



# EARLY PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN IRAQ AND NINEVEH

BİLGAY DUMAN | HÜSEYİN ASLAN

## INTRODUCTION

Iraq's early elections, which will be held on 10 October 2021, are seen as a significant step in the country's modern history. For the first time since the 2003 invasion, an Iraqi government is responding to public demand positively in its decision to conduct early elections. In this

regard, the Iraqi parliament has amended the electoral law. According to Article 15, Paragraph 1 of the amended law, a province is divided into several constituencies and according to Paragraph 2, only one woman candidate is nominated from each constituency. Elsewhere, according to Article 13, Paragraph 1, the parliament consists of a total of 329 seats, where 320 seats are allo-

cated to provinces based on administrative boundaries and 9 seats are allocated to minorities. The seats allocated to minorities are distributed as follows:

One seat for each Christian community living in Baghdad, Nineveh, Kirkuk, Dohuk and Erbil amounting to 5 seats in total,

- One seat for Yezidis in Nineveh,
- One seat for Sabians in Baghdad,
- One for Shabaks in Nineveh, and
- One seat for Feylis in Wasit.

According to the law, the quotas for Christians and Sabians are allocated in one constituency. It should be noted that three of the nine quotas in the Iraqi parliament are elected by minorities in Nineveh.

Along with Basra, Nineveh is considered as one of the most important provinces in Iraq after Baghdad, considering its high population and 34 seats (including 3 quota seats) in the parliament. The province is divided into eight constituencies, and all political groups strive to partake in this distribution and win at least one seat. Unlike other provinces, this province stands out for its ethnic and religious diversity. This diversity has become the trump card of the conflict between the different components of Iraq since the fall of Baghdad in 2003. Some political factions unsatisfied with the province's diversity have tried to take advantage of the conflict to alter the demographics of the region and impose a policy of "drive out and kill". Consequently, ethnic and sectarian tensions emerged in Nineveh between communities that used to live in peace for centuries. Following its liberation from the ISIS terrorist organisation,

Nineveh has recently witnessed radical political, economic and social changes, which, so to say, has increased and intensified competition in the province.

### **CHANGE IN THE SECURITY ATMOSPHERE OF NINEVEH**

Nineveh has become a gateway for nationalist and/or religious extremist groups and a conflict zone between internal forces (Sunni Arabs, Shia Arabs and Kurds), which has made it a scene of contest between regional forces for control over this key area. The province has gone through three periods of control.

The first period started in 2003 and lasted until ISIS entered Iraq. Kurdish and Yazidi forces, as well as the al-Qaeda terrorist organisation, held control of most of this region during the period.

The second period began with the ISIS capture of Mosul, after which a third of Iraq fell into the hands of ISIS groups. Groups belonging to this terrorist organisation invaded the Iraqi-Syrian border area between Anbar and Nineveh. However, before these groups attacked Mosul, the district of Al Ba'aj and a large part of Nineveh were already de facto under the control of Al Qaeda-linked cells.

Lastly, the third period began with the defeat of ISIS and the end of the operations to liberate the region from the organisation. Local and regional power balances have changed during this period, with the Kurds dramatically losing their weight after Peshmerga forces withdrew. Turkey's influence, the only country with a consulate-general in Mosul, has also weakened, while Iran's influence has increased thanks to the Hashd al-Shaabi's participation as a leading force in



Hosh Al-Bayaa Square with four historical churches in Iraq's Mosul

the operations against ISIS in Mosul and its acquisition of dominance in the region as a result.

The Hashd al-Shaabi managed to build up powerful armed forces, forming various brigades of Turkmens, Yazidis and Sunni Arabs, the latter of which extended their influence from the village of Mahmudiyah in north-western Syria to Anbar.

The general situation in Nineveh after 2018 has changed more significantly than the post-2003 period where the balance of power had shifted in favour of Kurds and Yazidis. On the other hand, it is fair to say that minority populations such as Shiites and Shabaks, who had to hide their identity and were under pressure, have gained considerable power with the change in the security balance after ISIS.

