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The Absent Alternative

The Crisis of Civil Movements in Iraq

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● **Analyses**

The Absent Alternative: The Crisis of Civil Movements in Iraq

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Introduction

Following 2003, Iraq witnessed a radical transformation in its political structure, accompanied by significant diversity in the forces and entities that have contested elections since 2005. Most political entities and parties have been characterized by a component-based nature that did not transcend sub-identities, being divided between nationalist trends in the Kurdish regions and sectarian and tribal trends in Sunni and Shiite areas. In contrast, national and civil movements emerged that attempted to present a different political project; however, their presence remained limited, and they were unable to form a genuine alternative to traditional forces.

After the October 2019 protests, a group of civil movements emerged seeking to translate street demands into a political project. Some chose to participate in the early elections of 2021, while other movements preferred not to participate due to time constraints and the continuation of their foundational stages. The "Imtidad" Movement is considered the first of these forces to contest the elections and achieve notable results, followed by the participation of the "Qiyam" Alliance in the 2023 provincial council elections, and then the "Al-Badeel" Alliance, which contested the parliamentary elections of 2025.

Despite the presence of other civil forces proposing reformist projects across multiple governorates, these three alliances are regarded as the most prominent models in terms of organizational structure, engagement in electoral experiences, and the achievement of tangible political presence. Accordingly, this paper adopts these three models for purposes of comparison and analysis.

The research findings show that the participation of civil alliances has remained geographically limited, concentrated primarily in Shiite-majority governorates, with a clear absence in Sunni governorates and the governorates of the Kurdistan Region. This renders the portrayal of these alliances as representatives of all Iraqi components a political exaggeration not supported by electoral realities. Consequently, their electoral presence remains closer to being an extension of a socially and geographically specific environment, rather than a comprehensive alternative project to Iraq's traditional political class.

The Civil Movement After the October Protests

Following the change in Iraq's political system and since the first elections held after 2005, numerous civil movements have emerged, most notably the Iraqi Communist Party, the National Conference, the National Accord Party, and the Iraqi Loyalty Movement, alongside other political movements. The civil experience witnessed fluctuations in the level of its representation within the Council of Representatives and the Iraqi government during previous periods.

In the aftermath of the October events, new movements adopting a civil political orientation emerged. Some of these chose to participate in elections, while others preferred to boycott them. This phase also witnessed the formation of alliances among these movements, with some joining civil alliances, while others opted to join different electoral lists, most notably the "Reconstruction and Development" Alliance, in addition to local, governorate-level alliances with a civil orientation-such as "Design Wasit More Beautiful"-as well as individual candidates who preferred to participate within lists such as "State of Law" and "National State Forces," among other electoral lists.

The most salient features of the civil movement after the October events over the past six years will be presented through three experiences: the Imtidad Movement, the Qiyam Alliance, and the Al-Badeel Alliance, as these are considered purely civil experiences, without alliances with other political entities. It is certain that the civil movement is broader than these movements; however, for the purposes of distinguishing votes and conducting comparisons, these three experiences have been selected.

Moreover, political civil representation cannot be reduced solely to electoral results, as political action extends beyond elections alone, and some movements chose not to participate in them.

1. The Imtidad Movement

On 18 January 2021, the launch of the movement was announced at an official conference under the leadership of Alaa Al-Rikabi, who affirmed that it represents an extension of “great Iraq” and an extension of the sacrifices of the October protests. The movement declared that it is an opposition force and does not monopolize the representation of October; rather, it considers itself part of the broader protest movement. It emphasized that its objective is to build a state of citizenship and institutions, to seek the formation of the largest parliamentary bloc and the

government, and, if unable to do so, to serve as an opposition within parliament.

2. **The Qiyam Alliance**

A political alliance announced on 24 September 2023, described as “the electoral umbrella for democratic change forces.” The alliance comprises ten civil forces and parties, including the Iraqi Communist Party, the Social Democratic Current, the National Home Party, the Iraqi Civil Movement, and the “Nazil Akheth Haqi” Movement. The alliance is jointly chaired by Dr. Ali Al-Rifai and independent Member of Parliament Sajjad Salim.

