



Electoral Security in Iraq after 2003: An Analytical Study of Challenges and Opportunities

¹ **Dr. Nayar Muhladeen Hamadamin**

¹ **Department of Politics and International Relations, Faculty of Law,
Political Science and Management, Soran University, Soran City,
Kurdistan Region, Iraq**

Abstract:

This research examines electoral security in post-2003 Iraq, focusing on the main challenges and opportunities that have affected the country's democratic activities over the past twenty years. Using a liberal institutionalist perspective, it explores how institutional reforms, legal frameworks, civil society participation, media freedom, and international cooperation contribute to greater transparency, credibility, and stability in Iraqi elections. The study also highlights persistent obstacles such as voter intimidation, corruption, security threats, and the political marginalization of ethnic and religious minorities. It notes the positive impact of legislative reforms, such as Law No. 31 of 2019 for the Independent High Electoral Commission and Law No. 9 of 2020, which improved institutional independence, representation, and security through technology, thereby reducing manipulation risks. Furthermore, it emphasizes the vital roles of civil society, media oversight, and international donors, including the United Nations, the European Union, and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems in bolstering transparency, capacity, and voter confidence. The research also underscores the importance of an inclusive national dialogue that involves all Iraqi communities Kurds, Turkmen, Christians, Yazidis, and Sunni and Shia Arabs in decision-making processes, helping to manage political tensions and enhance legitimacy. The findings suggest that despite ongoing challenges in enforcement, security, and political fragmentation, reforms, civic engagement, and international cooperation offer a promising path toward sustainable electoral security.

1: Email:

nayar.hamadamin@soran.edu.iq

2: Email:

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الأمن الانتخابي في العراق بعد عام ٢٠٠٣: دراسة تحليلية للتحديات والفرص د. نيار محي الدين حمدامين^١

^١ قسم السياسة والعلاقات الدولية، كلية القانون والعلوم السياسية والإدارة، جامعة سوران، مدينة سوران، إقليم كردستان، العراق.

الملخص:

هذا البحث يدرس الأمن الانتخابي في العراق بعد عام ٢٠٠٣، مع التركيز على التحديات والفرص الرئيسية التي أثرت على الأنشطة الديمقراطية في البلاد على مدى العشرين سنة الماضية. باستخدام منظور المؤسساتية الليبرالية، يستكشف كيفية مساهمة الإصلاحات المؤسسية، الأطر القانونية، مشاركة المجتمع المدني، حرية الإعلام، والتعاون الدولي في تعزيز الشفافية والمصادقية والاستقرار في الانتخابات العراقية. تسلط الدراسة الضوء أيضًا على العقبات المستمرة مثل التهريب الانتخابي، الفساد، التهديدات الأمنية، والتهميش السياسي للأقليات العرقية والدينية. وتشير إلى الأثر الإيجابي للإصلاحات التشريعية، مثل القانون رقم ٣١ لسنة ٢٠١٩ بشأن المفوضية العليا المستقلة للانتخابات والقانون رقم ٩ لسنة ٢٠٢٠، الذي حسن الاستقلالية المؤسسية والتمثيل والأمن من خلال التكنولوجيا، مما قلل من مخاطر التلاعب. علاوة على ذلك، تؤكد على الأدوار الحيوية للمجتمع المدني، ورقابة الإعلام، والمانحين الدوليين، بما في ذلك الأمم المتحدة، والاتحاد الأوروبي، والمؤسسة الدولية للأنظمة الانتخابية، في تعزيز الشفافية والقدرات وثقة الناخبين. وتبرز الأبحاث أيضًا أهمية الحوار الوطني الشامل الذي يشمل جميع مكونات المجتمع العراقي من الأكراد، التركمان، المسيحيين، الإيزيديين، والعرب السنة والشيعة في عمليات اتخاذ القرار، مما يساعد على إدارة التوترات السياسية وتعزيز الشرعية. تشير النتائج إلى أنه بالرغم من التحديات المستمرة في التنفيذ والأمن والانقسام السياسي، فإن الإصلاحات والمشاركة المدنية والتعاون الدولي توفر طريقًا واعدًا نحو الأمن الانتخابي المستدام.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

العراق، الانتخابات، الأمن، المؤسساتية الليبرالية.

المقدمة Introduction

Since the 2003 overthrow of Saddam Hussein, Iraq's political scene has experienced repeated cycles of reform, political turmoil, and violence. Elections, which are conducted under ever-changing rules and institutions, remain central to state-building efforts. However, these processes reveal the ongoing inability of institutions to fully guarantee the safety and credibility of voter and candidate participation. Security challenges include organized insurgency attacks on polling sites, intimidation efforts aimed at undermining voter confidence, accusations of electoral fraud, and the politicization of security forces. These persistent issues continue to hinder the organization of free and fair elections (İpek, 2025).

While Iraq has implemented legal reforms to revise its electoral law and administrative system, some analysts argue that these changes have not enhanced electoral integrity or political accountability. Most reforms have focused on ballot design and seat allocation, neglecting deeper issues such as post-electoral government formation, elite bargaining, and the entrenched clientelist networks that create security arrangements around elections. The security consequences of this gap between legal reform and political practice include protests over contested results, vulnerabilities to violent spoilage of outcomes, and a security force perceived as partisan rather than neutral, posing significant challenges (Stewart-Jolley, 2021).

