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Iraq's elections: greater fragmentation among the usual elite suspects

- The results of Iraq's 2025 parliamentary elections suggest that greater fragmentation is becoming an increasingly salient feature: many electoral lists compete, there is no clear winner and elites jockey for leverage rather than mandates.
- Established parties remain dominant not because of their popularity, but because structural factors favor larger and well-resourced actors, such as state-embedded networks, favorable electoral rules and deep financial pockets.
- Intensified US pressure to curb militia influence and Iran's efforts to preserve its political and energy leverage have narrowed the boundaries of post-election bargaining.
- Ultimately, government formation hinges on cross-bloc bargaining rather than electoral performance. The Shia bloc has the greater numbers. Sunni parties will strategically leverage 'their' parliamentary speakership. Kurdish parties gain advantage from their flexible political positioning.

Introduction

Iraq's 2025 parliamentary elections offered a clear look at how political authority in the country is shaped in practice. While the vote determines the distribution of seats, the formation of a government hinges on the broader interplay between electoral strategizing, patronage networks and external actors with the ability to influence outcomes. This brief explores what the November 2025 vote suggests about the deeper structures influencing Iraqi politics – in particular why fragmentation persists (and seems to increase), how post-election bargaining unfolds and what the ensuing dynamics may mean for the shape and limits of the next governing coalition.

Who really won?

Iraq's 2025 election did not have a clear winner and hence produced a parliament without an obviously dominant party. Fragmentation shaped each successive stage of the electoral process: nominations, campaigning, voting and, ultimately, the composition of parliament. With [around 7,744 candidates and 75 lists on the ballot](#), most parties ran with ideologically incoherent electoral lists centered on prominent (but not necessarily popular) figures and assorted hanger-on candidates: Islamists sat alongside liberals, tribal notables next to former independents, and even celebrities and media personalities had their place. These lists were not designed to articulate a shared program but to gather as many votes as possible from disparate

constituencies. Sudani's Reconstruction and Development, which emerged as the leading bloc, secured less than 14 percent of the total number of seats (46) and in total [30 lists](#) are slated to take their place in the new parliament (see Figure 1 below).

Shia parties remain the largest segment of parliament, but their dominance is dispersed over more than 12 lists. Each list is in turn composed of several parties. The Reconstruction and Development alliance, a newly formed bloc by Prime Minister al-Sudani, ranked first with 46 seats. State of Law retained a decent power base with 29 seats, offering a reminder that Maliki's patronage network and party machinery continue to anchor a substantial segment of Shia votes. Alongside, PMF-aligned groups – notably Sadiqoun (27 – linked with Asaib

ahl al-Haq), Badr (21), Hoquq (6 – linked with Kataib Hezbollah), and Ibshir (4 – linked with the Supreme Iraqi Council) – recovered much of their pre-2021 strength with a total of over 60 seats.

Sunni parties engaged in significant internal electoral competition. Over eight separate Sunni lists appeared on the ballot. Taqaddum (Halbousi) secured 27 seats, Azm (al-Samarra'i) won 15 and the Sovereignty list (al-Khanjar) took 9 with additional seats scattered across smaller, local parties. Many of them sought to make additional gains by forming short-term alliances with smaller groups and tribes. The Sovereignty (Azm) list campaigned alongside al-Seyada Party (led by Khanjar but also containing figures such as speaker Mahmoud al-Mashhadani and Ziad al-Janabi's Legislation Party). Taqaddum and Azm forged arrangements with locally based

Box 1 A short explainer of Iraq's political landscape

Formally, Iraq is a parliamentary democracy. In practice, political authority rests on a blend of constitutional procedures, elite pacts and an informal system of power-sharing. The country's governing order – shaped after 2003 through a combination of negotiated arrangements and conflict legacies – remains anchored in sectarian and ethnic balancing among Shi'a Arab, Sunni Arab and Kurdish political elites. Although the allocation of top offices by sect is not written into law, it has become an enduring political convention that structures every post-electoral bargaining round and narrows the space for programmatic or issue-based politics.