Most components of the alliance trace their origins to forces emerging from the October 2019 protest movement, and the majority lack parliamentary or local representation, with the exception of limited representation held by the Iraqi Communist Party. The alliance announced its intention to contest local elections in all governorates except the Kurdistan Region, a step reflecting a national orientation that transcends sectarian and ethnic alignments. The Qiyam Alliance represents a qualitative development, as it brings together, for the first time in recent years, most civil forces within a single framework after years of fragmentation and division within this political current.

3. **The Al-Badeel Alliance**

A civil political alliance announced on 27 May 2025 under the leadership of Member of Parliament Adnan Al-Zurfi. It comprises 13 political entities, including the Iraqi Communist Party, the National Home Party, the National Civil Movement, the Independents Alliance, and the Democratic Current. The alliance advances an alternative reform project to traditional pathways, focusing on rebuilding the state on the foundations of citizenship, justice, dignity, and democracy, and combating corruption. It is grounded in a clear civil vision and practical programs aimed at genuine change, affirming its determination to participate actively in upcoming electoral processes, empower citizens, and strengthen the authority of the state.

Comparison of Alliance Results

Here, the results of civil alliance participation in three electoral events are reviewed: two parliamentary elections (2021 and 2025) and one local election (2023), conducted under two different electoral laws. The results are compared and their implications and impact on the civil movement are analyzed.

Table (1): Alliance Results in Elections

	Governorate	Elections 2021 (Imtidad	Elec- 2023 tions (Qiyam	Elec- 2025 tions (Al- Badeel
1	Baghdad	32,317	10,191	12,278
2	Basra	6,939	3,560	-
3	Dhi Qar	134,045	19,490	19,672
4	Najaf	32,860	11,858	16,213
5	Karbala	11,115	-	7,789
6	Al-Qadisiyah	15,726	35,976	5,113
7	Wasit	8,220	12,727	7,888
8	Babil	31,702	23,640	-
9	Al-Muthanna	2,366	-	-
10	Salah al-Din	-	-	1,543
11	Diyala	-	804	1,201
12	Al-Anbar	-	671	-
13	Maysan	-	8,031	-
14	Nineveh	-	2,929	-

Table prepared by the researcher based on official election results.¹

1. Results of the Elections of the Council of Representatives and the Provincial Councils Not Affiliated with a Region, 17 November 2025; access date: 30/21/11/2025. For further details, see the following link: <https://ihec.iq/>

The table shows that the highest levels of support for civil movements occurred in the 2021 elections (Imtidad Movement), particularly in the governorates of Dhi Qar, Najaf, and Baghdad, which recorded the highest vote totals across the three electoral events. It also shows that the Qiyam Alliance in the 2023 elections achieved uneven presence, performing strongly in Al-Qadisiyah, Wasit, Babil, and Maysan, while performing weakly in Al-Anbar, Diyala, and Nineveh.

As for the Al-Badeel Alliance in the 2025 elections, it demonstrates overall moderate performance, with relatively stable results in Dhi Qar, Najaf, and Baghdad, though lower than those achieved by the Imtidad Movement in 2021 in the same governorates. The alliance records limited presence in governorates such as Salah al-Din and Diyala, and is absent from other governorates that had been represented in the 2021 and 2023 experiences. In general, it is observed that the greatest popular momentum for civil movements occurred in 2021, while the 2023 and 2025 elections witnessed decline and fluctuation in most governorates, with clear variation in areas of strength across each electoral experience.

Consistent Participation of Civil Movements

The civil current-whether under the banner of the Imtidad Movement, the Qiyam Alliance, or the Al-Badeel Alliance-did not participate under a unified label across the three electoral experiences except in only five governorates: Baghdad, Dhi Qar, Najaf, Al-Qadisiyah, and Wasit.

In the remaining governorates, participation took place through different alliances or under other electoral names, as illustrated in Figure (1), which shows the upward and downward trends in the number of votes obtained by these alliances in the five governorates across the three electoral experiences.

