

Ethno-sectarian politics in Iraq – a weekly news review

This week saw the first provincial elections in Iraq in ten years. The ethno-sectarian nature of Iraqi politics seems to be taken for granted, but how did it get this way and what are the implications? What is the background and significance of the Kurdish vote in Kirkuk, and how did the Yazidis vote in Nineveh? This review also looks at recent diplomatic meetings between Iraq and Turkey, and between Turkey and Iran; at the Syrian Democratic Council conference; and at the forces trying to destabilise North and East Syria. It looks at attempts to disrupt democracy in Turkey, and at two positive rulings from Turkey's Constitutional Court; at anti-immigrant legislation in Europe; and at a Christmas greeting in Syriac.

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On Monday, elections for Iraq's Provincial councils were held for the first time in ten years, and provisional results are now in. Although there were no elections in the three provinces that make up the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Kurdish parties stood in the four provinces that include areas where control is disputed between the Kurdistan Region and the federal government, and there has been much interest generated by the strength of support for Kurdish parties in Kirkuk and by the swing towards the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). But before looking at the results, I want to examine something that appears to be unremarked on. All the discussion is in terms of Shiite and Sunni, Kurds and Arabs. The ethno-sectarian nature of Iraqi politics seems to be taken for granted, and other potential differences do not get a mention. The focus is on how power is divided between these different groups, not on how politicians might use that power to change the lives of Iraq's citizens.

This preoccupation of Iraqi politics is no intrinsic cultural development. It was deliberately created by those seeking to end the rule of Saddam Hussein. Academic researcher, Taif Alkhudary, [explains](#), "The Iraqi opposition and its Western allies first came up with the idea of the muhasasa, which distributes political power and state resources between three main religious and ethnic groups – Shia, Sunni and Kurds – during a series of conferences that took place throughout the 1990s." And she notes that, "Contrary to claims of democratisation and reconciliation... what the opposition was in fact doing was dividing Iraq along ethno-sectarian lines, as if this were the central and only organising factor of Iraqi society." Alkhudary claims that, "the muhasasa has encouraged rampant corruption. Ministerial portfolios, civil service jobs and government contracts have been distributed along ethno-sectarian party lines. Since 2003, successive Iraqi governments have been paralysed due to the clash of sectarian and partisan interests. There has also been massive institutional dysfunction." And she observed that "no to muhasasa, no to political sectarianism" became a chant in the massive anti-government protests of 2019.

At this point I want to reassure my Kurdish friends that I consider the type of divisive approach that is exemplified by the muhasasa – and that had already

proved so disastrous in Lebanon – as very different from the Kurdish argument for regional autonomy or even independence – so long as that region is governed for the benefit of all the peoples living there. It is also different from the attempts in North and East Syria to include members of minority groups in the Autonomous Administration, as that administration has a strong social and economic programme – though there are always risks that this sort of community representation can be exploited for divisive patronage politics. Reaction to the oppression of minorities can easily turn into new dominating relationships, and can also be used to divide resistance to capitalist exploitation that affects people from all ethnic groups. Unity over specific issues, such as Kurdish rights, should not be allowed to be used to extinguish campaigns on other issues where views may differ.

Returning to this week's provincial elections, the main result is a strengthening of the power of the ruling Shiite alliance, known as the Coordination Framework, which includes Iran-backed groups. This was no surprise as their main rival, the movement lead by Moqtada al-Sadr, boycotted the elections. Provincial elections had been postponed due to the fight against ISIS, and the previous provincial councils were dissolved in response to Iraq's anti-corruption protests of 2019; but those protests, which were brutally suppressed, do not seem to have resulted in significant changes in power structures.

Kirkuk

In the provinces where control is disputed between the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government – Kirkuk, Diyala, Salahaddin, and Nineveh – Kurdish parties won 15 of the 75 seats. Seven of those seats were in Kirkuk, which elects 16 council members. Kurdish parties won 38 percent of the Kirkuk vote: five seats for the PUK and two for the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Oil-rich Kirkuk is ethnically mixed, with the main communities being Kurds, Turkmen, and Arabs. What proportion of the population belongs in each group is contested and has also been the subject of political interventions such as Saddam Hussein's Arabisation policy, and boundary shifts. The much-quoted [1957 census](#) recorded Kurds as making up just under half of the province's population, but census enumerators were largely Arabs and

Turkmen while most Kurds were rural and uneducated, and there were claims of misrecording. Disputes over population lists had resulted in Kirkuk having no provincial council elections since 2005.

The Iraqi constitution of 2005 stipulated that, before the end of 2007, Kirkuk and the other disputed areas would have their populations “normalised” by the return of former residents and the resettling of imported Arabs, followed by a census of the adjusted populations, and a referendum on whether they wanted their area to be part of the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Many Kurds, and also Turkmen, have returned to Kirkuk, but the Iraqi government have made sure that the referendums never happened. Turkmen are also resistant to becoming part of the Kurdistan region, in which they have Turkey’s backing.

