Edited by Andrea Plebani

AFTER MOSUL
RE-INVENTING IRAQ

Introduction by Paolo Magri

ISPI

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Introduction

Three years after the self-proclamation of the "Islamic State" (IS), the militants of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi have been driven out from most of the territories they had conquered in Iraq. Tikrit, Sinjar, Ramadi, Falluja, once strongholds of the so-called "Caliphate", have been fully liberated, and the group appears unable to keep faith with its ambitious motto: "*baqiya wa tatamaddad*" ("remaining and expanding"). These defeats have set the stage for the final phase of anti-IS operations in the "land of the two rivers": the liberation of Mosul. Indeed, the liberation of the last major IS stronghold in the country is likely to write a new page in the history of contemporary Iraq.

This holds true not only because it would mark the military victory of the anti-IS coalition, but also because it would put an end to a dark chapter in Iraqi history; one the country has been stuck in since the U.S. invasion in 2003. Indeed, deep transformations have occurred in Iraqi politics in this period. First of all, the Iraqi political system seems to have fallen into a profound crisis, marked by the difficult coexistence of a political class in decline (which came to power after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime) and new stakeholders who took part in the fight against IS and are now seeking a political reward. A second transformation currently underway is the importance of informal networks of influence, which are growing side by side with the official state institutions, often outflanking or substituting them completely; the increasing political power of warlords and their militias provides a clear-cut example. Finally, as shown by the renewed Kurdish push for independence, new relations between centre and periphery are taking shape, with unpredictable consequences for the future of Iraq as a unitary state.

However, the liberation of Mosul does not imply Iraq's liberation from IS *tout court* and even less so from the root causes which brought about its birth and ascent to power. Indeed, it is worth recalling that IS' sudden military success, often described as "astonishing" and unexpected, is instead the result of a long process; a process that led to the gradual erosion of the Iraqi state structure, and that goes hand in hand with the spread of corruption and lack of clear public authorities. The gap was rapidly filled by a number of rising jihadist groups, among which stood out Abu Musʿab al-Zarqawi's organisation, "al-Qaʿida in Iraq" (AQI). AQI went through different phases, with many ups and downs. But not even the killing of al-Zarqawi himself in 2006 was able to deal a lethal blow to the movement. The appointment of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its leader in 2010 was key to the resurgence of the group. This was also indirectly helped by the deep political crisis that had arisen in Iraq during al-Maliki's second term; a crisis that ultimately led to a growing polarisation of the country along ethno-sectarian lines, with the result – among others – of a strongly marginalised Sunni community. Between 2012 and 2014, the group led by al-Baghdadi was able to both contribute to and exploit the destabilisation of the country, until the launching of an all-out offensive paving the way to the battle of Mosul and the proclamation of the (in)famous "Islamic State".

Since then, Mosul has become the symbol of the rise of the "Islamic State", and its fall will mark a new milestone for the land of the two rivers. But this will not necessarily make things easier. Over the past three years, the country's multiethnic and multifaith society and its various political actors have been joining forces as they face the common goal of defeating IS, thus triggering an extraordinary phase of converging aims. But today such convergence risks disappearing, while – needless to say – several crucial questions remain unanswered: once Daʿesh is defeated in Mosul, what will be the fate of the city and the other liberated territories? And what about the destiny of the so-called disputed areas between Baghdad and Erbil? Is it possible

to fully eradicate IS from the country or is Iraq destined to fight an insurgency for years to come? If Iraq has to remain a "single, independent federal state with full sovereignty", as indicated in Art. 1 of the Iraqi Constitution, how will it be possible to reassemble the pieces of its complex political mosaic? How to counter the heightening polarisation that is undermining the very foundations of its diverse community? What plans for the future have been devised by Iraq's main socio-political actors? What are the interests and agendas of the main regional and international players? And, last but not least, what is their expected impact on the future of the country?

This volume intends to put all these questions into perspective, and to sketch out possible answers through a multi-pronged approach, bringing to light the complexity of the Iraqi scenario and the influence exerted by a broad array of actors operating at the local, regional, and international levels.