This hybrid system – part constitutional, part negotiated, part transactional – has produced a state that functions through informal governance networks more than through rule-bound institutions. Parties derive strength from their control over ministries, provincial administrations, state-owned enterprises and security agencies, which allow them to distribute jobs, contracts and services in ways that reinforce loyalty. These networks often matter more than party platforms and shape how coalitions form and how authority is exercised once individuals are in office.

As a result, Iraq's democracy remains fragile and its governance a limited driver of economic growth. Public trust is low after years of corruption scandals, deteriorating services, economic precarity and violent repression of protesters. While voter turnout rose in 2025, many Iraqis did not view the election as a vehicle for accountability or reform. Instead, the vote was largely seen as a redistribution of influence among established elites rather than a contest over competing visions of governance. The result is a political system in which elections matter – they influence who enters the bargaining arena and with what weight – but they rarely shift the underlying principles of rule: elite accommodation, informal deal-making and fragmented but persistent power structures that limit the scope for democratic renewal.

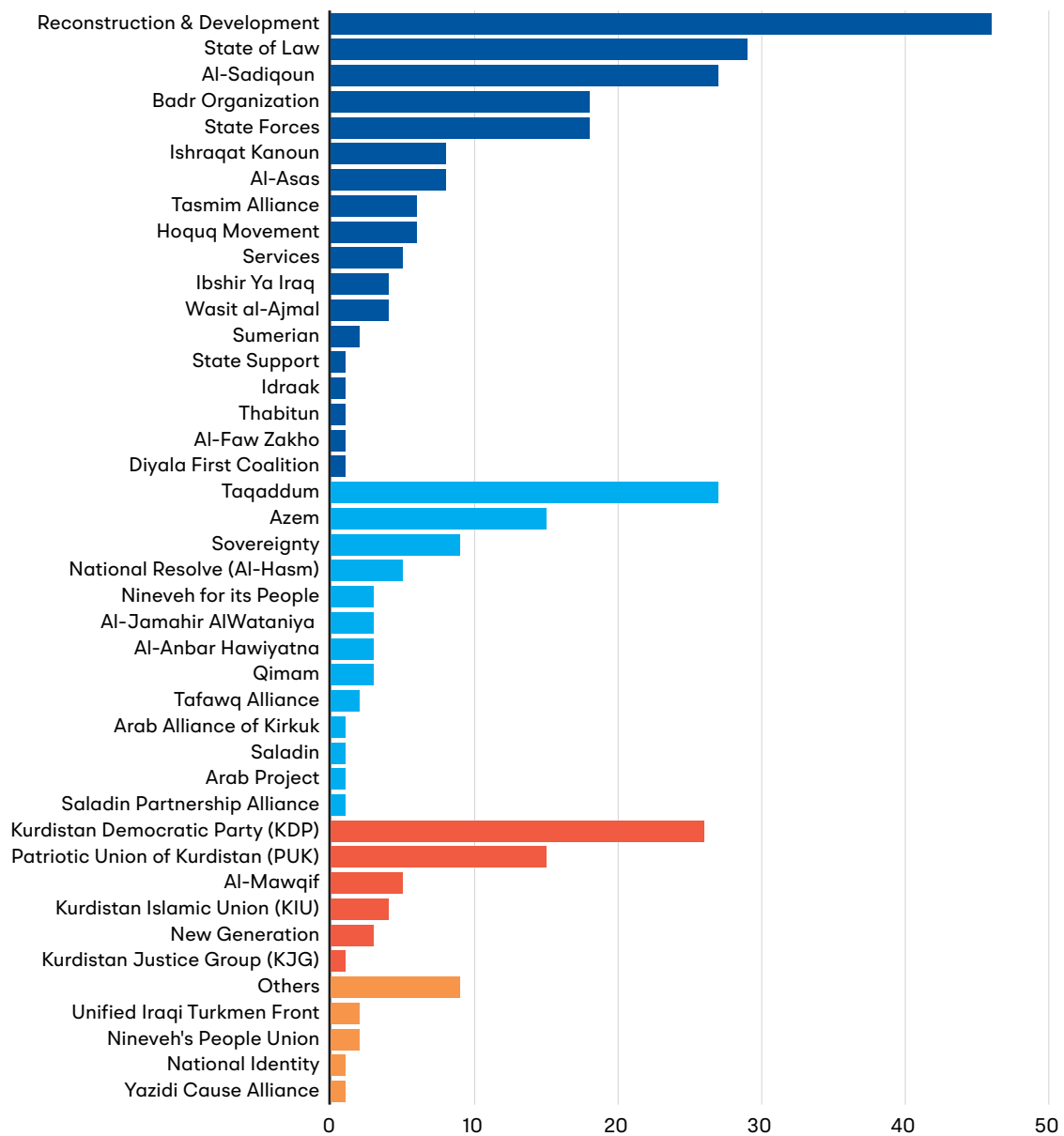
See: Ezzeddine, N and Noun, B, 2020. *Iraq and Lebanon's tortuous paths to reform*. Clingendael Institute; Dodge, T, 2020. *Iraq's Informal Consociationalism and Its Problems*. London School of Economics and Political Science; Mansour, R, 2023. *Tackling Iraq's Unaccountable State*, Chatham House.

