

Politics



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Iraq Snapshot: Upcoming election period carries increased risk of political violence, unrest

Executive Summary:

- Parliamentary elections will be held across Iraq on November 11, while security personnel will cast their vote in a special ballot on November 9.
- In the run-up to the elections, there is an elevated risk of political tensions and violence, which has already materialized in recent weeks.
- Tensions between rival political blocs may prompt protests or militia mobilization. This risk will persist throughout the election period, including in the aftermath of the vote, especially if parties submit appeals against the outcome.
- In this context, and based on precedent, there is likely to be a protracted government formation period after the ballot, in which political tensions and the risks of violence will persist.
- IS militants may attempt attacks before, during, or after the elections. However, given the group's declining capabilities, the risk of sophisticated attacks in major urban areas is reduced.
- In the coming weeks, security forces will intensify security measures across Iraq to mitigate these risks.
- **Those operating or residing in Iraq over the coming weeks are advised to remain cognizant of the prospect of increasing political tensions and associated political violence ahead of the November 11 parliamentary elections and during the government formation process.**

PRIMARY RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH UPCOMING ELECTION PERIOD IN IRAQ



Politically motivated violence



Protest activity



Armed militia mobilization



Terrorism

Current Situation:

Parliamentary elections:

- Parliamentary elections are slated to be held across Iraq's 18 governorates on **November 11**, which will reportedly be a public holiday.
- Election campaigning commenced on [October 3](#) and will end at 17:00 (local time) on November 8.
- There will be a 24-hour electoral silence period before voting begins.
- Security and military personnel will reportedly cast their ballots in a special vote at designated polling stations on **November 9**.
- According to data by Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC), over 7,700 candidates are reportedly competing for 329 parliamentary seats. Nine of these are reserved for minority quotas.
- 75 lists are independent, while the others are associated with 31 alliances and 38 parties.
- Voting will only be possible with biometric voter cards, which will be deactivated for 72 hours after the individual casts their ballot to preserve electoral integrity.
- Reports indicate that authorities are expected to publish initial results of the parliamentary elections 24 hours after the closure of polling booths. There is reportedly no fixed deadline for the announcement of final results.
- The ruling Shiite Coordination Framework (CF)'s constituent parties and alliances are running on separate lists, although they are expected to reunite in the government formation process after the vote.
- Prominent Shiite cleric [Muqtada al-Sadr's Sadrist Movement](#) is boycotting the elections due to alleged corruption among Iraq's political elite.

Electoral system

- Iraq's 18 provinces form single electoral districts in the elections.
- In each electoral district, the seat allocation will be determined proportionally based on the votes each list received in that district.
- Seat allocation uses the Webster/Sainte-Lague method with a divider of 1.7, which is widely perceived as benefiting larger party lists to the detriment of smaller parties or independent candidates.

Security measures

- The IHEC has reportedly stated that a security plan is in place to secure the voting process, although details have not been disclosed.
- According to October 17 reports, the Iraqi Parliament urged the security apparatus to devise a systematic security plan for the run-up to the vote commensurate with the “sensitivity of the current situation.”
- Reports, including from October 23, indicate that authorities do not plan to impose a curfew or airport closures on election day. Such measures were implemented during the [October 2021](#) parliamentary elections.
- A security official on October 19 stressed that authorities were generally authorized to implement restrictions, such as a possible ban on inter-governorate travel on election day.

Assessments & Forecast:

