

# Burning ghost money ahead of the Chinese New Year festival



**Denis Staunton**  
**Beijing Letter**

With Covid galloping through the country, China hopes vaccines and a weaker virus will blunt impact of reopening

There were five of them standing on the corner shortly after 9pm, two women and three men and although it was hard to tell in the dark, they all looked somewhere between 25 and 45 years old. Two of the men were carrying metal sticks about a metre long, the other man and one of the women held sheets of paper while the second woman was crouching as she chalked something on the ground.

Was this some kind of demonstration, like the protests against zero-Covid last November marked by young people holding blank sheets of paper as a symbol of censorship? Before I had a chance to ask my Chinese companions, we had reached the group of five and saw that the woman had drawn a chalk circle with

an opening like the neck of a bottle. "They're going to burn paper," one of my friends said. One of the men held a lighter to the edge of one of the sheets of paper, which were covered in red characters, and set it alight. Soon there was a small bonfire in the middle of the chalk circle, with coils of smoke drifting upwards into the night as the men poked at it with their sticks.

**Ceremony** They were burning ghost money, also known as hell money, for their ancestors to use in the afterlife, a ceremony performed around big festivals including Chinese New Year which is on Sunday. "The circle has to have an opening facing north for the ghosts to come in and out to take the money," my

friend told me. We were on our way from dinner to the opening of a new bar near the Workers' Stadium, where the clubs and bars have returned in a brilliant flash of neon since the end of zero-Covid. The restaurant had been full, partly because many places in Beijing have already closed for new year, and a number of diners had suitcases with them, ready to take the night train home to their families in other parts of China.

As we picked from clay pots full of shrimp, chicken, beef, tofu, vegetables and rice as they rolled around on a Lazy Susan, the seven of us talked about the food, the traffic, our travel plans for new year and beyond, the latest films and Beijing's favourite brand of baijiu, a strong liquor made from sorghum. Nobody

66

**The seven of us talked about the food, the traffic, our travel plans for New Year and beyond, the latest films and Beijing's favourite brand of baijiu, a strong liquor made from sorghum. Nobody mentioned coronavirus.**

The Chinese authorities said last Saturday that 60,000 people had died with coronavirus in hospitals between December 8th and January 12th, although they acknowledged that others who died at home have not yet been included in the death toll. The National Health Commission said yesterday that the number of people needing critical care because of the virus had already peaked and numbers attending fever clinics were falling.

In a video message this week, however, President Xi Jinping expressed concern about the impact on rural areas as millions travel from the cities for new year family reunions. "China's Covid prevention and control is still in a time of stress, but the light is ahead,

persistence is victory," he said. "I am most worried about the rural areas and farmers. Medical facilities are relatively weak in rural areas, thus prevention is difficult and the task is arduous."

Chinese drug manufacturers have accelerated production of medicines to treat coronavirus symptoms, including cough and fever but Pfizer's antiviral drug Paxlovid, which is widely used in western countries, is hard to come by. Some international forecasters are predicting a huge death toll in China as the virus moves through the population unchecked but Chinese health officials believe the mortality rate will be well below that of Europe and the United States. With 1.1 million coronavirus

deaths, the US had a mortality rate of 3,214 deaths per million people, while the EU's 1.2 million translates into 2,630 deaths per million people. Chinese analysts have been studying the experience in New Zealand, which followed a zero-Covid policy until October 2021, after which the number of deaths increased sharply.

Even after the end of zero-Covid, New Zealand's mortality rate of 435 deaths per million people is just one-seventh of that of the United States. China's hope is that its vaccination programme, even with its limitations, the accumulation of medical expertise during the pandemic and a weakening of the virus itself will mean that three years of zero-Covid will blunt the deadly impact of opening up.

# Iraqis begin to tire of Iranian influence

**Lorraine Mallinder**

in Baghdad

Tehran's power in Iraq runs deep, but most people there just want to get on with their lives



Walking through Baghdad, you could easily be forgiven for thinking Iraqis are hell-bent on wreaking vengeance on the United States. At least, that was the message conveyed by the hanging of a cardboard cut-out of former president Donald Trump on Tahrir Square.

