



Politics

27

OCT
8:40 UTC

Iraq Analysis: Sadr's gains in election point to diminishing Iranian influence; tensions over results to prolong government formation, prompt unrest

Executive Summary

- Parliamentary elections were held across Iraq on October 10. New measures were implemented to improve the credibility of Iraq's electoral process and bolster voter confidence. However, the election recorded a 43 percent voter turnout amid subsequent accusations of impropriety, which will undermine the legitimacy of the results and prolong the government formation process.
- The Iraqi nationalist Shiite Sadrist Movement won a plurality of seats in the election, while the Iran-aligned Shiite Fatah Alliance suffered a significant loss of support compared to the previous vote. This suggests that sizable parts of Iraq's Shiite populace have become critical of Iran's perceived meddling in Iraqi affairs and points to friction within the broad Shiite political camp.
- The election results may lead to a slightly less Iran-aligned government. However, in the interim, Iran will seek to capitalize on the likely prolonged government formation in order to insert itself into the coalition process via the pro-Iran political factions and their armed militias.
- Despite calls by anti-government activists to boycott the election, the Tishreen (October) [protest] movement-linked parties still secured around 13 seats. This indicates a lack of cohesion between groups sharing a common goal, as some believe that change can be achieved through engaging with the political process, while others who boycotted the election consider it ineffectual.
- **Overall, a prolonged government formation process is likely over the coming weeks at least. This will destabilize the security environment as pro-Iran factions call for protests denouncing the election results. Regardless of who leads the next coalition, the government will aim to enact economic reforms, which could facilitate investment opportunities in Iraq.**

Short-term Security Implications

Disputed election results to prolong government formation, destabilize security environment in the short-term

1. This was the sixth parliamentary election held in Iraq since the US-led invasion ousted Saddam Hussein in 2003. Originally scheduled in June, the October 10 election was still held months ahead of the constitutionally mandated date set for 2022. This was due to Prime Minister (PM) Mustafa al-Kadhimi's promise to hold early elections following the outbreak of large-scale, unruly anti-government protests in October 2019, which resulted in the killing of over 600 demonstrators and the subsequent resignation of former PM Adel Abdul Mahdi.
2. The new measures implemented in advance of the election, namely smaller voting districts and significant international oversight, were aimed at improving the credibility of Iraq's electoral process and bolstering voter confidence. This is because a portion of the populace perceives the government as an illegitimate and corrupt entity that perpetuates a sectarian-based political system whose primary goal is to continue serving the needs of Iraq's political elite, rather than addressing citizens' socio-economic needs. Thus, the new measures, which allowed for increased participation of independent candidates while curbing the influence of larger, more established political parties, were aimed at combating this perception. Still, the recent election recorded its lowest voter turnout since 2003. Despite the al-Kadhimi-led government's efforts, the election's outcome shows that the Iraqi electorate has become further disillusioned with Iraq's political system as an instrument to implement meaningful change for Iraqi citizens.
3. **FORECAST:** As coalition formation negotiations are currently underway, the increased number of political independents in the new parliament will likely contribute to a protracted government formation process over the coming weeks at least. This is in part because independent candidates may refuse to enter coalition partnerships with the more established parties due to their

perception that they sustain the current status quo. Alternatively, they may unite under one bloc in order to leverage their combined electoral strength and join the government formation negotiations. The fact that the Iraqi government must also operate according to an ethnic and sectarian-based political quota system, for instance where the president is Kurdish and PM Shiite Muslim, will further contribute to the prolonged government formation process as politicians attempt to bridge ideological differences to form coalition blocs. Regardless, the increase of independent representation will likely make it difficult for the larger parties to form the necessary 165-seat majority without incorporating Tishreen movement-aligned parties and independents into their coalition.

