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Iraqi Elections 2021: Independents and New Political Parties

Can new actors bring political change into a stagnant system?

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Introduction

In the days and weeks leading up to October 10, 2021 – the date of the sixth parliamentary election in Iraq – activists and citizens despaired of change, and many insisted on an electoral boycott. The turnout was the lowest in Iraq’s post-2003 history, coming at 43.54% by the most generous estimation.¹ Despite this lack of participation, citizens, observers and even the political elite were surprised by the results of the elections.² Emtidad, a newly established political party with roots in the protest movement that brought about early elections, had won a surprising nine seats in the Council of Representatives. Other new parties emerged victors as well, with Ishraqat Kanoon winning six seats. Moreover, 43 independent candidates had won seats. At the same time, some of the entrenched elite – namely the Fateh coalition and the Alliance of National State Forces (of former Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi and Ammar Al-Hakim) – suffered surprising losses. For a few days, Iraqis celebrated the unexpected results and began to wonder, what would have happened had more Iraqis voted? Others cautioned that the celebrations came too early, insisting that the independents could easily be indirectly linked to the established political parties that have led Iraq since 2005.

With a new electoral system that drew smaller districts and implemented a single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system, political parties could have been incentivized to market their candidates as independents. Moreover, the public disenchantment with the political elite, particularly in the aftermath of the 2019 October Protest Movement, also motivates candidates to style themselves as “independents” to protect themselves from electoral punishment for their previous affiliations, knowing that the rules of government formation are less malleable to the effects of electoral system changes as Hamzeh Hadad describes in his corresponding piece (*Path to Government Formation in Iraq*). Conversely, the very same factors – the smaller districts and the wave of public dissatisfaction with status quo elites – could motivate ambitious local leaders and civil society activists to run for office as nonpartisan independents. In this report, I rely on data collected from the biographies of new candidates, interviews with candidates and local activists, as well as public opinion data to provide answers to these critical debates: who are Iraq’s independents? Who are the new political parties? And, most consequentially, can they deliver on change?

In order to do so, this report unfolds as follows. First, I provide an overview of the outcome of the elections and describe the environment in which they occurred. Second, I introduce the new political parties: Emtidad and Ishraqat Kanoon and provide an overview of the career trajectories of their representatives, as well as an analysis of their capacity to engage in politics. Third, I provide a similar overview of the independent candidates and, utilizing different definitions of “independence”, I draw different scenarios for the outcome of the elections and the bargaining power of various political sides, drawing on the work done by my colleagues – Hamzeh Hadad and Hashim Al-Rikabi. Finally, I conclude by providing an answer to the questions outlined above and providing recommendations for organizations seeking to bolster Iraqi voter turnout, as well as for new political parties and independent candidates who want to carve a space for themselves in Iraq’s political sphere.

¹ In this election, voter turnout was calculated as individuals who voted divided by individuals registered to vote. Due to the absence of an up-to-date census in Iraq, eligible voter estimates are difficult to come by and registered voter estimates are used instead. The data provided by the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) calculates 43% register voter turnout for 9.6 million participants (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turnout-iraqs-election-reached-43-electoral-commission-2021-10-16/>). Population estimates put about 23 million Iraqis as being over 18 years old (the legal age of voting) meaning that a rough estimate of eligible voter turnout is roughly 41.7%.

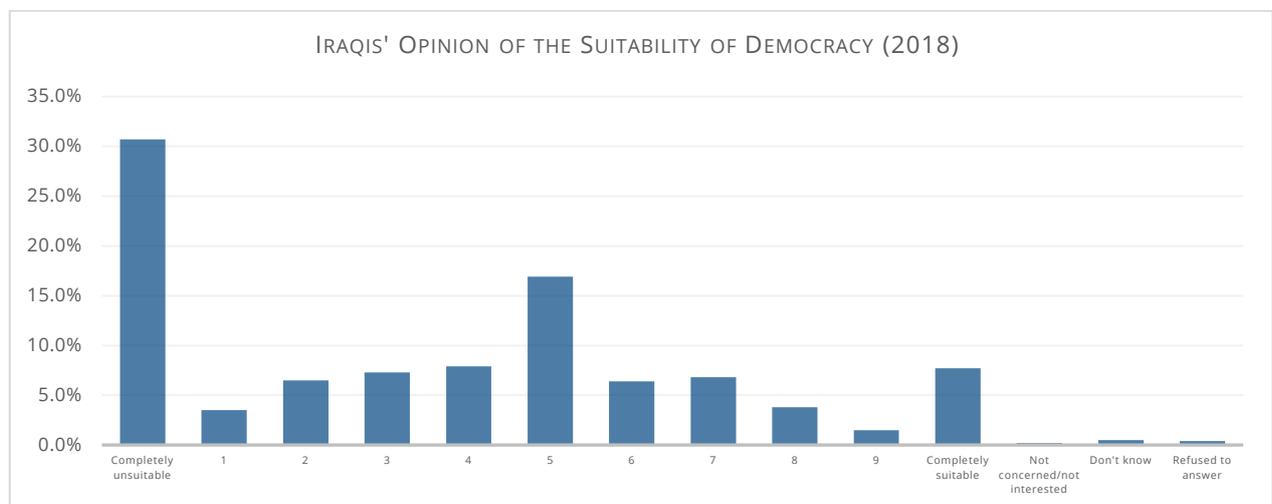
² See for example: Lahib Higel, “Iraq’s Surprise Election Results”, November 16, 2021. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/iraqs-surprise-election-results>.

