

# The Struggle over the Future of Iraq: Looking to the Parliamentary Elections and Beyond

Eldad Shavit

## Background

On December 9, 2017, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi proclaimed victory over the Islamic State, following the liberation of parts of the country that since 2014 had been held by the organization, including Mosul, the country's second largest city. Iraq, declared al-Abadi, has entered "the stage after the victory over the Islamic State."<sup>1</sup> Beyond the achievement represented by this victory over the Islamic State, and after many forecasts of the collapse and dissolution of the Iraqi state, al-Abadi can be credited with success, both inside and outside Iraq, in leading the efforts that have made it possible to maintain the country's territorial integrity and strengthen Iraqi state frameworks, with an emphasis on the army and other security elements.

Yet notwithstanding the territorial defeat of the Islamic State, many within and without Iraq continue to support the group ideologically, and Islamic terrorism remains a viable threat. Although due to the weakening of the Islamic State, 2017 witnessed a 50 percent drop in the number of people killed in terrorist attacks throughout Iraq in comparison to 2016,<sup>2</sup> the number of civilians killed in attacks in January 2018 has already risen in comparison to the previous month, with many of these attacks in the capital city of Baghdad.<sup>3</sup> Against this background, military operations conducted by security forces throughout Iraq to cleanse additional strongholds held by the Islamic State continue unabated.

The Iraqi leadership can now focus on advancing efforts to turn the page and begin a new chapter, while directing attention and resources to

Col. (res.) Eldad Shavit is a research fellow at INSS.

overcome the numerous challenges before them. First and foremost, this includes strengthening internal integration in light of the significant gaps and conflicts that exist both within and among the different sectoral and ethnic elements (including the problem of the many displaced persons that have still not returned to their homes), repairing the extensive damage to the country's civilian infrastructure,<sup>4</sup> and reducing the influence of external forces.

The general parliamentary elections that are scheduled for May 12, 2018 and the subsequent political processes will have a direct impact on Iraq's chances of achieving state stability. Public opinion polls conducted in Iraq and interviews with decision makers there indicate cautious optimism alongside skepticism regarding the state's current ability to overcome the conditions that have previously resulted in deterioration.<sup>5</sup>

This article does not presume to predict the outcome of the elections (assuming they are in fact held on their scheduled date). Rather, it surveys the main elements currently influencing developments in Iraq and analyzing their possible implications.

### **After the Islamic State: The Attempt to Shape the Face of Iraq**

The political system in Iraq, which is characterized by internal division and considerable intricacies, is preparing for elections. In previous months, the forces with power have continued efforts to form a coalition that will advance their aspirations on the day after the elections. The ability of Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish elements to ultimately overcome their traditional internal divisions and join forces in promoting a national agenda that takes into account the needs of all the sectors, as well as the nature of Iranian and US involvement in the process, will have a decisive impact on the chances of bringing about the desired change.

Prime Minister al-Abadi failed in his attempt to lead the Shiite parties (who constitute more than 60 percent of the population<sup>6</sup>) to run together in the elections. The two rival Shiite leaders, Vice President and former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and Prime Minister al-Abadi (who in practice belong to the Dawa party and ran together in the last elections) have announced that they will run on two separate lists (the State of Law Coalition and the Victory Coalition, respectively). Another list running in the elections will encompass the Iraqi Communist Party, which is supported by leading Shiite leader Muqtada al-Sadr, who initially threatened to boycott the elections if reforms were not made to the electoral system.<sup>7</sup>

Al-Abadi has sought to cultivate the image of a list that cuts across ethnic and sectoral divisions. In practice, however, even if his list ultimately ends up including Sunni or Kurdish elements, this will only give the impression of sectoral partnership, and sectoral political division in Iraq will continue to exist after the 2018 elections as well. The Sunnis' ability to expand their political influence remains extremely limited, *inter alia* due to their lack of leadership and the large number of Sunnis among the refugees who have not yet returned to their homes, and their attempt to postpone the elections was rejected by the Supreme Court. The Kurds, whose ability to maneuver has been significantly weakened due to Masoud Barzani's failure to lead them to independence, are also entering the elections in the wake of military defeat and plagued by internal political divisions. Moreover, Prime Minister al-Abadi, encouraged by the Iranians, appears to continue to undermine all signs of Kurdish independence. Their weakened status and the difficulty of reaching agreements with the central government regarding economic issues are likely to make it difficult for them to maintain their political status and their piece of the regime's economic pie.<sup>8</sup>

