

Iraq's New Electoral Process, and the Likely Winners and Losers

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Key Points

- The Iraqi elections come amid positive signs of Middle East de-escalation and new geopolitical conditions.
- Political stability could open doors for Iraq to play a mediator role in the region, especially after Baghdad's actions as a neutral mediator in the region.
- Although contrary to the goal of protestors, militias will likely have success in the elections.
- Since the likely winners of the early elections in Iraq are the same political players, it is unlikely that the upcoming elections will result in significant changes to the political map or cause major alterations to the ruling parties.
- Muqtada Al-Sadr is working to promote his movement as a moderate and effective alternative on the Iraqi Shia political scene. He is also seeking to reassure the West.
- The Tishreen is a spontaneous social movement that is not ideologized nor supported by external countries. Although it lacks a unified strategy, it will mature over time, and thus, Tishreen options and programmatic agendas will crystallize.

Background

The Iraqi elections come amid positive signs of Middle East de-escalation and new geopolitical conditions. These positive signs include the Baghdad Summit of neighboring countries, the recent KSA–Iran discussions in Iraq, bilateral visits between Iraq and GCC countries, and the loss of Iranian influence in Iraq. Examples of a decrease in Iran's influence are the Iraqi-Shia protests against Iran, strengthened Iraqi relations with GCC, and Muqtada AlSadr's statements against Iranian influence. This situation presents opportunities for Iraq to gain internal stability and the upcoming elections will have impact an immediate and long-term future for the region.

Iraq has held numerous elections since the US overthrew of the government of Saddam Hussein in 2003. In most of those elections, voting was based on ethnic, sectarian grounds, and partisan and personal interests. Previous Iraqi elections were considered seasons to revive sectarian discourse where parties race to win the largest number of supporters through their candidates' sectarianism rhetoric.¹ Such electoral disfunction was

¹ Albaghdadi, "الانتخابات العراقية موسم لإحياء الخطاب الطائفي" [The Iraqi elections are a season to revive sectarian discourse], Alkhaleej Online, 5 May, 2019, <https://alkhaleejonline.net/سياسة/الانتخابات-العراقية-موسم-لإحياء-الخطاب-الطائفي-والمذهبي> (Accessed September 20, 2021)

evident in voting boycotts by main components of the Iraqi people. The populace has expressed a lack of confidence in the electoral process despite over 15 years of reform efforts.²

Iraq is on the eve of its fifth electoral experience since 2005. The 2021 elections are particularly important for two key reasons. The first reason is its reformed processes are in response to widespread protests in October 2019.³ Many Iraqi protestors (especially among the youth, across different regions of the country) expressed hope to gain an equal share of political empowerment. The protestors' pessimism was based upon ethnic tensions and the control exercised by some armed factions.⁴ Although many believed their voices would not be heard, the protests resulted in changes in electoral law. As for the second reason, the elections are also in the geopolitical shadow of the recent Baghdad Summit. The Iraqi Prime Minister has sought to portray Iraq as a neutral mediator in the region's crises and is re-engaging internationally after years of internal struggle.⁵

The Iraqi Electoral Commission stated, elections will take place on October 10, 2021. Elections will consist of the participation of 21 political alliances and 167 participating parties. In total, 3,249 candidates are competing (951 of which are women).⁴ Despite reports about postponing the elections, the Iraqi Prime Minister rejected such a possibility. He stressed during a press conference that the government will stick to the scheduled date.

Iraq's New Election Law

The main demands of the protests of 2019 were calls for moving away from the political system that the US had instituted and diminishing of Tehran's influence.⁵ Consequently, in late 2019, the Iraqi parliament voted in favor changing election processes and in 2020, the new election law was ratified. The Parliament's decision was remarkable since it was able to overcome controversial issues.⁸ The new law seems to lessen the influence of political parties and enables the inclusion of new generations of Iraqis into the political arena. The new law divides Iraq into districts with a member of Parliament elected from each. The law changes the voting process from voting for candidates grouped by a party to voting for individuals. Such an adjustment may help counter corruption of the ruling political class.⁶

While this law is a response to protestors, its effectiveness (like all other electoral systems) depends the way it is applied and the environment to where it is applied. The new law has limited power over the control political money and armed militias. Its degree of effectiveness maybe lessened by the use of loopholes by some political

² Staff, "اتساع مقاطعة الانتخابات العراقية.. ومحللون يتحدثون عن الأسباب" [The expansion of the Iraqi elections boycott.. and analysts talk about the reasons], Alhurra, 29 July, 2021, <https://www.alhurra.com/iraq/2021/07/29/اتساع-مقاطعة-الانتخابات-العراقية--ومحللون-يتحدثون-عن-الاسباب> (Accessed 18 September 2021)