The Atmosphere and Outcome of the 2021 Elections

Iraq's elections take place at four-year intervals and were scheduled for the spring of 2022. However, the mass protest movement that shook the country from the fall of 2019 through the winter of 2020 demanded largescale political changes, including the resignation of the prime minister, a change in the electoral law, and early elections. As a result, elections were planned, the electoral law was changed, and Adil Abd Al-Mahdi was replaced by Mustafa Al-Kadhimi in the short-term.

Because of the new electoral law, the number of candidates running dropped precipitously, by the thousands, in comparison to previous elections. Under the old electoral system, political parties strove to gain as many votes as possible across all candidates, because they could combine all their votes and translate them into seats for the party. Under the new system, an individual candidate's votes serve only the candidate him- or herself in his or her bid for a seat in a specific district. Therefore, running too many popular candidates from the same party in one electoral district was a sure way to dilute votes in a way that could cripple both candidates. Hence, parties nominated less candidates. In the 2021 election, 21 coalitions, 108 parties and 789 independent candidates ran for office.³ Of these, 138 seats went to members of coalitions, 148 seats to members of political parties and 43 seats to independent candidates.

Some of the protestors that had populated the public squares of south-central Iraq organized themselves into political entities and deliberated over whether to participate in the elections or whether to boycott them. Iraqis were disenchanted with the political system, and more so they were losing their faith in the suitability of democracy for Iraq, as demonstrated through public opinion polling conducted by the Arab Barometer.⁴ Parties like Emtidad, the Democratic "Nazil Akith Haqi" Movement, the Fao-Zakho Organization, and the Tishreen National Organization all registered and ran in Babil, Baghdad, Basra, Diyala, Karbala, Maysan, Muthanna, Najaf, Ninawa, Qadisiya, Salahuddin and Kirkuk. Emtidad won seats in Babil (2), Najaf (1), Thi Qar (5), and Qadisiya (1). Others, like the 25 October Movement, the Iraqi House, the Organization of Opposition Forces, and the National House did not even register to run in the elections. When asked, their reasoning was that the pre-electoral environment was not safe and that activists faced threats from armed actors.



To promote participation in elections, the international community invested a great deal of energy and resources in ensuring the technical integrity of the elections. International observers poured into the country and the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) provided election day monitoring as well as extended electoral assistance, including technical assistance.⁵ UNAMI also produced media promoting participation in election, both online and in the streets in Iraq.⁶ Although many protestors had called for the United Nations' involvement in the elections⁷, UNAMI's support did not deter many from boycotting.

Following the elections, UNAMI praised the conduct of the elections and provided a level of legitimacy. A statement was delivered to the security council ahead of the finalization of the results by IHEC, which occurred

³ Independent High Electoral Commission, "Candidate Affairs" accessed December 8, 2021, <https://ihec.iq/الثورون-المرشحين/>.

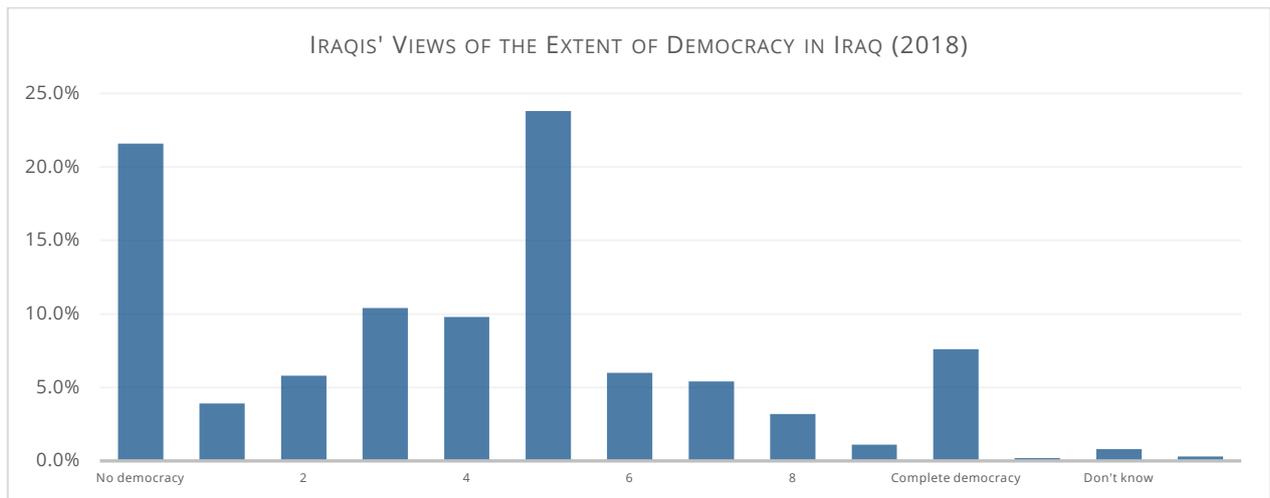
⁴ Arab Barometer Wave V: 2018-2019, <https://www.arabbarometer.org/surveys/arab-barometer-wave-v/>.

