

# Elections in Iraq: What Does the Future Hold?

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**ABSTRACT** *Iraq held parliamentary elections in April, the country's first vote since the withdrawal of U.S. troops in December 2011. Although turnout was impressive and a democratic culture has settled in Iraq, outstanding challenges, including terrorism, sectarian divisions and regional conflict, are unlikely to be rectified by the elections. The status quo will continue and Iraq, at best, can only attempt to contain domestic and regional problems.*

Iraq held parliamentary elections in April 2014, the nation's third vote since the U.S. invasion in 2003 and the first since the withdrawal of U.S. troops in December 2011. The elections showed that Iraq can hold its own: turnout was estimated to be more than 60% and there were no security incidents in Baghdad, the country's capital and a common flashpoint for terrorist atrocities.

On May 19<sup>th</sup>, the Iraqi High Electoral Commission released the provisional results of the elections, which show yet another electoral victory for Prime Minister Maliki. The State of Law Coalition (SLC), led by Maliki's party, the Islamic Dawa Party, emerged with

at least 94 of the Iraqi parliament's 328 seats, gaining over 60 seats more than the second and third-placed rivals. His coalition received 1,074,000 votes in Baghdad alone. The two-term prime minister also emerged with 721,000 personal votes, a marked increase from the 620,000 he received in the 2010 elections. His second placed rival received only 229,000.

The Sadrist movement of the anti-Western radical cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr, emerged with a total of 35 seats, whilst the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) emerged with 31 seats, which represented a comeback after its abysmal performances in previous elections.

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Iraq's main Sunni parties received a total of 59 seats: 27 seats for the Mu-tahidun bloc led by Iraq's parliament speaker, Osama Nujayfi; 21 seats for the list led by Ayad Allawi, the former Iraqi Prime Minister and former head of the now fragmented Iraqiyah bloc; and 11 seats for the list led by Deputy Prime Minister Salah al-Mutlaq. The Kurds, collectively, received 62 seats. Unlike the Sunni parties, the Kurds are expected to maintain a unified stance in Baghdad and bargain on the basis of the total number of seats they have received collectively.

The numbers suggest Mr. Maliki is a favorite within the Iraqi electorate and, despite strong opposition from his rivals and widespread criticism, will seek another term in office from a position of strength.

At the very least, the next prime minister will be a Shia from one of the main Shia blocs, namely the Sadrist movement and the ISCI, which came second and third, respectively. The ISCI's chance of taking the premiership is much stronger than the Sadrists' chance, mainly because the latter is seen as too radical by Iraq's various political movements as well as by regional powers. Both the Sadrists and the ISCI will, nonetheless, aim to prevent Mr. Maliki from holding another term in office, largely because of his consolidation and centralizing of power in recent years. The Kurds are also looking to achieve the same objective.

The politics will now begin. Everything is on the table and all sides will

spend the next phase of the democratic process engaging in intense negotiations and lobbying in an effort to form the next government and secure their own political objectives. The last time this took place in 2010, the process lasted nine months.

In reality, a number of underlying dynamics underpinning Iraqi politics suggest it makes little difference who the next prime minister of Iraq is. Although the country held largely free and fair elections and a democratic culture has been gradually settling, it remains plagued by terrorist atrocities, an Islamist-led insurrection in the Sunni North, and a continuation of sectarian divisions that have been exacerbated by events in Syria.

Two underlying dynamics will ensure that it will be business as usual in Iraq and that elections, far from resolving Iraq's problems, are likely to sustain them: first, the ongoing sectarian tensions between the Sunni and Shia communities; and second, the ongoing conflict in Syria, which has essentially created a second front in the sectarian war taking place in Iraq.

## Sectarian Tensions

Sectarian tensions in Iraq deteriorated so quickly after the U.S.'s withdrawal that many believe it is no longer a question of if, but when, the 2006 sectarian civil war is repeated. The conflict between Sunni and Shia communities took the country to the brink, claimed thousands of lives and divided Baghdad along sectari-

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an boundaries. Yet, in many respects, Iraq has been in a state of continuous civil war since 2006, claiming, in the process, hundreds of thousands of lives.

