

# Confessionalism and Electoral Prospects in Iraq



## Elections



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The Middle East Research Institute engages in policy issues contributing to the process of state building and democratisation in the Middle East. Through independent analysis and policy debates, our research aims to promote and develop good governance, human rights, rule of law and social and economic prosperity in the region. It was established in 2014 as an independent, not-for-profit organisation based in Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

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# **Confessionalism and Electoral Prospects in Iraq**

**MERI Policy Paper**

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## Summary

Ever since Saddam's regime was toppled in 2003, Iraq has three competitive parliamentary elections in 2005, 2010 and 2014. In all of these, pre-election alliance building and post-election coalition building processes were fairly predictable given the confessional nature of Iraq's political system. Essentially, the system is centered on a politically conventional power-sharing arrangement among the country's three main ethno-sectarian powerhouses: Shi'ite Arab Muslims, Sunni Arab Muslims, and ethnic Kurds (both Sunni and Shi'ite).

This arrangement has prompted small political parties to forge alliances with these confessional powerhouses. This time round, this trend is likely to continue in the upcoming elections scheduled on 12 May 2018, but perhaps on a smaller scale. What gravitates political entities are political expediency and nationalist sentiments. These two factors seem to be shaping and forming some alliances such as between secular and civil-minded parties, the Shiite Sadrist movement via Hizb Istaqama (the Integrity Party), and the Iraqi Communist party.

On 22 January 2018, Iraqi legislators ratified a decision to hold much-debated anticipated parliamentary elections on 12 May 2018, thereby ending the stalemate by some lawmakers to postpone it. Iraq is at a crossroads, and much of what is at stakes will depend on which of the 27 registered electoral alliances emerge as winners. The large number of alliances suggests that political entities are aware of the competitive advantages inherent to forming these, versus running independently. Indeed, because of Iraq's particular parliamentary arrangement, the 24 million eligible voters in the 18 national electoral districts, representing the country's 18 governorates, will not be electing the next prime minister – they will, instead, be picking an electoral alliance, which will engage in post-election coalition building negotiations to nominate the prime minister and form the next government.

While it is still premature to forecast the ultimate composition of the next government, it is most likely to be led by one of four viable options: Eitilaf al-Nasr (Victory Alliance) led by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi; Eitilaf al-Wataniya (National Alliance) led by former Prime Minister Ayad Alawi; Eitilaf Dawlat al-Qanun (State of the Law Alliance) led by former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki; and Tahaluf al-Fatah (Conquest Alliance) led by al-Hashd al-Sha'abi (Popular Mobilization Units) commander Hadi al-Ameri.

However, given the unpopularity of Iraq's political class, no single alliance is expected to win a majority of parliamentary seats, forcing the formation of a grand-coalition government, which, given Iraq's oversized economic, security, and political challenges, would help build broad-based support and legitimacy. Furthermore, the next election is expected to maintain the status quo due to the existence of potent structural forces inspired by political and electoral confessionalism. However, and encouragingly, the status quo may prove ephemeral in the face of internal divisions within the traditional confessional centers of power, the rising popular discontent with the quality of the existing democratic system and the limited progress it has made over the past fifteen years.

It would be safe to say that an inclusive government will increase popular support, reduce the likelihood of ethno-sectarian civil war, minimise the influence of external powers, and bolster the nation's attractiveness to foreign investors. In the long term, Iraq needs a government that is ambitiously reformist to transform the state's political, electoral, and economic systems.

## Confessionalism and Party Alliances

From the time Saddam's regime was toppled in 2003, Iraq held a total of three previous competitive election cycles in 2005, 2010 and 2014, in which pre-election alliance building and post-election coalition building processes were fairly predictable given the confessional nature of Iraq's political system. At its core, the system is centered on a politically conventional power-sharing arrangement, albeit with no basis in the Constitution, among the country's three main ethno-sectarian groups: Shiite Arab Muslims, Sunni Arab Muslims, and ethnic Kurds (both Sunni and Shiite), determined by the population size of each group. As a consequence of this political understanding, the office of the Prime Minister is stamped to Shiite Arabs, the office of Presidency to the Kurds, while Sunni Arabs are allotted the presidency of Parliament.

Like other aspects of Iraq's political life, electoral politics is not spared the negative effects of the confessional arrangement. Indeed, it has become the norm that political entities (i.e. candidates, parties, and alliances) congregate along ethno-sectarian (i.e. confessional) lines, entrusted by voters to advance the interests of their particular groups. As a result, voters have over the years grown hesitant to vote for an independent candidate, whom the electoral system does not favor. Besides being ideologically convenient, electoral alliances serve an important practical purpose: because Iraq's electoral law favours large political entities, alliances are simply an expedient vehicle to gain and maintain power. By contrast, small parties, if run independently, have little chances of success in this electoral environment. In fact, when they do, they often fail to meet the high threshold required to translate votes into seats, based on the Sainte Lague 1.7 formula for seat allocation.