4. Several pro-Iran Shiite factions, such as the Fatah Alliance (16 seats) and Katai'b Hezbollah's political wing, the Huqouq Party (one seat), have rejected the IHEC's release of preliminary election results. This underscores the potential for a prolonged government formation process as such groups have instigated large demonstrations in recent weeks, including in [Basra](#) and [Baghdad](#). This showcases their ability to mobilize supporters in a continued effort to challenge the election's outcome, particularly as results are still undergoing appeals processes by the IHEC.
5. **FORECAST:** Despite the al-Kadhimi-led government's extensive efforts to hold transparent and democratic elections, such accusations of impropriety threaten to undermine the process of forming, and thereafter the legitimacy, of the new Iraqi government. Given that the election results have yet to be ratified by the Iraqi Supreme Court, claims of voter fraud and protests denouncing election results will likely escalate over the coming weeks. This is further underscored by reported threats made by several Shiite militias, particularly Katai'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS), to intensify anti-election demonstrations if IHEC officials do not re-conduct the election. No major unrest has yet to be reported during such demonstrations beyond blocking roads with tire fires. That said, there is a high risk of localized clashes between security forces and protesters. This is particularly given the ongoing sit-in outside Baghdad's Green Zone since [October 19](#), which has seen a high security presence deployed to the locale. Security forces are unlikely to engage with the protesters and risk an escalation but will intervene should protesters become unruly near sensitive or strategic sites.

6. Some Iran-linked groups in Iraq have also since threatened the UAE and UN-linked individuals who were involved in monitoring the election in coordination with the IHEC. For instance, Iran-backed militias issued a threat campaign against Special Representative for the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) on October 13, accusing the UN and the Iraqi authorities of conducting election fraud. The UAE has been targeted by similar threats because servers used by the IHEC to process election results are located in the Emirates, thus fueling the perception that Emirati authorities may have interfered in the election. An Iran-linked media commentator reportedly stated that “drones, precision missiles, and ballistic missiles will be launched from the Iraqi soil towards the UAE, to send a deterrence message to the leaders of the conspiracy [to steal the elections].” Taken together, these developments demonstrate the heightened risk to UN and UAE-linked entities in Iraq due to the perception that they meddled in the election in a way that adversely impacted Iran-linked political actors. This risk may extend to other international bodies, particularly US-linked elements. **FORECAST:** Armed attacks against foreign entities operating in Iraq are possible over the coming weeks. This is indicated by both the hostile rhetoric disseminated by Iran-backed groups and their evident ability to target Western-affiliated entities over recent months, including through the use of [armed unmanned aerial vehicles \(UAVs\)](#), which have posed operational challenges for established military forces.

Political Implications and Outlook

Al-Sadr electoral gains to result in slightly diminished Iranian influence in new government, although Iran to continue to harbor influence in Iraq

1. Preliminary results from the recent election show an increase in support for the Iraqi nationalist Sadrist Movement, led by Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. This was largely at the expense of the more hardline Iran-aligned bloc, namely the Fatah Alliance, which incurred a loss of 32 seats. While coalition formations are currently in the negotiating stage, al-Sadr stated on October 17 that his bloc seeks “national, non-sectarian and non-ethnic alliances, under the tent of reform”. This indicates that the party with the plurality of seats in the incoming parliament will adhere to its nationalist platform, based on non-interference by international actors, namely the US and Iran. al-Sadr’s statement was also likely aimed at appealing to political independents, Sunni and Kurdish political representatives, as well as unaligned Shiite factions, to expedite the formation of a coalition.
2. The Sadrist Movement and Iran-backed factions have been disseminating conflicting narratives regarding the recent election. The former has lauded the vote as an affirmation of Iraqi self-determination and control, while the latter, namely the Hadi al-Amiri-led Fatah Alliance, has stated that the election results were fabricated. Although the parties joined forces after the 2018 election and were once partners, their diverging statements point to tensions within the broader Shiite political camp. This particularly concerns Iranian interference in Iraqi domestic affairs, which Sadr has rejected. The Fatah Alliance and the Sadrist Movement maintain varying degrees of connection to Iran and actively campaign for non-US interference. However, al-Sadr has emphasized an Iraqi nationalist approach and broadly considers any foreign interference a violation of Iraq’s sovereignty. He remains largely ambiguous on his preferred relationship between Iraq and Iran. The Shiite cleric capitalized on opposition to foreign interference to gain favor among the Iraqi populace at the expense of the Iran-aligned bloc, particularly as some Iran-backed PMU factions have been accused of violently cracking down on anti-government activists since 2019. This shift of power is reflected in the Sadrist Movement’s notable increase in seats in areas of Baghdad and southern Iraq, specifically in Shiite-majority areas of Basra, where Iran retains a lot of influence, and the simultaneous decline in support for the Fatah Alliance.