The first chapter by Ibrahim al-Marashi sets the stage for the analysis. The author delineates the main challenges affecting the Iraqi State, focusing on the complexity and fluidity of its inter- and intra-ethno-sectarian dynamics, as well as on the problems the government has to face at the socio-political, financial, administrative, security, and international levels. Indeed, as noted above, a multifaceted victory over IS will not serve as an end to Iraq's problems, as it may instead evolve into the beginning of a complex clash involving both domestic and foreign players. As the author puts it, the Shiite-dominated ruling coalition should implement more inclusive policies towards Iraq's largely neglected Sunni community; otherwise, the end of the battle for Mosul will only be a sort of "anything-goes" situation for the detonation of numerous underlying conflicts.

As a matter of fact, current Iraqi politics is marked by a high level of conflict and competition inside each one of the three main Iraqi ethno-sectarian communities (Sunni, Shi'a, and Kurdish). Giovanni Parigi shifts the spotlight to Iraq's multidimensional Shi'a community, analyzing its major socio-political actors, their different agendas, the relations they established

with key regional and international players, and the fragility of the Shi'a political block; one which is much more fragmented than generally assumed. Too often omitted, the political polarisation between the block led by al-'Abadi and the block led by al-Maliki is only one of the major fault lines which run through the Iraqi Shi'a community. In addition to the need to reconcile its internal differences, the Iraqi Shi'a should aim to establish a balanced relationship with the other two communities – the Sunnis and the Kurds – in order to avoid further rounds of internal strife and civil war.

The future of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (KRI) is discussed by Ofra Bengio. The author puts emphasis on the factors that allowed Erbil to substantially strengthen its autonomy *vis-à-vis* Baghdad, while at the same time underlining the fractures affecting the "other" Iraq. The author also examines the KRI's potential bid for independence, presenting the factors working against it and the strategies adopted by the main Kurdish socio-political actors.

The crisis that arose in the Iraqi Sunni community, as well as its fractured socio-political system, is at the core of the fourth chapter. In her contribution, Myriam Benraad describes the challenges and opportunities of a community whose marginalisation dramatically contributed to IS' successes. Indeed, normalizing the political status of Iraq's Sunni population, which has been a long-standing issue for the country, represents a prerequisite for a return to long-term security and stability, and to the establishment of an inclusive and truly unitary "new Iraq".

Marina Calculli focuses instead on the competing Iranian, Turkish and Saudi agendas in Iraq. The chapter presents the strategies adopted by these different players and the patron-client networks they established in the land of the two rivers, underlining the risk stemming from an escalation of the current competition.

The last chapter of the volume deals with the fate of the "Islamic State" in Iraq. After mapping out the evolution of the movement and the reasons that allowed it to re-emerge from

its ashes in 2010, Andrea Plebani examines IS' unique selling points and the strategy it adopted in the region. The last part of this chapter focuses on the viable options IS has at its disposal in Iraq, delineating the status of its remaining strongholds, the important operational capabilities it still retains, and the risks connected to an approach based only at the security level.

All in all, there is a fil-rouge going through the whole volume: no national reconciliation in Iraq will ever be forthcoming if previous mistakes are to be repeated. Learning from the past – and from the mistakes of the international community – will make the difference. One which may turn the liberation of Mosul from an end to chaos to a return to darkness.

Paolo Magri
ISPI Executive Vice-President and Director

1. What Future for Iraq? Unity and Partition after Mosul

Ibrahim Al-Marashi

Since 2014, the invasion of Mosul by the auto-proclaimed "Islamic State" (IS) has led to upheaval and conflict in Iraq and the region. However, as of 2017, the "Islamic State" appears to be losing its grip on its main strongholds. Despite the expulsion of IS from territory within Iraq's borders, both the collapse of the neighbouring state of Syria and the lingering presence of IS – no longer just a terrorist group, but a state-sponsor of regional and international terrorism – in Iraq and Syria still pose a significant challenge.

