

Election Results in Iraq: A Country at a Crossroads and a Message to Iran

Yaron Schneider | No. 1539 | December 15, 2021

The parliamentary elections in Iraq this past October were essentially decided in advance, when Iraqis took to the streets in opposition to the local Shiite militias and the corrupt ruling class that has failed to tackle economic problems. Iran received a clear message that anyone who tries to shape the agenda in Iraq will encounter considerable problems. Thus the big question remains: given the difficulties of forming a government of “the winners of the neglect” under Shiite leader Muqtada a-Sadr, will Iran be able to “impose” a candidate for prime minister who is acceptable to all parties as well as to Tehran, and thus disrupt and neutralize any attempt to block its influence?

Two events in October illustrate the crossroads at which Iraq finds itself. The first, which attracted much global attention, were the parliamentary elections. The elections were pushed up by Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, based on his belief that the outcome would help stabilize and build the country, which is struggling with internal conflict and a harsh economic situation. The second event, which is symbolic but no less important, was the second anniversary of the October 2019 protest, an authentic “Arab Spring”-style protest that mainly involved the younger generation (in their teens and early twenties). Some took their life in their hands in street confrontations with the police forces and the pro-Iranian militias that tried to suppress the protest, just as Iran suppresses protests. Apart from the many ensuing casualties, the protest reflected the refusal of young Iraqis from all communities – Shiite, Sunni, Christian, and Kurdish – to bow their heads and accept a lost future. They were particularly troubled by the fact that Iraq, one of the richest countries of the Middle East in natural resources, has no future – but not because of fate, but because of the corruption that plagues the ruling elite, management failures, and Iranian involvement. All these have brought the country to a severe economic crisis, which joins the other calamities that have beset Iraq over the past year, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the hospital fires, where many died due to the ineptness of the rescue services, and the

renewed momentum of ISIS attacks, which have added to the sense of anarchy.

The demonstrations were suppressed, partly by the pro-Iranian militias, but the protest was not extinguished. Sunni terror and Iranian involvement are still present, as are other failures of management in Iraq, affecting the economy, security, and sovereignty in general. These problems are expected to continue for the foreseeable future, but among the youth there is hope for change, and this contributed to the popularity of the current Prime Minister, who formed a government last year after his predecessors (who were preferred by the Iranians and the militias loyal to them) failed. Al-Kadhimi set himself a clear target: to restore the institutions of government and forcefully halt the creeping takeover of control by the militias, with which he has tense relations due to his opposition to their attacks on Iraqi citizens and American forces in Iraq, attacks that have increased in the past two years.

The impact of aspirations for change shown by the wave of protest were evident in the October elections: most of those eligible to vote abstained, as a protest based on despair, while the votes of those who did go to the polling stations led to a surprising and uncomfortable result for Iran and its militias, which suffered a humiliating defeat. Their seats in the parliament were reduced by two-thirds, from 48 to 17 – a complete surprise compared to pre-elections predictions. The big winner was Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr (a supporter of the boycott before the elections), who won 73 out of the 329 seats and thus became the new kingmaker in Baghdad. The pro-Iranian losers complained of forged results and refused to accept the situation. Consequently there were demonstrations against the government, which developed into violent clashes in Baghdad between pro-Iranian demonstrators and the security apparatuses, in which a protester was killed. This was followed by a threat to al-Kadhimi from one of the militia leaders. The tension escalated even more after an attempt to assassinate al-Kadhimi with incendiary drones in early November. The militias – one of which apparently carried out the attack, in the estimate of government security elements in Iraq, without instructions from Iran – are

now opposed by a broader coalition than before, which is united by the same concern for the economic and security welfare of Iraqi citizens, and the call to release Iraq from dependence on foreign influence in general and Iranian hegemony in particular.

The elections were made earlier in order to increase stability and reduce the chaos in Baghdad with a new government whose legitimacy would rest on proper elections (which was indeed the case in the opinion of observers), but the polarization between the rival forces, the political crisis, and lack of government stability have all worsened. However, the internal conflict in Iraq has changed its form, from a public uprising against a corrupt government and the pro-Iranian militias, to a battle over the new government – between the supporters of Iranian hegemony on one hand, and on the other hand, Prime Minister Kadhimi and the popular Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr. The latter seek to establish clear conditions for continued relations with the militia umbrella group Popular Mobilization Forces: no to activity outside the law (all arms to be under government supervision) and no to outside instructions or dictates – a message aimed directly at Iran. Therefore, in the current talks between al-Sadr and representatives of the pro-Iranian forces, al-Sadr insists that the new government will be based on the decision of the majority in the elections, and not on a compromise due to pro-Iranian pressure.

