

POST-ELECTION IRAQ: KEY POLITICAL AND SECURITY CHALLENGES

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Annotation

Iraqi elections in November 2025 brought significant changes and unexpected events. The first shock was the murder of Safaa Al-Mashhadani, which reflects the constant violence in the country. Despite the victory of the Coalition for Reconstruction and Development, the interim prime minister Mohammad Shia al-Sudani was forced to step down in favor of Ali al-Zaidi after the outbreak of the U.S.-Iran war, ending the complex post-election process in Iraq.^{i,ii,iii,iv}

Introduction

Iraq's elections ended victoriously for the Shia led bloc called the Shia Coordination Framework (SCF), which is internally divided on several significant political subjects, including political parties that represent pro-Iranian forces and militias. Those forces seek to control the state (where we can observe a slow process of state capture), which may and clash with the interests of the United States (US) in the country.

The Sunni bloc was the slight loser, as the events before these elections indicated. The first indicator was the aforementioned assassination of Safaa Al-Mashhadani before the elections, and the second was further facilitated by the rise of Ahmad Al-Shara in neighboring Syria. One of the main political forces within the Sunni political scene is the Taqqadum (Progress) party.

The Kurdish bloc, is divided between two major rival parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), with little internal opposition. After the elections, KDP and PUK began to compete with each other to win the mandate of the president of Iraq, as this position traditionally falls to the Kurds. The PUK emerged victorious from this political rivalry.

US position and internal development

An important development shaping Iraq's security environment is the ongoing withdrawal of the majority of US troops from federal Iraq, initiated under an agreement reached in September 2025 and scheduled to continue until September 2026. Until now, around 250-350 advisers and security personnel remain at the Ain Al-Assad base. Coalition forces withdraw gradually, with the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), being the last area they should withdraw from before September 30, 2026.^{v,vi}

Previously, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio called on the former prime minister Al-Sudani to disarm the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which has officially around 240,000 troops. In this regard, the US exerted pressure on Iraqi lawmakers to withdraw legislation that would have placed the PMF fully under government authority, although the bill's failure was also driven by internal political disagreements. Sudani recently said that armed groups have two options: "Join official security institutions or go to political work."^{vii}

Iraq risks becoming an indirect battleground. In May 2025, US Representatives Joe Wilson and Greg Steube advocated for sanctions against Iraq as part of a "maximum pressure" strategy against Iran. Their proposal targeted extensive sanctions on the PMF, a major component of Iraq's banking and oil sectors, the treasury minister, "Iranian facilitators in Iraq," the Iraqi Supreme Court Justice, and former prime ministers^{viii}. Therefore, the crucial task for the Iraqi prime minister (former and current) to navigate this rivalry between the US and Iran and address the challenges based on who is leading in this conflict.

One of the important events that put Iraqi people in dismay was the assassination of Safaa Mashhadani, a

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Baghdad Provincial Councilman and electoral candidate who represented the Sunni electoral bloc and opposed the expansion of the PMF influence. According to some sources, Mashhadani was killed by the Kata'i'b Hezbollah militia.^{ix} The incident occurred in the city of Tarmija, which lies in an agricultural area around Baghdad that pro-Iranian elements of PMF have been trying to control for a long time. The day after Mashhadani's death, the office of the Yazidi candidate running for the KDP was set on fire. The attack took place in the Sinjar region, where a power struggle exists between the PMF and the KDP. There were several similar cases before the elections.^x

Another very important factor that could have influenced the election is the water problem. The year 2025 was the driest year since 1933, when the levels of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers reached their lowest, triggering a humanitarian crisis, especially in the predominantly Shia-populated south of Iraq. The salinity of the water destroyed agricultural land, palm groves, and citrus orchards. In October 2025, Baghdad and Ankara reached a draft water-sharing agreement that includes infrastructure renewal by Turkish firms and the establishment of a permanent consultative group to coordinate future water-sharing decisions.^{xi}

Water scarcity could become another source of political tension and intercommunal conflict. Against this backdrop, Taqaddum candidate Raad al-Dulaimi has campaigned on expanding drinking water infrastructure in underserved areas and predominantly Sunni communities north of Baghdad.^{xii}

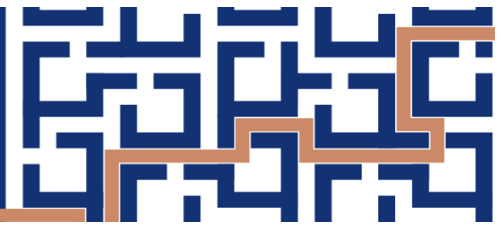
The Iraqi political system and its specifications

