

September 2021

Kirkuk in Iraq's Upcoming Elections

Electoral Segregation and Intra-Ethnic Fragmentation

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With the approach of the upcoming early federal elections, slated to take place on October 10th, the conflict-torn city of Kirkuk is preparing to take part in the race. Kirkuk, a disputed oil-rich city, remains pivotal in the power struggle among the various Iraqi ethnic groups, especially its major components, Kurds, Sunni Arabs, and Turkmen. Since the fall of the former Baath regime and the successive federal elections, the city has always experienced heated election campaigns, as each ethnic group aims to protect and expand its constituency through elections: a democratic means from which they do not only attain their political representation but also reaffirm their presence as integral parts of the contested city.

Kirkuk, like the other provinces, experiences an unprecedented type of federal election as a result of the new electoral system, i.e. Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) and the division of the provinces into multiple electoral districts. The law has differently affected the ethnic groups, and the division of the province into multiple electoral constituencies has sharply contributed to further ethnic segregation of the city. Thus, it is not helping to find a way out of Kirkuk's disputes, but rather it seems to be already serving its complexities.

To showcase the consequential implications of the new electoral law on Kirkuk's political order, this paper firstly aims to explain how the boundaries of the electoral districts in the city emboldens ethno-sectarian division and changes the nature of electoral competitions, and, secondly, separately explores how the Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmen are fragmentedly entering the elections through political parties, electoral coalitions and independent candidates to secure their share of the city's seats in the Council of Representatives (CoR).

District boundaries: Emboldening ethno-sectarian division

As a result of the new electoral law, Kirkuk province is now divided into three electoral districts with 12 seats¹, coming after the division of Iraq into 83 electoral districts from 18 districts, which previously corresponded to the number of Iraq's provinces. Drawing the boundaries of the electoral districts in Kirkuk posed a unique challenge due to its ethnic diversity. The political elite of the ethnic groups strove to guarantee their share of the city's seats in the CoR, demonstrating zero compromises. As a result of heated negotiations, the city's three electoral districts were divided along ethno-sectarian lines, or *mohasassa ta'ifa*, where each of the three electoral districts is a stronghold of the city's ethnic components. This, in turn, means that each of the three major ethnic groups of the city, Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmen, is dominant in a specific district, which forces them to substantially concentrate on a specific district to win seats. The Kurds are concentrated in the first district, the Turkmen in the second, and the Arabs in the third.

While drawing boundaries on ethno-sectarian lines appeared as an acceptable solution for the various ethnic groups in the city, disagreements over the inclusion of certain ethnically-mixed areas in the electoral districts remained unsolvable until further electoral division within certain areas was agreed upon. Hence, the agreement engineers the segregation of the ethnic groups in the ethnically mixed areas. For instance, even though Kirkuk's southern

¹ The following link shows the new electoral law and the three electoral districts of Kirkuk (see page 20): <https://moj.gov.iq/upload/pdf/4603.pdf>.

district of Daquq was included in the second district, its polling stations at which Kurds and Arabs constituents vote are added to the first and third districts respectively. This helped both Kurds and Arabs to add the votes of their corresponding ethnicity in Daquq to the districts in which they are predominant. Simultaneously, it also means that only the Turkmen voters of Daquq remain in the second district, which increases the votes of the Turkmen respectively to the votes of the Kurds and Arabs. The same mechanism was pursued in the northern district of Altun Kupri, whose inhabitants are predominantly Turkmen and Kurds. While Altun Kupri is attached to the Kurdish dominant first district, its polling stations at which the Turkmen vote are excluded and added to the second district, assisting Turkmen to increase their electoral dominance in the second district against the Kurds and Arab constituents.²

