

## Restoring Direction: Iraq's Renewed Political Path

by [Hajar Bashir Sadoon \(/experts/hajar-bashir-sadoon\)](#), [Mohammed Tatarkhan \(/experts/mohammed-tatarkhan\)](#)

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Hajar Bashir Sadoon \(/experts/hajar-bashir-sadoon\)](#)

Hajar Bashir Sadoon is an assistant professor at the College of Political Sciences, University of Duhok, focusing on politics in de facto states and the wider Middle East.

[Mohammed Tatarkhan \(/experts/mohammed-tatarkhan\)](#)

Mohammed Tatarkhan is a lecturer at the College of Political Sciences, University of Duhok, focusing on international relations in the Middle East.

 Brief Analysis

**To prevent hawkish actors from once again seizing the initiative, Kurdish, Sunni Arab, and moderate Shia factions need to come together during the post-election period and work on fundamental tasks like implementing the constitution and strengthening institutions.**

The emergence of a new political landscape in Iraq marks an important moment in restoring stability on this front and resetting the country's trajectory. The system established after 2003 was predicated upon consensual democracy, with decisionmaking power shared between various sectarian and ethnic groupings. This trend was reversed as Arab Shia parties and factions gradually managed to consolidate and accumulate state power at the expense of other ethnic and sectarian groups on the pretext of asserting Iraqi sovereignty and organizing the affairs of state. Concurrently, Iran's role in shaping Iraq's political and security domains increased considerably amid a corresponding decline in U.S. influence. One consequence of this was the collapse of the Kurdish, Shia Arab, and Sunni Arab consensus that had constituted the backbone of the post-2003 restructuring of the Iraqi state with American assistance.

The sixth post-Saddam parliamentary election was held on November 11. According to the Independent High Electoral Commission, some [56.11 \(https://shafaq.com/en/Iraq/Iraq-s-voter-turnout-hits-54-as-IHEC-nears-final-count\)](#) percent of registered voters participated—12,009,453 out of a total of 21,404,291. It should be noted, however, that only about 70 percent of the roughly 28 million Iraqis of voting age were registered to vote, indicating that only a minority of eligible Iraqis participated in the process. The election came after two years of bloody conflict in the Middle East. During this time, the Iran-led Shia “axis of resistance,” which stretches from Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and then to Iran, was greatly weakened, with significant ramifications for Iraqi politics.

Since 2003, Iraq has failed to build robust institutions capable of designing and implementing domestic and foreign policies without outside interference. The state still lacks a grand vision with a long-term, coherent, strategic plan that guides actions, policies, or development. In this situation, the Shia-dominated Council of Ministers—according to the constitution, the most powerful executive institution in Iraq—has designed the state's political approach and implemented policies that align with it, in accordance with the outlook and ideologies of its predominant personalities or powers. For instance, Ibrahim Jafari, the first post-2003 prime minister, was more Islamist in his outlook and tended to do pragmatic balancing. In contrast, under U.S. military and political conditions, [Nouri al-Maliki \(https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2010/3/4/profile-nouri-al-maliki#:~:text=Nouri%20al%20Maliki%20became%20Iraq&apos;s,a%20degree%20in%20Islamic%20Studies.\)](#), the second prime minister and still a formidable figure within the Coordination Framework (CF), tends to align with Iran and [associate Iraq with the axis of resistance \(https://ina.iq/en/politics/40531-al-maliki-irans-victories-stem-from-its-belief-in-the-justice-of-the-cause.html\)](#).

However, Maliki's successor [Haider al-Abadi \(https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/abadi-s-balancing-act-between-the-us-and-iran/\)](#), facing the threat of terrorism and the independence referendum of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), attempted to strike a balance between receiving U.S. support and collaborating with Iran-aligned Shia militias. This approach was reversed by Prime Ministers Adil Abdulmahdi and [Mustafa al-Kadhimi \(https://amwaj.media/en/article/how-iraq-s-pm-channels-his-predecessor-s-approach-to-us-forces\)](#) who took a more pro-U.S. stance but dealt cautiously with Iran and its affiliated groups in Iraq. Finally, Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, initially nominated and supported by the CF, has expressly stated that his administration's policy is [neutrality \(https://amwaj.media/en/article/how-iraq-s-pm-channels-his-predecessor-s-approach-to-us-forces\)](#), maintaining a tough balance between domestic interests, Iranian patronage, and U.S. pressure.