As a coalition of military forces is ejecting IS from Mosul, an examination of Iraq's future is even more salient. While the defeat of IS would be a significant national victory, the Iraqi government has yet to articulate a strategy to manage the post-IS endgame after the battle for Mosul. A victory over IS will not serve as an end to Iraq's problems, but will rather evolve into the beginning of an internal political battle over territory. While the Iraqi state and nation has survived intact since the IS incursion, the contours of Iraqi politics, identity, and culture have been transformed irrevocably since 2014. The question for the future is how the Iraqi state will reform and govern its territory in the aftermath.

The incumbent Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider al-'Abadi, faces a series of daunting challenges, both in governing Iraq, and in dealing with post-conflict security issues. Iraq's future stability is contingent on how the state and sub-state actors, as well as international and regional partners, will interact to overcome three interrelated challenges: 1) fostering Iraqi national cohesion, 2) strengthening national governance, and 3) balancing foreign interests[1].

[1] For a historical overview of these challenges see P. Marr and I. Al-Marashi, *The*

This chapter does not offer a forecast as to when these challenges will be or could be overcome, but rather serves as a diagnosis of Iraq's current and future problems. Addressing these challenges will revolve around two independent variables: first, a respite from internal conflicts and a modicum of internal security, and second, a stable, external regional order. Both scenarios appear elusive, and thus, Iraq's leaders will be dealing with the aforementioned challenges in a less than ideal environment.

Fostering national cohesion

In the immediate aftermath of the fall of Mosul and large swathes of the Arab Sunni heartland in Iraq to IS in 2014, analysts and policy makers projected that the Iraqi nation would disintegrate into Arab Shi'a and Arab Sunni states, with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) taking advantage of the chaos to declare its independence. Such predictions were premature. As I wrote in the immediate aftermath of the Mosul invasion, "Iraq is not facing imminent disintegration. It is being challenged by tribal links and a terror group that straddles the borders of Syria and Iraq in a zone I would call Syraq – but Iraq has faced similar crises in the past and has proved resilient"[2]. Of course, various actors in Iraq have and will continue to articulate a desire for Kurdish independence or a fragmentation of Iraq into three areas, but the more sustainable solution is for the Iraqi state to foster national cohesion to counter these partition sentiments.

To foster national cohesion, the Iraqi political elites will have to pursue a goal that, so far, has been elusive – a modicum of consensus among its various communities, divided along political, social, and geographical lines. While sectarianism has

Modern History of Iraq, 4th Edition, Westview Press, Boulder Co, 2017.

[2] I. Al-Marashi, "Iraq in Turmoil: The Rise of Syraq," *Al-Jazeera*, 17 June 2014, http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/06/iraq-turmoil-rise-syraq-201461711341937533O.html

been seen as the most divisive issue in Iraq's post-Baathist era, in order to forge a political consensus Iraq will have to deal with geographical disparities as well as generational divides within the imagined Kurdish, Sunni and Shi'a entities.

The breakup of Iraq

In the summer of 2014, Iraq's future as an intact nation was uncertain as IS seized Mosul and cities along the Tigris and Euphrates. In order to preempt IS advance, Kurdish forces seized the city of Kirkuk, which lay outside of the KRG's jurisdiction, but had been long coveted as an integral part of Iraqi Kurdistan.

At that juncture, the KRG emerged in a position of relative strength *vis-à-vis* the central government in Baghdad, whose military had all but collapsed in the face of the IS offensive. In July 2014, Barzani articulated the possibility of a Kurdish declaration of independence[3]. However, as IS came dangerously close to the KRG capital of Irbil in August 2014, the Kurdish leadership realised it would have to rely on American support, particularly its airpower, and subsequently deferred to Washington's long-standing policy that Iraq's territorial integrity remain intact. For the most part, calls for independence among the Kurdish political elites remained relatively silent, despite being a cherished dream among the Kurdish population, particularly the youth.

