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# 2018 Elections in Iraq

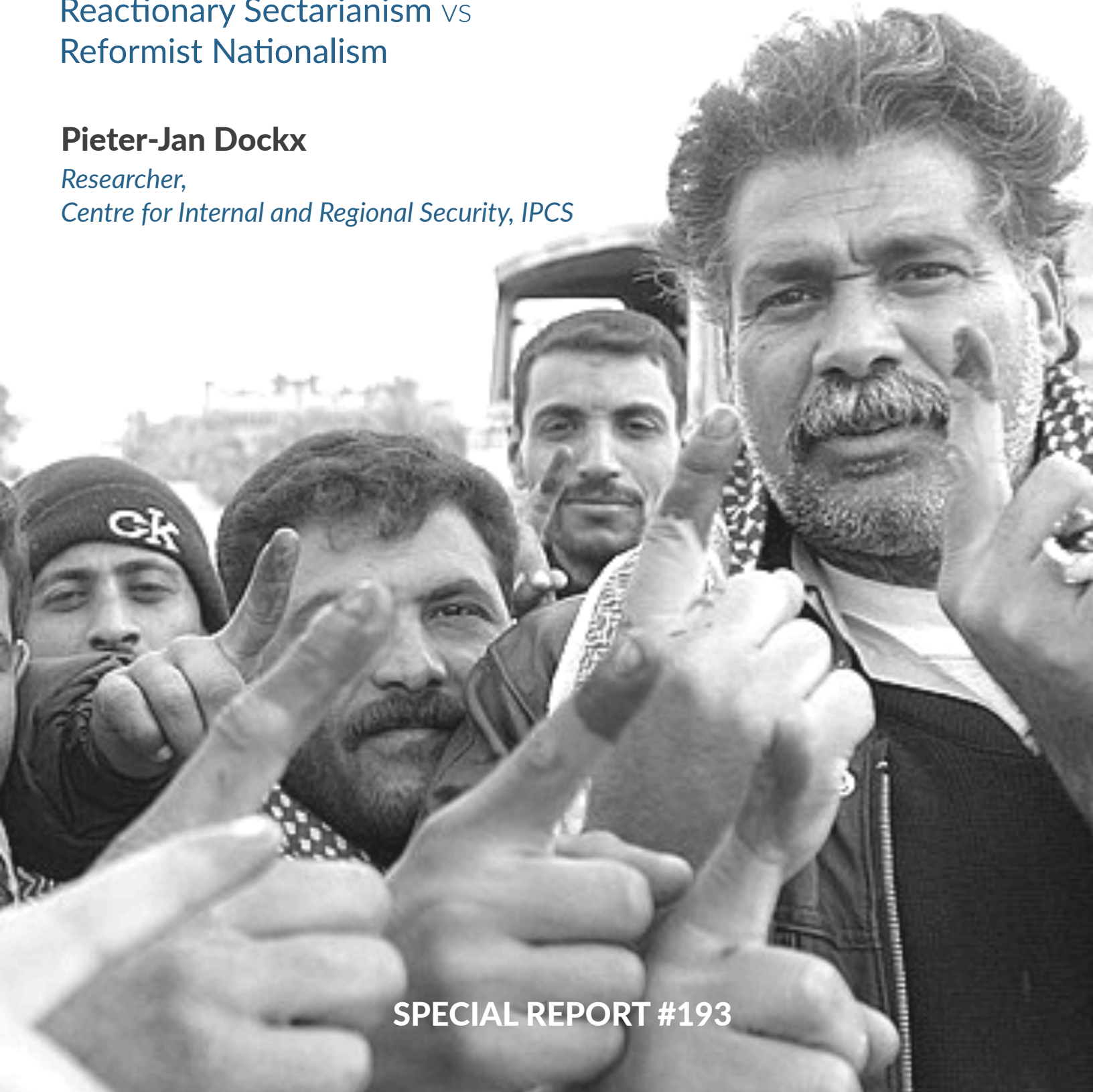
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Reactionary Sectarianism vs  
Reformist Nationalism

**Pieter-Jan Dockx**

*Researcher,*

*Centre for Internal and Regional Security, IPCS*



**SPECIAL REPORT #193**

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# Executive Summary

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On 12 May 2018, Iraqis will take part in general elections, which could serve as a stepping stone for addressing the drivers that facilitated the rise of the Islamic State (IS). Largely, there are two competing ideological currents in the Shia polity in this election: sectarianism and nationalism. On the sectarian side, former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is joined by the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF). This grouping has a reactionary agenda that will most likely witness a perpetuation of Sunni discrimination and closeness between Iraq and Iran. In this scenario, the drivers that facilitated the IS will be relegated to the background. In response to this, a nationalist movement spearheaded by Muqtada al-Sadr has emerged. This reformist movement aims to tackle issues like ethno-sectarian discrimination and corruption that played into the hands of the IS. In this scenario, Iraq will attempt to pivot away from Iran and move closer to Saudi Arabia and possibly the US.