The consensus is that even after the upcoming elections,<sup>9</sup> the Shiite parties will continue to maintain a parliamentary majority, and one of their leaders will succeed in forming a coalition and serve as prime minister. Prime Minister al-Abadi, who has succeeded in positioning himself as a determined and dependable leader promoting state interests,<sup>10</sup> has a good chance of leading the Shiite bloc: in addition to his success against the Islamic State, he was credited with determination in thwarting attempts by Barzani to promote the independence of the Kurdish region, including the successful military operation to take back the city of Kirkuk from the Kurds.<sup>11</sup> But it is still too early to rule out al-Malaki's chances of increasing his power. In any event, as in the previous elections,<sup>12</sup> the split within the Shiite camp creates uncertainty, which could result in new partnerships with the potential to completely turn the tables with regard to the identity of the next prime minister.

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### The Role of the Shiite Militias

Whoever holds the title of Prime Minister will undoubtedly influence the future of the country. It is even more important, however, to analyze the

dynamics that currently characterize relations among the Shiite elements themselves, particularly regarding the significance of the decision of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) – the overarching framework of Shiite militias in Iraq, some of which are supported by Iran – to integrate into the Iraqi political arena.

More than anything else, the question of the future of the Shiite militias in Iraq reflects the struggle over the orientation of Iraq, which can be expected to peak after the elections. The debate is among the Shiite elements themselves, shaped by the external intervention of Iran in its effort to exert influence on the one hand, and Western elements led by the United States and its Sunni allies, particularly Saudi Arabia, on the other hand. Since 2014, the Shiite militias have constituted a significant power element in Iraq, and were the most powerful force to fight alongside the Iraqi army against the Islamic State. It is widely agreed that without the involvement of the Shiite militias, Iraq would neither have achieved victory nor regained control over the territory it had lost.

A number of studies of the past few years on the Shiite militias have emphasized that the strongest groups among them are the militias with close ties to Tehran. As a result of this allegiance, demonstrated through the defense of Iran's interests, these militias enjoy large scale economic and military aid. Moreover, it has been shown repeatedly that the Quds Force and its commander Qassem Soleimani have been directly involved in influencing the actions of the militias.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the Shiite militias that are loyal to Iran include a number of small groups that have served as Iranian

proxies in Iraq and Syria. Still, the bulk of the forces consist of Iraqi elements, some of which are already active in the political sphere. Their political power stems from the fact that they are Iraqis, whereas their military capacity is provided by Iran. Today, the Badr organization headed by Hadi al-Amiri already enjoys parliamentary representation and has a minister under its auspices serving as a member of al-Abadi's government. It was former Iraqi Prime Minister al-Maliki who, with Iranian encouragement, impelled

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these groups to integrate themselves into Iraqi politics and to join his party on the eve of the 2014 elections.<sup>14</sup>

The debate that has been underway in Iraq in recent months regarding the future of the militias has reflected disagreement between those who are

in favor of the militias' complete disarmament and the resulting reduction in Iranian influence in Iraq, and those who have sought to take advantage of their popularity stemming from their decisive role in the victory over the Islamic State, in order to increase their power and influence in the Iraqi parliament. A prominent aspect of the public debate has to do with the future of the weapons currently held by the militias. In mid-December 2017 Prime Minister al-Abadi joined senior Shiite religious leader Ayatollah Sistani in a demand to collect all the weapons in the country, in light of the announcement of the end of the war against the Islamic State. Some of the militias were quick to announce their willingness to turn over their weapons to the government and cut ties with their original frameworks – apparently because Iraqi law prohibits elements within the military or other armed elements from running in parliamentary elections. Nonetheless, it is not at all clear whether the Iraqi authorities can guarantee that all those running in the elections did in fact turn over their weapons before their lists were authorized to run. The question of separation between the military and political elements will need to be clarified at some point. Still, the basic interest of most of the militias will be to retain military power, even if this requires an element of separation between their military arm and their political arm that would be elected to parliament and could take part in the future governing coalition.

