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Iraq at a Crossroads: Stabilization or Further Fragmentation?

THE NATIONAL PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF MAY 12 WILL HELP PREDICT THE OUTCOME OF STABILIZATION AND REFORM EFFORTS IN IRAQ

The upcoming elections on May 12, 2018 mark the first national elections in Iraq after the military victory over the Islamic State (ISIL). These elections will determine whether Iraq will be able to stabilize itself politically, to establish a nation-wide security regime and to start an urgent reform process after years of civil war and the fight against ISIL. Since the last parliamentary elections in 2014, the number of challenges for Iraqi politics has steadily increased; The economic situation has deteriorated due to falling oil prices, vast stretches of the land are utterly destroyed after the war against ISIL and the group's terror cells still operate underground. Additionally, relations between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Iraqi Central Government have reached an all-time low after the Kurdish independence referendum of September 2017. Despite these enormous challenges that Iraq faces in 2018, there has been a further fragmentation of the party landscape in the run-up to the parliamentary elections. Concrete thematic topics and reform programs have at the same time clearly moved into the background of political discourse. It is therefore doubtful that the national elections in May will actually set the course for urgently needed reforms in the economic, political and security sectors. Much more likely is the maintenance of the status quo under the current Prime Minister, Haider Al-Abadi.

Relevance of the elections

It is on May 12, 2018, exactly fifteen years after the fall of the Saddam regime, that elections are to take place in Iraq. Democratic elections took place in the country for the first time in 2005 after the adoption of

the new constitution in a referendum by a majority of 79 percent, paving the way for a federally structured, parliamentary democracy.

The first national parliamentary elections of December 2005 led to the uprooting of the traditional power structures. Nuri Al-Maliki was the first Shiite politician to head the Iraqi executive, which had been in the hands of the Sunni regime of Saddam Hussein for decades. These changed forms of power have been consolidated in the following years and in the two parliamentary elections of 2010 and 2014. These changed power relations were reaffirmed in the following years and in the two parliamentary elections of 2010 and 2014: Haider Al-Abadi, who followed Maliki 2014 as Prime Minister, also belongs to the Shiite Islamic *Dawa* Party. In 2014, Abadi was still seen as a weak consensus candidate, and the rival Shiite camp only accepted him after the highest Shiite cleric in Iraq, Ayatollah Al-Sistani, intervened. Now, prior to the 2018 election, Abadi is considered to be the strongest and most promising candidate, strengthened by the military victory against ISIL and respected by the international community as a trusted partner.

The political consolidation of the Shiite parties after 2005 has gone along with the alienation of the Sunnis (who make up around 35% of the population) from the political process in Baghdad. The majority Sunni provinces of Anbar and Salah Ad-Din had rejected the new democratic constitution. Meanwhile, the build-up of Sunni party structures stagnated in the following years, and the Sunni electoral turnout in the national elections of 2005 and 2009 was far behind that of the Shiites. Maliki's anti-

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Sunni policies during his second term (2010 – 2014) led to a further marginalization of the Sunnis and drove many of the Iraqi Sunnis into the arms of ISIL.¹ Since the parliamentary elections of 2014 fell into the period of the rise of ISIL, which for many Sunni Iraqis represented an alternative to the politics of Baghdad at the time, it is now essential to politically remobilize the Sunni bloc, and to integrate them into the parliamentary democracy.

The political balance between the Iraqi Central Government in Baghdad and Iraqi Kurdistan is especially important for the country's stability. In 2005, the Kurdish community overwhelmingly voted for the new constitution of Iraq, legally defining the autonomous character of the Kurdish region. Since then, however, the relationship between Baghdad and Erbil has suffered from disputes over the concrete structure of Kurdish autonomy. Relations between the two reached a low point with the Kurdish independence referendum on September 25, 2017, held by the KRG under Masoud Barzani without the support of the international community. 92 percent of the Kurds voted in favor of complete independence from Iraq, to which the Iraqi Central Government reacted by shutting down all international flights to and from Kurdish airports. Also, they reduced Iraqi-Kurdistan's share in the national budget, and froze public money transfers from Baghdad to Erbil.² In October 2017, the Iraqi forces pushed the Kurdish Peshmerga out of Kirkuk and the

disputed territories.³ In the months that followed, the KRG kept using a possible boycott of the elections as leverage over the central government and the international community.

