

# Iraq's 2018 Elections

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Iraqis are voting in national, regional, and provincial elections in 2018 as they seek to consolidate the country's military victory over the Islamic State, rebuild shattered communities, and improve government performance. On May 12, Iraqi voters went to the polls to choose national legislators for four-year terms in the 329-seat Council of Representatives (COR), Iraq's unicameral legislature.

Turnout was lower in the 2018 COR election than in past national elections, but the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) has stated that it was "largely peaceful and orderly" and has called on election officials "to act expeditiously in order to seriously address all complaints." Irregularities are under investigation, while most of the leading factions and figures have accepted the results and are now engaged in negotiations aimed at choosing a prime minister and forming a new cabinet.

## Iraq's Electoral System and Government Formation

Voters in Iraq's 18 governorates selected their preferred political list and/or candidate in the May 2018 COR election, with seats awarded proportionally on a complex formula basis. Some Iraqis have criticized the electoral formula as biased toward larger parties. The COR election results are informing the selection of a new prime minister and cabinet, with nominees determined through coalition negotiations among the various parties, lists, and candidates. One quarter of the COR seats are reserved for women and nine seats are reserved for representatives of minority groups, including Christians and Yazidis.

After results are finalized, the newly constituted COR is required within 15 days to choose a speaker and two deputies by a majority of its members (165 votes). Within 30 days from the date of the first session of the new COR, members are to choose a new national president by a two-thirds majority (220 votes). Within 15 days of selection by the COR, the new president is to direct the prime minister-designate nominee of the largest negotiated COR bloc to form a government. Within 30 days of being designated, the designee must present a cabinet platform and slate of ministers for COR confirmation by majority vote.

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## Campaign and Results

Most candidates and coalitions adopted campaign rhetoric reflecting the anticorruption, pan-sectarian, and pro-reform aspirations of popular protest movements, although coalition platforms and mobilization strategies were defined by a mix of new appeals and established methods. Overall, turnout declined considerably from levels in 2005, 2010, and 2014, with 44.5% of more than 23 million registered Iraqi voters participating. Analysts attribute the decline to abstentions and an organized boycott, voter disillusion and fatigue, the unpopularity of incumbents and establishment candidates, technical and administrative failures, and continuing internal displacement. Voters did not choose candidates strictly on ethnic or sectarian lines and demonstrated a range of candidate and list preferences within communal groups.

The *Sa'irun* (On the March) coalition led by populist Shia cleric and longtime U.S. antagonist Muqtada al Sadr's *Istiqama* (Integrity) list placed first, followed by the predominantly Shia *Fatah* (Conquest) coalition led by Hadi al Ameri of the Badr Organization. *Sa'irun* leveraged a unique slate of new candidates to distinguish itself and campaigned on an anticorruption and service delivery platform. *Fatah* includes several individuals formerly associated with the mostly Shia Popular Mobilization Force (PMF) militias that helped fight the Islamic State, including figures and movements with ties to Iran. Prime Minister Haider al Abadi is seeking a second term, but his *Nasr* (Victory) coalition underperformed to place third in the election, and he will depend on support from Shia rivals if he is to remain in office. Abadi's inclusive, Shia-led list earned the most votes in predominantly Sunni Ninewa governorate, home to the city of Mosul, but fell short in Baghdad and other areas.

Former prime minister Nouri al Maliki's State of Law coalition, Ammar al Hakim's *Hikma* (Wisdom) list, and Iyad Allawi's *Wataniya* (National) list also won significant blocs of seats. Among Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) won the most seats, while smaller Kurdish opposition lists have joined together to condemn alleged vote tampering and to demand cancellation of the results.

**Table 1. Iraq's 2018 National Legislative Election**

Seats won by Coalition/Party

Coalition/Party	Seats Won
Sa'irun	54
Fatah	47
Nasr	42
Kurdistan Democratic Party	25
State of Law	25
Wataniya	21
Hikma	19
Patriotic Union of Kurdistan	18
Qarar	14
Others	64

**Source:** Iraq Independent High Electoral Commission.

## Next Steps and Outlook

Iraqi analysts note that election results are one reference point for post-election government formation negotiations, and underscore that vote totals may not directly determine the leadership or the final makeup of Iraq's next government. Electoral lists may combine or fracture during negotiations aimed at creating blocs in the COR. Analysts expect negotiations to remain fluid and somewhat opaque. Some scenarios project a status quo result based on an expansive but fragile coalition government, while others consider alternate coalitions that could include or exclude different parties. Observers have identified some possible candidates for prime minister, but negotiations could last for weeks or longer. Prime Minister Abadi could return under some scenarios, but the makeup of the governing coalition will determine its viability and freedom of action on controversial issues.

Prime Minister Abadi has expressed his desire to see U.S. and other international military support for Iraq's security forces continue. *Sa'irun* leader Muqtada al Sadr remains critical of U.S. policy toward Iraq and the broader Middle East, but has not called for the immediate withdrawal of foreign forces. It remains to be seen whether any coalition government featuring Sadr's movement and/or members of the *Fatah* or State of Law coalitions might seek to substantially revise or reverse current patterns of U.S.-Iraq cooperation. Senior officials from Iran and the United States have visited Iraq in the wake of the election and consulted with leading political figures.

The Kurdistan Regional Government has proposed holding long-delayed legislative and executive elections on September 30, with nationwide provincial council elections set for December.

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