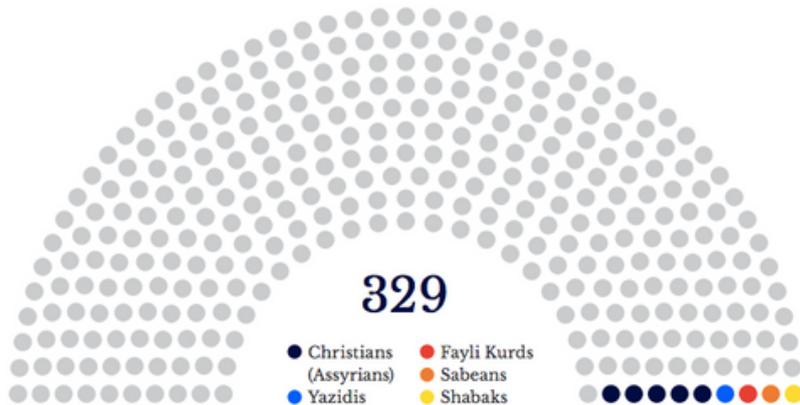


# BRIEFING:

## 2021 Elections for Christian Representatives in Iraq



### OVERVIEW

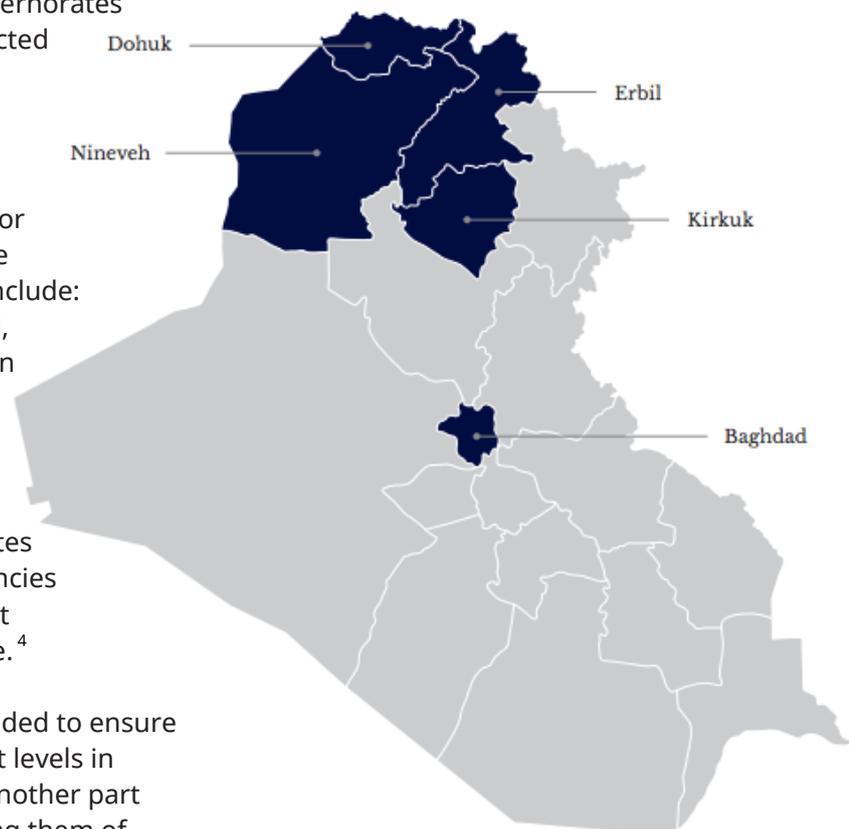
Early parliamentary elections are scheduled to be held across Iraq on October 10, 2021. The elections will decide the 329 members of the Iraqi Parliament, formally called the Council of Representatives, who will in turn elect the Iraqi President and Prime Minister. The Iraqi electoral system was changed following the last parliamentary elections held in 2018. Previously, elections were conducted under party-list proportional representation calculated using the Sainte Laguë method with governorates as constituencies. The 2021 elections will be conducted under the “single non-transferrable vote” system within 83 constituencies which have been defined under the new electoral law.<sup>1</sup>

