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**Iraq's 2018 Elections and Beyond:
Party Attitudes and Possible Future Politics**

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Summary

- More than a year after the federal elections of 2018, Iraq's ethno-sectarian political system and the increased fragmentation of the spectrum of political parties still hamper any attempt to form a government and implement broader staffing policies.
- Under the new government, however, there is unlikely to be any substantial attempt to address the ethno-sectarian proportional system or issues around federalization. This is because no majority for such reforms could be created.
- Popular demands, as well as the structure of the party system, have largely centered around issues of security and demilitarisation, reconstruction, and the lack of public services in the aftermath of the fight against ISIS.
- Before and after the election, the sectarian divide within Iraq remains the dominant driver of voting decisions. That said, a more nationalistic rhetoric has been invoked by the parties and rewarded by voters.
- Leading political players have distanced themselves from foreign influence. This is due to a growing popular aversion to foreign intervention. Despite this, Iranian influence in Iraq will remain strong due to political, security-related, and economic dependencies.

Over a year after the elections of May 12th, 2018, Iraq has made a huge step toward the formation of a fully functioning government. The elections resulted in an oversized coalition that appointed an independent consensus candidate, Adil Abd al-Mahdi, as Prime Minister. But since its inception, this coalition has been riven by repeated internal struggles over staffing policies. Only at the end of June 2019 did parliament finally grant approval to Najah al-Shammari as Minister of Defense, Yassin Taha al-Yassri as Minister of Interior, and Farouq Amin al-Shawwani as Minister of Justice. The post of Minister of Education remains vacant, as Shaima' al-Hayali resigned in December 2018 after her older brother was accused of ties with Islamic State (ISIS). Her former Ministry is currently under the stewardship of the Ministry of Higher Education and Research.

At present, street protests still flare up every few weeks, especially in the region around Basra. These are mainly due to the lack of basic services. The reconstruction of the regions destroyed by the war against ISIS also remains a crucial task, as does post-war trust-building. The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 resulted in the creation of an ethnosectarian system of proportional representation. Although this system has been heavily criticized by numerous political actors and by many protesters, the new government decided to preserve most of its key features. In recent elections, however, the ethnosectarian cleavage that has traditionally divided Iraqi society seems to have lost much of its poignancy. Former blocs within this divide have themselves split over particular issues, while many

political actors have looked to establish cross-sectional ties. In some regions, observers have pointed to an erosion of former sectarian voter affiliations.

The 2018 Election Result in the Light of the Domestic Disparities

The formation of governments in Iraq has been complicated not only by the ethnosectarian, proportional distribution of posts. Divisions among old alliances and parties have left parliament without any clear options for the formation of a majority, and have confronted politicians with a difficult task.

The most contentious domestic issues include, first, the question of ethnosectarian proportional distribution of posts versus a government of technocrats. The latter would require a fundamental reform of politics with respect to the philosophy of government formation. Second, the degree of federalism remains contested. This issue is closely connected to the distribution of Iraq's massive oil wealth. Third, there exists an ideological cleavage, especially within the Shi'a religious camp, whereby some political actors advocate for a state in which Islamic scholars hold a leading role in politics and society, roughly in the style of the Iranian Republic. This position is opposed by those who argue that the Islamic community ('Umma) should be the backbone of politics and society. Proponents of this view more explicitly advocate for a strengthening of all societal strata by welfare policies. Fourth, security issues still play an important role, including the fate of the country's militias. These militias are often tied to particular political parties, and there is much controversy about their precise role in the fight against ISIS. Fifth, and also connected to the latter point, the question of the degree of foreign influence exerted by foreign powers has proven divisive. It has split both the parties and the electorate. The most influential parties after the 2018 election can be characterized as follows:

Bloc	Leading Party	Leadership	Simplified Major Inclinations	Share of Seats (out of 329)
Sairoon	Sadr-Movement	Muqtada as-Sadr	Welfare oriented Islamism, Nationalistic, Reform oriented	54
Fatah	ISCI	Hadi al-Amiri	Tradionalistic oriented Islamism, Militant, Iran oriented	48
Victory	Da'wa – Abadi Wing	Haider al-Abadi	Reform oriented, US oriented, Cross-Sectarian	42
State of Law	Da'wa – Maliki Wing	Nouri al-Maliki	Reform sceptic, Iran oriented, Sh'ia sectarian	25
KDP	KDP	Nerechivan Barzani	Kurdish, Federalism-oriented, Reform oriented, Barzani controlled	25