- 3. FORECAST:** In light of the loss of seats incurred by pro-Iran factions in the recent election, Iran and its proxy elements will also seek to insert itself into the process of coalition formation by exerting pressure on negotiations among Shiite factions. This was exhibited by a visit to Baghdad by Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) commander, Esmail Qaani, as election results were being counted on October 11. As Iran retains considerable influence among several Shiite militias, a prolonged government formation process will support Tehran's interests in Iraq. Protracted months-long negotiations and subsequent election of a new PM will hinder Iraqi authorities' ability to implement reforms to undermine the current status quo enjoyed by Iran, particularly regarding its dependency on Iranian energy imports. Iraq imports nearly a third of its gas and electricity from Iran to bolster its supply of electricity and will be unable to become completely self-reliant over the short term. The US has periodically granted sanctions waivers to Iraq to meet its energy needs, thereby indicating that the former continues to prioritize Iraq's stability as such power disruptions have previously triggered large-scale protests. However, Tehran's sustained involvement in Iraqi affairs will likely persist, at least over the coming months, which will facilitate its ability to interfere in the formation of the coalition. Furthermore, it is likely that Sadr and his chosen candidate for PM, which could be the incumbent al-Kadhimi, will continue to rely on the support of Iran-linked political elements. This is both because of the electoral figures and the sheer force and influence that these groups' military wings harbor in the country.
- 4. FORECAST:** That said, over the medium term, the marked increase in electoral power held by the Sadrist Movement is likely to result in a slightly less Iran-aligned incoming government. This is reflected in Muqtada al-Sadr's statement after the election proclaiming the result was a "victory by the people over... [Iran-backed] militias", thereby underscoring his somewhat distancing away from Iran and its perceived meddling in Iraqi affairs. Furthermore, during his speech on October 11, al-Sadr stated that "arms must be controlled by the state only, and the use of arms must be banned outside this scope, even if [used] by those who claim they are the resistance". This rhetoric is evidently directed against Iran-backed militias and points to the high probability of tension between the Sadr and the Iran-aligned factions.
- 5.** The mere threat of disarming Iran-backed PMU factions or consolidating their forces under the Iraqi security apparatus risks provoking such groups and destabilizing Iraq's security environment due to the PMU's considerable strength. This was evidenced on May 26 when, following the arrest of one of its senior officials, some factions within the PMU deployed members and armored vehicles at the entrances of the Green Zone in Baghdad. This show of force illustrated the impact of PMU-affiliated militias on Iraq's security environment, particularly at a strategic and sensitive

locale, such as Baghdad's Green Zone. The incident highlighted the Iraqi government's challenge in reigning in armed militia groups. **FORECAST:** Given that some Iran-linked PMU factions retain power within both Iraqi security and political spheres, such clout will be leveraged in the coalition formation process, particularly in response to al-Sadr's calls to limit their influence.

6. Through his statements, al-Sadr likely sought to curry favor among independents and anti-government activists in preparation for a possible political partnership. This is particularly given that restricting the proliferation of arms and consolidating them under state control was one of the Tishreen Movement's primary demands in holding early elections. Armed Iran-linked paramilitary groups, namely armed militias affiliated with the PMU, have been accused of excessive use of force when cracking down on anti-government protests in recent years. In light of the PMU's significant influence and armed force, it is highly unlikely that al-Sadr or the Iraqi government will succeed in meeting such calls for disarmament. Regardless, his statement nevertheless suggests that an incoming Sadrist Movement-led or aligned coalition will likely be less Iran-allied than in years past.