Of the 329 parliamentary seats, nine are reserved for minorities—including five for “Christians.”<sup>2</sup> The five governorates represented by the Christian quota include: Baghdad, Ninewa, Kirkuk, Erbil, and Dohuk. In total, there are 34 candidates contesting the five Christian seats (see the full list of candidates available on pages 8-9).<sup>3</sup> Voters are not limited to candidates nominated for their governorate of residence (i.e. a resident of Dohuk can cast his or her ballot for a candidate in Baghdad), and Christian candidates will appear on all ballots issued to the 83 constituencies across Iraq. The candidate who receives the highest number of votes in each constituency will win office.<sup>4</sup>

However, the minority quota system that was intended to ensure representation of minoritized groups at the highest levels in government has been exploited and has become another part of the machinery repressing Assyrians and depriving them of equality among their fellow citizens in Iraq.

### QUICK FACTS

- Iraqi parliamentary elections will be held on October 10, 2021.
- Five parliamentary seats are reserved for 'Christian' representatives.
- Electoral reforms did not address the abuse and exploitation of the minority quota system.
- A loophole in Iraqi electoral law will enable majority parties to steal seats reserved for minorities.
- Turnout among Assyrian voters is expected to reach a historical low.



## DETRIMENTAL LOOPHOLE

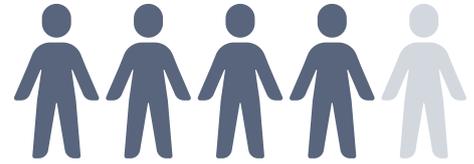
For more than a decade, a loophole in Iraqi electoral law has left the voting process for the selection of the Christian MPs who will fill the seats reserved by the quotas open to non-Christian voters, enabling powerful non-Christian parties to exploit the quota system. In other words, parliamentary ballots permit non-Christian citizens to vote for Christian candidates. Given the smaller electorate involved, elections for Christian representatives are contested by majority parties as part of a calculated strategy to win additional seats with less votes required—while simultaneously creating the illusion of support for their agenda from Christian populations. This destructive practice involves the methodical mobilization of tens of thousands of non-Christian voters, ultimately overriding the Assyrian vote and disrupting the democratic process. In order to win seats in the parliament, major Iraqi political parties must mobilize hundreds of thousands of voters according to a calculation made against the total population. However, the lower number of Iraqi citizens voting for representation through the quota system means that a significantly lower number of votes is required to secure the fixed number of seats allocated to Christians. Thus, Assyrians often say that their seats are “cheaper.”<sup>5</sup>

This negative trend has been detrimental to the interests of Assyrians from the establishment of the quota system in 2010, resulting in unaccountable representation. Denial of real political empowerment enables socioeconomic marginalization and violent targeting of Assyrians with impunity by dominant actors. The same problem also afflicts the elections of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The enduring exploitation of the minority quota system has thus widened the gap between Assyrians and their political representatives.

Iraq’s 2018 parliamentary elections for Christian representatives were marred by severe fraud, voter intimidation, historically low turnout among Assyrians, and deliberate electoral interference from non-Christian, majority groups—reflecting a broader electoral injustice.<sup>6</sup> Four of the five seats reserved for Christians were won by proxies of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Badr Organization.<sup>7</sup> These elections were seen to lack legitimacy, and those representatives are perceived by many as partisan tools serving the interests of the dominant parties rather than those of the Assyrian people. These factors have consistently undermined the integrity of the electoral process and are likely to deter participation in the forthcoming elections.

The absence of laws to protect the spirit and purpose of the Christian quota system—first by mandating that only Christian voters are entitled to select their representatives, and second by prohibiting the use of financial patronage by dominant groups to colonize the political landscape of marginalized ethno-religious populations—has therefore resulted in the near-complete elimination of independent minority political representation. With competition and deliberate interference from majority parties amid ongoing population drain, Assyrians have struggled to secure legitimate representation.

The systemic failings evident in the elections and the low levels of voter participation in districts inhabited by Assyrians show the need for fundamental reform. Such reform requires principled political leadership committed to the rights of Assyrians and other minoritized groups. Without this, the consequences will be unaccountable leadership and further disengagement. Electoral reforms instituted following the 2019-2021 Iraqi protests did not involve minority stakeholders and failed to address deficiencies related to the quota system. Assyrian voters will likely be deterred from casting their ballots this October as a result.



