

Iran's Axis of Resistance

In Review

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Iranian Proxy Violence Possible in the Wake of Iraqi Elections

By: Katherine Lawlor

Iran's Iraqi proxies will likely increase their use of violence and other forms of coercion against political opponents and the Iraqi state in the coming months. The political wings of Iran's Iraqi proxies lost two-thirds of their parliamentary seats in Iraq's October 10, 2021, elections, which they are legally contesting due to perceived fraud. Iran's Iraqi proxies may escalate against UN, US, Emirati, or suspected Israeli personnel or assets in retaliation for their perceived role in the proxies' political losses in the coming months. Domestic political conflicts, Iranian decision-making, Iranian proxy attempts to enforce the December 31 deadline for the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq, and the potential for a new regional ISIS campaign to stir up sectarian violence could exacerbate post-electoral Iranian proxy violence in Iraq.

Political State of Play:

Iran's proxies lost ground in Iraq's October 10, 2021, parliamentary elections while their rival, nationalist Shi'a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, made dramatic gains, setting conditions for a potential second term for Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi. All Iraqi parties are



now negotiating to form the “largest bloc” in Parliament, which will have the first chance to appoint a prime minister-designate. That prime minister-designate must then form a cabinet within 30 days and secure the support of at least 165 parliamentarians (out of 329) to form a government. The leading bloc is Toward Reform, the party of the notoriously mercurial Sadr, who went from controlling the largest bloc in 2018 with 54 seats to an overwhelming 73-seat plurality in 2021.¹ Sadr is most likely to nominate the politically independent current prime minister, Kadhimi, for a second term; Sadr's other three named picks are Sadrist of whom few parliamentarians would approve.²

Candidates representing Iran's proxy militias lost badly in the 2021 elections; Iran's parliamentary proxy—the Conquest Alliance bloc that encompasses the political wings of

Badr Organization and US-designated terrorist organization Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH)—secured only 16 seats, a dramatic loss from its 2018 high of 47.³ Proxies are politically disadvantaged even when factoring in their five seats among minority quota candidates and the one seat secured by US-designated terrorist organization Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH)'s Rights Movement, KH's first foray into parliamentary politics. Proxy militias and politicians, as well as former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, have all claimed that the elections were stolen by the United Nations, the United States, Israel, or the United Arab Emirates and demanded recounts.⁴

Iranian leaders appear to be comfortable with a Sadrism-dominated government under a second-term Prime Minister Kadhimi. Iranian officials described Sadr's victory as a win for Shi'a Islamists and characterized Iraq's elections as successful.⁵ Tehran has historically been able to bend Sadr to its will when necessary and likely believes that a combination of Iranian pressure and Sadr's inherent anti-US tendencies will be sufficient to advance Iran's core strategic objectives: ousting US forces from Iraq and maintaining a non-threatening, Shi'a-led client state there. Iranian rhetoric suggests that Iran's leadership is unwilling to dramatically destabilize Iraq over the election results alone. Tehran knows that the makeup of Iraqi governments has never been determined by electoral results alone and that its proxies will likely still have a say in the process. Separately, Iran will likely order a resumption of proxy attacks on US forces near the end of 2021 to force a complete withdrawal of all US forces, including advisors, from Iraq. US combat forces (but not advisory forces) plan to depart Iraq by December 31, 2021.

A potential new ISIS campaign could stir up sectarian conflict. ISIS' Afghanistan affiliate, IS-KP, has called on ISIS cells around the world to attack Shi'a mosques "from Baghdad to Khorasan" to mirror the October 15 ISIS attack on a Shi'a mosque in Kandahar.⁶ An ISIS attack on a Shi'a mosque or another symbolic Shi'a target in Iraq could become an opportunity for Iranian proxies to rally support among Iraq's Shi'a population by attacking

Sunni groups. Iraqi Security Forces and their Coalition advisors must remain vigilant in the coming months to prevent attacks by ISIS from igniting Iraqi tensions into broader sectarian conflict.

Below are the most likely trajectories for Iraq to follow in order of highest- to lowest-assessed probability.

Possible Trajectories:

1. **Quick Government Formation:** Fast government formation would likely be a positive outcome for both Iraqi domestic stability and US interests. Sadr has set conditions for a quick government formation process if he can capitalize on his plurality without alienating other large, non-Iran-aligned blocs. Sadr will likely work with other parties—including Sunni Parliamentary Speaker Mohammed al-Halbousi's Progress Party (38 seats), the Kurdistan Democratic Party (33 seats), and some nominally independent members of parliament (37 total)—to ensure he retains the prerogative to appoint his prime minister of choice—Sadr prefers to be the kingmaker, not the king.

