



Middle East May elections: Iran-Saudi proxy confrontation

Oxford Analytica Conference Call summary

- Just this morning reports of new missile attacks on Syria, false as they turned out, prompted immediate speculation of another Israeli attack and provided a reminder, if one were needed, that this is not just a civil war with superpower overlays but that there are significant regional dimensions too.
 - At its heart is the contest between the region's two hegemony, Iran and Saudi Arabia, which as we know is fought out in proxy wars on the battlefields but also at the ballot box.
 - Parliamentary elections are due in Lebanon on May 6 and in Iraq on May 12. Both Tehran and Riyadh will have dogs in both fights and the outcomes will affect the balance of power between them and regional stability.
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Elections in Lebanon

Back in November Lebanon's prime minister, Saad al-Hariri, was detained against his will in Riyadh and forced to resign because Saudi Arabia did not believe that he was holding a firm enough line against Hezbollah, linked of course with Saudi Arabia's antagonism towards Iran. Then the Saudis u-turned and now they see him as their most reliable Lebanese bulwark against Hezbollah. How do we make sense of this? How should we be reading this election?

It is the first election since 2009 and there is interest in it from various regional and global powers. First of all, the elections will happen, barring perhaps war between Israel and Hezbollah. There is a lot of support from all parties in Lebanon. We have seen electoral lists being formed and alliances taking shape. We can say some things on how it is developing, even though the outcome is quite unpredictable.

If we are looking back to the time after the death of Hariri's father, Rafiq al-Hariri, in 2005, we have had a series of transitions of government in Lebanon that had to be managed with outside help and also interference by Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Iran in particular. The big question over these elections is: to what extent will Tehran and Riyadh be able to weigh in this time?

Until now, Saudi Arabia and Iran have been trying to influence the campaigning in key districts in Lebanon, such as the Beqaa Valley. Just last week, we saw the ambassadors of the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia visit their key allies from Hariri's Sunni Future Movement, in a territory that is traditionally aligned with Hezbollah. We have also seen Iranian officials making a whole series of visits in that area as well, for example in Baalbek. There are even rumours in Lebanon that these states have been funding the electoral campaigns of their local allies, which is illegal, and that they offered money and rewards to prospective voters, which is of course still more illegal.

The reason for their interest in this stage of the campaigning is the new electoral law, which is a bit of a game changer. It was passed last year, and really adds an element of unpredictability. Whereas the old law was a 'winner takes it all' system, with the new law, the number of seats received in a district is proportional to the percentage of votes won. This means that even if candidates find themselves on a losing list in a district, they can still make it to parliament. If we look at for example the Baalbek district, that used to be steamrolled by Hezbollah's lists, who would take all ten parliamentary seats there, despite the fact that quite a number of residents

are not Shia but Sunnis and Christians. Now Hariri's allies are eyeing an opportunity to steal some seats, which is why the Saudi and UAE representatives are coming there.

The new system means no-one can be complacent and therefore everyone will try to get potential voters off the couch. In 2009, voter turnout was just about 50%, in some districts it was even as low as 20%. I think we will see a much higher number this time around. So, what will they vote?

This could bring some surprises and may also benefit Lebanon's civil society groups, who for the first time are running in these elections on a joint list called 'My Nation'. There have been a lot of protest movements in the past years, complaining about inefficiency, the lack of proper social services and infrastructure. They may be able to win quite a few votes. We saw them being quite successful in local elections in 2016. If we look at the alliances that are shaping up, they do look a lot like the old blocs, which were known as the 'March 8 Alliance' and 'March 14 Alliance', even if people say that this division is now obsolete. On the one hand we have the Christian Lebanese Forces parties, Hariri's Sunni Future Movement and the Druze PSP Party (Progressive Socialist Party). They form lists together in most districts, against on the other side the Shia parties, Hezbollah and the Amal Movement, allied with president Michel Aoun's Christian Free Patriotic Movement party. However, in some districts alliances are a little different, for example in Sidon, the fourth-largest city where Aoun has allied with Hariri against Amal and Hezbollah.

