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Peace, Protection, And The Polls: Lessons Learned From The 2023 Iraqi Provincial Elections



Processing election papers. Haider Noman Ibraheem of Al Jazeera English/Wikimedia Commons.

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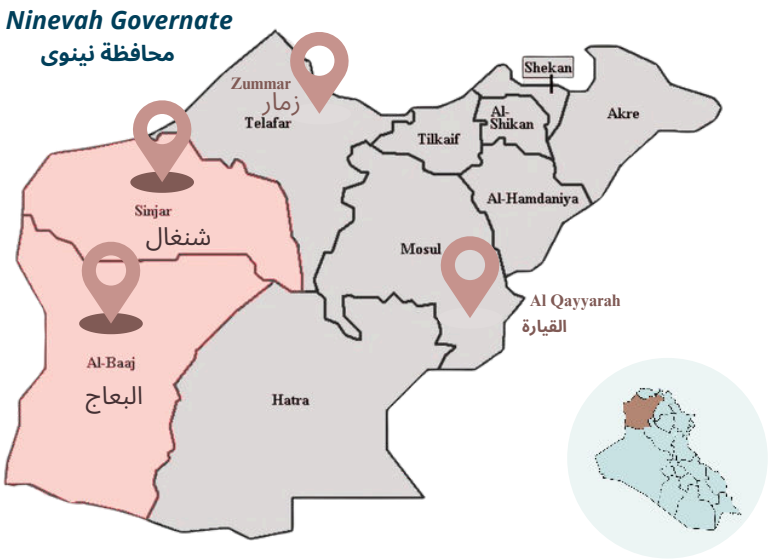
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Background

The December 18, 2023, Iraqi provincial elections marked a critical juncture in the nation's democratic journey. This was the first provincial election in over a decade, presenting a vital opportunity to restore and fortify democratic principles and to understand the desires of Iraqi voters. In addition, the 2023 elections are a significant event in how the political landscape will be shaped for the next four years, with those elected empowered with oversight over local governance and the power to select provincial governors, and providing an important precursor to the parliamentary elections slated for 2025. Impacts on peace efforts, the protection of civilians, and the political future of Iraq are likely to be widespread – at the provincial, national, and regional levels.

This brief analyses how the 2023 elections were experienced by civilians, particularly focusing on four key cross-cutting themes: 1) the impact and role of security forces; 2) the participation of women; 3) the impact of electoral card trading; and 4) inter- and intra-communal tensions. These four themes were identified by communities themselves and NP teams on the ground as having significant impacts on peace and civilian protection before, during, and after the election period. The qualitative analysis draws particularly on four key areas in Nineveh governorate - Qayyarah, Zummar, Sinjar, and Ba'aj – where NP has field presence and long-standing relationships with communities, civil society groups, and authorities. In the case of Sinjar, a case study analysis highlights how the cross-cutting themes identified are interconnected and can mutually reinforce one another. Drawing on common experiences and observations across the four governorates, we identify lessons learned that need to inform approaches to electoral politics, peacebuilding, and protection of civilians in the future. This particularly includes the need to build trust between the community and duty-bearers while emphasizing the heightened inclusion of civilians in decision-making processes. In doing so, and ahead of the 2025 elections, we aim to amplify critical issues surrounding the protection of civilians during elections, contributing to a more secure and participatory democratic future in Iraq.



Key Themes: Peace And Protection At The Polls

The 2023 provincial elections in Iraq presented a concerning backdrop for the protection of civilians and peaceful democratic transitions. Prior to the election, changes were made to electoral laws and processes by the Parliament of Iraq, giving major political blocs more advantages vis-à-vis smaller parties. The alleged exploitation of state resources by high-ranking officials in areas where armed groups have a presence for electoral gains raises additional ethical and safety concerns. Though tensions between Sunni and Shia-majority provinces has been a persistent issue, the election period exacerbated risks of escalation to armed violence due to heightened competition and political rivalries. In Nineveh, a region known for its diverse demographics – notably home to the largest Sunni population within Iraq – the precarity of these challenges was even more pronounced.