The evolving threats in Iraq's information and civic landscape involve institutional and operational challenges. Rising tensions surrounding elections, fueled by disinformation, targeted messaging, loosely regulated media ecosystems, and regional differences in control and governance, especially in unsettled or destabilized governorates, can lead to security imbalances that electoral organizers must manage. International and domestic actors such as UNAMI, the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC), and civil society observation

networks have played key roles in capacity-building and monitoring efforts. However, the shift towards sustainable national ownership remains incomplete, especially given the recent changes in the presence and mandate of international missions (Al-Kaisy, 2021).

This paper examines electoral security as a multidimensional concept that goes beyond simply protecting polling stations. It includes legal integrity, impartial administration, information security, and post-election dispute processes. The goal is to find practical, context-specific strategies for conducting safer, more credible elections in Iraq. This involves analyzing historical trends of electoral violence and contestation from 2005 to 2024, evaluating institutional reforms and operational practices, and considering strategies to enhance resilience, such as better electoral dispute resolution and interventions in the information environment.

1.1 Significance of the Study

The research is significant because it provides an in-depth analysis of the issues and opportunities related to electoral security in Iraq post-2003. Iraqi elections have been marred by inadequate security conditions characterized by threats from insurgents, political militias, and civil unrest. Understanding these challenges is essential to improving mechanisms that ensure the safety of voters, candidates, and electoral staff. Additionally, the research supports the potential for enhancing institutional capacity, legal frameworks, and the integration of electoral and security institutions. The anticipated findings will aid policymakers and stakeholders in developing more secure, transparent, and credible electoral procedures throughout Iraq.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Since the 2003 political transition, Iraq has struggled to create a secure environment that allows for free and fair elections. Election processes have been disrupted repeatedly by security threats such as

voter intimidation, militia interference, terrorist attacks, and weaknesses within electoral and security agencies. These issues have undermined public confidence and complicated election management. Despite ongoing reforms and international aid, there is still a lack of adequate planning, coordination, and security implementation. The main problem remains the continuing failure to establish a stable and protected electoral environment. This paper explores these challenges and offers strategies to improve electoral security in Iraq after 2003.

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To examine the most important security issues that have been noted to influence electoral processes in Iraq since 2003, such as insurgent groups, militias, and political interference.
2. To analyze the institutional, legal, and operational weaknesses that undermine effective coordination between electoral and security institutions during the conduct of national and local elections.
3. To identify potential opportunities and measures to strengthen electoral security in Iraq, focus on capacity building, law revision, and agency cooperation.

1.4 Research Questions

Main Research Question:

What are the key issues and opportunities that influence electoral security in post-2003 Iraq?

Secondary Questions:

1. How have security threats and institutional weaknesses influenced the election process in Iraq since 2003?
2. How can the effectiveness of Iraq's electoral security system be enhanced?

1.5 Previous Studies

Since 2003, Iraq's electoral security has been affected by a complex mix of institutional weakness, political exclusion, and ongoing violence. Scholars have examined Iraq's post-conflict elections by focusing on legal, political, and security dimensions, showing how fragile institutions and sectarian rivalry have hindered stability. The following sections review academic and policy studies that collectively analyze the evolving challenges and opportunities related to electoral security in Iraq. These studies, including legal interpretations and empirical research, highlight that election reforms, inclusion efforts, and violence are interconnected factors that will influence Iraq's future stability across all sectors.

Victoria Stewart-Jolley provides a detailed analysis of Iraq's challenges with electoral reform in her 2021 paper, ***"Iraq Electoral System: Why Reform After Reform Fails to Bring Change."*** Through qualitative research that includes policy review and elite interviews, she demonstrates that despite multiple amendments to the electoral law, meaningful change has not occurred. Her findings suggest that reforms are exploited by established political elites to maintain sectarian patronage systems and weaken representation and accountability. Stewart-Jolley argues that Iraq's instability stems from the manipulation of institutions and a lack of political will rather than technical flaws in the laws. Her work highlights how weak governance compromises electoral security and democratic legitimacy (Stewart-Jolley, 2021).

In his article ***"Exclusion and Violence in Post-2003 Iraq,"*** Yasir Kuoti (2016) examines the underlying reasons for Iraq's fragile democracy. Using a historical-institutionalist approach, he analyzes constitutional negotiations, early parliamentary debates, and government reports to highlight how Sunni disqualification contributed to long-term instability in the post-2003 political landscape. His

findings suggest that institutionalized divisions and violent opposition to state power were reinforced through sectarian quotas and exclusionary policies. The paper argues that a sustainable democracy requires inclusive political participation, equitable power sharing, and the dismantling of sectarian political structures. Kuoti's work aligns with Stewart-Jolley's research, as both identify how political marginalization and flawed institutional designs undermine electoral and democratic stability in Iraq (Kuoti, 2016).

In his article titled *"Iraq's Democracy Under a Cloud"* published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Kirk H. Sowell (2019) examines the political crisis in Iraq that followed the contentious 2018 elections. Through qualitative analysis of election reports, media coverage, and protest records, Sowell links the 2019 Tishreen protests to allegations of electoral fraud. He observes that institutional accountability was undermined by a lack of integrity, corruption, and repression, which eroded public trust in democratic institutions. Sowell concludes that citizens view elections as meaningless, undermining democratic legitimacy. His discussion aligns with Kuoti's view that exclusion and elite domination, rather than procedural inefficiencies alone, are primary factors behind Iraq's recurring legitimacy and security crises (Sowell, 2019).

