

Commentary, May 10, 2018

AFTER IS: THE MEANING OF IRAQ'S ELECTION FOR THE ARAB SUNNI COMMUNITY

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The demise of the Islamic State (IS) caliphate in Iraq in 2018 has unveiled the magnitude of destruction caused by IS booby-traps, coupled with the strikes of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the coalition's targeting IS fighters, who took cover in Sunni-majority cities. Due to the war against IS, millions of Iraqis were displaced. The majority of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) have returned to their home cities since then but hundreds of thousands are yet to return. Sunni IDPs who cannot return to their homes are either prevented by powerful Iran-backed militias or had their homes destroyed during the war against IS. The return of IDPs, the reconstruction of destroyed cities and protection of the Sunni community are among top priorities for Iraqi Sunni politicians.

Post-IS challenges define the Iraqi Sunni community's concerns and aspirations. Iraq is scheduled to hold general parliamentary

elections on 12 May 2018. In contrast to the Shia and Kurdish communities after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Iraqi Sunni community has not been politically unified under a defined political structure(s) or leadership. Experts often cite Sunni political disarray as one of the main reasons behind Sunnis' political under-representation in previous Iraqi governments. There are a number of contiguous circumstances that present Iraqi Sunnis with the unique opportunity to achieve better representation in the upcoming Iraqi government. These are: the defeat of IS, the failure of the Kurdish independentist bid launched in September 2017, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) rapprochement with Iraq.¹ To illustrate, the King of Saudi Arabia favoured

¹ Kathem, M. (2018): A New Era Beckons for Iraqi-Saudi Relations. <https://warontherocks.com/2018/02/a-new-era-beckons-for-iraqi-saudi-relations/>

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relations with Iraq by funding projects such as the new football stadium in Baghdad.²

Nevertheless, the defeat of IS came at a heavy price both financially and politically. In June 2014, IS terrorists managed to overrun almost one third of Iraq's territory, taking advantage of the weak Iraqi state led by former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. His government was often described by commentators as corrupt, incompetent, and sectarian.³ The Hashd al-Shaabi – also known as the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs) – were formed following Grand Ayatollah Sistani's Jihad al-Kifa'i fatwa calling for mobilisation against IS, and were exploited by the Iraqi government as a tool to counter IS. The Hashd, however, represents a divisive force and a controversial challenge for the Iraqi Sunni community for at least three reasons. Firstly, the creation of Hashd has resurrected dormant Shia militias such as the Badr Brigades, Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), the Mahdi Army, Hezbollah Iraq, and other smaller Shia militant groups, which were active during Iraq's 2006-2007 sectarian conflict. Secondly, while the Hashd forces played a major role in defeating IS, they have also been accused of committing war crimes⁴ in Sunni-majority cities during the war against IS, and they have been blamed for

demographic change⁵ in Sunni-majority cities.⁶

Moreover, several Hashd units are preventing Sunni IDPs from returning to their homes⁷ in cities such as Jurf al-Sakhar and Yethrib, citing security concerns based on the sectarian identity of these cities.⁸

Thirdly, during the war against IS, Hashd forces also managed to recruit local Sunni fighters and commanders: many of those who joined Hashd forces are former fighters/commanders of the Sahwa – also known as the Awakening Councils – which were mainly composed of Sunni tribalists supported by the US Army against al-Qaeda in Iraq between 2007 and 2011. Indeed, the rise of Hashd and demise of IS created new challenges in Sunni-majority cities. For Sunni leaders to deliver on their pre-election promises, Hashd forces should be replaced by the Iraqi Army and local police. Prime Minister al-Abadi has already instructed several Hashd units to be replaced with Iraqi army and federal police units in Sunni-majority cities.

To further complicate this situation is the "politicisation" of the Hashd militias. Despite their controversial nature, Hashd leaders have decided to participate in Iraq's upcoming elections under the al-Fatih

² Mail Online (2018): <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5483295/Saudi-Arabia-offers-build-biggest-football-stadium-Iraq.html>

³ Dodge, T. (2013): Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism.

⁴ HRW (2016): <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/31/iraq-possible-war-crimes-shia-militia>

⁵ Business Insider UK: <http://uk.businessinsider.com/iraqi-shia-militias-fighting-isis-are-kicking-sunnis-out-of-their-homes-2015-1>

⁶ Iraqi News: <https://www.iraqinews.com/iraq-war/mp-1000-babil-sunnis-kidnapped-shia-militias-3-years/>

⁷ The Guardian (2015): <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/05/iraqi-sunnis-forced-abandon-homes-identity-survival-shia-militia-isis>

⁸ Al-Falluja TV (2018): Militias prevent the return of IDPs to Jurf al-Sakhr.

<http://www.alfallujah.tv/news/مليشياتايشييلملا-دوع-عنملمصاوتتايشيلملا-فيحانل-ال-ارخصلافرج-يحزان>

electoral list. Sunni politicians voiced concerns that Hashd forces stationed in Sunni-majority cities might affect the outcome of the elections either by preventing people from going to voting stations or by facilitating fraud in favour of Sunni candidates affiliated with the Hashd. In response, the Iraqi Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) promised free, fair, and fraud-free elections using advanced electronic vote-counting machines and employing thousands of independent observers.

Ironically, both Kurdish and Shia political parties are divided and in disarray ahead of the 2018 elections. The consequences of the Kurdish independence referendum and the rise of Shia Popular Mobilisation Units as powerful (militant) political actors increased intra-political rivalry among Kurdish and Shia political groups. Despite challenges, the post-IS political atmosphere in Iraq offers the Sunni community a chance to start to rectify perceived injustices and political marginalisation through the ballot boxes.

Sunni politicians are participating in the elections either on exclusively Sunni electoral lists or as candidates of others. Iraqi Vice President Osama al-Nujaifi, also leader of the Muttahidoon Coalition, and Khamis al-Khanjar, Secretary General of the Arab Project, are leading the al-Qarar Coalition electoral list, which includes many prominent Sunni political parties and figures such as Dr. Ahmed al-Missari, Dr. Talal al-Zouba'i, MP Ahmed al-Mashhadani, and Dr. Salman al-Jumaily. Other Sunni parties are also participating in the elections, although under different electoral lists. For example, Speaker of Parliament and former leader of the Iraqi Islamic Party Dr. Saleem

al-Jebouri is participating in the elections as part of Vice President Dr. Iyad Allawi's electoral list, the al-Wataniya Coalition. Former Sahwa leaders affiliated with Hashd forces, also known as Sunni tribal Hashd, are participating under the al-Fatih Coalition electoral list led by MP Hadi al-Ameri, leader of Badr Brigade militia. Several Sunni political parties and prominent figures, such as former defence minister Khalid al-Obeidi, are participating in elections under PM al-Abadi's list, al-Nasr. Although Sunni political actors are participating under different electoral lists, they are better organised than in the 2014 elections.⁹

So far, there is no well-defined Sunni political leadership under which Sunnis can unite to politically claim their proportionate share in the next Iraqi government. However, post-election political coalition(s) cannot be ruled out. Political parties can break away from their electoral lists after elections in the run-up to forming the next Iraqi government.

Since 2003, Iraqi Sunnis were often described as 'rejectionists' because they rejected the new political structure installed by the US-led Coalition Provisional Administration (CPA). Would Iraqi Sunni voters be able and/or willing to participate in the upcoming elections to achieve proportionate representation in the government? And consequently, will Sunni political parties unite after elections to negotiate with the winning party their share of power in forming a new government? May 12 will tell.

⁹ Ali, A. (2014): Iraq's 2014 National Elections. <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/AhmedAliIraqElections.pdf>