IRAQ VOTES 2018
ELECTION MOBILIZATION STRATEGIES

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This paper is dedicated to Dr. Faleh Abdul Jabar, whose idea it was to write this piece, and whose instruction and legacy allowed and inspired us to continue after his death. His contributions, advice, and direction were greatly missed during the research and writing process.

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2

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Introduction

Iraqis head to the polls on Saturday, May 12, 2018, to vote in national elections, at a critical time for the country's political future. These are the fourth federal elections held since the 2003 US-led invasion toppled Saddam Hussein and restructured the state, and the first since the rise – and defeat – of the so-called Islamic State's (ISIS) territorial rule. Last year also witnessed an independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan that hurt relations between Baghdad and Erbil and triggered Baghdad's reassertion of control over Iraq's disputed territories. Meanwhile, the economy is also struggling with Iraq's 2018 budget indicating a deficit of nearly 13 trillion dinars ($10.9 billion USD). How these elections shape Iraq's political trajectory is key to addressing the roots of ISIS, the relationship between the central government and the provinces, Erbil-Baghdad relations, and the potential to rebuild the state.

Despite significant political, economic, and security challenges, as well as societal changes, over the last fifteen years, one of Iraq's few constants has been holding national elections on time. To the political leadership, elections matter. Not only are the results used to help form the next government, the cabinet, and divide the national pie, but leaders have also benefited from control of Iraq's Council of Representatives to pursue political agendas, pass favorable laws, and target opponents. Moreover, leaders use election results to claim to legitimately speak on behalf of their citizens. Iraq may be far from a perfect democracy, but nonetheless, popularity is one way for a leader to prove his or her legitimacy. As such, the over 200 parties and thousands of candidates have given considerable thought on *how* to win votes, which constitute their electoral mobilization strategies.

This pre-election paper focuses on these electoral mobilization strategies at the central government level in Baghdad, in Shia provinces in the south, in recently liberated areas, and in the Iraqi Kurdistan region. The strategies provide glimpses not only into the way Iraqi politicians attempt to claim popular legitimacy, but more critically, into the country's political environment and trajectory after the elections. The paper then concludes with an analysis of the key trends, changes and challenges in these elections, and the impact they may have on Iraq's political future.

This paper is the first in a series of three on the 2018 Iraqi federal elections. An analysis of results will be published after the elections, as well as a report following government formation.

Mobilization Strategies (Methodology)

Relying on election materials – campaign manifestos, speeches and social media – as well as on-the-ground interviews with campaign managers, civil society activists, and local election monitors, this paper is structured around four broad mobilization strategies:

1. **Identity Politics**
   This mobilization strategy refers to when a political leader evokes ethno-sectarian (or other) identity to convince the voter that only someone who is part of their community can defend or protect them from an external threat or enemy. In the past, candidates have widely relied on this strategy to win votes. For instance, in the 2010 and 2014 elections, former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki constructed the Sunni Ba'athist threat to convince the Shia voter that he was best able to protect their group. Kurdish political parties have also played heavily with the Kurdish electorate's fears of a strong central "Arab" government by invoking past atrocities committed against the Kurds to win votes.

2. **Civicness**
   The second strategy – civicness – is also known as issue-based politics. A protest movement, which first erupted in Basra in the summer of 2015 and quickly spread throughout Iraq, saw demonstrators demanding change to the identity-based quota system (*muhassasa*) and to the endemic corruption that has enriched the elite but not the citizen. Since 2011, protests in the Iraqi Kurdistan region have similar demands of their Kurdish leaders.

3. **Public Authority**
   Since the majority of parties and candidates have been in power since 2003, they can rely on their existing power structures to mobilize votes. A leader who already holds a political office, or who commands a patronage network, or who heads an armed group or social structure (i.e. tribe, religious association), will use his or her power and influence within the institution to win votes.

4. **Economic or Material Incentives**
   The fourth mobilization strategy, akin to patronage, refers to the practice of offering direct compensation in return for votes, such as when politicians provide – often quite openly, with broad publication – cars, jobs, housing, land or other economic benefit to individuals, groups or influential community members.

Key Findings

➢ A large majority of electoral lists and candidates mirror those of earlier years, however, the political field has been rearranged. The traditional ethno-sectarian blocs have fragmented into new coalitions and parties.

➢ Events since the last election, namely the rise and fall of ISIS, the emergence of the protest movement, and the Kurdish independence referendum, have shifted the Iraqi electorate.

➢ *Al mujarab la yujarab.* Dissatisfaction with political incumbents has created a demand for "new faces." While new candidates have entered the field, the dominant trend is that old faces have reinvented themselves, proving their ability to survive in the electoral system.

➢ Many analysts refer to an ongoing a shift from identity to issue-based politics. Across the board, political parties and candidates have taken up the language of anti-corruption, service-provision, and economic recovery.

  o However, at a more nuanced level, this election revealed that while parties may present different ideas on the economy, security sector, or foreign affairs, they use these issues to mobilize but failed to develop coherent platforms and engage in debates.

  o Furthermore, identity remains a key form of electoral mobilization; even those who deploy the rhetoric of issue-based politics still rely on ethno-sectarian narratives to mobilize votes. Even cross ethno-sectarian lists deploy candidates based on identity in the various localities.

➢ A large segment of the population remains disillusioned with the political elite and does not trust that elections can bring about change. Many, therefore, plan to boycott the vote.

➢ Most political parties have not institutionalized, and remain autonomous and driven by personalities. This favors those with a history of public authority who can use their experience in government and associate funds to win votes. New candidates cannot compete in the electoral system.

Section 1. Politics at the Center

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The 2018 Election Cycle

Thousands of candidates in Iraq are vying to win one of the 329 seats in the Council of Representatives, which determines the next prime minister, cabinet, and president. Although more than 200 parties compete for this process, the 2018 government constitutes a relatively small number of leaders and parties at the center. Following every national election since 2003, the government-formation process has resulted in grand compromises and power-sharing agreements that feature the diffusion of power rather than an outright winner and loser.

In the 2018 elections, power and influence are once again shared by some combination of the major blocs, which include Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's Victory Alliance (*Tahaluf al-Nasr*), Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition (*Itilaf Dawlat al-Qanun* - SOL), Hadi al-Ameri's Conquest Alliance (*Tahaluf al-Fateh*), Ayad Allawi's National Coalition (*Itilaf al-Watania*) and Muqtada al-Sadr's Revolutionaries for Reform Alliance (*Tahaluf al-Sairoon*). Other electoral blocs that will play some role in the government (or opposition) formation include Ammar al-Hakim's National Wisdom Movement (*Tayar al-Hikma al-Watani*), Usama al-Nujaifi's the Iraqi Decision Alliance (Tahaluf al-Qarar al-Iraqi), and the several Kurdish parties, featured in Section Two of this report.

Despite the expectation for change in the 2018 elections, most of the major parties and lists have stood in previous elections as part of post-2003 politics.[6] Although some lists have chosen individual newcomers and other lists have chosen established elite, the lists themselves and their senior leaders are not new. As a result, many analysts and writers do not anticipate much change from the 2018 election, which will likely serve to reinforce the status-quo.[7]

Although a large majority of the players remain the same, the continued fragmentation of ethno-sectarian blocs remains a key trend in the 2018 elections. In the 2005 parliamentary

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[6] Mustafa Mohammad Al-Asadi, "'He Who Has Tried Should Not Try:' A Phrase that Did Not Come from the Religious Authority" ("'*A-mujarib la yujarib:' kalima lem tured men a-marjaiyya a-dinia al-alia, bil kanit*"), *Shafaqna*, April 21, 2018, http://iraq.shafaqna.com/AR/112720/المجرب-لا-يجرب-كلمة-لم-ترد-من-المرجعية-ا/.
[7] Kirk Sowell, "Iraq's Status Quo Election," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 8, 2018, http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/75488.

elections—the first held after the U.S. invasion of Iraq—the major electoral blocs included the United Iraqi Alliance (*al-Itilaf al-Watani al-Iraqi* – all major Shia Islamist blocs), the Kurdistan Alliance (all major Kurdish parties), and the Iraqi Accordance Front (the few Sunnis who voted). In each subsequent election—2010 and 2014—these blocs increasingly fractured, splitting the Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish electorate.

The Electoral Base

The main competition over power in Iraq will again fall to the post-2003 "demography equals democracy" phenomenon. According to this identity-based logic, the Shia always win the most votes as a result of their demographic majority. Within this grouping, since 2003, Shia Islamist parties—namely the Islamic Dawa Party, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), and the Sadrist Movement—have used majoritarianism to win the largest share of seats since 2003. In the first parliamentary election in December 2005, the parties all ran under a single list—the United Iraqi Alliance—which won 128 out of 275 seats (47 percent of the vote).

Since 2005, however, the Shia Islamist list has gradually fragmented. Despite these divisions, the parties have managed to share about 50 percent of the seats in each election. In the 2010 elections, the UIA split into two lists: Maliki's State of Law (SOL) and Jaafari's National Iraqi Alliance (the new name for the UIA). Maliki won 89 seats and Jaafari won 70, totaling 159 seats out of 325 seats (49 percent of the total vote). During these elections, the winner with 91 seats—Allawi's al-Iraqiya—made considerable gains over the non-Islamist Shia vote. In 2014, the Shia Islamist list further split, yet the associated parties won the top three highest numbers of seats. Maliki's SOL won 92 seats, Sadr's al-Ahrar won 34 seats, and Hakim's ISCI won 29 seats, resulting in 155 out of 238 seats (47 percent of the vote).

In 2018, despite the split between Abadi's Nasr, Maliki's SOL, Ameri's Fateh, Sadr's Sairoon, and Hakim's Hikma, the Shia Islamist vote has remained the same—an indication that the government will be formed by at least some of these lists.

This section focuses on the grand competition between the main lists, which compete to form the 2018 government and plot Iraq's political trajectory. On the surface, leaders and candidates from the major electoral blocs appear to employ the same tactics and discourse in their attempt to win votes. Their campaign manifestos all include similar promises: to fight corruption, provide jobs and services, protect against security threats, and build the state. While it is difficult to perceive differences between the lists at first glance, an in-depth examination of mobilization strategies reveals nuance and offers insight into how leaders frame issues, claim to speak on behalf of the electorate, and ultimately envision the next phase of Iraqi governance.

Fundamentally, these mobilization strategies are based on the calculations of each leadership's electoral base. Following the fragmentation, however, Shia Islamist groups have branched out to compete in Sunni and Kurdish areas. They rely on Sunni candidates in Sunni areas and Kurdish candidates in Kurdish areas.

At one end of this grand competition is the State of Law Coalition (SOL), headed by former PM Nouri al-Maliki, who has almost entirely focused his mobilization strategy on the Shia electoral base. SOL relies on Maliki's networks—primarily rural and lower-class Shia in central and southern Iraq[8]—which helped give him a clear majority in the 2014 elections.