The militias' intention to run in the elections required special consideration among the other major Shiite elements. Prominent in this context was Prime Minister al-Abadi's unexpected declaration, made in late January, regarding the establishment of a political alliance, most likely brokered by Iran, with the pro-Iranian militias, including Hadi al-Amiri, leader of the Badr organization, who was previously recognized as an ally of al-Malaki and as a rival of al-Abadi. Although the agreement that was reached between al-Abadi and al-Amiri collapsed one day after it was announced,<sup>15</sup> the motivations underlying the alliance appear to have remained intact.

First and foremost, it appears that al-Abadi, who was appointed Prime Minister after al-Malaki failed to form a coalition and who lacked his own political basis, understood that in the political constellation developing in Iraq with the Iranian-affiliated militias' entry into politics, the key to survival lay in allying himself with these forces, even if until now he had maintained the image of someone who was not interested in being identified as an ally of Iran. Prominent in this context was the assertion by an element within the coalition that the alliance had collapsed for technical reasons,

implying that the failure did not stem from ideological disagreement. The same element also made it clear that cooperation with al-Abadi would indeed be possible after the elections, as part of a future coalition that would establish the government in Baghdad.<sup>16</sup> The prevailing assessment is that the militias will continue to hold significant political and security power after the elections, unrelated to the actual number of their elected representatives. In this context, al-Abadi recently issued an order specifying the Shiite militias' full incorporation into the Iraqi army and stipulating that their economic rights be equal to those of Iraqi military personnel.<sup>17</sup>

### The Iranian Role

Iran's meddling in Iraq by using the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards under the leadership of Qassem Soleimani in order to establish an alliance between al-Abadi and the militias is indicative of Iran's immense interest in intervening and, in practice, in influencing the election results. Its aim in doing so is to ensure that the coalition that is established after the elections serves its interests. Iran views unity within the Shiite camp as extremely important and will take action to make certain that the Shiites enjoy representation as broad as possible within the coalition, and that every Iraqi leader in the future view cooperation with Iran as a precondition for political survival. In this framework, Iran does not rely on one single political personality but rather takes action to provide itself with space for political maneuvering that will enable it to dictate an agenda that suits it.

Iranian involvement in Iraq is nothing new, having existed for many years. Iran, which shares a 1,500-km long border with Iraq, regards Iraqi territory as its own backyard and a potential threat to its security. From its perspective, the ability to control developments within Iraq effectively is an important condition for expanding the influence of the principles of the revolution in the religious, ideological, and military realms of additional strategic regions, such as Syria and Lebanon.

The Iranian effort to this end is based on a number of military and civilian realms, and in recent years, Iran has made great efforts to expand its economic, cultural, and religious influence in Iraq.<sup>18</sup> The fundamental instability characteristic of Iraq, the Islamic State's entry into the governing vacuum that resulted from the withdrawal of US forces, the great diversity of the sectors in Iraq, and the Shiite dominance in the country are all factors that have enabled Iran to solidify its hegemony in large parts of Iraq.<sup>19</sup>

Even if the leading Shiite elements in Iraq include some who oppose or are trying to distance themselves from Iran, in recent years the Iranian leadership has succeeded in using the Republican Guards to take advantage of the extensive aid provided the militias, primarily in the military realm, to transform them into the best armed and most effective fighting force in Iraq. From Tehran's perspective, this force serves as the primary arm of the Quds Force in Iraq. It has been estimated that the Shiite militias currently number between 110,000 and 122,000 fighters, with approximately 50,000 affiliated with groups that are under the Quds Force's direct influence.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Involvement of the United States and its Arab Allies**