Kirkuk came under Kurdish control in 2014 when the Iraqi army retreated during the fight against ISIS, but after the Kurdistan region’s vote for independence in 2017, in a referendum that included Kirkuk and that Iraq declared illegal, the situation was reversed. The Iraqi army and their pro-Iranian militias retook control and the Kurdish peshmerga left without resistance. The last five years have seen a return to Arabisation and a systematic attempt to remove Kurdish influence from the region. Ethnic politics divides Kirkuk, and when the KDP was given permission to return to their headquarters building in September, Arabs and Turkmen blocked the roads to Kirkuk city. Kurds organised a counter protest which was [met with live fire](#) by the Iraqi army, killing four Kurdish protestors.

There has been much discussion, not least from the PUK, about potential further “Kurdish” seats being lost in Kirkuk from the failure to run a single unified Kurdish list, but [calculations by Kurdistan Watch](#) show that this would not have affected the result. In the [Sainte-Laguë](#) method for allocating votes (which works on a similar principle to the D’Hondt method) it is quite hard to predict results as the maths can help smaller parties provided they get enough votes. Election laws anyway require power sharing between the different groups rather than majority government.

Kurds everywhere have been happy to see that the Iraqi government has not been able to drive away support for the Kurdish parties from Kirkuk, but the response from the DEM Party in Turkey (the former HDP) also shows an awareness of the risks of ethnic politics. They claim the simple fact that the election in Kirkuk proceeded peacefully as a sign of hope, and, after congratulating the PUK, they [note](#) “We trust that the administration will show the necessary sensitivity in Kirkuk for the democratic coexistence of the people, allowing them to live with their identities and beliefs.”

Nineveh

In Nineveh province, Arab parties topped the poll, and it was the KDP that took more Kurdish seats – four to the PUK’s two – though the [PUK vote share](#) has increased compared to the 2021 parliamentary elections. Niniveh province, which includes the disputed district of Şengal, the Yazidi homeland, also saw the election of a [candidate from the Yazidi Freedom and Democracy Party \(PADÊ\)](#), which supports Yazidi autonomy and self-governance within Iraq. Despite the distrust in Şengal of the KDP, whose Peshmerga forces retreated in 2014 and left the Yazidis to face the genocidal ISIS fighters with no protection, many Yazidis also [vote for the KDP](#), which makes sure to run Yazidi candidates. The majority of Yazidis are still living in displacement camps in the Kurdistan region, and this is the politics and opening to power that they are exposed to.

Iraq-Turkey relations

Also this week, Iraqi government ministers met with Turkey’s Foreign Minister to, in the words of the [press statement](#) put out by Iraq’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “improve bilateral relations between Baghdad and Ankara and to increase cooperation, especially in the field of security and intelligence.”

Turkey has put pressure on Iraq through their control of the river waters and of the pipeline used to export oil, and there are fears that they will exploit this to force Iraq to help them in their attacks on the PKK, and not to object to Turkish military incursions. It has been suggested that the inclusion in the Iraqi delegation of the head of the Popular Mobilisation Forces might indicate

that Şengal was a focus of discussion. The Iraqi press statement described the talks as a “new turning point”.

A week ago, the United States Congress [passed](#) an act that will equip and train the Iraq military and the Kurdish Peshmerga to defend themselves against missiles, rockets, and drones. The Americans are concerned about attacks by Iran-linked groups that often target US forces. They won't give air defence equipment to those who might use it to defend against attacks by Turkey, such as the Syrian Democratic Forces in North and East Syria

Syria

Turkey's Deputy Foreign Minister has been in Iran for talks on the future of Syria, where he discussed plans for future meetings between Iran, Turkey, Russia, and the Syrian government. Any deal involving Turkey would come at the expense of the Kurds and the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (whose name has now become even longer and more cumbersome).

The negotiations in Tehran will have been in complete contrast to the conference of the Syrian Democratic Council that took place this week in Raqqa. The Council is the main political body of autonomous North and East Syria, while the Autonomous Authority [takes](#) the executive role. It consists of representatives from different political parties and organisations, and also individuals, and its members are from all ethnic groups. The Council leads the call for a democratic, decentralised federal Syria created by the Syrian people themselves and not by external powers – though they also argue for participation in the Geneva talks on a new Syrian constitution.

The Raqqa conference focussed on democratic change for the whole of Syria. [The Council](#) has a roadmap for this, involving a transitional government, a committee to draft a new constitution, and the restructuring of the army and security services – but this needs engagement from other areas and (crucially) from the Syrian government.