Sunni-Shia divisions were a strong component of the Iraqi state and society before the U.S. toppled the Baath regime in 2003. In the new Iraq, those differences were not reconciled and a settlement never took place between Iraq's Sunni and Shias. What exacerbated divisions and ultimately led to violent conflict was the mobilization of Iraq's Sunni Arabs to reject the new Iraq.

The understanding has mistakenly been that after the 2006 sectarian civil war there was reconciliation; that the Americans helped transform Sunni militants and tribes into local security forces (known as the Awakening movement) and together with the Shia they moved to defeat Al-Qaeda. Iraq then started to move forward as one, so the argument goes.

However, Iraq's Sunni Arabs have been mobilized by the Sunni Arab elite since 2003, both politically and violently. Mobilized, that is, to reject the new Iraq in which Shia political actors are the most powerful, largely as a result of a democratic process in which Iraq's Shias have taken advantage of their demographic superiority in response to the Sunni Arab's rejection. Not all Sunni Arabs supported the political and violent rejection of the new Iraq; these individuals, however, have been side-lined by more extreme elements and faced constant threats from within their own communities.

As the trajectory of Iraqi politics shows, it was after 2005 that Iraq's Shia political actors reconciled their internal differences and contested elections as a unified bloc in response to the Sunni Arab mobilization. The Sunni Arab rejection and mobilization against the new Iraq also produced the 2006 civil war. Iraq's Shia community decided that they could no longer restrain themselves from retaliating, having been constantly attacked since 2003.

Rather than giving way to a peaceful settlement, as some have suggested, what really took place after the civil war was a tactical retreat by Sunni militants who accepted defeat and realized they could no longer confront their rivals in head-to-head combat, choosing instead to do so as amorphous entities waging war through indiscriminate terrorist atrocities.

The absence of a settlement and continuation of the conflict today, most

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notably in the Anbar province where militants still control Fallujah, means that Iraq has been in a state of civil war since 2003. Violence, however, is underpinned by both the belief that the conflict is a battle for the future of the country and conflicting visions of that future.

Iraq's Arab Sunnis believe that they are marginalized and the downfall of the former regime also brought their downfall. From the outset, they were encouraged to reject the new Iraq and its constitution by members of the Sunni Arab elite, who promoted the idea that the Sunni Arabs were being suppressed and marginalized in an effort to win local support and strengthen their bargaining power during state and government formation negotiations. Today, those same members hold prestigious and influential government posts and are the ones who now most often refer to the constitution to bolster their political positions, despite their earlier contentions. Yet, those politicians' formulation and promotion of the idea of Sunni Arab marginalization lives on, despite the strong presence of Sunni Arabs within the government and other state insti-

tutions. The myth continues to dominate Sunni Arab perceptions today, to their detriment and to the detriment of all Iraqis. This myth persistently underpins the violent mobilization of the Sunni Arab community and the overlap between indigenous secular Iraqis and domestic, as well as foreign, jihadists. It has made reconciliation a distant, if not impossible, reality.

On the other hand, Iraq's Shia community fears returning to the past, where, like the Kurds, they were brutally oppressed under a Sunni-dominated state. Thus far, Iraq's Shias have refrained from full-blown retaliation, owing largely to the efforts of Ayatollah Sistani. The new Iraq gives them their greatest weapon by way of their demographic superiority – democracy. As one Iraqi Shia told me last month in Baghdad, just before casting his vote, “every vote is a bullet for al-Qaeda.”

### The Kurds

Baghdad also continues to be embroiled in tensions with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). This dispute has been centered on territorial disputes, oil and gas, and revenue sharing.

Iraq's Kurds are becoming increasingly independent from Baghdad; they have capitalized on their vast hydrocarbons resources with great effect and developed a pipeline that gives them an independent export capacity. The pipeline connecting Kurdistan and Turkey means that the former



Kurdish regional president Massud Barzani casts his ballot in the country's first parliamentary election in Arbil, the capital of the autonomous Kurdish region of northern Iraq, on April 30, 2014.

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can start exporting its oil to the latter, eventually reaching international markets, in an efficient and sustainable manner, thus allowing it to maximize on its oil and gas reserves. Previously, the KRG's only option was to send its oil to Turkey by truck, as Baghdad controlled the national pipeline.

