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Iraqi Elections: Current Coalitions Are Not a Recipe for Change

by [Nawzad Shukri](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Nawzad Shukri](#)

Nawzad Shukri holds a PhD in politics and international relations from Leicester University. He currently works as a lecturer at the University of Salahaddin in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Shukri is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



Brief Analysis

As Iraq's electoral coalitions campaign for parliament spots, old alliances and political players are likely to prevent the elections from leading to major changes in Iraq's political sphere.

Due to significant political party pressure, it is still not clear whether Iraqi elections will be held in October 2021 as scheduled, or whether elections will be postponed to next year. The latest example came from Muqtada al-Sadr, who initially [announced on July 15](#) that his movement will not take part in the October 2021 election, then reversing his decision on August 27.

While the government's decision to hold early elections stems from calls for reform, the outcome of the new elections is unlikely to bring major change. The Tishreen movement in Iraq, which began in October 2019, gave voice to increasing public pressure to hold new, fair, and transparent elections after the previous elections in 2018 were widely viewed as neither free nor fair.

Tishreeni protesters voiced their anger over Iraq's widespread corruption, high levels of unemployment, the deterioration of Iraqi security and stability, and the government's inability to provide basic services, such as water and electricity to its citizens. These pressures, together with intensified American-Iranian competition in Iraq, led to the [resignation of Adul Abdul Madi](#) in December 2019. [Mustafa Kadhimi](#), who took power in May 2020, promised to hold early elections.

Reasons behind Kadhimi's withdrawal from the elections

Despite having fielded a [list for the October elections](#), Prime Minister Mustafa Kadhimi decided not to form a coalition for the next elections. There have been various interpretations of this decision. One explanation argues that Kadhimi sees the elections as primarily a fulfillment of his promise for free, fair, and early elections, a central point of his policy when he came to power. Kadhimi may also believe not forming a coalition will position him as a compromise candidate for prime minister via the backing of the major Shia parties.

On the other hand, Kadhimi's weak political position could also explain this decision. The Iraqi government under his leadership has not been successful in taking any steps to improve the situation in Iraq and has changed the perspective of Iraqi peoples.

Kadhimi's government has failed to effectively address Iraq's basic services crisis, and has likewise failed to maintain security and stability in Iraq, or confront Shia militias that have murdered and arrested dozens of political activists. In addition, the widespread corruption and increase in unemployment rates have further weakened his position. An unpublicized deal between Kadhimi and Muqtada Sadr might be another factor motivating Kadhimi to withdraw from the elections in return for gaining Sadr's support for the second term.

Competing Shia coalitions

Despite the plethora of political parties and independent figures and coalitions, there are three major coalitions in Shia-dominated areas expected to succeed in the upcoming election. First is Muqtada al-Sadr's newly reinstated coalition. Sadr's initial decision to withdrawal was a direct response to the fires at the [coronavirus hospital in Nasiriya](#), which left dozens dead and injured. Sadr's officers control Iraq's Health Ministry, so his announcement seemed aimed at distancing himself from the current corrupted Shia elites and denying any responsibility for what happened.

Though it did not enter into any coalition with other parties for the next elections, the Sadrist list nevertheless constitutes one of the most popular and powerful Shia parties in Iraq. It has a strong leadership and well-centralized authorities and organizations. It is expected that Sadr's list will retain its current position and receive the majority of Shia votes in the October 2021 election.

Generally, Sadr's political outlook is complex and lacks a consistent direction. Therefore, it is hard to expect a clear Sadrist Movement policy after the elections. However, the party's policies do tend to concentrate on protecting Iraqi sovereignty, ending the interference of regional states in Iraqi domestic affairs, the removal of U.S. troops from Iraq, and the normalization of Iraqi relations with the Arab world. Sadr has good relations with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), led by Masoud Barzani, and with some Sunni parties as well.

The second major Shia coalition is the Fatah alliance, which is the political arm of those Shia militia groups with close relations with Iran. If Iraq holds fair, transparent, and free elections, Fatah will not maintain the position that it gained during the 2018 election, when it won 48 seats. The position of this coalition is now much weaker—especially since the eruption of demonstrations in October 2019 in Shia dominated areas, which pushed back against the power of the militia groups. Shia armed groups have been responsible for killing political activists, a move that has decreased their popularity. It is notable that the Fatah alliance is pursuing [an Iranian agenda](#) in Iraq and the region, and has confronted the U.S. military presence in Iraq.

However, these Shia militia groups obtain power by guiding Iraq's deep state and operating by way of Iraqi authorities. As such, Iran's backing and the fact that they have significant military, political and financial resources will undoubtedly help them buy votes and influence the election results.