The Arab Barometer's 2018 report titled *"Turnout in Transitional Elections: Who Votes in Iraq?"* explores how electoral participation reflects the state of democracy. It employs quantitative analysis through a large-scale national survey to examine the links between insecurity, institutional trust, and voter behavior. Findings show that people living in areas affected by violence or poor governance are much less likely to vote. Additionally, distrust in government institutions remains the strongest predictor of voter abstention. This research adds an empirical perspective by highlighting that both physical insecurity and emotional disillusionment hinder

electoral engagement, which in turn hampers Iraq's democratic development (Arab Barometer, 2018).

To sum up, previous research has focused on institutional failures, disenfranchisement, and voter turnout, but often lacks direct connections between stability and election security. The impacts of violence, geographical disparities, and public trust in institutions have not been thoroughly examined. Additionally, there are few studies that provide foresight or practical policy recommendations, and limited research investigates the roles of security, governance, and politics in Iraq's fragile democracy. This paper explores the challenges and opportunities of election security in Iraq from an academic perspective.

1.6 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach to examine electoral security in post-2003 Iraq, focusing on legal frameworks, institutional reforms, civil society participation, media freedom, and international cooperation. Primary sources include Iraqi laws such as the Independent High Electoral Commission Law No. 31 of 2019, Electoral Law No. 9 of 2020, and the 2021 Electoral Code of Conduct, which provide the legal and institutional context. Secondary sources comprise reports from the United Nations, European Union, International Republican Institute, and Human Rights Voices, detailing the implementation, challenges, and outcomes of electoral reforms. The analysis also involves election monitoring reports and case studies on national dialogue processes to evaluate inclusivity, minority representation, and transparency. The study assesses reform effectiveness through the triangulation of legislative documents, institutional records, civil society campaigns, and international observations, and identifies opportunities to enhance electoral integrity. This approach offers a comprehensive view of how institutional, legal, societal, and global factors interact to shape electoral security in Iraq.

1.7 Structure of the Study

The study begins by defining electoral security, emphasizing its theoretical foundations and practical significance. It then examines electoral security concerns in post-2003 Iraq, highlighting key issues such as electoral violence, militias and armed non-state actors, foreign interference, institutional weakness, corruption, and threats to voters. These challenges have compromised the integrity, transparency, and stability of Iraq's electoral process. The latter part of the study explores ways to strengthen electoral security, suggesting reforms like improving legal and institutional frameworks, empowering civil society and media, fostering international cooperation and observation, and encouraging inclusive national dialogue to build trust and legitimacy in Iraq's democratic system.

I. Understanding the Conceptual and Theoretical Framework of Electoral Security

I.A. The Definition of Electoral Security

The clearest example of democratic rituals is the election. Yet, the ability to support or challenge political regimes depends not just on laws and institutions but also on the security, both actual and perceived, of voters, candidates, officials, information systems, and the electoral process. Over the past 20 years, many practitioners, international organizations, and scholars have developed the concept of electoral security. Despite differing in focus, these definitions share core ideas: protecting people and processes, covering the entire electoral cycle, addressing various threats (physical, institutional, informational, environmental), and upholding norms like neutrality, proportionality, and human rights that constrain security actors. This overview summarizes five official institutional and academic definitions of electoral security, highlights their commonalities, and explores their policy and programmatic implications.

The International Foundation of Electoral Systems (IFES) defines electoral security as a comprehensive, human-focused approach that ensures the safety of people, institutions, and processes throughout the electoral cycle, shielding them from violence, threats, and conflict to enable citizens to participate freely and securely.

Furthermore, the Carter Center defines electoral security as the guarantee that voters, candidates, electoral officials, and election materials are shielded from intimidation, coercion, or unlawful interference, ensuring the free exercise of political rights and trust in electoral results (The Carter Center, 2012, p. 47).

In a complementary approach, the United Nations, especially its Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), considers electoral security an integral part of peacebuilding efforts. It defines electoral security as a combination of legal, logistical, protective, and diplomatic measures aimed at ensuring that elections, especially in transitional or post-conflict contexts, are conducted safely, credibly, and with widespread participation, thereby supporting peacebuilding and democratic strengthening (United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, 2021).

From an academic perspective, Oni, Chidozie, and Agbude define electoral security as “the process of safeguarding electoral stakeholders, including voters, candidates, poll workers, media, and observers; electoral information like vote results, registration data, and campaign materials; electoral facilities such as polling stations and counting centers; and electoral events such as campaign rallies from harm, damage, or disruption,” (Oni, Chidozie, and Agbude, 2020, p. 903).

Similarly, Albert (2007, cited in Oni et al., 2020) states that electoral security includes protecting physical facilities, personal stakeholders, information systems, and electoral events from harm or disruption (Ibid, p. 903).

In brief, electoral security is a complex, multifaceted concept that prioritizes safeguarding voters, candidates, officials, electoral materials, and institutions from threats, intimidation, and interference. Scholars and organizations emphasize its holistic, human-centered, and context-aware approach, incorporating legal, logistical, and operational safeguards. Whether viewed as a component of democratic integrity, peacebuilding, or electoral management, there is a shared understanding that effective electoral security is vital for ensuring elections are safe, credible, and inclusive giving people confidence and enabling them to exercise their political rights freely.

