

Iraq's Defining Moment

Muhanad Seloom

Abstract: The socio-political drivers of conflict in Iraq have shifted. For the first time since 2003, Iraqis are seeking to form a representative government led by competent officials rather than choosing representation through customary ethno-sectarian quotas. Yet, Iraqi political parties opted for negotiating the formation of Iraq's next government based on the post-2003 communal quotas system. Through protests, Iraqis are pressuring the political elites to form a technocratic government capable of delivering essential services, fight endemic corruption, create jobs. For Iraqis, the new government must be capable of good governance.

Protests in several Iraqi cities have forced the winning Iraqi political parties to work together at the cost of their ethno-sectarian sub-identities. On the surface, Iraq appears to be a functional democracy. At a closer inspection however, further complexities are revealed.

Iraq is yet to recover from the aftermath of ISIS, more than a decade of poor governance, and ongoing corruption. The recent anti-corruption protests in the southern cities of Iraq are a testament to the severity of issues with infrastructure and governance, all of which must be addressed promptly. Equally, Sunni majority cities such as Mosul, Ramadi, and Fallujah, which were destroyed by the war against ISIS, are in urgent need of funding to be used for their reconstruction and stabilisation. The Iraqi government declared that it will not be able to cover all the costs of reconstruction. Consequently, the Iraqi Government is seeking donations and investment loans from both regional and international donors. During the reconstruction of Iraq conference held February 12-14 2018 in Kuwait, a total of 74 nations pledged to donate and loan the total of \$30 billion USD towards the reconstruction of Iraq which is expected to cost \$88 billion USD. Among the largest donors were Turkey and Saudi Arabia pledging together \$8 billion USD.¹ Turkey and Saudi Arabia are not only seeking to create strategic spaces of influence inside Iraq through donations and investment loans, but also want Iraqis to form a representative

government capable of resisting Iran's growing influence over Iraqi politics. It remains to be seen whether the pledges made by these donors will be honoured in their entirety.

Another unintended by-product of the war against ISIS was the rise of powerful militant groups. These groups create a threat to the government's monopoly over the legitimate use of armed force. In addition to the already overwhelming number of issues described here, the government in Baghdad is yet to resolve all of its outstanding issues with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), including the settlement of the disputed territories; the appropriate share of the budget to be allocated to the KRG; and the status of Kirkuk. Faced with a myriad of challenges, the question of the role and meaning of Iraq's new government comes to the forefront.

Iraqis hope that the newly constituted government will be different from its predecessors. Since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iraq has been held hostage by poor governance and divisive ethno-sectarian politics. Many Iraqis accuse their ruling political elites of incompetence, corruption, and collusion with foreign powers against Iraq's national interests. These structural problems have created fertile ground for chronic cycles of violence across different cities of Iraq. To demonstrate, in June 2014 the growing discontent with poor governance and perceived discrimination against the Sunni community contributed to the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Equally, the mismanagement of resources and corruption left densely populated cities without most fundamental services such as clean water, electricity, and proper sewage disposal facilities.

Iraqis hope that the newly constituted government will be different from its predecessors. Since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iraq has been held hostage by poor governance and divisive ethno-sectarian politics. Many Iraqis accuse their ruling political elites of incompetence, corruption, and collusion with foreign powers against Iraq's national interests

On 7 and 8 September 2018, demonstrations in the oil-rich city of Basra turned violent when young protesters set local governments' offices, diplomatic missions' headquarters, and foreign oil companies' buildings on fire. Local security forces were overwhelmed by the number of young protestors who led these demonstrations. In the absence of a functional private sector economy, coupled with state-sponsored patronage networks, nepotism, tribalism, and corruption, thousands of young Iraqis have been left without employment and means of sustenance. In this context, Iraqis expect the new government to carry out genuine political and economic reforms.

The New Iraqi Government

During its second and third sessions on 15 and 16 September 2018, the Iraqi Parliament was able to name its Speaker and his deputies. The Speaker, an Arab Sunni, Mr. Mohammed al-Halbousi is the youngest Speaker of the Parliament in Iraq's history. His appointment, however, has been surrounded by controversy. There was a fierce rivalry among different Sunni political groups to win the Speaker's position. Furthermore, rival Sunni political groups have voiced concerns that the nomination and subsequently election of the Speaker was the result of a corrupt deal.² Halbousi's nomination and election unveil deep divisions among



Sunni political groups – which date back to 2003.³ Although this is the official record of events to date, the complexities in the background are much more detailed.