Background

1. The slated elections mark the seventh such ballot since 2003. The last elections occurred in [October 2021](#), which saw a landslide victory for Muqtada al-Sadr’s Sadrist Movement. This was followed by a prolonged political deadlock and turbulence as al-Sadr failed to assemble a government coalition amid resistance by the Iran-backed Coordination Framework (CF). This included violent protests in Baghdad, armed inter-militia clashes, and limited aerial attacks involving [UAVs](#) by Iran-backed militias. Only in [October 2022](#), after al-Sadr’s retirement from politics and withdrawal of all Sadrist Movement deputies in [June 2022](#), did the CF win lawmakers’ support to nominate Muhammad Shia al-Sudani as Prime Minister (PM).
2. Since the start of PM al-Sudani’s tenure, Iraq has experienced a period of relative stabilization. However, the country continues to face long-standing domestic and geopolitical challenges. Many Iraqi citizens have major socioeconomic grievances regarding widespread unemployment, [poor public service provision](#), and perceived government corruption. This will likely contribute to disillusionment with the political process among voters, increasing the prospects for a low turnout, which will cloud the representativeness of results. This is particularly given the decision by al-Sadr, who retains a significant support base, to [boycott](#) the parliamentary elections himself and call for his supporters to do the same in protest of perceived corruption among the ruling political elite.
3. Geopolitically, the Iraqi government continues to face the challenge of balancing its ties and cooperation with the US and Iran – two opposing powers that retain a strategic interest in influencing Iraqi affairs. Since the last elections, this challenge was underscored by the role played by Iran-backed militias, several of whom are integrated within the state-endorsed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), under Iran’s Axis of Resistance. These actors launched UAV attacks on Israel and US bases in the region, prompting retaliatory US airstrikes in Iraq on [several occasions](#). While this trend ceased in November 2024, the US-Iran rivalry in Iraq was underscored again by the PMF law, which was recently [withdrawn](#), likely as a result of extensive US pressure to impede legislation that is perceived as enshrining Iranian influence within Iraqi state institutions.
4. Within the context of the upcoming poll, recent actions by both actors underscore their vested interest in Iraq’s political prospects. For the US, this was underscored by the appointment of Mark Savaya as Special Envoy to Iraq on October 20 to strengthen ties between the countries. Additionally, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio emphasized in a phone call with PM al-Sudani on October 21 the urgency of disarming Iran-backed militias and Washington’s commitment to advancing the countries’ “shared interests.”
5. Meanwhile, according to October 25 reports, Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) Commander Esmail Qaani reportedly met with leaders of PMF factions, urging them to avoid internal rivalries that could imperil the political dominance of the Iran-backed CF. This highlights Tehran’s determination to ensure the continuation of its influence in the upcoming government through the establishment of a unified alliance of Iran-backed parties following the vote.

Risks prior to voting: Politically motivated violence, unrest, and militia activity

1. These contextual factors and underlying political challenges have already translated into a surge of political tensions and associated acts of [violence](#) ahead of the vote. Most notably, on [October 15](#), an IED attack killed Sunni al-Siyada politician Safa al-Mashhadani in Tarmiyah. Gunfire toward party premises and campaigning events has also been recorded, as seen near Baghdad on [October 17](#), in Kirkuk on [October 11](#), and in Najaf on [October 5](#).
2. Collectively, these incidents highlight the use of violence as a means of intimidation ahead of the elections, which is a recurring trend around prominent ballots in Iraq in recent years. This includes more sophisticated modus operandi in high-profile assassination attempts, in addition to smaller-scale security incidents during campaigning, culminating in a risk of collateral damage. In turn, this increases the risk of retaliatory acts and cyclical political violence ahead of the vote. This is abetted by the widespread proliferation of arms, which continues to limit authorities' capacity to address this threat effectively, creating a continued risk.
3. While localized at this stage, such attacks heighten tensions between rivals, including Sunni blocs, Iran-backed Shiite parties, non-Iran-aligned Shiite parties, and their affiliated supporters. This will undergird the risk of protests or militia mobilization, which can materialize even in the absence of political violence. The possibility of such incidents was shown on [September 28](#) when a prominent opposition activist accused a politician from Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition of plotting to assassinate Muqtada al-Sadr, prompting Sadrist Movement supporters to mobilize in Basra.
4. **FORECAST:** There will be an underlying risk of militia mobilization throughout the political period, which is likely to surface in the event of an escalation in tensions between rivals. This is because several major parties maintain affiliated armed militias. The risk is particularly elevated in Baghdad and southern Iraq, where prominent Shiite organizations, including Iran-backed PMF groups, retain a considerable presence.