Since 2005, Iraq is a parliamentary republic, whose main body is the Council of Representatives (CoR), which is elected in 19 Iraqi provinces, every four years. The CoR, consisting of 329 members, elects a president (more of a representative function) and then appoints a prime minister from the winning bloc of political parties and movements.^{xiii}

According to the informal convention on power-sharing, the so-called *mubasasa ta'ifiyya*, the main state offices are divided between the dominant ethno-sectarian groups: the president is a Kurd, the prime minister is a Shia, and the speaker of parliament is a Sunni representative.^{xiv}

Iraq's political party system is highly fragmented, prompting parties to form electoral blocs in order to improve their prospects of coalition formation. However, competing interests among the constituent parties, movements, and militias often generate internal tensions, undermining the cohesion and stability of these alliances. An example was the dispute that arose shortly after the election over replacing prime minister Mohammad Shia Al-Sudani in his position. This dispute erupted after figures within the State of Law Coalition (led by Nouri al-Maliki) issued a statement openly suggesting a large-scale reversal of the current government's decisions if al-Maliki were to return to the prime minister's office. A similar scenario played out in 2022, when al-Sudani's cabinet reviewed and reversed several decisions taken by the caretaker government of the previous prime minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi.^{xv}

A broader challenge facing Iraqi governments is their limited capacity to ensure policy continuity. Incoming administrations often abandon or revise projects initiated by their predecessors, particularly when former governing parties move into opposition. At the same time, defeated political factions frequently obstruct parliamentary proceedings, slowing both the legislative process and the functioning of state institutions. While such forms of parliamentary obstruction are relatively common in many European democracies and are generally absorbed by well-established institutional frameworks, their consequences in Iraq can be far more severe. Delays in decision-making may directly affect the state's ability to respond to pressing challenges, including water shortages, food insecurity, and other humanitarian crises.^{xvi}



The winning coalition in these parliamentary elections included the Reconstruction and Development Coalition (Mohammad Shia al-Sudani), the State of Law (Nouri al-Maliki), al-Sadiqoun (Qais al-Khazali), Badr Organization (Hadi al-Ameri), and the National State Forces Alliance (Ammar al-Hakim and Haider al-Abadi). While some of them have stronger or weaker ties to Iran, the Shia Coordination Framework (SCF) bloc is generally opposed to the Sadrists, who boycotted the elections.

Sunni parties, on the other hand, are more fractured, with Taqaddum (Mohammed al-Halbousi) as the main party, followed by al-Siyada Alliance (Khamis al-Khanjar) and Azm Alliance (Muthanna al-Samarrai).^{xvii}

In these parliamentary elections, the trend of declining voter turnout was reversed, with participation reaching 56 % despite the renewed boycott by the Sadrist Movement. This increase has also been anticipated by pre-election surveys and carries several implications. First, the boycott appears to have had only a limited effect on overall voter participation. Second, the long-term decline in electoral turnout may have at least temporarily come to an end. Third, the higher level of participation could be interpreted as an indication of renewed public confidence in the electoral process and, to some extent, in Iraq's political system more broadly.^{xviii}

Voter turnout was significantly higher in Kurdish and Sunni provinces than in Shia-majority areas (which had the lowest turnout). Baghdad, in particular, with 71 parliamentary seats allocated, had a low turnout rate of 48.76 %^{xix}.

The political elite increasingly portrays internal cohesion as a national priority. While this objective resonates with a significant portion of the population, it also provides political leaders with a useful narrative through which they can divert attention from persistent governance shortcomings, parliamentary dysfunction, and entrenched corruption.^{xx}

Political patronage networks, clientelism, and corruption remain prominent features of Iraqi politics.

Political actors often leverage access to state resources, public offices, and financial means to strengthen their electoral support. As a result, voter mobilization frequently relies on individuals connected to patronage networks or otherwise benefiting from the existing political system, rather than on broad-based civic participation.