PM Abadi's chances at victory have decreased significantly after Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani revealed a set of conditions for Iraq's next Prime Minister to meet including the criteria that he/she should not have held senior government office before

Ahead of the Iraqi Parliament's session on 3 September 2018, political coalitions competing to form the biggest parliamentary bloc and with it, appointing the next Prime Minister, were divided into two camps: the first was led by Muqtada al-Sadr and then incumbent Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi; and the second was led by Vice President Nouri al-Maliki (Dawa Islamic Party) and Hadi al-Amri (Fateh Coalition – Hashd). PM Abadi is widely perceived as favoured by the United States' government and its allies, while the Vice President Maliki's bloc is perceived as pro-Iran. PM Abadi's chances at victory have decreased significantly after Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani revealed a set of conditions for Iraq's next Prime Minister to meet including the criteria that he/she should not have held senior government office before. Equally, Mr. Amri withdrew his nomination for the Prime Minister's office leaving the door wide open for a new candidate. Adil Abdel-Mahdi is the new [compromise] candidate who won the premiership of Iraq. Until recently, however, it was not clear how PM Abdel-Mahdi was nominated. He was neither nominated by the biggest parliamentary bloc nor was such a bloc ever formed.

In a recent exchange between Sadr and Hadi al-Amri on Twitter⁴, Sadr revealed that Adil Abdel-Mahdi was nominated as Iraq's next Prime Minister as a result of an agreement

between Hadi al-Amri and Muqtada al-Sadr to "rule Iraq in a new way". The fact that Sadr chose to use Twitter as a platform to address Hadi al-Amri confirms the fragility of this agreement. Sadr tweeted,

"My message to the mujahid brother Hadi al-Amri: there are massive [corrupt] deals being negotiated between certain elements of al-Fateh and Sunni elements from al-Bina'a blocs to buy ministerial positions with unprecedented external support [money]. My dear brother, we agreed that Iraq should be run in a new and correct way that preserves its independence and sovereignty. We also agreed to maintain this alliance under the banner of loving Iraq and its people [...] either we continue our alliance that way or let them take [by corruption] whatever they want [...] my alliance is with you not with the corrupt and militiamen. I hoped you would uphold your end of the agreement".



Hadi al-Amri response to Sadr's tweet: please send me evidence of these claims so that I inform the relevant legal authorities to press charges.⁵ In this context, al-Amri dismissed Sadr's claims as baseless. The disagreement between Sadr and al-Amri explains why PM Adil Abdel-Mahdi is struggling to appoint Ministers to his cabinet.⁶ Adel Abdel-Mahdi's government is "Hostage to All".⁷

It is important to remember here that the United States' withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), together with the US sanctions imposed on Iran, and the escalating rhetoric between Iranian and US officials are all relevant factors which impact the formation of Iraq's new government

It is important to remember here that the United States' withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), together with the US sanctions imposed on Iran,⁸ and the escalating rhetoric between Iranian and US officials are all relevant factors which impact the formation of Iraq's new government.⁹ It is known that ever since the collapse of Saddam's regime in 2003, Iran has maintained a "special relationship" with powerful Iraqi political actors, such as the ruling Islamic Dawa Party, Badr Brigade, Sadr, and several Shia militant groups. At present however, both the US and Iran are competing to shape Iraq's new government. As a result, Iraq has been transformed into a battle ground for Iran and the United States to settle their scores and protect their associated strategic interests.¹⁰ On the one hand, the US wants to help Iraqis form a patriotic government, which can pushback against Iran's growing influence in Iraq. On the other hand, Iran is mobilizing its Iraqi allies to form a pro-Iran government in Baghdad to maintain its so-called Axis of Resistance which theoretically includes Iraq, Syria, Palestinian Hamas, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Yemen's Houthi(s). For Iran, maintaining its influence in Iraq is of strategic priority. However, Iran is facing serious challenges inside Iraq. Increasingly perceived as a hegemonic power, Iran's popularity among Iraq's Shia demographic majority is declining. Moreover, Iran's allies in Iraq, accused of corruption and working in collusion with Iran, are losing their popular support too.

