



## North Iraq – Political Developments September 2018

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### Glossary

KR	Kurdish Region
KRG	Kurdish Regional Government
PMU	Popular Mobilization Units (Government created militia formed into units based on ethnicity and religion. Shia PMUs, affiliated to Iran, are the most numerous)
US	United States of America

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### Summary

Political stalemate in the formation of Iraq's central government following the May election is potentially driving the opposing political blocs to the use of violence to break the deadlock. Potential 'Kingmakers', and thereby potential breakers of the stalemate, are the Kurdish members of parliament, but they are divided into political parties who are competing in the KRG general elections at the end of September 2018. The longer the situation in Bagdad continues, the greater the likelihood of a violent fight between the opposing Shia political blocs.

## 1. Political Developments

### POST-NATIONAL ELECTION

Iraq's elected politicians still haven't formed a government, despite the results of the election recount being released 5 weeks ago. Two Shia dominated blocs claim to have sufficient parliament members to gain the status of the "largest bloc" and thereby the constitutional right to choose the next Iraqi Prime Minister. One is a new 16-group alliance, including the political party Sairoon led by Shia leader Muqtada al-Sadr's and the party of the current Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi al-Nasr. On paper the bloc has 96 seats out of 329 and is supported by the US.

Opposing them is the Iran-affiliated al-Fatih alliance led by the former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in alliance with PMU commander Hadi al-Ameri. They have 48 seats but claim more following defections from Sairoon caused by its alliance with al-Abadi.

*Comment: Neither alliance have included the 43 Kurdish members of parliament from the two main Kurdish parties, Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). This potentially places the Kurdish members in the position of 'Kingmakers', a role they have played in the past. With major issues outstanding between Iraq's central government and the KRG, this could be an opportunity for the Kurds to gain concessions on these issues through negotiations with either block. However, the KDP and PUK are currently opposing each other in the KRG's general election due to take place on 30 Sept. The election campaigning could block the two parties working together in Bagdad to take full advantage of the political situation there.*

*There is a growing fear that the political battle between the Shia groups in Bagdad is becoming violent as each side uses force to break the political stalemate. This is compounded by geopolitics with the US supporting the al-Abadi/Sairoon alliance, and Iran backing the al-Maliki/al-Ameri alliance. Recent events suggesting an escalation include:*

- *As Prime Minister al Abadi fired his National Security Advisor who controlled the PMUs – mostly Shia militia supported by Iran – and took control himself in an attempt to ensure they won't be used against him. The move was condemned by several Shia PMUs.*
- *Three mortar shells hit Baghdad's Green Zone, close to the US embassy.*
- *In violent riots in Basra over inadequate services and corruptions, groups attacked and burnt the Iranian consulate and PMU headquarters. In turn government buildings and al-Abadi's party offices were attacked.*

*If the political stalemate continues further violence is likely.*

### KRG ELECTIONS

General elections are scheduled to take place in Iraqi Kurdistan on 30 Sept 2018 to elect both the President and Parliament. In the parliamentary election there are over 700 candidates competing for 111 seats. The Kurdish political parties will race for 100 regional seats, and minority groups will compete for the remaining 11 seats reserved for them under the quota system. There are 3 million eligible voters and campaigning started on 11 Sept with several rallies in the main cities. The President is elected separately but heads a cabinet selected by the majority party in Parliament. The President also shares executive powers with the Prime Minister. The previous President, Masoud Barzani, resigned in Oct 2017 following the aftermath of the Sept independence referendum, which whilst producing an overwhelming majority vote for independence, caused isolation for the KRG, and military and economic actions from Iraq's central government.

*Comment: A low voter turnout is expected on the back of the low turnouts for Iraq's national parliamentary elections in May 2018. Pre-elections violence is always a concern in the KR due to the history between the leading parties and the proliferation of small arms in the region. In May's national elections, the two leading parties, KDP and PUK, won the majority of the seats allotted to the KR. A coalition of opposition parties, led by the Gorran movement, rejected the results, accusing the region's major parties of electoral fraud.*

*This election is unlikely to significantly alter the balance of power within the KR. Post-election it is likely there will be further allegations of fraud and corruption, but large-scale unrest remains unlikely. The new KRG will have a number of issues to manage, including:*

- *Significant economic challenges exacerbated by the loss of about half of the region's oil-exporting capacity following the Sept 2017 independence referendum.*
- *Continued tensions with the central government over the independence vote and central budget allocation.*
- *Socio-economic protests over unpaid wages to government employees.*

*However, there are opportunities for the government in acting as 'King maker' in the forming of a new Iraqi government provided the KDP and PUK parliament members can work together despite the KR general election.*