Hariri looks quite secure in Beirut. In Tripoli, the second largest city, there is some competition from other Sunni candidates like Ashraf Rifi and Najib Mikati. At one point, Rifi in particular looked like a potential challenger to Hariri but the way that Hariri has turned it around in the last couple of months with renewed Saudi backing and looked more like a statesman suggests that he will also do quite well. He has been able to form good alliances in the north. Hezbollah will do well and could form strong alliances as well that will help them win seats in districts where they traditionally did not get any. They put a lot of effort and resources into forming these alliances and into campaigning. They are quite well organised, with Iranian support.

Hariri is coming from the CEDRE donor conference in Paris where he has secured around 11 billion dollars in loans and grants. The majority of this sum is for loans, and Hezbollah points out that this will add to Lebanon's foreign debt, which is already above 150% of GDP, arguing it could lead the country to bankruptcy.

Hariri is looking at it differently and promises no less than 900,000 new jobs. This seems a little bit ambitious, but it is a fact that this elaborate plan of reforming the water, waste removal and electricity sectors and combating corruption is playing quite well with parts of the Lebanese population.

The big question is whether people are buying these grand plans or if the thing that matters in the end is the more established weight of clientelism, which usually secures the necessary votes for the traditional parties.

After the elections, a new government will be formed. This can take time. In 2009 it took five months to form a government. The term of the current parliament ends on May 21. The outcome will likely be quite close between Hezbollah's bloc and Hariri's bloc. It is unclear which of the smaller parties will support which bloc. This will draw in regional allies much more because neither side is likely to yield, and the end result could be a continuation of the current national unity government.

What will happen formally is that the new prime minister will be appointed by the president and should have the backing of at least half of the parliament. It is then the prime minister's task to form a new cabinet. Always in Lebanon, this situation is incredibly politicised and there is a lot of interference from the outside. Even if the polling itself runs smoothly we will probably have a contentious situation afterwards, with interest and intervention from Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Elections in Iraq

Iraq is in many ways even more complicated than Lebanon. It is a larger country, and rather than having those two core blocs, it has a much more fragmented political landscape. It has Shia Sunni and Kurdish blocs and divisions within them, as well as more cross-sectarian or nationalist parties. This landscape has been fairly steady through the four elections since 2003 but is often confusing for voters as well as analysts because of the way the parties combine electoral lists or run independently and often in different combinations in different provincial constituencies. This year there are 6,904 candidates split across 143 parties running alone or as part of 27 coalitions all competing for 329 seats. This compares starkly to the first few electoral cycles when there were just a handful

of grand coalitions on the ballot. Most parties campaign on the basis of sect, or alternatively a more nationalist vision, with a focus on prominent leaders rather than policy platforms. All of this makes it difficult really to assess how the preferences of voters have evolved over the years.

The demographic maths means that the Shia parties can expect to get a slim majority of seats in parliament, and so could theoretically form a government on their own, but their internal differences and concerns about a backlash from Sunnis and Kurds mean that all previous governments have been broader-based national unity governments (as in Lebanon).

The electorate's mood at the time of the 2010 election, in the aftermath of the first sectarian civil war, was perceived to be reacting against extreme sectarianism. The then prime-minister, Nuri al-Maliki, formed what he branded as a nationalist alliance, called the 'State of Law Coalition' around the core of his Dawa party, which is the oldest and largest Shia Islamist party and has supplied all three of Iraq's elected prime ministers. This squared up against the traditional nationalist bloc led by Iyad Allawi, a secular Shia who mainly drew Sunni votes. In the end, after a particularly long and bitter government formation process, Maliki held on to a second term as prime minister but quickly turned back to his Shia sectarian roots and drew closer to Iran.

That set the stage for the 2014 election, when most of the other Shia parties sought to distance themselves from Maliki (and Iran). The vote left another complex hung parliament and the government formation process was made even more fraught by the sudden fall of Mosul and the north to Islamic State, something that was inconceivable a few weeks before on election day. Eventually Dawa split into pro- and anti-Maliki factions and Haider al-Abadi emerged as the anti-Maliki compromise candidate with sufficient support from other parties to form a government. That is where we are now.

In the run-up to the current elections there has been the long war against the Islamic State, which was finally defeated last year, and the face-off between the federal and Kurdish governments after their independence referendum.