A separate, yet added variable, which is affecting the formation of the government in Iraq, are the Sunni and Kurdish political parties. Sunni political parties have not been able to unite their front in time for the elections held on 12 May 2018. The reason for this failure can be ascribed to internal leadership rivalries.¹¹ These parties are mostly built around individuals, who do not offer any real policy programs. The Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) is currently the only Sunni political party with a hierarchical structure and defined policy program.¹² Importantly however, IIP did not participate directly in the 2018's elections. Instead, its individual candidates ran for Parliament under different electoral lists including Shia-led lists. After the elections, there are now fourteen IIP affiliated Members of Parliament.¹³ Similar to the Shia Islamist political parties, IIP's popularity is declining in Sunni majority cities. Many Sunnis accuse IIP of incompetence, corruption, and using religion to maximise its political interests.

The Sunni political landscape has witnessed the rise and demise of political factions which have long claimed to be representatives of the Sunni community. Until 2014, the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP), Muthaidoon led by former Vice President Usama al-Nujaifi, Salih al-Mutlaq leading the Iraqi Front for Dialogue, and former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi's Iraqi National Movement (formerly Iraqi National Accord and al-Watanyia) were considered the main political groups representing Sunnis. The 2018's elections gave rise to new political actors who are more pragmatic and willing to compromise in order to reach senior government positions. The new Speaker of Parliament Mr. Al-Halbousi, who leads al-Anbar Hawitona party, is an ally of the al-Hal Party led by Iraqi billionaire



Mr. Jamal al-Karbouli. Al-Halbousi was able to defeat his Sunni contender, the former Vice President Usama al-Nujaifi. Moreover, Deputy Prime Minister Salih al-Mutlaq's Iraqi Front for Dialogue and the Vice President Allawi's Iraqi National Movement were not able to secure a sufficient number of parliamentary seats to be considered for senior government positions. The rise and demise of Sunni political parties unveils the impact ISIS had over the Sunni community in Iraq. Many Sunnis believe that their representatives failed to protect them from ISIS and Iran-backed militias, failed to assist the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), or deliver any of their pre-2014 elections' promises.

While Shia political parties also have internal leadership rivalries and further lack real policy programs, what sets them apart is that they rally behind a single religious authority (Marjiyia). Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani often acts as a catalyst to facilitate political settlements among rival Shia factions. Furthermore, their position is strengthened by the fact that Iran also plays a conciliatory role, which promotes the aim of a pro-Iranian government ruling in Baghdad. In contrast, Sunni political parties do not have a single religious authority to rally around or a sole regional patron to iron out their differences. In fact, Sunni political groups are 'close' to different regional powers such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. Polarization between these Sunni majority countries in the region, a notable example of which is the 2017 Gulf crisis, have had a knock-on effect on intra-Sunni divisions.

Despite a pressing need for effective governance, it appears that Sunni political parties are not prioritising their efforts towards this need. Major Sunni cities such

as Mosul, Fallujah, Tikrit, and Ramadi have been destroyed by the war against ISIS. The reconstruction and stabilisation of these cities is estimated to cost 88 billion US dollars.¹⁴ The Sunni community expect the next Iraqi government to lead a campaign of reconstruction in their provinces, to facilitate the return of Sunni Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) to their homes, address their security concerns, and create new jobs. Yet, leaders of the Sunni political parties are competing to secure senior government positions in Iraq's next government, taking advantage of the customary ethno-sectarian quota system. Accused of corruption, incompetence, and nepotism, it is hard to see how Sunni political parties would be able to deliver on their promises to the Sunni community.

The Sunni community expect the next Iraqi government to lead a campaign of reconstruction in their provinces, to facilitate the return of Sunni Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) to their homes, address their security concerns, and create new jobs

Barham Salih, a veteran Kurdish politician, was elected by the Iraqi Parliament as the country's new president on 2 October 2018. On the same day, Salih named Adel Abdel-Mahdi as prime minister-designate. This was seen by commentators as part of a political alliance¹⁵, unofficially formed, between Sadr and Hadi al-Ameri. While Hadi al-Ameri and Sadr together do not constitute a parliamentary majority, their organisations have significant popular support on the ground and control powerful armed militias. Prime Minister Abdel-Mahdi was sworn in amid bickering over his cabinet. Iraqi legislators are yet to approve key postings such as the ministries of interior, defence, Justice, and Education. For Kurdish political



parties, their “share” of the new Iraqi government is almost certainly secured. The President Barham Salih and Minister of Finance Fouad Hussein are veteran Kurdish politicians who represent two major political parties, the PUK and KDP respectively, which are ruling Kurdistan’s Regional Government.