The United States welcomed Prime Minister al-Abadi's announcement on the defeat of the Islamic State, as vanquishing the group has been the main challenge facing the United States since 2014 and a goal that President Trump emphasized repeatedly from the outset of his term in January 2017. A few months have passed since the conquest of Mosul and al-Abadi's subsequent declaration, and questions still remain regarding US policy in Iraq on the day after the Islamic State. The formulation of strategy and its translation into practical measures holds importance not only with regard to the question of the future of the US forces stationed in Iraq, but also, and primarily, for the ability to learn from the mistakes made by the United States after the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq in 2011.

The American administration is aware of the need to formulate practical and effective policy that will ensure it a position of influence that contributes to Iraq's establishment as a democratic state, takes into consideration the needs of all its sectors, and works to effect an equal division of resources. This joins the need to prevent the return of radical Islamic forces and to contend with Iran's accelerated efforts to seize control of the Iraqi sphere and create a situation in Iraq similar to that in Lebanon and Syria, where forces operating in the service of Iran (such as Hezbollah) leverage their military ability to accrue political strength. Indeed, the US Secretary of Defense recently acknowledged that the administration has information indicating that Iran is working to influence the outcome of the elections in Iraq.

On the eve of the 2018 elections, the United States appears to be continuing to center its policy in Iraq on Prime Minister al-Abadi. President Trump's meeting with him at the White House in March 2017 was followed by a declaration by both leaders regarding "the furthering of extensive political

and economic cooperation between the two countries.” Al-Abadi is perceived as a figure to work with who is capable of advancing measures that will result in unity among Iraq’s different ethno-religious groups. In practice, the Iraqi Prime Minister has indeed taken care to maintain good relations with the West, based in part on the understanding that his government is in need of massive resources in order to rehabilitate the country’s infrastructure and economy, most of which is expected to come from the United States and European countries. US administrations have also believed that al-Abadi both wants to and is capable of bringing about the establishment of closer relations with their Sunni allies on the one hand, and reducing its ties with Iran on the other hand.

The United States’ reliance on al-Abadi – who in actuality is the only card they currently hold – as a mover and shaker capable of achieving American aims is now being put to the test by the nature of his governing. At this point, the United States does not appear to have an alternative policy that would bring al-Abadi closer to the Sunnis and the Kurds, or to other Shiite elements who oppose Iranian involvement in Iraq. Moreover, United States opposition to the Kurds’ desire to declare independence, and its image as a country that has betrayed its allies in light of its silence regarding the military offensive initiated by al-Abadi to conquer the city of Kirkuk, has greatly weakened the Kurds.

In practice, the ongoing discussion between the Iraqi Prime Minister and senior members of the US administration continues. In tandem, the United States has stated that it has started to withdraw its military forces that are currently deployed in Iraq as part of an agreement with the Iraqi government, and that it is taking action to coordinate additional investment in Iraq. However, as a product of the Trump administration’s aim of reducing American investments, the United States does not intend to allocate funds directly to the reconstruction of Iraqi infrastructure within the framework of the international efforts currently implemented by the coalition to establish stability in the country.<sup>21</sup> At a conference held in Kuwait in February 2018, coalition members succeeded in raising only \$30 billion of the \$90 billion in aid that Iraq has said it needs in order to rebuild its infrastructure.<sup>22</sup>

At the same time, the United States continues its efforts to bring Iraq closer to its Sunni allies, with an emphasis on Saudi Arabia. Previous US administrations have tried, but the Arab countries have refused to establish closer relations with Iraq due to their perception of al-Maliki, and subsequently al-Abadi, as an Iranian lackey.<sup>23</sup> In the past year, efforts by Saudi



Arabia, in conjunction with the United Arab Emirates, to establish closer relations with Prime Minister al-Abadi and with Muqtada al-Sadr, in light of his identification as an opponent of Iran, appear to have increased. In the course of 2017 Saudi Arabia took a number of such measures, culminating in Prime Minister al-Abadi's visit to Riyadh, during which, in the presence of the US Secretary of State, the two countries set up a steering committee to oversee their mutual relations. The border shared by Saudi Arabia and Iraq was opened recently after having been closed for decades. And, for the first time since 1990, Saudi Arabia has opened a consulate in the city of Basra.<sup>24</sup> The Saudis are also checking the possibility of expanding their investments in Iraq as part of efforts to increase their influence.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, immediately following his visit to Saudi Arabia, al-Abadi was quick to visit Tehran for meetings with the Iranian leadership.