# Introduction

Iraq has been engulfed by sectarian strife between Sunnis and Shias ever since the 2003 US invasion. However, the rise of the IS was arguably the country's most daunting challenge to date. Apart from external factors such as the American troops' withdrawal from Iraq and the Syrian civil war, the emergence of the IS was attributed to Shia-centric state building led by former Prime Minister Maliki, who ruled the country from 2006 to 2014. Maliki, a Shia with strong ties to Iran, centralised decision-making under his and his Shia allies' authority, excluding Sunnis from power. Subsequent dissent within the Sunni community was met with a crackdown under the guise of vaguely-defined Anti-Terrorism and De-Ba'athification laws<sup>1</sup>. With many Sunnis disillusioned and disenfranchised by Maliki's sectarian rule and the Iraqi army decimated by corruption, the IS was able to gain control of large swathes of predominantly Sunni territory<sup>2</sup>.

Under international pressure, Maliki was replaced by current Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. Seen as a less sectarian figure than his party leader Maliki, Abadi, himself a Shia, was tasked with removing the IS from Iraq and reversing Maliki's discriminatory policies. With the Iraqi army in disarray, Abadi relied on the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) to militarily destroy the IS. This umbrella organisation was established in 2014 and comprises of predominantly Iran-linked Shia militias. Although the PMF was pivotal in the fight against the IS, the organisation became notorious for their abuse of the local Sunni population and the destruction of Sunni towns in areas recaptured from the IS. This has further exacerbated sectarian tension in the country<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, in the realm of governance, Abadi's attempted reforms were met with resistance from reactionary Shia Islamists.

Against this backdrop, Iraqis will go to polls on 12 May 2018 for what has been dubbed the most important election in the country's history. Although this claim was also made during previous

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<sup>1</sup>De-Ba'athification laws are a set of laws that intended to reduce the influence of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party in the political system; "Ahmad Chalabi and the Legacy of De-Baathification in Iraq", The New York Times, November 3, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/04/world/middleeast/ahmad-chalabi-and-the-legacy-of-de-baathification-in-iraq.html>

<sup>2</sup>Pieter-Jan Dockx, "ISIS and the Importance of Popular Support", *International Perspective*, May 7, 2017, <http://www.internationalperspective.be/impression/2017/05/isis-and-the-importance-of-popular-support/>

<sup>3</sup>Pieter-Jan Dockx, "The Return of Maliki and a New Sunni Insurgency in Iraq?", *LSE Middle East Centre Blog*, July 12, 2017, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2017/07/12/the-return-of-maliki-and-a-new-sunni-insurgency/>

elections, this time it holds more credibility. This first post-IS election could be the start of addressing the aforementioned drivers that led to the rise of the terrorist group.

First, this report aims to uncover the main ideologies and actors that will be competing in the elections. On one hand there are the Iran-linked sectarian Shia Islamists, who have primarily dominated Iraq since 2003. In this side of the spectrum, Maliki, who intends to regain his position as prime minister, is joined by the PMF. Although the initial purpose of the PMF was solely defeating the IS, the organisation has transformed itself into a political alliance. On the other hand, as a response to this dominant sectarianism, a more reformist non-sectarian nationalist movement was born. This movement is spearheaded by Muqtada al-Sadr. The Shia cleric, who became infamous for leading a sectarian militia during the Iraqi civil war, has transformed himself into a more nationalist figure, calling for an end to sectarianism and the concomitant corruption<sup>4</sup>. Apart from Sadr, Prime Minister Abadi has appropriated a similar nationalist narrative. Both figures will be participating in the elections with their own cross-sectarian lists.

It needs to be noted that all the actors discussed in this report are Shia Arabs. While the scope of this report does not allow a detailed analysis of all the various other contenders (Sunnis and Kurds), there are also objective considerations for discussing only the Shia actors. Firstly, Shia Arabs constitute the largest ethno-sectarian group in the country, making their political actors indispensable within Iraq's power sharing institutions. Furthermore, with high levels of internal displacement of the Sunnis and the widely reported voter disillusionment, the Sunni community is less likely to participate in the ballot. Hence, an increased importance of the Shia vote and their political actors.

| Sectarianism            |  | Nationalism             |                                  |
|-------------------------|--|-------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <i>Political Figure</i> | <i>Associated Electoral list</i>                 | <i>Political Figure</i> | <i>Associated Electoral list</i> |
| Nouri al-Maliki         | Dawa Party                                       | Muqtada al-Sadr         | Sairoon Alliance                 |
| Hadi al-Amiri           | Fatah Coalition<br>(Popular Mobilisation Forces) | Haider al-Abadi         | Victory List                     |