Like SOL, Fateh is a conservative Shia list that has competed primarily, but not exclusively, for the Shia electoral base. It focuses on its fighters in the Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), an umbrella organization of some 50 paramilitary groups with anywhere between 45,000 to 122,000 fighters, and on their families and the families of its martyrs.[9] These fighters and their families are primarily Shia, but also include smaller Sunni, Turkman, Yezidi, Christian groups. As such, Fateh has reached out to Sunni communities; Hadi al-Ameri, the head of Badr Organization—one of the groups included in the Fateh Coalition—for example, has campaigned extensively in Anbar in the weeks leading up to the election. One of the coalition's main slogans is, "because we had a stake in the honor of victory over terrorism, we have the honor to provide services and rebuild"[10] As a result, Fateh has chosen candidates who are affiliated with or show strong support for the PMUs.

Political party posters in Baghdad.

On the other side, Sairoon, inspired by Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and the civic protest movement, focuses on an electoral base of disenfranchised citizens. This base seeks systematic change in the political system and includes a wide mix of Shia urban and rural lower class citizens, as well as Islamists and secularists – all in opposition to the ruling

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[8] Author interviews in Baghdad, April 2018.
[9] Renad Mansour, Faleh Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future," Carnegie Middle East Center, April 28, 2017, http://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810.
[10] Fateh Coalition (*Tahalof Al-Fatih*), "Why Al-Fatih? For Construction." ("*Limatha al-fatih? lilbina'a*") May 4, 2018, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0JLMXk7e0tI.

elite.[11] Sadr mobilizes voters by putting forward the highest number of new candidates selected on the basis of popularity in their own neighborhoods. In Basra, for instance, Nasr, SOL, and Fateh have all appointed established elites, including ministers, Members of Parliament, and governors, whereas Sairoon has chosen non-establishment candidates. Its leaders argued that if the corrupt parties manipulate elections, it is illogical for reformists to give up and allow these actors to shape the future of Iraq.[12] Beyond campaign rallies, Sairoon's main forms of mobilization include protests and demonstrations against the elite, which began the summer of 2015.[13]

Striking a more centrist line, Abadi's Nasr stresses an all-Iraq base. Throughout his campaign, Abadi has traveled to Kurdish and Sunni areas, where candidates on his list are running. Unable to compete with the conservative Shia groups over the base, according to one of his strategists, Abadi's electoral attention includes a more urban and middle-class Shia and across Iraq.[14] He has selected prominent Sunnis, such as former Defense Minister Khalid al-Obeidi and Abdul Latif Humeim, the head of the Sunni *waqf*, or religious endowment.

Ammar al-Hakim's Wisdom Movement (Tayar al-Hikma) split from ISCI to focus on a new electorate: young voters disenfranchised with the current elite yet supportive of the political Islam project. According to a strategist, Hikma's focus is the adoption of a "new Islam" to govern Iraq.[15]

Allawi's Watania similarly pursues a centrist and anti-sectarian line, but focuses more on the Sunni base, with the presence of senior Sunni leaders such as Speaker of Parliament Salim al-Jabouri and Saleh al-Mutlaq, a former deputy Prime Minister.[16][17] It aims to replicate the results of the 2010 election, in which Allawi's list won the most seats but failed to form a government.

Finally, a small number of lists make Sunni-specific arguments to win the vote. Out of the main electoral players, Usama al-Nujaifi's Iraqi Decision Coalition (*al-Qarar*) do not pursue an Iraq-wide program but focus on the Sunni electorate only in Anbar, Baghdad, Diyala, Salahadeen, and Ninewah.

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[11] Faleh Jabar's report on the protest movement outlines this demographic. Faleh Jabar, "The Protest Movement and Accountability: The End of Conformity and the Beginning of Accountability," (Beirut: Iraq Studies, 2016).

[12] Facebook post from Ayssar Yahya Hadi; see
https://www.facebook.com/saaronbabli156/posts/160131468016985.

[13] Facebook post from Revolutionaries for Reform Coalition (*Tahalof Sairoon*); see
https://www.facebook.com/143143263160546/photos/pcb.208379349970270/208378076637064/?type=3&theater.

[14] Author interviews in Baghdad, April 2018.

[15] Author interview in Baghdad, April 2018.

[16] It should be noted that Fateh has also targeted the Sunni and non-dominant groups that also constitute its fighter base.

[17] "The Iraqi Elections: Allawi Wins by Two Seats." ("Alentkhabat aliraqia: allawi yefoz bifariq makaden") Alwasat, March 26, 2010, http://www.alwasatnews.com/news/387884.html.

A large part of the electorate remains unconvinced of the prospect for change. Many within this base have threatened to boyctt the election, rather than vote for the same leadership under the same political system. The widespread disillusionment with the existing political elite is rooted in the perception that the corrupt class ruling the country fails to represent the needs and interests of its citizenry.

Mobilization Strategies

Each of the major lists employs specific electoral mobilization strategies linked to their electoral bases. Throughout the electoral process, many analysts have referred to the use of civicness and issue-based politics as principal strategies. However, identity-based claims continue to play a role, as candidates operate under an electoral system still defined along identity lines. A third strategy is public authority, which advantages the established elite, who uses their wealth and power from their positions to win votes. Finally, material incentives—despite the growing taboo—remain an important part of Iraqi election cycles. Candidates employ these strategies through speeches at campaign rallies, in party manifestos, and through formal and informal networks and social media, which have become major focal points of electoral mobilization.[18] This section argues that these considerations are creating a divide in the strategy of competing coalitions and splitting the electoral base. This section is based on interviews conducted primarily in Baghdad, Mosul, and southern Iraq and concludes with an analysis of the major challenges ahead and prospects for translating mobilization strategies to policies.

Issue-Based Strategies

Since the federal elections of 2014, the emergence of the protest movement has become the most significant political shift in Baghdad and other cities throughout Iraq. The movement began in the southern province of Basra in 2015 and has subsequently expanded throughout the south and center.[19] The movement features Shia protesters demonstrating against their own Shia leaders. At its core, it calls for an end to corruption and the ethno-sectarian based quota system (*muhassasa*). It challenges the identity-based politics previously used by the elite to mobilize support.[20] Although the movement's goal has been

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[18] The regular media also played a prominent role. For instance, television channels and radio stations aired campaign commercials, and political satire shows criticizing candidates became increasingly popular in the lead-up to the elections. Ahmad al-Bashir's show, for instance, was watched by 67 percent of Iraqis, according to a communications strategist in Baghdad.

[19] The most detailed account of the movement can be found here: Faleh Abdul Jabar, "The Protest and Accountability Movement . . the End of Compliance and Beginning of Accountability" ("*harka al-ihtijaj w al-musa'ala . . nihayat al-imtithal bidayat al-musa'ala*"), *Iraq Studies*, 2016. Slogans included "the corrupt is the same as the terrorist." Similarly, in the Kurdistan Region, Kurdish masses began protesting against their own leaders.

[20] Faleh Jabbar, "From Identity Politics to Issue Politics - The Iraq Protest Movement. The End of Conformity, the Beginning of Accountability." *Iraqi Economists Network*, January 28, 2017, http://iraqieconomists.net/en/2017/01/28/from-identity-politics-to-issue-politics-the-iraqi-protest-movement-the-end-of-conformity-the-beginning-of-accountability-by-faleh-a-jabar

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far from achieved, it has nonetheless impacted mobilization strategies ahead of the 2018 vote.

Candidates from all sides promise change in line with the narratives of the protest movement: to change the political ethno-sectarian quota (*muhassasa*) system, improve the economy, and combat corruption. It has become difficult to distinguish, on the surface, between the parties. In a press conference in November 2017, Prime Minister Abadi said, "today we have to defeat the *fasideen* [the corrupt] just like we defeated ISIS.[21] Nasr's party manifesto promises to "identify the sources of corruption and support directing the government to fight it."[22] Nasr's competitor, Fateh, similarly claims that "the fight against corruption is the next war that we will fight with the same firmness and strength with which we fought ISIS."[23] In an effort to win the vote of the disenfranchised Iraqi citizen, all major lists highlight the need to fight corruption.

To appeal to the disillusioned electorate, the electoral lists have also adopted terms such as "civic" and argued for a state based on the citizenship of all Iraqis. Nasr promises to "liberate" the state from ethno-sectarian politics and implement citizenship and civic service. Likewise, Sadr's Sairoon promises to "strengthen the civic and democratic character of the state."[24] Sadr's protest movement has adopted "Yes, yes to Iraq" as one of its main chants.[25] His rival, Fateh candidate Qais al-Khazali, stated in May 2017 that "if by civicness you mean building the state and enforcing the rule of law, then we are the original civics."[26] As such, a competition has emerged over the ownership of concepts such as civicness.

Part of this push towards issue-based politics includes promises to better the economy, offer jobs, and improve the provision of services. Although all major lists use similar vocabulary and ostensibly offer the same promises, a deeper look at party platforms and candidate rhetoric reveals different strategies based on each candidate's electoral calculations. However, these policies are not genuine economic platforms, but rather mobilization strategies to win the vote.

Economy

The economy is one of the most hotly debated issues ahead of the 2018 vote. To varying degrees, all parties use the fight against corruption in their campaign discourse. On May 3, 2018, Abadi called the fight against corruption "a new miracle, the second victory . . . to

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21 Al-Ahed Satellite Channel (*Qinah al-Ahed al-Fida'iyah*), "Abadi: We Must Eliminate the Corrupt as we Eliminated ISIS" ("*Al-Abadi: alina al-qada 'ala al-fasideen kama qadina ala da'esh*"), YouTube, November 27, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHKSqfbIn6I.
22 Al-Nasr Coalition Manifesto, http://www.alnasr.iq/ar/program.
23 Fateh Coalition Manifesto, http://www.alfateh-iq.com/electoral-program.
24 Sairoon Coalition Manifesto, http://www.iraqicp.com/index.php/sections/orbits/3758-156
25 iraq the love, "The Speech of Sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr on Reform in the Government" ("*kalimat al-sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr hawal al-isalah fy al-hokomah qabl qleel*"), YouTube, February 26, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rxxLAt7MiTE.
26 ALAhad2TV, "Festival (The Brothers of Zainab .. the Story of Victory and Waiting) : Speech of Sheikh Amin Qais al-Khazali" ["*mehrjan (akhwat Zeinab .. hekayat al-intisar wa al-intithar) : kalimat al-sheikh al-amin Qais al-Khazali*"] YouTube, May 15, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KibhUTIXl28.

break corruption and stand against the corrupt who use big headlines in the name of religion and the community and national votes whom we will continue to chase them."[27] Although everyone promises improvements, each leader employs a different strategy to win over the base.

Nasr's focus, for example, is sweeping neoliberal reforms as part of a long-term attempt to streamline state bureaucracy. According to this group, the biggest impediment to Iraq's economic progress is the bloated state civil service and corruption associated with rentierism. Backed by IMF loans, it seeks to privatize and liberalize the Iraqi economy. In an April 2018 speech, Abadi stated his support for partnerships between the public and private sectors: "Some say that the private sector is not a friend, that it's not in the interest of the country because they want millions of dollars to be spent by the state so the corrupt can benefit from it. They want the wasting of public money to continue so that the corrupt keep benefiting from it. However, when the private sector partners with the public sector, it can result in great achievements."[28]

Maliki's SOL, however, pursues a slightly different economic plan as part of its mobilization strategy. It reminds voters of the strength of the economy and record oil prices under Maliki's administration. Appealing to his base of rural lower-class Shia, Maliki emphasizes the provision of jobs as a primary means to alleviate families' economic burdens.[29] He presents his views in opposition to Abadi's privatization package, which he deems a job-cutting exercise.[30]

Fateh's manifesto states, "we fought ISIS, and our next fight will be against corruption."[31] The coalition also focuses heavily on the provision of jobs. However, given the heavy participation of and support from PMUs and their families in the electoral process, party officials specifically target this demographic, as many of them fought ISIS and have begun returning to their communities with few economic opportunities.