Risks during and after the elections

1. Iraqi elections are susceptible to fraud, with candidates or their supporters likely to exert efforts to influence citizens' voting by offering financial rewards. In this context, Iraq's security forces have reportedly intensified operations targeting suspected violations of the electoral process, including the illicit sale and purchase of biometric voting cards. The IHEC reportedly warned political parties that it would disqualify candidates found to be guilty of trading voting cards or attempting to influence the outcome.
2. However, despite the authorities' efforts to crack down on this phenomenon, fraudulent efforts to influence the election results will persist. This will fuel both voters and political parties' doubts about the integrity of the ballot, which will instigate tensions in the aftermath of the November 11 vote.
3. Upon the IHEC's announcements of the ballot's official results, political parties are liable to submit appeals against the election outcome. Such a scenario could translate into protests or even militia mobilization, although the former remains more likely at this stage. Nonetheless, the latter cannot be excluded, as suggested by precedent. In [November 2021](#), major clashes between PMF supporters and security forces occurred in Baghdad's Green Zone as the former implicated acting PM Mustafa al-Khadimi in election fraud during the October 2021 parliamentary elections. This dynamic culminated in a [failed UAV attack targeting al-Khadimi's residence in the Green Zone](#).
4. That said, the risk of such escalatory conduct is mitigated by several factors this year. Firstly, the absence of the Sadrist Movement in the vote will remove the Iran-backed parties' primary rival from direct contention, reducing the prospects for a closely contested ballot and heated government formation period as recorded in 2021-22. Iran-backed parties and their affiliated militias are more likely to direct efforts toward securing another ruling coalition rather than instigating unrest. This is supported by IRGC-QF Commander Qaani's call for affiliated parties to prioritize the consolidation of Tehran's influence in Iraq's political institutions in the government formation process.
5. **FORECAST:** Regardless, coalition building is likely to be protracted, and the risk of [deadlock](#) cannot be excluded, which would increase the prospects for unrest. This could

materialize from Sadrist Movement supporters denouncing the results as invalid if voter turnout is low or irregularities are raised. Alternatively, rival Iran-backed parties could mobilize their militias to increase pressure in a bid to secure control over [specific ministries](#) and files in line with their interests.

Underlying risk of terrorism to persist throughout election period

1. [Islamic State \(IS\) militants](#), who primarily retain a presence in Iraqi Federal government-controlled territories in northern and central Iraq, may aspire to conduct attacks before, during, or after the elections, which they reject as “un-Islamic.” Successful attacks targeting campaigning events, ballot boxes, or celebrations of results would constitute a symbolic achievement for the group, whose activity has significantly waned in recent years. This is because they would show IS’ remaining capacity to destabilize the security environment and gain support among jihadist sympathizers.
2. On [October 26](#), Iraqi authorities dismantled a terrorist cell and defused a motorcycle bomb near the residence of Kirkuk Governor Rebwar Taha in Kirkuk City’s Azadi neighborhood, with unconfirmed reports indicating that the cell members were IS operatives. This is overall plausible given the jihadist group’s known presence in the Kirkuk region. A successful attack targeting Taha would have served IS’ agenda to deepen [political divisions](#) among Kurds, Turkmen, and Arabs in the multiethnic city of Kirkuk ahead of the ballot and undermine state authority.
3. **FORECAST:** Authorities will likely increase intelligence gathering to detect and foil possible IS plots targeting the elections in the coming weeks. While such attacks cannot be entirely excluded, the long-standing absence of sophisticated IS attacks, particularly in major urban areas, reiterates that the group’s capacity to stage major acts of militancy has been significantly reduced by the Iraqi security forces’ and the US-led coalition’s anti-IS campaign. Thus, the risk of successful IS attacks surrounding the elections is limited, particularly outside northwestern and central Iraq.