## Implications

The defeat of the Islamic State and the impending parliamentary elections have, for the first time in many years, increased Iraq's chances of implementing further processes that will solidify its stability and ensure its existence as a unified state. However, these prospects are contingent on the Iraqi leadership's ability to contend with a long and complicated list of challenges. In the complex reality of power relations in Iraq and the risk of a return of Islamic State activists and/or other Islamic terrorist elements, there is an interest in both the United States and Iran to maintain the unity of the state. Moreover, both countries appear to view Prime Minister al-Abadi as the right figure to lead Iraq in a manner that will serve their interests after the elections as well. He himself continues to take care to maintain good relations with both the American administration and Iran, after many years of successfully establishing a dialogue and cooperation with the leaderships of both countries.

Although al-Abadi has an advantage leading up to the elections, his party's ability to win a majority that will enable it to form a coalition is not guaranteed. Presumably the Shiite militias will play a major role in determining the identity of Iraq's next prime minister. Moreover, these militias, some of which are directly affiliated with Iran, will have significant influence on the character of Iraq and on the direction of its government.

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The United States continues to base its interests primarily on the actions of Prime Minister al-Abadi, despite the fact that in the past year he appears to have moved closer to Iran. In addition, actions by the US administration over the past year suggest it does not have the attention or the motivation to resist the Iranian measures. The Iranians, for their part, are implementing their policy vis-à-vis Iraq broadly and in a number of dimensions in order to ensure their influence on all levels. From Tehran's perspective, the need to ensure Iranian hegemony in Iraq serves the core of its security interests, including its interest in ensuring a corridor to the Mediterranean Sea.

In practice, in the struggle for the control of Iraq, Iran has thus far enjoyed the upper hand. Even if all the sides wish to maintain and expand their influence, their success in doing so likely depends first and foremost on willingness to invest energy and resources to translate their aims into actions on the ground. As such, whoever is willing to make such an investment stands to be the party with an influence. The Iraqi arena, and especially the business opportunities presented by the processes involved in building a military force and rebuilding Iraq's infrastructure, has also prompted additional countries (Russia, China, and European countries) to take an interest in expanding their investments in the country.

The future of Iraq will likely have significance for Israeli interests, as its importance as a functioning independent country lies not only in the fact that in recent years it has provided fertile ground for the growth of radical Islamic elements, but also in its capacity as a focal point of external influence. Therefore, attention must be paid to the regional implications of Iraq's geographical location and the degree of influence exercised on it by external parties.

Israel has no direct influence on Iraq. Nonetheless, it must take into account that the future of the country will have a direct impact on Israel's ability to realize its goals of limiting the ability of Iran and Hezbollah to

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act in the region, in Syria and Lebanon in particular. Israel's efforts in this context must be focused on the US administration, particularly on its willingness to remain active in Iraq, especially with regard to the building of, and influence on, its military force, in order to prevent Shiite militias with close ties to Iran

from seizing control of these bodies. At the same time, as part of Israel's shared interest vis-à-vis Iran with the Sunni states, and with Saudi Arabia in particular, the Sunni efforts at expanded influence in Iraq is a critical

aim from Israel's perspective. Therefore, Israel would do well to conduct a dialogue with the Sunni states on the subject.

## Notes

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- 9 In contrast to other states in the region, elections in Iraq in recent years are considered relatively democratic, and their results are not known in advance. Parliament is made up of 328 members, who are elected for a four-year term. The head of the largest party is charged with forming a government that must be approved by the parliament.
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- 14 Ibid.
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