The KRG insists that it manage its energy sector independently of the Baghdad government and maintains it has every right to export its own oil, as well as manage revenues from those exports, as provided for by the Iraqi constitution. This is disputed by Baghdad, which contests Kurdistan's right to unilaterally export oil to Turkey and maintains that the Kurds must let the State Oil Marketing Organization (SOMO) handle the revenues.

How sustainable this arrangement is and how far the Kurds' autonomy goes depends on the Kurds' relations

within Iraq and with the rest of the region, particularly Turkey. In recent years, Ankara has offered the Kurds patronage in their efforts to expand their energy sector. For decades, the Turkish state suppressed Kurdish rights within its own borders and waged war with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a rebel group that has fought the Turkish state for thirty years in search of a combination of political, territorial and human rights for Turkey's marginalized Kurds. Historically, Ankara has feared and suppressed the ascendancy and autonomy of the Iraqi Kurds, lest it encourage Turkey's own restive Kurdish population to push for similar rights.

However, times have changed as the matter is now predominantly one of economics. Turkey will permit pipeline exports regardless of Baghdad's opposition, since it desperately needs a reliable source of energy to fuel its

economic growth and decrease dependence on other suppliers. In many respects, Turkey believes Baghdad is too far into the orbit of Iranian influence for it to abandon the Kurds and develop a closer strategic relationship with Baghdad. Iraq's Kurds constitute a useful counterweight against Iranian influence, and they are important allies in a volatile Middle East. Ankara also sees the Iraqi Kurds as useful allies in an uncertain and unstable Syria.

Relations deteriorated considerably between the Kurds and Baghdad when Baghdad recently withdrew the Kurds' 17 percent of the Iraqi national budget, which Kurdish President Massoud Barzani called an action tantamount to "a declaration of war." The withdrawal of Kurdish access to the budget put increased financial pressure on the KRG, which turned to the private sector for financial loans.

Armed confrontation between the Iraqi and Kurdish armed forces is unlikely. Armed conflict should not be dismissed altogether, given the history of Kurdish-Arab tensions and conflict in the modern Iraqi state. It is, however, very unlikely, principally because Baghdad's Shia-dominated government continues to battle with Sunni Arab militants. The Peshmerga, the armed forces in the Kurdish region, and the Iraqi military have come close to exchanging blows in the past but conflict would be costly for all sides involved. Nonetheless, small and localized skirmishes should not be ruled out, even if these are unlikely to escalate into a broader conflict.

## Syria

To analyze Syria's impact on Iraq it is first necessary to appreciate the cross-border relationship between Iraqi actors and those in Syria currently fighting the Bashar al-Assad regime. Various Sunni Arab actors from both Iraq and Syria developed cross-border ties as part of the post-2003 Iraqi insurgency, particularly in the Sunni Northwest areas that separates Iraq and Syria. Sunni Arab militants from Syria, as well as those foreign militants who used Syria as a transit point into Iraq, fought alongside Iraqis during the insurgency against American and Iraqi armed forces.

The favor has been returned during the course of the Syrian civil war. Fighters from Iraq's Sunni Arab community have joined rebel forces in Syria, whilst tribal groups who have extensive kinship ties with Syria provide supplies as well as safe havens for militants from Syria.<sup>1</sup>

This cross-border relationship between predominantly Iraqi and Syrian Sunni Arab actors has produced powerful Islamist forces like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The ISIS has already transported a wave of suicide bombers to Iraq from Syria, largely because it controls the Northeast of Syria and finds a hospitable environment in Iraq's Sunni northwestern provinces. The organization itself originated as an al-Qaeda offshoot in Iraq and fought the Iraqi government and American forces. Furthermore, the cross-border relationship has given Iraq's Sunni Arab

militants a momentum that they have capitalized on, particularly in places like Anbar where they retain control of the key strategic city of Fallujah.

Fearing that Bashar al-Assad's downfall would allow Syria's Islamist-dominated opposition to intensify its support for Iraq's militants, Iraq's Shia-dominated government in turn allowed Syria-bound Iranian cargo flights to use Iraqi airspace. It has also turned a blind eye to Iraqi Shia militias entering Syria to support the Assad regime. These militias have ensured the survival of the Assad regime, alongside other Shia actors such as Hezbollah.