I.B. Theoretical Framework

Neoliberal Institutionalism, also known as Liberal Institutionalism, is a key theory in International Relations. It highlights the role of institutions, norms, and cooperation in creating stability and reducing conflict. Emerging as a response to Realist pessimism, it argues that, despite the international system's anarchic nature, cooperation among states and other actors is possible through institutions that set common expectations, rules, and accountability (Keohane, 1984, p. 26). Unlike Realism, which sees power and competition as the main motives, Liberal Institutionalism considers states to be mutually dependent, trusting institutions and shared benefits as essential for peace and security (Nye and Keohane, 1971, p.19).

This school of thought's key contribution is from Robert Keohane. In his book *After Hegemony* (1984), he argues that cooperation can occur even without a dominant hegemon because institutions reduce uncertainty, enforce compliance, and facilitate negotiation. These institutions provide clarity in an otherwise unpredictable environment by offering clear guidelines for behavior. However, Keohane also notes that institutions face challenges when trust is weak or when actors manipulate rules for political gain. Maintaining the credibility of institutions in the face of conflicting

interests and fragile states—such as post-2003 Iraq, where institutions are still developing—is particularly difficult. Nevertheless, Keohane's insights suggest that consistent use of institutional rules can, over time, foster legitimacy and build trust among political actors (Keohane, 1984, p. 26).

This view is reinforced by Joseph Nye and Keohane's concept of complex interdependence, as outlined in their book *Power and Interdependence* (1977, p. 19). They propose various forms of contact—political, economic, and social—that connect states and societies, reducing reliance on military force and encouraging problem-solving through cooperation. Unlike the realist emphasis on coercion, Nye introduces the concept of soft power, the ability to influence people through persuasion, legitimacy, and cultural appeal (Nye, 2004, p. 2). This approach is crucial for leveraging legitimacy to ensure electoral security rather than resorting to force. However, soft power only works when institutions are perceived as just and transparent. In the case of Iraq, the effectiveness of democratic institutions' soft power is undermined as most of the population distrusts and politicizes electoral bodies, weakening their cooperation.

John Ikenberry (2001, p. 1; 2011, p. 19) expands on these ideas by explaining how institutions create and sustain a liberal international order rooted in rules and shared norms. He argues that strong institutions reinforce power within predictable frameworks, where arbitrary political actions are limited and long-term stability is supported. Additionally, Ikenberry highlights that post-war and transitional states tend to succeed most when they integrate into broader systems of international aid and oversight. However, he warns that weak institutionalization or inconsistent rule enforcement can lead to fragmentation and increased instability. Ultimately, the power and stability of institutions determine whether they serve as anchors of stability or sources of conflict.

In Iraq, Liberal Institutionalism provides a nuanced view of its complex transition. After 2003, Iraq faced challenges like rebuilding its political system, sectarian violence, corruption, and foreign influence. Institutions such as the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC), the 2005 Iraqi Constitution, and the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) were established to promote transparency, oversee elections, and strengthen legitimacy. Yet these institutions have struggled with political interference, limited resources, and public mistrust, hindering the conduct of secure and credible elections. Conversely, Liberal Institutionalism highlights opportunities for gradual progress through institutional learning, international cooperation, and adherence to rules that would allow Iraq to develop electoral resilience and stability. The potential for trust-building among Iraqi political groups aligns with Keohane's concept of cooperation under anarchy. At the same time, Nye's theories of interdependence and soft power suggest that international interactions can bolster democracy by promoting consistent rule application. Ikenberry's institutional order emphasizes how the democratic process can mature via regular rule enforcement. Overall, Liberal Institutionalism offers a comprehensive framework for assessing the challenges posed by weak institutions and for exploring cooperative governance to strengthen election security and democracy in post-2003 Iraq.

II. Historical and Political Context of Elections in Iraq

In 2003, the US-led invasion of Iraq marked a major turning point, ending decades of Ba'athist authoritarian rule and opening the door to electoral politics. The immediate aftermath involved a reorganization of the state under external influence and an ambitious effort to promote political liberalization, aiming to build pluralistic institutions and facilitate free elections. However, the swift removal of Saddam Hussein's regime and the subsequent institutional decisions

significantly shaped the political and social electoral landscape in the following years. These structural changes can be seen as the introduction of competitive institutions, which also created environments prone to exclusion and institutional fragility (Tripp, 2007).

One of the earliest major decisions in the occupation was de-Ba'athification and the dismantling of state security institutions. These actions excluded many officials from participating in state affairs and dismantled key state functions. As scholars have shown, de-Ba'athification quickly evolved from temporary transitional justice into a lasting process of political marginalization, mainly targeting Sunni Arabs. This created grievances that influenced electoral politics and perceptions of legitimacy. Additionally, the political instability and security issues caused by the administrative vacuum following the army's dissolution affected voter turnout, access to elections, and the state's ability to conduct secure elections (Mako, 2019).

The structure of post-2003 Iraqi politics, including electoral processes and legal frameworks, was established by the transitional legal framework, particularly the Law of Administration of the State of Iraq for the Transitional Period (TAL) and the 2005 constitution. Key milestones in reconstituting the state included early elections in January 2005 for the Transitional National Assembly, the October 2005 constitutional referendum, and the December 2005 parliamentary elections. These events created the basis for representative institutions and enshrined federalism and regional self-governance for Kurdistan. However, scholars highlight that while these legal frameworks promoted pluralism, they also institutionalized ethno-sectarian power-sharing, organizing political competition and representation around communal identities. This arrangement influenced party formation and voter alignment in subsequent elections (Mansour and van den, 2018).