<i>Al-Wataniya</i>	Iraqi National Accord	Iad Allawi	Reform sceptic, Cross Sectarian, US oriented	21
<i>Wisdom</i>	ISCI defectors	Ammar al-Hakim	Welfare oriented Islamism, Nationalistic	19
<i>PUK</i>	PUK	Korsat Rasul Ali	Kurdish, Federalism-oriented, Reform oriented, Talabani controlled	18
<i>Uniters for Reform</i>	Iraqi Islamic Party	Osama an-Nujaifi	Reform sceptic, Sunni sectarian, Federalism-oriented	14

Before and after the Iraqi elections, some fairly remarkable developments caught the eye of outside observers. One of the first of these was the inclusion of the Communist Party of Iraq (CPI) into As-Sadr's welfare-oriented Sairoon movement. This attracted international attention. On closer examination, however, this move appears as a logical continuation and consolidation of As-Sadr's nationalistic strategy and, moreover, as a symbolic gesture. The ICP is not the mass mobilizing movement it had been until the 1970s. Instead, it is a well-organized but completely marginalized faction inside the political landscape that, since 2003, has never won more than two seats in parliament. If we ignore its secular stance, then the CPI's focus on unemployment, corruption, and anti-sectarianism allow it to fit rather seamlessly into Sairoon's welfare-oriented bloc.

In fact, the victory of the Sairoon bloc in the elections caused some commotion. But the surprise generated by this result is mitigated by the fact that only 44% of eligible voters turned out, while the diversification of the party system allows a bloc with 17% of government seats to emerge as the most powerful. Many Iraqis seem to have been persuaded by As-Sadr's family background, his nationalist strategy's conformity with the statements of the influential chairman of the Hawza of Nadjaf, Grand Ayatollah As-Sistani, and his welfare approach, which promises an improvement of services. Nonetheless, other domestic issues must be examined in more detail in order to shed a clearer light on the election results.

Domestic Issues Which Cut Across Party Lines

The aforementioned internal divisions of the party system and the different political camps have no clearly definable borders. Many domestic issues carry the potential for diverse coalition formation, at least in outcome-oriented partnerships of convenience. They cause fluctuations inside the party system and ultimately affect election results. This is particularly true in four key fields: security-related perceptions, the corruption-complex, the degree of federalization, and the stance towards foreign influence.

The legacy of ISIS and Issues of Demilitarization

The last sixteen years of Iraqi history have borne witness to the US-led invasion, the traumatic sectarian strife of 2005-2008, and the violence of ISIS. But since the effective defeat of the self-styled “Caliphate” in 2017, the security situation inside Iraq has improved. Still, some remnants of ISIS seem to be active, as the explosions in al-Maalif district on July 15, 2019 indicate. In mid-July 2019, the Iraqi government launched a “Will to Victory” operation against ISIS sleeper cells. Security issues are still a predominant topic in Iraqi’s society, politics, and media.

Beyond this, however, the fight against ISIS has left clear traces upon the Iraqi party system and civic culture that will endure for decades. In the south, almost all the main roads of major cities are lined with portraits of Martyrs. This gives an impression of a newly existent pride and self-confidence among the population due to the military victory. Since the US-led occupation, the security situation and military success have played, and continue to play, a crucial role in Iraqi politics.

The so-called “Battle of Basra” in 2008 saw the Mahdi Army driven out of the city. Since then, Nouri al-Maliki has managed to successfully present himself as one of the principal guarantors of law and order. The Mahdi Army was created by Muqtada as-Sadr in 2003 in response to the U.S. led invasion of Iraq and, from 2006, openly opposed the Iraqi government. Although many Iraqis welcomed the government’s restoration of control, as-Sadr’s fight against the occupation troops gained him a measure of popular respect and credibility. He still benefits from this today.

