

The Upcoming Iraqi Elections: Military Coup Through Democracy

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Brief Analysis

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Arab and Western circles are anticipating the possibility of change in Iraq and some distancing from Iran. However, the basic fact is that Iraq is going through a very complex change that is transforming it into a province of Iran, fully tied to Iran politically, economically, and militarily. Despite Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's military victories over the Islamic State and his expansion against the Kurds in Kirkuk, these successes occurred under Iranian management and assistance.

There are two types of leadership in Iraq, the first represented by al-Abadi and the second by Iran's Qods Force commander on the scene, Qassem Soleimani. Soleimani has become increasingly influential amongst today's breakdown, fragmentation, and retreat of the Kurds in Kirkuk. Millions of displaced Iraqis, mostly Sunnis, are prevented from returning home by Suleimani's orders to the Iraq's Shiite militias, the People's Mobilization Units (PMUs). Thus, we can predict a political future for Iraq where it is expected for al-Abadi to remain as prime minister, for Iran to control the Iraqi Parliament, and for the militias to be legitimized in Iraq.

The victories over IS have led many respectable Iraqi voices to call for the PMU to participate in the upcoming national elections, to replace corrupt members of parliament or those who have not achieved the aspirations of Iraqi citizens. This call was a generous and sincere recognition of the efforts and sacrifices of PMU members; however, the call is illegal or, at best, against the Iraqi constitution, which prevents security forces or armed forces from entering politics. The law and the constitution allow Iraqi armed forces to participate in elections and to vote for whomever they wish, but the law does not allow members of the Iraqi armed forces to be nominated as candidates for parliament until after they retire or leave their position in the security apparatus. So long as the PMU is considered part of the Iraqi armed forces and carries out the orders of the commander of the armed forces, the entry of its members in the upcoming parliamentary elections would be a legal and constitutional violation. In this respect, al-Abadi has stressed the importance of a commitment from the parties that intend to participate in the elections not to embrace any armed faction, noting that the government will not allow the presence of a service branch outside the scope of the state.

Nevertheless, there are many indications that the PMU intends to participate in the elections process, with Naeem

al-Aboudi, the spokesman for Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, announcing that "the movement's Sadiqun Bloc will participate in the upcoming parliamentary elections." Similarly, Qais al-Khazali, the leader of the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq militia, declared last December that Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq had transformed into a political entity that would be under the command of the commander-in-chief of the armed forces by another name. It is worth noting that those militias adopt the ideology of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) and their primary loyalty is to Iran not Iraq.

Today, these militias have several paths to gain political power, management of Sunni areas, and control of displaced persons. Today, propaganda portrays them to the public as the defenders and liberators not just of Iraq, but even of Jerusalem. In the May election, these militias will work towards control of the Iraqi Parliament after having transformed into political entities. Al-Abadi will allow them to gradually transform into political parties without any guarantees that they will give up their weapons or any proof that they will abandon their ties with the IRGC. One electoral path to power may be a broad electoral coalition composed of five entities and militias close to Iran. These include Nouri al-Maliki, the leader of the State of Law Coalition; Hadi al-Amiri, member of parliament and leader of the Badr militia; Qais al-Khazali, the secretary general of the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq militia; Akram al-Kaabi, the leader of the Nujaba militia; and the commander of the Iraqi Hezbollah militia.

Iran and its sympathizers in Iraq are aware that Abadi is the preferred candidate of the U.S. and of neighboring Arab governments., Yet they also know that Abadi will not clash directly with the PMU or with Iranian influence, and that any escalation on his part towards Iran will be no more than words. Abadi is a man of the middle, with simultaneous Islamic and Western tendencies. He originates ideologically from the Da'wa (Islamic Call) Shiite party and remains affiliated with it, but he also received his education in European universities. Al-Abadi therefore desires to maintain his relationship with the West, especially the U.S., and with the Arabs led by Saudi Arabia, without inflicting attacks on one of his other, sectarian allies in Iran or elsewhere. Iran wants the U.S. and the Arabs to be deceived into thinking they have an accepted Iraqi player, while Iran gains nearly unlimited influence on the political and security affairs of Iraq. Iran's influence will stem from parties sympathetic to it and from armed militias that will transform themselves into political forces, win most of the votes, and enter Parliament. This resembles a military or armed militia coup, but by taking control of legislative power.

The Arabs are trying to help a political coalition in support of Abadi and Muqtada al-Sadr, the mercurial Shiite militia leader who has lately appeared to resist Iran. Saudi Arabia has cordially welcomed Abadi, and UAE has received Sadr, in order to form an alliance removed from Iran. Yet Iran sees and understands this effort, and will go along with it by allowing Abadi to take advantage of the opportunity to receive Arab support with Sadr because. In reality, the Iranians want Abadi to remain prime minister. Iran's prime concern is control over Parliament, which has sovereign decision-making over the prime minister and will make him a mere political tool or official spokesman rather than an influential player on the ground.

Among other influential neighbors, Turkey is expected to align with the PMU and with the survival of Abadi accompanied by strong Iranian influence on the Iraqi Parliament. Following the theory that the enemy of my enemy is my friend, Turkey desires Iranian rather than Kurdish control over Kirkuk and Mosul because it sees the Kurds as a potential strategic threat to Turkey.

Thus, the Iraqi Parliament will most likely be a new Iranian force in the region, with a prime minister who has no legislative capability. The military power of Iraq's own sectarian militias will also represent a threat to the region, especially as parliament turns towards formulating policies in line with Iran's hegemonic ambitions.

What might possibly preempt this dire scenario? First, real guarantees to ensure the integrity of elections, including the return displaced persons to their cities. Second, Abadi and his allies must summon the will and the capability to pressure the political parties to abandon their ties to the Shiite militias. Only if these two conditions are fulfilled will Iraq's upcoming election produce progress toward real democracy, rather than an Iranian-sponsored military coup

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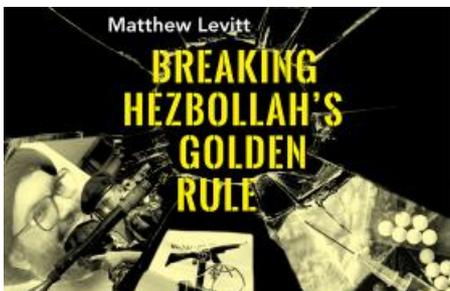
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