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has emerged much stronger in popular opinion, his control of Dawa and broader influence. Just a few years ago there were real concerns that he could have been ousted by Maliki midway through his term. Now he has formed his own broad coalition, called the Victory Alliance, taking a leaf from Maliki's playbook. Meanwhile, Maliki has reconstituted his State of Law Coalition.

However, there are big unknowns in the coming election, which is harder to predict than others, given the reshuffling of the deck of parties and leaders and the impact of the events of the last four years (e.g. war against IS and Kurdish independence referendum) on voter opinions. There is no reliable polling to keep track of this between elections. In the past, provincial elections have come a year before the national ones and given some lead indicators to what people are thinking, but provincial elections were delayed due to the war and are now happening in December.

There are three major questions to consider for the vote on May 12. Firstly, how will the core Shia Dawa voters split between Abadi and Maliki, and will Abadi attract material numbers of non-Shia votes (particularly Sunni, as he is unlikely to secure Kurdish voters)?

Secondly, how much support will go to the Conquest Alliance, the main group formed out of the Iranian-backed Shia militias (Popular Mobilisation Units) that mobilised against Islamic State? (Its core is the Badr Organisation, headed by Hadi al-Amiri, which was formed in the 1980s from Iraqi exiles in Iran and has fluctuated between being a militia and a political movement. Badr already has 22 seats (7%) in the outgoing parliament.) Some of those militias were already represented in parliament but many of them are new to politics. Their profile is much higher than in previous years.

Thirdly, how will the continued high levels of displacement, particularly of Sunnis, impact the vote? Some Sunni leaders had been calling for delays to allow time for resettlement.

There is a host of smaller groupings as well, with the many familiar faces heading coalitions and parties (e.g. Muqtada al-Sadr, Ammar al-Hakim, Usama Nujaifi and Nechirvan Barzani). Many of those can get a few percent of the vote and, depending on how the split between Abadi and Maliki supporters falls, could be kingmakers. It is unlikely that any single list will win more than a fifth of the seats, so a coalition government would probably need to bring together half a dozen or more major parties.

The expectation is that the militia parties (the Conquest Alliance) will back Maliki, while most of the others will oppose him. However, this is not guaranteed and Abadi even had an abortive attempt to integrate the militias into his coalition in January – it lasted less than 24 hours and probably will have cost him some of his credibility as a nationalist.

Meanwhile, the Kurds have had bruising experiences with both Maliki and Abadi and if they end up as potential kingmakers then will likely look for the best deal, although they are unlikely to negotiate as a single bloc this time given deep internal splits.

Turning to Iran and Saudi Arabia, Iranian influence runs extremely deep, and not just with Shia but also with some of the Kurds. The close involvement of the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) in providing strategy and training to the militias during the fight against Islamic State brought that influence to a new level. Qassim Suleimani, the head of the IRGC al-Quds Force, was a near-constant presence on the front lines.

The US Secretary of Defense has also accused Iran of funnelling money into the elections, presumably to the Conquest Alliance. However, Iran's influence is not uncontested. Many Iraqi Shias worry about Iranian overreach and their Iraqi and Arab identities counterbalance their sectarian resonance with Iran. Very few Iraqis any longer aspire to an Iranian-style theocracy. (Muqtada al-Sadr, despite doing his clerical training in Qom and being of partly Iranian origin, has always presented himself as a staunch Iraqi nationalist. Indeed, he played a role in the ongoing rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, making a surprise visit there last July.)

Haider al-Abadi has also tried to balance Iran and the Arab world, particularly Saudi Arabia. On his watch, Riyadh sent an ambassador in 2016 for the first time since 1990 (it replaced him when he made offensive comments) and also sent its foreign minister last year.

Abadi visited Saudi Arabia last June and a bilateral economic coordination committee has been formed to revive trade and investment, with talk of SABIC investing in petrochemicals in Basra and reopening the Arar crossing to trade for the first time since 1990.

Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf countries together in February pledged five billion dollars in loans and investment at the Kuwait donor conference for Iraqi reconstruction, although it is unclear how much of this will really materialise.