***Four of the five seats reserved for Christian representatives are currently occupied by proxies of the KDP and Badr Organization.***

***The systemic failings evident in the elections for minority MPs and the low level of participation from Assyrian voters show the need for fundamental reform. ■***

## 2021 ELECTIONS FOR CHRISTIAN REPRESENTATIVES: KDP VS BADR

While the 2021 elections are ostensibly competitive with a large number of candidates contesting the seats reserved for Christians, in actuality the competition is primarily between the KDP and the Badr Organization. Both the KDP and Badr have established and continue to finance alternative Christian political parties to compete with, undermine, and challenge the authority of established and authentic groups. Political finance regulation is nonexistent as it pertains to the minority quotas, undermining transparency and equality of opportunity among minority candidates. These artificial entities (or proxy parties), such as the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council or the Babylon Movement, are used by the KDP and Badr to achieve electoral victories over authentic Assyrian parties. This often results in minority representatives communicating and presenting the dominant party's interest towards their community, rather than the other way around.

In total, there are five registered political coalitions for the upcoming elections (full list available on page 7). Of these, only a single coalition—the Assyrian Democratic Movement—is contesting the elections without endorsement or funding from ruling parties. Another independent Assyrian party, Abnaa al-Nahrain, announced a boycott of the elections due to continued interference from majority parties.<sup>8</sup> Apart from these coalitions, 12 Christian candidates are contesting the elections as individuals, though many of them are also backed by powerful majority parties, such as the KDP, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the Iraqi Communist Party, and *Nasr al-Iraq*.

**The Kurdistan Democratic Party** is a Kurdish nationalist party and the dominant Kurdish faction in Iraq. The party claims to promote democratic values, social justice, freedom of speech, and equality. However, the KDP has been described by experts as tribal and autocratic—and as the ruling party in the KRG, has committed extensive human rights violations against Assyrians and other marginalized groups. Contrary to popular perceptions of the KRG's treatment of minorities, since its founding the KRG has marginalized Assyrians through a number of harmful policies, patterns of governance, and other repressive practices—including the systematic expropriation of Assyrian lands and severe violations of freedom of speech.<sup>9</sup>

**The Badr Organization** is an Iraqi Shia Islamist party considered “Iran's oldest proxy in Iraq” due to its close ties, and is a serious political and military force in Iraq. It has been accused of serious human rights abuses—including against minorities in the Nineveh Plain, where its affiliated forces continue to occupy Assyrian towns, preventing the return of displaced Assyrians. The Badr-backed 50th Brigade in particular has illegally seized and sold agricultural lands, and Assyrians have accused the group of intimidation, extortion, and harassment of women.<sup>10</sup>



◀ The main KDP-backed Christian candidates Raed Ishaq Matti (left) and Sami Ushana (right).

▶ The main Badr-backed Christian candidates, Iraqi Minister of Migration and Displacement Evan Gabro (left), and Aswan Sawa Kaldani, MP (right).



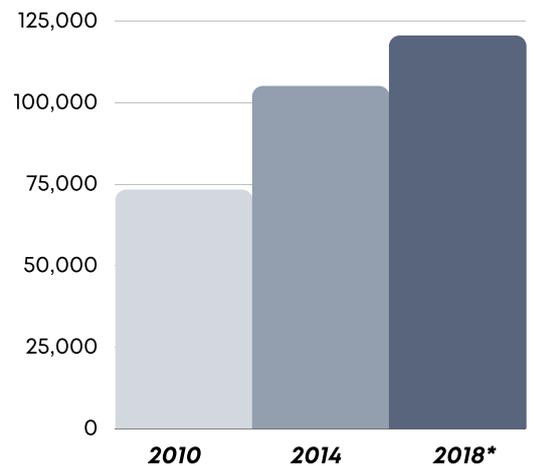
## LOW TURNOUT EXPECTED AMONG ASSYRIAN VOTERS

The total vote tabulation for Christian representatives in the 2018 elections was 120,582, an improbable increase of nearly 20,000 voters from 2014 despite the decrease in the Christian population, high rates of internal displacement due to the rise of ISIS, and less than 20% average turnout in areas with large concentrations of Assyrians.<sup>11</sup> The actual turnout of Christian voters is understood to be significantly lower than the final tabulation, clearly indicating the interference of non-Christian voters. Low voter turnout in districts inhabited by an Assyrian majority during the 2018 elections signals growing civic disengagement among Assyrians commensurate with the community's disillusionment with the political process in Iraq, a trend that is expected to continue this October.