Prospects For Civil Unrest

Anti-government Tishreen protest movement to remain active, despite parliamentary gains

1. The number of seats secured by independent candidates as well as the Emtidad Party, affiliated with the Tishreen (October) anti-government protest movement, is noteworthy. Such parties affiliated with the Tishreen Movement, including the Tasmim Alliance, are newly formed factions participating in Iraq's political sphere since the anti-government movement's emergence in 2019. Independent candidates also secured a much larger foothold in the upcoming parliament (39 seats), compared to their performance in the 2018 election (five seats). These gains can partially be attributed to the new electoral laws that eradicated list-based voting in favor of individual candidates, thereby helping facilitate the relative success of independents and Tishreen movement parties as they were able to reach out to the electorate on a localized level.
2. This increase in support for Tishreen-aligned and independent parties is despite calls to boycott the election by several groups within the anti-government camp. Such an unprecedented electoral performance comes against the backdrop of widespread anti-government demonstrations, which started in October 2019. Since then, activists have attempted to prolong the movement by denouncing government corruption and poor socio-economic conditions. Their efforts have persisted despite frequent arrests and assassinations of activists. The Tishreen movement's strong electoral performance therefore showcases the sustained fervor of activists in their effort to generate political change. **FORECAST:** Seats secured by Emtidad and other activist-led parties will likely be translated into forming coalition partnerships with other independent candidates or the larger Sadrist Movement bloc in order to actualize at least some of the reforms they seek.
3. Several anti-government activist groups, such as "The Opposition Forces Gathering", called for a boycott of the election, which partly explains the slightly reduced voter turnout compared with 2018. It moreover highlights the disunity among groups within the anti-government camp. Parties such as the Emtidad Movement have sought to engage with Iraq's political process to facilitate reform, while the others perceive it to be a fruitless pursuit. Regardless, both groups believe the government to be plagued by corruption and Iraq's political elite to be incapable of implementing the necessary reforms to benefit Iraqi citizens. In particular, the May 9 assassination of a prominent activist in Karbala reinvigorated the anti-government protest movement and sparked calls to boycott the election. Activists subsequently set fire to trailers belonging to Iran's consulate, underscoring the perception that Iran is behind the assassination of activists. Anti-government protesters have also violently targeted Iranian infrastructure to express their grievances on multiple occasions over the past two years.
4. **FORECAST:** Despite the increased representation of independent candidates and anti-government activists, the protest movement in Iraq will persist over the coming months. The Iraqi government is unlikely to be able to address their demands to disarm and consolidate Iran-linked militias under

the state security apparatus at the current juncture, which will further invigorate the Tishreen Movement's resolve to prolong the movement. This may act as a catalyst for additional unrest to be reported across the country, including in Baghdad, over the coming months. Furthermore, Iraq is still experiencing an economic crisis, which was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The government will unlikely be able to implement the required economic reforms to address the socio-economic grievances held by large segments of Iraq's populace.

Continued Threats to Iraq's Stabilization

US to attempt to capitalize on perceived diminished Iranian influence in Iran; likely to increase friction between parties

1. **FORECAST:** Based on the high probability of a coalition led or heavily influenced by the Sadrist Movement, the US will seek to capitalize on the likely diminished power of Iran in order to strengthen its influence. In order to dispel perceptions of direct US interference that cause tension, this will primarily be through economic and security measures and other soft power means. This is likely to include steering Iraq's energy infrastructure away from reliance on Iran and towards US allies such as Saudi Arabia, and discreetly encouraging the consolidation of Iraqi state forces under one umbrella. However, the US and its associated interests will remain a target for Iranian-linked groups in the country, with periodic attacks against US-linked facilities and contracted convoys to continue as part of its overall campaign to push the US to fully withdraw. The persistence of these attacks poses a risk to uninvolved civilians and threatens to undermine operations in the country, including energy-related infrastructure and supply lines.
2. US President Joe Biden and PM al-Kadhimi agreed to formally end US combat missions in Iraq by December 31, 2021. That said, its remaining presence in the country as an advisory force indicates that it maintains a vested interest in stabilizing Iraq, especially due to potential economic opportunities in multiple sectors for US companies. **FORECAST:** The US's continued presence in

Iraq will prompt further militia-perpetrated attacks against US-linked interests and personnel over the coming months. This will be especially the case if Iran perceives itself to be under pressure due to its waning influence in the event of a coalition devoid of its main proxy groups or if they have limited influence over the cabinet and decision-making. This threat is likely to be somewhat tempered once the new parliament has been established and tensions subside.