First, from 2003 to 2014, Nineveh was controlled by the Peshmerga in terms of security and the army, but also implicitly by al-Qaeda forces. Here, we need to point out that most of the soldiers and officers of the Iraqi army are of Kurdish descent and some of them come from the Arab villages outside Nineveh. Furthermore, the fact that administrative decisions in the province are mainly taken by the Kurds, and the control is secondarily in the hands of al-Qaeda groups, must be underlined. The second force that has emerged after 2018 is the Shiite forces represented by the Hashd al-Shaabi and the Sunni Arab forces close to the Shiites. The Hashd al-Shaabi has filled the void left by Kurdish forces firstly due to ISIS taking control and secondly due to the illegitimate independence referendum organized by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). The

The conflicting political figures in Nineveh, which hold 31 seats in parliament, aimed to divide the regions according to their sphere of influence.

progress made by the Iraqi forces in reclaiming lost territories also have a say in this sense. At the same time, the PKK, a terrorist organisation that has helped the Yazidis and gained the sympathy of part of the Yazidis after their mistreatment of ISIS-affiliated terrorists in the Sinjar region, has also emerged and increased its influence in the region.

## CONSTITUENCIES IN NINEVEH

With the approval of the constituencies in Nineveh and Kirkuk, the major blocs represented by Shiites preferred to leave matters to the MPs representing the people of the region to determine the districts. The conflicting political figures in Nineveh, which hold 31 seats in parliament, aimed to divide the regions according to their sphere of influence. We see that the Kurdish groups have preferred to design the constituencies in Nineveh by dividing Turkmen regions of Rashidiyah and Salamiyah, which are geographically close to each other and densely populated by Turkmens, and made them parts of different constituencies at the request of the Kurdish groups. 35 villages of Muhalabiyah were included in the Hadra constituency, while Mu-

halabiyah was included in the Middle Right Bank Mosul constituency. Ba'aj, which is linked to the Tal Afar Command in the security system, was linked to Hadra in the electoral system. There are more such examples, and one can already say that the electoral dynamics in Mosul will unfold in a different manner.

Different internal dynamics have developed in each constituency in Nineveh, which is divided into eight constituencies. It is therefore worth looking at each constituency separately.

**1. Nineveh Plain Constituency:** Nineveh is considered one of the sensitive regions where the composition of the population varies. This constituency includes the districts of Makhmur, Hamdaniya, Bartella, Nimrud, Ghuweir, Kalak, and Karaj. In terms of population density, Arabs and Kurds are prevalent in Makhmur, while Christians are in Hamdaniya, Shabaks and Bartella, Sunni Arabs and Turkmens are in Nimrud, Sunni Arabs are in Ghuweir and Kalak, and Kurds are in Karaj. The whole constituency is allocated 3 seats. This constituency was completely under the Peshmerga administration in terms of security before ISIS, and all votes were cast in favour of the Kurdish