³ Staff, "الكاظمي يكرر: انتخابات العراق في موعدها" [Al-Kazemi repeats: Iraq's elections are on time], Al-Arabiya, 24 August, 2021, <https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/iraq/2021/08/24/الكاظمي-يكرر-انتخابات-العراق-في-موعدھا> (Accessed September 5, 2021) ⁴ Ibid. ⁵ Staff, "Iraq hosts summit aimed at easing regional tensions," AlJazeera, 28 August, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/28/iraq-hosts-regional-summit-aimed-at-easing-regional-tensions> (Accessed 20 September, 2021)

⁴ Staff, "What will distinguish the upcoming elections in Iraq? Will the political map change?," *Teller Report*, 11 September, 2021, <https://www.tellerreport.com/news/2021-09-11-what-will-distinguish-the-upcoming-elections-in-iraq-will-the-political-map-change-.SkGY5qfqt.html> (Accessed September 19, 2021)

⁵ Staff, "بكل بنوده البرلمان العراقي يمرر قانون الانتخابات الجديد" [With all its provisions, the Iraqi parliament passes the new election law], Sky News, 24 December, 2019, <https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1307729-بكل-بنوده-البرلمان-العراقي-يمرر-قانون-الانتخابات-الجديد> (Accessed 9 September, 2021) ⁸ Ibid.

⁶ Hassan & Rubin, "Iraq's New Election Law Draws Much Criticism and Few Cheers," *New York Times*, 24 December, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/24/world/middleeast/iraq-election-law.html> (Accessed 16 September, 2021)

and tribal movements. These movements have great political leverage considering the level of loyalty between tribal leaders and religious clerks. Therefore, many are concerned that factions within nonpartisan systems often evolve into political parties. Newly elected representatives in Parliament will be required to form political parties to elect the Prime Minister.⁷ Moreover, there are risks in using such system when the absence of party labels confuses voters and the resultant lack of knowledge about candidates may cause voters to simply cast ballots along ethnic lines.⁸

Preparation for the Elections

The Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) carried three election simulations that were aimed to test system reliability.⁹ The Prime Minister stressed his hopes that the upcoming elections will be unlike any previous elections as they are designed to support the decisions of the Iraqi people. Upon completion of the simulations, he announced that all the requirements of the electoral process have been fully completed and described the simulation as excellent and successful by all standards. He declared that elections will be based on integrity and transparency and there will be no nepotism, fraud, and corruption. In addition, he urged all Iraqis to go to the polls and warned against attempts to buy votes through fake appointments or the distribution lands.¹⁰

The elections will be held according to the new electoral procedures of closed electoral districts, so that nominations do not require affiliation lists. These procedures can be limited to a number of candidates depending on the number of residents in each district. The IHEC had earlier invited about 25 million voters to participate in the early elections, in which more than 3,200 candidates are competing for all 329 House of Representatives seats (25 percent of which are allocated to women). While the political groups are likely to nominate dignitaries and prominent personalities within 83 electoral districts, the situation often changes and new alliances are formed after the results are announced. This constitutes a change for the political groups under the dome of Parliament.¹⁴

Leading up the elections, there has been evidence of efforts to commit fraud. Attempts to rig the early elections by a network of corrupt officials were thwarted by the Iraqi intelligence service. A former electoral commission member, Miqdad Al Sharifi was arrested on accusations of involvement electoral interference.¹¹ The security services explained that they were able to implement a proactive operation that prevented illegitimate pressure being applied on a number of IHEC employees. The fraudulent scheme aimed to provoke misinformation and political chaos through a network of electronic communication sites. The Iraqi government's statement indicated that one of these websites suggested that it was linked to employees from the office of the Prime

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Staff, "Partisan vs. Nonpartisan Elections," National League of Cities, <https://www.nlc.org/partisan-vs-nonpartisanelections/> (Accessed 28 September 2021)

⁹ Dilan Sirwan, "IHEC aims to announce election results within 24 hours," *RUDAW*, 23 September 2021, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/230920212> (Accessed 23 September, 2021)

¹⁰ Staff, "الكاسمي: اذهبوا إلى الانتخابات وأنهوا الفساد في العراق," [Al-Kazemi: Go to the elections and end corruption in Iraq], *AlArabiya*, 22 September, 2021, <https://www.alarabiya.net/arab-and-world/iraq/2021/09/22/الكاسمي-يعد-بانتخابات-خالية-من-التزوير-أو-الفساد> (Accessed 23 September, 2021) ¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹ Al-Awsat, Asharq. "Iraq Foils an Attempt to Commit Election Fraud." Saudi Research & Publishing Co. 3 September, 2021. <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3168386/iraq-foils-attempt-commit-election-fraud>