### The Shia Position in Iraq

Within the so-called [Shia House \(https://tcf.org/content/report/iraqs-sectarian-relapse-lessons-of-the-shia-house/\)](#), Sudani's Reconstruction and Development Coalition has emerged as the largest single group, with [forty-six parliamentary seats \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/pro-iran-militias-are-big-winners-iraqs-election\)](#). This election, Sudani's coalition formally joined the CF, which likewise includes Maliki's State of Law Alliance (twenty-nine seats); the National State Forces Alliance list, led by Ammar al-Hakim and Haider al-Abadi (nineteen seats); Al-Asas Alliance, led by Deputy Speaker of Parliament Muhsin al-Mandalawi (nine seats); and Abshir Ya Iraq, headed by Humam Hamoudi, leader of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (four seats). While a powerful force in Shia politics, Muqtada al-Sadr and his movement—the counterweight to the CF in past elections—boycotted the current

election and thus have no seats in the new parliament despite their popularity during the 2021 election, when they secured 73 of the 329 seats.

Preliminary results indicated that one of the major political outcomes of this election was the obvious defeat of parties linked to Iraq's armed Iran-aligned Shia factions. These groups include the Sadiqoun bloc, the political wing of [Asaib Ahl al-Haq \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-asaib-ahl-al-haq-0\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-asaib-ahl-al-haq-0), led by Qais al-Khazali; the [Badr Organization \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/badr-organization-irans-oldest-proxy-iraq\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/badr-organization-irans-oldest-proxy-iraq), led by Hadi al-Ameri; [Harakat Hoquq \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-hoquq-movement\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-hoquq-movement) (Rights Movement), representing Kataib Hezbollah and under the nominal leadership of Abu Fadak or Ahmad Mohsen al-Hamidawi; [Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-kataib-sayyid-al-shuhada\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-kataib-sayyid-al-shuhada), represented in parliament by the Muntasirun bloc, led by Abu Ala al-Wal'ai; and the Khadamat Alliance, representing [Kataib al-Imam Ali \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-kataib-al-imam-ali\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-kataib-al-imam-ali) and led by Shibl al-Zaydi. Collectively, the political branches of these armed Shia factions obtained sixty seats, accounting for approximately 36% of the CF's 165-seat [165-seat \(https://amwaj.media/en/article/iraq-s-coordination-framework-claims-election-victory-as-largest-parliamentary-bl\)](https://amwaj.media/en/article/iraq-s-coordination-framework-claims-election-victory-as-largest-parliamentary-bl) bloc.

The victory of Sudani's list signals that the majority of Iraqi Shia voters want to protect the current inward-looking political line he represents. Entering the election under the slogan "[Iraq comes first \(https://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/2025/11/16/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%86%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A\)](https://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/2025/11/16/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%86%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A)," Sudani avoided adopting overtly sectarian postures and presented a message transcending the ethnosectarian divide. His [electoral program \(https://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/2025/11/16/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%86%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A\)](https://www.aljazeera.net/encyclopedia/2025/11/16/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%86%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A) thus focused on achieving sustainable reconstruction, boosting the economy, combating corruption, and consolidating stability and security. These programs necessarily require preservation of stability and security. Hence, one of the greatest achievements of the previous Sudani government was preventing Iraq from being dragged into the Israel-Iran war, as many feared that the actions and posturing of the Iran-aligned armed militias would make their country the [next Israeli target \(https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-2025-iraqi-election-will-sudani-serve-a-second-term/\)](https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-2025-iraqi-election-will-sudani-serve-a-second-term/). Sudani's victory also confirms that Shia voters desire a technocratic figure (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/profile-with-electoral-win-mohammed-shia-al-sudani-becomes-iraq-s-key-political-player/3743158#:~:text=BAGHDAD%20/%20ISTANBUL,after%20the%20examination%20of%20appeals>) focused on welfare and public services—someone who is also able to pursue [strategic compromise \(https://thenewregion.com/posts/3729/iraq-between-the-quest-to-end-us-military-presence-and-fear-of-iran-backed-militia-dominance#:~:text=Iraqi%20Prime%20Minister%20Mohammed%20Shia,the%20so%2Dcalled%20resistance%20factions\)](https://thenewregion.com/posts/3729/iraq-between-the-quest-to-end-us-military-presence-and-fear-of-iran-backed-militia-dominance#:~:text=Iraqi%20Prime%20Minister%20Mohammed%20Shia,the%20so%2Dcalled%20resistance%20factions) by balancing between public calls for sovereignty and international demands to contain Iran's influence.