groups such as al-Masar al-Watani in Nineveh under Abdullah Atheel al-Nujaifi. Several of these alliances campaigned together even while running under different list names.

Kurdish parties held their ground in the Kurdistan Region and, unlike 2021, slightly improved their bargaining position in Baghdad by winning 26 seats (KDP) and 15 seats (PUK) respectively. Both parties maintained their traditional dominance in Erbil (KDP), Duhok (KDP),

Sulaymaniyah (PUK) and Halabja (PUK). What stood out was the KDP's greater reach outside its core regions: it performed strongly in Nineveh, including Mosul, finishing ahead of several Sunni lists. It is worth adding that Kurdish leverage in Baghdad is more a result of their flexible political positioning than the number of their parliamentary seats. Nevertheless, Kurdish parties hold just over fifty seats, and these seats will be crucial in assembling the largest parliamentary bloc.

Figure 1 Iraq's parliament (2025) by party and sectarian affiliation (total of 329 seats)



Legend: Parties in dark blue mostly have Shia constituencies, parties in light blue mostly Sunni, parties in red mostly Kurdish, and parties in orange mostly have minority constituencies.

What decided the outcome?

The 2025 elections indicate that the traditional elite-run establishment parties will retain control over parliament. They had four structural advantages that helped them achieve this result, which also explain why smaller and newer forces (including parties that originate in the 2019 Tishreen protests – the largest popular uprising in Iraq) faded during these elections: (1) control over and use of state levers like government offices and the ability to provide access to public service on a clientelist basis, (2) the revised electoral law (again), (3) greater wealth resulting in more attractive handouts during elections and (4) the reduced space for emergent and opposition parties.

State levers and embedded networks

Over the past two decades, Iraq's main political parties embedded themselves deeply in the fundamentals of the country's ministries, provincial administrations and state-owned companies. Those positions are used as political assets that translate into jobs, contracts, welfare, fuel allocations, school appointments, municipal projects and security influence that can be activated during campaigns.

This is not a new tactic and it is used across the board. [Maliki was best known for it during his premierships](#) in the late 2000s by expanding the public payroll and using appointments to tighten his control over ministries. The State of Law base remains a political force to be reckoned with in part because its access to the state apparatus never disappeared. Sudani used the same playbook while in power. His government expanded public hiring by over [370,000 positions](#), oversaw significant upgrades of the social safety-net that benefited more than [1.5 million families](#) and brought cash-transfer schemes forward in the months preceding the vote. Asaib ahl al-Haq's comeback also fits this pattern. Its formal and informal [penetration of service ministries](#) under Sudani, like the Ministry of Higher Education, but also parts of oil and industry gave it resources and a larger constituency. The payoff shows in Sadiqoun's boost to 27 seats (Sadiqoun is Asaib's political

wing). Not too different, al-Hakim's Hikma party maximized gains through its influence within provincial councils and directorates. Sunni leaders relied on similar tactics at the provincial level. Halbousi's dominance in Anbar and parts of Baghdad rests on years of building local patronage networks connecting governorships, municipal councils and reconstruction funds.