⁵ Marsin Alshamary and Maya Nir, "The prospects and limitations of United Nations electoral observation in Iraq," *Order from Chaos*, May 3, 2021.

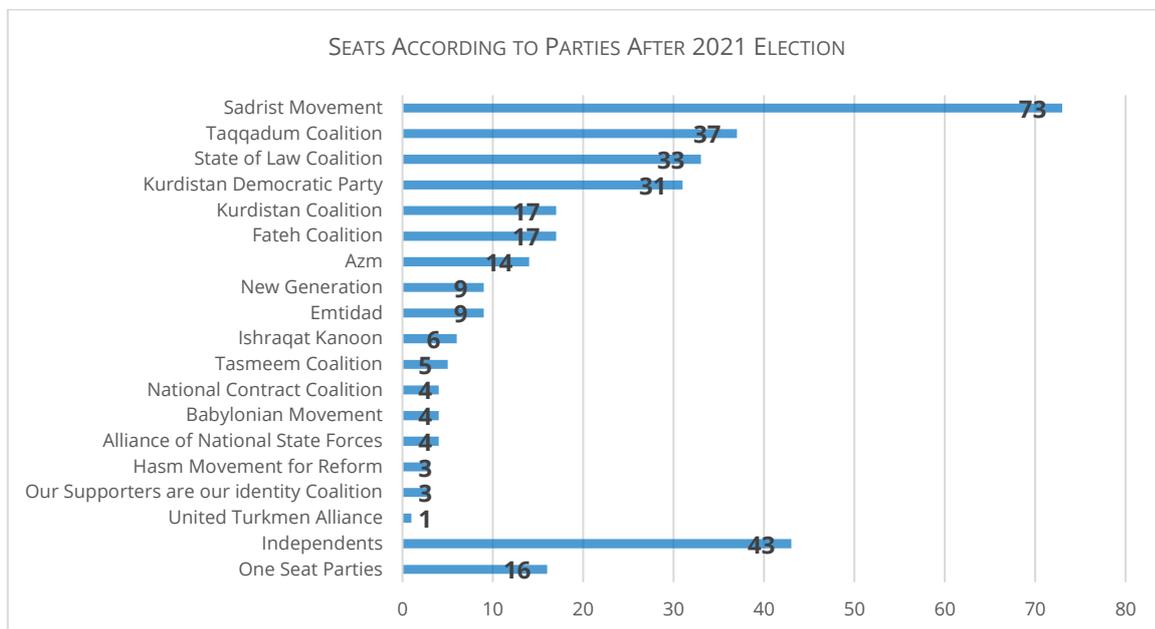
⁶ For an example of online promotion, see the video produced by UNAMI to promote trust in Iraq's election: UNAMI, Twitter post, October 10, 2021 [9:19 AM], accessed December 2 2021, <https://twitter.com/UNIraq/status/1447205176050335745>.

⁷ In fact, the Emtidad Movement itself published a statement about registration for the elections that called on the United Nations to monitor, see: Emtidad Movement, Twitter Post, May 4, 2021, <https://twitter.com/emtidadiraq/status/1389623621908418561/photo/1>.

in late November. The final results did not change vastly from the initial results, with only five seats changing in Baghdad, Ninawa, Erbil, Kirkuk and Basra.⁸



The clear winners were the Sadrist Movement, followed by the Taqqadum Coalition (headed by the last Speaker of the Council of Representatives, Mohammad Al-Halbousi) and the State of Law Coalition (of former Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki). The graph above outlines the allocation of seats and shows why observers would be tempted to believe that independents, if allied with non-establishment political parties (e.g. Emtidad, Ishraqat Kanoon or the New Generation Movement) would create a formidable force in the Council of Representatives, perhaps even an opposition government as Hadad (2021) discusses in his report. However, of these newly elected figures, who is actually a genuine force for change? To answer this question, I first turn to an analysis of the most prominent of the new political parties: Emtidad and Ishraqat Kanoon.⁹



New Political Parties

Emtidad: Bringing Tishreen to Parliament

The leader of the Emtidad Movement, Alaa Al-Rikabi, was one of the few activists to emerge from the October Protest Movement as a leader. He managed to maintain his popularity through the pandemic and through the new government formation, which resulted with his party gaining nine seats in the Council of Representatives. He was one of the few party leaders who ran himself. By contrast, the new SNTV system drove many party

⁸ Shawn Yuan, November 30, 2021, "Iraq announces final results of October parliament election," *Al-Jazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/11/30/iraq-announces-final-results-of-the-october-legislative-election>.

⁹ There is also the Tasmim Party with the Governor of Basra, Asad Al-Idani. Idani has ties to most of the Shi'a parties.

leaders to avoid running in fear of embarrassment and the inability to pinpoint a district of strength. Al-Rikabi did not face this problem.

He formed the Emtidad Movement in January 2021 and published its registration information on January 22, 2021, saying that it had collected 36 million Iraqi dinars (IQD) from member donations to finance its operation.¹⁰ Emtidad's name means "continuation" and in the description of its establishment, it is described as an extension not only of Iraq's civilizations but an extension of the October Protest Movement, with the goal of either forming the majority in government or forming an opposition in the Council of Representatives that is able to act in a monitoring capacity.