Soon, electoral politics in Iraq took on an ethno-sectarian character. Both elite negotiations and mass voting hinged on identity importance, with major parties and coalitions forming along Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish lines. The results of the December 2005 and subsequent parliamentary elections reinforced sectarian blocs and patronage networks, while limiting the rise of cross-communal, programmatic parties. Experts argue that this trend was driven not only by the electoral system's political incentives but also by deeper social divisions intensified by war and displacement. The long-term consequences of institutionalized identity politics have affected state legitimacy and intercommunal trust (Haddad, 2011).

The 2010 elections indicated a more complex political landscape where cross-sectarian alliances, like Iraqiyya, might not easily lose their votes. Instead, it was institutional and elite influences that often determined who would govern. Controversies such as Nouri al-Maliki's continued role as prime minister despite narrow election results highlight how post-2003 institutions and elite politics can sway outcomes beyond vote counts alone. Vetting procedures and debates over eligibility also hindered Sunni reintegration and fueled narratives of marginalization, contributing to subsequent instability (Mako, 2019).

The rise of ISIS in 2014 and the subsequent massive security crisis had a significant impact on the electoral landscape. As ISIS expanded, displaced populations and loss of state control in large areas caused disruptions that affected voter registration, polling activities, and political engagement. Although elections still took place, particularly in 2014 and 2018, the security issues shifted public focus toward order and military successes. Meanwhile, corruption and poor service delivery emerged as primary concerns, eroding trust in the electoral process. The post-ISIS recovery showed that military victories alone could not address the underlying political instability (Mansour and van den, 2018).

By 2018, especially after the 2019 Tishreen protests, widespread dissatisfaction with elite corruption, clientelism, and foreign interference began to grow, shaping the electoral agenda. Both the 2018 election and the 2019 protests revealed not only the influence of sectarian party machines but also the rise of civil demands for accountability, services, and representation that transcended ethnosectarian identities. According to research and policy reports, a key turning point in cross-communal civic mobilization was the Tishreen movement, which prompted resignations and pressured electoral reform through cross-communal efforts. However, it did not lead to lasting institutional change (The Century Foundation, 2023).

Since 2003, Iraq's electoral process has reflected a tension between formal democratic institutions and various structural obstacles. These include the legacy of de-Ba'athification leading to exclusion, the weaponization of identity within Iraqi party systems, the persistent security dilemmas, elite capture, and failures in service delivery. While elections have significantly influenced political competition and elite turnover, experts agree that they alone cannot solidify democracy without deeper institutional reforms, non-discriminatory policies to address political marginalization, anti-corruption measures, and accountability for both state and non-state violence. Overall, Iraq's electoral procedures since 2003 show the potential for democratic participation, tempered by institutional constraints, conflict history, and elite politics.

III. The Environment of Iraq's Electoral Security after 2003

Following the 2003 regime change, Iraq entered a new political era marked by efforts to establish democracy amid significant institutional instability and security challenges. The rise of armed groups and the collapse of centralized authority led to an unreliable electoral process. Sectarian conflicts, external interference, and

frequent terrorist acts have turned elections into high-stakes events often overshadowed by wider security concerns. Corruption and weak electoral institutions further undermine transparency and public confidence. Overall, Iraq's electoral scene since 2003 has remained volatile and disputed. The following highlights some key issues shaping this environment.

III.A. Violence and Terrorism

In Iraq, serious threats to election security stem from violence and terrorism. Insurgent groups have targeted election officials, candidates, and voters repeatedly. For example, before the 30 January 2005 election, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems reported 141 incidents of violence related to the election, caused mainly by insurgents (Human Rights Watch, 2005). During the 7 March 2010 parliamentary vote, bombings across the country resulted in 38 deaths on polling day (Open Democracy, 2010). In 2014, after U.S. troop withdrawals, attacks on military and police officers caused 32 deaths and injured 92 (UPI, 2014). This climate of fear discourages voter participation, undermines legitimacy, and allows spoilers to disrupt the electoral process (Amnesty International, 2014).

III.B. Militia and Armed Non-State Actors

The threat of militia emergence and armed non-state actors has been very high in post-invasion Iraq, affecting the country's electoral environment. Iraq is no longer the only actor controlling the use of force and election security. Military groups like the Badr Organisation, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq, and the broader Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) have become political players, leading in elections while still maintaining independent weapons and coercive capabilities (Brookings, 2021). During the 2010 parliamentary elections, the state was weak, and armed actors continued to play a role: political-military organizations and tribal militias vied for power, though precise data on voting shares remain scarce. In the 2014 election, militias actively

participated and had a significant influence; Iran-affiliated Shi'ia groups such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq and the Badr Organization operated as political parties and engaged in coercion and land control before voting day (International Crisis Group (ICG), 2016).

In 2018, the Fatah (Al-Fatah) Alliance, a coalition of many former PMF and militia leaders, won 48 seats, showing that armed forces had officially entered the electoral scene (Stewart-Jolley, 2021). In the 2022/2021 election cycle (the October 2021 elections, certified in 2022), militia-linked blocs also lost ground. The Fatah Alliance's seats dropped from about 48 to roughly 17, reflecting growing voter resistance to militarized political parties (Freedom House, 2022). These trends suggest that militias and armed non-state actors are not only security threats using coercion, threats, and territorial gains, but also political threats, as they convert military power into electoral influence. Their presence distorts electoral competition, hinders fair access, and erodes public trust, as citizens may feel pressured or intimidated, leading to fear and voting abstention.