The other factor preventing KRG independence in the near future is Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's overriding fear that the rise of Syria's Kurds might embolden Turkey's Kurds. He has thus expressed renewed fears that an independent Kurdish region in Iraq, concurrent with an expanding Kurdish quasi-state in Syria, would only exacerbate Turkish Kurdish separatist tendencies[4].

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[3] M. Chulov, "Iraqi Kurdistan president: time has come to redraw Middle East boundaries," *The Guardian*, 22 January 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/22/kurdish-independence-closer-than-ever-says-massoud-barzani

[4] M.A. Salih, "Ma'a Rahil al dawlah al islamiyya min sinhar, tatasara' al-jama'at

Nonetheless, desires for independence and future visions of Iraq as a country split into three entities are still far from gone. For example, in 2016 Kemal Kirkuki, former Speaker of the KRG's parliament and a Peshmerga himself, said, "We hope Iraq becomes three independent countries; Kurdistan, Shiitestan and Sunnistan. We will be good neighbors […] we faced five genocides as part of Iraq, the state is no longer viable"[5]. Notwithstanding Turkish and Iranian objections on the formation of an independent Iraqi Kurdistan, the focus on the fragmentation of Iraq into these three states misses an important dynamic in Iraqi politics: there are just as many divisions within Iraq's Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurdish communities as there are problems between these different sects and ethnicities. These three groups would not be able to break off and form discrete, never mind stable political entities. Rather, the scenario of partition along these three lines misses a greater problem plaguing Iraq – the lack of a national cohesive ethos and political consensus.

Inter-sectarian tensions

The greatest challenges to national cohesion have been the sectarian conflict that erupted from 2006 to 2008, then persisted in the form of latent sectarian tensions from 2009 until the rise of IS in 2014, and the military campaign against IS afterwards, which has further heightened sectarian divisions.

The conflicts from 2006 to the IS invasion have resulted in internal displacement and shifts in the population that have left deep divisions between Shi'a and Sunnis. Repairing the social fabric caused by violence and social disruption will be daunting, especially after the trauma caused by the emergence of IS on all of Iraq's communities. Arab Shi'a have blamed Arab Sunnis

al kurdiyya lihkam saytaratiha", ("With the Islamic State withdrawal from Sinjar, Kurdish groups battle for its control"), *Al-Monitor*, 10 December 2015, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/originals/2015/12/iraq-kurdistan-sinjar-liberated-IS-hegemony.html

[5] P. Iddon, "Peshmerga Commander: We are planning for future operations against IS", Rudaw, 2 April 2016, http://www.rudaw.net/english/interview/02042016

for enabling the IS resurgence in the first place, as a means of challenging Shi'a government control. The Arab Sunnis blame the heavy-handed behaviour of Iraq's Shi'a security forces for creating resentment on the ground that made some of their community sympathetic to IS in 2014. They were then further traumatised by living under IS' control or suffering reprisals from Shi'a militias. Addressing these sentiments will be paramount to Iraq's future stability. If the central government or KRG fails to do so, IS' remnants can still intimidate alienated civilians in their vicinity, depriving security forces of the human intelligence needed to combat its sleeper cells.

The survival of IS' remnants will serve as a future challenge to sectarian relations[6]. As IS started to lose territory in Iraq and withdraw from the Iraqi cities in the summer of 2015, it proved it could still operate from the peripheries, resorting to launching car bombs in urban centres. The most devastating attack occurred on 3 July 2016 in the Karrada, killing more than 300[7]. Such indiscriminate weapons are designed to sap the morale of the civilian base of its enemies in Iraq, but also revert back to IS progenitor, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's plan of targeting Shi'a civilians to provoke retaliation against Arab Sunnis, fomenting a sectarian civil war. The possibility always exists of IS' remnants attacking a Shi'a structure or procession, such as pilgrimages to Najaf and Karbala. Such an action might provoke another series of retaliatory killing, as occurred with the bombing of the sacred Shi'a al-'Askari shrine in Samarra in 2006.