Moreover, drawing the boundaries of the electoral districts in accordance with ethno-sectarian lines³ has changed the nature of electoral contest in the city. The electoral districts have created a situation in which the ethnic components are fundamentally competing among each other, rather than against candidates of another sect, which had mostly been the case in the past elections. This is primarily correct for the first and third district, where Kurds and Arabs are predominant. For instance, in the first district areas, Kurdish parties won approximately 83% of votes in the last election.⁴ As a result, candidates of Turkmen and Arab parties, and independent candidates, will not significantly attempt to galvanize voters in this district to win seats, knowing they together won 17% of votes.⁵ Arabs in the third district comprise almost 100% of voters. Thus, it is impossible for a Kurdish or Turkmen candidate to win a seat there. As a result, in the first and third districts, the major struggle to secure seats is not taking place between the different ethnic components, but rather within the Kurds themselves in the first district, and within Arabs in the third district.

Unlike the first and third districts, the second district, with four seats, has become the electoral battleground between and within the different ethnic components. Even though Turkmen won 40% of votes in the last election in the areas that the second district includes, they are not as predominant in this constituency as the Kurds and Arabs in the first and third districts. For instance, Kurds and Arabs won the remaining 60% (Kurds 35% and Arabs 25%) of the areas comprised by the second district. It appears that the new electoral law has put the Turkmen into a difficult situation as the Kurds and Arabs enjoy a relatively strong presence in the district, too. Thus, the two compete with each other in the second district to add another seat to the seats that they are already guaranteed in the first and third district.⁶ As this constituency has become the center of electoral wrestling between the main ethnic groups of the city, it ranks top with regard to the number of candidates: A total of 56 applicants compete for the four parliamentary seats in the district.⁷

Fragmented Ethnic Groups in Electoral Competitions

The ethnic groups of the city are fragmented on various levels. They simultaneously compete within their respective group as well as against one another, running as single political parties and individual candidates and, in particular, as electoral coalitions to maximize their chances of political victory. This section aims to explore how each ethnic

² The following link shows the different electoral districts and the names of the polling stations in Daquq and Altun Kupri that are excluded from their original district and added to the other districts: <https://www.nasnews.com/view.php?cat=64693>.

³ The reason that the various parties in the city wanted to divide the districts along ethno-sectarian lines is because people still vote for candidates corresponding to their ethnicity, with the Kurds voting for Kurdish candidates, Arabs for Arab candidates, and Turkmen for Turkmen candidates.

⁴ The author has obtained the data on the percentage of each ethnic groups in the three electoral districts from the head of the election office of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in Kirkuk.

⁵ The likelihood of winning a seat by the Turkmen or Arabs still remains in a situation where they mobilize their voters effectively and, simultaneously, if the Kurds fail to convince their voters to go to the polls on the election day.

⁶ The reason that Kurds and Arabs, on ethnic levels, have already secured their seats is because that the first and third districts are predominantly Kurdish and Arab, respectively, meaning that the previous will win the majority of the seats in the first district – if not all – whereas the latter will win all the seats in the third district, regardless of which party the candidates might belong to.

⁷ See the number and names of candidates of Kirkuk on the official website of the Iraqi High Electoral Commission: <https://ihec.iq/kirkuk-constituencies/>.

group has capitalized on a district, what the electoral race looks like, and who are the parties and/or the candidates that are likely to win the seats in the province, considering their popularity and the size of their constituents according to past federal elections.

The Kurds

The Kurds, which had ruled the city from the fall of the former Baathist regime in 2003 to October 2017, have always secured the majority of Kirkuk's CoR seats. Even though all of the Kurdish parties have run in the federal elections since 2005, only the two ruling Kurdish parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), have been able to collect enough votes to secure seats. The PUK won six of the city's 12 seats in the last two federal elections and the KDP two seats in the 2014 federal elections, but boycotted the 2018 election in Kirkuk on the pretext of "military occupation"⁸ of the city. It is noteworthy to mention that the KDP has ended its boycott and is participating in the upcoming race. Despite long negotiations, the Kurds have failed to form a Kurdish front for the upcoming elections in Kirkuk, primarily due to disagreement over the number of candidates from each party.⁹ As a result, each party is participating independently, except for the PUK and Gorran movement, which have formed the Kurdistan Coalition (KC), not only in Kirkuk but also in the other disputed areas and the Kurdistan Region.