In addition, the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) earlier this year canceled election participation for citizens living abroad, a decision that disproportionately impacts Assyrians in the country amid ongoing population drain. Unlike predominant communities, independent Assyrian candidates heavily rely on expatriate voters to secure their seats in Iraq's parliament.<sup>12</sup>

Declining participation among minoritized populations warrants review by the IHEC, UNAMI, and other international partners in order to make elections more inclusive and those elected more representative of minority populations.

TOTAL VOTES CAST FOR CHRISTIAN QUOTA CANDIDATES 2010-2018



\*Excludes expatriate votes following cancelation by IHEC.

**The implausible increase in the number of voters for Christian quota candidates between 2014 and 2018 clearly indicates the interference of non-Christian voters. ■**



ADM campaign event held in on September 24, 2021 in Dohuk featuring candidate Yacoob Yaco (pictured).

## SIDELINING AUTHENTIC ASSYRIAN REPRESENTATIVES

The manipulation of the Christian quota prevents independent Christian parties from retaining seats in parliament, thereby silencing their voices and sidelining their policies. Popular independent Assyrian candidates are specifically targeted by majority parties.

For example, Among the candidates contesting the Christian seat for Dohuk is Yacoob Yaco, who is considered the top candidate for the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM). Two KDP-backed Christian candidates, Sami Ushana and Faris Youkhana, are also vying for the Dohuk seat. However, the KDP reportedly pressured Youkhana into suspending his candidacy in order to consolidate KDP votes and bolster its chances for success against Yaco.

## BACKGROUND: A MINORITY QUOTA HIJACKED BY THE MAJORITY

The institution of a minority quota is aimed at achieving an equal or more balanced access to political power by applying measures of positive discrimination in order to engage marginalized groups. Despite the fact that the Christian quota seats are intended to provide marginalized Assyrians a voice in the Iraqi Parliament, voting in the Christian quota election since its establishment in 2010 has not been restricted to Assyrians and other Christian groups. This means that non-Assyrians are able to vote in the very elections that determine the special representation of the Assyrians. The irony of this defective system is striking: the ostensible purpose for the quota is to protect the interests of an underrepresented minority, but this objective is undermined when the majority is able to supersede Assyrian wishes and determine who will fill the reserved seats. The recent elections proved the dwindling population of Assyrians simply cannot compete with dominant Arab and Kurdish entities intent on co-opting minority quota seats to advance their own agendas.

Repeated attempts to advance measures to protect the integrity and purpose of the minority quota system have been unsuccessful, including in regard to proposals for separate ballots, special elections, and/or separate electoral rolls clearly defining that only members of these minority groups are entitled to vote for their candidates. In the absence of any such measures intended to ensure elections better serve the interests of the Assyrian people, the outcome of these elections is largely determined by dominant majority parties, undermining voters' free choice and distorting the playing field. As a result, the legitimacy and accountability of minority representation in Iraq is diminished.



Hemin Hawrami  
@heminhawrami

KDP has 28 seats. Duhok 10, Erbil 8, Mosul 6, Suli 1, Baghdad 1. KDP as the only multi religious party in Kurdistan, mobilized the Christian members & succeeded in wining 2 out of 5 seats of Christian quota. In total KDP now has 28.