Second, this report also comprises a scenario-building exercise in which possible post-election coalitions are discussed. Iraq's power-sharing political institutions make coalition formation a crucial part of the political process. This report also discusses the possible consequences of the elections for Iraq's domestic and foreign policy. On the domestic front, the election will impact

<sup>4</sup>Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army was one of the most violent sectarian militias during the 2006-2008 Iraqi civil war in which over 40 000 civilians lost their lives; "Who are the Mahdi Army?", Al Jazeera, August 30, 2007, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2007/01/2008525135739989284.html>

the treatment of the Sunni community in the future and whether the drivers behind the rise of the IS are addressed. The paper also sheds light on the fate of the PMF as a security actor and Baghdad's relations with the Kurds. On the international front, the paper discusses both camps' relations towards Iran, Saudi Arabia and the US.



# Reactionary Sectarianism

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This section discusses the two main Shia sectarian actors, former Prime Minister Maliki, and the PMF.

In the Shia Islamist camp, Maliki, who aspires to regain his position as prime minister, is joined by the PMF which will participate in the elections for the first time as a single entity. Like Maliki, the principle groups within the PMF, such as the Badr Organisation, are Shia Islamists<sup>5</sup>. PMF leaders like Badr's Hadi al-Amiri aim to turn their military victory over the IS into electoral gains during the May 2018 elections. Large scale Sunni displacement that took place due to the IS insurgency and the former's disillusionment from mainstream politics could lead to low Sunni voter turnouts. This would increase the weight of the Shia vote, which is more likely to be in favour of Shia Islamists, thus benefitting Maliki and the PMF.

Despite the electoral law that is designed to prohibit militias from forming political parties and Abadi's moratorium on their attempts to form political groupings, the militias were able to enter mainstream politics. Furthermore, while the Badr Organisation was already in parliament, they have recently announced the Fatah alliance, which unites all the various PMF factions under one political banner<sup>6</sup>. If Fatah is able to achieve electoral success, it will become the dominant force both in security and politics, giving the group unprecedented influence in the country.

In January 2018, to the surprise of many Iraq analysts, nationalist-minded figure Abadi formed an alliance with the Islamists of Fatah, led by Badr's Hadi al-Amiri<sup>7</sup>. Although the coalition was short-lived and collapsed in merely three days, it demonstrated Amiri's desire to be in a position of

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<sup>5</sup>The Badr Organisation is the oldest Shia militia in Iraq and one of the dominant groups within the PMF. It is strongly linked to Iran and already controls the Iraqi Interior Ministry; Guido Steinberg, "The Badr Organization, Iran's Most Important Instrument in Iraq", *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, July, 2017, [https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2017C26\\_sbg.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2017C26_sbg.pdf)

<sup>6</sup>"Iraqi Militias Form one of the Biggest Political Coalitions for Elections", *The National*, January 11, 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/iraqi-militias-form-of-one-of-the-biggest-political-coalitions-for-elections-1.694713>

<sup>7</sup>"Iraqi PM Abadi to Seek Re-election, in Alliance with Iran-backed Group", *Reuters*, January 14, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-vote/iraqi-pm-abadi-to-seek-re-election-in-alliance-with-iran-backed-group-idUSKBN1F3039>

power after the elections. As explained in the next section, Abadi's role as prime minister would probably be guaranteed in an alliance with his nationalist ally Muqtada al-Sadr. Therefore, it is conceivable that Amiri offered prime ministership to Abadi as part of the agreement between both factions. In return, the Islamists most likely asked for increased control over the country's security forces.

However, the failed alliance formation lays bare the disunity that exists within the Fatah alliance. According to sources, the alliance failed because some factions within the PMF-list would not comply with Abadi's demand for a cross-sectarian rather than a sectarian platform<sup>8</sup>. As the ideological opposite of cross-sectarianism, Amiri's compliance with the prime minister's preference highlights the division that exists between the central leadership and the factional leaders of the PMF. Since an alliance between both actors would have probably formed the most competitive electoral bloc, Amiri chose political power over ideology, an indication of the leader's desire to take part in a future government.

If Iran did play a role in the abovementioned coalition formation—as has happened in the past Shia coalition formations—the failed coalition would point to the limits of Iran's clout in Iraq. While a coalition would be in Tehran's best interest, it was unable to facilitate a lasting alliance. This means Iran was either unable to make Abadi give up cross-sectarianism or it was unable to make the militias comply with the requirement. Either way, Iranian influence does not appear to be uncontested.