In terms of their preferences, the Saudis are very close to the Sunni parties and Iyad Allawi, a secularist. However, among the two possible prime ministers they favour Abadi, while Iran seems to favour Maliki -- although in 2014, Iran ultimately came around and backed Abadi. However, the precise nature of the coalitions that undergird whoever is prime minister will affect policy stances towards neighbours (Iran and Saudi Arabia). Also, we should not discount a compromise candidate emerging, just as Maliki and Abadi came to prominence as apparently weak compromise candidates.

Based on past experience, the government formation process could take many months and the resulting government is likely to be unstable.

Iran's Strategy

Iran is a unique actor in the region. It has a very security-focused foreign policy, which has caused it difficulties. Tehran is dealing with multiple interconnected concentric crises. These are much tied to the 2015 nuclear agreement and its withering; and May 12 will be an important deadline in this regard, when the Trump administration will decide if it will stay in the deal, withdraw from it or stay with conditions. This is very much connected to the economic pressure Iran finds itself under. Furthermore, a number of protests erupted in December and January and some are ongoing. Iran's currency has also been in freefall, driven by uncertainty stemming from Washington's forthcoming policy vis-à-vis Iran.

This is also tied to factional tensions at home. Iran's political elite is notoriously divided. A simplistic breakdown that could be used would be between principalists, also known as hardline conservatives, and pragmatic elites around President Hassan Rouhani, who are in alliance with reformists in the political system. Those groups are united in preserving and protecting the Islamic Republic, but divided in strategy on how to achieve this.

Since January, the elites are at a crossroads, struggling to make critical decisions on economic policy and foreign policy. This is playing out in reference to regional issues, tying in to Iraq, Lebanon and wider regional foreign policy as well. Iran currently feels under strong threat from neighbours in the region.

With its security focus, Iran differs from other countries that use their foreign policy to promote economic interests. If it had moderated its behaviour and support for proxy groups throughout the region, it could have avoided some of the economic pressures at home and the threat to the nuclear deal.

Nevertheless, Iran's security-focused foreign policy is guided by its history of tension with the United States going back to the 1979 Iranian revolution. It is tied also to a defensive perception of its security dating back to the Iran-Iraq war, when it felt isolated and encircled by the states that opposed it. This gives Iran's political elite its paranoid sense of itself and its place in the region.

Iran sees itself as defensive in its actions in the region, while other regional actors see Iran as acting offensively. This increases tensions and distrust. Iran has also managed to apply a very long-term foreign policy, which it has effectively used in multiple theatres. We have seen it grow its relationship with Hezbollah and with Shia groups in Iran, as well in Syria.

These relationships with nonstate actors help Iran achieve strategic depth by pushing threats as far away from its own border as possible, aiming to ensure that it will never be under attack as during the Iran-Iraq war. Relationships with proxy groups bolster the country's asymmetric capabilities -- Iran is aware it has weaker military capacity than its neighbours.

Another goal is repeatedly to challenge US presence in the region. Iran believes that the US role in the Middle East has been predominantly negative in its consequences not just for Iran but also for the wider region.

Iran therefore tries to create opportunities for itself in the Middle East and to promote relationships (not solely sectarian, but with a variety of groups) in order to promote its interests and to obtain leverage in different arenas so that it can challenge the United States, obtain strategic depth and get as close to Israel as possible.

In bringing this to the current round of elections, Iran's objectives are clearly to support its proxies, both Lebanese Hezbollah and the Popular Mobilisation Units' candidates in Iraq. In Iraq, Iran has maintained a consistent policy. It would like to see an Iraq that is strong enough to maintain territorial unity but weak enough to never pose a threat to Iran again. Territorial integrity is important because it feels that any fracturing of Iraq could have a domino effect on Iran as well. An important element of Iran's Iraq policy is to push for the United States to be evicted. Therefore, many of the candidates Iran backs have called for US withdrawal.

Beyond this, there is no unity within Iran's elite over strategy in Iraq. There are contesting voices, which can be broken down into the pragmatic and the reformist groups vs. the hardliners. The hardliners, for example, backed Maliki and believed that his policies were effective because he had succeeded in getting the United States to withdraw and leave Iraq, whereas Rouhani believes that backing Abadi is a more balanced strategy that can protect Iran in the long run.