The Kurdish parties in Kirkuk have strategically adapted to the new electoral law, SNTV. The different and major parties have nominated a limited number of candidates to prevent the spread of their votes over too many candidates, which would drastically reduce the chances of winning seats under the SNTV.¹⁰ For instance, the KC, which claims it will win the majority of Kurdish votes in the city,¹¹ has nominated five candidates – four from the PUK and one from Gorran – for the five seats in the Kurdish dominant first district, helping the coalition to prevent the dilution of their votes. The Gorran movement has nominated only a single candidate in the first district, who is the secretary of the movement's headquarters in Kirkuk. The movement has always had an extremely slim electoral base in the city,¹² which makes it highly unlikely for its candidate to win a seat. Moreover, unlike former elections, the PUK, within the KC coalition, has strategically nominated candidates with relatively equal and low popularity.¹³ This is another precautionary step taken by the PUK not to have a popular candidate among its candidates, which could potentially receive a majority of the party's votes, jeopardizing the chances of the other candidates to win seats. Simultaneously, the PUK, within the KC, has nominated a male and female candidate in the second district. The party aims to win at least one of the four seats in the second district.

However, the success of these strategic steps is significantly threatened by the intra-PUK upheaval, with one of the party's co-leaders, Lahur Sheikh Jangi, having recently been ousted from the party.¹⁴ Lahur, one of the PUK's most popular leaders, could mobilize thousands of voters not only in Kirkuk¹⁵ but also in the Kurdistan Region, which was the reason for his

⁸ See, "KDP Will Boycott Iraq Elections in Kirkuk, Disputed Areas," *Rudaw*, January 15, 2018, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/150120184>.

⁹ See, "The Electoral District Makes It Difficult to Form Coalitions," *KirkukNow*, February 22, 2021, <https://kirkuknow.com/ku/news/64947>.

¹⁰ See the law in detail in, "Will Iraq Hold Early Elections? Reform at the Ballot Box," of the Institute of Regional and International Studies: <https://auis.edu.krd/iris/events/will-iraq-hold-early-elections-reform-ballot-box>.

¹¹ Dilshad Anwar, "Mohammed Othman: KDP Might Win a Seat, otherwise the Entire Seats [of the Kurds] Will be Won by the PUK", *Voice of America*, May 11, 2021, https://www.dengiamerika.com/a/5886312.html?fbclid=IwAR1ZvdGsZ_rcMt5YquUrb35nWhSEjxkj5A8Qzk5gnL9xjip9HdzDWyyENY4.

¹² For instance, the Gorran Movement, Kurdistan Justice Group, and President Salih's former party, Coalition for Democracy and Justice formed an electoral alliance, named Nishtiman alliance, in Kirkuk and collectively won only 13,109 votes in the city. See the results of the 2018 elections in Kirkuk: <https://www.facebook.com/diplomatic2017/posts/382281082271009/>.

¹³ The six candidates that the PUK has nominated are not popular figures, especially in comparison to the key candidates of the Arabs and Turkmen. Five of them have not been involved much in the political scene yet, unlike the candidates that the party nominated in the last elections. The last candidate is a woman PUK member of the CoR, who aims to win the quota seat through her already established electoral base.

¹⁴ See, Surkew Mohammed, "Week of Political Turmoil, Power Play Rocks Sulaymaniyah: What Happened within the PUK?" *Peregraf*, July 20, 2021, <https://peregraf.com/en/investigation/3366/Week-of-political-turmoil-power-play-rocks-Sulaymaniyah-what-happened-within-the-PUK>.