During his second term, al-Maliki’s rule grew increasingly authoritarian. He began to place many institutions under his personal control. These included the High Court, the election commission, and to some degree the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of State for National Security, and the Ministry of the Interior.¹ And yet it was under his rule that ISIS emerged and spread across the country. This was mainly due to the tolerance ISIS enjoyed among many Sunni tribes. These tribes had no reason to fight for the system in Baghdad, which they accused of sectarianism and delaying reforms. Furthermore, because of growing discord between Sunnis and Kurds, and ISIS overrunning around one-third of Iraqi territory, al-Maliki’s position as Prime Minister became increasingly untenable from 2014. Furthermore, he had lost the support of Iran and, perhaps even more importantly, of the Marji’iyah around Grand Ayatollah as-Sitani. This was the moment when Haider al-Abadi, also from the Da’wa party, was appointed Prime Minister. He was regarded as a moderate Shi’ite leader who could win over powerful Sunni tribal chiefs to the fight against Islamic State.² Despite some initial difficulties, al-Abadi, in contrast to Al-Maliki, succeeded in delivering the promised military victory.

But the fight against ISIS jeopardized al-Abadi’s relationship with his own coalition allies. In August 2014, Nouri al-Maliki and Osama an-Nujafi demanded that the government withdraw an investigative report on the capture of Mosul by ISIS that identified al-Maliki and former defense Minister an-Nujaifi as the main culprits for the mistakes of Iraqi security forces. In September 2014, more politicians withdrew their support after a new party law banned foreign financial aid and paramilitary organizations, especially those with active militias. But al-Abadi was most seriously damaged by his October 13th bill, which was designed to rebalance civil servants' salaries. The rash and poorly drafted law became the target of angry protests and led to the withdrawal of support from the as-Sadr and the al-Hakim bloc. The division within the Da’wa party between al-Abadi and al-Maliki became more obvious. Eventually, al-Abadi split off from the party and formed his own

“Victory Alliance”. This name hints unequivocally at the military success al-Abadi aimed to take credit for.

Al-Ameri, the new head of the ISCI after the split of al-Hakim, was a well-known battlefield fighter against ISIS. He thus had a better chance to take the credit al-Abadi was trying to gain. This partly explains the strong performance of al-Ameri’s Fatah in the elections, with al-Amiri’s Fatah Coalition pushed into third place. Al-Abadi’s Victory Alliance won respectable results and was particularly strong in the Northern provinces freed from ISIS. In other parts of the country, however, it underperformed. Al-Ameri’s reputation as a fighter for the Iraqi nation seems to have won him a degree of public trust that spans sectarian lines. First, he ousted al-Maliki as a symbol of law and order and received support from vast Shi’i areas. Second, he garnered support from mainly Sunni areas. In Niniveh, with its capital Mossul, and in Salahaddin, al-Ameri’s Alliance became the third strongest party with 11% and 14% of the votes respectively. This was a creditable result, even if these numbers have to be read with extreme caution, because the army and militias were permitted to register their votes in the areas where they are positioned.

In 2015, a senior Sunni tribal sheikh declared in an interview with the Hona Baghdad Satellite Channel that Al-Ameri would be the true representative of Sunnis. As he put it, “the one who fights for the Iraqi Land and who carries his gun and fights alongside his tribe is the only one that deserves to represent us”³. This is an astonishing statement, given that al-Ameri is still dogged by charges related to alleged sectarian war crimes against Sunni Arabs. It seems that mutually beneficial networks emerged during the fight against ISIS, which was characterized by a degree of cooperation between mainly Iran-backed Shi’a militias and Sunni tribal units. This has apparently had an impact on recent election results. In contrast, and standing in al-Ameri’s shadow, al-Hakims ISCI splinter party turned out to be weaker than expected. al-Hakim still benefits from his prestigious family name, but he did not manage to mobilize many voters in the north of Iraq. Defense Minister an-Nujaifi, who like al-Maliki is still haunted by his de-facto military defeat against ISIS, was similarly unable to score in the field of security politics.