Emtidad's mission is to build a country of citizenship and institutions, and to put an end to the informal ethno-sectarian quota, *muhasasa*. Accordingly, in its opening statement, the movement describes its intentions to create constitutional change so that Iraqis can directly vote for their president and their governors.¹¹ The head of Emtidad in Karbala and a candidate in the elections, Dhia Al-Hindi, explained that this was a push for forming a semi-presidential system in Iraq, which was one of the demands of the protest movement: "We tried presidential systems in Iraq, it brought dictatorship. We tried the parliamentary system. We create a semi-presidential [system]: the president sets the government, and the parliament can punish the president."¹²

Moreover, following their win in the elections, they have publicly denied association with entrenched political parties and have been pictured meeting with the Kurdish New Generation Movement, largely considered to be a non-establishment party that was established in the previous elections by a Kurdish businessman. In fact, Alaa Al-Rikabi himself tweeted about building an understanding with independent candidates and with the Kurdish New Generation Movement.¹³

Emtidad plays the public opinion game better than most Iraqi political parties and draws much of its legitimacy from being based in the protest movement. For example, their view towards religion is aligned with that of the Iraqi public, who is increasingly disenchanted with religious leaders. In an explanatory statement, they maintain the view that the Sunni and Shia Waqfs (endowments) should be dissolved and the Ministry of Awqaf (endowments) should be renewed, in what can be interpreted as an effort to treat religion as a category and to not ascribe different powers and resources to different religious institutions.¹⁴

At the same time, they are not immune to the inevitable contradictory declarations of political life. For example, while they lay out an economic plan that moves away from a rentier state driven by the public sector, they also published statements standing with Iraqi graduates who are demanding public sector jobs.¹⁵ The movement has also been open in its criticism of the Kadhimi government, stating on May 25, 2021 that: "There is no path for the Kadhimi government except for killing the revolutionaries, because the authority and its oppressive forces do not believe in Democracy."¹⁶ It remains to be seen how they conduct themselves when it comes to having to deal with entrenched parties in order to form a government.

Emtidad ran candidates in the heartland of the protest movement, with 31 candidates running across Babil, Baghdad, Basra, Karbala, Muthanna, Najaf, Qadisiya, Thi Qar and Wasit, but they won only in Babil, Najaf, Thi Qar and Qadisiya. In some governorates – like Karbala – the margin of defeat was narrow, with a candidate losing out on the last seat of a 4-seat-district (with a 4,718 vote difference) due to the women's quota. Another close loss occurred in Qadisiya's first district in which the women's quota seat ended up going to a Sadrist candidate, Intisar Al-Ghurabi, over the Emtidad candidate Nour Nafi Dohi by a margin of a mere 124 seats. Dohi would have been the youngest parliamentarian in Iraq's history had she won. In Thi Qar's fourth district, Naysan Abd Al-Ridha – an Arabic teacher and the founder of an English-teaching organization – won without the quota, coming at 22,827. In Babil's second district, Nida Hasan Al-Kiriti, also a school teacher, won without the quota. According to IHEC regulations, the quota rule only comes into play if a female candidate is not in the top positions through her votes. In that case, the female candidate with the highest votes in the district is selected for the quota seat.

Of course, Alaa Al-Rikabi himself won a seat but perhaps more impressively, Dawood Al-Tai won 41,399 votes in Thi Qar's second district, the third highest number of votes received in Iraq overall (Al-Rikabi got 34,870 votes in Thi Qar's first district). In Qadisiya, Mohammad Al-Khuzai – a lawyer and a judge in the Qadisiya Appellate Court – also won a seat. Kathem Al-Fayadh is an engineer from Thi Qar with significant experience in local governance. He worked at the Rifai District Municipality only to become the director of the municipality and then in 2020, he became the Qaim Maqam, or the governor of the provincial district of Rifai. Falah Al-Hilali is a history teacher with a PhD in Islamic History. He won a seat in the Shatra district of Nasriya. A college professor,

¹⁰ Emtidad Movement, Twitter Post, January 2, 2021, <https://mobile.twitter.com/emtidadiraq/status/1352722462664962048/photo/1>.

¹¹ Emtidad Movement, Twitter Post, January 25, 2021, <https://mobile.twitter.com/emtidadiraq/status/1353716503892414476/photo/1>.

¹² Author interview with Dhia Al-Hindi. December 2021.

¹³ Alaa Rikaby, Twitter Post, November 29, 2021, <https://mobile.twitter.com/Alaakamilrikaby/status/1465410126051950594>.

¹⁴ Emtidad Movement, Twitter Post, February 21, 2021, <https://twitter.com/emtidadiraq/status/1363537843633725444/photo/1>.

¹⁵ Emtidad Movement, Twitter Post, April 11, 2021, <https://twitter.com/emtidadiraq/status/1381190501186076672/photo/1>.

¹⁶ Emtidad Movement, Twitter Post, May 25, 2021, <https://twitter.com/emtidadiraq/status/1397284915427819521/photo/1>.