Electoral design

[Iraq's 2023 electoral law](#) restored 18 province-wide electoral districts and re-introduced open-list proportional representation based on the [Sainte-Laguë method](#). This electoral approach encourages parties to optimize their ability to obtain votes effectively across and within electoral lists. This requires smart and strategic electoral campaigns that are more complex and expensive to organize, which gives established parties a competitive advantage.

Shia parties have the additional advantage that they are strong in provinces that happen to have many parliamentary seats (such as Baghdad and Basra). They ran separate lists with strong leaders so that excess votes could flow down the list to candidates with low popularity due to favorable divisor slots, and so secure more seats. Moreover, by fielding separate but allied lists (such as Badr and Asaib each running separately compared to their joint Fatah alliance in 2021), Shia parties reduced overflow waste and maximized the number of candidates that could reach the threshold. They also shared candidates strategically, with for example State of Law members running on Badr's list and such. In a large district, 120,000 votes split between two lists can gain 4 seats in this manner, as opposed to 3 seats if a single list had been deployed.

More concretely put, in such a setting two parties can win comparable national vote totals yet emerge with very different parliamentary footprints as it is not only the number of votes secured that matters, but also where they are cast and how efficiently they are organized. For example, during the 2025 elections, Sudani's bloc gained 46 seats from roughly 1.3 million votes; Maliki's State of Law won 29 seats from 728,000 votes; Halbousi's Taqaddum gained

27 seats despite collecting 945,000 votes; and the KDP, with more than a million votes, ended with just 26 seats.

Iraq today suffers from substantial distortions. Going by present population numbers would [probably increase the number of parliamentary seats](#) for Baghdad and reduce those for the Kurdish areas, for instance. Sadr City alone is estimated to host roughly two million residents (equivalent to around 20 seats), yet the capital as a whole continues to have fewer allocated seats than its actual population suggests it should have. Recalibration of parliamentary seats with up-to-date population numbers by province is urgently required to fix such disparities and not using [the 2024 census](#) for this purpose was a missed opportunity – possibly intentionally.

Different types of handouts

A third factor shaping the 2025 electoral outcome in favor of larger and more established parties has been the growing use of financial incentives – ranging from vote-buying to payouts and promises tied to state programs. While not new, the scale and visibility of these practices were striking in this cycle. Also, rising poverty, widespread precarity and the expansion of cash-based welfare mechanisms created fertile grounds for vote buying.

Across Baghdad, Nineveh, Basra, and parts of the south, buying and selling voter cards became a common electoral practice. In Nineveh, cards were traded for 50,000 to 150,000 dinars (equivalent to 114 USD) while in Baghdad some neighborhoods saw prices surge to [150,000–500,000 dinars](#) (380 USD) as election day approached. Reporting and videos circulating on social media reveal recruitment campaigns and promises of enlistment into state entities, including the Popular Mobilization Forces. A Badr-linked candidate got disqualified after having attracted roughly 1,500 votes in exchange for promises of enlistment into a fictitious [“Martyrs of Victory Brigade”](#). This is only the top of the iceberg however, as Jund al-Imam and other PMF-affiliated candidates deployed similar schemes that used fake IDs, staged trainings and offered conditional pledges of employment.

Limited emergent and opposition parties

In addition to the structural advantages discussed above, established parties gained from the decline of emergent and opposition parties that faced cooptation efforts, indirect repression and internal dysfunction between 2021 and 2025. Sadr’s withdrawal is the best example of a suppressed opposition party that also happens to be the largest. After winning the largest bloc in 2021, his bid to form a majority government collapsed under coordinated resistance from rival Shia parties who used judicial rulings, institutional pressure and at times coercive tactics to block his claim to the largest bloc and prevent a non-consensus cabinet. Faced with a deadlock he could not break, Sadr ordered all his MPs to resign and withdrew from formal politics. His exit removed the only group from politics that had enough support and cross-sectarian appeal to challenge the ruling elite at scale. His party’s departure left no counterweight to the ruling elite and further narrowed the space for viable opposition.