¹⁵ Another issue that the PUK faces in Kirkuk's first district is the presence of two female PUK candidates. Ala Talabani, a popular PUK figure with strong ties to Lahur Talabani, was the PUK's official female candidate in the first district.

election as the head of the KC. Since his removal, Lahur has stopped his support for the KC, which, combined with the ongoing power struggle within the PUK, may result in severe consequences for the KC campaign in Kirkuk. If the internal struggle remains unresolved, unexpected and disappointing election results may await the PUK in the city.

In addition, this upcoming election will be fundamental for the KDP to return to Kirkuk following its almost four-year absence after the withdrawal of the Kurdish forces on October 16 2017, soon after the Kurdish independence referendum. Knowing its limited electoral base in Kirkuk, the KDP has nominated two candidates in the city, a male in the first district, and a female candidate from the Kaka'i minority¹⁶ in the second district. The party has mostly eyed winning a seat in the first district, for which it has nominated a former well-known member of the CoR, Shaxawan Mohammed. The nomination of a single candidate would leave the party's followers with no choice but to vote for him, allowing Mohammed to collect all KDP votes, which also provides the party with the best possible chance to win a seat. Furthermore, the reason that KC has a candidate from Gorran with an extremely vulnerable constituent renders it more likely for the KDP to win a seat. Moreover, the KDP's nomination of a Kaka'i woman in the second district is firstly to secure the votes of the Kaka'i minority residing in Daquq, and secondly to secure the quota of women representatives.¹⁷ However, the KDP's chances to win a seat in the highly contested second district are quite slim, while its candidate in the first district has a better chance of winning a seat.¹⁸

Among the other Kurdish parties running in Kirkuk, the New Generation (NG) has the highest chance of winning a seat. Even though the movement has symbolic candidates in the three electoral districts, the electoral base of the party is limited, and only has the potential of galvanizing voters in the first district. To maximize its ability to mobilize voters, NG has nominated a well-known journalist from the city, Omed Mohammed, who is the Baghdad correspondent of the popular NG-controlled Nalia Radio and TV (NRT).

The return of the KDP to Kirkuk with a strong candidate in the first district, NG's nomination of a well-known journalist, and most importantly, the intra-PUK power struggle pose serious challenges to the PUK to secure the four seats it desires. Consequently, the other Kurdish parties are vigorously competing to seize the opportunity and secure their share of seats in the first district. The intense competition leaves the parties with great uncertainty over the outcome of the election.

The Arabs

The Sunni Arabs of Kirkuk have led the local government since the retreat of Kurdish forces in October 2017, with Rakan Sa'ed, known as Rakan al-Jabouri, becoming the acting governor

However, due to her relationship with Lahur Sheikh Jangi, Talabani has been ousted from the KC by the party and instead, the PUK has started supporting Dilan Ghafur, who is currently a PUK CoR member, but had decided to run as an independent candidate as her party earlier officially nominated Talabani, not her.

¹⁶ The Kaka'i minority is scattered over several Iraqi provinces such as Diyala, Erbil, Sulaimaniyah, and Kirkuk. According to The Minority Rights Group, there are around 110,000 to 200,000 Kaka'i members in Iraq. In Kirkuk, they predominantly reside in the southern district of Daquq, which electorally is attached to the second electoral district. To learn more about the group, read their profile on *The Minority Rights* website:

<https://minorityrights.org/minorities/kakai/>; or Saad Salloum, "Who Are Iraq's Kakai?" *Al-Monitor*, February 10, 2016 <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2016/02/iraq-kakai-religious-minority-kurdistan-quota.html>.

¹⁷ One seat from each of the 83 electoral districts throughout Iraq is allocated to women, which collectively comprises 25% of the 329 seats of the CoR, as the Iraq Constitution (Art 49:4) requires women representation to be no less than one-quarter of the members of the CoR. As a result, in Kirkuk, at least, three women will be elected from the three electoral districts. Additionally, if a female candidate secures enough votes to win a seat, then the quota system will not be implemented.