Intra-sectarian tensions

What most analyses of Iraq's present and future neglect are the intra-sectarian tensions that have evolved in Iraq since 2003. While

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[6] V. Mironova and M. Hussein, "The New ISIS Insurgency: What Jihadists Do after Losing Territory", *Foreign Affairs*, 9 January 2017, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2017-01-09/new-IS-insurgency

[7] A. Mamouri, "Ba'ad tafjirat al-Karada tawajah al-hakuma dhagutan ijtima'iyya l-tahsin al-amin," ("After the explosions in Karada, social pressure on the government to improve security", *Al-Monitor*, 13 July 2016, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/originals/2016/07/iraq-karrada-security-baghdad.html

Shi'a parties cooperated during the early election following 2003, the Shi'a alliance broke down in the lead up to the 2010 election. Arab Shi'a parties had a common foe in the shape of IS after 2014 but, in the present, there is no cohesive political Shi'a alliance in Iraq. Intra-Shi'a rivalries between Shi'a political factions allied with Iran and those trying to carve out a more nationalist trajectory for the nation have been a feature of Iraqi politics since 2003, and will continue to be so in the future.

Intra-Arab Sunni conflict is also pronounced. There is no single Sunni Arab political movement, and Arab Sunni politicians often jockey for position amongst themselves. In the immediate post-IS environment, reprisal attacks from Arab Sunni tribes using vigilante justice to punish other Arab Sunnis who collaborated with IS have already occurred[8].

Inter-ethnic tensions

In terms of ethnic relations, latent conflicts have endured between the central government in Baghdad and the KRG, a conflict among political elites that has filtered down to societal levels as part of a perceived conflict between Arab and Kurd since the formation of the Iraqi state in 1920.

Arab Shi'a have blamed the Kurds for enabling the IS resurgence to grab a territory outside of KRG control, such as Kirkuk. The Kurdish parties have blamed the central government for failing to provide military and economic resources for Kurds to fight IS, which came close to seizing the KRG capital Irbil. The Kurds will remember how vulnerable Irbil was in August 2014, and seek to secure enough territory to protect the KRG flank. Meanwhile, the central government will most certainly demand it reverts to its control.

A future conflict still looms between these two sides over the issue of territories Kurdish forces seized outside of the KRG

[8] V. Mironova and M. Hussein, "Iraq after ISIS: Why More Fighting May Be in Store", *Foreign Affairs*, 3 November 2016, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2016-11-03/iraq-after-isis

zone, particularly Kirkuk. Other ethnic conflicts in Kirkuk include those between Turkmen versus Kurd, with the former preferring to live under central government control.

Intra-ethnic tensions

Just as there are latent intra-sectarian conflicts, so there are intra-ethnic tensions. Kurdish divisions persist among the two dominant Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). In the KRG, a Kurdish opposition party, Gorran or "Change", opposes their duopoly of power. Another Kurdish actor has entered this conflict, the Syrian-Kurdish People's Protection Units (referred to by its Kurdish acronym YPG), usually referred to as an affiliate of the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), who expelled IS forces from the Iraqi town of Sinjar in November 2015. Finally, the Yazidis, a Kurdish people practicing a syncretic faith, are alienated from the KRG parties and security forces for abandoning them as IS forces entered their towns in 2014[9]. The Syrian Kurds have threatened the KDP's hold over Sinjar, which technically is not within the boundaries of the KRG, but is an area that the KRG had hoped to incorporate, along the lines of Kirkuk.

All of the categories highlighted above are fluid, and can manifest themselves in a single contested zone, such as the town of Tuz Khurmato, half controlled by the Kurds, half controlled by Shi'a militias ostensibly protecting the town's Shi'a Turkmen. In June 2016, members of two Shi'a militias, the Badr Organisation and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq fought street battles there, after the latter group kidnapped a member of the former. Thus, not only the town encapsulate ethnic tensions between Arab Shi'a, Kurds, and Turkmen, but intra-sectarian tensions as well. Furthermore, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq itself is a splinter of the Shi'a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army, and the Badr Organisation splintered from

[9] T. Goudsouzian and L. Fatah, "Is Sinjar the New Kobane?", *Al-Jazeera*, 13 November 2015, www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/11/analysis-sinjar-kobane-151113081340990.html

the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), demonstrating that, in Iraq, Shi'a political plurality is the norm. The situation in Tuz Khurmato is not an aberration but a projection of Iraq's future.