The disappearance of many emergent Tishreen-aligned parties also shows [how difficult it is to move from street protests to formal politics](#) in a system controlled by established networks. These parties entered parliament in 2021 with votes and plenty of social energy from preceding protests, but internal splits, leadership arguments and weak organizations meant they could not turn their newly established position into lasting influence. Their decline was [not just due to election rules](#).

However, there are a few exceptions. Ishraqat Kanun focused early on building local ties and staying involved in communities. As a result, it increased its vote share and won more seats in parliament. This shows that new parties can succeed if they choose local candidates, build strong organizations, and keep in touch with voters. However, such cases are rare and tend to be limited to certain areas. On the other hand, Najm al-Jubouri’s experience shows how vulnerable even strong independent candidates can be. He won almost 40,000 votes in Nineveh but was disqualified right after the election

Table 1 Changes in the number of seats of major political blocs between 2018-2025

Political Bloc	2018	2021	2025
State of Law	25	33	29
Badr & Asaib (previously Fatah)	48	17	48
Hoquq Movement	–	1	6
Taqaddum	–	37	27
Ishraqat Kanoun	–	6	8
Sovereignty	–	14	9
KDP	25	31	26
PUK	18	17	15

due to alleged ties to the Baath regime even though he had passed earlier checks. This shows how politicized institutions can be used at key moments to block political competition. His removal also increased divisions among Sunni parties just when they were trying to come together.

What happens next?

Taken together, electoral fragmentation in Iraq is not an aberration but the product of structural factors. Iraq's post-2003 system was built as a consociational, patronage-driven order that rewards elites for dividing, rebranding and renegotiating power rather than consolidating into parties with a coherent view on national development and society. Fragmentation allows political actors to preserve partisan and private influence, maximize access to state resources and diffuse accountability. This pattern has been reinforced in every electoral cycle once Maliki's premierships had set the tone.

For example, most Shia parties derive from the same ideological and organizational lineage and split not over ideology but over patronage shares and power competition between individuals. [Parties lack ideological platforms, organizational capacity and programmatic ties to voters.](#) Instead, they revolve around leaders: clerical families (Hakim; Sadr), armed groups (Asaib; Badr), ruling families or tribes (KDP), or ex-premiers (Sudani) and rally disparate candidates that are often in it for themselves,

not national agendas. Under Iraq's electoral law, fragmentation is rational: running multiple lists captures more seats and politically regrouping after the vote strengthens bargaining power. The result is a cycle in which parties do not grow. Instead, they multiply, fracture and recombine. This preserves a diffuse form of elite dominance.

This fragmentation plays out unevenly across Iraq's political landscape, however. The Shia parties – despite their rivalries – remain the only political 'camp' with the capacity to act in concert when it matters. They draw on shared institutions, overlapping patronage systems and a common hold over key parts of the state's security and administrative machinery. Together, these factors give them the ability to function as a unified gatekeeper once the ballots are tallied. Sunni and Kurdish parties operate from a weaker position as their alliances tend to be looser, their internal competition deeper and their leaders more exposed to pressure or co-optation. This leaves them dependent on Shia-brokered deals to secure influence or protect their gains. The resulting imbalance means that, despite fragmentation, Shia actors still shape the terms of government formation and define the boundaries within which everyone else must bargain.

With all ballots now counted, Iraq moves into this post-electoral phase that will determine which government is formed. In this process, electoral results are one of the drivers in addition to having foreign sponsors, commanding

coercive capabilities, using the judiciary, employing bribes, making threats and perhaps using political violence. Each of the three major groups of sectarian parties enters this phase with different electoral strengths.