¹⁸ Mohammed Othman, head of the PUK headquarters in Kirkuk, also claims that the KDP has a chance of winning a seat, adding that the electoral base of the other Kurdish parties might not reach the threshold of the number of votes needed to win a seat, which he claims is around 60,000 to 70,000 votes. What might support Othman's claim is the results of the successive elections in the province, in particular in 2018. For instance, the Nishtiman alliance – composed of three Kurdish parties – Kurdistan Justice Group, Gorran Movement, and Iraqi President's old party Coalition for Justice and Democracy – and New Generation collectively got 23,918 votes in the 2018 federal elections, while the head of the PUK list alone secured 63,721 votes. See, Dilshad Anwar, "Mohammed Othman: KDP Might Win a Seat, otherwise the Entire Seats Will be Won by the PUK", *Voice of America*, May 11, 2021, https://www.dengiamerika.com/a/5886312.html?fbclid=IwAR1ZvdGsZ_rcMt5YquUrb35nWhSEjxkj5A8Qzk5gnL9xjip9HdzDWyyENY4. See the results of the 2018 elections in Kirkuk here: <https://www.facebook.com/diplomatic2017/posts/382281082271009/>.

of the city. The group is significantly fractured and has experienced serious internal competition, particularly on a tribal level.¹⁹ Governor Jabouri has been accused of corruption and large-scale nepotism by the other major Arab tribe, al-Ubaid. Tensions between the two prominent Sunni tribes reached a crescendo when, in a written statement, the al-Ubaid tribe called on Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi to sack Jabouri when he took office in May 2020.²⁰

The fragmentation of Sunni Arabs remains robust and pervasive ahead of the elections. In the 2018 federal vote, the group was more cohesive and gathered influential figures under the Arab Alliance in Kirkuk (AAK), which won three seats.²¹ For the upcoming elections, the group is participating in numerous different electoral lists and fields dozens of independent candidates. Collectively, over 70 Arab candidates in the three electoral districts are competing for votes, which will spread Arab votes significantly, diminishing the chances of success in the first and second districts. The inter-Arab electoral competition takes place on three levels: firstly, the division over broader Sunni coalitions; secondly, tribal affiliation, and thirdly, on an individual level. On a larger Sunni coalition level, they have aligned with the Taqadum and Azm coalitions led by the competing Sunni leaders, CoR speaker, Mohammed Halbusi and Khamis al-Khanjar, respectively. This has also fragmented the AAK; Mohammed al-Tamimi, as the most influential leader of the alliance, has left the coalition and now leads Taqadum. On a tribal level, tough competition remains between the al-Jabour and al-Ubaid tribes, both of which reside in the district. On an individual level, there is strong competition between influential Arab leaders, who are running in the elections.

In the third district, 39 candidates are competing over three seats, as independent, party, and coalition candidates. Turning the Arab dominant areas – Hawija and Riyaz – into a three-seat electoral district removed the need for the group to participate in the elections as part of an alliance, as it did in the 2018 elections. On the contrary, it presented an opportunity to the influential figures of the group to seize and raise the leading leaders of the Sunni Arabs of the city. As a result, key powerful Arab leaders, such as Governor Jabouri, from the AAK,²² Mohammed al-Tamimi, and Wasfi Asi al-Ubaidi from the United Arab Front (UAF), vigorously bidding to win two of the three seats, with the third reserved for a woman as per the quota system.²³ Their popularity and influence among the Sunni Arab community provides them with a significant chance of winning the elections and pushes out other competitors.

Over the course of his governorship, Jabouri has established a strong patronage network, favoring people in his circle and from his tribe as well as initiating several projects in his town, Hawija, to win people's loyalty. His electoral base in Hawija, which has the largest number of voters in the third district, is expected to bring him thousands of votes.²⁴ At the same time, Tamimi, who is currently a member of the CoR, is a well-known and powerful Sunni Arab figure in Kirkuk, with a well-established network in the federal government, serving as Minister of Education from 2010 to 2014 during Nouri al-Maliki's second term in office. Tamimi now heads Taqadum and has been well known for securing a significant number of public jobs for Arabs in the city through his CoR membership and network in Baghdad, as well as for his vigorous nationalistic rhetoric, in particular toward the Kurds of

¹⁹ See, "Tough Competition between Al Jabouri and Al Ubaid Tribes for Power in Kirkuk", *KirkukNow*, January 14, 2020, <https://kirkuknow.com/en/transition/17>.