The event was staged by the Hashd al-Shaabi, a motley crew of Iran-backed Shia militias who hold great sway over Iraq. Its militants were gearing up for the three-year anniversary (on January 3rd) of the Trump administration's assassination of top Iranian general Qasem Soleimani and Hashd commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

Iran is omnipresent, it seems. Judging by the hanging, it wants revenge on a scale similar to Trump's lethal drone attack – and, its proxies would claim, so does the Iraqi public. Only, talking to people in the street, a parallel, more convincing reality emerges, one in which the majority just want to get on with their lives, preferably with a reliable supply of clean water and electricity.

Observing punters posing for photos in front of the dangling Trump, Amir, a 55-year-old bystander, could barely contain his contempt. "Look at these people. If they got the chance to go to America, they would go fast," he said. "Iran is the real enemy. They did nothing for the Iraqi people. The only reason they came here is because they wanted our money."

Filthy lucre certainly figures among the many reasons why Iran, a Shia nation, got involved in this Shia-majority country. Iraq is a captive market for Iranian products – food, machinery, gas, you name it – traded above and below board for much-needed US dollars. And it has also served as a gateway to the rest of the region, part of Iran's Shia crescent project, a sphere of influence extending from Tehran to the Mediterranean.

The militias have been instrumental in all this. Some date back to Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, when Iraq's oppressed Shia sought protection from Iran. Others were formed after the US invasion of Iraq, launching lethal attacks on US-led coalition troops with Iran's sophisticated explosives. Most emerged in 2014, when Islamic

State (also known as Isis) reared its head. Crucially, it was Iran that funded, armed and trained the militias to fight the terror group long after the premature withdrawal of the US from Iraq in 2011, a move that legitimised its presence in the country.

Today, the Hashd's masters and backers control parliament, their tentacles reaching deep into a system oiled by brazen corruption. If there's a master plan, it's not immediately obvious in the cauldron of Iraqi politics. United in the so-called Co-ordination Framework, the pro-Iran Shia parties are a discordant lot whose idea of a common vision seems to be keeping populist Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr out of politics.

**Bloody battle** Sadr, who bolts to the Iranian holy city of Qom when the going gets tough, is not free of Iranian influence. But, positioning himself as an Iraqi nationalist, his Sairoon alliance came out tops in the 2021 parliamentary election. Having failed to form a ruling coalition with Sunni and Kurdish blocs, the cleric withdrew his 73 representatives from parliament, leaving the Co-ordination Framework to rule the roost. But he remains a threat to the pro-Iran constellation, able to summon his faithful on to the streets

with a click of the fingers, as he showed last summer, storming parliament and clashing with rival militias in a bloody battle that left dozens dead.

After more than a year of deadlock, the Co-ordination Framework manoeuvred its choice of prime minister into the driving seat last October. Mohamed Shia al-Sudani was at first presumed to be Iran's man. But he's struck a more

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pragmatic note than expected, discussing gas exports with Germany and approving the continued presence of about 2,000 US troops in the country.

It's a stance unlikely to find favour with Iran's most prominent allies in the Co-ordination Framework, including rum figures such as Qais Khazali, leader of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, one of the country's most lethal militias. Trained by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), it ran sectarian death

squads in the chaos that followed the US invasion, torturing and killing countless Sunnis. More recently, it was designated as a terror group by the US, accused of killing anti-government protesters in 2019.

Sudani's divergence from his backers indicates that Iran, grappling with protests and a collapsing economy at home, is not the puppet master it appears to be. It could be argued it never was all-powerful. "Iran's power in Iraq ebbs and flows," says Toby Dodge, a professor at the London School of Economics. "They have a long-term plan. Their demands change. It's a fluid relationship being negotiated all the time."

Still, the killing of Soleimani, a man whose power was second only to Ayatollah Khamenei, struck a big blow to Iran's influence. It has been said that Soleimani, mastermind of Iran's expansion throughout the Middle East, could drive from Tehran to Lebanon's border with Israel without being stopped.

By contrast, when his successor, Esmail Ghaani, first visited Iraq's militias in Baghdad in 2020, he had to apply for a visa – a clear indication that then-prime minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi was intent on keeping him at arm's length.

Ghaani, who cut his teeth in Afghanistan and does not

speak Arabic, struggled to impose his will on the militias. To make matters worse, the assembled hardmen were unimpressed when he turned up with a box of silver rings, rather than the wads of cash they had come to expect.

The killing of Muhandis, founder of the Kata'ib Hezbollah militia, another US-designated terror group, was also consequential. He had been in the throes of bringing the unruly militias under a centralised command structure, turning it into a sort of Iraqi IRGC.