3. Iran-linked militias, as well as sustained Islamic State (IS) activity in several parts of the country, continue to jeopardize Iraq's economic growth, particularly regarding foreign investment in its energy sector. The [September 11](#) unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) attack against Erbil Air Base and [August 27](#) rocket attack targeting US-linked elements in Basra Province near the Kuwait border illustrate the risks posed to US-linked interests and facilities in Iraq. Similarly, the [August 15](#) IED explosion reported at Kirkuk's Bay Hassan Oil Field and IS-claimed [May 5](#) IED attack at the same locale highlight the threat to Iraq's energy sector posed by IS. Such repeated attacks against Iraq's infrastructure are part of IS's campaign to undermine the Iraqi government and its efforts to stabilize and secure the country, particularly by targeting its oil revenues. This is because Iraq's economic stability is largely contingent on energy derivatives, accounting for more than 90 percent of the state budget and as well its crude oil exports.
4. **FORECAST:** Generating foreign investment in Iraq's energy infrastructure will be a primary concern for the new Iraqi government to overcome the country's current economic crisis, regardless of the coalition makeup. On October 24, al-Sadr signaled a willingness to collaborate with countries throughout the world in the security and economic sectors, among others. In this context, efforts to stabilize Iraq's economy are particularly hindered by the fact that many of the country's oil reserves are underdeveloped due to the lack of investment and technical expertise to operate such facilities. Over the coming years, a reduction in Iraq's dependence on Iranian energy imports could facilitate additional opportunities for companies from Western and non-aligned states to exert influence in the country. Thus, should a less Iran-aligned Iraqi leadership successfully emerge from the election that prioritizes Iraqi interests over those of external actors, there will likely be increasing opportunities for investment in Iraq. This will largely be dictated by the ability of the new government to stabilize the country and reign in armed groups outside of the state apparatus.

Recommendations:

1. The threat of militancy is higher in the outskirts, particularly in Shiite-populated neighborhoods. Contact us at Operations@max-security.com or +44 20-3540-0434 for itinerary and contingency support options.
2. Those operating in Iraq, particularly in Baghdad and Basra, are advised to avoid the immediate vicinity of any political gatherings or demonstrations, regardless of goal or affiliation, given the potential for the event to devolve into unruly civil unrest and subsequent security crackdowns.
3. As a general precaution, it is advised that any travel, particularly in outlying areas, be conducted in armored vehicles, with proper security escorts and coordination with authorities.
4. Remain vigilant of the risk of roadside IEDs planted in parts of Iraq by Shiite militias, which are aimed at targeting US-linked logistical convoys but carry a risk of collateral damage due to misidentification.
5. Travel to Anbar, Nineveh, Salahuddin, Kirkuk, and Diyala Provinces should be avoided at this time due to ongoing counter-militancy operations and militant attacks.
6. Those operating natural gas or oil facilities are advised to obtain security consultation for facilities in outlying areas, specific to the nationalities and operational needs of their employees.
7. To mitigate the risk of attacks or abductions, ensure that accommodation is equipped with sufficient perimeter security details, alter travel routes, and avoid disclosing sensitive itinerary information to unknown individuals.
8. As a general security precaution, avoid revealing to strangers your position or affiliation with foreign-based firms, as your response could attract a negative reaction from locals.
9. Travelers to Iraq are advised to regularly review their emergency and contingency procedures as a basic security precaution, as the ongoing tensions between Iran on one side and the US and its

regional allies on the other will likely lead to additional hostilities.