Haidar Muhammad Habib Khamis, won in Babil's first district. Finally, in Najaf's third district, Hamid Al-Shiblawi won a seat. In a televised interview, Al-Shiblawi said he was not surprised that Emtidad received so many votes due to the "accumulated failures" of the past, "the Iraqi people have spoken and chosen nationalistic characters...despite the boycott, these are the results."¹⁷

After having won their seats in the Council of Representatives, the next steps for the newly minted parliamentarians is to resist political co-optation and to serve as a counterforce to the entrenched elite. They claim they will do so through alliances with independents and with other newer parties seeking change. As of writing this report, Emtidad has announced a parliamentary bloc with New Generation and a group of independents with a total membership of 24 parliamentarians, under the name of "For the People Alliance". As government formation unfolds, they have been adamant about not taking part in forming the largest bloc in parliament.

Ishraqat Kanoon: Islamism re-imagined

One of the many surprises of the 2021 elections was the ascendancy of a previously unknown political party, Ishraqat Kanoon, who ran in Baghdad, Babil, Karbala, Najaf, Muthanna and Wasit, and won six seats in Babil (2), Karbala (2), Baghdad (1) and Qadisiya (1). There is very little known about Ishraqat Kanoon and their parliamentarians are hesitant to participate in interviews. They are not based in the protest movement, but they claim to share many of the values of citizenry and reform that parties like Emtidad call for. They are unique in that they combine civic values with attributes of Islamism. Their motto is "active participation and good governance". Their name is said to have been derived from the date of their establishment as "Kanoon" refers to either December "Kanoon Al-Awal" (Kanoon the first) or January "Kanoon Al-Thani (Kanoon the second), in other words "The brightness of Kanoon".

According to some of the official statements they have issued, their secretary general is Saad Jafar Aziz Al-Asadi, an engineer from Baghdad who works currently in the private sector. According to the official biography published by Ishraqat Kanoon, he is involved in a number of charitable civil society organizations and was part of various teams encouraging turnout or observing the elections from 2004 to 2010. In 2014, he provided logistical support to the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). On February 17, 2021, he was elected as the secretary general of Ishraqat Kanoon. Interestingly, he did not run in the elections.

Their Islamist attributes have to do with the fact that they received support from the religious establishment, specifically from the Abbas Shrine in Karbala.¹⁸ Moreover, residents of Karbala report that the advertisement campaign for Ishraqat Kanoon relied a lot on religious circles, including Quran circles, in the holy shrines as well as on social media campaigns. They are reported to receive implicit support from clerical figures in Najaf as well, though this information has not been confirmed by the clergy. It is important to note that they issued a statement ahead of the elections denying any ties to existing political parties and calling out the rumors circulating about them.¹⁹ In a video statement, one of their parliamentarians from Babil – Mohamad Al-Khafaji – denied the presence of any entity that controlled the party, emphasizing their independence.²⁰ Regardless, their messaging and their values are complementary to a segment of the Iraqi population that seeks change but that is unwilling to abandon their conservative or religious values.

Unlike the Emtidad candidates, none of the winners from Ishraqat Kanoon have a past in the protest movement or have an academic background in policy, politics, law or economics. In fact, most of the candidates from Ishraqat Kanoon are engineers as are all their elected delegates. Most of them, however, have worked in municipalities or ministries and some have expressed, through social media, their support for the PMF.

For example, in Baghdad's district 11, Taqi Nasir Al-Waili won while running with Ishraqat Kanoon. His political past consisted of working in the High Coordinating Commission for Governorate Affairs, which falls under the Council of Ministers' General Secretariat. Basim Al-Ghurabi worked in the electricity directorate in Qadisiya since 2004, and in his social media presence is known to support the 2014 fatwa against ISIS. Haider Al-Mutairi who won in Babil is a PMF supporter and had been a protestor against occupation as far back as 2003. Mustafa Karaoui, also from Babil is another PMF supporter, who worked in the office of the Inspector General of the Ministry of Construction, Housing, Municipalities and Public Works. Nufuth Hussein Al-Musawi, from Karbala, is the only woman who won from Ishraqat Kanoon and she previously worked at the Karbala municipality. Other than a video with her biography and credentials, there is very little information publicly available about her. She won in Karbala district 1 which is a peripheral district (not the center of the governorate) without the quota.

¹⁷ Hamid Al-Shiblawi, Facebook post, 28 October, 2021, <https://en-gb.facebook.com/H.Alsheblawi/videos/308131460795037/>.

¹⁸ This is according to interviews with residents of Karbala, Najaf and Qadisiya. It was validated by a candidate from Ishraqat Kanoon who had lost in the elections and will remain anonymous.

¹⁹ Ishraqat Kanoon Media Office: <https://www.kitabat.info/subject.php?id=160726>.

²⁰ Ishraqat Kanoon, September 30, 2021, "Talking about Eshraqat", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WagRUROjs-k&feature=youtu.be>.

Karbala's central district, district 3, saw Mohammad Jasim Al-Khafaji as the top winner. An engineering professor at the University of Karbala, he also had a past working in the Ministry of Defense in 2009 and in the Asiacell telecommunications company.