Figure (1): Increases and Decreases in the Number of Votes

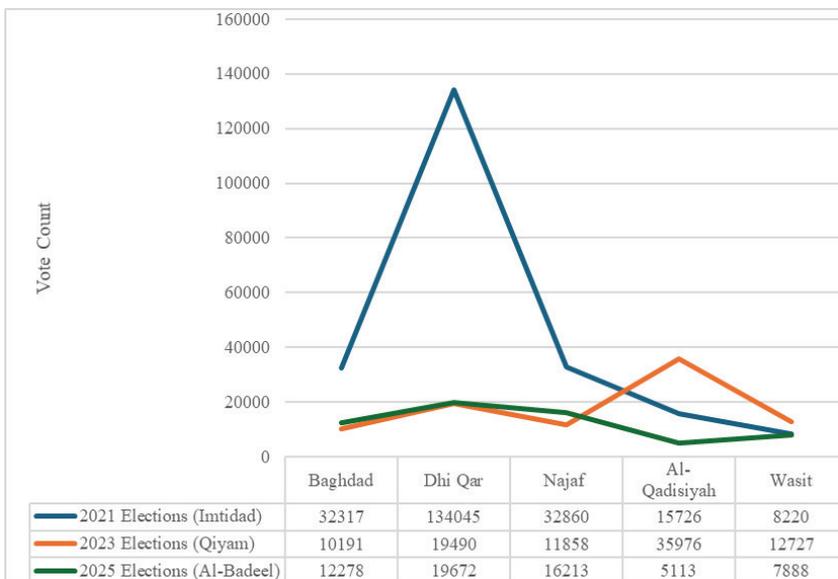


Figure prepared by the researcher based on the official election results.

From the figure above, it can be observed that the center of gravity of the civil movement was more concentrated in Dhi Qar Governorate compared to Baghdad, Al-Qadisiyah, and Najaf in the 2021 elections. The primary reason for this is attributed to the fact that the Imtidad Movement originated in Dhi Qar, in addition to the wider scope of protests in the governorate compared to others, the accompanying popular resentment toward the political reality at that time, and the desire for change.

Conversely, the votes of the Qiyam Alliance declined significantly in the 2023 provincial council elections not affiliated with a region, with a clear decrease in Dhi Qar, Baghdad, and Najaf, compared to a notable increase in Al-Qadisiyah and Wasit. As for the 2025 parliamentary elections, the results in Dhi Qar, Baghdad, and Najaf were close to those of the 2023 elections, while a sharp decline was recorded in Al-Qadisiyah and Wasit.

Participation of Civil Alliances

Here, we review the participation of civil alliances in Iraqi governorates, which occurred in an irregular manner. These

alliances participated explicitly under their own names, without entering into alliances with other forces within the governorates, in only nine governorates and on a non-continuous basis.

Table (2): Participation of Civil Alliances

Vote Count				
Governorate		Number of Votes 2021 Elections (Imtidad	Number of Votes 2023 Elections (Qiyam	Number of Votes 2025 Elections (Al- (Badeel
1	Basra	6939	3560	-
2	Karbala	11115	-	7789
3	Babil	31702	23640	-
4	Al- Muthanna	2366	-	-
5	Salah al- Din	-	-	1543
6	Diyala	-	804	1201
7	Al-Anbar	-	671	-
8	Maysan	-	8031	-
9	Nineveh	-	2929	-

Table prepared by the researcher based on the official election results.

The table above shows clear fluctuation in the participation of civil alliances across the nine governorates during the past three elections. Participation was limited in governorates such as Maysan, Nineveh, and Al-Anbar during the 2023 elections, and in Al-Muthanna during the 2021 elections. Meanwhile, Basra and Babil participated in two electoral occasions (2021 and 2023), with Babil outperforming in terms of the number of votes. Karbala recorded good results in the 2021 elections but experienced a significant decline in the 2025 elections. This fluctuation can be explained by the entry of civil alliances into other alliances in some governorates, such as the Al-Faw–Zakho Gathering, in addition to the presence of local alliances in governorates—most notably Basra and Karbala—that succeeded in attracting a large number of votes away from traditional parties, as demonstrated by the experience of the Tasmim Alliance in Basra.

Are Civil Alliances an Electoral Alternative to Traditional Parties?

To answer this question, we first review the level of participation of civil alliances in Iraqi governorates, excluding the governorates of the Kurdistan Region and Kirkuk Governorate, where no participation by the three alliances was recorded across the three previous electoral experiences. While emphasizing that we do not

adopt the notion of the existence of any Iraqi governorate with a single component, we rely on the highest population proportion in each governorate. Accordingly, the votes of Diyala Governorate were excluded, given that it is a mixed governorate, in addition to the low number of votes obtained by civil alliances there. The Imtidad Movement did not participate in the 2021 elections; the Qiyam Alliance obtained only 804 votes in the 2023 elections; and the Al-Badeel Alliance obtained 1,201 votes in the 2025 elections, as shown in Figure (2).

