



Iraq's October 2021 Election

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With Demands for Change Unmet, Iraqis Vote Under New System

On October 10, 2021, Iraqis are set to vote in an [early](#) election to determine the makeup of the unicameral Council of Representatives (COR), Iraq's national legislature. The COR elects Iraq's president and approves the prime minister's program and cabinet nominees. The election comes two years after the start of mass protests that [convulsed](#) Iraqi society and [ousted](#) the government formed after Iraq's [2018 national election](#). The election result may shape Iraqi policy on [issues](#) of congressional concern, including U.S.-Iraq security cooperation, Iran's influence in Iraq, Iraq's foreign policy, human rights, protection of minorities, and prospects for economic and governance reform.

The 2019 protest [movement](#)'s demands for systemic political, administrative, and economic change have not been realized, and smaller sporadic protests with varying demands have continued in 2020 and 2021. Iraq weathered economic and fiscal [crises](#) in 2020 linked to the COVID-19 pandemic and low oil revenues, and the state's dependency on oil revenue persists. Experts [warn](#) that without structural change, crises may recur if oil prices fall again. State forces and Iran-backed militias killed hundreds of [protestors](#) and have assassinated and kidnaped activists. Perpetrators of [violence](#) continue to operate with [impunity](#), abetted by the failure of authorities to [prosecute](#) human rights violators. Leading parties partake in and tolerate [pervasive corruption](#), despite its cumulative immiserating effects on Iraq's [growing](#) population.

Under a new voting law finalized in 2020, Iraq [adopted](#) a single nontransferable vote system (one vote, one candidate, multiple seats per constituency). Voters will select 320 candidates across 83 local constituencies and nine candidates for seats reserved for minority groups. At least 25% of the COR seats are reserved for women, with one seat per constituency designated for female candidates. Prior elections saw voters choose party lists in province-wide constituencies. The provincial list system favored larger parties and enabled them to seat loyalists who might not have attracted support as individual candidates.

Iraq's new electoral system could enable independent and locally accountable candidates to prevail, but few [analysts expect](#) fundamental change to result from the election. While fewer candidates registered, a higher proportion are independent candidates, reflecting new [political](#) and tribal [dynamics](#). Iraqi [officials](#) and [clerics](#) are encouraging voters to participate, but most analysts [expect low](#) turnout, reflecting some [boycotts](#) and Iraqis' [lack](#) of confidence that participation will produce change. Pro-Iran groups may have [lost](#) some support by suppressing protests, but Iraqi analysts [expect](#) they will use resources and intimidation to [maintain](#) their influence.

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Political Coalitions and Possible Outcomes

Prominent parties, coalitions, and trends competing in the election include the following:

- **Sadrist Bloc.** After winning the most seats in the 2018 election, Shia religious figure and militia leader [Muqtada al Sadr](#) announced his Sa'irun (On the March) movement would boycott the 2021 election, then reversed this position, as expected. Sadrists campaign against corruption, but Sadrist officials [face](#) related allegations.
- **Fatah (Conquest) Coalition.** Led by Badr Organization figure Hadi al Amiri, this coalition aligns Shia, Iran-friendly [opponents](#) of the U.S. military presence in Iraq and proponents of strengthening the [Popular Mobilization Forces](#) (militias officially incorporated in the security sector). It includes the Sadiqun (The Honest) Bloc of the U.S. designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) [Asa'ib Ahl al Haq](#) (League of the Righteous).
- **State of Law.** Former prime minister Nouri al Maliki's coalition includes the Shia Islamist Dawa (Call) Party and smaller Shia Arab and Turkoman parties critical of the U.S.-Iraqi partnership.
- **Coalition of the National State Forces.** Supporters of former prime minister Hayder al Abadi's Nasr (Victory) bloc and Shia leader Ammar al Hakim's Hikma (Wisdom) make up this coalition of establishment parties seeking pro-reform voters' support.
- **Haquq (Rights) Movement.** Supporters of U.S.-designated FTO [Kata'ib Hezbollah](#), which is widely considered a close [ally](#) of Iran and its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps–Qods Force (IRGC-QF), lead this party.
- **Taqaddum (Progress) and Al Azm (Resolve).** These coalitions represent [competing](#) blocs of Sunni Arab parties respectively led by COR Speaker Mohammed Halbusi (Taqaddum) and Khamis Khanjar (Azm).
- **Kurdish Parties.** The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) remain the [dominant](#) parties in the federally recognized Kurdistan Region. The [PUK](#) has aligned with the Gorran (Change) movement in an electoral alliance.
- **Activist Groups.** New [parties](#) have organized to advance demands of the protest movement through [different](#) agendas. Their relative electoral success could complicate government formation negotiations. Observers of Iraqi politics expect established parties to seek to coopt or marginalize successful activist candidates.

The interests of some established parties align around maintaining the status quo, and some analysts report that negotiations over post-election alliances have already begun. Government formation requires identifying the largest bloc in the COR to nominate a prime minister, though this bloc may or may not include the coalition or party that wins the most COR seats. Past negotiations have taken months to resolve. Iraqi officials [hope](#) to announce election results promptly and avoid the delays and fraud allegations that [marred](#) the 2018 election.

Implications for the United States

The Biden Administration has said that it [seeks](#) a multifaceted partnership with Iraq, and alongside U.S. aid programs, 2,500 U.S. military personnel [provide](#) advisory and intelligence support to Iraqi operations against tenacious Islamic State [remnants](#). In July, U.S. and Iraqi leaders [decided](#) that “there will be no U.S. forces with a combat role in Iraq by December 31, 2021.” Congress is now considering [authorization](#) and [appropriations](#) legislation for the advisory mission beyond that date. An election outcome and

governing coalition that favors Fatah could lead Iraq's next government to request a fuller or more prompt U.S. withdrawal. Any broad-based coalition also will face pressure from Iran-backed groups to ensure the planned end of Iraq-based U.S. combat missions. Results seen by Iraqis as reinforcing corrupt and unaccountable governance could drive renewed confrontational protests, which, if met again with deadly force, could prove destabilizing. U.S. policymakers may continue to debate whether and how to cooperate with Iraqis to achieve shared short-term objectives while encouraging longer-term reform opposed by entrenched elites.

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