In summary, the spread of armed actors in Iraq's politics poses a significant threat to electoral security. While some legislative successes show that militias can be limited through elections, the legacy of violence, autonomous force lines, and political-military ties persists. Without the state reclaiming its exclusive control over the use of force and an electoral environment free from militia intimidation, genuine democratic consolidation cannot occur.

III.C. Foreign Interference

Foreign interference has remained a serious and pressing issue for Iraq's electoral security since the 2003 invasion and the establishment of the post-Saddam electoral system. Regional actors, especially Iran, along with others like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United States, have consistently tried to influence election outcomes, coalition formations, and the formation of post-election power blocks.

The 2010 elections saw a 62.4% voter turnout out of 18.9 million registered voters, but security threats and foreign political interference impacted the process: vehicle bans were enforced during voting, and nearly 40 people were killed in explosions (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2010; Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East, 2010).

Analysts noted that Iraqi candidates and parties traveled across the region to garner support from Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other neighbors (Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East, 2010).

In 2014, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, along with the involvement of Iran-backed militias, enabled Tehran to increase its influence on Iraqi politics and the broader electoral environment (JNS.org, 2014). This period also saw significant foreign influence: according to the Al Jazeera Centre of Studies, Qasem Soleimani's visit to Baghdad before the elections underscored Tehran's role in shaping electoral alliances (Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 2018).

In the 2022/2022 election cycle, citizens expressed dissatisfaction with external interference: The Fatah Alliance, linked to pro-Iran militias, saw a dramatic loss of seats, dropping from 48 to about 16, reflecting public discontent with external influences (Al Jazeera, 2021).

Foreign interference distorts electoral competition by favoring externally supported lists, affecting voters' perceptions of the system's validity, and damaging its credibility. Ultimately, this interference undermines the principle of genuine popular sovereignty and threatens democratic consolidation in Iraq. In summary, Iraq's electoral environment post-2003 remains vulnerable to foreign actors seeking influence, which is a core challenge to electoral security. Without strengthened mechanisms to shield elections from foreign influence, the democratic process risks losing its integrity and legitimacy.

III.D. Institutional Weaknesses

Since 2003, Iraq has faced institutional weaknesses that have hindered electoral security, undermined electoral legitimacy, and diminished public trust. Key institutions, including the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC), continue to struggle with issues of capacity, independence, and transparency.

During the 2010 parliamentary elections, IHEC faced accusations of disqualifying over 400 Sunni candidates, raising concerns about its impartiality and inclusiveness (The Guardian, 2010). In the 2014 elections, analysts noted significant vote wastage, such as in Wasit province, where about 36 percent of valid votes were wasted due to list fragmentation (Al-Bayan Center, 2018). The 2018 elections saw voter turnout drop further to around 44.5%, indicating growing disillusionment with institutions (LSE Blogs, 2018). In the 2022 election cycle, contested in October 2021 but reported in 2022, IHEC continued to face criticism, mainly due to mistrust over electronic vote-counting and lack of reforms (Arab Center, Washington, DC, 2021). Additionally, institutional integrity is undermined by inadequate planning, insufficient voter education, accessibility issues, particularly for disabled voters, and overall lack of support (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Ultimately, electoral security continues to face the challenge posed by the institutional fragility of Iraq's electoral administration. The elections risk being perceived as a mere sham unless significant improvements are made to strengthen independence, transparency, capacity, and accessibility.

III.E. Corruption and Threats to the Voter

Since the 2003 invasion and the transition to parliamentary democracy, Iraq's electoral environment has been marked by high risks to voter turnout and widespread corruption, affecting both electoral security and voter confidence.

The 2010 parliamentary election reported issues such as voter intimidation, missing names on voter lists, and armed individuals entering polling stations, raising concerns about the fairness of the election (IPU Parline, 2010). The 2014 election faced similar problems: despite fluctuations in national turnout data, observers noted that many voters, especially in conflict-affected areas, were effectively disenfranchised, undermining inclusiveness (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2014). In 2018, corruption emerged as a major voter grievance, with Iraq ranked 168th out of 180 countries on the Corruption Perceptions Index, indicating widespread corruption (Trading Economics, 2025). The 2022/2021 elections saw a historically low turnout, estimated as low as 41%. This was partly due to widespread voter apathy, driven by distrust in the system and vote-buying, and partly because many believed the elections were rigged (Anadolu Ajansi, 2021).

Vote-buying, bribery, and other corrupt practices were prevalent: a 2018 report revealed that candidates paid between US\$50 and US\$500 per vote. In 2021, illegal campaign payments were estimated to total over US\$250 million. Voter intimidation took various forms, including threats, campaign destruction, and intimidation of election officials at polling stations (Shafaq News, 2025). Ultimately, voter intimidation, exclusion, and manipulation, whether through threats or systemic corruption, were rooted in the electoral security issues of the post-2003 Iraqi system. To ensure the legitimacy of Iraq's democratic process, protecting voters' rights and addressing corruption are essential.

To sum up, Post-2003 Iraq's electoral experience shows weak links between security, governance, and legitimacy. According to Liberal Institutionalism, institutional strength and international cooperation are vital for stability. Effective, transparent institutions can reduce conflict, curb armed groups, and build trust. In Iraq, ineffective electoral institutions, corruption, and foreign influence eroded trust and

stability. Improving institutions, adopting rule-based policies, and involving UN, EU, and regional partners can help stabilize elections. Developing inclusive, transparent, and accountable structures can transform conflict zones into spaces of consensus. Ultimately, empowering institutions and integrating them into regional and global frameworks is key to Iraq's democratic consolidation, security, and stability.