To explain how this formula works, consider the following hypothetical example. Assume that there are three electoral lists competing in an electoral district: one large alliance, one small bloc, and a small party candidate. Also assume that the number of votes required to gain a seat in parliament is 5000. Further assume that the small party candidate receives only 4500 votes. If this were to happen, the candidate would lose the chance to serve, for failing to meet the threshold of 5000 votes. This, in fact, occurred in 2014 parliamentary elections. There and then, a small party candidate in Baghdad electoral district (allotted 69 seats) won 17,575, and yet didn't gain a parliament seat, because he ranked seven in the overall candidates' list in Baghdad. Conversely, some other candidates affiliated with large alliances won seats even though they received far fewer personal votes than the small party candidate.

This is one main reason why small political parties build alliances with traditional major powerhouses, previously known locally as the House of Shiites, House of Sunnis, and House of Kurds. Now, these 'Houses' are being dismantled, smaller powerhouses (lists and alliances led by established political entities or personalities) are replacing them, albeit still congregating along ethno-sectarian lines. Indeed, small parties recognize the difficulty, if not impossibility, of succeeding without allying themselves to this confessional system, i.e. adjusting to the logic and functionality of the system. Hence, the problem in Iraq is not a matter of the quality (good vs. bad) or nature (good. vs. evil) of candidates - the problem, in essence, is structural, rooted in the vertical ethno-sectarian system.

More telling is why the majority of voters continue electing and re-electing the same roster of leadership. Given how disappointing the performance of leaders has been over the last 15 years proving themselves unable and/or unwilling to address basic popular demands, it seems counterintuitive that voters would *tajreeb al-mujarab* or "test the tested." And yet, what seems puzzling to outsiders is actually a conscious decision made by voters aware of their country's political arrangement, its opportunities and restraints. In one sense, for electoral considerations, social and religious figures routinely encourage constituents

and followers to “not waste their votes by voting for small lists.” In another sense, from a psychological perspective, voters have been socialized to elect candidates so long they are members of their particular ethnic or religious group.

## **Continued, Yet Weakened Confessional Trend**

The trend of forming electoral alliances on the basis of confessional affiliations will continue in the upcoming elections, however, not as profoundly as in the past. Instrumental political expediency and nationalist sentiments have emerged as critical factors shaping and forming some alliances such as between secular and civil-minded parties, the Shiite Sadrist movement via Hizb Istaqama (the Integrity Party), and the Iraqi Communist party.

Building alliances on the basis of nationalist and political agendas must be marked as a step in the right direction—indeed, the evolution in voters’ preferences away from status quo, confessional parties is definite yet awfully slow, frustrating ordinary Iraqis and Western leaders, alike. But that is to be expected. Deeply entrenched confessionalism cannot be defeated easily or at once. It can, however, be gradually routed until its final demise.

Noteworthy in this regard, the congregation of parties along strict ethno-sectarian lines have slowly but steadily been eroding at least since 2009. The Shiite electoral alliance is a prime example of this norm. In the 2005 parliamentary elections, almost all Shiite political parties congregated under a single alliance umbrella: the United Iraqi Alliance. By 2009, the Alliance had split into two factions: the State of Law Alliance led by former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and the Iraqi National Alliance led by Ammar al-Hakim, leader of the newly formed Al-Hikma (Wisdom) Movement. By 2018, the Shiite alliance that existed in 2005 is hardly recognizable and its leaders went their separate ways in search of personal interests, power, and influence. In general, the character of many current electoral alliances is fairly heterogeneous in membership and ideological orientation, most notably Muqtada al-Sadr’s Saeroun (Marching) Alliance, which is not only a cross-sectarian but also unprecedentedly led by a woman in their Baghdad list, MP Majeda al-Timimi.

Still, some voters deem such developments unworthy of celebration given that the overall system is broken. Indeed, there is a sizable public disenchantment with the entire political process and the roster of political leaders it has produced. Consequently, many eligible voters are vocalizing their intentions to boycott the upcoming May elections, suggesting that turnout may be very low. Social media campaigns, such as *lan antakhib* “I will not vote” and *muqate’oun* “boycotters” attest to this popular displeasure and limited

## Key Alliances and Likely Winners

While it is still premature to forecast the ultimate composition of the next government, it is most likely to be led by one of four viable options:

- Eitilaf al-Nasr (Victory Alliance) led by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi,
- Eitilaf al-Wataniya (National Alliance) led by former Prime Minister Ayad Alawi
- Eitilaf Dawlat al-Qanun (State of the Law Alliance) led by former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, or
- Tahaluf al-Fatah (Conquest Alliance) led by al-Hashd al-Sha’abi (Popular Mobilization Units) commander Hadi al-Ameri.