In addition, the KRG democratic process is facing serious challenges due to its weak democratic institutions and internal political disputes. By large, Iraqi Kurds’ demands are focused on improving their economic conditions, fighting corruption, and rehabilitating the Kurdistan Regional Government’s democratic structures

Unlike the Sunni political parties, Kurdish parties in Iraq are presenting a united front and have more defined policy programs. Kurdish political parties, such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), have defined policy programs to help the KRG’s economy recover from the devastating effects of sanctions imposed by the central government in Baghdad in response to the KRG’s independence referendum conducted on 25 September 2017. Kurdish political parties are also determined to resolve the issue of disputed territories through the implementation of Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution. Internally, Kurdish political parties intend to implement policies which would lead to the unification of the Peshmerga, the creation of alternative sources of income other than oil and carrying out political reforms which would lead to better governance. Despite this, Iraqi Kurds have their fair share of challenges. There is a growing gap between the Kurdish people and their political elites. During 2017 and 2018, the

Kurdish federal region witnessed several violent protests against corruption, nepotism, and difficult economic conditions,¹⁶ which were exacerbated by Baghdad’s sanctions against the Kurdistan Regional Government in response to the 25 September 2017’s ill-fated referendum of independence.¹⁷ In addition, the KRG democratic process is facing serious challenges due to its weak democratic institutions and internal political disputes.¹⁸ By large, Iraqi Kurds’ demands are focused on improving their economic conditions, fighting corruption, and rehabilitating the Kurdistan Regional Government’s democratic structures. Former KRG President and leader of the KDP Massoud Barzani visited Baghdad on 23 November 2018.¹⁹ This visit represents a landmark in the relationship between the KRG and the Iraqi government after the ill-fated 25 September 2017 independence referendum. It is expected that Baghdad and Erbil will soon agree formally on a roadmap to resolve most of the outstanding issues between the two sides.

Conclusion

Iraq is at a turning point. The next Iraqi government will either pull Iraq off the brink of instability or continue its descent into further chaos, started by previous governments. For the first time since 2003, Iraqi Shia, Kurdish, and Sunni communities are united in their demands for representation through good governance rather than ethno-sectarian quotas. While political sub-identities are still present in the public’s conscious, there is a growing momentum for patriotic politics to take root in Iraq. Iraq needs a leader with a vision, who can implement economic and political reforms. Prime Minister Abdel-Mahdi and President Barham Salih together can lead Iraq out of the vicious cycle of ethno-



sectarian politics and corruption, which combined, have helped perpetuate the resurgence of extremist and communal violence in Iraq – so far. Equally, Iraq must cultivate a healthy parliamentary opposition which aims to monitor the government's performance rather than hinder its efforts. Iraq's previous parliamentary oppositions were often used by rival political parties to settle scores, stoke ethno-sectarian sentiments to consolidate party's electoral base, and in most extreme cases even use parliamentary [select] investigation committees to force government ministers endorse corrupt deals.²⁰

For the first time since 2003, Iraqi Shia, Kurdish, and Sunni communities are united in their demands for representation through good governance rather than ethno-sectarian quotas

In this complex patchwork of competing interests, the people of Iraq are painfully aware of the realities of the situation and have aligned their expectations accordingly. The new Iraqi government will not have a magic wand or silver bullet to address endemic corruption; to fully rehabilitate the economic and social infrastructure of Iraq; or end all patronage networks in the country. Nevertheless, Iraqis expect the new government to seriously commit to the improvement of Iraq's structural problems and forego any polished slogans, unrealistic promises, and ongoing excuses for failing to deliver. In order to regain its citizens' trust, the new government of Iraq must wholeheartedly commit to good governance.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Muhanad Seloom is an associate lecturer in International Relations at the University of Exeter, United Kingdom. His main research interests are mainly within the fields of political violence and peace-building. He has been particularly focused on counterterrorism policies, ethno-nationalist, Islamist and sectarian violence in the Middle East

ABOUT ALSHARQ FORUM

The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

Address: Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 Plaza Floor:6
No:68 Postal Code: 34197
Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey
Telephone: +902126031815
Fax: +902126031665
Email: info@sharqforum.org

sharqforum.org



الشرف
منتدى
ALSHARQ FORUM