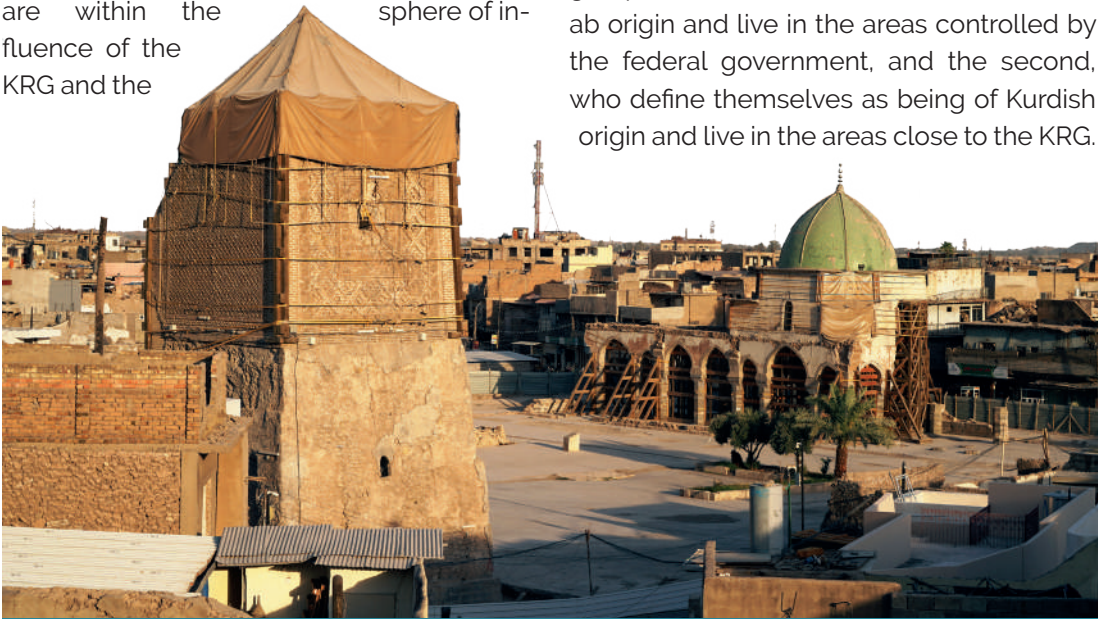
lists. The security situation in the region, however, changed following its liberation from ISIS, after which the Hashd al-Shaabi gained influence in the region, like how the Badr Organisation gained influence in the Shabaki regions, and the Babylon Brigade, which is composed of the supporters of Ryan Chaldean, did in the Christian regions. At this point, the Fatah Alliance led by the Badr Organisation comes to the fore. It is known that the Babylon Brigade is also close to the Fatah Alliance. In addition, it would not be wrong to say that the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) is also active in this constituency.

**2. Bashiqa Constituency:** Bashiqa is the second part of the Nineveh Plain, which is comprised of the districts of Shayhan, Farouk, Faida, Tel Kaif and al-Qush, with 4 seats in parliament in total. Christians, Yazidis and Kurds make up the majority of the population of the constituency, while Arabs are a minority. The Kurdish population in Faida, however, is small. Most of these districts are within the sphere of influence of the KRG and the

KDP, which are known to have considerable influence and is expected to win the majority of seats in the constituency.

### **3. West Nineveh (Tal Afar) Constituency:**

Tal Afar has been one of the most troubled regions in the past due to its diverse population structure, composed of Yazidis, Arabs, as well as a low population of Kurds alongside a strong Turkmen presence. Especially after ISIS seized the district, inter-tribal conflicts broke out in the region and a large part of the population was displaced, killed or fell into captivity. With the liberation of this district from ISIS, many new forces have emerged in the district. The four-seated Tal Afar district is divided into sub-districts. The centre and Iyadiyah, which has a dense Turkmen population, Rabia, which possesses a dense Arab population, and Zummar, where the Gergeri tribes form the majority, are the four sub-districts concerned. The people in these regions are further divided into two groups: the first, who call themselves of Arab origin and live in the areas controlled by the federal government, and the second, who define themselves as being of Kurdish origin and live in the areas close to the KRG.



The fourth anniversary of the liberation of Mosul from the terrorist group ISIS.

After the expulsion, murder and captivity of its inhabitants and their subsequent liberation, various actors are trying to seize power in Sinjar, which is where all the aforementioned problems arise from.

On the one hand, all Shiite, Sunni, Turkmen and Kurdish parties are competing for the seats in this constituency. On the other hand, Sunni Arab and Kurdish forces are striving to split the Turkmen vote in and around the city centre. Among the powerful Shiite parties that can get Turkmen votes in Tal Afar, the leading ones are the National Wisdom Movement, the State of Law Coalition, and the Fatah Alliance. Parties such as Sadr's Group and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq also have the potential to gain votes. The Iraqi Turkmen Front is another active force in Tel Afar. The KDP is strong in Zummar, though the PKK terrorist organisation is also trying to exert influence on political figures. Among the Sunni groups with high voting potential in Rabia besides Khaled al-Obaidi, the Shammar tribe and Ethyl al-Nujaifi also find support. The PKK is also trying to gain influence in Rabia through establishing contacts with local tribes.