Iran is very aware that nationalist sentiments are high and that anti-Iranian sentiments are brewing. It is therefore cautious not to overstep. Nevertheless, this is an important election. They ultimately want to ensure influence and maintain strategic depth, possibly using Iraq as a territory to confront US interests should tensions in the Levant heat up.

With regard to Lebanon, Iran's goal is to maintain its support for Hezbollah and keep the Hezbollah-dominated status quo strong. Iranian officials have been visiting Hezbollah, recently including hardline former presidential candidate Ebrahim Raisi. They have a mutual but uneven dependence. Hezbollah-Iranian relations are closer than ever because their interests are tied to the conflict in Syria. Iran is not looking to increase tensions in Syria or Lebanon, but Lebanon has proven to be a very useful staging ground to protect Iran, for example in the recent conflicts between Hezbollah and Israel.

Ultimately, Iran is looking to maintain its ties throughout the region and see its candidates win at the ballot box, as this is necessary for Tehran to make use those people in the post-election scenario to support its own national interests.

Saudi Arabia is increasing confrontation with Iran across the region and, in particular, encouraging the United States not to waive sanctions again, stepping away from the nuclear deal. Riyadh feels that Tehran has expanded through too many different means into too many different Middle Eastern countries. In fact, the countries that Saudi Arabia is likely most concerned about in the short term are Yemen and Bahrain, but that does not mean that Iraq and Lebanon are irrelevant.

Saudi Arabia's Strategy

Saudi Arabia is taking very different approaches to those two polls. In Lebanon we saw last year a failed effort by Saudi Arabia to apply heavy pressure to reduce the role of Hezbollah in the country and to push away from the alignment with Tehran. Pre-election, the policy is now much softer. It is focused on support for Sunni candidates, with a public rapprochement with Hariri and allocation of donor funds. The president, Michel Aoun, who is fundamentally a Hezbollah ally, has just visited Saudi Arabia and received promises of increased tourism. That said, if the election result that seems to Saudi Arabia to be empowering Hezbollah significantly, we could see a rapid change. Iraq is a very different case. In Lebanon there is a balance between the two countries (Iran and Saudi Arabia), in Iraq it is clear that Iran is a primary influence (together with the United States -- although to a much lesser extent these days). What Saudi Arabia is doing there is much more opportunistic. It is about providing economic and social benefits. Riyadh is setting up a new consulate and promising construction funds and even a football stadium, which was a massively popular pledge. Saudi Arabia does not anticipate any kind of election victory, but is taking a longer-term view on not limiting Iran's popularity across the region.

Questions

Is it a clear fact that Hariri was detained by Saudi Arabia last year?

No, it is not a clear fact -- at least, he does not say so himself. He claims that he was free to move around, which made it easier for him to mend ties with Saudi Arabia. There were a lot of indications that initially he was restrained, but the way he looks at it now is that he was not.

What can be expected in terms of violence and is there a risk in either country that the elections could be disrupted by increasing violence?

In Lebanon, most of the political elites, the leaders of the big parties and movements, are very interested in making this run smoothly and they do have a certain level of control over the streets through intermediaries. There are no major risks therefore of crowd violence or terrorist bombings. There could however be a risk from regional events, as we saw in Syria, where the bombings of chemical sites risked involving Lebanon as well. There is always that threat of retaliatory action against Iran bringing in Hezbollah. There are questions over whether Israel might see this as an opportune moment to act. That is the major worry. The security services and the army are very invested in protecting polling stations. There could be a risk of terrorism from Islamic State-linked groups but in general those sorts of attacks have been few in recent years. The route into Lebanon from Syria has been blocked and protected by the army and Hezbollah, working together. The elections will likely run fairly smoothly but the political process thereafter may well be messy.

In Iraq, elections are always messy and there is always violence. The situation is however relative. Currently around ten civilians are killed by violence every day, which seems like a vast number but by Iraqi standards is close to the lowest it has been since the US invasion in 2003 and about one fifth of the level a year ago. I am sure there will be incidents: remnants of Islamic State might launch attacks. There are also other armed groups. The Shia militias could intimidate voters. There are no real red flags that any of this would affect the overall outcome of the elections.

Is Iran supportive of the Iraqi army's push into the disputed territories (Kirkuk and other regions that the Kurds garrisoned in 2014 against IS and then tried to hold on to and wanted to integrate into Kurdistan regional government)?