To sum up, in an attempt to uphold the post-2003 Shia order, Maliki is being accompanied by the PMF. As the failed alliance with Prime Minister Abadi indicated, Fatah leader Amiri's main aim is to be in a position of power following the election. This would make the organisation not only the predominant security actor but also the major political force in Iraq.



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<sup>8</sup>"Iraqi Militias and PM Abadi to contest general elections separately", *The New Arab*, January 15, 2018, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/1/15/iraqi-militias-and-pm-abadi-to-contest-election-separately>

# Reformist Nationalism



This section begins by closely examining the new nationalist current witnessed in Iraq. Differences and similarities between reformist nationalism and Ba'athism are highlighted and explained, followed by a discussion of its two main actors: Muqtada al-Sadr and Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

Although in the past, Iran has always been able to unite most Shia factions under an Islamist banner, this time a reformist cross-sectarian nationalist counter movement has emerged. This reformist nationalism encompasses a complex amalgam of interwoven narratives. To summarise, it contends that excessive sectarianism is the cause of the country's political ills. While a practice like the *muhasasa* system intended to accommodate the different sects, in reality it led to backroom politicking instead<sup>9</sup>. Figures like Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, the main proponent of the movement, aim to abolish this practice that has placed inter-communal rivalry ahead of state building. In addition to sectarian institutions, Sadr points at Maliki's sectarian policies as the main factor of the IS' emergence.

This discourse of anti-sectarianism goes hand in hand with the movement's opposition to corruption. According to Sadr, rampant sectarianism has led officials to use state institutions to benefit themselves and their communal allies, which has reduced institutional efficacy. This was visible in Maliki's mismanagement of the military which led to their retreat from Mosul when the IS laid siege to the city. The narrative links the issue of security to the interwoven elements of sectarianism and corruption<sup>10</sup>.

While this discourse of anti-sectarianism and anti-corruption naturally resonates with a sizeable section of the Sunni community—which has borne the brunt of this sectarian practice—it could

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<sup>9</sup>Iraq's 2005 US-led Constitution installed a structure of sectarian quotas (*muhasasa* system) that divided political power among the different sects. The *muhasasa* system is best embodied in the existence of three Vice-President and three Deputy Prime Minister offices; John McGarry & Brandon O'Leary, 2007, "Iraq's Constitution of 2005: Liberal Consociation as Political Prescription", *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, 5(4): 670-698

<sup>10</sup>"Iraq: Sadr Supporters in Mass Protest for Political Reform", *BBC News*, April 26, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36138283>

also attract some of the Shia constituency. Given how the lack in provision of public goods they have experienced is being linked to Maliki's corrupt practices, an anti-corruption narrative could strike a chord with the Shia community.

Although the ideology has appropriated the Arab nationalist component of Ba'athism (discussed later in the paper), it is not an extension of Saddam Hussein's beliefs. This can be visually observed through the flags hoisted during the nationalist demonstrations. During the 2012-2013 anti-Maliki protests, Sunni protesters flew Ba'athist flags, indicating a desire to return to the Saddam era<sup>11</sup>. Sadr-led protests, on the other hand, fly the current Iraqi flag, pointing to their belief in the new Iraq<sup>12</sup>. Although Ba'athism was an inclusive movement, since the 1990s, after the imposition of sanctions by the US, Ba'athism intensified Sunni Islamic symbolism in their ideology giving it a Sunni sectarian touch. This new movement, on the other hand, is led by a Shia and has a predominantly Shia base.

After untangling the movement's ideological framework, its main actors need to be discussed. As mentioned above, the movement is spearheaded by Muqtada al-Sadr. While he is commonly known for his Shia militia that killed scores of Sunnis during the civil war, he has recently transformed his image into that of a nationalist leader. Although an undertone of 'sectarian reconciliation' has always been somewhat present in the cleric's discourse, his recent nationalist turn and aversion towards sectarianism should be seen as a move to carve out a political identity that could set him apart from other contenders in the elections<sup>13</sup>. As Maliki and PMF leaders have already monopolised the top positions within the Shia sectarian current, Sadr had to reposition himself to avoid playing second fiddle. Therefore, Sadr has distanced himself from his traditional sectarian Ahrar Bloc and will contest the elections with his cross-sectarian Sairoon Alliance. The nationalist alliance could attract Sadr's traditional Shia constituency while at the same time appeal to sections of the Sunni community who share the movement's apprehensions about sectarianism.

Another important actor in this fold is Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. Although Abadi should be seen as a more centrist figure, between Sadr and Maliki, he (Abadi) has partly emulated Sadr's

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<sup>11</sup>The Ba'athist Iraqi flag has three stars symbolising Arab unity.