Against the backdrop of these ethnic-confessional tensions overlying the political process in Iraq, the May 12 elections will be groundbreaking in determining whether the country will succeed in shaping an inclusive, participatory political process and lead the country to political stability.

The Election Process in Iraq

Iraq is constitutionally a representative parliamentary democracy divided into federal structures. Similar to Germany, on May 12, the 24 million people eligible to vote will elect delegates from 18 electoral districts that correspond to the 18 Iraqi provinces to the Iraqi parliament. After the election, the parliament will consist of 329 seats that are distributed according to a fixed formula.⁴ On a national level, 7,000 candidates from different ethnic and religious groups will compete for a seat in parliament. Six constituencies reserve seats for minority representatives from the Christian, Yazidi and Kurdish communities. After elections, the new parliament will directly elect a government, which requires a simple majority of 165 votes.

Throughout the election process, political parties and candidates are organized into lists that can be voted for on Election Day. These lists then form coalitions in parliament and are crucial for the formation of the government and the subsequent voting

¹ Renad Mansour: The Sunni Predicament in Iraq, Carnegie Middle East Center, 2016, www.carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC_59_Mansour_Sunni_Final.pdf (03.05.2018)

² In parts, the sanctions were lifted in March 2018. This is partly due to the political relevance of the Kurds to the national election. See "Iraq sends money to pay Kurdish salaries for first time since 2014", in Reuters, 19.03.2018, www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds/iraq-sends-money-to-pay-kurdish-salaries-for-first-time-since-2014-idUSKBN1GV0T1 (06.05.2018)

³ Nils Wörmer/Lucas Lamberty: Scattered Dreams - The Independence Referendum, the Fall of Kirkuk and the Effect on Kurdish and Iraqi Politics, in: International Reports of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Volume 1, 2018, www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_52122-544-1-30.pdf?180419100002 (06.05.2018)

⁴ The Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) of Iraq announced the current formula of distributing seats on March 22, 2018. According to this, 69 of 329 seats will be given out in Baghdad. Nine seats are nationally reserved for religious minorities reserved. See Inside Iraqi Politics, Issue No. 176 (26.04.2018)

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conditions in the legislative process. Traditionally, parties and candidates are organized along their ethnic-confessional lines and see their mandate in representing the interests of their respective groups. This system structurally puts independent and non-confessional candidates at a disadvantage and leads them to join forces with larger lists.⁵ 27 lists, consisting of several parties, are currently competing in the elections. If there were only a few strictly confessional lists in previous elections, several Shiite and Sunni lists will be available for election this year. This points to a further fragmentation of the political landscape, which can often be traced back to personal ambitions and confessional special interests, but rarely to content-related motives.

2018 marks the first year that Iraqi parliamentary elections are held with the support of electronic systems. Throughout the country, 60,000 electronic voting machines have been installed which will be used with the individual electronic voting card of each Iraqi registered to vote. This reform was implemented to prevent electoral fraud - especially double voting - and to speed up the voting process.⁶ Each polling station transmits its results to the central office of the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) in Baghdad via satellite, where they are collected and ready to be calculated and published after mere hours. With this system, results can be announced on the same day or following morning, given there are no technical disturbances.

Several times during the weeks before the elections, problems with the registration process came up and the electronic system was criticized. On March 31, 2018, IHEC

⁵ Yasir Kouti, Dlawer Ala'Aldeen: Confessionalism and Electoral Prospects in Iraq, Middle East Research Institute (MERI), <http://www.merik.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Confessionalism-and-Electoral-Prospects-in-Iraq.pdf> (21.04.2018)

⁶ Raya Jalabi: New electronic system to speed up Iraqi election results: elections chief, in: Reuters, 23.04.2018, www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-election/new-electronic-system-to-speed-up-iraqi-election-results-elections-chief-idUSKBN1HU1AZ (03.05.2018)

announced that the biometric registration of voters will be paused to speed up the distribution of the electronic voting cards. Although the election will still be held electronically, this has likely reduced the security standards of the process. The Sunni camp in particular has heavily criticized the voter registration process and asked to reschedule the elections. First, they claimed that there were significantly fewer registration centers in the Sunni regions, putting Iraqi Sunnis at a disadvantage.⁷ Additionally, they noted that the majority of the 2.5 million displaced Iraqis are Sunni Muslims who, due to their displacement, were not able to renew their election documents, excluding them from being able to vote on May 12.