Minister and to the Prime Minister's advisors. While this instance of fraud was prevented, there may be many other attempts that passed without detection.¹²

Electronic Voting System

The 2018 elections were plagued with problems within the electronic voting system and accusations of fraud. The governorates of Kirkuk and Sulaymaniyah (Northern Iraq), along with other governorates, called for a manual resorting process.¹³ While millions were spent on electronic voting system equipment to ensure integrity of the upcoming early elections, the same electronic system will be used again, so therefore, voter ballot cards will remain at the mercy of fraud, manipulation, and possibly theft. Thus, voting system equipment should not be the sole means of ensuring a fair election. It is essential that the intentions of the election administrators are fair. Even western countries (including the US) has combinations of electronic systems' and the counting processes' issues.

The 2021 Iraqi election marks the first time the government is not participating as a party in the election. Instead, it will serve as a contributor to election impartiality and fairness.¹⁴ Moreover, the government has taken a series of actions to limit fraud, increase security of the election,¹⁵ and foster election integrity through its Electoral Code of Conduct. The Iraqi president announced that political officials signed the "Electoral Code of Conduct" to enforce the principle of "honorable" electoral competition, to avoid smear campaigns, and to deter the exploitation of political money.²⁰

Further fraud prevention activities included the destruction and disposal of more than 4,670,000 invalid ballots printed for the 2014 and 2018 elections. Staff from the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq joined officials from the IHEC in the process to remove invalid from the voter registration database.¹⁶ Based on IHEC information, the number of invalid ballots that will be removed is likely to rise to more than 5,000,000 as registered voters turn in their old electronic voter cards in exchange for the new biometric cards. The IHEC stated, "No one will be able to vote on someone else's behalf. The voter must be the person whose information is stored on the card, and they must match all of the person's 10-digit registered fingerprints before they can continue with the voting process. In the event of a non-conformity, the person will not be allowed to vote."¹⁷

¹² Mohammad Abadi, "الانتخابات البرلمانية العراقية تقترب.. والأحزاب الطائفية تستعد" [The Iraqi parliamentary elections are approaching... and sectarian parties are preparing], Alfateh News, 26 September 2021, <https://fath-news.com/ar/news/425106/الانتخابات-البرلمانية-العراقية-تقترب-والأحزاب-الطائفية-تستعد> (Accessed 28 September 2021)

¹³ Aref Jawad, "الانتخابات العراقية.. التصويت الإلكتروني يثير موجة استياء و غضب عارمة" [The Iraqi elections.. Electronic voting provokes a wave of resentment and anger], AA, 13 May, 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/--التقاري-ر/الانتخابات-العراقية-التصويت-الإلكتروني-يثير-موجة-استياء-و-غضب-عارمة-تقرير-143669> (Accessed 24 September, 2021)

¹⁴ Hassan Ahmad, "Iraq focuses on voter security ahead of elections ," Al-Monitor, 12 September, 2021, <https://www.almonitor.com/originals/2021/09/iraq-focuses-voter-security-ahead-elections> (Accessed 24 September 2021)

¹⁵ Ibid. ²⁰ Laith Alkatib, "لضبط الانتخابات.. قوى سياسية عراقية توقع على "مدونة سلوك" [To control the elections, Iraqi political forces sign a

"code of conduct"], Al-Ain News, 15 September, 2021, <https://al-ain.com/article/iraq-election-document-signature> (Accessed 26 September 2021)

¹⁶ Staff, "تشرين الأول 10 مليون بطاقة اقتراع إلكترونية قديمة من النظام الانتخابي في العراق قبيل انتخابات 4.7 سحب ما يقرب من " [Nearly 4.7 million old electronic ballot papers have been withdrawn from the electoral system in Iraq ahead of the October 10 elections], United Nations Iraq, 9 September, 2021, <https://iraq.un.org/index.php/ar/143858-shb-ma-yqrb-mn-47-mlywn-btaqt-aqtra-alktrwnytdymt-mn-alnzam-alantkhabby-fy-alraq-qbyl> (Accessed 24, September 2021)

¹⁷ Ibid.