IV. Prospects for Electoral Security in Iraq

The pursuit of electoral security in Iraq remains a fundamental issue following the political transformation post-2003. The intricate processes influencing the nation's security landscape, including threats to voters, foreign interference, corruption, and the presence of armed groups, continue to pose significant challenges. Insecurity and political division have led to fluctuations in public confidence in institutions and in voter participation, despite multiple elections. The objective of reforming the electoral framework and enhancing governance is to establish a system that is more transparent and representative. However, achieving enduring stability requires consolidating state authority, ensuring electoral integrity, and promoting political inclusivity. The subsequent discussion examines Iraq's prospects for attaining sustainable electoral security amidst internal and regional challenges.

III.A. Legal Frameworks and Electoral Institution Reform

The future of electoral security in Iraq depends heavily on comprehensive reforms of electoral institutions and laws. Strengthening these foundations is essential to ensuring credible, transparent, and secure elections, which will help restore public confidence in Iraq's evolving democracy.

The adoption of Law No. 31 of 2019 for the Independent High Electoral Commission marked a significant step toward establishing

institutional independence and transparency. This legislation reconstituted the Commission's board with nine senior judges, appointed by the High Judicial Council, to reduce partisan influence and ensure legal neutrality (United Nations, 2021). Similarly, the Electoral Law No. 9 of 2020 redefined Iraq's electoral constituencies into 83 seats and upheld the 25% parliamentary quota for women, enhancing representation and fairness (United Nations, 2022). These reforms introduced biometric voter registration and electronic result transmission systems, reducing the risk of duplicate registrations and manipulation (Human Rights Voices, 2020).

Moreover, the 2021 Electoral Code of Conduct, signed by political parties under the supervision of UNAMI and IHEC, established specific rules against the abuse of state resources and electoral intimidation (United Nations, 2021). Collectively, these measures strengthen Iraq's legal and institutional framework, increasing transparency and accountability. Overall, reforms to electoral institutions and laws provide a solid foundation for improving electoral security. Although enforcement faces challenges, the strengthened legal framework, judicial oversight, and technological innovations make the legislation's enforcement credible and safeguard Iraq's democratic process.

III.B. The Role of Institutional Reform, Civil Society, and Media Freedom

Enhancing electoral security prospects in Iraq requires not only institutional and legal reforms but also improvements in security operations, civil society, and media freedoms. These elements act as essential barriers against manipulation, intimidation, and disinformation, thereby reinforcing the integrity of elections.

During recent election cycles, Iraq has increased the size of its security forces and enhanced logistical coordination to guard polling stations and infrastructure. This creates safer environments for voters

and lowers the risk of violence or coercion (United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, 2023, p. 12).

The involvement of civil society organizations (CSOs) is also significant. For example, a coalition of over 285 CSOs successfully pushed for reforms to strengthen biometric registration and the timely release of election results for provincial council elections (International Republican Institute, 2024, p. 1).

In the media sector, efforts to combat disinformation and promote reliable information have helped reduce harmful reporting and improve transparency through reforms and awareness campaigns, as seen in the 2021 parliamentary elections (United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, 2023, p. 7). Overall, these developments promote accountability, increase citizen participation, and enhance the credibility of Iraqi elections.

In summary, Iraq is advancing electoral security by improving security measures, empowering civil society, and strengthening the media and information environment. These initiatives are crucial for ensuring future elections are fair, transparent, and legitimate.

III.C. Improving Iraq's Election Integrity via International Collaboration and Observation Projects

Election monitoring and international aid have played key roles in shaping electoral security and democratic processes in Iraq. These organizations enhance transparency, reduce fraud, and boost the credibility of elections, which are essential for establishing lasting electoral security in Iraq.

The electoral system in Iraq has been maintained through ongoing support from international actors, including the United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq (UNAMI), the European Union (EU), and the International Foundation of Electoral Systems (IFES), since 2003. UNAMI has contributed technical expertise, capacity building, and logistical assistance to the Independent High Electoral Commission

(IHEC), including training over 25,000 polling officials and providing cybersecurity and disinformation countermeasures for the 2021 elections (United Nations, 2023, p. 4).

During the 2021 parliamentary elections, the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) deployed 108 observers, who reported that the elections were largely peaceful and credible, despite some isolated irregularities (European Union, 2022, p. 7).

These efforts have enhanced transparency, voter confidence, and support for democracy. Collaboration between local authorities and international organizations helps strengthen institutions and build public trust.

concisely, international aid and monitoring significantly contribute to election security in Iraq through improved technical capabilities, fair oversight, and transparency. Further cooperation with foreign entities will be essential to uphold electoral integrity and strengthen democratic stability in Iraq.

Electoral security in Iraq depends on institutional and legal reforms along with an inclusive national dialogue. Hosting a national conference that brings together all ethnic, religious, and political minorities could serve as an essential platform for reconciliation, ensuring equality across the country and strengthening the legitimacy of Iraq's democratic process.