The Contestation of the Consociational System and the Corruption-Complex

The consociational proportional system (Muhassassa) of Iraq was constructed according to the model of political systems such as those of Switzerland, Belgium, or Lebanon. It assures the balance of representation of different ethnic groups in a country by tying the government to particular quotas in the distribution of posts. It was the logical outcome of the predominant reading of US-lead policy consultants, especially after the uprising of 1991. These consultants regarded Iraq as a country split by sectarian lines, in which a Sunni minority had suppressed a Shi’a majority for decades under the rule of Saddam Hussein. However, this reading was by no means universally accepted, either on a scholarly level⁴ or during the actual process of state building. Among the various Shi’i and Sunni Iraqi opposition groups in exile, only the Iraqi National Congress (INC) favored proportional representation.⁵

The US-backed INC eventually succeeded in shaping the newly implemented political system, in which the proportional distribution of posts is only indirectly anchored in the constitution. Important posts must have two deputies, but there is no mention of their required ethnic or sectarian background. In practice, the President of the Republic is a Kurd, the Prime Minister Shi’i and the

Speaker of Parliament a Sunni. Similar to Lebanon's National Accord of 1943, the proportional norm thus resembles a kind of gentlemen's agreement. Theoretically, it could be abandoned by a qualified political majority. To avoid conflict, other posts in government and administration are distributed along these lines in order to include as many factions as possible in a representative government.

The system has been blamed for causing mismanagement, corruption, and for hampering Iraq's infrastructural and economic progress. According to critics, the granting of official posts according to sectarian and party affiliation, rather than competence and expertise, inevitably leads to government underperformance in creating jobs and addressing defective infrastructure. The latter includes shortages in electricity, water, access to healthcare, or schooling. Additionally, such a system would surely result in the emergence of patronage networks that embezzle public money to secure power and reward loyalty.

Against this political and systemic background, the tribal networks of the north are often accused of benefitting from corruption. Such tribes experienced a notable enhancement of their importance when the security situation in Iraq deteriorated markedly after 2003. Even today, tribal tribunals frequently stand in for official judicial institutions in conflict mediation across the entire country. This is partly due to the cumbersome and corrupt nature of the bureaucracy. But these tribes are politically divided and plagued by feuds. Corruption scandals are frequently catapulted to public visibility, most notably in 2016. On August 25 of that year, a majority of parliamentarians confronted Sunni Defense Minister Khalid al-Obeidi with evidence of corruption scandals in his ministry. During his interrogation, al-Obeidi accused parliament speaker Salim al-Juburi of being guilty of corruption himself. Indeed, al-Juburi's name is linked to a series of corruption cases. He pushed ahead with the impeachment of al-Obeidi, as did his fellow MP Haitham al-Juburi. Salim was a trustee of Al-Maliki and is a member of the influential northern Iraqi tribe al-Jubur. The city of Salahaddin is governed by Ahmad Abdullah al-Juburi and the al-Jubur tribe is dominant. But this tribe is obliged to constantly vie for power and control over essential services and government with the powerful, yet smaller Al-Obeidi tribe. This holds especially true around Bayji, one of the most significant towns of the governorate and Iraq's largest Oil Refinery.

These scandals and the incrimination of many prominent politicians in the Panama and Paradise Papers affairs increased discontent about corruption in Iraq. Indeed, *Corruption* had already become a major buzzword among the protesters during the small-scale demonstrations of 2011. After 2015, popular discontent over corruption became more directly linked to the ethnosectarian quota system. Against the backdrop of increased pressure from the street, prominent political players either positioned themselves in favor of the Muhassassa System, or they began to advocate for a "government of technocrats".

This distinction became crucial during the government crisis that emerged during al-Abadi's reform attempts. Al-Abadi, who suggested a government of technocrats with fewer party members, received support from the Sadr-Movement. The Sadr-Movement managed to position itself at the forefront of the protests and constantly called for demonstrations to add authority to the reform endeavors. Initial resistance came from Allawis secular al-Watania and the Kurdish Bloc. Sunni and Kurdish party spokesmen insisted that they would not give up their respective quotas of 33 percent and 20 percent of government posts. From al-Abadi's own alliance, ex-prime minister al-Maliki claimed that the proposal of a technocratic government was part of an anti-Islamic secular agenda and demanded al-Abadi's withdrawal. Al-Hakim, who at this time was leader of the ISCI, welcomed the idea of a cabinet reshuffle. But he also declared that any fundamental new beginning would have

to involve a change of Prime Minister.