To secure votes, the incumbent prime minister often uses his executive authority and the power to hand out public-sector jobs. During Sudani's three years in office, the government's wage agenda has inflated dramatically, with about one million new jobs announced.^{xxi}

Unfortunately, mass mobilization and political violence are also common practices in Iraq. This controlled mobilization is supervised by employees of the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of the Interior, and various armed groups under the umbrella of the PMF and the Kurdish Peshmerga forces. Individual commanders often oversee where votes are cast, so the votes of these entities can be well directed.^{xxii}

Results of the elections

It was the first election under an electoral law that reintroduced the modified Sainte-Laguë method. The amended law reintroduced proportional representation using a formula based on the first divisor of 1.7. Within this system, the votes for each candidate list are divided by successive odd numbers starting at 1.7, then 3, 5, 7, etc. The first divisor increases the number of votes needed to win the first seat, making it easier for elite blocs and weakening smaller parties or new candidates.^{xxiii}

Shia-led parties won 187 of 329 parliamentary seats. The SCF ruled Iraq for three years before fragmenting. It has now been torn apart by the rivalry between Nouri al-Maliki and Muhammad Shia al-Sudani, as well as the bloc's Iranian core. Several leaders of the pro-Iranian Shia militias also achieved notable successes. For instance, the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, under the leadership of Qais al-Khazali, has won 28 seats.^{xxiv}



The leading Sunni party, Taqqadum, fell from 44 seats in the previous election to 37. The biggest loss for Sunni parties was the Sovereignty Alliance, led by Khamis al-Khanjar, with only 9 seats.^{xxv}

The KDP has received over 1 million votes, winning in the governorates of Duhok and Erbil (where Duhok had the second-highest turnout in these elections, a little over 70 %). Despite the high number of votes, the KDP has lost within the proportional system, as it has only 29 seats instead of the 31 seats the party won in 2021. The KDP's strongest performance was in Nineveh, which resulted in five seats. It also won one seat in Kirkuk.

The PUK came slightly closer to the KDP. Despite winning around 625,000 votes, mainly in Kirkuk and Sulaymaniyah, the PUK slightly reduced the KDP's dominance by winning 18 seats, one more than in the previous elections.^{xxvi}

The party increased its presence in Kirkuk from three seats to four (however, this is the first time that the Kurds won less than half of the seats in Kirkuk Governorate). It also won two seats in the Nineveh Governorate and one seat each in Diyala and Salah al-Din. One PUK member was elected in Baghdad.

The Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) has gained about 50,000 votes. However, it is expected to hold only four seats, the same number it achieved when supporting independent candidates in 2021.^{xxvii}

Post-electoral development

The election results were announced on Monday, November 17, by the Independent High Election Commission (IHEC). According to the Iraqi Constitution, within fifteen days of the ratification of the election results, the new members of the CoR convene the first meeting to elect the speaker of the parliament (who has already been elected) by a majority vote. The CoR will then elect the President of Iraq, who must obtain a two-thirds majority of the 329 members.

Following the elections, negotiations take place among the major parliamentary blocs to determine a candidate for prime minister. Once elected, the president is required to nominate the candidate of the largest parliamentary bloc within 15 days of assuming office. In practice, government formation typically involves extensive bargaining among the principal Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurdish parties, resulting in a broad coalition government.

Once the prime minister-designate is selected, they have 30 days to submit their cabinet nominees, each of whom will be approved by CoR. After the Council of Ministers is approved by an absolute majority of the CoR and the prime minister receives a vote of confidence, a new government will be formed.^{xxviii}

In the Sunni bloc, there were disputes after the elections about who would hold the mandate to serve as speaker of parliament. The main candidate was the chairman of the Taqqadum Party, Haibat al-Halbousi. Halbousi's prospects depended on securing support from multiple political entities, including his opponents, with whom he shared both ideological and sectarian tensions, as well as competitors who vied for influence in Sunni-majority provinces, such as his main rival in parliament, Muthanna al-Samarrai of the Azm alliance.^{xxix}

The Speaker of the Parliament has already begun his mandate, and it is ultimately subordinate to Mohammed al-Halbussi (Haibat's brother) of the Taqqadum party. He won the election by a clear margin of 208 votes, with only 66 against. The presidency is usually held by the PUK. This year, the rival KDP has nominated its own candidate: Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein.^{xxx,xxxi}

However, he did not succeed, and after a five-month political crisis, Nizar Amedi from PUK secured 227 votes and became the president. Although the position was supposed to be elected within 30 days of the first session of parliament, the rivalry between the KDP and the PUK significantly slowed down this process.