5/19/18, 3:27 AM

21 Retweets 78 Likes

*In a since-deleted Tweet posted on May 19, 2018, head of KDP Foreign Relations and Senior Assistant to Masoud Barzani, Hemin Hawrami wrote, "KDP as the only multi religious party in Kurdistan, mobilized the Christian members & succeeded in wining [sic] 2 out of 5 seats of Christian quota. In total KDP now has 28."*

*In his tweet, Hawrami asserts that the KDP won 28 seats, a number that includes the two seats won by the KDP-funded Chaldean Assyrian Popular Council and the Chaldean Coalition. The significance of this statement from Hawrami is that it represents an open recognition that the KDP and the proxy parties are one and the same.*

**"We, as minorities, should be the only ones who have the right to vote for the people who will represent us and speak for us."**

—ASSYRIAN FROM ERBIL, AGE 43

◀ **Hundreds of Assyrians stage a protest against electoral fraud outside the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament building on July 30, 2018 following the KDP's capture of two quota seats reserved for Christians in the 2018 parliamentary elections.**

## LOOKING BACK: 2018 ELECTIONS FOR CHRISTIAN REPRESENTATIVES

The previous election cycle saw increased interference from party agents belonging to both the KDP and Badr. The KDP has consistently wielded its influence and military power to infringe upon the representation of Assyrians—from committing voter suppression in six major Assyrian towns in the 2005 provincial elections to unilaterally installing a party agent as mayor of Alqosh in July 2017—in pursuit of its long-term aim to annex the Nineveh Plain to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.<sup>13</sup> The KDP has consistently mobilized Kurdish voters to influence the elections for Christian representatives at all levels of government, including through its exploitation of Peshmerga soldiers and other KRG security personnel.<sup>14</sup> The partisan nature of KRG forces has enabled the KDP to maintain political power and secure significant victories in past elections through a controlled vote. Similarly, in 2018 the Badr Organization deliberately mobilized tens of thousands of Shia Arab voters, dwarfing the votes cast by Christian Assyrian voters and securing two seats reserved for Christians. These tactics compromise the integrity of the electoral process and therefore the legitimacy and accountability of Assyrian representation.

In the 2018 parliamentary elections for Christian representatives, a number of governorates had implausibly high voter turnout rates, clearly indicating the interference of non-Christian voters. For example, in Kirkuk, the combined total number of votes cast for KDP-affiliated Christian candidates was more than double the total Christian population in the governorate.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, there were tens of thousands of votes cast from southern provinces with dwindling numbers of Christians or no Christian population at all.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, in areas administered or controlled by the KRG, Assyrians are often subject to obstruction, harassment, intimidation, threats, and arrests by KRG security personnel and KDP supporters—notably the KDP-affiliated Asayish.<sup>17</sup> There are widespread reports of the Asayish intimidating and obstructing the work of Assyrian electoral workers and monitors. These factors have consistently prevented elections for Christian representatives from being genuine, free, or fair.

Evidence and allegations of electoral abuse and intimidation have generally remained unaddressed, and the Government of Iraq has failed to take sufficient steps to protect minorities' right to representation. **Learn more in the API's 2018 report *Iraq's Stolen Election: How Assyrian Representation Became Assyrian Repression* available at [www.assyrianpolicy.org](http://www.assyrianpolicy.org).**



Rehan Hana, MP was backed by the KDP in the 2018 elections. In the weeks leading up to the elections, her campaign received extensive coverage on KDP-affiliated media outlets.



Non-Christian citizens at a restaurant in Basra posing with a Babylon Movement campaign pamphlet during the campaign cycle.



Aswan Salem, MP of the Badr-backed Babylon Movement hosts a campaign event in Al-Rusafa District in Baghdad on May 4, 2018.



## CHRISTIAN COALITIONS AND CANDIDATES

Christian candidates can compete in the elections by running as part of an electoral slate which can be comprised of members of a single political party or a coalition of multiple parties. Slates can include up to five candidates with one candidate from each province represented by the quota. Candidates may also choose to run independently. The following section contains basic information about each electoral slate competing for seats reserved for Christians. The full list of candidates is available on page ##.



### ASSYRIAN DEMOCRATIC MOVEMENT

Founded by Assyrians in 1979, the ADM is the largest and most prominent “Christian” political party in Iraq. The party is headquartered in Baghdad. It has consistently retained seats in parliament since 2005, even prior to the establishment of the quota system. It is the only Christian slate contesting the elections without endorsement or funding from dominant parties.