Amid this broader precarity, NP field teams observed four key cross-cutting issues that impacted civilian safety and community cohesion during the election period, and that should be considered strategic priorities in approaching the proposed 2025 parliamentary elections:

1. Security Forces and Armed Groups

Across the region, in the lead-up to and on polling day itself, concerns were consistently raised about the impacts of the presence of security forces and armed groups on the capacity of civilians to exercise free votes. According to NP observations and analysis, and those of local civil society organizations including Oma Organization for Human Rights, at times the presence of security forces helped quell tensions and respond to violence during the election period. However, in NP operating areas, civilians also reported feeling unsafe – or even coerced – by members of the security forces, specifically the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which influenced their voting behaviours and increased risks of harassment, particularly against women and girls. This also impacted members of the PMF and their families directly, who were reportedly pressured to vote for particular candidates by being threatened with termination of their employment or confiscation of their QI cards, from which they receive their monthly salaries.

Similarly, political parties and armed groups including the Nabni Coalition, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, and the National Progress Coalition were observed to be influencing political mobilisation in remote areas by threatening civilians with illegal weapons – not only posing a threat to Iraq's young

democracy but also directly threatening the safety of civilians. Citizens reported feeling pressured to vote for particular candidates by armed groups. This also impacts members of armed groups and their rights to participate in elections – for example, in Qayyarah, communities reported that Al-Hashid forces exerted coercion and threats on member soldiers and families to vote for specific candidates.

2. The Participation of Women

Though some areas saw an increase in women's participation due to improved security measures and accessibility to polling stations, such as in South Mosul, this was not the case in areas like Zummar and Sinjar. In Zummar, the dynamics of tribal politics and harassment by security actors restricted women's participation in the provisional election. Internal divisions within tribes resulted in fragmented support for different candidates, leading to tensions within the community and increased risks of harassment for women. Families cautiously navigated the decision to allow women to vote, often opting for male accompaniment to mitigate risks, especially when relatives stood as candidates. Interestingly, urban areas, where NP operates, saw comparatively higher women's participation and lower tensions due to greater community awareness. Despite overarching risks, election authorities did not implement specific measures to encourage women's involvement. Women primarily expressed concerns about verbal harassment by security actors, including the Iraqi Army and the local police. In Sinjar, women's participation in the election was low, reflecting a lack of confidence in the electoral process and potential electoral outcomes. Many women were worried that their preferred political party or candidates might not win, and that their votes may indirectly advantage other parties they did not support. As a result, they chose to abstain from voting to avoid inadvertently supporting parties they did not align with.

Similarly, in Ba'aj, troubling practices like candidate coercion of female relatives and vote-selling were prevalent. Women, especially IS-affiliated wives, faced marginalization and distrust toward security forces, deterring their participation. Despite these challenges, families often sold votes without allowing women to express their preferences freely, highlighting the influence of familial and tribal pressures on electoral dynamics. Instances of husbands forcing wives to vote against their will were reported, along with familial pressure to vote for candidates aligned with clan interests. These dynamics underscored the complex socio-political landscape shaping electoral processes in Ba'aj and other regions, where women's participation faces significant barriers and challenges, where women's participation faces significant barriers and protection concerns, compromising their ability to engage in the electoral process effectively.



Nineveh Governorate campaign photo by NP's Zummar CPT team, revealing electoral integrity concerns, (Decemeber13, 2023)

3. Enfranchisement and Electoral Card Markets

Across the region and the country, widespread concerns were raised about intimidation and extortion of civilians specifically related to electoral cards (i.e. the buying of votes). Biometric electoral or voter cards enable citizens to cast their ballots. In the first instance, many eligible voters reported having not received a card prior to the election, and so were unable to cast a ballot. In addition, across Nineveh, communities reported the buying and selling of electoral cards, a major threat to the integrity of the democratic process. These purchases involved brokers, hired by specific candidates to work on their behalf, buying electoral cards from individuals and families to secure additional votes, thereby influencing voting outcomes in favour of the candidates who enlisted their services. In Qayyarah, community members reported the sale of voter cards ranged from IQD 25,000 to 150,000. This also manifested as vote-buying – for example in Ba'aj, community members reported that candidates spent significant amounts (ranging from 30,000 IQD to 50,000 IQD) to secure votes. This has resulted in further conflicts as families demand the return of their cards from brokers, and inflamed divisions between different tribes and ethnoreligious communities. Overall, barriers to enfranchisement, particularly the influence of electoral card markets, are a concerning trend that compromises electoral integrity.