²⁰ See, "United Arab Front Requests Iraqi Prime Minister to Dismiss Kirkuk Governor", *KirkukNow*, May 31, 2020, <https://kirkuknow.com/en/news/62366>.

²¹ See the results of the 2018 election in Kirkuk: <https://www.facebook.com/diplomatic2017/posts/382281082271009/>.

²² It is said that Rakan al-Jabouri has sided with the Khamis Khanjar's Azm Coalition and leads the coalition in Kirkuk. However, he has run under the banner of the Arab Coalition in Kirkuk.

²³ Mohammed al-Tamimi, Rakan al-Jabouri, and Khalid Mafraji were three Arab winners in the last federal elections. Mafraji is also a candidate under the Arab Coalition in Kirkuk but is running in the contested second district.

²⁴ In the third district, Rakan al-Jabouri and his brother, Sahmi al-Jabouri, are the only two candidates of the Arab Coalition in Kirkuk. It appears that Rakan al-Jabouri has purposefully nominated his brother, aiming to win the seat himself and, later, send his brother, Sahmi, to the CoR. This is doable under article 46 of the new electoral law as it reads that, "An elected candidate should take the constitutional oath within a month after the first session. Otherwise, he will be replaced with the unelected candidate with the most votes of the same list within the same district." In this case, it will be his brother because he is the only other candidate of the AAK in the district.

the city.²⁵ He came in first among the Arab candidates in the last federal elections, with 21,560 votes, followed by Governor Jabouri with 11,020 votes. The last candidate with a considerable chance to take a seat from Jabouri or Tamimi is Wasfi Assi, the brother of Anwar Assi, head of the al-Ubaid tribe, that dominates the sub-district of Riyaz, the second largest electoral district after Hawija.²⁶ If Assi succeeds in his maneuver to win the votes of the al-Ubaid tribe, especially through his brother's promotion, his chance of winning a seat also increases. In short, these three candidates are the most prominent, and leave little room for their competitors to mobilize voters, and thus are believed to collect the majority of the votes in the third district.

Additionally, in a scenario where these three male candidates secure the top three votes, the woman who has received most votes in the district will replace the male candidate who has ranked third as per the new quota system. There are two prominent women, both of whom have begun a robust election campaign. The first is Sahira Abdullah Mohammed al-Jabouri; not only does she have the chance of gaining votes from her tribe, but she also has strong support from Tamimi as she is the only female candidate for Taqadum in the third district. Tahrir Ahmad Hassan Kaka al-Ubaidi is the other woman, who is running independently,²⁷ but also has a great chance of winning, not only because she is from the al-Ubaid tribe but also because her father is a well-known politician in Kirkuk's Sunni Arab political arena.

These influential Arab parties and coalitions have invested the least in the Kurdish-dominant first district. While the AAK has only nominated a single male candidate in the district, Taqadum has not even nominated any candidate, understanding that its small constituents in the first district should not distract their focus from the second and third ward. Contrary to the first district, both coalitions and other Arab parties have eyed winning at least one seat in the second, for which they have nominated influential and well-known figures. For instance, the AAK has nominated the current CoR member Khalid Mafraji, who won the AAK's third seat in the 2018 federal elections, coming after Tamimi and Jabouri. Mafraji enjoys a strong electoral base in the Arab neighborhoods of Kirkuk, that are attached to the second district. Another strong Arab candidate in the second district, who is running under Khamis Khanjar's Iraq's National Project, is Ismail Ahmad Hadidi. Hadidi is an Arab career politician in Kirkuk, who was a member of the provincial council, deputy governor and now is an advisor to Iraqi President Barham Salih. However, the presence of a significant number of Arab candidates in the second district – 28²⁸ out of the 56 candidates – could result in the spread of Arab votes, which would put the candidates in a weak position against Kurdish and Turkmen candidates.²⁹