### ASSYRIAN PATRIOTIC PARTY

Founded 1973, the Assyrian Patriotic Party was previously allied with the KDP. There was a change in party leadership in 2011, and since that time, the party has declared itself in opposition to KDP policy. However, the party is now backed by the Iraqi National Congress (Al-Moutammmar al-Watani al-Iraqi) which is led by MP Aras Habib Karim who was sanctioned by the United States in 2018.



### BABYLON MOVEMENT

The Babylon Movement is an Iran-aligned fringe group with little ties to the Christian community led by Christian militiaman Rayan al-Kaldani, who was sanctioned by the United States in 2019. It is affiliated with the Badr Organization. Its affiliated militia, the Babylon Brigades, was founded by the Iranian-controlled *Kata'ib al-Imam Ali* and is mainly comprised of Shia Arab soldiers.



### CHALDEAN SYRIAC ASSYRIAN POPULAR COUNCIL

The Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council, also known as al-Majlis al-Sha'abi, was founded by the KDP in 2007. As the KDP's oldest proxy, the Popular Council is fully funded by the KDP and is considered the party's “Christian wing.” It is affiliated with KRG President Nechirvan Barzani's faction of the KDP.



### HAMMURABI COALITION

The Hammurabi Coalition consists of three KDP-affiliated organizations: the Chaldean League; the Chaldean Democratic Union Party; and the Chaldean National Congress. It is led by KRG Minister of Transportation Ano Abdoka, and is backed by KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani's faction of the KDP.

## CANDIDATES CONTESTING THE SEATS RESERVED FOR CHRISTIANS IN THE 2021 IRAQI ELECTIONS

CANDIDATE NUMBER	NOMINATION GOVERNORATE	NAME (ENGLISH/ARABIC)	SLATE
118	Dohuk	Yacoob Gorgis Yaco / يعقوب كوركيس ياقو طليا	Assyrian Democratic Movement
119	Dohuk	Baida Khidir Behnam* / بيدا خضر بهنام يعقوب	Babylon Movement
120	Erbil	Nader Moshe Murad / نادر موشي مراد نادر تمو	Assyrian Democratic Movement
121	Kirkuk	Duraid Jamil Eshua Simon / دريد جميل ايشوع سمعان	Babylon Movement
122	Dohuk	Sargon Salim Benjamin / سرگون سليم بنيامين بطرس القس	Assyrian Patriotic Party
123	Dohuk	Ansam Manuel Iskander Mansour / انسام مانوئيل اسكندر منصور ادورد	N/A
124	Dohuk	Sami Ushana Gorgis / سامي اوشانه كوركيس انويه	Hammurabi Coalition
125	Nineveh	Khalil Musa Baho / خليل موسى بحو يسي	Assyrian Democratic Movement
126	Nineveh	Shamma Boutros Ruffo / شمه بطرس روفو يوسف اسو	N/A
127	Nineveh	Hoda Bernard Gerges Hanna / هدى برنار جرجيس حنا	Hammurabi Coalition
128	Nineveh	Riad Qariu Hanna Qariou / رياض قريو حنا ميخا قريو	N/A
129	Baghdad	Alaa Edwar William / الاء ادور وليم نصري	Assyrian Democratic Movement
130	Kirkuk	Emmanuel Khoshaba Youkhana / عمانوئيل خوشابه يوخنا بوداخ القصراني	Assyrian Patriotic Party
131	Erbil	Farouq Hanna Atto Shimon / فاروق حنا عتو شمعون	N/A
132	Erbil	Sana Yaqoub Flo Issa / سناء يعقوب فلو عيسى	Hammurabi Coalition
133	Dohuk	Rita Shamoun Yusef Shamoun / ريتا شمعون يوسف شمعون كه كوني	CSA Popular Council
134	Baghdad	Najib Saliwa Haido Hormuz Qas Hanna / نجيب صليوه حيدو هرمز قس حنا	N/A
135	Kirkuk	Imad Youkhana Yaqo / عماد يوخنا ياقو العمادي	Assyrian Democratic Movement
136	Baghdad	Heba Gerges Abdel Ahad Khosho / هبه جرجيس عبدا لحد خوشو القس	N/A
137	Dohuk	Sabah Nimrod Jajo / صباح نمرود ججو نمرود الديري	N/A