#### **4. Sinjar Constituency:**

Sinjar includes the northern region as well as Qahtaniyah and Kairavan, and is made up mainly of Yazidis. There are also a small number of Arab and Turkmen villages in the region. Since the presence of the PKK on Sinjar Mountain

has not ended, it forms the basis for Iraq's next problem. Although it has been repeatedly stressed that PKK members should be expelled from Sinjar, the PKK is still strongly present and influential in the district. Both the PKK and the KDP are trying to win the three seats allocated to the constituency, with the PKK expanding its sphere of influence and the KDP by refusing to close the KRG-controlled camps for the displaced. It is worth noting that Kurdish forces are competing with each other to reinstate dominance in the region. After the expulsion, murder and captivity of its inhabitants and their subsequent liberation, various actors are trying to seize power in Sinjar, which is where all the aforementioned problems arise from. Meanwhile, the Yazidis are divided into two groups: those who are linked to the Hashd Al-Shaabi forces in the south of Sinjar and belong to the Hussein Brigade (53), and those who are linked to the YBS, which is directly led by the PKK.

#### **5. South Mosul Constituency:**

South Mosul consists of Hamam al-Alil, Shora, Qayyarah, Ma'mun, Hadra and Ba'aj. This constituency is allocated 5 seats in the parliament. Before 2018, the district was one of the main nests of terrorist



Pope's Visit to Mosul.

groups and remained almost entirely outside the control of Iraq. The locals provided a significant amount of support to ISIS. The rest of the population was displaced and migrated to other parts of Iraq. After its liberation, however, these areas came under the control and influence of the Hashd al-Ashairi, a tribal force subordinate to the Hashd al-Shaabi, thus shifting the balance of power from the terrorist groups represented by ISIS in favour of the Hashd al-Ashairi. A quarter of the inhabitants of this region live in camps set up for the displaced. Competition between those close to the Hashd al-Shaabi and the Sunni blocs is also increasing, and Hashd al-Shaabi supporters seem to be closer to victory. There is also a competition between the candidates of this constituency to close the camps and bring back ISIS fam-

ilies in order to win their votes. A large formation led by Khamis al-Khanjar, newly formed among the Sunnis in this region, may come to the fore as part of the Azm Alliance. At the same time, a race between the tribes in this region is also expected. It is possible that there will be contention between the Sunni Arab tribes, namely Jubur, Tai, Shammar, al-Ubaid, Hadidi and Albu Mutevit.

**6. Middle Right Bank Mosul Constituency:** Middle Right Bank Mosul is consisting of the districts of al-Shifa, al-Arabi, al-Rifai, New Mosul, al-Hamidat, al-Mansour, Bab al-Jaid, Day al-Hawar, Hadba, Abu Tammam, Muhalabiyah, and al-Yarmouk. This constituency has 5 seats in parliament and is likely to be the constituency where the strongest strife is expected in the entirety of Mosul. From

the emergence of al-Qaeda until its liberation from the hands of ISIS, this district was one of the most dangerous and, because of the rescue operations in the province, also the most damaged. The majority of the population in the region are Arabs, with some Turkmens living in the town of Muhallabiyah. It would not be wrong to say that the competition in this region will be among Sunni blocs. In addition to the Azm Bloc, a contest between Osama al-Nujaifi, Ahmed al-Juburi and Mohamed al-Halbousi is expected, as well as a support for some Sunni candidates by Shiite blocs.

**7. Middle Left Bank Mosul Constituency:** Middle Left Bank Mosul consists of al-Andalus, al-Zuhur, al-Nasr, al-Musenna, al-Jazair (Algeria), and al-Rashidiy, and is allocated 3 seats, which is disproportionate to the size of the local population. The population in the region consists of a Turkmen majority living in the Rashidiya neighbourhood, as well as Kurdish and Christian minorities in general alongside Arabs. Due to the influence of the Hashd al-Shaabi in Turkmen regions, the

competition in these neighbourhoods is expected to be between the Sunni and Shiite blocs. It is possible that Turkmens will win a seat in this constituency if they find a compromise among themselves, and the competition for the remaining two seats is likely to be between Sunni blocs and the Sunnis close to the Hashd al-Shaabi.