At this point, the alliance standing the best chance of marginally winning most seats is al-Abadi’s Victory Alliance. Founded in January 2018, following a schism within the Shiite Hizb al-Da’wa al-Islami (al-Da’wa Islamic Party), the Alliance links a mixture of kingpin secular, religious and tribal actors and identities. While such diversity is intended to broaden the Alliance’s electoral base, attract more voters, and build on al-Abadi’s personal popularity, doing so has also brought a litany of challenges stemming from the difficulty of managing the diverse interests of the Alliance’s broad-based members. It ultimately led to several blows, as powerful parties and alliances began to defect, including the Conquest Alliance and Ammar al-Hakim’s Tayar al-Hikmah al-Watani (National Wisdom Movement).

Notwithstanding these defections, al-Abadi remains in a strong position to win the largest number of seats. Indeed, though he disappointed reformist and liberal voices, both domestic and international, who were shocked by his willingness to be associated with the likes of alleged corrupt politicians and Iran-backed PMU elements, which he used to criticize, al-Abadi remains popular among a sizable pool of voters across sectarian groups. For these voters, his track record in defeating ISIS, preserving the unity of the country, and launching a media campaign on corruption is enough for now. There is also the recognition among many voters that al-Abadi’s possible reelection will bring with it a sustained international support to the Iraqi state, politically and otherwise.

Another viable contender expected to challenge al-Abadi as a significant force in the upcoming elections is Alawi’s National Alliance. Alawi ranks among the few key political leaders who have resisted confessional urges since 2003. Consistent with his electoral patterns, Alawi’s National Alliance is a mixture of secular and nationalist parties, with significant Sunni representation. Also aligned with previous electoral patterns is Alawi’s political platform advocating for national reconciliation and opposition to outside interferences. As such, he is expected to approve a strong opponent, especially among nationalists and secular Shiites and Sunnis in big cities such as Baghdad and Ramadi.

One of Alawi’s major strengths is his ability to build cross-sectarian alliances. This quality, however, offers as many restraints as opportunities. In theory, though a secular Shiite himself, Alawi’s partnership with Sunni parties, such as with Speaker of Parliament Salim al-Jebouri’s al-Tajamu’ al-Madani lil Islah (Civil Congregation for Reform) and former Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al-Mutlaq’s al-Jabha al-Iraqiya lil Hiwar (Iraqi Front for National Dialogue) could potentially bring additional votes from Iraq’s Sunni base. But it could also flop for at least two reasons. First, Sunni voters are disappointed with their existing roster of leaders whom they feel have “let them down,” thus, they may be less inclined to vote for these “tried” leaders. Second, and most critically, Alawi’s reported soft views on Ba’athism might cause him the premiership if

Shiites feel, as they did in 2010 elections, that Baathists are using Alawi as a backdoor to rule over their fate again.

In addition, if public polls and debates hold true, Alawi would have to compete for Sunni votes with al-Abadi whose favorability rate among Sunnis skyrocketed from 24% in December 2015 to 78% in April 2017. By reclaiming control of disputed territories from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in October 2017 and liberating Mosul in December of 2017, al-Abadi's favorability rate among Sunnis is likely to have increased as more Sunnis see him as a national leader who saved Iraq from ISIS, disintegration, and potential nationwide civil conflict. Hence, on 01 February 2018, influential Sunni cleric Ahmed al-Kubaisi visited al-Abadi in Baghdad, signaling acceptability or indirect support to the PM by both al-Kubaisi and his Sunni allies in the Gulf states particularly the UAE, where al-Kubaisi resides. Last but not least, the international community, especially the West, also favors al-Abadi, which should boost his chances of re-election.

The other alliance expected to make strong debut in upcoming elections is the PMU-led *Tahaluf al-Fatah* (Victory Alliance), in large part due to its high profile victories over ISIS. Led by PMU commander Hadi al-Ameri, this Alliance consists of 18 predominately Shiite political entities including: *Munadhamat Badr* (Badr Organization) led by al-Ameri himself, *Hezbollah-Iraq* led by Salim al-Bahadeli, *al-Sadiqoun/Asab Ahil al-Haq* (League of the Righteous People) led by Qais al-Khazali, and *al-Majlis al-Aala li al-Thawra al-Islamiya* (Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution) led by member of parliament Human Hamoudi.