Lists and Candidates

Iraq's political landscape is extremely stable in terms of both its workforce and political parties. Since 2005, only a few political players have the power to significantly influence the political process. Above all, the composition of the lists before the elections and the formation of a coalition after the elections are politically decisive.

Since the first parliamentary elections of 2005, the Islamic *Dawa* Party has dominated the Shiite party spectrum and occupied the position of Prime Minister. Also in the run-up to the 2018 elections, the *Dawa* Party, with Abadi and Maliki, determines the field of competing candidates. However, for the first time, the party has two lists: Both the Victory Alliance Party of Abadi and the State of Law Coalition of his predecessor, Maliki, consist primarily of members of the party.⁸ The internal party schism took place in January 2018 and can primarily be seen as a power play between the two politicians. With the exception of a few nuances, such as in questions of foreign and security poli-

⁷ War-ravaged Iraq not ready for elections, say Sunnis calling for delay, in: Rudaw, 17.01.2018, www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/170120182 (27.04.2018)

⁸ PM Abadi, VP Maliki to run for Iraqi elections on different lists", in: Rudaw, 13.01.2018, www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/130120182 (04.05.2018)

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cy, their election program differs only slightly. It can be expected that the two lists of the *Dawa* Party will be reunited in the course of forming a government for power-political reasons, and then to appoint the Prime Minister. Equally dominant in the Shiite camp is the Conquest Alliance of Hadi Al-Ameri, a leader of the People's Mobilization Movement (*Al-Hashd Ash-Shaabi*). His alliance consists of around 500 former Shiite militiamen who, for formal reasons, left their units in order to participate in the political process. Nonetheless, the direct influence of the Iran-related *Hashd Ash-Shaabi* on Iraqi politics exists through them. The Conquest Alliance includes the *Badr* Organization, led by Ameri himself, Hezbollah-Iraq under Salim Al-Bahadeli, and *Qais al-Khazali's Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq* (League of the Righteous People).⁹The current popularity of the Victory Alliance can be traced back to the military success of the militia against ISIL.

The Shiite cleric and militia leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, will lead his *Istiqama* Party in a rather unexpected alliance with Iraq's communist Party. Formerly a radical advocate of Shiite interests, Al-Sadr's repositioning focuses on nationalist-minded and secular Iraqis of the underclass. Consequently, Al-Sadr consciously ignores denominational interests and advocates a radical reform of the Iraqi state.¹⁰

Ayad Allawi, the former Iraqi Interim Minister President (2004 – 2005) and Vice President of Iraq (2014 – 2015), is also currently being treated with great prospects of success. His National Alliance is a mix of secular and nationalist parties with a significant Sunni membership. With his explicitly non-confessional agenda on topics of societal

reconciliation and the rejection of external interference in Iraqi affairs, secular and nationalist Shiite and Sunni in Baghdad and Ramadi (Anbar Province) are likely to vote for him.

The Sunni camp remains largely under-organized shortly before the upcoming elections. The strongest list is the Iraqi Decision Alliance of Osama al-Nujayfi, one of the acting vice presidents of Iraq; it is particularly known for its representation of Turkish and Qatari interests in Baghdad. Sunni parties and prominent Sunni politicians, such as Salim Al-Jiburi, the current spokesman for parliament, are increasingly targeting lists led by Shiites, such as Abadi's Victory Alliance, Maliki's State of Law Coalition, or, in the case of Al -Jiburis, the National Alliance of Ayad Allawi. However, since in the vast majority of cases, Sunnis only elect Sunni MPs on these mixed lists, there is very limited evidence of inter-confessional tendencies in the political process.

Despite the profound internal and inter-party conflicts, the two leading Kurdish parties, the Democratic Party of Kurdistan (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), are on the same list. Within the Kurdish camp, they will compete against a list of *Gorran* (Party of Change), *Komal* (Kurdish Islamists) and the Alliance for Democracy and Justice of Barham Saleh, the former Prime Minister of the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan. If the two Kurdish lists succeed in winning seats in the so-called "disputed territories" around Kirkuk and putting together a united political front in Baghdad after the elections, they could become the kingmakers of the new government in various scenarios.