The election was challenging; Nizar Amedi was only elected in the second round. In the first round, 252 out of 329 parliament members participated. The required minimum turnout was 220 members, representing a two-thirds majority. In the second round, only Amedi and Muthanna Amin competed, with Amin receiving just 15 of 249 votes.^{xxxii,xxxiii}

Former Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki was considered the clear winner of the political schemes and the future prime minister immediately after his victorious dispute with al-Muhammad Shia al-Sudani, but shortly after the war between the US and Iran began, this changed the whole situation. US President Donald Trump refused to recognize al-Maliki as prime minister, claiming that al-Maliki was pro-Iranian. Trump initially warned that the United States would reduce its support for Iraq before subsequently implementing a series of punitive measures. Washington suspended the transfer of cash payments derived from Iraqi oil revenues, halted security assistance, and curtailed cooperation with Iraqi security institutions. At the same time, the administration issued strong warnings regarding the activities of pro-Iranian armed groups operating in Iraq.

The American president seems to have got his way, and al-Maliki was replaced by al-Zaidi. So far, Donald Trump seems to be happy with this choice. Circumstances show that this is his victory over Iranian influence in Iraq. Al-Zaidi was given the difficult task of pro-Iranian militias in Iraq disarmament.^{xxxiv,xxxv}

One indication of the impact of US pressure has been Muqtada al-Sadr's announcement that his militia, Saraya al-Salam, will be disarmed. This development is particularly significant given that Saraya al-Salam remains one of Iraq's most prominent armed groups and was directly involved in clashes with the PMF in 2022 following Sadr's unsuccessful attempt to form a government.^{xxxvi}

Prime Minister al-Zaidi has also faced the persistent challenge of corruption. One notable example is the

case involving Deputy Oil Minister Adnan al-Jumaili, who was accused during an official investigation of accepting bribes. Corruption remains a systemic issue in Iraq, and the Trump administration has repeatedly emphasized the need for greater transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption measures.^{xxxvii}

Iraq's new prime minister Ali al-Zaidi has launched an anti-corruption campaign, leading to arrests and the seizure of about \$86 million in cash, along with properties, vehicles, and gold linked to alleged embezzlement cases, including the detention of Oil Ministry official Adnan al-Jumaili. The authorities also expanded probes into government contracts from recent years, with additional arrests such as former Salah al-Din governor Raed al-Jubouri. The government has created a new high-level integrity and asset-recovery body to monitor ministries and recover state funds, positioning corruption as a major threat to Iraq's political order.^{xxxviii}

However, analysts and critics say the effort may not be enough because it is still early and has not yet tackled older, more significant, or politically sensitive cases. They point to structural obstacles in Iraq's legal system, much of it based on outdated laws, and to the claim that corruption is "politically protected," making enforcement difficult. Former integrity officials also urge the prime minister to prioritize major legacy cases, such as alleged corruption tied to Central Bank currency auctions.^{xxxix}

US-Iran rivalry and Iraqi foreign policy

The new Iraqi prime minister al-Zaidi visited the White House in July 2026, where he discussed key economic and military issues facing Iraq with the US president. This meeting marked a historic turning point in mutual relations, as it mainly concerned economic issues and there were few military ones.

The main topic was oil and gas production, which the Trump administration says should increase. Zaidi also demanded that he have a larger stake in OPEC+. Zaidi is taking this step because of the possibility of obtaining new funds to rebuild a country that has not



yet recovered from the war against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The US and Iraq are expected to create new jobs as part of their cooperation, as part of new trade ties. Iraq will also boost investment with U.S. companies.

Furthermore, Zaidi sought to end the military presence of United States military units by September 30, 2026 and claimed that he would disarm pro-Iranian militias by the very date.^{xl, xli, xlii}

As for the pro-Iranian militias, these self-proclaimed "resistance" factions targeted not only American assets inside Iraq, but also American bases and civilian infrastructure in Jordan, Syria, and the Gulf. Some sources still say that their disarmament is unlikely, despite Zaidi's recent successes.

But Zaidi's administration has chosen a different tactic against the "axis of resistance." These militias are trying to gradually integrate into the Iraqi army, and so frequent negotiations arise. Asaib Ahl al-Haq (Qais al-Khazali), and Kataib al-Imam (Ali Shibl al-Zaidi) have promised to follow the aforementioned Muqtada Al-Sadr and join the country's armed forces, although the details and timeline remain unclear.^{xliii}

The factions closest to the resistance, including Kataib Hezbollah, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada and Harakat Ansar Allah al-Awfiya, have publicly rejected the idea, although some appear to be in talks with the government. However, there is a possibility of integration into other institutions belonging to the armed forces, so everything is far from over.

