

# Iraq's Elections: Red Flags and Opportunities for Inclusion

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Brief Analysis

## A closer look at the local security changes, turnout obstacles, sectarian divisions, and other factors that could determine the shape of Iraq's next government.

Iraqis head to the polls on May 12 to elect a new parliament, after which legislators will choose a speaker, president, and prime minister. The elections come at the end of four tough years for Iraq, with the Islamic State seizing a third of the country in 2014 and the Kurds making a strong push for independence last September.

Despite the turmoil, Kurdish-Arab violence has been minimal, and the numerous victors of the war against IS are all hoping to turn their battlefield triumph into votes. Chief among them is Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who is seeking reelection and a stronger mandate to govern. The numerous Shia militias who fought IS have formed a political coalition that is expected to do well. Yet the electoral prospects are uncertain for the Kurds, whose independence referendum and subsequent military and political setbacks have diluted the goodwill they gained by fighting IS in the north.

Indeed, ethnosectarian divisions continue to cast a shadow over the Iraqi political scene. Interestingly, however, the public thirst for accountability has caused fragmentation within each group, leaving the Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish houses internally divided on the eve of the election. This may further complicate and delay the government formation process.

## DETERMINANTS OF A SUCCESSFUL ELECTION

**S**ecurity. Although security in Iraqi cities has significantly improved in recent months, IS remains a threat, especially as it transitions from a territory-controlling entity back into an urban insurgency. Polling stations and election season in general have been among the group's favorite targets over the years.

**Turnout.** Around 18 million Iraqis are eligible to vote this year, and they will have to sift through some 7,000 candidates to fill 329 seats in parliament, a quarter of which (83) are allocated to women. On average, 60 percent of voters took part in the two previous elections, but recent polls indicate that more of the electorate is disillusioned by a political class that has been unable to deliver on key concerns such as job creation, economic reforms, and curbing corruption. Despite making cosmetic changes to party names and slogans, the main contenders are familiar faces. In a nod to the public discontent, leading Shia ayatollah Ali al-Sistani issued a fatwa emphasizing people's right not to vote if they cannot identify with any of the candidates.

**Sunni participation.** Whether due to boycotts or lack of security, turnout among Iraq's Sunni minority has been consistently low in past elections. Sunni parties are actively participating in this year's campaign, but many of their constituents were forced to flee during the war against IS and still live in refugee camps. Although the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) has committed to placing ballot boxes at these camps, fears of low Sunni turnout persist—not least because security in many of these areas is provided by Kurdish personnel or militias from the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which are dominated by the country's Shia majority.

**Kurdish unity.** Kurdish parties have campaigned as if this were a local election—rather than reassuming the unified stance that helped them maximize gains from Baghdad in the past, they have focused on each other's failures instead. As a result, the Kurds collectively stand to lose seats in parliament, decreasing their leverage in Baghdad.

**Changes in local control.** To determine whether minorities will lose influence at the national level, one litmus test may be the turnout and voting results in areas that recently changed hands. In Kirkuk and Sinjar, for example, army and PMF forces replaced Kurdish forces in response to the independence referendum, while many Sunni towns and refugee camps are still controlled by Shia PMF units. Such local control often translates into votes by enabling coercion and cooptation. Kurdish parties losing significant votes in Kirkuk would be a glaring red flag in this regard, as would PMF-affiliated parties making gains in Sunni areas.

**Election fraud.** Allegations and instances of fraud have haunted all Iraqi elections, at times contributing to public distrust about the electoral process, delaying the certification of results (as seen in the 2010 recount), and impeding government formation. Current members of IHEC were nominated by the parties in power, so the commission has a partisan flavor despite being representative. And while IHEC recently invested in modern voting technology that could help reduce fraud and declare results faster, some fear that registration cards not collected by their owners may open the door for ghost votes, especially by parties already in government (e.g., certain officials could create fake IDs to match uncollected voter cards and give them to other Iraqis).

**Iranian meddling.** Tehran's desire to shape the outcome of Iraqi elections is always a given, but it is unclear how aggressive such interference will be this time around. In light of the many pressures Iran is under—from Israeli strikes in Syria to U.S. renunciation of the nuclear deal—the regime may be too distracted to pay full attention to Iraq's vote. Alternatively, it could stay passive on purpose, relying on its local proxies in various institutions to wield influence in Baghdad while trying to convince Europeans that they should continue doing business with Iran. More likely, however, Tehran will take a direct approach by attempting to play spoiler, insisting on its favorite candidates for top jobs in the next Iraqi government. Although this path risks hurting Tehran's international reputation, Tehran may calculate that a neutral Iraq would be dangerous to the Islamic Republic if a regional war erupts.

## U.S. INTERESTS

**T**he United States remains committed to a strong, neutral, democratic Iraq. Specific outcomes aside, Washington has an interest in the country running a clean election that results in an inclusive government. Iraqis, including members of the PMF, are cognizant that U.S. military support was instrumental in their ability to defeat IS, so Washington may need to **remind them of this fact (**

**analysis/view/how-iraqi-sovereignty-supports-u.s.-national-interests**) as they proceed through the election and its aftermath—likely including long weeks of waiting for final results and forming the next government. More broadly, U.S. officials should maintain full attention on all of these processes, since they will shape Iraq for the next four years.

*Bilal Wahab is the Nathan and Esther K. Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute.* ❖

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