**8. Left Mosul Constituency:** Left Mosul consists of al-Tamim, Aden, Saladin, al-Zahra, and al-Wahda. The population of this constituency, which is allocated 4 seats, consists mostly of Arab families from Mosul and a small percentage of Kurds. It is likely that the candidate or candidates will be elected from the families known as the "urban families" of Mosul, called "Muslawi". Although votes in these districts used to go to national lists such as the Kurdish and Ayad Allawi lists in previous elections, Sunni Arab blocs also find support in these districts. Arabs are expected to win three seats from this constituency, while the Kurds are predicted to win one seat.



## CONCLUSION AND EVALUATION

The province of Nineveh, with its complex population structure, has entered a new process in the post-ISIS era. The local politics in Nineveh also had its share in this process, and thus, an unstable administration has emerged in the province. In the aftermath of ISIS, different political structures have sought to gain influence in Nineveh and the governor has changed several times due to the intervention of different political groups. Looking at the internal dynamics of Nineveh, one can examine the province is under three different aspects: the urban centre of Mosul, the rural and tribal structure, and the situation of minorities. Considering the social structure of the population, it would be fair to say that tribes are of mammoth importance. The tribal structure that dominates most of the rural area also has a significant population in the city centre and can, therefore, exert influence in the city centre as well, although not as effectively as in the countryside. On the other hand, there is the native families of Mosul, the Moslawis. This social structure, which forms the "urban" part of Nineveh, is particularly influential in the centre of Mo-

sul. Another important factor affecting both the social and political structure of Mosul are minorities such as Christians, Shabaks, and Yazidis. The fact that these three communities have received quotas in Mosul is remarkable for their existence and importance. In addition, Mosul is also distinguished from other Iraqi provinces by its significant Turkmen and Kurdish population, who also live in Nineveh.

It would not be wrong to say that Iraq's October 10 elections under the new elections law will create a different dynamic from Mosul's point of view. After all, apart from the advantages and disadvantages of multiple identities in Mosul, the introduction of a system that will be applied for the first time in the upcoming elections may further complicate the complex structure in Mosul. Given the identity-based politics in Iraq, the social, class, ethnic and religious diversity in Mosul has led to great confusion in the province. Moreover, the changing security atmosphere, especially in the post-ISIS era, has been of such a magnitude that it can affect Mosul's political future.

In this sense, each constituency of Mosul, where the upcoming elections will be held in 8 different consti-

Even if Tal Afar, which has a Turkmen majority, were a single constituency, the fact that there are large districts in Tal Afar with different ethnic and religious identities, such as Zummar and Rabia, is a disadvantage for the Turkmen vote in the region.

cies, has its own internal dynamics. Looking at previous elections, we see a relatively pronounced orientation in Mosul. Given the Sunni Arab population of the province, the Nujaifi family, which steers politics in Mosul, as well as Sunni-dominated political structures such as the Iraqi Islamic Party and the lists and formations defined as national, such as Wataniya (formerly Iraqiya) led by Ayad Allawi, played a prominent role until the ISIS era. It is also known that the KDP, led by Masoud Barzani, has a great influence on the Kurdish population and the minorities in Mosul. The fact that these forces harmonize with each other in both local and Baghdad politics kept the politics in Mosul in a certain balance until the ISIS period began. However, ISIS dominance in Mosul, the entry of Shiite militias into the province and the positioning of Shiite political groups as a result, as well as the efforts of the Iraqi central government to strengthen its position vis-à-vis the KRG and the intervention of external factors such as the PKK terrorist organisation, which has taken advantage of the security gap in the region, have differentiated and further complicated the process in Mosul. The fact that the Sunni factions based in Mosul have lost their power to represent the Sunnis in general Iraqi politics, and thus the leadership of Sunni factions, and that the Sunni factions from Anbar have taken over this leadership role after the election of Mohamed al-Halbousi as president of the Iraqi parliament, has made the Sunni Arab bloc in Mosul unstable. It is fair to say that there is confusion in the Sunni Arab community and politics in Mosul. From the Sunni Arabs' point of view, there are options and question marks such as continuing cooperation with Kurds, building cooperation with Shiite groups (especially based on Arab identity),

the possibility of acting together with Sunni blocs, and formulating politics by prioritising the identity of Mosul.