<sup>12</sup>The current Iraqi flag holds the Takbir, which is the Islamic Arabic expression: "God is [the] greatest".

<sup>13</sup>Sadr, at one point, used a discourse of 'sectarian reconciliation' in the face of the "American Satan", to generate support for his struggle against American presence in Iraq; "Sadr, The Anti-American Shiite Cleric, Appears in Iraq", *The New York Times*, May 25, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/25/world/africa/25iht-iraq.5.5873034.html>

discourse and will also be contesting the elections on a cross-sectarian 'victory' list.<sup>14</sup> For the longest time, rumour had it that Abadi and Sadr would form a joint list which would have made political sense. Sadr realised that a crucial element of the upcoming elections will be about capitalising on the victory against the IS. Of the two parties that lay claim to this victory, the PMF's overt sectarian agenda makes it incompatible with Sadr's nationalist discourse, leaving only Abadi as a possibly ally. The abuses carried out by the PMF during their 'liberation' of Sunni areas also led many in the Sunni community to credit Abadi with the victory over the IS rather than the sectarian militias. As Sadr's troubled past makes the international community wary of him in the driving seat, Abadi's chances of a second term in office would thus be higher in Sadr's camp<sup>15</sup>.

Despite Abadi's cross-sectarian discourse, the recently failed coalition formation between Abadi and Amiri's Fatah are an indication of his political pragmatism. Although ideologically an alliance with Sadr would have made sense, Abadi's primary objective is to secure his position as prime minister. Since his role as prime minister would nearly be certain in an alliance with Sadr, it can be assumed that Amiri promised to give Abadi that position. Furthermore, both Abadi and Amiri can lay claim to the victory over the IS. This would have given them a distinct advantage over other coalitions, making his prime ministership even more likely. The alliance would have also isolated the other Islamist challenger, Maliki. By this logic, a pre-electoral alliance between the ideological allies, Sadr and Abadi, would have paved the way for a similar alliance on the Islamist side of the spectrum between the PMF and Maliki. As an alliance between Sadr and Maliki has been rendered unfeasible due to their troubled history, Abadi has opted to ally with the PMF, leaving Maliki without allies<sup>16</sup>.

Despite Sadr's disappointment and extremely agitated reaction to the alliance, the failed agreement might actually work in his favour during post-election coalition formations. Abadi's attempted alliance with the sectarianists has badly damaged the prime minister's reputation, domestically and internationally. This backlash could make Abadi wary of re-joining with the PMF. Furthermore, the three-day alliance has also indicated that an agreement with the various PMF

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<sup>14</sup>"Iraqi PM Abadi on Elections, Corruption and Kurdistan", *Al Arabiya English*, January 29, 2018, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2018/01/29/Abadi-tells-Al-Arabiya-Holding-elections-is-a-commitment-to-Iraq-s-constitution.html>

<sup>15</sup>Sadr and his militia, the Mahdi Army, fought against, what they labelled, 'the American occupation of Iraq' which made him notorious in the West; "Profile: The Mahdi Army", *Al Jazeera*, April 20, 2008, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2008/03/200861505611516526.html>

<sup>16</sup>After the 2003 US invasion, Prime Minister Maliki and militia leader Sadr often found themselves on opposing sides, leading to (armed) confrontation. Moreover, Sadr's entire political discourse is based on an anti-Maliki narrative; Bill Roggio, "Mahdi Army taking significant casualties in Baghdad, South", *Long War Journal*, March 29, 2008, [https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/03/mahdi\\_army\\_taking\\_si.php](https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/03/mahdi_army_taking_si.php)

factions will be difficult to maintain. This would lead to a fragile governing coalition, something Abadi would want to avoid. The episode also showed that sections of the militia are unlikely to back Abadi's prime ministership, making a future coalition even more unlikely.

While the previous logic already makes a grand nationalist coalition comprising Abadi and Sadr more likely, there are other factors that point in this direction. On one hand, Abadi's difficult relationship with Maliki makes a possible alliance between both actors equally unlikely<sup>17</sup>. On the other hand, Sadr has had an enduring rivalry with all sectarian actors. This virtually leaves both Abadi and Sadr with only each other as possible partners.

To conclude, Sadr's new nationalist ideology is based on an antagonism towards sectarianism and corruption, which resonates with a large section of Sunnis and possibly non-Sadrists Shias. Despite Abadi's pragmatic attempt to form an alliance with the PMF, a post-electoral alliance between Sadr and Abadi is still more likely. The prime minister is ideologically less Islamist than Fatah and shares Sadr's nationalist agenda.



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<sup>17</sup>Although both Maliki and Abadi hail from the Islamist Dawa Party, the animosity between both figures has made that they will contest the elections on separate lists; "Maliki Rejects Joint Electoral List with Abadi: Dawa Party", *Arab News*, January 9, 2018, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1221646/middle-east>

# Domestic Consequences



The results of the May 2018 election will shape the course of the country in the post-IS era. This section investigates the most important domestic implications for the Sunni community, the future role of the PMF as a military organisation, and Baghdad's relations with the Kurds.

If sectarian actors like Maliki and Amiri emerge victorious in the upcoming election, they are likely to persist with their discriminatory policies towards Sunnis. In fact, the country's reconstruction efforts will become a platform for perpetuating discrimination. This was already clear in a motion tabled by Shia Islamists that would prevent reconstruction funds from reaching Sunni cities<sup>18</sup>. As indicated by the rise of the IS, this continued discrimination of the Sunni community could potentially lead to the formation of a support base for new insurgency groups<sup>19</sup>.

The possibility of better managing the country's sectarian tension is more likely if the nationalists gain the upper hand in the elections. Although Abadi partly came to power to appease Sunnis and bring an end to their disfranchisement, he was unable to push through the necessary reforms owing to Islamist opposition. A new term in office backed by a majority nationalist parliament would allow him to adequately address these issues.

Furthermore, Sadr also has every incentive to challenge institutionalised sectarianism. While the cleric has appropriated the 'Sunni cause' as part of his discourse, his resentment towards Maliki makes the cleric eager to overturn his rival's policies. A drive to stay relevant in national politics combined with the realisation that another return to the sectarian fold would make him untrustworthy in the eyes of the electorate form an incentive for Sadr to stick by his nationalist promises.

However, even with strong nationalist backing in the parliament, the nationalists are faced with several issues. For example, Shia Islamist elements that have infiltrated state institutions are likely

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<sup>18</sup>"The Iraq Report: Hopes of Unity Dashed as Reconstruction efforts Smothered", *The New Arab*, January 4, 2018, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2018/1/4/the-iraq-report-hopes-of-unity-dashed>

<sup>19</sup>The factors that will determine the depth and breadth of such militant groups fall outside of the scope of this report.

to resist the nationalists' envisioned policies. Moreover, although they envision appointment of government officials based on merit rather than sectarian identity, sectarianism is deeply ingrained in a polarised society like today's Iraq. Nationalists will have to be mindful of how their electoral base will react when officials turn out to be predominantly from one sect.

The treatment of the Sunni community is intertwined with the decision on the future of the PMF's military wing. As the organisation became infamous for its violent abuse of Sunnis in territory recaptured from the IS, their continued existence will negatively impact the community. Therefore, Sadr has called for the PMF to be disbanded. He has also asked for the integration of 'loyal' elements into the Iraqi army<sup>20</sup>. In a nutshell, although the PMF is predominantly composed of Shia Islamist militias loyal to Iran, some factions are led by actors like Sadr himself. Implicitly, his aim is to dissolve the sectarian Iran-linked militias and allow their own factions to merge into the army.

However, Sadr's idea of complete dissolution of the Iran-linked factions is not feasible. PMF factions like the Badr Organisation have a long history in the country before the birth of the PMF and have no incentive to end their operations. Furthermore, Sadr is unlikely to find partners to support his idea. Sadr's possible ally, Abadi, has generally been more ambiguous about the future role of the militias. In March 2018, as a means to appeal to the Shia electorate, he integrated the PMF in the security forces<sup>21</sup>. While the most visible consequences of the move are the benefits for the militias like higher salaries, it could also strengthen government oversight over the organisation, possibly reducing sectarian and Iranian influence. Despite this move, the fate of the PMF will be decided after the elections.

Conversely, the PMF's political faction, Fatah's aim would most likely be to model the PMF along the lines of Iran's Revolutionary Guard or Hezbollah, as an independent alternative to the Iraqi army<sup>22</sup>. This would allow Shia actors or a possible Shia sectarian government to directly control the militias without parliamentary oversight.

Apart from affecting the Sunni community, the elections will also impact Iraq's Kurdish community. While ties between Baghdad and Erbil have weakened since the 2017 Kurdish

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<sup>20</sup>"Iraqi Shia Cleric Sadr Calls on Government to Disband Iran-backed Militia", *Middle East Eye*, August 6, 2017, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraqi-shia-cleric-sadr-calls-government-disband-iran-backed-militia-849365799>

<sup>21</sup>"Iraq's Shia militias formally integrated into state's security apparatus", *The New Arab*, March 9, 2018, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/3/9/iraqs-shia-militias-formally-integrated-into-states-security-apparatus>

<sup>22</sup>Bill Roggio, "Iraqi Militia Leader Wants to Model PMF After Iran's Revolutionary Guard", *Long War Journal*, March 22, 2016, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/03/why-cant-the-hashd-be-like-the-revolutionary-guard-in-iran-iraqi-militia-commander-says.php>

independence referendum<sup>23</sup>, possible post-election alliances would likely need Kurdish support. Therefore, relations are expected to improve after the elections, regardless of who wins the poll. This is not to say that differences do not exist between the various actors. While Sadr has generally opted for a more toned-down approach towards the Kurds, Maliki has been courting the Kurdish parties. Meanwhile, the PMF has been more hawkish towards the Kurds. Although the organisation could use a Kurdish threat to justify its own existence—because of Iran's cordial relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)—Tehran is likely to restrain the Shia militias.