The attempt to force through a technocratic government based on a list made by Al-Abadi in parliament on June 2016 ended in tumult and violence in the plenary hall. After these scenes, one section of the government broke away, boycotted official sessions, and effectively formed a parallel parliament. Others remained in post, but without achieving real progress on the issue of systemic electoral reform.

During this time, demonstrators twice stormed the parliament in the green zone. They were driven by disenchantment over the gridlock. Nonetheless, the discussion about a possible technocratic government remained a recurring theme until the elections of 2018, though without a sustainable solution anywhere in sight. In view of the recent elections, the split of the Da'wa party into an al-Maliki wing and an al-Abdi wing was apparently of no help to either side, especially in the disenchanting Sh'ia south. In this region, as-Sadr and al-Amiri were perceived as distant from and innocent of involvement in the corrupt Baghdad apparatus – the apparatus al-Abadi was not able to weaken. That said, anti-reform forces in Iraq remain strong and will certainly continue to influence the direction of domestic politics.

Federalism and Issues of Distribution

In accordance with Art. 119 of the Iraqi constitution, three Kurdish governorates have formed a region with vast rights of self-administration. However, federalization has proven a contested topic across the rest of Iraq. Despite recent upheavals and the breakup of the KDP-PUK-Gorran Bloc, Kurds agree on the importance of federalization and are resistant to any increase of the central government's power *vis à vis* their regional autonomy. The fact that they have already secured extensive rights makes them more receptive toward a reform of the Muhassassa System. After the reopening of the Iraqi parliament in 2016, President Fouad Masum, a Kurd, declared that the party quota system had to be speedily revised.

By contrast, Sunni-Arabs do not have any protective, self-administered borders. Given this fact, and as long as there is no comprehensive Federal Hydrocarbon Law in force, federalization appears as a widely acknowledged possibility for channeling the distribution of oil in a more beneficial manner for the regional governorates. Such a move could greatly strengthen their position with respect to Baghdad. In the Iraqi rent-based economy, in which revenues of natural resources account for more than 40% of the GDP, this is of utmost importance. The federal Region of Kurdistan currently receives a fixed 17% share of oil revenues. However, other governorates have to take their chances with \$1 a barrel. Critics argue that these oil revenues feed the machine of corruption and patronage in Baghdad.

Another oil related issue relates to the unmistakable dominance of foreign oil companies in Iraq. This leads to an outflow of revenues into foreign countries and an influx into the pockets of particular Iraqi leaders. Changing the system and the rules for wealth distribution proved a rather difficult task for political forces beyond Baghdad. Despite being mentioned in Art. 65 of the Iraqi Constitution, no second chamber representing the governorates has yet been created. The discussion was largely muted in 2011 and has not been picked up since.

In 2013, the oil rich Salahaddin Governorate made an attempt to declare itself a semi-autonomous region. This was in keeping with the conditions of the constitution. However, the move was rejected by the central government, which feared a breakup of Iraq and ramifications for the war against ISIS. The businessman Mudhar Shawkat, who formed a Sunni based militia that fought ISIS, was among the first to float the idea of a Sunni Regional Government akin to the Kurdistan Regional Government. But he came under heavy pressure due to disclosures of corruption after the release of the Paradise Papers, and he has no real support base inside Iraq. In 2017, Osama an-Nujaifi, leader of the mainly Sunni “Uniters for Reform”, declared the establishment of a semi-independent Sunni region according to constitutional laws as an important goal. Such a region would lie either solely in Niniveh, or it would be composed of al-Anbar, Salahaddin and Niniveh.

This evident and widespread desire to be more independent from Baghdad is connected to a deep-rooted aversion toward cooperation with the central government. It has led to a split between cooperators and non-cooperators within the Sunni community. “Representation by post” (*tamtheel bil mansib*) – the inclusion and support of particular, sometimes small tribes by the central government – is often regarded as a dishonorable practice.