The Turkmen

The Turkmen of Kirkuk marked a great victory in the last federal elections when their electoral alliance, The Turkmen Front in Kirkuk, won three seats for the first time. The group is once again participating in the upcoming electoral race through an alliance called The

²⁵ Among many instances, in a press conference in the CoR, along with the Turkmen and the Arab members, Tamimi aggressively advocated against the return of the Kurdish forces to Kirkuk after their withdrawal in October 2017, after the Kurdish independence referendum. See, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=414242845657207>.

²⁶ In the electoral law, the third district is referred to as "Hawija plus Riyaz" as they comprise the absolute majority of Arab voters.

²⁷ In a post on her Facebook page, Tahrir appears with Mohammed al-Tamimi in the presence of Sheikh Mahmoud, head of the Kaka clan. She claims that she has the backing of Tamimi. Running independently and seeking the support of Tamimi demonstrates the magnitude of the power of Tamimi among the Arab community in the district. See, <https://www.facebook.com/tahreer.ahasan/posts/555062035913965>.

²⁸ Ramla al-Ubaidi, a candidate for Iraq's National Project, tells the Voice of America that there are 28 Arab candidates in the second district. See, Dilshad Anwar, "Expectation of the Distribution of Kirkuk's Seats over the Ethnic Groups", *Voice of America*, August 12, 2021, https://www.dengiamerika.com/a/iraq-election-6000123.html?fbclid=IwAR1s6ySujL7mWAoNZME2VFkE7_B6X1TCWLZEXDRr1f9ff_WlpKn_AXbB1hg.

²⁹ For instance, major Turkmen parties, that are running under a coalition called United Turkmen Front of Iraq, have only nominated four candidates even though they won 40% of votes in the areas comprising second district in the last elections. Also, the key Kurdish parties have nominated three candidates, two candidates for the KC and one for the KDP. However, the major Arab actors, which are the Arab Coalition in Kirkuk, Taqadum, and Iraq National Project, have collectively nominated six candidates, one candidate less than other major Turkmen and Kurdish parties in the district. See the alliance and their candidates in the three electoral districts here: https://nasnews.com/pdfs/%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%88%D9%83_2.pdf.

United Turkmen Front of Iraq (UTFI),³⁰ which is comprised of nine Turkmen parties.³¹ Four prominent Turkmen candidates are running under the UTFI, including CoR member Arshad Salihi. Salihi is a key and strong Turkmen leader of the Turkmen Front party and won the majority of Turkmen votes in the last elections with 38,899 votes and, thus, is well-positioned to regain his seat. Simultaneously, the coalition has smartly nominated another popular Turkmen woman – Sawsan Abdulwahid Jadu’ – in an attempt to fill the quota.

Even though it appears that the Turkmen have organized their house in Kirkuk, in particular through their major electoral alliance, the group still faces numerous key challenges, which leaves them in a vulnerable position in comparison to the Arabs and Kurds. The first challenge is that the Turkmen constituents are predominantly located in the second district with four seats, where the Kurds and Arabs also have a strong presence, meaning that the Turkmen are not only competing among each other to win seats but also with the other major groups.

The second reason is the presence of an important leader like Salihi, who, as in the 2018 elections, could win the majority of Turkmen votes. Thus, the chances of the other candidates would be jeopardized, as the remaining votes might not be enough to win against the other Kurdish and Arab candidates in the district.³² The third reason is that there are also strong Turkmen candidates who are running independently, outside the UTFI. In fact, two of the Turkmen CoR members, Ahmad Ali Qassem and Khadija Ali Abass, who won their seats running within the Turkmen Front Coalition in the last elections, are now running independently. The other prominent Turkmen figure running independently is Nyazi Ma’mar Oghlu, who was also a CoR member (from 2010 to 2014). The participation of these figures will most likely contribute to dispersing Turkmen votes in the district.

