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Iraqi Early Elections: The Will of Iraqis and Opportunities for the International Community

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Brief Analysis

The international community should push for free and fair elections in Iraq as a way to diminish the influence of armed militias on Iraqi politics.

Iraqis are looking forward to the early elections set for October 2021 as a chance for change in a politically troubled country. Nonetheless, despite the importance of these elections for Iraq and its democracy, politically connected armed factions could undermine the elections and the general political process by seeking to influence the electoral results. The chance that militias and their political networks could engineer the elections to further their own legitimacy will lead to a loss of faith in democracy and political process in Iraq. Accordingly, it is critical that the international community works to ensure free and fair elections in Iraq to combat the political influence of militias and ensure a healthy step towards real Iraqi democracy.

Political support for armed militias has been a crippling influence on Iraqi democracy for years now. In Iraq's 2018 elections, parties with armed wings managed to win a third of the seats in the Iraqi parliament, and their influence has since become a pervasive force in Iraqi politics. After the election, these parties exploited their parliamentary influence to obtain ministerial and security positions, and those connections have emboldened and empowered militias, most of whom officially operate outside government control. During the government of Adel Abdul Mahdi in particular, the militias—backed by parliamentary legislation—managed to exert greater power than even the government did.

As a result, Iraqis have been trying to limit the power of the militias in government for over a year now, periodically filling the streets with loud demonstrations since October 2019. In response, the militias and government forces violently suppressed the protests, leaving hundreds of youths [dead](#) and thousands wounded. Although the Iraqi protests weakened the militias, besieging them socially and causing internal rifts in their leadership, the armed

factions were able to survive largely due to their foreign political support.

Changing the power structures in Iraq's parliament is crucial in solving Iraq's problems with the militias. As such, with early elections on the horizon, Iraqis have the opportunity to remove the parliamentary cover enjoyed by armed factions and replace the political influence of the militias with the power of unarmed civilian leaders. As such, Iraqis and the international community should focus on the degree to which the elections neutralize the political blocs that support the militias as the real indication of success for the early elections.

The elections therefore also present the international community with an opportunity to mitigate the influence of destabilizing forces in Iraq, particularly through full international supervision and monitoring. The Iraqi people have repeatedly **demand**ed international supervision of the 2021 elections during the period of demonstrations. Unsurprisingly, the political forces that support the militias have rejected that demand, aware that international supervision would hinder their efforts to skew the elections. In addition, those political forces know that international observation of the elections would make the world more aware of the militias' threats against activists and anti-militia candidates. This heightened concern on the part of militia supporters reflects the impact international supervision could have in restoring civilian control over the government.

Moreover, international pushes for free and fair elections would work to weaken not only the armed factions in Iraq, but the regional Iranian-led network that supports the militias as well. Ensuring legitimate, safe elections in Iraq therefore also helps the international community preserve stability and security at a regional level.

If the early elections fail to remove the militias' parliamentary cover, they will bring in an Iraqi government that does not negotiate with the international community. The militias will transform into the state itself and thus target international interests in the name of the Iraqi state, using official military capabilities in a scenario that could resemble Libya in the aftermath of its 2011 civil war.

In contrast, ensuring that militia tactics do not influence the early elections will likely provide for a government eager for outside investment and reconstruction opportunities. Likewise, such a government could allow Iraq to contribute effectively to regional security. As such, it is important that the international community not buy into the militias' characterization of international supervision as a breach of sovereignty—especially given the lack of confidence among Iraqis themselves in the integrity of Iraqi elections under the influence of Iraq's political factions. The international supervision must be full and detailed rather than a supervision by name only.

On another note, stifling the militias' political power is a more effective tool against them than military action—military targeting of any militia inside Iraq will give the militias a legitimate excuse for armed mobilization and a justification for the use of force against civilian activists. In the event of military efforts by any external parties against the militias, the militias would be likely to use the pretext of “resisting the occupation” and “confronting global arrogance” to regain the influence they lost during the demonstrations. Any military action against militias inside Iraq should therefore be reserved to Iraqi government forces. Another choice for foreign military action against militias is to attack them outside Iraq by targeting the entire axis that supports them, dragging them into battles and a war outside the borders to drain their abilities.

There is now a seven-month window for Iraqis and the international community to provide Iraq with an environment that will allow free and fair elections. This goal can only be achieved by keeping militias away from the electoral process and neutralizing their political support. If such efforts fail, the Iraqi people will grow increasingly get angry with the entire regime over time, and the protest movements will grow even as militias continue to penetrate the state structure. This outcome will mean chaos and potential collapse in Iraq—a result that bodes poorly for security and peace in the region. And if the early elections fail, another choice for the global community is to invest in Iraqi people and educating a new political elite. Investing in Iraqi people is much more important for the

global community than investing in the Iraqi government. ❖



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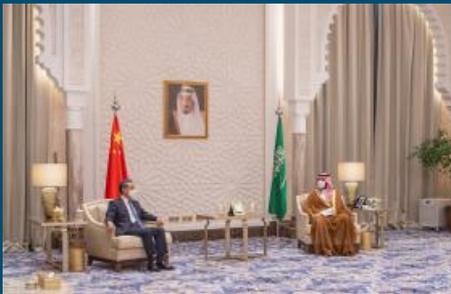
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