A vivid example is provided by the “Sunni Awakening”. This political party, which was led by Ahmed Abu Risha from the small Abu Risha tribe, emerged out of a popular protest movement in al-Anbar. Baghdad provided the tribe with money, weapons, and land to successfully fight off al-Qaeda in Iraq. Today, however, the Abu Risha tribe has lost its legitimacy.⁶ Nonetheless, the degree of cooperation with the government remains a heavily contested issue, even in the Sunni north. Parliamentary Speaker Saleem al-Juburi, a member of an-Nujaifis’ Bloc, was critical of the attempt at federalization. He argued that Sunni issues could be more effectively addressed through an improved relationship to Baghdad. Al-Juburi, from the ethnically mixed Governorate of Dyala, is often criticized by Sunnis as a collaborator with Baghdad’s Shi’a elite. As a result of these struggles, the Sunni Islamic Party, which is closely linked to the Muslim Brotherhood and is led by Salim al-Juburi, joined the cross-sectarian Bloc of Iad Allawi.

Hadi al-Ameri was one of the first Shiite politicians to call for regional autonomy in the south of Iraq. In recent years, however, this rhetoric has receded in place of a slightly more nationalistic tone. Indeed, the narrative invoked by his militia-driven bloc relates more to national unity, and the role of the militias in saving Iraq from ISIS. Al-Ameri has repeatedly stressed that his Fatah coalition’s credentials would be anchored in a “purely Iraqi movement”, proven “with our blood.”⁷ Apparently, the inclination towards national unity is still strong in Iraq’s south, and is backed above all by the Shi’a clergy around Grand Ayatollah as-Sistani. Indeed, and in keeping with his welfare-oriented Islamism, Muqtada as-Sadr expressed sympathy for the mainly Sunni protest in the province al-Anbar in 2015. But he nonetheless warned the protesters that Iraqi national unity should not be placed in jeopardy.

The split of the al-Hakim movement from the ISCI in 2017 can be regarded in the same light. When founding his “Wisdom Movement”, al-Hakim announced it would “work hand in hand with Iraqis to ensure democratic elections that include all of Iraq’s spectra, away from sectarian and national polarization”⁸. As ISCI leader, al-Hakim had faced fierce resistance inside the ISCI when trying to realign its strategy by focusing more on youth and establishing relations to different Shi’a and Sunni tribes. These measures, along with a focus on deprived social groups and a more nationalistic rhetoric, can be understood as moves towards the strategy of Muqtada As-Sadr (whatever the liturgical and ideological differences between them).⁹ Indeed, inside most southern political and

religious circles, federalization is mainly viewed as a disagreeable means to advance a secessionist agenda. A rhetoric of national unity prevails in this region.

In the light of recent governmental and national crises, any attention to the issue of federalization seems to have receded. Moreover, because of the underperformance of an-Nujaifis Bloc and other pro-federalization forces, it seems less likely that federal reforms will be prioritized by the current government. Against this background, we might ask whether the low participation in the elections in many Sunni dominated regions does not constitute a self-inflicted wound for Sunni non-collaborators.

Domestic Attitudes towards Foreign Influence

After the invasion of Iraq, the United States constantly grappled with bringing the country under military and political control. US backed politicians such as Iad Allawi, the de-facto winner of the 2010 parliamentary election, have been repeatedly confronted with corruption charges and have lost credibility. Moreover, many Iraqis associate the occupation with instability, insecurity and sectarian strife. Proximity to the United States is still enough to see a candidate rejected by a good number of voters.

That said, for many Sunnis in the north of Iraq, US support is seen as a necessary evil in order to curtail Iranian influence. Some tribal leaders have also benefitted from US measures. In 2006-2008, for example, tribal groups in the western province of al-Anbar, including from ad-Dualim and ‘Annizah, fought alongside al-Qaeda against the US occupation. This resulted in a fundamental change to US strategy. Troops levels were increased, there was a push for expanded tribal rights with respect to the central authorities in Baghdad, infrastructural projects were expanded, and more equipment was provided. Al-Qaida was eventually defeated.

At this time, the Islamic Party, the strongest party in an-Nujaifi’s bloc, gave voice to many criticisms from within the broader religious political camp of the US occupation and the continued interference of “Western” players in Iraqi politics. However, the Nujaifi family has strong ties to Turkey. Turkish financial aid played a role in the Nujaifi family’s attempts to unify Sunni political forces. When Turkey began to conduct military operations on Iraqi territory against ISIS, then-Defense Minister an-Nujaifi’s reaction was rather cautious. He described Ankara’s increased role as a guarantee of survival in the face of current Shi’i expansion in northern Iraq. Salim al-Juburi, a member of the Islamic Party and allegedly close to Iran, openly criticized this position.

