
Provincial Elections Sees Rising Shiite Influence on Sunni- populated Cities

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Summary : In the upcoming provincial council elections, a significant development unfolds as the formidable Al-Hassm al-Watani coalition (National Coalition), one of Iraq's largest political fronts, enters the competition in Sunni provinces, contending against three other major fronts. Notably, the leading contender is Speaker Mohammed Al-Halbousi's list, known as "Taqaddum."

In the upcoming elections scheduled for December 18, 2023, the residents of Sunni provinces will exercise their voting rights for the first time since the 2013 elections, free from the shadow of insurgent armed groups and the threat of terrorism. These elections come six years later than originally planned and occur within a transformed political landscape that holds two significant developments for the Sunni provinces. Firstly, a new coalition has emerged, building upon the foundations of the old one, bringing fresh dynamics into play. Secondly, the withdrawal of Shiite lists and coalitions from these regions introduces a multifaceted and open-ended dimension, offering a range of possibilities and interpretations.

Emergence of Power Struggles in Sunni Provinces

In the upcoming provincial council elections, a significant development unfolds as the formidable Al-Hassm al-Watani coalition (National Coalition), one of Iraq's largest political fronts, enters the competition in Sunni provinces, contending against three other major fronts. Notably, the leading contender is Speaker Mohammed Al-Halbousi's list, known as "Taqaddum."

At the helm of Al-Hassm al-Watani coalition is a Sunni Turkmen hailing from Tal Afar, Thabet al-Abbasi occupying the role of Defense Minister within the cabinet of Mohammad Shia' Al Sudani. It's worth noting that in the previous parliamentary elections of 2021, the Movement of Al-Hassm Al-Watani secured merely three seats under the banner of "Al Azim." However, recent developments have seen them transition into rivals of the coalition led by Parliament Speaker Mohammed Al-Halbousi and the prominent figure Khamis Al-Khanjar within al-Siyadah leadership.

The newly established coalition, Al-Hassm al-Watani, has evolved into a unifying platform for a substantial number of esteemed Sunni leaders and prominent figures from past eras. Among its ranks are former Parliament Speaker Osama al-Nujaifi, former Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Rafi al-Issawi, Jamal al-Karbouli, the leader of the Solution Party, who initially supported Halbusi before becoming rivals, along with several former Sunni ministers and Members of Parliament.

This coalition stands as one of the four primary contenders vying for support within Sunni provinces. Its primary objective is to represent the Sunni community, which currently grapples with divisions and a notable absence of a unifying vision. Among the competing coalitions are "Taqaddum" spearheaded by Speaker Mohammed Halbusi, who has faced political and parliamentary challenges in his bid to retain power. Additionally, there's 'Al-Siyadah,' led by Khamis Al-Khanjar, both of which face competition from 'Al-Azim,' a close ally to the Shiite Framework, under the leadership of Muthanna Al-Samarrai.

Both the emerging coalition and al-Azim share a common objective: to challenge the dominance of the speaker Mohammed Al-Halbousi, who has historically controlled the Sunni community. The speaker has been reluctant to involve the previous generation of Sunni politicians in decision-making. However, the recent emergence of Thabet Al-Abbasi, the defense minister within the new coalition, with his significant position and financial resources, has posed a new challenge. It's worth noting that many Sunni elites openly acknowledge the authority as the supreme marja within this community. Essentially, any Sunni figure in a prominent position stands a chance to garner substantial support, especially if they have strong ties to Shiite factions and Turkey, as is the case with the defense minister's Al-Hassm campaign.

Despite relentless efforts to weaken him, the speaker's front remains remarkably robust, particularly in his stronghold of Anbar province. In the last parliamentary elections held in 2021, he only lost one out of the province's 15 seats. Simultaneously, his influence has expanded into other Sunni provinces, extending as far as Nineveh, where his faction now commands 37 out of 71 seats representing the entire Sunni community. Presently, he has strategically aligned himself with Khamis Khanjari's Al-Siyada, which has close ties with Turkey and Qatar. However, this election has presented unique challenges, prompting him to shift his focus more towards Anbar and Baghdad, whereas in Nineveh, he has

formed alliances with tribal Hashd forces.

The Relocation of Shiite Militias to Sunni Territories

Beyond the internal Sunni rivalries, a noteworthy development in the elections involves the relocation of Shiite lists and coalitions to these provinces. For instance, in Salahaddin and Kirkuk, the Shiite faction is engaging in electoral competition alongside Sunni and Kurdish lists through a unified representation, whereas in other provinces, they are fragmented. As per some analysts, the Shiite coalition has set its sights on capturing three out of Salahaddin's 15 seats.

In Anbar, a predominantly Sunni province with 15 seats, both the "National Contract" list led by Hashd leader Faleh al Fayyad and the "Service Coalition," of the Labor Minister Ahmad al-Assadi and the head of Jund al Imam which is in alliance with Imam Ali's battalions, have joined the electoral competition. Nevertheless, the specific candidates they will field and the electoral agenda they plan to pursue for this tribal Sunni region remain unclear.

In Nineveh province, which has 29 seats, the involvement of Shiite lists is notably extensive. Virtually all Shiite factions within this province have established their respective electoral lists. These include "Al-Hadba" led by Maliki, "Nash" associated with the Supreme Islamic Council, and "Al-Safwa" representing Qais al-Khazali's group. Additionally, there are Ammar Hakim's "Al-Hikma," "Khadamat" led by Ahmad al-Assadi, and "National Contract" led by Faleh Fayyad, the head of Hashd.

While the constitution and laws expressly forbid identity-based discrimination in electoral participation, it is noteworthy that Shiite lists in the Kurdistan Regional Governorate have previously ventured into electoral contests. However, their recent withdrawal to predominantly Sunni provinces raises suspicion and invites diverse interpretations. This move appears to deviate from the prevailing political norm established in the country since 2003, which emphasizes equitable political representation for Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds in their respective regions.

The formidable presence of Shiite lists in Sunni provinces poses an additional threat, stemming from the prevailing influence and armament of Hashd al-Shaabi. This is attributed to the continued presence of certain Hashd al-Shaabi forces in these areas post-ISIS conflict, notably in Mosul, Diyala, and Salahaddin. Over the past year, these forces have faced allegations of exacerbating security tensions, particularly in Diyala and Salahaddin.

In a broader context, if the election focuses on the Shiite heartland, there's a likelihood of position and role-sharing among Shiite parties, particularly in the absence of Sadr. On the flip side, Sunni provinces are likely to experience a unique landscape characterized by two forms of robust competition: the rivalry between Sunni and Shiite forces and the fierce internal competition among Sunni factions.