**No central figure**

With no central figure to rally around, the militias have been caught up in local rivalries, pursuing their own agendas, which include firing rockets at US troops. In 2021, Ghaani actually told them to stop, but his pleas for calm fell on deaf ears.

With backers embedded in key ministries and their own stockpiles of arms, the militias may be outgrowing their role as Iran's instruments of power. These days, they receive funding from local sources – not least the Iraqi government, which integrated them into state security forces in 2018. But legitimacy has not curbed their lawlessness.

Muhandis was Tehran's man in Iraq, who had fought with the IRGC against Saddam Hussein.

**A cardboard cut-out of former US president Donald Trump hangs on Tahrir Square, Baghdad in an event that was staged by Iran-backed Shia militias**

With his death, Iran lost one of its main keys to the country. And while there is no shortage of candidates ready to take his place, creating a new Iraqi leader could backfire if interests clash. This creates a dilemma for Iran, which needs coherence, but does not want strong leaders to emerge in Iraq.

In a 2019 study, the US army admitted that Iran was the only victor in the \$2 trillion Iraq war. But, like the US before it, its time may soon be up. The 2019 anti-government protests, which saw young Iraqis shouting "Iran barra barra" (Iran out) sent a clear message. In their eyes, the Shia parties and militias doing Tehran's bidding are responsible for the corruption, high unemployment and poor services that are holding the country back.

"These militia guys like Qais Khazali are mercenaries," says Ali (36), who was in the thick of the protests. "They need to stop running to Iran whenever there's trouble. They will go wherever the money is."

"They will become Iraqi if it suits their interests."

# Ardern to step down as New Zealand leader

**NIC FILDES**  
in Sydney

Jacinda Ardern, New Zealand's prime minister since 2017, is to step down by February, bringing to a close a five-year term that brought her international acclaim but left her increasingly politically isolated at home as a cost-of-living crisis took hold.

Ms Ardern said that following a period of reflection over Christmas, she no longer had the energy to continue as leader of the government and would resign rather than contest a general election this year. "I have no regrets," she told reporters about her decision, adding that she would be "doing a disservice to New Zealand" if she remained in the role.

The sudden conclusion of the 42-year-old Ardern's premiership will mark the end of an era that generated intense global interest in New Zealand, both for her socially progressive mandate and hard-line response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

ferred prime minister, but support for the Labour party had dropped to its lowest level since 2017. The poll indicated that even with the backing of its traditional coalition partner, the Green party, Labour would be unlikely to be able to form a government.

Stephen Mills, a former political adviser to prime ministers David Lange and Helen Clark, said that Ardern had not faced internal pressure to stand down. "The Nationals [opposition party] will be the ones opening the champagne tonight," he said.

Ms Ardern said yesterday that a general election would take place on October 14th and denied that she was standing down due to the poor polling. She added that it was im-



**Some will say she has cut and run, others that she has the emotional intelligence to go out on a high**

**'Jacindamania'** Bryce Edwards, a political analyst at Victoria University of Wellington, said Ardern rose to power "out of nowhere" at a time when left-wing parties were in retreat.

"There was a sense of mania – Jacindamania," he said, praising her charisma at a time when figures such as former US president Donald Trump were in the ascendancy. "She was a revelation and a nice counter to populist, reactionary politics."

Ms Ardern won a sweeping election victory in 2020 as the public backed her stringent policy of border closures and lockdowns in an effort to stem Covid's spread. She also won praise for strong and compassionate leadership in her response to the 2019 terrorist attack on two mosques in Christchurch in which 51 people were killed, as well as with the eruption of the White Island volcano.

But public sentiment towards her administration has soured this year as New Zealand grapples with a cost-of-living crisis, a sharp rise in interest rates, lower house prices and a rise in crime.

"Things have changed in New Zealand since the landslide election victory of 2020. The country has got grumpy and annoyed," said Edwards.

A 1 News Kantar poll in December showed that Ardern maintained a lead over the right-wing National Party's Christopher Luxon as the pre-

portant to give a new Labour leader enough time to prepare for an election rather than sticking with one who "didn't have enough in the tank to take them through".

A new prime minister is expected to be in place by February 7th.

Mr Edwards said of the resignation: "Some will say she has cut and run, others that she has the emotional intelligence to go out on a high."

**UNrole**

Ms Ardern, who has often been tipped to follow her mentor and former prime minister Helen Clark into a role with the UN, denied that her departure was motivated by plans for a next move. "That hasn't been my ambition," she said.