4. Inter- and Intra-Communal Tensions

The elections posed unique challenges in Nineveh due to the diverse demographics of the region, notably the largest Sunni population within Iraq. The increased number of candidates from within different clans and tribes, coupled with existing tensions between different ethnoreligious communities, fuelled violence and tension both before and after the election.

For example, in Ba'aj, tribal dynamics played a pivotal role in candidacy and mobilization processes, where the success of each candidate was closely tied to tribal affiliations. The abundance of candidates from the same tribe also introduced intercommunal tensions and competition, even among members of the same community. In the aftermath of the result announcement, a violent altercation erupted in the Al-Sakkar Complex involving citizens supporting different candidates, and which was responded to by the army and police. A similar incident was observed in Qayyarah, where the announcement of election results triggered a heavy shooting incident, resulting in injuries to four civilians.

Internal divisions also arose within clans, limiting freedom of political expression for individuals. For example, in Zummar tensions surfaced with Arab clans supporting Kurdish political components, causing significant social censure and pressure against those perceived to have deviated from clan expectations. In Qayyarah, the elections also led to internal divisions within the Al-Jobbour tribe, creating instability and tensions within the community.

These kinds of intracommunal tension can be attributed to significant pressure exerted within communities, particularly from one's own clan or tribe. The prevailing social dynamics created an environment where individuals feel compelled to align with the political preferences of their tribe or clan. Deviating from the political preferences of one's own tribe or clan, such as supporting a candidate different from the one endorsed by their own tribe or clan, can result in severe consequences. Individuals who take such a divergent stance may be labelled disloyal and perceived to have betrayed to their family, tribe, or clan. In some cases, this social stigma escalated to the point of individuals being shunned by their own community.

In such an environment, individuals may refrain from expressing their personal opinions freely, opting instead to align with the political choices of their tribe or clan to avoid potential ostracization. This dynamic not only impacts the democratic process but also highlights the complex interplay between political affiliations and deeply rooted social structures within these communities.

Spotlight on Sinjar

The dynamics observed during the election period Sinjar are an instructive case study for how the presence of security forces and armed group, inter- and intra-communal dynamics, and issues around enfranchisement are interconnected.

In Sinjar, the increased number of candidates in the 2023 provisional election confused voters, thereby posing a threat to the democratic process which could potentially lead to disputes and grievances. As each tribe presented more candidates, tensions escalated among them, exacerbating existing divisions within the community. Alleged vote buying by the PMF candidates led to resentment and disputes over the election results, particularly by the Yazidi Movement. Additionally, the participation of PMFs as political entities further exacerbated tensions, leading to suspicion that Shias – who are especially well represented within the PMF units – were attempting to influence local politics through elections. [i]

This controversy was further exacerbated after Aidan Sheikh Kalo won the Yazidi quota seat. As a cousin of a PMF Brigade 74 Commander, his victory has been seen by some – including the Yazidi movement broadly – as a case of PMF capturing the only Yazidi quota. There were some Shia-Yazidi tensions around elections with PMF Brigade 74 (composed of two Yazidi and two Shia regiments) running for and winning the Yazidi quota seat. Shortly before official election results were released, Abu Abbas al-Bashkani, who is Shia and deputy to the Murad Sheikh Kalo (commander of Brigade 74) posted that the Shia won the Yazidi quota seat. This greatly angered Yazidis and in response, Sheikh Omar Ajaj, a Yazidi tribal leader based in Gohbal posted a video saying: “Yazidis only have one seat in the Ninewa government and the PMF took this too, who will ask about Yazidi rights now, the Shia are taking over and they are trying to deal with Yazidis as Daesh did” (paraphrased). Abu Abbas al-Bashkani in turn published a statement in which he threatened to arrest and ‘liquidate’ Sheikh Omar Ajaj. The dispute was eventually mediated by some Yazidi clerics and public figures and the two parties apologized to each other. At the same time, the incident highlights the precarity of relations between communities in Sinjar, and the potential conflict that can emerge when frictions are spotlighted through election processes.