In the regional and international context, there are signs that the Iranian regime is striving to increase its involvement and to tighten the restraint imposed on the Shiite militias and coordination with them, against reports of their weakened control in the framework of internal clashes that led to the assassination attempt on al-Kadhimi. This is apparently based on an understanding that the emerging dynamic in Iraq is volatile and could spell trouble for the Tehran. In addition, there are signs of direct involvement by Iranian representatives in the current talks, including al-Quds commander Esmail Qaani and the Iranian ambassador in Iraq, Iraj Madajdi, in an effort to form a coalition that will meet Iranian expectations, notwithstanding the painful loss of its allies in the elections. At the same time, it is clear that the United States administration is not enthusiastic about its own involvement

in the simmering Iraqi arena. Hours after the attempted assassination of al-Kadhimi, the White House issued its first response, in which it strongly condemned the incident and called for pursuit of the attackers. However, this was clearly a lukewarm response regarding the provocations and threats of the pro-Iranian militias, and did not mention them explicitly. This indicates distancing from Iraqi events, amounting to renunciation of any real attempt to block further attempts by Iran and its militias to impose their will, even by means of terror attacks on US forces and the US embassy in Baghdad – against the background of the American decision to end its military mission in Iraq by the end of the year. This joins the impression created by the rapid US withdrawal from Afghanistan, which allowed the Taliban takeover. In the absence of American determination to demonstrate involvement, it has lost its power against Iran and its allies in Iraq.

However, the reduction of a US presence beyond its borders – the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the lengthy, slower process of cutting back its presence in Syria and Iraq – does not mean that Iraq will fall like a domino into the Iranian axis or once again be a stronghold for ISIS and other terror organizations. In Iraq there is a mass of internal forces that have united to strengthen the state's sovereignty and the rule of law. This mass weighs on the shoulders of the supporters of Iran and makes it hard for the Revolutionary Guards to control the reins in Baghdad as they wish. There is political momentum of opposition to Iranian hegemony. The election results have first and foremost benefited the enemies of the militias and boosted the protests against Iranian involvement. In Baghdad there is a Prime Minister who is not as comfortable for the Iranian regime as his predecessors, and there are still signs of public anger at the failures of the government to manage Iranian involvement. As a result, protests against Iran hinder Tehran's attempts to shape the Iraqi situation as it wishes as a satellite state, or to further its strategic regional objectives, including amassing advanced weapons and sending them to Syria, without growing opposition from political forces in Iraq.

Regional Significance

The Iraqi arena is important for Israel because of the potential consequences of events in Syria and Jordan and as part of the Iranian land axis in the region. While based on the statements of senior Iraqi officials Israel cannot expect Israeli-Iraqi normalization in the near future, Iran faces substantive problems in this arena. The internal clashes in Iraq after the elections should be seen as an expression of the gap between the vision of the Revolutionary Guards and the reality. Iran cannot get everything it wants in Iraq, and in its eyes, the consequences of its involvement, namely the lawlessness of the pro-Iranian militias, are not entirely desirable.

Moreover, developments in Iraq could inspire anti-Iranian forces elsewhere – particularly in Lebanon, which is currently experiencing the worst civilian-economic crisis in its history, as tension grows between Hezbollah and Iran and their opponents. The Iraqi case reflects the problem for intervening states (whether Iran in Iraq, or Turkey and Russia in Syria) to advance their objectives through local allies or proxies that they arm and fund, or even by the presence of their generals, if the target country is in chaos due to economic crises, internal conflicts, and weak central government. The Iraqi case shows that a crisis can be exacerbated by political protest starting in the streets and reaching voting booths. The fuel for the anti-Iranian fire in Iraq is the shaky economy and disgust with pro-Iranian forces that are acting not for the Iraqi citizens, but for themselves and for their Iranian patron.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen