



IRAQ

DLAWER ALA'ALDEEN

MIDDLE EAST RESEARCH INSTITUTE

After four years of political and security turbulence, Iraq has now turned a new page with plenty of optimism for 2019. Back in 2014, Iraq was at the brink of failure, with the Islamic State (IS) occupying almost a third for the country, the army melting away, over three million internally displaced people seeking refuge, oil prices plummeting, Baghdad-Erbil relations at rock bottom and most Iraqis losing confidence in their ruling elite.

By the end of 2017, ISIS was being militarily defeated by the Iraqi armed forces, including the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), the Kurdish Peshmarga and other security forces, with extensive support from an international coalition of over 70 countries. Meanwhile, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) went ahead with a referendum for independence in September, which was followed by an untimely round of violence and several months of stalemate between Baghdad and Erbil.

In 2018, Iraq not only stabilised and regained a degree of unity, but also witnessed a transformative general election on 12 May. This was enough to radically change the political dynamics in Iraq and focus minds on power sharing in Baghdad. No political party or alliance secured an outright majority to form a government, and the traditional political divide along the ethno-sectarian (Shia, Sunni and Kurdish) lines appeared to dismantle, due to internal fragmentations among all three blocs. This, in many ways, is seen as a positive development, or transition. It has, for the first time, paved the way for an "independent" compromise candidate, Adil Abdil Mahdi, to emerge among the Shias to form a government.

Meanwhile, the Sunni political parties regained their lost constituencies and began to rethink their provinces'

Dlawer Ala'Aldeen is the founding President of the Middle East Research Institute (MERI), a policy research institute and think tank based in Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI, meri-k.org). He was a former Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research in KRI Government

future relations with the central government. Whereas people in the southern, Shia-dominated provinces (such as Basrah) started a series of protests against poor governance and lack of services, adding to healthy pressure on the government to focus their attention on people's priorities. The Kurdish political parties made serious efforts to return to Baghdad with genuine commitment to share power and make the political process work for everyone. The Kurds' new enthusiasm for Baghdad will likely lead to great improvement in Baghdad-Erbil relations.

These were the positive signs that gave the local and international communities a strong sense of optimism about the future of Iraq, the roles it can play in the Middle East and the business opportunities it can provide. After all, Iraq is a middle income country with a vast wealth of natural and human resources.

Unfortunately, the process of forming a government in Baghdad has become extremely protracted and, to date, the new Cabinet remains incomplete with several important ministries vacant. The new Prime Minister (PM) has been unable to break through the ethno-sectarian barriers or win the confidence of a clear majority in the Parliament. He found himself between a rock and a hard place, unable to convince his earlier supporters, particularly the Sadrists (Sairoon bloc, followers of the cleric Muqtada Al-Sadir) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), to vote for his candidates whom he selected among the opposing blocs for the vacant ministries. In the process, the PM has not only begun to lose the confidence of his backers, but also of the general public who find him either too distracted or too indecisive to overcome major barriers.

Therefore, one can predict that these vicious political circles will continue well into 2019 with unpredictable consequences. At best, Mahdi's government, which

does not have any parliamentary bloc of its own, will linger along and fight every step of the way. At worst, pressure may mount, leading to public protests, possibly fuelled by the Sadrists and triggered by the heat of summer, poor electricity and water shortage (especially after Turkey starts filling its Dams). These may ultimately lead to the downfall of the Mahdi Cabinet, throwing the political process in disarray once again, with calls for a new election or even eruption of violence. Clearly, such nightmare scenarios are in no one's interest, hence the general sense of optimism.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) also witnessed an important election, in September, 2018, which is likely to change the composition of the next KRG Cabinet and the Region's political dynamics. The process for the formation of the KRG Cabinet also promises to be protracted and move well into early 2019, but its composition and future performance would be far more predictable than that of Baghdad's.

The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) secured 45 of the 100 core seats, and the KDP's close allies among the Christian and Turkman minorities won all of the 11 allocated (quota) seats. The KDP also decided, without consulting with its potential coalition partners (including the traditional partner in power, the PUK), to reactivate the presidency of the KRG after it was frozen in November 2017. The party nominated incumbent KRG PM, Nechirvan Barzani, for President and the current head of intelligence services, Masrour Barzani, for PM. Moreover, and much against previous expectations, the KDP is now inviting the opposition party, Gorran (Change) movement, to join the government, in a clear effort to dilute the PUK's share of the government, a prospect that has not necessarily been contemplated by the PUK which controls the

governance of half of the KRI. The KDP and PUK are still recovering after major recent setbacks following the 2017 referendum and the appointment of the PUK candidate as Iraq's new president. Relations are on course to improve steadily in 2019, particularly after the government formation in Erbil. Interestingly, these events are all seen as signs of evolution of the KRI's political landscape.

At the security level, having almost had a yearlong quiet period, there are signs of IS returning to the scene, due largely to the failure of the Iraqi leaders to address the fundamental factors that contributed to IS emergence in the first place. These include, among others: (a) lack of nation- and state-building, institutionalisation and rule of law; (b) failure to tackle the rampant corruption, provide services or to initiate credible reconciliation and reconstruction processes; and (c) the growing sub-nationalism and continued division and militarisation among Iraq's various communities. The growing political and security influence of the armed non-state actors, including the PMFs which are now stronger than the Iraqi army, is a barrier for progress and major cause for concern.

IS is now increasingly influential in relatively large swathes of the countryside in the northwest of Iraq, and likely to grow further into 2019. Although unlikely to re-occupy cities or towns in the near future, it is capable of undermining their stability and intimidating their populations. In numerous villages and small towns, IS is indeed in real control at night, while the Iraqi security forces are trivialising or underestimating their significance. Either way, IS will continue to constitute a real threat and a barrier for reconciliation in Iraq.

Finally, in 2019, Iraq will continue to be a centre stage for the global and regional power rivalries. The issue of

the Iran nuclear deal is likely to put Iraq in an unenviable position in the near future. Iran considers its overwhelming influence over Iraq's decision-making process of even greater strategic importance than ever before. The US will also watch Iraq's behaviour carefully to prevent Iran from using Iraq to bypass the newly imposed US sanctions. At the regional level, Iraq has been expanding its good relations with most of its neighbours, including those with whom it has had a long history of poor relations. However, Turkey is likely to complicate its relations with Iraq over its "national security" concerns and may intervene militarily in Iraq in pursuit of the PKK, Kurdistan Worker's Party.

Evidently, when left alone, politics in Iraq will evolve naturally amidst complex dynamics and numerous contradicting drivers for change. There are no major 'pan-Iraqi' political parties or political father figures to drive a healthier evolution of the country's governing system. However, there are growing sentiments of Iraqism among certain quarters in Iraq, largely promoted by leaders like Al-Sadr, in reference to their rejection of both Iranian and US interferences in Iraqi affairs. Nevertheless, these sentiments are unlikely to grow beyond the threshold or be translated into a credible process for regaining total sovereignty for Iraq. That said, the European member states and other global partners which find Iraq too important to ignore could engage the Iraqis more constructively and help them focus on the country's priorities. The Europeans should help the governments of Baghdad and Erbil to become fully functional by focusing on nation- and state-building processes. Only then can Iraq become a credible, long-term business partner for everyone and full member of the international community.