Post-election tensions in Sinjar persist, including the online commentary that generally expresses feelings of disappointment. Divisions among Yazidi political parties and the multitude of candidates continue to hinder effective coordination, sustaining disappointment among the community. The PMF victory, diverging from previous promises, has solidified their influence in Sinjar, contributing to continuing unease. Tensions also persist between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS), exemplified by the arrest of KDP lobbyists by YBS on election day. Yazidi-Shia tensions fueled by the PMF victory still pose risks of communal violence or tension, with accusations of power imbalance and concerns for minority rights. As of the latest update, there's no significant improvement in these tensions. The situation remains delicate, with the potential for further escalation, necessitating continued attention to address the underlying issues and promote stability in Sinjar.

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i The provisional election's adoption of designating entire governorates as a single electoral district and implementing a proportional representation system using the Sainte-Laguë method divisor of 1.7 is anticipated to result in significantly altered outcomes compared to previous rules, primarily favoring the Shia Coordination Framework (CF). Eliminating the ability to elect representatives at the local district level under this law obstructs accountability and undermines voter turnout. For more, see this analysis from the Institute of Regional and International Studies, American Univeristy of Iraq, Suleiman.

Looking Forward: Policy Recommendations

The 2023 elections in Nineveh showcased the delicate balance between democratic aspirations and the imperative to protect civilians in a region scarred by conflict. The elections witnessed a range of protection risks, including violence, intimidation, and manipulation. Addressing these concerns is crucial for ensuring the legitimacy of the electoral process and safeguarding the rights of civilians. As Iraq endeavours to navigate its democratic journey, addressing these concerns becomes not only a matter of ensuring electoral success but also a crucial step in fostering lasting stability and the protection of its resilient civilian population.

Understanding these dynamics, and working to safeguard civilian rights, strengthen election safety, and fortify community relationships is critical now, and ahead of the planned 2025 Iraq parliamentary election. To do so, key stakeholders – including governments and civil society – need to prioritise the following:

1. Human Rights Monitoring

Establish inclusive civilian-led and community-driven mechanisms for election monitoring to identify and address instances of coercion, corruption, and intimidation during elections. This not only reduces reliance on security forces for election-related safety, but the integration of civilian-led safety initiatives is an opportunity for communities to play another active role in strengthening of Iraqi democracy.

2. Civic Education and Participation

The better civilians understand their rights within the democratic process, the better equipped they are to participate confidently and safely. Ahead of the 2025 elections, it is necessary to implement comprehensive civic education programs so that civilians are well informed about the electoral process, their rights, and the significance of their participation. Establishing community security forums and meetings is another way of facilitating this learning whilst also an opportunity for direct interaction and relationship building between civilians and duty-bearers, and the prevention of potential violence before it occurs.

3. Women's Inclusion and Safety

To participate fully in democracy and in election processes, women need to feel safe. Encouraging inclusive participation of women in civic education and community conflict resolution is foundational to ensuring that women feel confident to participate

in their democracy – before, during, and after elections. During elections, dedicated safety measures for women – such as enabling protective presence and accompaniment by civil society organisations like NP, third party election monitoring, and accessible reporting mechanisms for harassment and intimidation, can work to facilitate safe participation.

4. Community Engagement and Conflict Resolution

Establish community-led conflict resolution mechanisms to address tensions arising from tribal, ethnic, or political divisions. Engage community leaders, local influencers, and civil society organizations to mediate conflicts. Investing in this now will enable these mechanisms to be practiced and strengthened by communities before the potential additional pressures and tensions of an election in 2025. This is also a way of promoting dialogue between different communities to foster understanding and collaboration, reducing the likelihood of inter-community conflicts and offering opportunities to interrupt violence before it escalates.