Implications for Iraq’s security environment

1. The aforementioned factors underscore that the upcoming election period is likely to undermine Iraq’s security environment, including in the greater Baghdad region. This increases the pressure on authorities to intensify security measures nationwide in the coming weeks.
2. An increased security presence is therefore likely at campaigning events and voting stations to mitigate the risk of politically motivated violence and terror attacks. Iraq’s security apparatus may also intensify counter-militancy operations and monitoring to thwart any IS activity.
3. Additionally, despite their reported intent to abstain from imposing more restrictive measures during the voting period, as recorded during the [October 2021](#) parliamentary elections, authorities may resort to such protocols. This could include curfews, the closure of airports and border crossings, and limitations on inter-governorate travel on November 11. Such a scenario is more likely in the event of further notable security incidents materializing in the run-up to the vote. This could result in the imposition of restrictions, either nationwide, in specific cities or governorates, including on short notice. Regardless, extensive disruptions to business operations can be expected on November 11, which could spill over into the days preceding and following the vote.

Recommendations:

Election-specific:

1. Those operating or residing in Iraq over the coming weeks are advised to remain cognizant of the prospect of increasing political tensions and associated political violence ahead of the November 11 parliamentary elections and during the government formation process.
2. Refrain from discussing politically sensitive topics with unknown individuals.
3. Adhere to authorities’ instructions regarding security measures for the upcoming vote, which could

include movement restrictions.

4. Allot for disruptions on November 11 due to the reported declaration of a public holiday and anticipated closure of public and private facilities.
5. During the voting process on November 9-11, avoid the vicinity of all election facilities, including polling booths, due to the underlying risk of attacks and unruly demonstrations at these locales.

Iraqi Federal Government:

1. Avoid nonessential travel to Baghdad due to the threat of militancy and civil unrest. Contact us at Operations@max-security.com or +44 20-3540-0434 for itinerary and contingency support.
2. For those conducting essential operations in Baghdad, restrict travel to the Green Zone. Ensure that contingency and emergency evacuation plans are updated.
3. Train personnel on emergency procedures for escalation scenarios, with an emphasis on aerial attacks. During periods of tensions between the US and Iran, Iran-backed Shiite militias are known to conduct aerial (including UAV and rocket) attacks against US-linked facilities in Baghdad, including the Green Zone and Baghdad International Airport.
4. Avoid nonessential travel to Basra due to the risk of civil unrest, crime, armed tribal clashes, as well as the underlying potential during periods of tensions for rocket attacks by Shiite militias against US-linked and Western targets.
5. Travel to Anbar, Nineveh, Salahuddin, Kirkuk, and Diyala provinces should be avoided due to persistent Islamic State (IS) activity in these areas. Remain vigilant of the risk of roadside IED and landmine explosions in the region.
6. Avoid nonessential travel to Iraq's southern provinces of Muthanna, Najaf, Dhi Qar, Qadisiyyah, Wasit, Babil, Karbala, and Maysan due to the risk of violent unrest and gun violence during tribal clashes.
7. Any travel, particularly in outlying areas, ought to be conducted in armored vehicles, with trained security escorts and coordination with authorities. This is due to the prevalence of remaining landmines and the risk of roadside IEDs planted by Shiite militias. If possible, travel by air between Iraqi cities to minimize risks associated with militancy and crime.
8. Westerners are advised to maintain a low profile and travel only with trained security personnel given the risk of attacks or kidnappings.
9. While traveling, regularly alter itinerary routes and avoid disclosing sensitive information to strangers, including your affiliation with foreign-based firms as your response could attract a negative reaction from locals.

Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG):

1. Maintain heightened vigilance in the cities of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah while adhering to security precautions regarding protest activity and militant attacks.
2. Avoid nonessential travel to outlying areas beyond the cities of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah.
3. Avoid travel to the vicinity of the KRG-administered Iraq-Turkey border region due to hostilities between Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) militants and the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK).
4. Avoid travel to the vicinity of the northern Iraq-Iranian border due to militant activity and periodic Iranian attacks in these areas.