By contrast, the traditional members of the CF view Iran as a primary [patron \(https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/understanding-the-shiite-crescent-as-iranian-grand-strategy/\)](https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/understanding-the-shiite-crescent-as-iranian-grand-strategy/) for political, security, and military support for Iraq's Shia, with some of its members considering Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to be their primary source of emulation (*marja taqlid*) and the [undisputed leader \(https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/understanding-the-shiite-crescent-as-iranian-grand-strategy/\)](https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/understanding-the-shiite-crescent-as-iranian-grand-strategy/) of global Shia Islam. Although the CF was initially established as a counterweight to Sadr's political bloc following the 2021 election, it has unofficially evolved into the highest political, economic, and military decisionmaking body of the Shia House, making decisions on the highest matters of state.

Meanwhile, Sadr's movement could be considered the Achilles heel of the Iraqi Shia political establishment. Sadr portrays himself as an [anti-establishment \(https://amwaj.media/en/media-monitor/iftar-banquet-with-ex-mps-heighten-talk-of-sadr-s-return-to-iraqi-politics\)](https://amwaj.media/en/media-monitor/iftar-banquet-with-ex-mps-heighten-talk-of-sadr-s-return-to-iraqi-politics) religious and political figure who competes with Iran-aligned factions, conducting boycotts, mass resignations from parliament, and street mobilizations that repeatedly weaken the Shia House. Sadr portrays his movement as a British-style loyal opposition or government in waiting. He believes that his more organized and dignified movement can step in to govern the state whenever it collapses under his rivals' governance. He seems to be playing [the long game \(https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/10/19/in-iraq-will-muqtada-al-sadrs-endgame-of-power-work#:~:text=Muqtada%20al%2DSadr%20is%20an%20Iraqi%20Shia%20leader,\\*%20His%20rivals%20controlling%20the%20government%20formation\)](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/10/19/in-iraq-will-muqtada-al-sadrs-endgame-of-power-work#:~:text=Muqtada%20al%2DSadr%20is%20an%20Iraqi%20Shia%20leader,*%20His%20rivals%20controlling%20the%20government%20formation) with the ultimate goal of forming a government on his terms.

## The Sunni Position in Iraq

**A**fter insurgency, terrorism, and bloodshed, the Sunnis of Iraq have abandoned competition with the Shia Arabs for rule of the country. However, their boycott of the post-2003 political system—for instance, through the writing of the constitution and the establishment of political institutions and processes—makes it extremely difficult for Sunnis to navigate the political machinations. Consequently, [the three main Sunni political groupings \(https://shafaq.com/ar/%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/%D9%88%D8%AB%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%B9%D8%A9-187-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%A9-77-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%AF-56-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%A7-%D8%AC-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-2025-%D9%88%D8%AB%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%A9\)](https://shafaq.com/ar/%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/%D9%88%D8%AB%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%B9%D8%A9-187-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%A9-77-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%AF-56-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%A7-%D8%AC-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-2025-%D9%88%D8%AB%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%A9)—the Progress Party (thirty-three seats in the latest election), the Sovereignty Alliance (nine seats), and the Azem Alliance (fifteen seats)—have secured majorities only in Anbar and Salah al-Din, the two Sunni-majority provinces.

It is noteworthy that Sunni Arab political forces did not present a clear and coherent political vision for the future of their electorate and the wider political process in Iraq as a whole. On the contrary, they communicated only veiled messages about which group has the right to hold the highest political offices of the state. Sunni political messaging was centered on the possibility that tensions would erupt between Kurds and Sunnis due to several factors. Iraq's Kurds, especially the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), benefit from the same sources of patronage and support in the region as the Sunni Arabs, particularly Turkey and the Gulf Arab states.