As the process of government formation unfolds, more information about the inclination of the movement will be revealed. From what we know so far, there is evidence to suggest that their reformist agenda would make them an ideal ally for Emtidad, but, conversely, their rootedness in the southern governorates and the professed support of their members to the PMF may make them amenable to join forces with more established parties. Their involvement in government formation, much like their participation in the electoral race, remains shrouded in secrecy. Only two days before the first parliamentary session on January 9, 2022, Ishraqat Kanoon announced an official alliance with the Voice of the Independents Alliance, claiming their intention to be distant from the formation of the largest bloc in parliament.

The Independents: Old parties, new packaging?

One of the most politically inspiring stories from this election was the win of Mohammad Annouz, an independent candidate, in Najaf. Annouz became famous on social media for running his campaign himself. Photos of him dressed simply while hanging election posters spread throughout social media, garnering public support. However, Annouz' simplicity belies an impressive academic background, with expertise in international law. His win with the highest number of seats in Najaf raised hopes about the role of independent candidates. Unfortunately, the analysis in this report reveals that Annouz is the exception, and not the rule.

However, before delving into the positionalities of the independents, it is worth considering what being a political independent refers to. Of course, the most basic definition is that of an individual who runs as an independent, regardless of their intentional or informal political views or affiliations. By that measure, there are 43 independents who have won seats in the Iraqi Council of Representatives.

According to political science research, there are three different types of independents in democracies: first, partisan independents; second, activist independents; and third, local leaders or entrepreneur independents.²¹ The first category run as independents despite a partisan affiliation for political expediency and for circumventing party dynamics, while maintaining the benefits of name recognition and incumbent advantage.²²

By a more complex definition of independence that is equated to political nonpartisanship, there are fewer than the official 43 candidates who are nonpartisan independents. Among those, there are some who are from activist backgrounds and others who are from business backgrounds or who are community leaders. The way the word is used in the current political discourse in Iraq goes beyond political independence to suggest an affinity with the protest movement, which is something a lot of candidates lack.

The usage of the word also carries with it the weight of having particular political views and of being anti-establishment. Annouz represents an extreme type of independent candidate – one who is not only free of relations to entrenched political parties, but also one with political expertise and who enjoys the support of the protest movement. He fits not only the traditional definition of independence, but he also fits the description that observers have ascribed to independents, along with the positive connotations of the term.

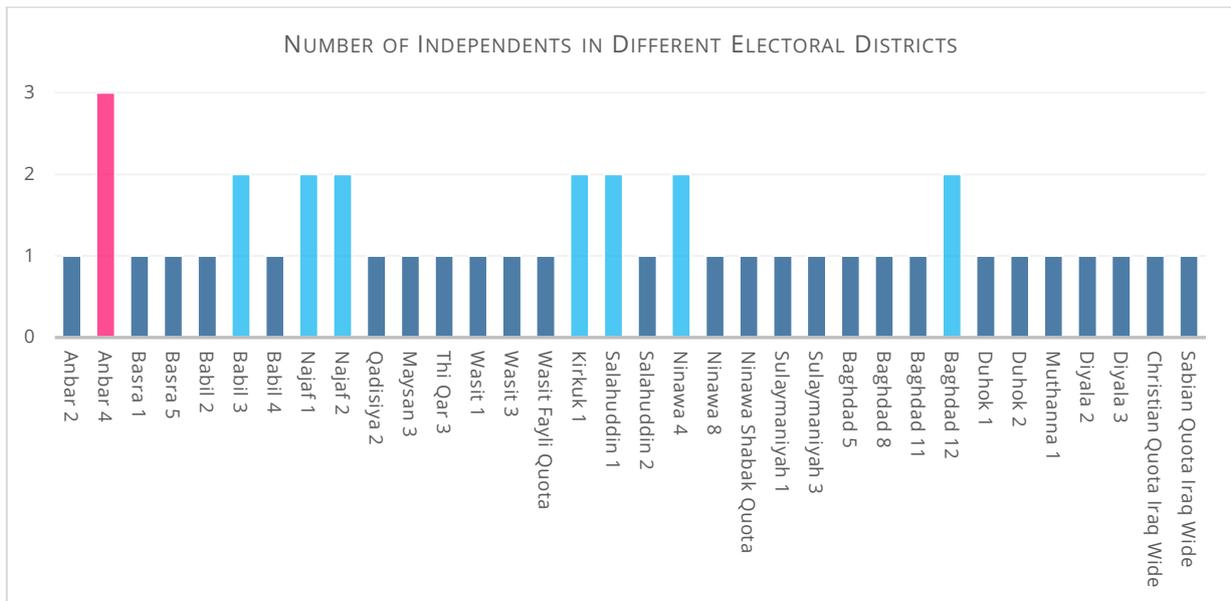
The positive connotation is understandable given that research in different democratic contexts, like India, has shown that independents have a positive impact on voter turnout. Moreover, they increase their vote share through incentivizing other people to change who they vote for.²³ The assumption here is, of course, that independents are not only independent of the entrenched political parties, but that they are perceived as such by the public. In the best of outcomes, their participation in politics provides a much-needed refreshment to the rancid status quo politics. In the worst outcome, they abuse public hope in independents and weaken faith in democratic suitability and performance. For this reason, the performance of Iraq's independents – as well as the new political parties – in the next four years will either help pivot democratization back on track in Iraq or it will help steer it off-track entirely.