The Election's Environment, the Likely Winners and Losers

The current atmosphere in Iraq enables the militias to gain a majority in the next assembly. This is contrary to the protests of Iraqi youth and the goal the early elections. Election campaigning will hopefully promote the types of changes that Iraq needs, but the elections are likely to be overwhelming influenced by sectarian propaganda.^{18,19} The Iraqi people lack confidence in the outcomes of the electoral process as youth segments believe the political tools available are in the hands of militias leaders and sectarian parties.²⁴

None of the parties will likely win a majority of seats, so therefore, the next government will be a coalition. Although Muqtada Al-Sadr's coalition will gain success through its ability to organization and mobilize voters on election day. Such capabilities from the Sadrist bloc will allow it to outperform Fatah.²⁵ Al-Sadr hopes to snatch the lion's share of votes by promoting his movement as a moderate and effective alternative on the Iraqi Shia political scene. He is also seeking to reassure the West, particularly the US and Britain, that he will prevent the transformation of Iraq into an ideal bridge for Iran to reach Syria, Lebanon, and the Mediterranean.²⁰ Al-Sadr is aware that his Shia opponents are now in their weakest position, and this allows him to expand his influence. After the elections, the Al-Sadr movement could form an alliance with the National State Forces Alliance led by Haider al-Abadi and Ammar al-Hakim.²⁷

As for the Sunni forces, the Parliament Speaker leads the Advancement Alliance in Anbar province, while the Nujaifi family coalition focuses on Mosul.²¹ It is expected that the two main Kurdish parties to win and form an alliance with one of the Shiite factions. According to informal negotiations between the two parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party, led by Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani, will join an informal coalition with the Sadrists to form a government. At the same time, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan will ally with the Fatah Alliance.²² However, the Tishreen movement opposes and challenges these elites.

Nevertheless, suppose all the parties mentioned above gain the lion's share of votes. In that case, the loser is obviously the Tishreen movement. While they are highly motivated, the Tishreen movement lacks political tools and is divided between two groups. One is pushing for participation in the election, while the other (the majority) is calling for a boycott.³⁰ They represent the young protesters that are messaging national identity and

¹⁸ Mezar Kamal, "الطائفية في العراق: هكذا تقاد الدعاية الانتخابية" [Sectarianism in Iraq: This is how electoral propaganda is conducted!], Assafir Al-Arabi, 20 September, 2021, <https://assafirarabi.com/ar/40429/2021/09/20> (Accessed 28 September 2021)

¹⁹ Mahmoud Nabeel, "تقرير بريطاني يرجح عدم فوز أي حزب بالأغلبية في انتخابات البلاد المقبلة" [A British report suggests that no party will win a majority in the country's upcoming elections], Sabah News, 26 September 2021, <http://newsabah.com/newspaper/255972> (Accessed 27 September, 2021)

²⁰ Staff, "Sadr promotes himself as moderate alternative ahead of Iraq elections," The Arab Weekly, 24 September 2021, <https://theArabweekly.com/sadr-promotes-himself-moderate-alternative-ahead-iraq-elections> (Accessed 28 September 2021)

²¹ Mahmoud Nabeel, "تقرير بريطاني يرجح عدم فوز أي حزب بالأغلبية في انتخابات البلاد المقبلة" [A British report suggests that no party will win a majority in the country's upcoming elections], Sabah News, 26 September 2021, <http://newsabah.com/newspaper/255972> (Accessed 27 September, 2021)

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

the dream of a free homeland.²³ The Tishreen group is a grass roots social movement that is not ideologized nor supported by external countries. Although it lacks a unified strategy, it will mature over time, and thus, Tishreen options and programmatic agendas will crystallize.²⁴

Conclusion

Since the likely winners of the early elections in Iraq are the same political players, it is unlikely that the upcoming elections will result in significant changes to the political map or cause major alterations to the ruling parties. Nevertheless, the regional and international political map may now be heading toward de-escalation in the region, and Iraq now has a great opportunity to play a positive mediator in the region. This can have a positive impact in changing Iraqi policies towards broader national reconciliation, greater integration into the regional community, increased investments, and a higher degree of security. Beyond the immediate results of the 2021 election, the strengthening of stability in Iraq is dependent on the political deals that will be made in the months following the elections.

Recommendations for the US / USCENTCOM

- Coordinate with the State Department to issue a strong statement on the US stance regarding the need for free and fair elections in Iraq.
- Seek out opportunities where there is a decline in Iran's influence in Iraq and the new Iran's geopolitical challenges.
- Message the international community's support for a robust Iraqi government that pursues Iraq's national interests first and prevent Iranian interventions in Iraq.
- USCENTCOM, through its military presence in Iraq, show its resolve for the Iraqi government by providing all the support needed to protect the elections.
- Using public media, emphasize that the US security cooperation activities that support training, advising, and intelligence sharing.
- Monitor post-election political negotiations and the coalition government's inclusivity.
- As political stability increases in Iraq, recalibrate security cooperation to match the situation.

²³ Staff, "التشريينيون في العراق.. الرقم الصعب في المعادلة الانتخابية" [The Teshreeners the difficult number in the electoral equation], Sky News, 27 September 2021, <https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1466359---الرقم-الصعب-ن-العراق-المعادلة-الانتخابية> (Accessed 28 September 2021)

²⁴ Ibid.