Other towns face similar problems, such as Tal Afar in the Ninawa province, which could witness a conflict between Turkmen Shi'a and Sunni. The Shi'a, who were expelled by IS, are seeking out reprisals against the Sunni for cooperating with the "Islamic State". Tal Afar could also be the site of a potential proxy conflict between Iran and Turkey. Iran and its Shi'a militia proxies have sought to secure the town and allow the return of its Shi'a inhabitants. Turkey has sided with its Sunni inhabitants, opposing an Iranian/Iraqi Shi'a domination of the town.

Identity mobilisational politics *vs* ethno-sectarian conflict

While ethno-sectarian attitudes will persist in the future, I argue that ethnic differences, such as speaking Kurdish or Arabic as a mother language, or theological differences between the sects, is not in and of itself a primary driver of violent conflict and political instability. Potential future instability in Iraq has been attributed to the tensions between Shi'as and Sunnis in the country, emerged from time immemorial after the 680 CE Battle of Karbala. Arab-Kurdish problems are linked to the beginning of the creation of the Iraqi state in 1920.

Rather than examining ethno-sectarian differences as primordial and embedded in Iraqi society, these tensions based on identity would be more aptly described as Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurdish narratives of victimisation and trauma. While these narratives seek to mask rivalries within each community, they need to be addressed to create a national consensus on what can be done to prevent trauma in the future.

The need of a national reconciliation process has been articulated since 2003, with little tangible results[10]. As of 2017,

[10] I. Al-Marashi and A. Keskin, "Reconciliation Dilemmas in post-Baathist Iraq-Truth Commissions, Media and Ethno-sectarian Conflicts", *Mediterranean Politics*,

ISCI proposed a reconciliation plan to the Iraqi parliament, but critics within Iraq argued it would fail to achieve this goal as it still excludes remnants of the former Baath party[11].

The challenge of governance

In the aftermath of the collapse of a strong Baathist state in 2003, a fragmented hybrid polity emerged. Despite its democratic features, its politicians follow former Baathist practices. Iraqi Shi'a parties emerged as a new political elite that, in order to remain in power, have adopted authoritarian features such as sweeping arrests and paranoia of being overthrown.

At the same time, since 2003, Iraq has made major improvements in terms of developing a democratic framework. The country has adopted a new constitution, albeit flawed, and has conducted several elections for a national parliament, all with unpredictable outcomes. There is a political leadership that represents large segments of the population, yet, at the same time, Iraq's government also reflects a fractured political landscape. A new class of career politicians is obsessed with keeping power, and collectively, the Iraqi government is one in which it is difficult to make decisions. Political elites practice ethnic and sectarian clientelism, while genuine political parties based on an alignment of ideological and national interest are still at an initial stage. Thus, the Iraqi system allows for political pluralism with competing parties, elections, and changes in executive leadership, but has so far failed to change the political elite which has come to power since 2003, to provide an efficient government, and to safeguard the rule of law.

Collectively, the problems of governance in Iraq were demonstrated by the government's failure to develop a strategy to deal with

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vol. 13, no. 2, Summer, 2008, pp. 243-259.

[11] N. Tarzi, "A Not-So-Historic Deal: Iraq's Post-IS Vision Runs into Trouble", *Middle East Eye*, 27 January 2017, http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/not-so-historic-settlement-iraq-s-post-vision-runs-trouble-1618578797

the IS threat since 2014, and will come back to relevance when dealing with the nation's future following IS' defeat in Mosul. As for the immediate future, al-'Abadi is presiding over a fragmented state, dealing with issues such as reconstruction and reintegration of territory and populations under IS control, and agreeing on Iraq's internal borders with the Kurds. At the same time, a series of sustained protests have emerged, pressuring al-'Abadi to achieve tangible policy reforms, with little or no success. This failure has revealed al-'Abadi's weak base of political support, as his attempts to address issues such as corruption have been stalemated by a recalcitrant parliament. The falling oil prices only exacerbated the issue, leading to severe cut backs in the budget.