In order to analyze the "independence" of the independents, this report collected biographical data on the 43 candidates, which come from the following districts:

²¹ Dedi Dinaro and Jefferson Ng, "Characterising Independent Candidates in Indonesian Local Politics." *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 40, no. 2 (August 2021): 266–92, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1868103420972412>.

²² Ibid.

²³ S. Kapoor & A. Magesan, (2018), "Independent Candidates and Political Representation in India," *American Political Science Review*, 112(3), 678-697. doi:10.1017/S0003055418000199.



Despite there being 43 candidates, there was only biographical information available about 28 of them, and most of that information was limited. Nevertheless, even with this limited data, some useful information emerges about them.

For example, five of the candidates were former parliamentarians and one was even a former minister. Moreover, at least 11 of the independent candidates have some present or prior affiliation with entrenched political parties. This includes being former candidates from groups like Hikma (Ammar Al-Hakim's party) or with Sairoon (Muqtada Al-Sadr's bloc in 2018) as well as a handful of individuals who are presently affiliated with the PMF or Fateh or with Halbousi's Taqadum Coalition.

Take, as an example, one of the independent candidates from Kirkuk district 1, Muhaymin Al-Hamadani. The most recent post on his Facebook page is a celebration of the meeting held between Taqadum and Azm, the two main Sunni parties, with the caption "our Taqadum and our Azm."²⁴ Scrolling a bit further down, there is a photo of him with Halbousi.²⁵ Hamadani is also of a clear tribal leaning, describing himself as, "the representative of the Arab tribe", which is interesting in a governorate as diverse and politically divisive as Kirkuk. Therefore, it came as no surprise when Hamadani officially joined Azm in mid-December, along with five other independents (Khalid Al-Daraji, Hind Al-Abasi, Nasik Mahdi from Salahaldin, Naif Al-Shamary from Ninawa and Mouhammad Farman from Anbar).²⁶ Halbousi's Taqadum Coalition also gained five independents: Azhar Hamid, Ahmed Rasheed, Mohammad Al-Mohamadi and Asma Al-Ani from Anbar as well as Adnan Al-Jahashi from Wasit.²⁷ A perusal of the social media presence of these candidates suggests that the change in affiliation is not surprising. Some, like Asma Al-Ani who was in the Anbar Provincial Council, have relationships and allegiances predating this electoral cycle.

Similarly, there is Wa'ad Qado who won the Shabak quota seat in Ninawa as an independent. Qado has a history of clear political partisanship. He was involved in the PMF's 30th brigade and, according to interviews with residents of Bashiqa and Bartella²⁸, his win raises concerns about increasing demographic change in the Ninawa Plains. Qado and his brother had close ties to Fateh, but when Fateh preferred to run a different candidate for the quota seat, Qado abandoned them and sought out Maliki's support. Maliki supported his run for the quota seat. On the surface, many might assume, given Qado's past, that he is a Fateh-aligned independent. In fact, Fateh lost Qado to Maliki. What Qado is not, however, is a nonpartisan independent.

There are numerous other examples of partisan independents with political pasts or with clear affiliations to entrenched parties. At the same time, there are several independents who present business interests as well. In Baghdad, for example, four of the five independents are all businessmen with no political affiliations (at most, they have experience working as public servants in the Iraqi bureaucracy). There are independent businessmen in Babil and Najaf, as well, and even Wa'ad Qado considers himself a businessman in some capacity. Business interests will always be represented in politics, as can be evidenced by the rise of

²⁴ Muhaymin Al-Hamadani, December 14, 2021, Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/pg/429482830846458-المداني-بمهيمن-الحماداني/posts/>.

²⁵ Muhaymin Al-Hamadani, October 28, 2021. Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/429482830846458/photos/a.429484440846297/1309554256172640/?type=3&theater>.

²⁶ Almada Paper, "11 Independent Winners Join Azm and Taqadum and an Independent Party Goes to Al-Sadr" December 13, 2021, <https://almadapaper.net/view.php?cat=253873>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Author phone interview and conversations with activists in Bartella and Bashiqa. November 2021.

oligarchs like Shaswar Abdulwahid founder of the New Generation Movement or Khamis Al-Khanjjar of the Azm Coalition.

In addition to businessmen, there are also five academics that could be identified, mostly in Najaf. Academics represent a category closer to what the publicly envisioned ideal for an independent is, even without political activism. When it comes to activists, there are four that are identified through this analysis. Activism is not restricted to participation in the protest movement but speaks more broadly to advocacy and civil society activity. Of these four activist candidates, one is the aforementioned Mohammad Annouz and the other is Basim Khashan from Muthanna. Khashan emerges as an interesting figure due to his past activism in uncovering corruption cases and in the threat his tribe issued to Muqtada Al-Sadr.²⁹ Khashan represents a type of independent who has tribal backing to protect him.

This is by no means an exhaustive overview of the independents, but rather one that is based on limited data and that only strives to illustrate that political independents come in many forms. There is an implicit equation of independence with nonpartisanship, anti-establishment, and even pro-protest. Independents can be partisans, they can be activists, and they can be community leaders, from academics to businesspeople. Moreover, even partisanship exists on a spectrum.