Figure (2): Number of Alliance Votes in Shiite and Sunni Governorates

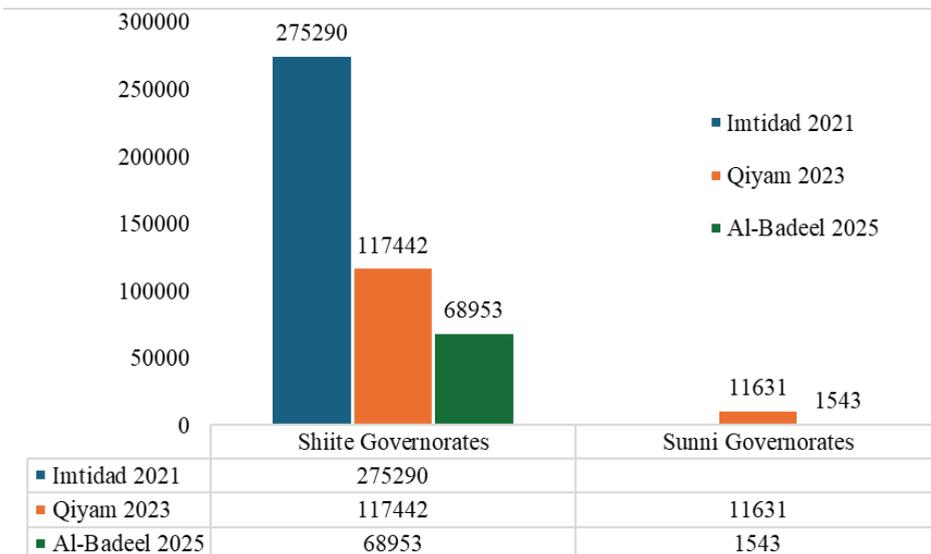


Figure prepared by the researcher based on the official election results.

