



NATO Foundation
Defense College

GULF May 2018

Iraq's Shia divided by geopolitics: a challenge for NATO cooperation

Iraq's parliamentary elections, held the 12th of May, highlighted the rising fragmentation within the Arab Shia community: three Shiite electoral lists run for the victory. Most of all, these political players differ with regard to geopolitical visions and external backers.

In this framework, Iraq's role and allies in the Middle East are likely to remain a contested issue, thus exposing the country to increased regional tensions among Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United States, especially after Washington's unilateral withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA).

The Shia cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr emerged as the winner of the elections: its Alliance of Revolutionaries for Reform, a nationalist coalition encompassing the Iraqi Communist party and some civil movements, gained 54 seats. Al-Sadr gathers an anti-establishment, populist coalition claiming for tightened measures for good governance, political reforms and against corruption.

Capitalizing on widespread security demands, the Conquest Alliance of Hadi Al-Ameri, chief of the Teheran-backed Badr Organisation, won 47 seats. This coalition represents the political wing of the controversial, Iranian-supported Shia militias of Iraq (Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi/Popular Mobilization Forces, PMF), institutionalized by the Prime Minister's executive order n° 91 (2016), although never integrated in the armed forces so far. These paramilitary groups were key actors for the territorial defeat of DAESH.

The incumbent Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi and his national, inter-confessional coalition, Victory Alliance, gained only the third position, conquering 42 seats [*The New York Times*, "Iraq's Al-Sadr Says Next Government Will Be 'Inclusive'", 20 May 2018]. "State of Law", the list headed by the former Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki, won 25 seats. Notwithstanding the third place, Al-Abadi should have good chances to be re-appointed as Prime Minister, in a context of extensive negotiations for the new coalition government: this is mostly due to his balanced, pragmatic stance vis-à-vis international players.

As a matter of fact, the three major Shia coalitions are deeply divided by a decisive factor: geopolitics. Al-Sadr has always rejected not only Iran's interferences in Iraqi politics, but the same military presence of the United States. Emphasizing the ethnic factor ("Arabism"), Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates publicly opened a channel of communication with Al-Sadr in August 2017, hosting him in Jeddah and then in Abu Dhabi. Al-Ameri instead, close to General Qassem Suleimani, the commander of the Al-Quds forces of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), is one of the pillars of Teheran's strategy in Iraq. Although accepted by Iran as interlocutor, Al-Abadi attempted to engage Arab Sunnis in the institutions and have good ties with the United States.

Sadr and Ameri's coalitions can mobilize a remarkable number of militants and weapons; in the case of Sadr, this is especially true for Baghdad's district. This means that political disagreements regarding Iraqi institutions and regional backers could easily turn into occasional or systematic guerrilla among rival Shia factions. Looking at the "Shia corridor", Iran would not accept to lose its strategic range towards the Eastern Mediterranean's coasts.

After the signature of the NATO's Defence Capacity Building Programme for Iraq and the training initiative for Iraqi officers (started in Jordan on April 2016), NATO is planning a comprehensive mission for the training of Baghdad's defence and security forces, with an eye to the opening of military academies. Factional balances in the next ruling coalition will be decisive to spin how the training mission (launched in response to a request by the Iraqi government and planned to start on July 2018) will be tailored. Iraq's political settlement -and security neighbourhood- depend, first of all, by an effective and inclusive Security Sector Reform.

Eleonora Ardemagni