Furthermore, despite his recent belligerence towards the Kurds, even Abadi is likely to change his posture after the elections. His behaviour can be explained in two ways. Firstly, Abadi aims to highlight his nationalist credentials in the run up to the elections. With the Kurds as a common enemy, themes like Arab unity and territorial integrity resonate with the Arab electorate. Secondly, as the Kurds could become kingmakers after the elections, they would find themselves in a strong bargaining position. By playing hardball now, Abadi gives himself more manoeuvring space in a future dialogue.

To sum up, a victory for the sectarianists will in all probability witness the continued marginalisation of Sunnis. On the other hand, nationalist leaders are more likely to address the issues—which had partly enabled the rise of the IS—faced by the community. Another issue Sunnis are concerned about is the future role of the PMF. While Fatah presumably intends to retain the PMF's independence, a possible nationalist coalition would have to find a compromise on reducing the militias' influence. Finally, relations between Baghdad and Erbil have been tense since the independence referendum. However, as the Kurds might be crucial to prop up the future government, relations are set to improve.



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<sup>23</sup>Prime Minister Abadi has retaken Kirkuk from the Kurds, he has taken control of the Kurdish border crossings, closed down the region's international airports and reduced the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) budget allocation; "Iraqi PM Meets Kurdistan Region Leader for First Time Since Independence Vote", *Reuters*, January 20, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds/iraqi-pm-meets-kurdistan-region-leader-for-first-time-since-independence-vote-idUSKBN1F90JL>

# Foreign Policy Ramifications

Apart from domestic significance, the election results will also influence Iraq's future foreign policy trajectory. This section discusses possible changes in the country's stance towards the two competing regional powers—Iran and Saudi Arabia— and the US.

Since the US invasion and the resultant rule of Shia Islamists, Iraq has found itself in Iran's sphere of influence. A victory for the Islamists will see a continuation of this practice. What is new is that under the PMF's political leadership, Baghdad would be expected to strengthen ties with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Lebanon's Hezbollah. Contrary to Abadi's instructions, PMF factions are already fighting alongside Assad. Furthermore, Qais al-Khazali, leader of a PMF faction, also made a controversial visit to the Lebanese-Israeli border, where he pledged to support Hezbollah<sup>24</sup>.

If the nationalists are able to gain the upper hand in the elections, Tehran will see its power in the country reduced. Although Sadr has in the past tolerated Iranian influence in Iraq, his breakaway from sectarianism has caused a deep rift between them. From Sadr's point of view, Iranian influence has chiefly benefited his adversaries like Maliki. Therefore, the cleric has little incentive to cooperate with Tehran. This became overt during Sadrist protests in Baghdad, in which slogans like 'Iran out' became routine<sup>25</sup>. Even a more centrist figure like Abadi has cautiously attempted to steer the country away from Iran towards rapprochement with Saudi Arabia.

This rapprochement with Saudi Arabia is indeed what the nationalists aim for. The first signs of growing Iraq-Saudi ties were already visible in 2017 when figures such as Abadi and Sadr visited the Kingdom. In response, Riyadh, among other things, reopened a border crossing with the

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<sup>24</sup>"Iraq's Shiite Militias Fighting ISIS Across Syrian Border", *Rudaw*, November 4, 2017, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/041120172>; "Iraqi Shi'ite Militia Leader Visits Lebanese-Israeli Border", *Reuters*, December 9, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-lebanon-iraq/iraqi-shiite-militia-leader-visits-lebanese-israeli-border-idUSL8N1O9096>

<sup>25</sup>"Did Iraq's Sadr Visit Tehran After Green Zone Protests?", *Al Arabiya English*, May 3, 2016, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2016/05/03/Did-Iraq-s-Sadr-visit-Tehran-after-protests-called-by-him-.html>

country that had been closed since the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait<sup>26</sup>. This mending of fences is facilitated by the 'Arab' component of the nationalist current. Apart from uniting Sunnis and Shias domestically, an Arab identity narrative allows the nationalists to shift Iraq away from its Shia allies towards Sunni Arab states.