Figure (3): Percentage of Alliance Votes in Shiite and Sunni Governorates

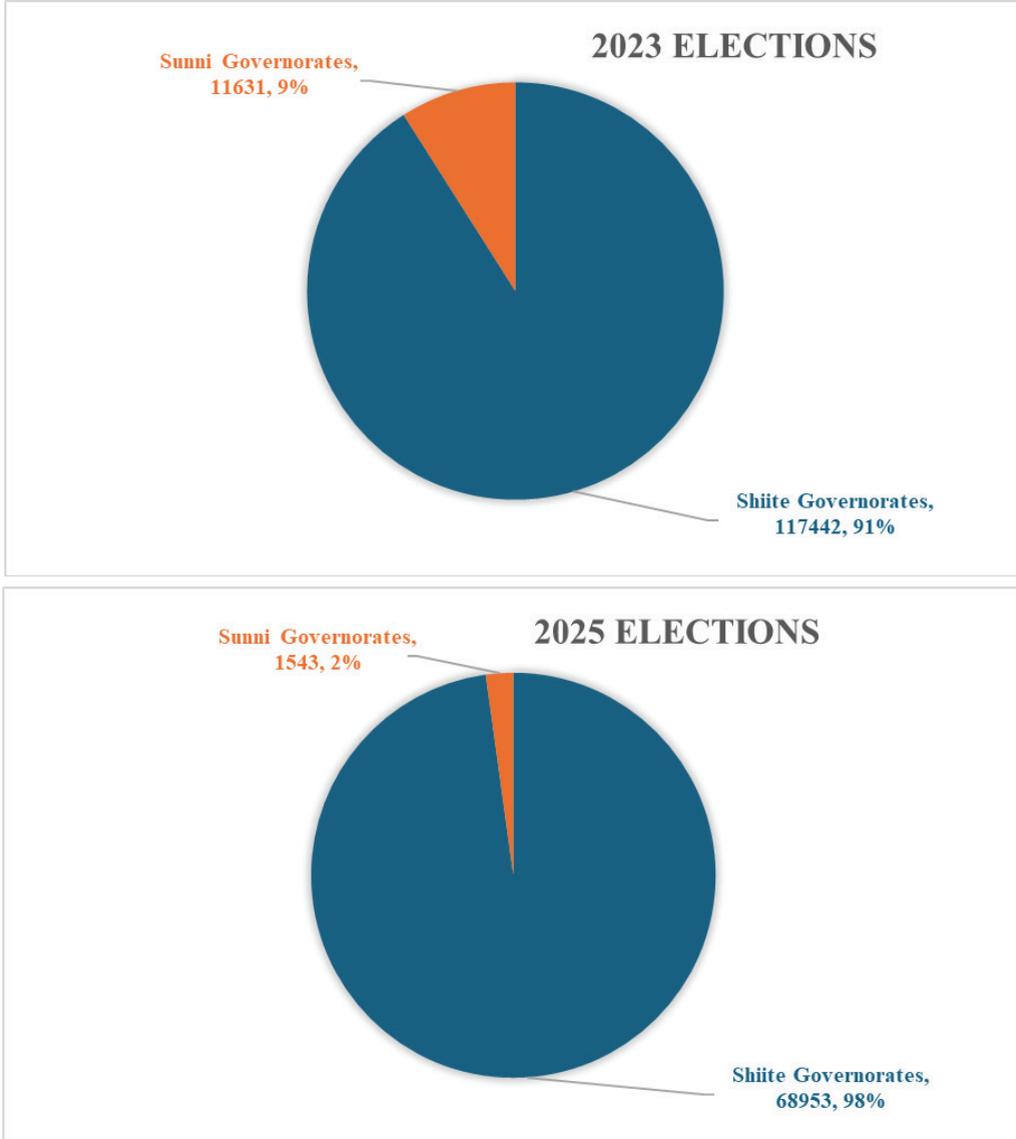


Figure prepared by the researcher based on the official election results.

From Figures (2) and (3), it is evident that civil alliances participated in elections primarily in Shiite-majority governorates, while their participation was very limited in Sunni governorates, and no participation was recorded in the governorates of the Kurdistan Region or Kirkuk Governorate.

The first participation of the civil movement after the October protests occurred in the 2021 elections through the Imtidad Movement, which recorded no presence in Sunni or Kurdish areas, with participation confined to Shiite governorates in central and southern Iraq. Even Diyala Governorate recorded no participation by the movement.

The second participation took place through the Qiyam Alliance in the 2023 provincial council elections not affiliated with a region, where participation outside Shiite areas was limited to Al-Anbar and Nineveh, with a total vote share not exceeding 9% of the alliance's total votes in those elections.

The third participation occurred in the 2025 parliamentary elections through the Al-Badeel Alliance, where participation outside Shiite governorates was limited to Salah al-Din Governorate only, with a total of 1,543 votes out of the alliance's overall vote count, representing just 2%.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that civil alliances participated in 14 out of 18 governorates, while they were absent from three governorates in the Kurdistan Region, in addition to Kirkuk Governorate, across all three electoral experiences. Despite their participation in elections under different banners (Imtidad, Qiyam, and Al-Badeel), their actual presence remained limited to only five governorates: Baghdad, Dhi Qar, Najaf, Al-Qadisiyah, and Wasit. Accordingly, describing these alliances as representing all political components constitutes a politically exaggerated characterization, as it lacks realistic foundations reflecting the true distribution of political power in the country.

Moreover, the limited participation in northern and western governorates contributed to reducing the geographical representation of these alliances and to the loss of a significant number of votes, revealing a structural deficiency in their nationwide outreach and underscoring the need to adopt broader outreach policies and to expand the geographical scope of their political activity.

In this context, civil alliances may be viewed as electoral projects rather than fully integrated political projects, or as foundational experiences still under development. This constrains their ability to compete with traditional parties and alliances, particularly in light of the substantial disparities in political spending, media capabilities, and levels of governmental influence.

The fragmentation of civil movements and their participation in multiple lists, along with the alliance of some of them with other political forces, led to vote fragmentation and weakened their electoral prospects, instead of unifying civil efforts within a comprehensive political framework.

This demonstrates that the trajectory of civil alliances still requires the development of their organizational and political structures and the formulation of a more comprehensive national strategy, enabling them to move from partial participation to genuine competition for power.



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