Many Sunni Arabs believe that countries in the region wish to weaken Iraq's Kurds, particularly against the background of [regional Kurdish issues](#)

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/07/world/middleeast/syria-sdf-clashes.html>) and the desire of the Gulf Arab states and Turkey to strengthen Iraq's Sunni Arab element (<https://aawsat.com/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A/5212258-%D8%B3%D9%86%D9%91%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%8A>) at the expense of the Kurds. Additionally, the sensitive issue of the disputed border territories between the core areas of the KRI and the Sunni Arab provinces of Iraq relates directly to the Kurds and to the Arabs (mostly Sunni) who were brought to live in these territories by previous Sunni Arab regimes.

## The Kurds' Fate in Iraq

In the lead-up to the election, rumors were circulating about a possible KDP boycott of the voting, with or without Sadr, to protest the policies the CF has adopted since 2022 against the KRI, including on issues related to [oil and the budget \(https://shafaq.com/en/Report/Oil-vs-Salaries-KRG-Baghdad-feud-pushes-Iraq-to-the-brink#:~:text=The%20dispute%20between%20Erbil%20and,in%20the%20federal%20budget%20law\)](https://shafaq.com/en/Report/Oil-vs-Salaries-KRG-Baghdad-feud-pushes-Iraq-to-the-brink#:~:text=The%20dispute%20between%20Erbil%20and,in%20the%20federal%20budget%20law). However, finding that the costs of the KRI's major ruling party choosing to boycott were higher than the benefits, the KDP finally decided in favor of participation. Election results indicate that the KDP, with **thirty-two seats**,

(<https://www.kurdistan24.net/ar/story/875986/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B7%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%AD%D8%B5%D9%84-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-27-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82%D9%8A>) has secured more votes than any other individual party in Iraq.

The results of the November election, coupled with wider regional power shifts, could pave the way for the Kurds to move beyond the post-referendum phase and fully reintegrate with Iraqi political processes. The Kurds and the Arab Shia, as two oppositionist groups, were integral parts of the post-2003 state-building processes. Together they formed the core of the political system and ran the state in partnership. This relationship was gradually shattered over Kurdish support for the Iraqiyah Alliance in 2010 and the government's disregard for constitutional articles relating to Kurdistan interests, which caused a gradual estrangement and led to the fateful independence referendum in 2017. The Kurds witnessed firsthand the absence of support from actors they had long regarded as allies.

## Conclusion

Tehran's geostrategic weaknesses following the decimation of its forward defenses in [the twelve-day war \(https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/10/humiliation-and-transformation-the-islamic-republic-after-the-12-day-war/\)](https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/10/humiliation-and-transformation-the-islamic-republic-after-the-12-day-war/), the rise of a Sunni Arab regime in Syria supported by Turkey and Gulf Arab states, and President Donald Trump's policy to [reduce \(https://eismena.com/en/article/the-trump-administration-and-iraq-what-comes-next-2024-11-13#:~:text=26%20it%20remains%20unclear%20how,in%20a%20fully%20unconstrained%20manner\)](https://eismena.com/en/article/the-trump-administration-and-iraq-what-comes-next-2024-11-13#:~:text=26%20it%20remains%20unclear%20how,in%20a%20fully%20unconstrained%20manner) U.S. commitments in Iraq have created a **fearful environment (https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/inside-the-divides-of-iraqs-coordination-framework-and-why-they-matter-ahead-of-landmark-elections/)** for many of the country's Shia. These developments should prompt moderate Shia forces to embark on a more independent path by strengthening Iraq's democratic and federal institutions.

The election also provides an opportunity for the Kurds to reestablish their alliance with the Shia majority on managing the affairs of state. Despite possible reservations or disagreements, Iraq's constitution, written under U.S. auspices, is perhaps one of the most modern and democratic constitutions in the Middle East, at least compared with other Arab states and Iran. It establishes mechanisms for checks and balances and separation of powers, enshrines individual and civil rights, and accepts federalism to divide and decentralize power and build trust among Iraq's various groups. The main Kurdish and Sunni Arab blocs must cooperate sincerely with the moderate Shia forces to gradually implement the constitution. Otherwise, if the more hawkish Shia forces sense that power might be slipping away from the Shia population, they might regain momentum by accusing the moderates of relinquishing this hard-won power. It remains to be seen if the Kurds, in partnership with Iraq's other main political groupings, can reengage with the political process, and if that reengagement can lift the knife from their throat, providing relief from the oppressive conditions they have experienced for almost a century. ❖

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