The elections will also impact Iraq's relations with the US. Guided by Iran, an election victory by the Islamists will see the US' role in the country further reduced. The PMF leadership has, for example, repeatedly threatened US forces and demanded that they leave the country<sup>27</sup>. The nationalists, however, are divided on the US' role. While Sadr holds staunch anti-American views, Abadi's position on the US' influence has been more ambiguous<sup>28</sup>. Having come to power with US support, Abadi has been engaged in a balancing act between Washington and Tehran. Moreover, aiming to reduce Iranian influence in the country, the nationalists could use American support. In this, Saudi Arabia could act as a broker between the US and Sadr.

While sectarian reign will see Baghdad's continued entrenchment in Iran's Shia axis, a nationalist victory would bring change to Iraq's foreign policy. Both Sadr and Abadi intend to bring Iraq closer to Saudi Arabia and to 'return the country to the Arab fold'. While the nationalists are divided on the US' role in Iraq, Washington could prove useful in countering Iranian influence.



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<sup>26</sup>"Moqtada Al Sadr Received by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman", *The National*, July 30, 2017, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/moqtada-al-sadr-received-by-saudi-crown-prince-mohammed-bin-salman-1.615503>; "Saudi Arabia and Iraq to Re-open Border Crossing After 27 Years ", *Reuters*, August 15, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-iraq-diplomacy/saudi-arabia-and-iraq-to-re-open-border-crossing-after-27-years-idUSKCN1AV11E>

<sup>27</sup>"Iran-backed Iraqi Militias Step Up Threat of Violence Against US Forces in Iraq", *Middle East Institute*, February 7, 2018, <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/io/iran-backed-iraqi-militias-step-threat-violence-against-us-forces-iraq>

<sup>28</sup>"In Iraq, a Popular Cleric Cranks Up Anti-US rhetoric", *CNN*, January 8, 2011, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/01/08/iraq.sadr/index.html>

# Conclusion



In the Shia polity—arguably the most important section of Iraqi politics— chiefly two ideologies will be competing in the elections. Traditionally, there are the sectarian Shia Islamists. Apart from former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, they will be represented by a new Fatah alliance led by Hadi al-Amiri. Fatah is the political wing of the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) that became infamous for their abuse of Sunnis after ‘liberating’ them from the IS. If Fatah is able to turn its military victory into electoral gains, ethno-sectarian discrimination is likely to be perpetuated. A possible platform for future discrimination is reconstruction funding. Furthermore, as all these actors are strongly linked to Iran, they will further cement the country in Tehran’s orbit.

Reform is more likely with an electoral victory of the second current, nationalism. The main proponents of this movement are Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and, to a lesser extent, Prime Minister Haider a-Abadi. Both figures have built their political discourse on cross-sectarianism and anti-corruption with an aim to attract voters with a promise of change. Although the extent of this change depends on multiple factors, their rapprochement with Saudi Arabia is a strong indication of their intentions. Despite their ambiguity towards the US’ influence in Iraq, Washington could prove to be a useful ally against Iranian meddling.

Government formation will also inevitably entail coalition building. While ideological proximity is typically a good marker to predict political coalitions, the attempted pre-electoral alliance between Abadi and Amiri highlights the importance of pragmatic considerations. Both figures are determined to be in a position of power after the elections, a consideration that trumped their ideological differences. Ironically, the recent experience of the failed alliance has made coalitions based on shared ideologies more likely.

Moreover, questions have been raised about the validity and legitimacy of the elections. Despite some polls suggesting high voter participation, various reports have indicated the prevalence of voter apathy, especially amongst Sunnis<sup>29</sup>. This combined with the internal

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<sup>29</sup>“Results of a nationwide public opinion poll on Iraq’s upcoming parliamentary election”, *1001 Iraqi Thoughts*, March 26, 2018, <http://1001iraqithoughts.com/2018/03/26/results-of-a-nationwide-public-opinion-poll-on-iraqs-upcoming-parliamentary-election/>; “Apathy, Distrust + Reconstruction: Many Anbar Locals Have Given Up on Iraqi Politics Won’t Vote”, *Niqash*, February 15, 2018, <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/5834/Many-Anbar-Locals-Have-Given-Up-On-Iraqi-Politics-Won't-Vote.htm>

displacement of a segment of Sunnis has led some Sunni lawmakers to make unsuccessful attempts at postponing the elections. Other factors like vote buying and physical threat by certain factions could distort the polls.

The factors that contributed to rise of the IS, Sunni exclusion, and pervasive corruption, continue to persist in Iraq today. To prevent a future Sunni insurgency from emerging, these issues need to be addressed. With the May 2018 elections fast approaching, the next government will inherit this baggage. Whether the future government will make the necessary reforms will depend foremost on the electorate.





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