Sairoon also uses economy-focused promises to mobilize its base, reflecting its primary strategy of populist and anti-establishment rhetoric to attract disenfranchised Iraqis.[32] It prioritizes anti-corruption measures as focal points of its economic platform. Jassim al-Helfi, a prominent member of the Iraqi Communist Party, asserted in April 2018, "we are going to confront a fight against the policies of waste of public funds, and stand in the face of serious

[27] "Abadi from Najaf: The Corrupt use the Titles of Religion and Patriotism to Steal Public Money" ("*Al-Abadi min al-Najaf: al-fasidoon yustakhdimoon anawen al-den wa al-watania min ajl sarqat almal al'am*"), Nasr Coalition (*Itilaf al-Nasr*), May 3, 2018, http://www.alnasr.iq/ar/news/829/-الفاسدون-يستخدمون---النجف-من-العبادي عناوين-الدين-والوطنية-م.
[28] IMN (*Qinah al-Iraqia al-Dowliyah*), "Abadi Sets the Foundation Stone for the Samawah Electric Station Project" ("*Al-Abadi yoda' alhajar alasas li-mashrou' limahata al-shamawa al-kahraba'i*") YouTube, April 16, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KD3_9p65YyI.
[29] "Head of State of Law Coalition: There are Efforts to Make the Elections Fail in Iraq" *("Rayys etilaf dawlat al qanon: honak masa'ay ly ifshal alentkhabat fy al-Iraq")* nourialmaliki.me*, April 27, 2018, http://nourialmaliki.me/لا-مساعي-هناك-القانون-دولة-ائتلاف-رئيس /.
[30] Author interview with analyst in Baghdad, February 2018.
[31] Fateh Coalition Manifesto, http://www.alfateh-iq.com/electoral-program.
[32] "Marching Towards Reform/ Jasim Al-Halafi" *("Sairoon lil elsah/ jasim alhalafi")* yanabe3aliraq.com*, April 18, 2018, http://www.yanabe3aliraq.com/index.php/2017-01-23-16-19-49/3586-2018-04-18-21-17-44.

financial and administrative corruption."[33] The coalition's economy-focused promises reflect Sairoon's primary strategy of using populist and anti-establishment rhetoric to mobilize disenfranchised Iraqis.

In Mosul and other liberated areas, reconstruction—in addition to jobs—has become the primary issue dominating political campaigns. In a visit to Mosul as part of his nation-wide campaign shortly before the election, Abadi laid the first stone for a new residential project in Mosul, indicating the urgency and priority with which Nasr views reconstruction.[34] Hakim's Hikma Movement also advocates the reconstruction of Mosul as an election platform. Its number one candidate in Ninewa, Adnan Burhan Al-Jahsh, campaigning in Mosul, used the slogan "vote for the best, for the reconstruction of Ninewa,"[35] and promised to demine Mosul, restore social inclusion, and enhance security.[36]

Nujaifi's Decision Coalition draws attention to the fact that the 'liberation' of Mosul destroyed most of the city, implying that the nation-wide parties and people responsible for those decisions could not be trusted.[37] They present themselves as specifically focused on the Sunni question. As such, their economic policy revolved around the Sunni-question and an "us" versus "them" argument. This coalition argued that it would guarantee local autonomy over economic affairs rather than remaining at the behest of the other parties.[38]

Security Sector Reform

Security sector reform has also proven to be a divisive issue between the major blocs. Both Nasr—"Victory" in English—and Fateh—"Islamic Conquest"—politicize victory over ISIS to win votes.

However, Fateh focuses on the role PMUs played in defending Baghdad from the start of the fight against ISIS and calls for the institutionalization of the PMUs into the state infrastructure to ensure job security for its many fighters. On April 16, 2018, Qais al-Khazali, the leader of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, another PMU group under the Fateh Coalition, asserted, "I believe that the *hashd*, since it is not a temporary state, or emotional state that can pass when the cause passes, was founded to continue. It was founded to stay."[39]

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[33] "Marching Towards Reform/ Jasim Al-Halafi" *("Sairoon lil elsah/ jasim alhalafi") yanabe3aliraq.com*, April 18, 2018, http://www.yanabe3aliraq.com/index.php/2017-01-23-16-19-49/3586-2018-04-18-21-17-44.

[34] Facebook post from Nasr Coalition | Ninewa Province; see https://www.facebook.com/AlnasrNineveh/videos/575490316158181/.

[35] "Summary of the biography of Dr. Adnan Burhan Al-Juhaishi, candidate of Ninewa province within Hikma Movement." *("mlkhs an alsyra althatya lldktwr adnan brhan aljhyshy almrshh ly mhafzt ninawa dmn tyar alhkmt") altator.net,* March 3, 2018, http://altator.net/news/188142/-ملخص-عن-السيرة-الذاتية-للدكتور-عدنان-برهان (-118)-الجحيشي-المرشح-على-محافظة-نينوى-ضمن-تيار-الحكمة-بتسلسل-رقم-(-1-)-القائمة-رقم.

[36] Al-Hikma Movement Manifesto, http://alforatnews.com/uploads/news/file/file_name_5ad47514a23d4.pdf.

[37] Author interview in Mosul, April 2018.

[38] Author's interview in Mosul, April 2018.

[39] Al-Ahed Satellite Channel (Qinah al-Ahed), Sheikh al-Amin Qais al-Khazali Vows to Eliminate the ISIS-like corrupted one ("*al-Sheikh al-Amin Qais al-Khazali yotahid balqada ala doa'sh al-fasad*") YouTube, April 16, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DYbVEZUcNBw.

Badr Organization leader Hadi al-Ameri has echoed Khazali's sentiment, asserting that one of Fateh's missions was the construction of a strong security system of the PMUs, army, police, and anti-corruption unit.[40] The party manifesto further reinforces these platforms, guaranteeing "weapons and proper training to the PMU fighters, which will make them a large fierce force that would be an asset for the Iraqi people in the face of adversity."[41] This strategy targets its main electoral base.

Prime Minister Abadi, on the other hand, aims to win the vote of PMU skeptics by countering the Fateh narrative. He believes that the PMUs challenge the state's monopoly over legitimate violence and thus argues for their integration. Despite the PMU law passed in November 2016, which states that "the Popular Mobilization Force is an independent military formation and part of the Iraqi Armed Forces and associated with the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces," Abadi's plan for security sector reform involves limiting the autonomy of the various paramilitary groups in the PMUs. [42]

In recently-liberated areas, the security issue proves more acute, as the threat of ISIS re-emerging has become a major issue. Candidates therefore argue that they can provide security. For instance, Nasr has hung pictures of Abadi wearing military uniform around Mosul to promote Nasr and remind the public of Abadi's role in liberating Mosul. Nasr has chosen former Defense Minister Khalid Al-Obaidi, a Mosul native, to head the list in Ninewa due to his popularity in the city.[43]

Haneen al-Qad, who heads Fateh's list in Ninewa, advocates the state's support for and development of the PMUs to defend the entire country.[44] Fateh's slogans focus on the role of PMUs in liberating Iraq from ISIS. In its campaigns, its candidates promise to show the same commitment to the reconstruction of Ninewa as they showed to liberating the areas occupied by ISIS.[45] Similarly, Nujaifi, focusing specifically on Sunnis, uses his armed forces—Haras Ninewa—to argue that he is best able to protect the citizens of Ninewa.[46]

Foreign Policy

Just as in economic policy and security sector reform, the coalitions differ in their approaches to foreign policy. The Nasr coalition, for example, argues for an independent Iraqi foreign policy, particularly targeting voters who remain disgruntled by Iran's

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[40] "The Promises and Missions of Fateh." *("Wo'od w mohmat al fateh")* alfateh-iq.com, May 3, 2018, http://www.alfateh-iq.com/multimedia/1546/الفت-مهمات-و-وعود .

[41] Fateh Coalition Manifesto, http://www.alfateh-iq.com/electoral-program.

[42] The *Hashd* Law 2016 (Iraq), Parliament of Iraq, http://ar.parliament.iq/2016/11/26/الشعبي-الحشد-هياة-قانون/.

[43] Bara Al-Shermari, "The eyes of "National Alliance" parties are on the North and West of Iraq.*" ("Ayn ahzab "altahlf alwataani" ala shmal w ghabr al-iraq"), Al-Arabi Al-Jadeed*, March 29, 2018, https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2018/3/29/العراق-غرب-و-شمال-على-الوطني-التحالف-أحزاب-أعين .

[44] Facebook post from Mohammed Al-Shabaki; see https://www.facebook.com/mohammed.alshabaki/videos/2408217855862435/.

[45] Facebook post from Tahuf Al-Fatih; see https://www.facebook.com/alFateh.iq/videos/826204504231147/.

[46] "Nujaifi: The Forces of "Ninawa Guard" Will Take Over Security in the Province in the Next Stage." *("Al-Nujaifi: qwat "haras nenawa" statwla hifth alamin bil mohafatha fy al marhala al moqbila") Rudaw,* April 11, 2017, http://www.rudaw.net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/1104201713.

hegemonic power in post-2003 Iraq. Prime Minister Abadi balances this outlook with a willingness to cooperate with all regional neighbors and foreign powers to allow Iraq to play an independent role in regional affairs. For example, in October 2017, he asserted: "What we are telling everyone, including our Iranian neighbors and the U.S., who have become our friends by supporting us in our fight against *Daesh*, is that we welcome your support, we would like to work with you, both of you, but please don't bring your trouble inside Iraq."[47]

Abadi's focus on regional relations extends to Saudi Arabia, as evidenced in Iraqi-Saudi efforts to convene a football match in Basra prior to the election, where thousands of Iraqis attended and celebrated the rapprochement. This was the first time in 30 years that Basra hosted a football match.[48] Since the early days of his premiership, Abadi has discussed a new era of relations with all neighboring countries. He highlights the intensive visits between officials of Iraq and neighboring countries related to counter-terrorism and counter-extremism measures, and supports the creation of a strong political, security, and economic network to enhance security and stability in the region.[49]

State of Law takes a different approach to regional relations, criticizing the U.S. and its allies for repeatedly failing to protect Iraqi interests.[50] In campaign speeches, Maliki often refers to "external conspiracies" seeking to undermine Iraq's sovereignty.[51] SOL remains comparatively closer to Iran, and argues that Iran is the most trusted and powerful external actor on the ground.

