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TRAVEL ADVISORY





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Iraqi General Election, 2018

KEY POINTS

- The Iraqi general election is due to be held on 12 May 2018.
- Iraqi borders and airports were shut on 11 May and will reopen following the close of the polls.
- Insurgents linked to Islamic State are almost certain to target electoral infrastructure and polling locations.

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SITUATIONAL SUMMARY

Political: The Iraqi general election is due to be held on 12 May 2018, delayed from the intended date in September 2017, and approximately six months after a referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan returned a resounding mandate for independence from the government in Baghdad. Both the electoral delay and the Kurdish referendum were direct results of the war against the Islamic State (IS) group which, until recently, held and ruled large swathes of Iraqi territory. The largest coalition of Iraqi Sunni political parties called for a further delay to elections in order to permit more members of the displaced populations to return home, however this demand was rejected by the Iraqi constitutional court.

Iraq, particularly its northern regions, are still experiencing substantial disruption as a result of the Islamic State occupation; small



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anti-state insurgent groups continue to conduct attacks, and tribal or ethnic tensions remain high. Significant numbers of Iranian-backed Shia militias continue to operate in Northern Iraq, at odds with the predominantly Sunni or Kurdish population, and potentially undermining the Iraqi government's mandate.

The remains of Islamic State strongly oppose the elections, having issued strong statements to the Iraqi Sunni population from which they drew their support, stating their intent to target voting centres, and their stance that the elections are illegitimate according to their interpretation of Islam. Backing up these words, there have been at least 15 recorded assassination attempts against candidates or election officials.

In an effort to minimise potential disruptions to the elections, the government has imposed a series of restrictions throughout the election period. Use of firearms has been banned for the polling day, and borders and airports are scheduled to be closed from 11 May until after the end of voting on 12 May.

Over 200 separate parties registered themselves for the elections, forming 27 distinct coalitions, in addition to those standing on their own distinct platform. These parties are set to compete for 329 seats spread across 18 geographical and one ethnically based multimember constituency.

Political parties in Iraq have recently undergone significant change; party lists for most parties now containing notably greater mixes of Iraq's varied ethnic and sectarian groups, with notable coalitions occurring between leaders who fought or worked together, in spite of religious differences, against the Islamic State. Inter-party debate on policy issues has remained limited, with no clearly different outcomes or options presented by any party.

SOLACE GLOBAL COMMENT

The immediate short-term impact of the election is almost certain to be two-fold; a significant increase in violence across the country, particularly in the north; and widespread disruption to international and domestic travel. The latter issue is directly tied to the government's imposition of enhanced security measures. Checkpoints should be expected throughout the country, and increased levels of armed security are likely around voting centres. The total ban on international movement throughout the election period is also likely to disrupt business operations, particularly in border areas.

Violence has the potential to develop from two quarters; Islamic State cells have been directed to disrupt the elections and target polling centres, and armed militias throughout the country have close ties to regional political elites. The Islamic State has seen its capabilities significantly degraded throughout the previous 12 months and remains a shadow of its former self. However, IS grew from a persistent Shia insurgency, and with the defeat of its conventional forces, many of its fighters have reverted to terror and insurgency tactics. Evidence in the form of persistent attacks and numerous assassination attempts indicates that numerous small cells of IS fighters maintain the capability to launch limited, but targeted strikes throughout the region, and offer a persistent challenge to the government's efforts to provide effective security for its population.

Despite the ban on civilian use of firearms during the election, the ready availability of weapons, and significant recent combat experience among the population leads to a significant risk that any outbreaks of unrest could result in widespread and lethal violence. Extensive ties between political elites and local warlords or militias mean that political groups may directly call upon significant numbers of armed personnel in the event of perceived slights or electoral irregularities.

A direct counter-point to the risk of violence has been the relatively recent emergence of ethnically mixed party lists. Although many of these coalitions have their origins in shared military or paramilitary experiences in the recent war against IS, the weakening of the link between sectarian and political identities makes the possibility of a more inclusive and stronger government significantly higher



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over the long term (i.e. beyond this election cycle). This said, considering the vast array of parties and coalitions standing in the elections, the most likely outcome in this vote is a further coalition of coalitions, with no single, clear platform, and formed after a protracted period of negotiation. If this potential government is able to in some way resist the lure of persistent and endemic corruption, however, there is a possibility that a more inclusive government may be able to build a political system resistant to the civil strife which has dominated Iraq since the defeat of the Ba'athist government in 2003.

SECURITY ADVICE

HIGH POLITICAL RISK



Travel restrictions will prevent foreign travellers entering the country during the immediate election period, however travellers should remain aware that restrictions and risks to travel are likely to persist for a significant period following the election date.

It is recommended that post-election protests are avoided. Political gatherings may initially seem peaceful but can escalate quickly into violence. It would be advisable for travellers already in country, or planning travel, to maintain a low profile in the short-term and monitor local media and events. Evacuation plans should be established in case the security situation significantly worsens.

Solace Global would advise clients to employ significant security measures when visiting Iraq – airport meet and greet with a security trained driver and close protection officer for the length of a visit should be minimum security precaution. Travellers should consider armed protection details and armoured vehicles for travel to more hazardous regions, dependent on the specific risk profile. All travel throughout Iraq should be undertaken with rigorous journey management in place, and travel tracking and intelligence software is strongly recommended to enhance situational awareness, while supporting implementation of duty of care.



Solace Global remains available to provide the full range of Travel Risk Management services to clients. Solace Global is also able to provide comprehensive crisis management, in-country journey management, tracking, response, and evacuation services. For further details please contact +44 (0)1202 795 801 or email sgr@solaceglobal.com