Election Campaign

The election campaign was officially opened on April 12, 2018, exactly one month before the election date. However, government parties had already used their public appearances and offices to launch issues and

⁹ Mona Alami: Iraq's Shiite militias hope battlefield wins can secure electoral victory, in: *Al-Monitor*, 27.04.2018, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/04/iraq-election-shiite-militias-iran.html#ixzz5EhPEba3c (28.04.2018)

¹⁰ Thanassis Cambanis: Can Militant Cleric Moqtada al-Sadr Reform Iraq? In: *The Century Foundation*, 01.05.2018, www.tcf.org/content/report/can-militant-cleric-moqtada-al-sadr-reform-iraq/ (02.05.2018)

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call for election. This behavior has only been sanctioned by IHEC in some cases.¹¹

Thematically, the election campaign reflects the urgent challenges of Iraq. In terms of content, however, the discussion remains largely superficial, with the large, decisive lists differing only slightly from each other, even in the culmination of these contents. Thus, it remains a slogan-style election campaign, primarily held by means of election posters, video messages (YouTube, Facebook, TV) and public events.

As the incumbent Prime Minister, Abadi focuses his campaigning efforts on the military victory over ISIL and the demonstration of power against the Iraqi Kurdistan as a result of the Kurdish referendum on independence - two issues that shaped his term in office. However, he has recently faced great challenges as a result of the high number of terrorist attacks and reports on the return of ISIL. Pushed by the media, the airstrike of the Iraqi Air Force on April 19, 2018, against ISIL positions on Syrian territory can be interpreted as a demonstration of power in times of election.¹² Abadi's other main topics in focus include economic development and the fight against corruption.

The only significant difference between Abadi's Victory Alliance, Maliki's State of Law Coalition, and Hadi Al-Ameri's Conquest Alliance lies in questions of national security and foreign policy. Unlike Abadi, Maliki and Ameri condemn US involvement in Iraq and the region. Ameri's Iran-related Conquest Alliance even demanded the complete withdrawal of the US from Iraq. In addition to discussing the fight against corruption, he also addressed the reform of the judiciary and less controversial issues such as the

¹¹ Iraq's electoral commission fines 60 candidates, political parties for violations", in: Kurdistan 24, 17.04.2018
www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/2e5d5e54-9f1e-41ad-baff-bb6f3778cb88 (2.5.2018)

¹² Iraq air force carries out strikes against ISIS in Syria", in: The National, 19.04.2018,
www.thenational.ae/world/mena/iraq-air-force-carry-out-strikes-against-isis-in-syria-1.723054 (03.05.2018)

improvement of the school system and the fight against youth unemployment.

There is almost no contentual debate in the Sunni camp; only the situation of the Sunni IDPs and the cooperation between Sunni tribal leaders play a role in the often folkloric-led conflict. The 2018 elections should, thus, not significantly strengthen the legitimacy of the Sunni democratic process.

On the other hand, the absence of a confessionally-sharpened and divisive discourse is positive. Especially in the Shiite camp, there are confessional hints when it comes to the explicitly Sunni ISIL or relations with Shiite Iran. However, none of the leading lists campaign with positions that are explicitly directed against one confessional or other ethnic group.

Fundamentally, the Iraqi population has shown little interest in the election campaign and little engagement in the mobilization of voters. Nationwide, young Iraqis are especially disappointed by the political process, which is why many might stay clear of the election. Moreover, according to recent polls, about one third of eligible voters are still undecided about their voting behavior.¹³

Outlook and German Interests

Due to the fragmentation of Iraq's political landscape, it is unlikely that any one list will be able to reach the necessary majority to build a government. As in the past, and after the 2018 elections, the strongest lists will most likely merge to form a coalition. The results of the Shiite lists in Baghdad and the nine Shiite provinces in the south of the country will be decisive for the balance of power within the next government. Out of the 329 seats in parliament, 190 could go to Shiite delegates. Surveys and expert analyses give current Prime Minister Abadi good chances at re-election. In particular,