To some extent, Fateh also positions itself as anti-American and anti-Saudi. Following rumors of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's impending visit to Iraq, the PMUs and Fateh organized a rally in Baghdad to protest the trip, signaling their objections to improved relations.[52] This group remains opposed to Saudi rapprochement. However, its wide electoral base means that its leaders, such as Hadi al-Ameri, are more willing to engage with Western leaders prior to the vote.[53] Ameri has begun engaging with Western officials in his bid to become an Iraqi statesman.

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[47] Yaroslav Trofimov, "Iraqi Leader Aims to Keep U.S.-Iran Rivalry From Destabilizing Country." *The Wall Street Journal*, October 25, 2017, https://www.wsj.com/articles/iraqi-leader-aims-to-keep-u-s-iran-rivalry-from-destabilizing-country-1508943600.

[48] Mohammed Ebraheem, "For 1st time in almost 30 years, Basra hosts intl'l friendly match between Iraq, Saudi Arabia." *Iraqi News*, February 28, 2018, https://www.iraqinews.com/sports/for-1st-time-in-almost-30-years-basra-hosts-friendly-football-match-between-iraq-saudi-arabia/.

[49] "Abadi: We have Restored the Confidence of the Iraqis and Succeeded in Creating Harmony Between the Executive and Legislative Authorities" *("alabady: adna thqt alraqyyn banfshm wnjhna bkhlq alwyam byn alslttyn altnfydhya waltshryya")* Al-Sumaria News, January 1, 2015, https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/120605/alsumaria-news/ar?utm_campaign=magnet&utm_source=magnet_article_page&utm_medium=related_articles.

[50] Footnotes "State of Law: America is Used to Abandoning its Allies" *("Dawlat alqanoon: america ta'awadat ala altakhali an holafaha")* Al-Masalah, October 3, 2016, http://almasalah.com/ar/NewsDetails.aspx?NewsID=32661.

[51] Facebook post by Nouri Al-Maliki; see https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=243765529127291&story_fbid=780591892111316.

[52] Tweet from Methaq Al-Fayyadh; see https://twitter.com/MethaqAlFayyadh/status/979699968050069505.

[53] Andrew England, "Paramilitary strongman sets sights on Iraq premiership." *Financial Times,* May 8, 2018, https://www.ft.com/content/0624781e-51b8-11e8-b3ee-41e0209208ec.

Identity Politics

Although the 2018 elections represent a departure from the discursive use of identity to win votes, the post-2003 political structure is such that identity continues to influence mobilization strategies. Affiliations based on family, tribe, ethnicity, and sect are still part of the system and as such part of electoral mobilization. As a prominent civil society activist questioned, "after these elections, the Prime Minister will still be a Shia. So how are we truly past identity politics?"[54]

Identity politics have historically served as a prominent form of mobilization. Identity politics best favor the conservative Shia Islamist groups because their electoral base more closely aligns with the Shia base. In post-2003 Iraq, Shia identity construction remains an exercise of creating an external threat—the Ba'ath Party or Sunni regional neighbors.[55] The mobilization of Shia identity is predominantly based on the narrative of historical oppression under the Ba'ath regime.[56] In both 2010 and 2014, for instance, Maliki used fear of Sunnis and the potential revival of the Ba'ath Party to rally his Shia base and eliminate challengers, and pushed Kurds and Sunnis out of senior positions to consolidate power based on ethno-sectarian identity.[57]

In the 2018 election, although 15 years had passed since the Ba'ath Party ruled Iraq, this external Sunni threat serves as a tool for these parties to mobilize their electoral base.[58] Out of the major lists, the State of Law Coalition relies more on identity *vis-a-vis* the external threat because of its predominantly Shia electoral base. Maliki and SOL, for instance, pursue this strategy by consistently highlighting the dangers of Sunni insurgent groups linked to the Ba'ath Party. In a statement given to *Baghdad Today* in February 2018, Rasul Abu Hasna, an MP from SOL, claimed that "the dissolved Ba'ath Party still exists and on many occasions, it has come out with statements by affiliates linked to Younis Al-Ahmed and Izzat Al-Douri"—former Ba'ath party officials. He went on to explain the frequency with which Ba'ath Party members challenge the Iraqi government and the possibility of party members sneaking into the next administration through the democratic process.[59]

At rallies, SOL relies heavily on the notion of Shia oppression and marginalization (*muthloomiya*). On May 2, 2018, Maliki told a crowd in Ma'amil District of Baghdad that he would focus on the poor, who have suffered from exclusion and marginalization from the

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[54] Author interview in Baghdad, April 2018.

[55] For a review, see Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (London: Hurst, 2011).

[56] Faleh A. Jabbar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq* (London: Saqi, 2003).

[57] Toby Dodge, *Iraq: From War to a New Authoritarianism.* (London: Routledge, 2012), 128.

[58] Fanar Haddad, "Shia-Centric State Building and Sunni Rejection in Post-2003 Iraq." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 7, 2014, https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/01/07/shia-centric-state-building-and-sunni-rejection-in-post-2003-iraq-pub-62408.

[59] "Maliki's Coalition Talks about Infiltration of Ba'ath Party Leaders into the Administration in Iraq... This is Their Plan!" ("*Itilaf al-maliki yetahadath an tasalol qadat hizb al-ba'ath ela alhokom fi al-iraq..hatha hiwa khotahom!*"), February 13, 2018, https://baghdadtoday.news/news/34796/ائتلاف-المالكي-يتحدث-عن-تسلل-قادة-حزب-البعث-الى-الحكم-في-العراق-هذا-هو-خطهم.

previous Ba'ath Party.[60] SOL's number one candidate in Basra, Khalaf Abdel Samad, has made his 11 years in a Ba'athist prison a focal point of his campaign in the lead-up to the 2018 vote.[61] Coalition leader Maliki harnesses this narrative to position himself as the "savior" of the marginalized predominantly Shia province.[62]

To some extent, the Fateh Coalition and its associated groups mobilize on the basis of not only ethno-sectarian identity, but also anti-Ba'athist sentiment more specifically. In May 2018, Fateh aired a video with senior leadership warning that actors inside and outside Iraq were working to resurrect the Ba'ath party, despite the July 2016 law banning Ba'ath Party political activities.[63]

At other times, however, Fateh leader Hadi al-Ameri limits his sectarian rhetoric in order to expand his electoral base to Sunnis and non-dominant groups. This goal is evident in his willingness to campaign in Sunni areas, where he stresses security and services, rather than Shiism.

The Nasr Coalition's comparatively weak position among the same demographic limits its ability to compete on the basis of identity-based politics alone.[64] As such, it seeks to shift away from Shia-centrism and employ themes of Iraqi unity. For instance, while SOL focuses on the Shia vote, Abadi travels to Sunni areas and employs powerful Sunni candidates to define his electorate. In a speech in Anbar in April 2018, he asserted that "ISIS will not return, and therefore we need to put sectarianism behind us, behind our backs. Anbar was liberated from the abomination of ISIS, from the abomination of terrorism, and now we have a new path ahead of us, a paved road that we choose, walk through, and achieve another miracle.[65] Likewise, Nasr's presence in Ninewa has become a magnet for alliances because the Sunni blocks view it as a cross-sectarian coalition involving various blocks, according to Nahla Hababi, an MP from Ninewa.[66] To reinforce his cross-ethno-sectarian policy, Abadi has even spoken in the Kurdistan Region. Despite his slim chance of winning seats in Sulaimani or Erbil, he used the trip to signal to his own base his focus on all of Iraq.

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[60] "Head of State of Law coalition, Mr. Nuri al-Maliki Meets the People of Ma'aml District." ("ryys aytlaf dwlt alqanwn alsyd nori almalky yltqy jmahyr mntqt almaml"), State of Law Coalition, May 2, 2018, http://state-of-law.org/home/single_news/1133.

[61] Nihad Al-Basri, "Dr. Khalf Abdul Samad from the Journey of Torment to Serve People." ("doktor khlf abd alsmd mn rhlt aladab ela khdmt alnas") Sot Al-Iraq, April 20, 2018, https://www.sotaliraq.com/2018/04/20/د-خلف-عبد-الصمد-من-رحلة-العذاب-الى-خدمة/.

[62] "Maliki's scenarios to restore governance of Iraq," The Baghdad Post, April 21, 2018, http://www.thebaghdadpost.com/en/story/26373/Maliki-s-scenarios-to-restore-governance-of-Iraq.

[63] "Political Parties are working to Bring the Ba'ath Party Back to the Front with Different Names." ("jhat syasya tml ly eadt hzb albth almqbwr ala alwajht basma mkhtlft") Al-Ghadeer TV, May 4, 2018, http://www.alghadeer.tv/news/detail/73932/.

[64] The Independent High Electoral Commission. Distribution of winners: 2014 Parliamentary Elections, http://ihec.iq/ihecftp/ntaij2014/baghdad.pdf. Abadi only had 5151 votes in 2014, but became prime minister.

[65] Al-Rasid TV, "The Mass Rally of Al-Nasr Coalition from Anbar: We Must Work to Ensure that the Situation Doesn't Return to the Past." ("altjma'a aljmahyri laytlaf alnsr alabady mn alanbar : yjb alml ly adm awdt alawda'a ela alwra") YouTube, April 23, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iw8Bw47-qvQ

[66] "Nasr Coalition in Ninewa Becomes a Magnet for Coalition .. These are the reasons.." ("Etlaf alnsr fy nynawa ysbh qtba jadhbaa llthalfat.. whdhh hy alasbab ..") Al-Masala, April 16, 2018, http://almasalah.com/ar/news/133741/ائتلاف-النصر-في-نينوى-يصبح-قطبا-جاذبا-للتحالفات-وهذه-هي-الأسباب -.

Posters from the Nasr coalition stressing Iraqi unity. Courtesy of Mustafa A. Hassan.

For Sairoon, the target audience is the protester who rejected the post-2003 leadership. As such, the group has moved away from Shia-centrism and employed themes of citizen-based Iraqi unity. One of the main Sadrist slogans from the protest movement is "we are all Iraq" (*kullna al-Iraq*).[67]

Nujaifi's Sunni-specific list relies on identity as a mobilizing factor. Muttahidoon Party campaigners in Mosul exclaimed "our sect is our [political party's] issue" in order to mobilize voters.[68] In statements shortly before the election, Nujaifi described Muttahidoon as the "face of Sunnis in Iraq," noting that coordination between coalitions that represent the Sunni community allow them to "forge one front to form a future Iraqi government."[69] This type of identity-based mobilization is in part a response to the dominance of two Shia lists in Mosul: Nasr and Fateh; as Nujaifi explains, "sectarian retrenchment is still present [in Iraq]. The recent political alliances have given this image."[70]

Watania's electoral goals include strengthening national unity by adopting a clear and explicit approach to achieving national reconciliation, ensuring security and stability in all dimensions, building and developing internal and national security units, and fighting financial and administrative corruption at all levels.[71] Although Allawi focuses on appointing popular Sunni candidates in each of the Sunni provinces, he remains opposed to ethno-sectarian strategies.[72]

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[67] "Blocs and Coalitions Participating in the Iraqi Elections" *("alktl walthalfat almsharka fy alantkhabat alraq"),* *BBC Arabic,* January 23, 2018, http://www.bbc.com/arabic/in-depth-42780460.

