

## **Iraqi polls open in first elections since victory over IS**

12/05/2018 08:48 by admin

The results of Saturday's election are expected within 48 hours of the vote, according to the independent body overseeing the election.

**An Iraqi woman prepares to cast her vote in the country's parliamentary elections in Baghdad, Iraq, Saturday, May 12, 2018. Polls opened across Iraq on Saturday in the first national election since the declaration of victory over the Islamic State group. (AP Photo/Khalid Mohammed)**

**Baghdad:** Polls opened across Iraq on Saturday in the first national election since the declaration of victory over the Islamic State group.

No clear front-runner has emerged after weeks of official campaigning as Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi faces stiff competition from political parties with closer ties to Iran.

The vote, the fourth since the 2003 U.S.-led overthrow of Saddam Hussein, will be conducted electronically for the first time to reduce fraud. Polling centers have been set up for many of the country's 2 million people who remain displaced by the war against IS.

While the conventional war against the militant group has concluded and Baghdad is experiencing a relative lull in insurgent-style attacks, Iraqi security forces have imposed tight security measures ahead of Saturday's vote with a curfew in place in the capital.

However, many Iraqis who turned up early to vote Saturday morning expressed cautious hope for the future.

Al-Abadi took office just weeks after IS fighters overran nearly a third of Iraq's territory in the summer of 2014 and has since overseen the grueling military defeat of the group with close support from the U.S.-led coalition and Iran.

Despite al-Abadi's military achievements, Iraq continues to struggle with an economic downturn sparked in part by a drop in global oil prices, entrenched corruption and years of political gridlock.

Al-Abadi's most powerful opponents are his predecessor, Nouri al-Maliki, and an alliance of candidates with close ties to the country's powerful, mostly Shiite paramilitary forces.

The alliance, called "Fatah" \_ Arabic for "Conquest" \_ is headed by Hadi al-Amiri, a former minister of transport who became a senior commander of paramilitary fighters in the fight against the IS group. Many of the candidates on his list were also paramilitary commanders before they cut their official ties with the force in order to seek office.

Another key player in the vote is Influential cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. He commanded fighters in the war against IS and headed a powerful militia that fought U.S. forces in Iraq before that, but his election campaign has focused on social issues and eliminating government corruption.

In total there are 329 parliament seats at stake, with nearly 7,000 candidates from dozens of political alliances.

The results of Saturday's election are expected within 48 hours of the vote, according to the independent body overseeing the election.

Government formation negotiations are expected to drag on for months after that as the dozens of political parties attempt to cobble together a political bloc large enough to hold a majority of seats in parliament.

- AP