Despite the volume of negative press against the PMU, the group remains popular among many Iraqis, especially in the southern governorates of Dhi-Qar, Basra, Misan, Diwaniya, Najaf, Karbala, and other Shiite pockets in Baghdad, Diyala, and Wasit. Residents in these governorates value the sacrifices the PMU has made to save Iraq from total collapse as ISIS advanced across Iraq in 2014-2015, resulting in PMU leaders and rank-and-files earning an aura of stature and sacredness. Therefore, the Alliance is expected to perform well in these Shiite-dominated governorates where most PMU cadres originate, and possibly in many Sunni areas such as Mosul, Salahaddin, Kirkuk and Diyala governorates where they are dominating the security scene and investing in voter attraction.

The fourth and last alliance with prospects for winning is the *Dawlat al-Qānūn* (State of the Law Alliance). Led by al-Maliki, this Alliance includes mostly traditional Shiite parties such as *Tayar al-Wasat* (the Middle Current) led by former National Security Advisor Muwafaq al-Rubae', *Hizb Du'at al-Islam-Iraq* (Preachers of Islam Party), previously *Hizb al-Da'wa-Iraq* (al-Da'wa Party-Iraq branch) led by former vice president Khudhair al-Khuza'e, and a few other small parties.

Despite al-Da'wa's organizational strengths, corruption, divisiveness, and poor governance have strained its reputation over the past fifteen years. Accordingly, although not to be underestimated, the Alliance is likely to win modestly compared to its performance in past elections, not only because of its leader's marred legacy, but also because of the limited number of parties on the list (less than 10).

Alliances will have several options to pursue when forming the post-elections governing coalition depending on their priorities and preferences, policy-related or otherwise. If al-Abadi wins, as a seasoned incumbent, he will likely have an easier time forming a new government, as, unlike his predecessor al-Maliki, for example, al-Abadi doesn't have vehement naysayers. In fact, even those unallied with the Victory Alliance have expressed interests in joining his post-election governing coalition. Such a coalition is likely to include Ammar al-Hakim's National Wisdom Movement, Muqtada al-Sadr's Saeroun, and former deputy Prime Minister Barham Saheh's *Tahaluf li aldimuqratiya wal 'Adala* (Alliance for Democracy and Justice) aligned in fighting corruption, engaging in national reconciliation and rebuilding state institutions.

Choices of post-election coalition partners will also be influenced by the policies and preferences of regional and international actors, most prominently Iran. Accordingly, it is possible that Iran would engineer a coalition between al-Ameri's Conquest Alliance and al-Maliki's State of the Law Alliance as the most expedient way to maintain Shiite-held power, especially supporters of Iran.

Some of the Kurdish lists and Alawi's National Alliance may, too, join this coalition now that they have experienced alienation by al-Abadi. The Kurds who appear fragmented at the moment may re-fashion themselves as kingmakers, but that would depend largely on their ability to form a unified post-election political front in the likes of the Kurdistan Alliance.

The Ameri-Alawi alliance along with some Kurdish representatives could be appealing to some Iraqis who may prefer the premiership to be stripped from the al-Da'wa Party while also keeping it in the political process given its political weight and historical legacy.

Lastly, based on geographic concentration of voters, trends in popularity of parties and individuals, and conversations with experts, it is expected that no single alliance will be able to gain a majority seats in parliament (see table 1), which may turn to be in the interests of the country. Surely, given Iraq's oversized economic, security, and political challenges, the next government must build broad-based support and legitimacy. An inclusive government will also be critical to ensuring popular support, reducing the likelihood of ethno-sectarian civil war, minimizing influence by external powers, and bolstering the nation's attractiveness to foreign investors. In the longer term, Iraq needs a government that is ambitiously reformist in character to take on transforming the state's political, electoral, and economic systems.

**Table 1: Distribution of (Predicted) Seats Per Alliance**

Actor/Alliance	Seats	Margin of Error +/-
Haider Al-Abadi/Victory Alliance	46	3
Hadi Al-Ameri/Conquest Alliance	41	2
Nouri Al-Maliki/ State of the Law Alliance	32	1
Ayad Alawi /National Alliance	30	1
Muqtada Al-Sadr/ Marching Forward	29	3
Ammar Al-Hakim/Wisdom Movement	21	2
Masoud Barzani/ Kurdistan Democratic Party	25 (22 plus 3 quota seats)	1
Barham Salah/Coalition for Democracy and Justice	10	2
Patriotic Union of Kurdistan	7	1
Gorran Movement	8	1
KRI Islamists (collectively, but in separate lists)	6	1

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