[68] "Decision Alliance is 'face of Sunnis in Iraq' – Nujaifi." *The Baghdad Post*, January 23, 2018, http://www.thebaghdadpost.com/en/story/22794/Decision-Alliance-is-face-of-Sunnis-in-Iraq-Nujaifi.

[69] Interview in Mosul, April 27, 2018

[70] "Watania Coalition Declares Its Position of Coalition with Al-Khanjar." *("Etilaf alwatania yolin mawkifah min altahalof ma'a alkhanjar")* Al-Sumaria News, January 14, 2018, https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/226823/-ائتلاف الوطنية-يعلن-موقفه-من-التحالف-مع-الخنجر/ar.

[71] "The Goals of Watania Coalition." *("Ahdaf etilaf alwatania"), al-watania.com,* n.d. https://www.al-watniah.com/.

[72] Author interview with Watania MP in Baghdad, April 2018.

Public Authority

Many of the candidates and political parties from the major lists have already held some form of public authority as former or present provincial council members, mayors, or deputy ministers. In the lead-up to the election, the line between institutional and electoral roles has often blurred, as candidates use their positions—and the wealth and influence associated with them—to win votes. In Iraq, where a majority of wealth comes from the state, public authority means resources. For instance, in Basra, Nasr's top five candidates include Members of Parliament, the Minister of Oil, and the provincial governor. Similarly, Fateh and SOL include Members of Parliament and ministers. The smaller or newer parties are unable to mobilize due to financial constraints; however, the well-established parties, which benefit from their leaders' roles in government, are better funded.

Leaders competing for votes use their public office to gain favor from the citizenry. All groups enhance their ability to provide services in the lead-up to the elections as a mobilization strategy. Nasr, Fateh, and SOL all rely on the networks of existing elites in each governorate to mobilize the Shia electorate. In Baghdad, residents have noticed a considerable improvement in services shortly before the elections. As a civil society activist claimed, "they are building things now and repairing infrastructure and cleaning up the streets. I am shocked to see buildings ordered, fixed, cleaned. They have taken down security and removed certain checkpoints to make it seem like Baghdad is now better and more secure. But all these will fail right after the elections."[73] For instance, Nasr's number two candidate in Basra is Iraqi Minister of Oil Jabbar al-Luaibi. In a campaign promise in early May 2018, Luaibi, speaking in his official role, announced the construction of a resort in Basra to "honor and appreciate its role to support the national economy as a generous oil governorate."[74] In this instance, Luaibi used his position as Minister to announce a pre-election project in an effort to mobilize votes. Abadi employed a similar tactic in Basra by using his public authority to open a pump station for the Shatt al-Arab irrigation project the Kitiban area of Basra in early May 2018, shortly before the vote.[75] In Mosul, Iraqi Minister of Construction and Housing, Anne Nafi Aussi, used her post to rebuild the bridges of Mosul right before the election in an effort to mobilize the electorate in her favor.[76]

Candidates also rely on societal leaders from tribal networks. All major electoral lists focus to varying extents on tribal leaders in an effort to attract their patronage networks.[77] According to this logic, gaining the favor of tribal leaders wins over members of the tribe. Maliki, speaking on behalf of SOL, traveled around Baghdad to meet various tribal leaders, praising their ability to defend themselves and contribute to stability in their

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[73] Author interview in Baghdad, April 2018.

[74] John Lee, "$234m Resort to be built in Basra." *Iraq Business News*, May 2, 2018 http://www.iraq-businessnews.com/2018/05/02/234m-resort-to-be-built-in-basra/.

[75] Tweet from PM Media Office; see https://twitter.com/IraqiPMO/status/993046520667824129.

[76] Interview with civil society activist in Mosul, April 2018.

[77] Author interviews in Baghdad, April 2018.

communities.[78][79] Abadi, Allawi, Ameri, and others similarly visited sheikh elders and elites in neighborhoods throughout Iraq.[80][81][82]

In recently-liberated areas, tribal identity mobilizes voters under an "us" versus "them" mentality. Many candidates do not list their tribal name on their application, but use it on billboards to stress their affiliation with a tribe.[83] As the activist said, "Unfortunately, the use of tribal name and tribal influence on voters exists strongly in our society and I can say that it will have a clear impact on the selection of candidates and vote for candidates of the same tribe."[84]

In the past, religious authorities have played significant roles in electoral mobilization. In 2005, the Shia Islamist groups united under Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who called on all Shias to vote. In the lead-up to the 2018 election, Sistani's position has to some extent changed. Many have referred to Sistani's famous ruling in 2010: "he who has tried should not try (*al-mujarab la eujarab*).[85][86] They argue that the elections simply justify the same elite. In a defining sermon given in Najaf on May 4, 2018, Sistani's representative did not call on all citizens to vote but said the decision to participate or not in the upcoming elections is the choice of the Iraqi citizen.[87] As such, the highest religious institution refused to endorse the political process as such and wanted to move away from electoral mobilization. Similarly, religious institutions in recently-liberated areas are not as active in mobilizing

[78] Afaq TV, "Vice President Nuri Al-Maliki' s Speech in front of a Gathering of Tribal Sheikhs and Elders of Baghdad 24 - 10 - 2017." *("klmt nayb ryys aljmhwrya nori almalky amam jm' min shywkh ashayr w wjha baghdad - 24 - 10 - 2017")* YouTube, October 24, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bs_74bc9VI.

[79] Afaq TV, "Vice President Nuri Al-Maliki' s Speech During His Visit to Abu Ghraib and His Meeting with the Tribes of Bani Tamim." *("klmt nayb ryys aljmhwrya nori almalky athna zyarth ela qada abw ghryb wlqayh ashayr bny tamim")* YouTube, December 23, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5MxgtjHBCUs.

[80] Facebook post from Etilaf Al-Nasr; see https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=2003953506544982&story_fbid=2061015780838754; Abadi attends a tribal gathering of the Al-Dueum tribe in the holy province of Karbala.
Facebook post from Etilaf Al-Nasr; see https://www.facebook.com/alnasriq/posts/2060182140922118.

[81] Facebook post from Etilaf Al-Watania; see https://www.facebook.com/alwatniah/videos/160436184649321/; Allawi meets with some of the tribes in Al-diwaniyah recently.
Facebook post from Etilaf Al-Watania; see https://www.facebook.com/alwatniah/videos/162390641120542/.

[82] "Basra Tribal Sheikhs and Citizens Receive the Head of Fateh Coalition, Hadi al-Ameri, with Great Hospitality" *("shewkh ashayr albasra w mwatnwha ystqblwn ryys thaluf alfth hady alamry bhfawa alya")* Al-Ghadeer TV, April 21, 2018, http://www.alghadeer.tv/news/detail/73289/.

[83] Interview in Mosul, April 2018.

[84] Author interview in Baghdad, April 2018.

[85] "Al-Sistani's Representative Warns Against Granting Positions to Those Who Have not "served" the People before and Confirms: He who Tried Should not Try." *"Momathil al-sistani yohather min manh almansib limn lm yekhdim alsha'ab sabekan w yoked: al mojarb la yojarb"* Al-Mada Press, August 29, 2014, http://www.almadapress.com/ar/news/36033ممثل-20%السيستاني-يحذر-20%من-منح-20%المناصب .

[86] "Statement by the Office of His Eminence (may the Almighty prolong his life) about the Forthcoming Parliamentary Elections" *("byan mktb smaht alsyd (dam zlh) hwl alantkhabat alnyabya almoqbla")* sistani.org, February 15, 2010, https://www.sistani.org/arabic/statement/1511/ https://www.sistani.org/arabic/statement/1511/.

[87] "Sistani Announces His Position on the Elections and Clearifies Three Points." *("Almarj' al-sistani yo'lin mawqifaho min alentikhabat w yobeen thalatht amoor")* Al-Sumaria News, May 4, 2018, https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/235750المرجع-السيستاني-يعلن-موقفه-من-الانتخابات-ويبين-ثل/ar..

votes in Mosul due to the experience with ISIS. For instance, the Sunni *waqf* has shied away from supporting Sunni candidates.

However, the conservative Shia groups continue to work with religious associations, such as the Iraqi Congregation of Islamic Unity (*al-mujama al-Iraqi lil-wahdat al-Islamiya*), to mobilize votes. At its inaugural conference in February 2018, Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Javad Zarif gave a speech in which he promised that he would not allow communists and liberals to return to power in Iraq.[88] His audience included Hadi al-Ameri along with senior leaders from SOL and other conservative Shia political groups. The head of Sairoon, Muqtada al-Sadr, retaliated to this attack by arguing that his group represented all Iraqis.[89] This is one example of religious institutions sparking debate and mobilizing the electorate. Civil society activists argue that they cannot compete with religious organizations, which makes it difficult for them to maneuver.[90]

Parties with established armed wings are at a distinct advantage throughout the liberated areas. Across Mosul, the PMUs remain entrenched and retain significant clout. "The militias are omnipresent in the province and control the security, and this favors the parties linked to them," said lawmaker Farah Sarraj, who ran on the secular National Alliance list of Vice President Ayad Allawi. "New alliances supported by the security forces on the ground will create a new reality."[91]

Material Incentives

A final mobilization strategy revolves around economic material incentives, given by the candidate to the potential voter. In past elections, candidates gave cash and material goods to resident leaders for votes. In the lead-up to the 2018 elections, the Iraqi government has to some extent attempted to overcome this practice. For instance, in April 2014, the cabinet passed a law prohibiting land sales until after the election period.[92]

However, candidates continue to use economic material incentives to mobilize voters, and some of the more colorful stories from the 2018 election feature candidates buying

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[88] "The Constituent Conference of the Iraqi Assembly of the Islamic Unity is Held in Baghdad .. What Are Its Messages?" (*"Mwtmr almjma'a al-iraqi altasysy llwhda alislamya yna'aqid fy baghdad .. ma hya rsaylh ?"*) *Knooz Media,* February 17, 2018, https://www.knoozmedia.com/312536/مؤتمر-المجمع-العراقي-التأسيسي-للوحدة.
[89] "Head of Sairoon Coalition: Our Diversity Cannot be excluded from the Country's Leadership by an Outside Voice." (*"Rayys thaluf sayrwn: tnwa'ana la yumkin lswt kharjy estba'adho mn qyadt alblad"*), *Al-Rasheed News,* April 4, 2018, http://www.alrasheednews.com/1290/.
[90] Author interview in Baghdad, April 2018.
[91] "In Mosul's ruins, Iraq election candidates vow bright future," *AFP*, May 2, 2018, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-5681937/In-Mosuls-ruins-Iraq-election-candidates-vow-bright-future.htmlhttp://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-5681937/In-Mosuls-ruins-Iraq-election-candidates-vow-bright-future.html.
[92] "The Council of Ministers Suspends the Sale and Distribution of Lands to Prevent Their Employment for Electoral Purposes." (*"Majls alwzra ywqf bay' w tawzy' alarady lmn' twzyfha llaghrad alantkhabya'"*) *Ayen News,* April 10, 2018, http://www.alliraqnews.com/modules/news/article.php?storyid=72569.

underwear for citizens in exchange for votes.[93] Other gifts include air conditioners and food staples.[94] All these goods are usually packaged with the candidate's campaign logo, as a way to remind the citizen. Moreover, there have been instances of direct cash incentives. In Baghdad, for example, residents have offered to sell their votes for up to 450,000 Iraqi dinars.[95] Prominent social media activists were likewise been offered up to 400,000 dinars for each Facebook post that supports a candidate.