These areas are largely Kurdish but are outside the Kurdish administrative regions. It is certainly the case that Iran was keen to see the Iraqi army recapture those areas, both because of its desire for unity in Iraq and because of its own Kurdish separatist movement, which it does not want to see empowered by developments over the border. The relationship between Iran and the Iraqi Kurds is both interesting and complicated. Traditionally, they have been close to some of the Kurds near their border region. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan was the main party there, although it faced challenges in recent years and has lost its leader Jalal Talabani. So, the relationships with Iran are changing and it is not entirely clear how they will evolve. There a flux but Iran is engaged with the Kurds as well as with the Shia, and this will continue.

Qatar confrontation – will it affect the elections or is this a separate conflict in its own right?

The Qatar conflict for the time being seems to be localised within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), with the UAE, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia creating their own alliance and leaving the other three out on their own but not quite allied together. Ultimately, this leaves Qatar quite marginalised, creating an opportunity for Iran. Tehran has come to the aid of Doha, offering food assistance and opening up its airspace. These are ties that have the potential to grow, but neither side will necessarily overstate the relationship, which historically has been tepid.

In Iraq and Lebanon, the Gulf split limits overt Qatari influence and leaves the two regional hegemony to dominate and support more visibly, whereas Qatar has to focus on the crisis at home.

What are the mechanisms of Saudi influence on the Iraqi elections? What are its levers here? Is it relying on money? Does it have more direct influence? Is it relying on Arab nationalism?

Saudi Arabia really has very limited direct influence. It has not built up ties with the political groups who are currently important in Iraq. Instead it will deploy money, which is unlikely to influence the elections greatly but could change feeling within Iraq, Saudis hope, gradually.

A football match was recently played between Iraq and Saudi Arabia, which was a huge hit in Iraq and very popular. It is not so much that Saudi Arabia is creating or fostering Arab nationalism in Iraq, but nationalism is re-emerging in Iraq and that is in many ways in opposition to Iran, which has been such a dominant influence for so long. This sense of general nationalism can mean that politicians have a reason to stand independently of Iran, calling on Arab identity -- and Saudi Arabia is hoping to capitalise on that.

Government formation post-election in Lebanon – what sort of bargaining will take place once the election is done? Is the likely length of time this will take going to increase the risk of instability?

Lebanon has had troubles with government formation in the past.

We will probably be looking at some similar patterns of government formation to those in 2005. Of course, there are some known unknowns like civil society groups, but even if they have a good election, they might get four or five seats in parliament at most. It is quite likely that Hariri will again emerge as the most probable candidate for the post of prime minister, which means that he will continue branding himself as an inclusive figure, who can negotiate with Hezbollah. His rival Ashraf Rifi said that he had moved too close to Hezbollah and was not critical enough; Hariri replied, "if we are not supposed to have discussions with our opponents, who should we discuss with?"

Given that Hariri has the backing of Western countries and Saudi Arabia and is emerging as a statesman, as long as he remains acceptable to Hezbollah, there will be a lot of interest in promoting him as the prime minister. However, if his bloc (meaning the Future Movement, Lebanese Forces, PSP, and the smaller groups that support him) really has a bad election, the situation will be much trickier. Then we might be looking at a Sunni prime minister closer to Hezbollah. It is not clear who that would be: there are not many options.

Hariri as prime minister would form a cabinet and then the big discussion will be around who will get which ministries -- almost certainly a drawn-out process of several months. It is always a question, who gets the ministry of defence and the ministry of interior. Hezbollah has come to view those ministries as 'their' ministries because they are linked to the security of the state. They will not relinquish those to Hariri-backed politicians. The son in law of president Aoun is currently in charge of the ministry of defence: he could perhaps continue. Then there would be a bargaining process to reach a result that Iran and Saudi Arabia would be able to live with. This is the scenario if there was a closely contested election. If one side wins a landslide, the situation would be much more difficult, as neither side is likely to yield and just hand over power.

Government formation in Iraq -- what do you see as the contours of the messiness?