Iraq's Shia parties hold most seats

Shia parties remain numerically dominant, but they are internally divided. Sudani's 46 seats give him a sort of first-mover advantage, but not an exclusive match-making position. To govern, he must navigate a Shia arena composed of entrenched rivals – Maliki's State of Law, Ammar al-Hakim's Hikma, and several PMF-linked lists – alongside other smaller Shia groupings. The main question facing Shia politicians is whether they think their interests are best served by reviving the erstwhile cohesion of the Coordination Framework (CF), or whether it is more useful to negotiate a new configuration around Sudani. Based on present tallies, the broader Coordination Framework now controls at most around 174 seats (including Sudani et al.) and at a minimum just over a 100 (excluding Sudani et al.). However, note that parts of Sudani's bloc – like Falah al-Fayadh or Ahmed al-Asadi – might side with the CF if push comes to shove. This suggests that the CF remains a decisive force with or without Sudani, which can block government formation, shape the choice of prime minister, and determine the distribution of key ministries.

Intra-Shia politics are also shaped by absence. Notably, Muqtada al-Sadr's continued self-imposed exile from politics removes the only Shia force from the equation that can disrupt CF dominance through mass mobilization or by building a cross-sectarian alliance. Sadr's absence leaves the Shia field more orderly, but also more tightly controlled by actors who are less open to working with opposing political forces. This gives the CF greater freedom to set the terms of post-election bargaining and to make unilateral decisions that other blocs must respond to. In brief, any future government will have to accommodate core priorities of the CF that include protecting PMF autonomy, remaining in charge of key security and service portfolios and preservation of their economic as well as institutional footprint across the state.

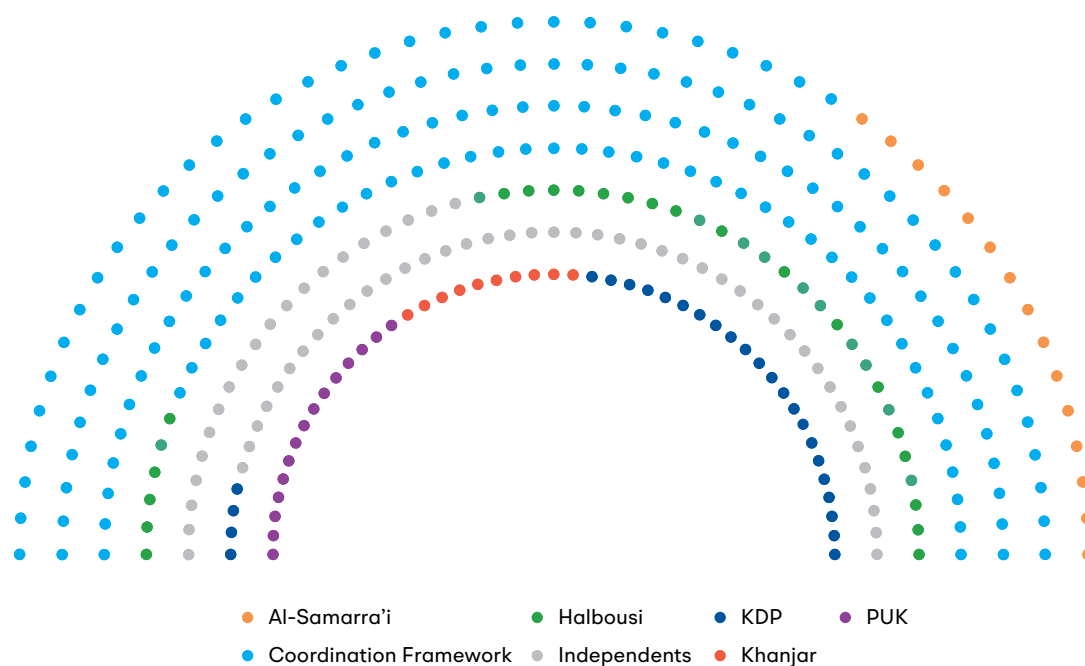
Sunni parties may bargain collectively

The Sunni political field is crowded but strategically relevant because of the simple fact that the parliamentary speakership is theirs by convention. Taqaddum's 27 seats, Azm's 15, Sovereignty's 9 and several locally rooted parties together form a fragmented but sizeable bloc. Although the political rivalry between these parties runs deep – particularly between Halbousi and al-Samarra'i – their influence in government formation can increase this time around. After all, it is for the first time since 2003 that Sunni leaders have responded to electoral fragmentation by attempting collective coordination through their newly announced [National Political Council](#) – a loose pact between leading Sunni parties. Whether this council endures or collapses under the weight of personal rivalry remains to be seen, but for now it strengthens the Sunni bargaining position. Their agenda will focus on negotiating greater access to reconstruction and investment funds, as well as obtaining security appointments in Sunni-majority provinces.