¹³ Results of a nationwide public opinion poll on Iraq's upcoming parliamentary election", in: 1001 Iraqi Thoughts, 01.05.2018,
www.1001iraqithoughts.com/2018/05/01/results-of-a-nationwide-public-opinion-poll-on-iraqs-upcoming-parliamentary-election-2/ (01.05.2018)

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his Victory Alliance and his natural partners in the Shiite camp, such as the list of Muqtada Al-Sadr, would have to do well and reach more than 100 of the 190 or so Shiite parliamentary seats. In addition, there are no larger lists that would categorically exclude a coalition with Abadi. Abadi's alliance with Ameri, chairman of the Conquest Alliance (Al-Hashd ash-Shaabi), failed in January 2018 after a few hours, causing disappointment in the Abadi camp. However, it cannot be ruled out that Abadi will return to Ameri after the elections to ensure his own power. The result is also eagerly awaited by Maliki, Abadi's intra-party competitor. Should his State of Law Coalition be strong, it could lead to a tough power struggle between Abadi and Maliki, which could lead to a compromise solution in the office of Prime Minister and, thus, to a replacement of Abadi. In this context, it will be significant how strongly Sunnis will speak out for Sunni candidates on Shiite lists, thereby influencing the balance of power in the Shiite party camp.

It is in the interest of the young Iraqi democracy, and good for the country's stabilization and reconstruction efforts, if the level of violence in the parliamentary elections remains low and the allegations of electoral fraud remain in check. Essentially, this means that demonstrations are peaceful, political killings are avoided, and ISIL does not carry out attacks, particularly at polling stations.¹⁴ It cannot be ruled out, however, that the possible exit by the US from the nuclear agreement with Iran (JCPOA), which

¹⁴ Before the elections, some Iraqi politicians became victims of assassination attempts. The Finance Director of the Hashd al-Shaabi, Qassim Al-Zubaidi, died from an attack on April 29, 2018, in the southwest of Baghdad. See: Sangar Ali, Iraqi PMF Finance Director dies in hospital after failed assassination attempt, Kurdistan 24, 30.04.2018, www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/0af38f22-612d-4cf0-b6da-b6cf73c252d2 (04.05.2018)

On April 15, 2018, Ammar Kahya from the Iraqi Turkmen Front in Kirkuk and the Member of Parliament, Abdul Karim Abtan, escaped an assassination attempt in Baghdad. See: Iraq: 2 electoral candidates survive assassination attempts, Middle East Monitor, 16.04.2018, www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180416-iraq-2-electoral-candidates-survive-assassination-attempts/ (28.04.2018)

President Trump will decide before the Iraqi elections, could have a negative impact on the security situation in Iraq.

With the introduction of the electronic voting system, the voting standards have been significantly improved; under the new conditions, subsequent manipulation of the election results is deemed unlikely. However, it cannot be ruled out that bribery, extortion or intimidation will occur in the run-up to the elections or in the polling booths, distorting the election result. In the run-up to the elections, it became known that voters' voices were bought in different provinces, or that secure jobs were promised to voters. This applies to Baghdad and the southern parts of the country in particular such as Basrah, which will be decisive for the balance of power in the Shiite camp. It is also possible that armed forces, such as Shiite militiamen, will create a climate of fear in or around the polling stations, thereby influencing the outcome of the election.

Iraq is a vital partner of Germany in the Middle East. This is especially true with regard to stabilization efforts in the region and the fight against international terrorism. For this reason, it is in the German interest that the elections are non-violent and fair and that a swift, independent government is formed. This, among others, is a prerequisite for urgently-needed economic and political reforms to be implemented and for the reconstruction and reintegration of refugees to be promoted. In addition, the restructuring of the Iraqi security sector is required under a stable, new Iraqi government. In cooperation with the government of Haider Al-Abadi, the German government decided in March 2018 to redirect the German Armed Forces mission in Iraq in order to assist this reform process and to train Iraqi security forces in Central Iraq. Until recently, German security policy and civic engagement had focused primarily on the Iraqi-Kurdistan. Now, however, Germany is a close partner of Baghdad in stabilizing the entire country and fighting ISIL and other jihadist terrorist organizations.