Iran’s connections with groups inside Iraq appear to be more stable than those of the United States. This is not least because of Iran’s contribution to the militias fighting. Relatively quick and unbureaucratic Iranian assistance is appreciated by many Iraqis, even Sunnis. For instance, Ali Dodah Khalaf al-Juburi, the mayor of ash-Shirqat, a town close to Tikrit, said with hindsight “...no one helped us when ISIS came - not America, not Turkey. But Iran helped us, with guns, tanks, and rockets”¹⁰.

Nonetheless, and despite their role in the fight against ISIS, Iran’s involvement is resented by much of the Iraqi population and by many prominent politicians. Most prominently, as-Sadr distanced himself from Iran and advocated for a more nationalistic and independent path in Iraqi politics. He publicly criticized the Islamic Republic and even undertook a journey to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Moreover, as-Sadr demands the integration of the Iranian backed militias that fought ISIS into the Iraqi security apparatus. Al-Hakim's newly established Wisdom Movement takes a similar approach, and seeks to gain more independence from Iraq's neighbor. This is one of the primary reasons for his split from the ISCI. In this way, both factions approach the subtle but influential recommendations of Grand Ayatollah as-Sistani. In contrast, and without mentioning al-Ameri by name, as-Sistani criticized candidates who looked to exploit their security achievements in order to score political points. He openly stated that he would oppose the funneling of foreign money and support to Iraqi candidates.

But the wish for good relations to Iran among some Iraqi leaders and the population is not only tied to the question of party finance and physical security, however. Due to the supply of goods and trade connections, many Iraqi regions are virtually dependent on Iran. The religious centers of the country benefit from tourism as a major source of income. In these cities, economic sanctions on Iran have hit businesses, such as souvenir shops, while religious institutions have been obliged to sack workers. Iranian electricity is also especially important for (re)construction, and for field irrigation with water pumps.

The Government Formation and Beyond

In the months after the Iraqi elections, the party system was in a state of near-constant flux. Rumors circulated about a mooted al-Abadi coalition with al-Hakim, Allawi, an-Nujaifi, and some minorities,¹¹ or the announcement of a new bloc called al-Binaa consisting of al-Ameri's Fatah bloc and al-Maliki's State of Law coalition. Its leaders claimed to be the leading force in parliament, potentially giving them the right to name the Prime Minister. The Alliance between al-Ameri and al-Maliki seemed a logical reaction to counter the possible alliance of as-Sadr, al-Hakim, and al-Abadi. This second coalition would surely find common ground over electoral and governmental reform, skepticism toward Iran, and welfare-oriented Islamism.

But the announcement of a close cooperation between al-Ameri's Binaa bloc and the Sadrist bloc changed the situation. This seemed an astonishing development, especially given as-Sadr's plentiful statements that he would never cooperate with al-Ameri. And yet these actors were able to find common ground on the question of anti-corruption, on the need to find policies to calm the growing uproar on Iraq's streets, on the conviction that the physical presence of Iran backed militias inside the country is an asset, and over an all-permeating fear of too completely alienating Iran.

This last fear is clearly grounded in Iraq's economic dependence on its Persian neighbor, a fact that becomes evident in the eastern province of Maysan. This region has the most advanced infrastructure in Iraq, but its electrical power comes from across the Iranian border. It is governed by the charismatic Ali Dawai Lazem, a supporter of as-Sadr who won the Governorate in a landslide. It has since become his stronghold and the most important basis for his nationwide electoral success. This suggests that any de-facto implementation of measures based on as-Sadr's anti-Iranian rhetoric will be extremely limited. Furthermore, clear statements from Tehran before and during the election caused much insecurity. Akbar Velayati, a senior foreign policy adviser to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, had already decisively stated before the election that Iran would "not allow liberals and communists to govern Iraq".¹²

