

INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP - NEW REPORT

Iraq's Uncertain Future: Elections and Beyond

Baghdad/Washington/Brussels, 25 February 2010: The run-up to the Iraqi elections on 7 March has brought to light deep-seated problems that threaten the country's fragile recovery.

[*Iraq's Uncertain Future: Elections and Beyond*](#),* the latest report from the International Crisis Group, examines the path to the country's third parliamentary election in five years. Issues that complicated and almost derailed the elections – disqualification of almost 500 candidates on charges of Baathist affiliation, accusations of demographic manipulations in Kirkuk, fears over the rights of out-of-country voters – reflect more profound conflicts that could haunt efforts to form a new government.

“If the road to the elections was hard, the road after them could be harder”, says Joost Hiltermann, Crisis Group's Middle East Deputy Program Director. “Even a freshened-up parliament will find it difficult to navigate the vast amount of unresolved conflicts in its effort to form a new government”.

Post-Saddam elections have tended to magnify existing trends. The first parliamentary vote (January 2005) was preceded by growing political polarisation and insurgent threats and triggered a destabilising partial boycott. The December 2005 vote institutionalised the sectarian dynamic in the streets, resulting in civil war – a legacy yet to be overcome. This time, forming a coalition government and holding it up as an example of national unity will not suffice. Serious work on national reconciliation is long overdue. There must be meaningful progress to open political space, increase cross-sectarian participation, improve transparency and accountability and strengthen judicial independence.

Ideally, the Iraqi government would reinstate, to the extent possible, disqualified candidates ahead of the elections. At a minimum, after the vote it should take steps to cure the de-Baathification process of its politicisation by setting clear criteria and procedures embedded in law, as well as a two-year deadline by which time all remaining files should be closed and the effort terminated.

In this context, the international community should intensify its electoral monitoring and define clear red lines that need to be respected if the results are to be considered legitimate. In particular, it will be important to observe the conduct of institutions and agencies whose impartial role will be critical in ensuring free and fair elections. Among them are the Supreme Court and the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC), as well as the military and the police. Iraqi and international observers should be able to deploy freely to all polling stations and monitor both the voting and vote count. If the above-mentioned red lines are crossed and election results are not broadly accepted, the

international community should consider making diplomatic, military and development aid conditional on a government commitment to thorough institutional reform.

“Iraq continues to suffer the consequences of a tragic war and the harmful policies that followed it: entrenched sectarianism, the absence of credible institutions and the erosion of the state”, says Robert Malley, Crisis Group’s Middle East Program Director. “U.S. troops may be on the way out, but the responsibility to remain actively engaged and help make up for the damage is as acute as ever”.

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Contacts: Andrew Strohlein (Brussels) +32 (0) 2 541 1635

Kimberly Abbott (Washington) +1 202 785 1602

To contact Crisis Group media please [click here](#)

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