Lastly, the Turkmen of Kirkuk will face the division of the group over Sunni and Shia sectarian lines. It is noteworthy to mention that the key military and political leaders of the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Kirkuk are comprised of Shia Turkmen, who mostly belong to the influential Badr Organization. As a result, the Badr-led Fatih alliance has only nominated a single Shia Turkmen candidate in the entire province. Kharib Askar Naqi – known as Haji Kharib, a PMF military commander – will run in the second district and is expected to receive the majority of Shia Turkmen votes due to the strict discipline and centrality of the group. The nomination of a single candidate is strategic for the Fatih Alliance to collect all of its votes for one candidate, which would maximize the chances of gaining a seat.³³

Conclusion: Kirkuk Post-Elections

Kirkuk, as a key disputed Iraqi city, will remain highly contested. Its major ethnic groups, Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmen robustly continue their struggle to protect their electoral bases and interests. The fault lines between and within the sects remain and are even widening: compromises are neither made between the ethnic groups, nor among themselves. In

³⁰ See, Ibrahim Salih, “Iraq, Turkmen Alliance to Run in Early Elections”, *Anadolu Agency*, April 8, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3nAVCK8>.

³¹ See, Dlashad Anwar, “Turkmen are divided by sect in Kirkuk and Salah al-Din”, *Voice of America*, https://www.dengiamerika.com/a/iraq-election-76001525.html?fbclid=IwAR0n1Oq_ee38s9jy08mOMlodTEk53RCGBziuwjwHUv5ls-8qTu15ed1ocD8.

³² The disparity between the votes of the Turkmen winners of the 2018 federal elections is significant. Salihi won 38,899, followed by Ahmad Haider Qasem with 9,580, and Khadija Ali Abass with 2,161 votes. This disparity was beneficial for the Turkmen under the former electoral law, proportional representation, as Salihi’s extra votes were redistributed over the other two mentioned candidates. However, under the new electoral law, SNTV, votes are not transferable. As a result, if the same scenario happens with the renomination of Arshad Salihi, it will be hugely costly to the Turkmen as the votes of the other candidates might be too thin to win seats. See the number of votes that each candidates won in the 2018 elections in Kirkuk: <https://www.facebook.com/diplomatic2017/posts/382281082271009/>.

³³ Shia Turkmen reside in the second district. Also, in the 2018 federal elections, the Fatih Alliance gained 17,532 votes and was headed by prominent Shia Turkmen, Mohammed Mahdi al-Bayati, former Minister of Human Rights and currently head of the northern Badr branch located in Kirkuk. It is of crucial importance for the Fatih Alliance to secure a seat in the city because the power of the alliance will no longer only come from its PMF military presence but also through political representation. This suggests a new emerging phenomenon among the Turkmen of the city as Sunni Turkmen are backed by Turkey, and the Badr Fatih-led alliance, to which the Shia Turkmen leaders of Kirkuk belong, is a key Iranian ally, inviting the country to direct interference in the politics of Kirkuk.

addition to that, it appears that elections have already contributed to the rift within the sectarian groups and will likely result in a revised post-electoral political order in Kirkuk, that is further disintegration of the social and political fabric.

As a result, the new electoral law is setting an alarming precedent in the city. The division into three electoral districts, and their demarcation mostly along sectarian lines, has emboldened Kirkuk's ethnic segregation. The law compels the political parties to invest their utmost focus and efforts into areas representing their particular ethnicity, conditioning the elected candidates to exclusively serve the sect that has elected them. Moreover, in the case of Kirkuk, it has paved the way for intra-ethnic fragmentation, instead of cooperation, as each of them separately strives to secure the seats that are allocated to the sect. Eventually, it is expected that the post-election political order of the city is unlikely to help establish the ground for pathways to resolve long-standing disputes in Kirkuk.