It can be said that the Turkmen, who were one of the most ISIS-hit groups in Nineveh, will also be negatively affected by the new electoral system. This is because the Turkmen settlements in the centre of Mosul have been divided into different constituencies, which has split the integrity of the Turkmen electorate. The Turkmen, who have a low voter potential in the population of Mosul, will probably be further weakened by the division of their constituencies. On the other hand, even if Tal Afar, which has a Turkmen majority, were a single constituency, the fact that there are large districts in Tal Afar with different ethnic and religious identities, such as Zummar and Rabia, is a disadvantage for the Turkmen vote in the region. Another handicap for the Turkmen is that a large part of the Tal Afar population emigrated because of ISIS and has not been able to return to Tal Afar to this day.

Finally, from the Kurds' point of view, the influence of the Hashd al-Shaabi and the PKK terrorist organisation in the post-ISIS era poses a particular problem. Especially, considering the fact that the KDP was active in almost all minority-inhabited districts in the pre-ISIS period, both the division of Mosul into different constituencies and the activities of the PKK in Sinjar, as well as the influence of the Hashd al-Shaabi in the eastern outskirts of Mosul in the post-ISIS era, limit the influence of the Kurds and the KDP in particular.

Looking at the bigger picture, it would not be wrong to suggest that this situation puts Mosul at a disadvantage in Iraqi politics.

The fragmented structure in the province is likely to persist if the structure in Mosul does not act as a bloc. After the Iraqi parliament failed to determine the largest bloc to form the government in previous elections, an attempt was made to bring order to this issue. The fact that all parties call themselves the largest bloc when forming a government, and that MPs have switched from one bloc to another based on material or moral interests and privileges, has resulted in chaos in the parliament and between the political blocs. Article 45 of the Electoral Law states that "No MP, party or bloc on an open list in an election shall be entitled to switch to another alliance, party, bloc or list. This is only

possible after the formation of the government following the elections, provided no such MP, party or bloc is on an individual or open list registered before the elections". This Article is primarily in favour of the Shiite blocs that hold the majority of seats in the parliament, in particular the Sadr Movement, the Fatah Alliance, the Wisdom Movement, and the State of Law Coalition. In this case, the others are expected to work with the Sunni and Kurdish political blocs to decide who will take over as prime minister. Here, it would be appropriate to say that politicians in Mosul should act together to have a say in Iraqi politics.

## About the Authors

### Bilgay Duman

Born in Ankara in 1983, Duman is a PhD student at Abant İzzet Baysal University, Department of International Relations. He wrote his postgraduate thesis on "The Turkmen and Kirkuk in the Post-Saddam Period". His articles and interviews have been published in various media outlets. Besides participating in numerous international conferences, he has also frequently conducted field studies in the Middle East and participated in international observer teams and served as a UN election observer in the Iraq and Afghanistan elections. Duman serves as coordinator for Iraq studies at ORSAM.

### Hüseyin Aslan

Born in Mosul in 1981, Aslan graduated from Gazi University with a bachelor's degree in history and completed a master's degree in history at the same university in 2009. He has been pursuing a PhD in history at Fatih Sultan Mehmet Vakıf University since 2018. As part of his studies, Aslan has worked in various research centres in Iraq.



## Copyright

### Ankara - TURKEY ORSAM © 2021

Content of this publication is copyrighted to ORSAM. Except reasonable and partial quotation and use under the Act No. 5846, Law on Intellectual and Artistic Works, via proper citation, the content may not be used or re-published without prior permission by ORSAM. The views expressed in this publication reflect only the opinions of its authors and do not represent the institutional opinion of ORSAM.

### Center for Middle Eastern Studies

**Address** : Mustafa Kemal Mah. 2128 Sk. No: 3 Çankaya, ANKARA

**Phone** : +90 850 888 15 20

**Email** : info@orsam.org.tr

**Photo** : Anadolu Ajansı (AA)