Like Sunni Arab groups, these Shia militias, particularly Sadrist movement offshoot groups like Asaib al-Haq, honed their skills in post-2003 Iraq. Not all of Iraq's Shia militias were experienced battle-hardened fighters, as many Shia militias come from ordinary backgrounds. Today, they fight in Syria as experienced guerilla fighters to defend Shia shrines, like the Sayyida Zainab, and guarantee the Assad regime's survival, ensuring that the conflict in Syria is both a holy war as well as a geopolitical battle for the region.

As a result, sectarian conflict is unlikely to abate. As usual, it will be Iraq's Shia parties that will continue to define and dominate the Iraqi state, and few of Iraq's Sunnis will be convinced the Shias are willing to share power and treat them as equals. It will also be Iran that emerges as the ultimate decision maker in post-election Iraq,

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largely because of its influence over the Shia parties, but also due to Tehran's significant influence over other important key players like the Kurds.

### **The Future**

It is these underlying dynamics that dominate state and society in Iraq; which were reflected in the recent elections and the ethno-sectarian composition of the results and which, ultimately, mean that little is likely to change until deep-rooted issues and animosities are resolved. Few believe this is possible, owing to both domestic and regional politics. Furthermore, as with previous elections, it is Iran who will heavily influence and, to a significant extent, decide the forthcoming government. Iran has unparalleled influence over Iraq's ruling Shia parties, although it also has extensive influence over the Kurds and a lesser, albeit still significant, influence over the Sunni blocs.

Iran's maneuvers after the elections warrant particular attention as divisions are expected to intensify among Iraq's Shia parties. Iraq's two-term Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, has agitated his rivals over the years and blocs led by the ISCI, the Sadrist and

the Kurds will look to prevent a third-term for his party. That could weaken Maliki's claim over the prime-minister's office, the country's most powerful position. If the three groups can muster an alliance of sorts, then they could strengthen the ISCI's efforts to take the premiership. Iran could also justify its support for the ISCI if the three blocs are able to present a unified stance against another Maliki premiership. Perhaps the biggest uncertainty to emerge from the elections will be the extent to which Maliki's Islamic Da'wa Party, which dominates the Iraqi armed forces and has made a point of emphasizing this dominance in the past, will accept such a post-election scenario.

Iran, for its part, will be determined to ensure that the next prime minister, at the very least, comes from one of the three main Shia parties with whom Iran shares mutual strategic interests, particularly vis-à-vis the geopolitics of the Middle East and the regionalized conflict in Syria, where Iraq has been a crucial partner for the Iranians.

Two conflicting visions for the future of Iraq exist: one that is based around the Sunni Arab rejection of the new Iraq and the Shias' empowerment; and, secondly, the Shias' efforts aimed at sustaining their empowerment. Iraq is, therefore, likely to witness a continuation of the status quo. The Iraqi state could contain the violence and the instability, but it is unlikely to be able to do so in the long-term.

At the worst, the country may continue to territorially and violently un-

ravel. Iraq has lost full control of its biggest province, Anbar, and is facing growing demands for a Sunni autonomous region similar to the KRG. The idea of dividing Iraq into autonomous regions, if not independent states, now has greater appeal than ever before, with prominent Sunni Arab actors now openly calling for an autonomous Sunni region.

The Kurds in the North have already achieved an independent export capacity, allowing them to circumvent Baghdad and export their natural resources independently, although this will depend considerably on Turkey's own foreign policy toward Iraq and whether it will fully support such an endeavor. Ankara may have to choose between Baghdad and Erbil in the near future.

While stronger KRG–Turkey ties may further undermine Ankara's relations with Baghdad, they would not necessarily have to eliminate ties completely. Differences can, in fact, be reconciled, as they have been before. Furthermore, economic ties between Turkey and Iraq remain strong despite recent differences. Turkish companies are important players in Arab Iraq and receive some of the biggest and most lucrative contracts. Turkey, on the other hand, will remain an important regional player that cannot be ignored by Baghdad. ■

## Endnote

1. [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/09/world/middleeast/syrian-rebels-tied-to-al-qaeda-play-key-role-in-war.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/09/world/middleeast/syrian-rebels-tied-to-al-qaeda-play-key-role-in-war.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&)