The Council has also restructured itself, getting rid of the influential executive council; and they have chosen new co-chairs, Leyla Qahraman, who had previously been deputy co-chair, and Mahmoud al-Meslet, a professor in the United States. The choice of al-Meslet, who hails from a prominent Arab clan and played an important role in the main Syrian opposition movement, and who has been [critical of corruption and poverty](#) in Deir ez-Zor under the Autonomous Administration, has raised much speculation, and many have [noted](#) his sharing of a photograph taken with Turkey's President Erdoğan.

Turkey's National Intelligence Organisation (MİT) has claimed responsibility for the 5 December assassination of senior SDF commander, Roni Welat. Welat was working to ease the Autonomous Administration's troubled relationship with Arab tribal leaders in Deir ez-Zor, who are being [encouraged](#) to rebel by the Syrian regime and their allied pro-Iranian militias. It seems that all the Autonomous Administration's enemies have recognised Deir ez-Zor as the Achilles heel of North and East Syria.

This is the first time that MİT has admitted operating in Deir ez-Zor, which is far from the Turkish border, but Turkey and its mercenaries have long been trying to destabilise the northern city of Manbij. Yesterday, the SDF [announced](#) that they had arrested four Turkish spies operating in the city and that these had confessed to involvement in the murder of three members of the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) in September 2022.

Turkey

In Turkey itself, the campaign for the March regional elections is gearing up, with reports of systematic manipulation of the voter registration lists in the Kurdish majority areas. Mehmet Rüştü Tiryaki, the DEM Party's Deputy Co-chair for Municipalities, described the situation as "a mobile voter base" that could be registered where the ruling Justice and Development Party felt that votes would be needed to defeat them. And he noted that, "In local elections, who wins the mayorship in small places, districts, and towns can be determined by small differences in votes". The [manipulation](#) is far from subtle,

with over a thousand people registered at some individual addresses. In a police guesthouse in Şirnex, the number of officers registered has gone up from 14 to 492.

The DEM Party has produced a report on the attacks carried out against the party since 2015. It [records](#) that at least 22,818 party members were detained and at least 4,334 of them were arrested – including two party co-chairs, 24 MPs, 104 provincial co-chairs, 201 district co-chairs and one town co-chair. Seven MPs, 14 members of the Central Executive Board, and 27 co-mayors are among those currently in prison.

More positively, there have been two important recent rulings against the government by the Constitutional Court. (No wonder some politicians want to see the court shut down.) The court has [ruled](#) that banning May Day demonstrations from Istanbul's Taksim Square violates the "right to organise and hold demonstrations". The ruling specifically noted the importance of the square in the collective memory of the labour movement due to the fatal attack on the 1977 May Day demonstration that left 40 demonstrators dead.

The court has also annulled as invalid the law that allowed people to be penalised for "committing crimes on behalf of an organisation without being a member". This law was [responsible](#) for some 244,000 convictions over four years.

Europe

This week, the rise of the political right in Europe has been manifested in a further hardening against immigrants, including asylum seekers whose rights are supposed to be protected by international law. Human Rights Watch observes that the new European Union migration pact "will severely curtail the rights of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees". They [comment](#), "The changes are based on deterrence, an approach proven to be both ineffective and abusive." And in France, the Macron government has [brought](#) in a new immigration law that Marine le Pen and the far-right National Rally has claimed as an "ideological victory".

In this world of diminishing opportunities, two young men from Rojhelat (Iranian Kurdistan) were [lost](#) when their boat capsized as they attempted to cross the English Channel.

In the city of Cologne, Germany's inability to respond to other genocides beside the holocaust, and their fear of upsetting their large Turkish population, has resulted in the tragic farce of the repeated official removal of the memorial erected in memory of the Armenian Genocide. This small monument has not been given official permission and for five years now it has been erected for the Memorial Day in April, and subsequently removed by the city. This year it stayed up a little longer, but it was [carted away](#) this week.

Today, there will be a march in Paris to remember the three Kurds murdered a year ago and to protest the refusal of the French state to consider what happened as a targeted attack and to investigate the role of the Turkish state.

A Christmas greeting

Last week I commented on the use of Kurdish in the Turkish Parliament. On Monday, the DEM Party's Syriac MP, George Aslan, gave a Christmas greeting in parliament in his native Syriac. In response to protests from the right-wing İYİ Party, Aslan stated, "We did not come from another planet. We are the indigenous people of this land. This language did not come from another planet. You will accept this language. This is a richness for Turkey." This time it was the Deputy Speaker in charge, the DEM Party's Sırrı Süreyya Önder. Önder [pointed out](#) that there had been no objections when he had said a prayer in Arabic for the recently deceased Felicity Party MP, and he claimed that diversity of language was a gift from Allah.

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