Other politicians, including some Iran-backed groups, will likely attach themselves to Sadr's coalition to retain their share of the governmental spoils if Sadr is able to quickly secure his position as the leader of the largest bloc. Iraq's political system has historically led to the same powerful parties and leaders preserving their role regardless of electoral outcomes. In this scenario, Iran will likely tolerate a second Kadhimi government to retain stability but will allow some of its proxies, like Kata'ib Hezbollah, to directly, and sometimes violently, oppose that government. If a newly emboldened, Sadrism-led government elects to crack down on proxy militias, as Sadr threatened to do in his victory speech, the proxies will

likely respond with violence against Sadrists or government officials.⁷

- 2. Political Stalemate:** Iran's proxies may benefit from prolonged negotiations to form a government, which would allow them to threaten or incentivize other parties into joining their preferred coalition. Sadr's capricious nature could also lead him to put forward a Sadrist candidate instead of a more widely accepted nominee like Kadhimi, ensuring a prolonged and possibly violent government formation process. The horse-trading required to garner sufficient votes to form a cabinet in Iraq's fragmented political system typically takes around six months.

Iran's proxies are most likely to join a parliamentary coalition led by Shi'a former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition (35 seats) and encompassing the Iranian proxy Conquest Alliance (16 seats), US-sanctioned Sunni businessman Khamis al-Khanjar's Determination Alliance (12 seats), proxy co-opted minority candidates (at least five seats), some of the nominally independent MPs (37 total), and others to attempt to reach the largest bloc designation. A State of Law MP claimed on October 14 that his coalition has secured a bloc of over 110 seats to nominate Maliki for a third term.⁸ Iran and its proxies would support a Maliki premiership, which remains unlikely. Sadr's supporters would likely resort to violence before allowing the return of Maliki, their political rival, to power. The longer a government formation stalemate lasts, the more likely it becomes that Iran's proxies turn to direct threats and political violence to further their objectives.

- 3. Kinetic Escalations:** Iran could approve violent escalation by its proxies to secure its objectives in Iraq if it determines that a new Iraqi government is attempting to shut out Iranian

influence. A shift in official Iranian rhetoric toward either condemning the election results or the government formation process would indicate that Tehran has greenlit additional proxy violence to constrain Sadr's influence. Iran could also decide to resume proxy attacks to simultaneously discredit a new government, build leverage ahead of the resumption of the US-Iran Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) negotiations, and attempt to enforce the December 31, 2021, deadline for the withdrawal of US combat forces from Iraq. Some Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-affiliated outlets already began recirculating Iraqi proxy claims of election fraud as the proxies set conditions for a "protest march" in Baghdad's fortified international district, the Green Zone.⁹ The ostentatiously unarmed protesters backed by Iran's proxies employed English language signage to target Western media audiences and help publicize their false claims of voter fraud.¹⁰

Violence by Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) against proxy protesters or staged violence by proxy infiltrators within the ISF could trigger a proxy escalation without Iran's approval. Any proxy escalation against the government in Baghdad could incite Sadr, the electoral victor, to mobilize his own militias, risking a cyclical descent into intra-Shi'a conflict and possibly civil war. Potential targets of Iranian proxy violence include US forces, facilities, and personnel, the UAE embassy, and personnel affiliated with the United Nations or international electoral observation missions. A prolonged and contentious government formation process would also provide greater opportunities for ISIS to exploit political divides and trigger sectarian violence that could intersect with and exacerbate political tensions.