Iraq is similar to Lebanon in many ways and the two countries' political systems and government formation are probably the closest of any countries in the world. They both have to balance sects, although the Iraqi landscape does not have the two clear blocs that Lebanon does. This makes it even more complicated. Based on past experience, we can probably expect two to five months for

government formation. A lot depends on whether there is a clear strong vote for either Maliki or Abadi to put them in a leadership position. However, even in the most optimistic scenario, neither would get more than around 70 seats out of 329.

They will therefore have to draw heavily on other parties and then you would get the bickering over ministries as in Lebanon. Traditionally certain parties have treated ministries as their own fiefdoms and used them for corruption and patronage networks. It seems likely that Abadi will come out as prime minister but beyond that it is very difficult to say who will get which ministries. This in turn could very much influence how the reconstruction process goes and the success of the government's attempts to get Sunnis back on side and show them that after the gruelling war against IS, the government is still a government for all Iraqis. It will also affect the way the government relates to the Kurdistan region. There are still outstanding complicated deals on oil revenue sharing, fiscal transfers, borders and the status of disputed regions like Kirkuk. The way the government forms will affect how those issues evolve over the next couple of years.

What are the likely reactions from the EU if or perhaps when the Trump administration decides on the May 12 effectively to pull the plug on the Iran nuclear deal?

There are a number of scenarios of how Trump and the EU will react. Just yesterday, the EU was not able to vote in favour of expanding sanctions against Iran for its regional foreign policies. A bloc of EU countries that did not support the sanctions that were brought forward by the United Kingdom, France and Germany in an attempt to placate the Trump administration and demonstrate that they were looking for ways to "fix" the deal so that Trump would stay in. At this point there is a high likelihood that the administration will withdraw. The question is: how are they going to withdraw? Are they going to withdraw and reimpose secondary and extraterritorial sanctions thereby limiting EU and wider investment in the Iranian economy? Or are they going to withdraw from the JCPOA but not impose extraterritorial sanctions, thereby keeping the door open for Iran to stay in the deal?

The E3 is still working on this. Macron and Merkel are both going to the United States towards the end of April and will be making pleas to keep the president in the deal. One cannot presume to know what Trump will do as he likes the element of surprise in his foreign policy, but it seems that the EU does not really have contingency plans. There is a possibility that the EU could invoke blocking regulations against secondary sanctions, but it will likely not have the will to stand up against Trump. The deal is ultimately not going to survive if Trump withdraws from the JCPOA without providing protection for the EU.

What are the chances of war between Saudi Arabia and Iran? How is the Huthi-Saudi conflict going to play out over the next year?

Outright war between Saudi Arabia and Iran is very unlikely. It is not in either country's interest and is not the kind of scenario for which they are preparing. A continued proxy confrontation is much more probable. Yemen -- where Iran is backing the Huthis to some extent, although probably less than Saudi Arabia has claimed -- is a key arena. Yemen is a conflict that in many ways should be resolved. High costs mean Saudi Arabia does not want it to continue. Iran does want it to continue but is unwilling to engage many resources. There should be room for a deal, but this is unlikely for three reasons. Firstly, the UN resolution laying out the grounds for a deal is not appropriate to the balance of power between the actors. Secondly, both sides believe that they are winning. After the killing of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, the Huthis have greater control of their core territory than ever, while the Saudi-led coalition can point to fresh military advances. While both sides have this sense of an advantage, they are unlikely to concede. Thirdly, both the south and north of Yemen are fragmenting: this means there are more actors involved, making it harder to come to a deal.

In the first year the Lebanese diaspora is able to vote, will this have an impact to the election in Lebanon or decrease Saudi influence?

The impact will not be significant, as the numbers of diaspora registered voters are still too small.

How will post-election governments in the two countries view the nuclear agreement issue and Trump's decision?

Both governments perform a tricky balancing act between Iranian and Western/Saudi interests. This is a structural feature of how the two countries are set up; it is likely to persist whatever the election outcome. Both are therefore strongly in favour of the nuclear agreement and any other measures to reduce tensions between the two sets of external patrons. They will be disappointed if it collapses, because it could make each country an arena for heightened proxy confrontation. However, the only scenario where there

could possibly be open protest would be if the deal completely collapsed and a strongly pro-Iranian premier were to emerge in Iraq, in which case Baghdad might pull away from Washington and display overt solidarity with Tehran on the issue.