the political system remains fundamentally based upon consociational power-sharing and the distribution of state institutions and resources among ruling political parties, systemic corruption is likely to endure, even if recent measures have inflicted painful setbacks upon certain actors.

It is equally important to recognize that most financial corruption networks in Iraq are interconnected through relationships of political clientelism and mutual interests. If investigations are conducted thoroughly and remain free from interference by domestic political leaders or external regional actors, they could trigger a domino effect, whereby exposing one corruption network leads to the unraveling of many others. Such investigations could reveal numerous additional corruption cases and implicate a wide range of influential political figures. Yet pursuing this path to its logical conclusion may ultimately implicate virtually the entire ruling political class in Iraq, together with the parasitic business elite that depends upon it, and even some individuals who present themselves as opinion leaders within various segments of Iraqi society.

Conversely, if the campaign remains confined to selected individuals or is halted by political considerations, it will inevitably be interpreted as part of the ongoing struggle for influence within the ruling establishment rather than the beginning of a genuine process of institutional state-building.

Accordingly, in our view, both the Prime Minister and the Iraqi judiciary should investigate the following issues to ensure that the campaign is not perceived as selectively targeting particular actors and to demonstrate that it represents a serious effort to confront the systemic corruption threatening the very existence of Iraq as a state, a people, and a territorial entity.

1. **Dismantling the economic offices of political parties.** These offices should be abolished in accordance with Articles 36, 37, and 38 of the Iraqi Political Parties Law No. 36 of 2015, thereby preventing political parties from functioning as holding companies and financial cartels that dominate Iraq's economy and media.

2. **Investigating the unlawful acquisition of state property.** A comprehensive investigation should examine how political parties and leaders of armed militias acquired state-owned lands and public assets, identify the individuals and institutions that facilitated these acquisitions, uncover any front entities in whose names such properties were registered, recover these assets for the state, and prosecute all beneficiaries together with the public officials who enabled these illegal transactions, regardless of their official positions.

3. **Reviewing all government contracts awarded since 2003.** A comprehensive audit should be conducted of all contracts awarded by ministries, directorates-general, and independent public authorities since 2003. Investigations should address fictitious projects, the legality of procurement

procedures, the impartiality of tender committees under government contracting regulations, and irregularities across all sectors, particularly reconstruction and development, electricity, oil and gas, government procurement, arms imports, military logistics, army supply contracts, and the security sector. All individuals found responsible for violations or illicit gains should be referred to the Iraqi judiciary.

4. Confiscating illicit assets. All movable and immovable assets belonging to individuals convicted of financial corruption, including those found guilty of participation or facilitation, should be confiscated, and the relevant judicial decisions should be published, together with the names of those convicted, in the Iraqi Official Gazette.

5. Establishing a public blacklist. The government should compile and publish, through the Iraqi Official Gazette and national media outlets, a blacklist of politicians, contractors, and businesspersons convicted of corruption. Individuals included on this list should be prohibited from standing for elected office, occupying senior public positions, holding leadership roles within political parties, professional associations, civil society organizations, universities, or public and private research institutions. Furthermore, they should be excluded from the scope of any future amnesty legislation.

6. Conducting comprehensive financial integrity investigations. The Federal Commission of Integrity should investigate the assets, wealth, and financial accounts of all government officials holding positions at the rank of Assistant Director General and above, irrespective of their office; senior leaders and officials of political parties; current and former members of the Council of Representatives; current and former provincial council members; members of political parties' economic offices and committees; heads and members of independent governmental bodies; and leaders of professional associations. Their accumulated wealth, real estate, and other assets should be examined in relation to their declared and legally verifiable sources of income. Any assets for which no legitimate source of funding can be established should be confiscated, and the individuals concerned should be referred to the judiciary to face the penalties prescribed by law.

.....
.....
.....