Iran's Axis of Resistance Activity

- 1. Lebanese Hezbollah will likely attempt to deescalate violence in Lebanon related to the Beirut port explosion investigation, but miscalculations could trigger further intra-Lebanese conflict or an escalation with Israel.** Militants likely affiliated with the Christian Lebanese Forces party fired on protesters affiliated with the Shi'a Lebanese Hezbollah and Amal political movements in Beirut on October 14, killing seven and sparking clashes as the Shi'a groups marched to condemn the investigation into the August 2020 Beirut port explosion.¹¹ Iranian officials and state media immediately blamed Israel for the violence.¹² Hezbollah blamed the Lebanese Forces party.¹³ Hezbollah will likely attempt to avoid further clashes with the Lebanese Forces party; neither side is interested in an uptick in confessional violence ahead of Lebanon's March 2022 elections. The Lebanese Forces and other political rivals will likely condemn Hezbollah's activity but allow the group to continue its pressure campaign against the judiciary because a free investigation would likely find fault with multiple parties, causing widespread political damage. Any subsequent protests and violence in Beirut will increase the likelihood of miscalculation, which could spark widespread violence in Lebanon. Hezbollah could also attempt to divert attention from domestic tensions by horizontally escalating against Israeli forces in Southern Lebanon or Israel. A realignment of Hezbollah messaging to mirror Iranian rhetoric blaming Israel for the violence would indicate that Hezbollah may be preparing to reduce domestic pressure by provoking Israel.
- 2. Iran's Iraqi proxies are falsely accusing the United Arab Emirates**

(UAE) of interfering in Iraqi elections and may begin kinetic attacks against UAE targets to protest the results. Iraqi channels affiliated with proxy militias like US-designated terrorist organizations Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah circulated conspiracy theories that the UAE undermined the political wings of the militias through the UAE-based servers used by Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission to process votes.¹⁴ A media commentator affiliated with Iran's proxies claimed that "drones, precision missiles, and ballistic missiles will be launched from the Iraqi soil towards the UAE, to send a deterrence message to the leaders of the conspiracy [to steal the elections]."¹⁵ Proxy channels also heavily implied that nationalist Shi'a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr secretly visited Dubai aboard a private jet to coordinate with his UAE handlers.¹⁶ Iran's Iraqi proxies launched a drone attack against Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in January 2021 after publicly blaming the Saudi government for funding ISIS and interfering in domestic Iraqi affairs.¹⁷ Proxy militants could conduct a similar attack into the UAE from Iraqi soil using long-range drones or launch drone or rocket attacks on UAE-affiliated targets in Iraq. Iraqi proxy groups could also coordinate with the Yemeni al-Houthi movement to attack the UAE on behalf of Iran's Axis of Resistance as a whole. The Houthis previously claimed two attacks on Abu Dhabi and Dubai airports in 2018.¹⁸

- 3. Iranian proxies are increasingly threatening the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI).** Proxy-directed protesters and media channels condemned UNAMI and its head, Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert, for the mission's role in coordinating international observers and elections procedures.¹⁹ One proxy façade group, Saraya Awliya ad-Dam, threatened to attack UN convoys after it

became clear that proxy political candidates had performed poorly in the elections.²⁰ That group previously claimed a 2020 IED attack on a UN World Food Program convoy, which the group claimed was cover for US intelligence personnel operating in Ninewa Province.²¹ Intra-Shi'a violence in Iraq could increase following a proxy attack on UN personnel or facilities if Iraqi nationalist Shi'a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, whose bloc won the most seats in the October elections, perceives that attack as a threat to his authority or international legitimacy. Sadr supported UN involvement in Iraq's elections even as Iran's proxies framed UNAMI as an Israeli intelligence asset.²² A Sadrist militia mobilization to protect UNAMI facilities could further politicize the role of the UN in Iraq, risking additional violence and reducing already-low public faith in the electoral system.

4. Likely Iranian proxy militants launched a coordinated drone and rocket attack on US forces' living quarters in Tanf, Syria, risking US casualties and a larger regional escalation. Unidentified militants launched approximately five suicide drones and an unspecified number of indirect fire munitions (rockets or mortars) at a US base in Tanf.²³ Combined rocket and drone attacks can

disrupt and bypass air-defense systems in a way that rockets or drones alone cannot. The attack reportedly targeted the living quarters of US forces around 2130 local time when those areas are likely to be occupied, indicating that the proxies intended to cause US casualties.²⁴ Iran likely greenlit this attack to deter US and Israeli actions against Iranian interests following recent Israeli military exercises, an October 13 Israeli attack on Iranian proxies in Palmyra that flew through Tanf's airspace, and rhetoric from US and Israeli officials threatening Iran's nuclear program.²⁵ Iran and its proxies may increasingly be equating the threats posed by the United States and Israel and may respond more frequently to Israeli provocations with attacks on US forces. The attack is the first on US forces in Iraq and Syria since July 29, 2021, and signals a likely resumption of Iranian attacks against the United States and its partners across the region.²⁶ Those attacks will likely ramp up in Iraq as the December 31, 2021, deadline for the withdrawal of US combat forces from Iraq nears.

Contributors to this Report:
 Katherine Lawlor
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