From Mobilization Strategy to Policy: Opportunities and Challenges Ahead

The major Iraqi parties employ a wide array of electoral mobilization strategies to compete for the 2018 vote. These strategies revealed calculations of their electoral base, which were based on varying sociological trends depending on the coalition. The question, then, is whether these strategies translate into policies once the winning candidate forms the government. Part of the problem is the rigidity of Iraqi politics. The competing lists will come together and compromise to form the next government. As a result, it is likely that some form of the same elite will govern the country for the next four years. Winning back the trust of the citizen, after the election, remains key to translating mobilization strategies to successful policies that can rebuild the Iraqi state.

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[93] Ahal Iraq, "It turned out to be true, some candidates are distributing underwear to people as part of their campaign." ("*Tila'at sidog bil iraq murashaheen yewaze'oon libasat lilmoawtneen (malabis dakhlya) hamla intikhabya*"), YouTube, April 28, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KZ4rmGhDpjw.
[94] Tweet from Atika Shubbar; see https://twitter.com/AtikaShubbar/status/987999048413171712.
[95] Author interview in Baghdad, April 2018.

Section 2. Electoral Discourse in Iraqi Kurdistan: The Intersection of Identity and Issue-Based Politics

Authors: Christine M. van den Toorn,[96] Kristina Bogos,[97]
Researchers: Mohammed Fatih,[98] Mohamed Bakr Mera,[99] Fazel Hawramy[100]

Parties based in Iraq's Kurdistan Region (IKR) have used various tools to mobilize the Kurdish electorate in advance of the 2018 Iraqi federal election: discourse; party, tribal,[101] and religious[102] networks; material incentives;[103] and threats and intimidation.[104] This paper focuses on the rhetoric that various Kurdish candidates and lists deploy to attract voters. An analysis of this campaign tactic highlights both the enduring appeal of nationalist tropes as well as the nascent power of critiques of the traditional IKR leadership by new "oppositionist" parties in the post-2003 politics of the IKR.

Kurdish political posturing in Baghdad since 2003 has relied heavily on ethno-nationalist claims based on past atrocities under Saddam Hussein and the failures of the federal government after the fall of the Ba'ath regime to guarantee Kurdish constitutional rights related to oil revenue, budget, and the disputed territories. The campaigns of 2010 and 2014 were no exception.[105]

The use of such identity-based politics undoubtedly persists today. Yet the controversial independence referendum held by the Kurds in September 2017 and subsequent loss of territory — primarily Kirkuk — and political and economic rights Kurds had gained from Baghdad since 2003, have tested the ethno-nationalist narratives espoused by Kurdish

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[96] Christine M. van den Toorn, Director, Institute of Regional and International Studies, http://auis.edu.krd/iris/iris-team.

[97] Kristina Bogos, Junior Fellow, Institute of Regional and International Studies.

[98] Mohammed Fatih, AUIS Student, IRIS Intern.

[99] Mohammed Bakr Mera, AUIS Student, IRIS Intern.

[100] Fazel Hawramy, Fellow, Institute of Regional and International Studies, http://auis.edu.krd/iris/latest-iris-resident-fellows-current/fazel-hawramy.

[101] In all Kurdish provinces, though particularly Dohuk, tribal names were used on posters and shaykhs were selected for lists to mobilize tribal members. In addition, shaykhs of tribes, for example Doski, were put on lists.

[102] 102 A review of posters, banners, and candidate lists show that all parties, though to a greater extent the KDP, have utilized tribal names as well as recruitment of shaykhs mostly in Dohuk, Erbil, and rural areas, but also in Sulaimani; all parties have placed mullahs and other religious officials on their lists.

[103] Authors' interviews revealed promises and threats to employment, particularly in the security services.

[104] A number of individuals were assaulted in Zakho in April: Ali Hama Saleh of the Gorran party; Dr. Kamaran Barwari, the head of the New Generation Movement in Duhok province. A Hawpaimani supporter was hit while driving by police in Sulaimani, and Hawpaimani Asayish and Peshmerga forces were refused salaries and pensions in Dohuk and subsequently let go from their jobs. At New Generation rallies in Erbil and Kirkuk, water bottles were thrown at speakers. On May 7, Rebun Marouf of New Generation was assaulted by a group of men wielding knives.

[105] Parties have often promised to secure justice for the victims of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's chemical attacks against the Kurds in what is known as the Al Anfal campaign, among other atrocities.

leaders up until now, a shift reflected in arguably new identity and issue-based discourse in the 2018 elections.

Moreover, in the 2018 election cycle, Kurdish candidates appeal to the economic discontent of the electoral base due to the ongoing economic crisis; Kurds are increasingly dissatisfied by the leadership's failure to pay salaries on time or in full, provide adequate services, such as electricity, and fight corruption.

While Kurdish identity and nationalism subtly underpins political messaging in the 2018 election rhetoric, it is instrumentalized in varying degrees and in different ways in each party's discourse on three main campaign issues: relations between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the federal Government of Iraq, economic malfeasance and corruption, and the status of Kirkuk.

Erbil-Baghdad Relations

One of the main campaign themes among IKR parties and their candidates is the Kurdish approach to and position in Baghdad. The KRG and the Kurdish population had been on a trajectory of increased autonomy from Baghdad and the state of Iraq since 1991, a trend that accelerated after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. The reassertion of federal authority following the referendum re-established the IKR as part of Iraq. Kurds lost not only territory, but also clout, power, and leverage in Baghdad.[1] Hence, Kurdish parties seek to explain to the Kurdish public how they will regain and reassert Kurdish rights in Baghdad.

While Kurdish parties continue to employ some forms of ethno-nationalist rhetoric as part of their discourse in 2018 election campaigns to mobilize the nationalist base, they use different and at times contradictory approaches. All parties campaign for strong representation in Baghdad, but there are clear differences in terms of ultimate objectives and commitment to preserve the status quo. With some variation, parties galvanize their electorate by emphasizing the need for strong Kurdish representation in Baghdad in order to regain their place and secure Kurds' constitutional rights. Parties in opposition to the ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), such as Gorran, the Coalition for Democracy and Justice (CDJ, known as Hawpaimani, a new list), New Generation (or Newye Nwe, a new list), and Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG, known as Komal) also criticize the existing Kurdish political leadership for failing to secure Kurdish rights in Baghdad and achieve normalized relations between the two governments.

Gorran, known as Change Movement, whose late leader Nawshirwan Mustafa, like Salih, split from the PUK in 2009, situates its approach to Baghdad by pointing out the failures of the current leadership, including the independence referendum, to mobilize voters. Omer Sayid Ali, the party's leader, said that the Gorran team in Baghdad would "correct the mistakes of KDP and PUK."[106] Gorran takes a clear stance against the referendum and campaigns on a platform of "securing a better life for people and attaining the national ambition of Kurdish people."

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[106] Gorran, "Omer Sayid Ali : Gorran Team in Baghdad will correct the mistakes of KDP PUK," May 5, 2018, http://gorran.net/En/Detail.aspx?id=16663&LinkID=141.

Other discourse Gorran employs to mobilize around KRG-Baghdad issues relies on a strict adherence to Kurdish rights as envisaged in Iraq's constitution. "Only the respect of the constitution can unite us," one of Gorran's slogans in Sulaimani read. The party utilizes its founder's popularity in party discourse, a tactic that the PUK also utilizes[107] pictures of Nawshirwan Mustafa are ubiquitous around Sulaimani. In party banners in Sulaimani, Hoshiyar Abdullah, the tenth candidate on Gorran's list, said he is "following the footsteps of Nawshirwan Mustafa with the same courage from the past." Mustafa is well known as a symbol of anti-corruption and honesty to Kurds.

Posters of Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's al-Nasr coalition and Kurdish parties in Sulaimani. Courtesy of Fazel Hawramy.

The Coalition for Democracy and Justice (CDJ) uses rhetoric about the need to reclaim Kurdish constitutional rights, while emphasizing that the traditional leadership has failed to do precisely that. For example, in a rally in Duhok on April 22, CDJ's president, Barham Salih, who split from the PUK in August 2017, said that the "people of Kurdistan are facing a big danger, if we don't do something, our constitutional and political position in Baghdad [will] be weakened … therefore we need to go to Baghdad, backed by your vote, to defend the rights of our nation and defend the constitutional status of Kurdistan."[108] The coalition's stance toward Baghdad is less aggressive than that of the ruling KDP and PUK, and instead promotes negotiations, utilizing the name Barham Salih to do so authoritatively, given his previous role as Deputy Prime Minister of Iraq. Salih said that "in cooperation with our Iraqi and international friends," the party works collaboratively to resolve issues on the national budget and salaries, among other issues.[109]

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[107] See the section on PUK in Erbil-Baghdad relations.

[108] Xendan, "Dr. Barham's full speech in Duhok." (*"Tewawi wetari Doctor Barham le Dohuk,"*) YouTube, April 29, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFbtNoy3lOg&feature=youtu.be.

[109] "Barham Salih vows to pay back civil servant salaries 'within 4 years'," *Rudaw Engish,* May 7, 2018, http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/07052018.

The New Generation Movement also deploys critical rhetoric around a change of leadership. "Yes, the constitution has been violated but violated by both sides, by Baghdad as well as Kurdistan," the party said, and added that "there isn't a clear mechanism on how to deal with Baghdad."[110] At a rally in Baghdad on April 27, the party proclaimed that Iraqis should choose a new group of politicians as the older parties have already been tested.[111] The President of the party, Shaswar Abdulwahid, said that new people would emerge and become influential in Iraq's political affairs.[112]

Posters of Gorran, New Generation, and CDJ in Sulaimani. Courtesy of Christine van den Toorn.

The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), both of which have dominated the Kurdish political landscape until the rise of Gorran in 2009, and which continue to wield a great deal of power, emphasize that they will regain and defend the rights of Kurds in the Iraqi parliament. They weave aggressive identity-based language with pragmatic rhetoric about negotiation and partnership.

The main slogan of the PUK, in control of Kurdistan's second largest province of Sulaimani, is "regaining our future" through "a safer nation, a thriving economy, and a better agriculture sector."[113] The PUK thus vows to reassert the rights of Kurds in Baghdad and aim for a more prosperous future. "What do we mean by regaining our future," the video said. "During Mam Jalal's time, Kurdistan had a bright future but now, this future is under threat. That is why we need to send a strong team to Baghdad to work for regaining our future."[114] The party consistently uses the phrase "strong team" and vigorously promotes the hashtag #TakeBackOurFuture on its social media channels.[115]

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[110] Post from Kawa Abdulqadir's Facebook on April 15, 2018. See https://www.facebook.com/kawa1982.
[111] "Shaswar Abdulwahid says new politicians to emerge in Iraq," *NRT English*, April 27, 2018, http://www.nrttv.com/EN/Details.aspx?Jimare=20862.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Tweet from PUK; see https://twitter.com/PUK162/status/988092329406926848.
[114] "Take Back Our Future" video on PUK's website; see https://puk162.com/.
[115] Tweet from PUK; see https://twitter.com/PUK162/status/988092329406926848.