The alliance that ultimately emerged is called the Coalition for Reform and Development (CRD). Alongside the al-Ameri and as-Sadr blocs, it also includes Haider al-Abadi's Victory Coalition, Allawi's al-Wataniya, Osama an-Nujaifi's Uniters for Reform, the Turkmen Front's list and Christian, Sabean and Yazidi representatives. It thus encapsulates most politically relevant players within an oversized coalition. Al-Maliki's Da'wa party refused to join the coalition, but it may yet play a role. Like the Kurds, it will have a say in the decisions to come, because the CRD has no absolute majority, and all partners stress the government's intended inclusivity. In a surprising move, Ammar al-Hakim's Wisdom Movement also announced its intention to form part of the opposition at the end of June 2019, although it had already signaled its willingness to participate in the CRD. It seems that the young party is still searching for a position that will distinguish it from its rivals.

Against this complicated background, the nomination of Adel Abdul Mahdi seems to provide a first point of agreement. Mahdi is a former communist as well as a former member of the ISCRI (the ISCI's name before 2003). He has no current party affiliation. He was ISCRI's representative in Iraqi Kurdistan and advocates a referendum in Kirkuk. He has ties to Sunni politicians and is considered neither US nor Iran dependent. He is presented as an independent technocrat but, when choosing his ministers, he was obliged to consider the quota principle. Though as-Sadr advocated for technocrats without party affiliation inside the government and gained support through the newly elected President Barham Saleh at the beginning of December 2018, al-Ameri still tried to place members close to him in the cabinet. With the nomination of the ministers for the important posts of justice, interior, and foreign affairs, this tug-of-war over positions seems to have come to an close.

Outlook: No Indication of Real Change

It would be exaggerated to claim that Iraq has arrived at a crucial crossroads in its recent history. Indeed, the country has reputedly been standing at a crossroads for some fifteen years. Nonetheless, two developments can be mentioned that may enhance the possibility of solving the political stalemate and economic underperformance of the country.

First, street protests directed at the infrastructural situation may yet flare up again. They hang over the government like a Sword of Damocles. Many leading politicians, such as as-Sadr and al-Ameri, have backed the demonstrators and demanded that their voices should be heard. After Iran stopped most of its electricity supply due to \$1.5 Billion in unpaid bills coupled with its own domestic shortage, an energy delegation was sent to Saudi Arabia to look into the possibility of cooperation in the electricity sector.¹³

But in contrast to previous protests, the most recent demonstrations targeted not only single politicians but also the political parties. Thus considerable pressure to resolve the parliamentary stalemate has been brought to bear on the political class. The increased security situation has triggered demands that go beyond security and focus on economic well-being and popular participation. If the pressure from the streets can be maintained while the security situation remains stable, and if the new MPs (two-thirds of whom are new to the job) can resist cooptation into the corrupt apparatus, then political change is possible.

Second, the rise of a strong welfare-oriented Islamism with nationalistic and cross-sectarian inclinations hints at a possible decline of ethnosectarian tensions and the political power sharing it

gives rise to. The strength of the Sadr-Movement and the withdrawal of al-Hakim from the ISCI in favor of a more nationalistic, anti-Iranian rhetoric are exemplary of this trend. To be sure, this diversification has not yet produced appreciable cross-sectarian election results. But this is largely because the new current has yet to demonstrate its real willingness and capacity to implement their cross-sectarian nationalism in the form of measurable policies. Such policies are possible, even if the election results and the formation of the Sadr-Ameri coalition show unambiguously that, at present, there is no chance to keep Iranian influence out of Iraqi politics.

Certainly, the advocates of a more nationalistic and welfare-oriented politics struggle to set up majorities at the governmental level in Baghdad. But this does not suggest that they would be unable to push through some of their policies. Any attempt to unify and develop Iraq will depend on success in the following areas; the effective, credible and visible fight against corruption; the enhancement of public services and infrastructure; the establishment of a comprehensive federal framework of revenue distribution; the integration of Iran-backed militias into the security apparatus in order to restore the state's monopoly of power; and the reintegration of disenchanting Sunni tribes.

Confronting these sensitive issues represents a Herculean task, especially because the electoral victor, as-Sadr, has yet to prove his willingness to govern inclusively. Even then, As-Sadr must show that he really is as discreet, farsighted, and strategic as his admirers claim.

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