At present, it is unlikely that the Iraqi state will gain control of the militia's equipment. The most powerful resistance factions keep advanced weapons supplied by Iran and stored in facilities beyond the government's reach, including bases such as Jurf al-Sakhar. Depriving the militias of this equipment would require a confrontation, for which the Iraqi armed forces do not have the strength.^{xliv}

Another important piece of evidence of Iran's presence was the U.S.-Saudi airstrikes that hit militia targets across eastern Iraq, leaving at least 20 dead. Saudi Arabia also said the strikes targeted an Iranian proxy group responsible for attacks on oil facilities in the Eastern Province and Riyadh region.^{xlv}

It is not only Iraqi sovereignty that has remained vulnerable. Also, the Kurds are exposed, having lost air defense in the form of Patriot systems that were recently withdrawn from the base in Erbil until the recent start of the withdrawal of US troops. The Patriots have protected 95 % of the strikes in this area since the beginning of the war with Iran, and even though military cooperation with the US does not end, the Kurds are concerned about the withdrawal of American troops.^{xlvi}

As a second foreign visit, the new Iraqi prime minister chose Tehran, which is still a strong economic partner in Iraq with important influence. Iraq is heavily dependent on Iranian natural gas and electricity, and bilateral trade exceeds \$12 billion a year, making it one of Iran's largest trading partners.^{xlvii}

The spiritual and cultural ties between the two countries are very strong, with millions of Iranian Shiite pilgrims crossing the border yearly to visit holy sites. When the Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was killed, the funeral procession marched through Iraqi Shiite towns Najaf and Karbala highlighted this bond.

On the other hand, there are factors in Iraq that can harm Iran. One particularly sensitive issue is Iran's Kurdish opposition groups based in northern Iraq, outside of Baghdad's direct control.^{xlviii} Al-Zaidi and Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian oversaw the signing of several agreements and memoranda of understanding (MoUs) in Tehran on foreign affairs, finance, the economy, and energy.

However, the meeting in Iran was not pleasant for Al-Zaidi. Iranian officials pressured him during his recent visit to Tehran to repay \$11 billion in



outstanding debt accumulated over years of Iraqi imports of Iranian natural gas. The Iraqi delegation countered that Iraq lost between \$40 billion and \$45 billion during the U.S.-Iran war and refused to succumb to this pressure.^{xlix}

Conclusion

Iraq's parliamentary elections and the events that followed have made it clear that Iraq is at a critical crossroads, where domestic political fragility meets enormous geopolitical pressure. However, the elections formally brought victory to the Shia Bloc (SCF) and confirmed the division of power among the main ethno-sectarian groups. The outbreak of the US-Iran conflict, which forced prime minister Mohammad Shia al-Sudani to step down in favor of Ali al-Zaidi, has fully exposed the extent to which Iraqi sovereignty is subordinated to a regional power struggle. Iraq thus continues to teeter on the edge of not becoming a mere proxy battlefield.

Moreover, the domestic political scene remains deeply fragmented and marked by violence, as tragically illustrated by the pre-election murder of the Sunni candidate Safaa al-Mashhadani. The continued power of independent militias, especially the PMF, and US pressure to disarm them create an almost intractable dilemma for any Iraqi government. The power-sharing system (*mubasasa ta'ifiyya*) guarantees representation of the main

factions, but at the same time breeds deep-rooted clientelism, corruption, and a chronic absence of political continuity. Each new administration tends to undo the steps of its predecessors, which cripples the state's ability to respond to acute existential threats such as extreme water scarcity, destroyed agriculture, and looming humanitarian crises in the south of the country.

Despite these obvious systemic shortcomings, however, the elections also brought cautious reasons for optimism. The increase in voter turnout to 56 % despite the Sadrists' boycott suggests that the long-term decline in interest in the elections has been halted, at least temporarily. That part of the public is regaining confidence in the political system. The growing authority of the federal courts is also a major positive development. The fact that political actors are increasingly preferring legal and institutional paths to armed violence in resolving their disputes is a promising step towards gradual democratisation.

The future of Iraq in the coming period will depend on whether the new leadership can skillfully navigate between the interests of Washington and Tehran, while using these fragile signs of institutional stabilization to make the state genuinely care for the basic needs of its citizens and to break free from the clutches of political patronage.

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