By invoking Mam Jalal, the sobriquet of the late Jalal Talabani, who was the founder of the PUK and former President of Iraq, the party seeks to remind the Kurdish public of the gains made while he was in Baghdad after 2003. Talabani's name, however, also symbolizes pragmatism: the former Iraqi President was seen as a true interlocutor between the Iraqi leadership and the Kurds.[116] The PUK has stated that Kurdistan could be part of Iraq if Kurdish constitutional rights were guaranteed, and further called for "coexistence federalism" in Baghdad.[117]

Similarly, the KDP uses language of both negotiation and aggression in its position on Baghdad. For example, when Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani asserted that Kurdistan would always be Baghdad's ally, even if "it is an independent one," he also stated that "[w]e have to reach a mutual understanding with Baghdad on the future of Kurdistan."[118] Party leaders and candidates also focus on "gains" and "achievements" for Kurds in Baghdad, and assert that sending KDP representatives to Baghdad will result in greater "achievements" for the Kurdistan region. "There are two fights in Baghdad; one is the economic and the other is political; I'll do both fights with heart and mind and reclaim the rights of the Kurdish people," said one of the senior KDP candidates in Duhok.[119]

The KDP also utilizes notions of Kurdish identity framed within the context of independence and the referendum to mobilize voters. Masrour Barzani, head of the Kurdistan Region Security Council and a senior KDP official, said on April 26, 2018, that the referendum for independence had not come to an end and that "by sending your true representative to Baghdad, you will defend that fateful right," [120] and added that "we strive for independence."[121] He further stated that the party had "bigger problems" than issues over salaries, and stated that "we ask for independence and the right of self-determination for the people of Kurdistan."[122]

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[116] The PUK's manifesto reads, "It's clear that the best way to guarantee a brighter future for the Kurdish nation is to have a strong Kurdish team in the Iraqi House of Representatives, in the same time Iraq's new experience has shown that with the existence of PUK's members in the high responsibilities will be a guarantee to those rights for the Kurdish nation," the party said, in order to "save Iraq from its political problems." "Messages, programs, and slogans of list number 162 for the elections," *PUK Media*, 2018, http://www.pukmedia.com/EN/EN_Direje.aspx?Jimare=43222. See also "Qubad Talabani: PUK is the sole party that has the best relations with all political parties in Iraq," ("*Qubad Talabani: Yeketi take heze bashtrin peywendi le gel tewawi heze siasie kani iraq heye*") *Kurdsat News*, May 1, 2018, http://kurdsatnews.com/news.aspx?id=20956&MapID=1, as well as statements made by Mustafa Chawrash at a PUK conference to commemorate martyrs held on April 29, 2018.

[117] Ibid.

[118] See Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani's speech from May 4. Falah Najm, "Nechirvan Barzani in Sulaimani: We will bury anti-PDK intellectual terrorism," ("*Nechirvan Barzani: le Sulaimani: Irhabi fikri dje party le gordeniin,"*) April 5, 2018. http://www.rudaw.net/mobile/sorani/kurdistan/040520183.

[119] "What does a KDP candidate tell duhok People?" ("*Berbejereki party bo khelki Dohuk delet chi Dukan",*) *Rudaw,* April 28, 2018, http://www.rudaw.net/sorani/onair/tv/episodes/episode/chidakan_28042018.

[120] Govand Mustafa, "Masrour Barzani: Anyone who is against the referendum, how would he/she would be able to defend the Kurds in Baghdad?" ("*Masrour Barzani: Kesek dejaieti rifrandom bkat le beghda chon berkri le kurd dekat,"*) *Rudaw,* April 26, 2018, http://www.rudaw.net/sorani/kurdistan/260420187.

[121] See video of Masrour Barzani's speech at https://www.facebook.com/kurdistan24.official/posts/2095920014004788.

[122] "Nechirvan Barzani in Duhok campaigns for his party candidates," ("*Nechirvan Barzani le Dohuk bangeshe bo berbejerekani partekei dekat,"*) *Rudaw,* May 6, 2018, http://www.rudaw.net/sorani/kurdistan/060520187.

The KDP also invokes language of "unity" and calls for a "unified bloc" to convince Kurds that they are the right party to achieve Kurdish rights in Baghdad.[123] Such an approach allows the party to assert both Kurdish nationalist aims and promote normalized relations with the Iraqi government.

The Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU), known locally as Yegertu, a frequent ally of the KDP, also adheres to the nationalist tone and defends the referendum in a heated debate in Sulaimani. "Holding the referendum was [the] right thing... the fact that it did not succeed does not mean it was wrong," said Muthana Amin, the head of the KIU list in Sulaimani and Member of Parliament (MP) in Baghdad. He continued, "I do not believe in the territorial integrity of Iraq, I believe in the independence of Kurdistan."[124] But at a later event, he tempered his rhetoric, saying they would return to a federal though not centralised Iraq."[125] Salahaddin Bahaaddin, the head of the KIU, criticized the traditional parties of PUK and KDP, saying that Kurds who go to Baghdad should not be those "concerned only about their own and their party pocket."[126]

In another shift in the relationship between Kurds and federal Iraq, multiple Kurdish candidates ran on Iraqi Arab lists, mainly Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's al-Nasr list and Ammar al-Hakim's Hikma Movement.[127] While this tactic is pragmatic — in Tuz Khurmatu, the five Kurdish candidates are running on Iraqi lists because they will not win seats otherwise[128] — it is also driven by disillusionment with the Kurdish leadership. In Duhok, one wounded peshmerga sat in the office of Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's Nasr Coalition and stated that the main reason why he supports the Nasr coalition was the failure of Kurdish rule and the crippling corruption endemic to the Kurdish areas.[129] Additionally, five Kurds from the disputed province of Kirkuk are running as candidates on the Arab lists from the province. Both the Nasr coalition and the Hikma movement have offices in major cities of the IKR, and Abadi spoke in Sulaimani and Erbil in April as part of his campaign.

Economic Woes: Salaries, Corruption, & Reform

Another key issue-based theme employed to mobilize Kurdish voters in the 2018 elections is the economy, and in particular, corruption and the payment of public sector salaries. Ever since the KRG's decision in 2014 to independently export crude oil triggered the federal government to cut off budget payments, the KRG has to fully or consistently paid salaries.

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[123] See speeches by Nechirvan Barzani and Masrour Barzani available at
http://www.rudaw.net/mobile/sorani/kurdistan/040520183 and
http://www.rudaw.net/sorani/kurdistan/050520184.
[124] Debate between the heads of electoral lists at the British Institute in Sulaimani, April 19, 2018.
[125] Shehab Mohammed, "KIU head: due to the shortcoming of logic among the Kurdistan region leadership, hunger came into being," ("*Emindari kashti yekgrtuu: behoi eqliieti seqeti demelatdarani herim brsiti hate arawe,*") *Speda,* May 1, 2018, http://www.speda.net/index.php/news/kurdistan/34427.
[126] Ibid.
[127] "52 Kurds in Kurdistan are on four Arabic lists," ("*52 Kurd le Kurdistan khoyan leser chowar listi arabi*"), *Rudaw,* April 17, 2018, http://www.rudaw.net/sorani/kurdistan/170420181.
[128] Author interviews with Kurdish and Arab officials from Tuz Khormatu; See also "Five Kurds are candidates on the Arabic lists in Kirkuk," ("*Pench Kurd lenio liste arabiiekani kerkuuk khoyan kandidkerduwe*"), *Rudaw,* April 27, 2018, http://www.rudaw.net/sorani/kurdistan/2704201813.
[129] Interview in Duhok on April 23.

As of 2017, the KRG's debt exceeded $17 billion USD,[130] and oil companies and private sector companies left due to ISIS and the decline in oil prices.

Generally speaking, Kurdish parties campaign on platforms to improve the economy and regain Kurdish economic rights in Baghdad. An analysis of discourse, though, reveals differences in both tone and proposed solutions: the traditional parties and elites focus on resolution via Baghdad—such as securing the Kurds' portion of the federal budget, and improving the economy in order to restore the KRG's autonomy. But for the protest parties, Baghdad is presented as part of the solution rather than the crux of the problem. The main obstacle for CDJ, Gorran, and New Generation is in the capital of the IKR, not Iraq. While they, too, speak of securing Kurds' portion of the federal budget, their rhetoric focuses on the traditional duopoly and its corruption as the immediate dilemma. Hence, Kurdish opposition parties campaign on platforms to fight corruption, pay salaries, and bring about good governance.

CDJ's platform overwhelmingly addresses, in greater terms, the payment of public sector salaries and solutions to fight corruption over broad economic reform. CDJ's two main slogans are "*Iter Bassa*," or "Enough," in Kurdish, in reference to the corruption and maladministration of the past 15 years,[131] and "*hkom rashid*," or "good governance," in Arabic.[132] Salih emphasizes, both in rallies and on social media, that his party strives to replace the "failed" and "corrupt" political party rule with a strong government in the Kurdistan region that could protect the constitutional rights of the Kurdish people in Baghdad. Salih further vows to return full salaries and the money owed to civil servants.[133] "We want to end the injustice of [the] KRG salary saving system, we want to return those salaries that have been saved for you, it is your right," Salih said at a public gathering for CDJ's election campaign for the Iraqi parliament in Dohuk on April 22.[134] Salih and CDJ also repeatedly assert that it is "shameful that Peshmerga are paid half of [that of] the Iraqi army."[135]

While focusing on the payment of salaries and an end to corruption, Salih has also said that the solution to Iraq's woes can be found in the country's "need for economic advancement."[136] He also addresses broader economic reform, calling in particular for

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[130] "Iraqi Kurdistan faces economic fallout from independence vote," *Financial Times*, September 27, 2017, https://www.ft.com/content/0d592a0a-a388-11e7-9e4f-7f5e6a7c98a2.

[131] See CJ's Facebook page at https://www.facebook.com/hawpaimani/.

[132] "Dr. Barham Salih President of the Coalition for Democracy and Justice: Kurdistan is need of good governance and justice," (Al-doktor Barham Salih rais tahalaf al-dimocratia wa adala: Kurdistan bihaja ila hokum rashid wa adal,) *Xendan,* April 3, 2018, http://www.xendan.org/ar/detailnews.aspx?jimare=17904&babet=70&relat=8030.

[133] Salih repeated this at rallies in Erbil in April and in Sulaimani in May and in Kirkuk.

[134] "Dr. Barham: We want to end the injustice of civil servant salaries and pay back the lost salaries," ("*Dr. Barham: demaewit kotaye bo zolme pashekewet behenin wa muuche pashekewetkrawekan begerinewe.")*, *Xendan,* April 22, 2018, http://www.xendan.org/detailnews.aspx?jimare=52275&babet=1&relat=1024.