International leaders including Anthony Albanese, Australia's prime minister, and Justin Trudeau, Canada's leader, were quick to praise Ms Ardern's legacy. "Jacinda Ardern has shown the world how to lead with intellect and strength. She has demonstrated that empathy and insight are powerful leadership qualities," Mr Albanese said. - Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2023

## Timeline Ardern's political career

**2008:** Jacinda Ardern is elected to the New Zealand parliament after working in the UK, including a stint in prime minister Tony Blair's office.

**2017:** Elected leader of the Labour party and becomes prime minister less than three months later, after forming a coalition with minority parties.

**2018:** Gives birth to her daughter Neve. She takes six weeks of maternity leave and later brings Neve to the UN General Assembly.

**2019:** Leads New Zealand through mourning after a terrorist attack on two mosques in Christchurch in March and implements stricter gun control laws in response. The eruption of the White Island volcano in December again brings her compassion to the fore.

**2020:** New Zealand closes its borders and adopts some of the strictest lockdown measures in the world in response to Covid-19. The headline approach is widely backed and she leads Labour to a decisive victory in October elections

**2022:** New Zealand's pandemic policies come under strain as mass protests take place outside parliament. The government lifts restrictions but a cost-of-living crisis and sharp rise in interest rates and inflation hit Ardern's popularity. She meets US president Joe Biden and signs an enhanced security pact to counter China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region.

**2023:** Ardern steps down, saying her energy level, not poor polling, triggered her decision.

# Hundreds flee sinking town in Indian Himalayas

**RAHUL BEDI**  
in New Delhi

Hundreds of people have fled their homes in a north Indian Himalayan town after the ground beneath it began steadily sinking, leading to giant fissures in houses, workplaces, schools, paths and streets, and the collapse of a Hindu temple.

Environmentalists have said indiscriminate and unplanned development over six decades, despite frequent warnings, had led to Joshimath – located at an altitude of 1,874m some 500km northeast of New Delhi in Uttarakhand state – subsiding 5cm over the last week, according to satellite imagery recorded by

the Indian Space Research Organisation. More than 100 families from an overall population of about 25,000 have been evacuated to government-run relief camps, after major cracks appeared in some 1,100 of Joshimath's 4,500 residences and various surrounding structures, officials said.

Last week, the local municipality began demolishing two hotels that were leaning precariously on each other because of Joshimath's subsidence. But the authorities cannot contain the continuous flow of water gushing down from the surrounding hillsides, threatening to completely inundate several neighbourhoods.

"The land has been subsiding in my ward over the past year and its sinking has increased due to the blasting being carried out for varied [road and other] construction activity," Deepa Devi, a member of Joshimath's municipal board, told the Hindustan Times.

**Warning signs ignored** Other residents told television news channels that the government had ignored obvious warning signs of the looming disaster and "recklessly" kept developing infrastructure.

In response, a rattled state administration issued a "gag order" last weekend on officials and environmental experts, pre-

venting them from sharing data on Joshimath's situation on social media. Locals claimed this fiat was increasingly proving "dangerous and counterproductive".

According to Chandra Bhusan of the International Forum for Environment, Sustainability and Technology in Delhi, the subsidence was predicted, as the town's gradual sinking had been documented over 50 years by numerous supreme court-appointed committees and federal and state government commissions.

Their findings and conclusions, he said, had warned against the region's haphazard urbanisation, large-scale hydro-

power development, arbitrary construction and slicing through hills and decimating forests to build and widen roads. But time and again, Bhusan said, these warnings had been ignored, sealing Joshimath's fate.

**Heavy construction** In 1976, an official report warned that Joshimath was sinking and recommended a ban on all heavy construction.

But successive state governments built 39 hydroelectric projects, and 25 more are being constructed. Hundreds of hotels, guest houses and unauthorised restaurants have been built in Joshimath over decades

to cater to tens of thousands of pilgrims who pass through it each year on the way to a clutch of Hindu temples in nearby Badrinath and the nearby Hemkunt Sahib Sikh shrine.

Many tourists, trekkers and skiers flock to Joshimath during summer, resulting in new roads and tunnels being bored into hillsides to improve connectivity. And while Joshimath's residents face the prospect of homelessness, prime minister Narendra Modi's BJP-led government is pursuing an all-weather 719km-long road project, connecting the plains to the many Hindu pilgrim spots in the mountains around the beleaguered town.