A clear example of how vulnerable the Sunni political scene is to institutional pressure appeared right after the vote, when Najm al-Jubouri was disqualified despite winning nearly 40,000 votes in Nineveh. He was removed via the Accountability and Justice Commission due to alleged ties to the Baath regime, even though he had passed earlier vetting.¹ This action shows how legal tools can be used selectively in times of elite competition. Jubouri was one of the few Sunni leaders with a strong local base and broad credibility because of his role in fighting the Islamic State. His exclusion makes the Sunni camp more divided, just as it is trying to unite behind a single candidate for speaker. It also shows that independent or consensus-minded Sunni figures are still at risk after elections, which weakens Sunni bargaining power and lets stronger blocs have more influence when forming a government.

1 IHEC disqualified over 800 candidates. Formerly known as the De-Ba'athification Commission, the Accountability and Justice Commission (AJC) sits within IHEC and has been used as a political tool barring candidates with (alleged) ties to the Baath regime.

Figure 2 Seat distribution by bloc in Iraq's Council of Representatives (2025)



Source: IHEC (2025)

Kurdish blocs can maximize their political flexibility for leverage

Kurdish parties – primarily the KDP and PUK – remain pivotal not because of their numbers, but because of their political flexibility and because they hold offices that are indispensable to any political deal. The presidency remains their strongest institutional card. Also, the KDP's 26 seats and the PUK's 15 form the core of a Kurdish bloc that exceeds 50 seats when smaller Kurdish parties are included. Their leverage, however, is simultaneously constrained by intra-Kurdish rivalries and the unresolved process of forming a new Kurdistan Regional Government (following the delayed 2024 regional elections). In practice, federal government formation and Kurdistan's internal power-sharing arrangement are likely to be negotiated in parallel with cabinet posts, budget transfers, oil export arrangements and senior security appointments all used as part of a KDP–PUK settlement. The KDP will seek enforceable guarantees on these issues before backing a second Sudani term. The PUK, while generally more flexible, will press for concessions

in Kirkuk, as well as obtaining relevant federal appointments and security portfolios. Whether the two Kurdish parties coordinate their demands as a unified bloc – as PUK leader Bafel Talabani recently proposed – or negotiate separately will shape their negotiating power at the national level.

Beyond party political dynamics

Several non-electoral actors will also shape the landscape in which coalition talks unfold. Najaf's clerical establishment, even if it avoids daily political involvement, still serves as a moral reference point. Its cues can steady elite behaviour, curb overreach, or – if government performance deteriorates – make it harder to rally behind a second term for Sudani. External players are also leaning in. [Tehran](#) is focused on keeping its allies aligned, preserving the autonomy and influence of non-state armed groups, and safeguarding its [broader security and economic interests](#). Washington has also drawn firm boundaries of its own: it wants the [next cabinet to exclude figures](#) openly linked to

Iran and/or armed groups, and has also warned that placing militia-linked figures in government will undermine future political or economic engagement. American threats now intersect uncomfortably with Iranian expectations, leaving a limited space in which a new cabinet can form.







Ultimately, the 2025 elections reconfirmed a long-standing reality in Iraq: the vote count determines the number of seats in parliament,

but government emerges from post-electoral alliances shaped by political bargains and positions of relative power. Whether Iraq's political parties can translate the election results into a functional governing coalition, hinges on their ability to negotiate beyond transactional deals and address the underlying structural imbalances of Iraq's political-economic order. If the past is any guide to the future, it is a tall order.

About the Clingendael Institute

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