[135] "Barham Salih vows to end KRG salary saving system," *Xendan*, April 25, 2018, http://www.xendan.org/en/detailnews.aspx?jimare=116&babet=51&relat=8029.

[136] Barham Salih, "A vision for ending Iraq's crises," *The National*, January 16, 2018, https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/a-vision-for-ending-iraq-s-crises-1.695870.

greater international investment in the country, and job opportunities for the youth, among other issues.[137]

Like CDJ, Gorran's messaging on the overall state of the economy and corruption addresses the payment of salaries and good governance, but discusses economic reform in greater detail than CDJ. Gorran's election manifesto emphasizes the importance not only of salary payments, but also the "Kurdistan [R]egional [G]overnment's financial payments and oil companies' payments." Regarding the share of Iraq's national budget, Gorran argues that the KRG's share should "not be tied to political problems" in a period of political impasse between Iraqi and KRG authorities. The party instead proposes a mechanism, whereby the issue of the KRG's budget share "should return to the Supreme Court rather than cutting budget and subsistence from people." Gorran places great emphasis on rebuilding an impaired economy through a reinvigoration of the private sector, especially the agricultural sector. The party also levies consistent condemnation of the ruling elites, though are more tempered in their condemnation, likely because they were part of government until 2015.

Newcomer Shaswar Abdulwahid emphasized "good governance" and a "strong economy"[138] when he launched New Generation. He put forth a 15-year plan for the KRG, and frequently refers to large-scale long-term economic development plans, such as greater investment in city and regional infrastructure, projects in agriculture, tourism, and small businesses, and the prospects for women and the younger generation. In an infographic on Abdulwahid's Facebook page, he asserted that the party has "long-term plans but we don't think salary issue is a long term issue. It only requires honest people to negotiate for it. It only requires a political decision. But our dream is bigger than the salary problem."[139] As other opposition parties, New Generation also levies criticism at the ruling political elite as the root cause of these ills.

The PUK's platform focuses more on regaining the Kurds' future and asserting Kurdish rights in Baghdad rather than promoting broad economic reform or directly calling for the return of regular salary payments for civil servants. In its manifesto, the party delineates the steps it will take to "change the economic condition" in Kurdistan.[140] These points include pledges of "reducing monetary expenses in the budget and allocating it for the rebuilding of the harmed (damaged) areas," "ensuring employment especially for people in the disputed areas," and seeking "transparency in economic activities."[141] The party also asserts its commitment to defend the Kurdistan region's share of the federal state budget,[142] among other economic issues.

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[137] Ibid.

[138] "Shaswar Abdulwahid announces New Generation political platform," *NRT English*, http://www.nrttv.com/en/Details.aspx?Jimare=16803.

[139] See the Facebook account of Shaswar Abdulwahid, available at https://www.facebook.com/shaswarrr/.

[140] Brochure from PUK's website, available at https://puk162.com/storage/takeback/2.pdf.

[141] Brochure from PUK's website, available at https://puk162.com/storage/takeback/3.pdf.

[142] See point 3 of their manifesto in English, available at http://www.pukmedia.com/EN/EN_Direje.aspx?Jimare=43222.

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KDP and PUK posters in the city of Akre in the Dohuk province. Courtesy of Fazel Hawramy.

The KDP's manifesto states its commitment to ensuring that the KRG's equitable share of Iraq's national budget. "Besides KDP's respect and acknowledgement of the endurance of people of Kurdistan in general, public employees in particular, we assert an intensifying of our efforts to ensure the just portion of budget for the Kurdistan Regional Government as well as the Kurdistani areas outside the KRG from Iraq's natural resources, and put an end to the treachery done against our people in the scope of budget, public salaries, and the monetary receivables," the Party said.[143]

Both the PUK[144] and the KDP[145] have also acknowledged and accepted shortcomings in their rule while promising a more prosperous future.

"Kurdish" Coexistence in Kirkuk

As a result of the Kurdish referendum on independence in September 2017, the KRG lost administrative control and security presence in the disputed territories to Iraqi forces the following month. For both symbolic and financial reasons, most significant among these losses was the city of Kirkuk. The loss of the oil-rich and multi-ethnic city impaired the economic backbone of the KRG, which had been dependent on oil exports from the city since 2014.

Many Kurds blame the loss of Kirkuk on the traditional ruling elites: the KDP, the driving force behind the referendum, and the PUK, whose security and political forces dominated the city and withdrew in the face of the mobilization of Iraqi forces. Kirkuk is a traditionally "green" or PUK area, though KDP did gain two seats from the city in the 2014 elections.

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[143] Point 2 of KDP's manifesto in Arabic.
[144] See PUK's manifesto, available at https://puk162.com/takeback.
[145] "Without unity, Kurds will achieve nothing in Baghdad, warns PM Barzani," *Rudaw English* (min. 4:25)*,* April 25, 2018, http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/250420183.

While all parties deploy the language of "peaceful coexistence" among the city's multi-ethnic population of Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmen, they also evoke Kurdish ethno-nationalist claims over the city to varying degrees. While the PUK focuses on the latter, the protest parties tend to highlight the former. Parties also highlight other issues of concern, such as the return of Peshmerga forces to the city and the implementation of Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution.

A PUK poster in Kirkuk. Courtesy of Mohamed Bakr Mera.

The KDP and the PUK take different approaches to Kirkuk. In January, the ruling KDP announced that it would boycott the elections in Kirkuk, denouncing the "military occupation" in the city .[146] The PUK, on the other hand, vigorously campaigns to mobilize supporters in Kirkuk. A mix of overtly Kurdish nationalist tones about Kirkuk's "Kurdistani" and Kurdish" identity mixed with pragmatism characterizes the party's discourse in the contested city. Party banners in the city also invoke an overt sense of Kurdish nationalism, with language that asserts that "Kirkuk Kurdistan depends on your vote" and "proving Kirkuk is Kurdistani depends on the resistance of its hardworking people."[147] Rebwar Taha, a PUK candidate in Kirkuk, said that "on the day of election, act like Peshmerga, go to the ballot box and prove the existence of your nation so that the dream of Mam Jalal would come true as he always said the key solution of Kurds is only Kirkuk and will always be Kirkuk."[148] One PUK candidate stated that they would "work on administrative reform and confront the corruption…because it and terrorism are two faces of the same coin."[149]

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[146] "KDP will boycott Iraq elections in Kirkuk, disputed areas," *Rudaw English*, January 15, 2018, http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/150120184.

[147] Shalaw Mohammed, "An Explosive Mixture: In Kirkuk, Vote-Hungry Politicians Play With Ethnic Fire," *Niqash,* 2018, http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/5896/in-kirkuk-vote-hungry-politicians-play-with-ethnic-fire.htm.

[148] See Taha's speech at https://www.facebook.com/rebaz1989kirkuk/videos/t.100004177389050/1868610956505238/?type=2&video_source=user_video_tab.

[149] Interview in Kirkuk on April 22, 2018.

Three Kurdish opposition parties, CDJ, Gorran, and the KIG, have formed a coalition named Nishtiman, or Homeland in Kurdish. New Generation are also running in Kirkuk. While the discourse of these opposition parties is similar to that of the PUK, it is less overtly nationalist and more supportive of coexistence, while also laced with subtle attacks against the current leadership for the loss of Kirkuk and the growing security challenges in the city.

A poster of the Nishtiman coalition in Kirkuk. Courtesy of Mohamed Bakr Mera.

The call for peaceful coexistence and representation of all ethnic groups is a central theme for opposition parties amidst subtle invocations of nationalistic rhetoric. A Nishtiman candidate said that the coalition would focus on "building a new culture of coexistence"[150] in the city, and that any discussion around the return of Peshmerga must involve all ethnic groups.[151] "Kurds are not the only ethnic groups in the city, there are Arabs and Turkmen so if we want to bring back Peshmerga to the city, we should all sit down and agree upon bringing back Peshmerga to the city or not," the candidate said.[152] Mohammed Shwani, the head of the Nishtiman list, said that he had "participated in several debates and defended Kurdishness and the Kurdistani of this city."[153] Reben Nasradin, another candidate from the Nishtiman list, said that the current leadership tried to weaken the role of the Kurds in the city, which they said they aimed to stop. CDJ's Salih, also said that "Kirkuk is the national identity of people of Kurdistan…Kirkuk has a key as well as a sensitive economic role, but unfortunately this city has not benefited from its resources for decades, and Kirkuk always has been made the center of conflicts, misfortunes, and suppressions," Salih said.[154]

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[150] The head of the Njtiman list, Mohammed Shwani, said this during the campaign trail. See https://www.facebook.com/340431386459896/videos/368431396993228/.
[151] Interview with Njtiman candidate in Kirkuk on April 22, 2018.
[152] Ibid.
[153] See Shwani's interview at https://www.facebook.com/340431386459896/videos/376732172829817/.
[154] "Barham Salih: We will not let smugglers and oil gangs to play with the fate of Kirkuk over again," *Xendan English*, April 24, 2018, http://www.xendan.org/en/detailnews.aspx?jimare=126&babet=51&relat=8029.

Posters of Arab and Turkmen parties in the disputed city of Kirkuk. Courtesy of Mohamed Bakr Mera.

Opposition parties also directly attack the existing leadership in their messaging. Another New Generation candidate on the party's list in Kirkuk said that "we want to bring back Peshmerga, but we do not want Peshmerga to be under the control of the parties, PUK and PDK."[155] Barham Salih of the Nishtiman coalition claimed that their alliance "will not let the fate of Kirkuk to be under the control of the oil mafia and oil smugglers."[156] Ashka Shakr, another candidate of Nishtiman, said "Kirkuk has been the victim of a failed government that was sunk by corruption and a fascist government in Baghdad."[157] Shaswar Abdulwahid, the leader of the New Generation party, also attacked the ruling elite. "The two families were taking the oil of the city and were leaving the smoke of it to you," he said in rally in Kirkuk on April 25.

Conclusion

The citizens in the IKR are still suffering the political and economic repercussions of the independence vote and the subsequent loss of territory. Issues related to these events dominate the discourse and campaigns of rival parties. That said, the positions of rival parties are also shaped by the degree to which they seek more fundamental change in the KRG, and the path forward with Baghdad. The traditional parties aspire to preserve their status and prerogatives, while new parties aim to mobilize the frustration of Kurds with the corruption, nepotism and maladministration that characterizes the status quo. Regarding the relationship with the federal government, the KDP-PUK duopoly direct blame at each other and toward Baghdad, and promote the need to reassert Kurdish power in the Iraqi capital, while protest parties blame the duopoly first and foremost. While similarly vowing to reassert Kurdish influence, their rhetoric paints Baghdad more as a potential partner in restoring the politics and economy of the IKR. The 2018 election is therefore as much a referendum on the ruling elite of the KRG as it is a competition for votes in Baghdad.

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[155] Interview with New Generation candidate in Kirkuk on April 22, 2018.
[156] See Salih's speech at https://www.facebook.com/hawpaimani/videos/1614322851994851/.
[157] See Shakr's speech at https://www.facebook.com/340431386459896/videos/376592929510408/.

IRAQ VOTES 2018
ELECTION MOBILIZATION STRATEGIES