In the upcoming weeks and months, more information will be made available about the 43 independents who are joining the Council of Representatives. Until then, we know that some of the independents have officially aligned themselves with two of the entrenched parties – Taqadum and Azm. We also know – with certainty – that other independents have close relationships with the Sadrists, Fateh, and State of Law, though they may not have made an official announcement yet. In addition, three groups of independents have emerged during government negotiations: the Independent Iraq Alliance (with 12 members), the Independent People’s Bloc (with four members) and the Voice of the Independents (with 4 members)³⁰. The former began with 15 members but suffered internal divisions, with rumors circulating that the defectors joined the Coordination Framework (an alliance of the major Shia parties excluding Sadr).³¹ The Independent People’s Bloc was also established early and is headed by Mohammad Annouz. Finally, the Voice of the Independents was a more recent development.

The Price and Possibility of Change

With every election cycle in Iraq, there has been a massive turnover in the Council of Representatives. However, it has not been accompanied by political change or by the demise of entrenched political elite. This election has also brought new faces to the Council of Representatives in the form of new parties as well as independent candidates. This report has described who these candidates are and how they came to be. It has also examined what their potential for enacting change is – whether that change comes in the form of a true opposition in the Council of Representatives, or to push much-needed legislative change, or most importantly, to reignite Iraqis’ faith in democracy.

In many ways, this election is a critical juncture in Iraq’s torturous path towards democracy. For one, this election has come early as a result of nationwide protests which brought down an entire cabinet. The change in the electoral law, from 18 to 83 districts and from an open list proportional representation system to a SNTV system is also a demand of the October Protest Movement. The satisfaction of these demands has done nothing to assuage public disillusionment, as evidenced by the boycott movement and the low voter turnout. However, what the surprising performance of Emtidad and some of the independents, like Annouz and Khashan, has shown is that there is a critical mass of activists who have decided to attempt reform from within.

The responsibility of restoring public faith in elections rests, albeit unfairly, on their shoulders. As one of the Emtidad candidates from Karbala said, “we must infiltrate the political system and work on change from within – we have now convinced people of this change, maybe these nine seats become 90 in the future.”³² His colleague in Qadisiya shared the same perspective and goal: “I went out in 2019 and in Tishreen [protests] and participated...when you go out and protest and people get killed, what is next? You have to be organized; you have to have a party that accomplishes the process of Tishreen.”³³ Emtidad’s candidates had higher aspirations for their seat gain, but the boycott movement hindered their cause. One of their implicit goals is to break the barrier of participation and to give voters and first-time candidates faith in the utility of voting.

²⁹ “The sheikh and dignitaries of the Khashan clan hold Muqtada al-Sadr personally responsible for the life and safety of the representative,” September 14, 2021, YouTube Video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gdExw4c3qdY>.

³⁰ The Voice of the Independents have formed an alliance with Ishraqat Kanoon, bringing their membership up to ten.

³¹ Rudaw, “Member of Al-Fatah to Rudaw: More than 10 independent deputies joined the coordination framework,” December 9, 2021, <https://www.rudaw.net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/091220212>.

³² Author interview with Dhia Al-Hindi. December 2021.

³³ Author interview with Nour Nafe. December 2021.

To achieve that, they will need allies both within and outside of the political system. As government negotiations are ongoing, their ability to maintain their anti-establishment position will be integral to maintaining their public image. This goes for the independents, who in fact, face a double challenge because they will always face accusations of being partisans. In the analysis of independents in this report, many of them had bureaucratic governmental experience – rather than political experience – which, with the ease of fake news, can be utilized by their opponents to weaken them. To combat this, the efforts of local civil society organizations and international organizations (in supportive roles) can counter false narratives and can launch public image campaigns that reflect reality.

Candidates need to market themselves better as well. One of the inadvertent findings of this report is that some independents and members of Ishraqat Kanoon (most notably) have been unwilling to engage with not only the media, but with researchers as well. This would be forgiven had their political programs and biographies been made readily available online. Voters can hardly be blamed for their skepticism about candidates when information is limited to posters and to sparse social media presences. As parliamentarians, these new candidates need to be smarter about their public image.

Convincing the Iraqi public to vote and activists to run for office in 2025 is a herculean task, but it is not the only one. The newly elected parliamentarians can raise the standards of representation and accountability with the new electoral districts and can increase local-level, rather than national-level pressure, on the status quo politicians.

In the meantime, civil society can continue to train the next set of candidates. Another inadvertent finding of this research and prior research on the protest movement has shown that although activists expressed an interest in political knowledge and a keen desire to engage in discourse, they lacked crucial tools of political and economic education that can make them competitive with and a challenge to the entrenched elite. Investing in the education of these individuals – the ones who already expressed the desire and daring to run for office – can have positive implications for democratization going forward.

There is potential in Iraq to salvage what is left of democracy and to reinvigorate the political process. This task will mainly fall to a small group of new parliamentarians who are besieged by challenges from every corner. For Emtidad, it will be the heavy responsibility of carrying the name of Tishreen. For some of the independents, it will be to maintain non-partisanship and to serve as a source of hope and empowerment for other Iraqis.

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