III.D. Inclusive National Dialogue for Iraq

In recent years, the call for an inclusive national conference has gained popularity among political and civil society actors. These efforts aim to build consensus among Iraq's diverse communities on electoral reforms, political participation, and national unity, including Kurds, Turks, Christians, Yazidis, and Sunni and Shia Arabs (United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, 2023, p. 9). Both the United Nations and the European Union have emphasized national dialogue as a key strategy to ease political tensions arising from contested elections and

to foster confidence-building among marginalized groups (European Union, 2022, p. 11). The 2023 UN political engagement report highlights that such inclusive dialogue initiatives have helped decrease local tensions and increase voter engagement in minority areas (UNAMI, 2023, p. 10). Incorporating minority voices in decision-making processes can help Iraq reduce political exclusion, a significant factor in instability, and strengthen electoral security by building public trust and encouraging greater participation.

In conclusion, an internal national conference including all Iraqi minorities presents a promising opportunity for electoral security. This framework can also enhance stability, legitimacy, and confidence in future elections in Iraq by promoting inclusion, dialogue, and equitable representation. In Iraq, the outlook for electoral security appears promising, emphasizing the importance of strong institutions, the rule of law, and inclusion mechanisms, in line with liberal institutionalist theory. Reforms to electoral laws, enhancing the independence of the High Electoral Commission, and adopting technological safeguards have strengthened the formal institutions that oversee political competition and ensure transparency. These efforts are complemented by active civil society and media engagement, which promote accountability and informed citizen participation. Additionally, international cooperation through observation missions, technical assistance, and capacity-building supports national efforts and boosts legitimacy, reflecting the liberal institutionalist view that working within established norms can reduce conflict and foster stability. Lastly, inclusive national dialogue involving all ethnic, religious, and political minorities offers a platform for negotiation, trust-building, and consensus, further reinforcing democratic institutions. Together, these institutional, societal, and international strategies provide a viable path toward sustainable electoral security and democratic consolidation in Iraq

Conclusion

The Iraqi electoral experience after 2003 highlights the complexity of security governance and democratic legitimacy. While elections have provided a platform for political competition and elite turnover, challenges such as weak institutional support, sectarian divisions, corruption, and insecurity have undermined participation and public trust in democracy. The concept of electoral security, developed over the past twenty years by scholars and institutions, emphasizes protecting voters, candidates, electoral officials, institutions, and the entire electoral process. Addressing multidimensional threats, physical, institutional, informational, and environmental, requires a human-centered, holistic approach that includes legal, logistical, and operational safeguards to ensure free and fair elections. However, issues like elite capture, identity-based power-sharing, and fragile institutions, combined with armed non-state actors, violence, and foreign interference, have severely strained electoral integrity.

The Iraqi case illustrates the consequences of institutional weaknesses and political marginalization. The process of de-Ba'athification (dismantling security agencies) and the institutionalization of ethno-sectarian power sharing created exclusionary practices that affected voting, elite bargaining, and constitutional development. Four elections, 2005, 2010, 2014, 2018, and 2021/2022—demonstrate how insecurity, political fragmentation, and corruption have impacted voter turnout, public trust, and legitimacy. Factors such as political actors, foreign influence, and electoral fraud, including vote-buying and intimidation, also compromised the fairness and safety of the electoral process. Studies by Arab Barometer, Stewart-Jolley, Kuoti, and Sowell reveal that voter disenfranchisement, institutional malpractice, and systemic corruption are key drivers undermining democratic consolidation.

The Liberal Institutionalism framework provides both a prescriptive and explanatory approach to understanding Iraq's electoral dilemma and potential solutions. Keohane, Nye, and Ikenberry suggest that conflict can be reduced, trust built, and stability enhanced through strong institutions, cooperation, and established rules. Iraq's elections are supported by structural and normative foundations, including institutions like the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC), the 2005 Constitution, and international entities such as UNAMI and the EU. However, institutional effectiveness remains constrained by weak enforcement, partisan politics, and public distrust of the government. Despite these ongoing issues, significant progress is being made in transparency, legal neutrality, and accountability through reforms like the IHEC Law No. 31 of 2019, Electoral Law No. 9 of 2020, biometric voter registration, and the 2021 Code of Conduct.

Civil society and media involvement have played a key role in enhancing electoral security by engaging in monitoring, voter education, and countering disinformation. International cooperation has strengthened capacity-building, election observation, and technical support, contributing to the electoral system's legitimacy and oversight. These efforts, alongside gradual institutional development, suggest a path toward democratic consolidation based on cooperation, consistent with liberal institutionalist principles.

Furthermore, inclusive national dialogue serves as a vital tool for bolstering electoral security and political legitimacy. By involving all ethnic, religious, and political minorities in decision-making processes, Iraq can address grievances, reduce political marginalization, and foster greater trust in state institutions. Experiences from UNAMI-mediated talks and EU recommendations show that such inclusion promotes minority participation, reduces conflict, and encourages consensus, crucial aspects of a sustainable democracy.

In sum, the future electoral security depends on simultaneous progress in institutional reform, civil society involvement, media freedom, and international cooperation within a national dialogue. Strengthening legal and organizational electoral frameworks, reducing armed groups' influence, ensuring transparency, and fostering political inclusiveness are vital for rebuilding public trust. Despite ongoing challenges such as intense sectarianism, external meddling, and corruption, current reforms, alongside civic and international support, offer a promising path toward sustainable electoral security. Ultimately, Iraq's democratic consolidation will rely on empowering legitimate institutions, fostering cooperative governance, and encouraging inclusive participation to transform elections from conflict zones into foundations of trust, consensus, and stability.

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