\*Incumbent

## CANDIDATES CONTESTING THE SEATS RESERVED FOR CHRISTIANS IN THE 2021 IRAQI ELECTIONS

CANDIDATE NUMBER	NOMINATION GOVERNORATE	NAME (ENGLISH/ARABIC)	SLATE
138	Erbil	Peter Munir Hormuz / بيتر منير هرمز نيسان العمادي	Assyrian Patriotic Party
139	Dohuk	Manar Mahfouz Mirkhan Gabriel / منار محفوظ ميرخان جبرائيل الخوري	N/A
140	Baghdad	Shamiran Morogel Odisho / شميران مروكل اوديشو شليمون البيلائي <sup>18</sup>	N/A
141	Erbil	Joseph Sliwa Elia / جوزيف صليوا سبي ايليا خوراني	N/A
142	Erbil	Raghad Youssef Gabro / رغد يوسف كبرو يعقوب	Babylon Movement
143	Nineveh	Kamel Rafou Yohana / كامل رفو يوحانه رفو كلكوان	CSA Popular Council
144	Dohuk	Faris Youkhana Balios / فارس يوخنا باليوس يويلا <sup>19</sup>	CSA Popular Council
145	Baghdad	Evan Faek Gabro / ايفان فائق يعقوب زيا جابرو	Babylon Movement
146	Kirkuk	Safaa Sabah Nasser Suleiman / صفاء صباح ناصر سليمان هندي	Hammurabi Coalition
147	Erbil	Hilan Issa Karim Ishaq / هيلان عيسى كريم اسحق	N/A
148	Baghdad	Lisa Rustam Yaqoub / ليزا رستم يعقوب ابراهيم دولي	CSA Popular Council
149	Erbil	Raed Ishaq Matti / رائد اسحق متي داود ال باهوخصر	CSA Popular Council
150	Nineveh	Aswan Salem Sadiq Sawa Kaldani* / اسوان سالم صادق ساوا الكلداني*	Babylon Movement
151	Baghdad	Hikmat Daoud Jabo / حكمت داود جيو حيدو	Hammurabi Coalition
###	Dohuk	Burhanuddin Ishak / برهان الدين اسحق ابراهيم <sup>20</sup>	N/A
###	Baghdad	Mashaal Matti Aziz / متي عزيز <sup>21</sup>	Assyrian Patriotic Party
###	Dohuk	Coriel Beto Shimon Boutros / كورئيل بتو شمعون بطرس <sup>22</sup>	N/A

\*Incumbent

For questions and media inquiries,  
contact us via email at [info@assyrianpolicy.org](mailto:info@assyrianpolicy.org).

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6. Ibid.
7. Current Members of Parliament occupying the reserved Christian seats include Rehan Hana and Hoshyar Yalda, who are affiliated with the KDP, and Aswan Sawa Kaldani and Baida Khidir Behnam, who are affiliated with the Badr Organization.
8. Statement by Abnaa al-Nahrain issued on July 28, 2021. [www.facebook.com/bnaynahrain/posts/1940191142810948](https://www.facebook.com/bnaynahrain/posts/1940191142810948).
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15. Hanna and Joseph. "Iraq's Stolen Election."
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Candidate formally withdrew from the elections on August 10, 2021 citing corruption and voter fraud and claiming that free and fair elections were impossible in the wake of the ongoing political crisis. See statement: <https://tareeqashaab.com/index.php/sections/news-report/1884-2021-08-11-20-42-40>.
19. Candidate withdrew his candidacy on September 26, 2021 following pressure from the KDP. The KDP reportedly aims to consolidate its votes in Dohuk for KDP-backed candidate Sami Ushana in order to bolster its chances for success against ADM candidate Yacoob Yaco.
20. Candidate was disqualified by the Accountability and Justice Commission based upon the de-Ba'athification law.
21. Candidate died from complications related to Covid-19 on May 23, 2021.
22. Candidate died from complications related to Covid-19 prior to the elections.