The third major Shia faction is called the National Power of the State Coalition, formed by Amar-al-hakim and Haider Abadi. This coalition is not very strong, and was formed out of necessity for both sides as a means of reaching the electoral threshold. As such, it will likely collapse in the aftermath of the elections, especially as it has yet to issue a common agenda or comprehensive strategy for the future of Iraq. Nor is this group supported by regional or international backers, and some figures in the coalition are on a United States blacklist. Even so, the coalition constitutes a key rival to Fatah Alliance, as it stresses bringing Shia militias under control of Iraqi state. Politically, it has good relations with Sadrist Movement and Kurdistan Patriotic Union and this might push it to cooperate with them after the elections.

The strongest Sunni coalitions

Since 2010, the Arab Sunni political parties have been more willing to engage in the Iraqi political process and participate in elections to regain the political position that they lost after regime change in 2003. In this context, there are a number of Sunni parties, coalitions, and independent candidates participating in the elections.

However, there are three key coalitions that are most likely to attract the majority of Sunni voters. The first coalition is called al-Azm, which is under the leadership of [Khamis al-Khanjar](#), the Sunni businessman and billionaire. Al-Khanjar, who is [sanctioned by the United States](#) due to allegations of corruption, has good relations with Qatar and Iran.

[Taqaddum](#) (Advancement Alliance), which was formed by current Speaker of Parliament Mohamed al-Halbousi, constitutes another powerful coalition. This alliance's stronghold is in Anbar province, and the coalition has close relations with Saudi Arabia. The National Salvation Project, which is under the leadership of al-Nujaifi, is regarded as the other major coalition, and has strongholds in Mosul province, and close relations with Turkey.

Overall, there is a significant amount of criticism from Sunni Iraqi voters of the Sunni political parties and their elites. Sunni politicians have been accused of looking after their own interests rather than defending broader Sunni concerns. Deep division and the absence of any collective policy to defend Arab Sunni interests constitute the common characteristics of Sunni political elites, with each aligning itself to a different axis of regional states competing for influence in Iraq. The lack of a strongman or charismatic leadership constitutes another weakness. Most importantly, most alliances are tactical rather than comprehensive in nature—after the elections, each party will likely seek its own interests. Therefore, it is probable that there will be increased intra-coalition divisions after elections.

Kurdish parties

When it comes to Kurdish representation, there are likely to be even fewer surprises. The Kurdish Region of Iraq's two main parties—the KDP and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—are likely to maintain their dominant positions, with the former continuing as the largest party. However, there is currently a formal coalition between the PUK and the Change Movement, under the title of the Kurdistan alliance. Moreover, there is an informal agreement between the PUK, the Islamic Union, led by Salahaddin Bahaaddin, and the Kurdistan Justice Group, led by Ali Bapir, to support each other's candidates in different electoral districts. However, these formal and informal alliances will not affect the political map in the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI), and the competition will primarily remain between the PDK and the PUK.

The PUK policy of forming formal and informal coalitions with other parties is aimed at undermining the KDP's dominant position. Moreover, the PUK authorities are attempting to expand and extend these kinds of coalitions to future elections in the KRI. In this way, the PUK is attempting to change the balance of power within the KRI.

Iran has also played a key role in forming such coalitions against the KDP. Iran and its proxies are unhappy with KDP policy and the party's close relationship with Arab states and the United States. As a result, Iran is working to

strengthen and unify its allies to obtain the most seats in the Iraqi parliament and form an Iraqi government favorable to Iranian interests.

However, it should be noted that there has been recent internal conflict between [Bafel Talabani and Lahur Talabani](#), the co-head of the party with the latter now forced to handover all his authorities to his cousin Bafel. This, in turn, could affect the political process in Kurdistan, and improve the relationship between the PUK and the KDP. In particular, Lahur Talabani has played a key role in intensifying conflict between Kurdish parties and forming a coalition against the KDP.

While Bafel Talabani is seen as conciliatory towards the KDP relative to his cousin Lahur, he has also stated that the PUK expects to form an alliance with the Fatah alliance in the aftermath of the elections.

The Limited Prospects of Change

Given the current political players, it is quite unlikely—though not impossible—that Iraq’s early elections will shift the country’s political map or yield any major changes to the authority of the current ruling parties. The strongest parties of this election are the same parties that have dominated Iraqi political affairs since 2003. The political and demographic map of the coalitions has not changed, and is still based on old ethnic and sectarian divisions. In this regard, there are no powerful cross ethnic-sectarian coalitions that embrace all Iraqi factions—Kurdish, Sunni and Shia. Any inter-sectarian alliances are tactical rather than designed to work towards communal goals.

And while there was hope that the veterans of the demonstrations in Iraq, particularly in Shia-dominated areas, could play a key role in the next election by undermining the classical Shia parties’ rule, they have lost the chance to form a unified coalition due to a lack of experience, leadership, and deep internal divisions. Lastly, the recent change of Iraq’s electoral law will further undermine any prospect for change, and will instead maintain the influence of well-established political parties. With established political parties already prepared to continue their control, the new electoral law will further damage and weaken the position of the newer and smaller parties and coalitions. ❖



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