Corruption

Iraq has developed a hybrid regime, characterised by a democratic *façade* but undermined by systemic authoritarianism and corruption. Apparently, traditional pre-2003 patterns of governance, such as patrimonialism and patronage-based relations, are resilient and embedded in Iraqi politics. Reliance on kin and clan, the patronage system, and subtle patron-client transactions (*wasta*) have resulted in inevitable corruption.

Al-'Abadi has faced demands for reform and restructuring of the political system, which he attempted so far with only marginal success. In August 2015, anti-government protests erupted in several Iraqi cities, such as the capital Baghdad, Basra in the south, Najaf, Karbala, and Hilla. The protests were primarily aimed at corruption in the government, which had resulted in electricity cuts and salty tap water[12]. The protestors demanded al-'Abadi to tackle the pervasive corruption affecting all levels of government, from politicians in ministerial posts to civil servants demanding bribes from citizen for completing even the simplest administrative task.

[12] I. Al-Marashi, "Endless Battle: Fighting Systemic Corruption in Iraq", *Al-Jazeera*, 11 August 2015, http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/08/endless-battle-fighting-systemic-corruption-iraq-150811084000991.html

The Prime Minister's failure to deliver on his promises enabled the reemergence of another player on Iraq's political scene. Muqtada al-Sadr, a Shi'a religious and political leader, has challenged two Shi'a parties, the Da'wa Party and ISCI, proving that intra-sectarian tensions will be an enduring feature of Iraq's future politics. In February 2016, al-Sadr convened a rally in Baghdad's Tahrir Square, mobilizing a crowd of close to 100,000 to pressure the Prime Minister to follow through with reforms[13]. Then, al-Sadr staged a sit-in outside of the Green Zone, the location of Iraq's parliament, to pressure al-'Abadi to accede to his demand for a technocratic cabinet that would tackle government corruption.

In April 2016, al-'Abadi attempted – and failed – to get approval for this new cabinet from the Iraqi parliament. He had presented a list of technocrat candidates to form a new Iraqi cabinet, including new Ministers of Electricity, Finance, and Oil and Water. None of the candidates in al-'Abadi's list came from the major political parties: they all were nominated for their technical expertise. However, a cabinet of technocrats threatened the power of career politicians already established in cabinet positions, and the latter rallied their fellow party members in parliament to obstruct al-'Abadi's plan, thus creating a political deadlock.

As for Iraq's future, al-'Abadi's introduction of cabinet based on a minister's technical skills, rather than their ethnic or sectarian background, represented the first serious attempt to challenge the governing consensus over the *muhassasa* system, a quota system that empowers politicians based solely on their ethno-sectarian background, rather than the expertise. The resistance al-'Abadi faced from career politicians represents the emergence of a new post-2003 political elite that benefitted from the system. After years of instability, the people will continue to seek out leaders who are qualified to govern and rebuild the nation, opposed to career politicians looking to safeguard their power

[13] I. Al-Marashi, "The Reinvention of Muqtada al-Sadr", *Al-Jazeera*, 9 March 2016, http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/03/iraq-reinvention-muqtada-al-sadr-160309061939234.html

and patronage networks. Ironically, Muqtada al-Sadr, one of the most polarizing figures in Iraq during the sectarian conflicts that has been raging since 2006, after the bombing of the al-'Askari shrine, has now evolved into one of the few nationalist voices in Iraq, joining Iraqi communists and leftists in street protests to demand reform of a Shi'a-dominated government.

Reconstruction & IDPs

The first paramount humanitarian issues the Iraqi state faces in its near-term future is the displacement of large swathes of the population, the reannexation of previously IS-held territories, and the reintegration of those who lived under IS rule. For this to occur, the Iraqi government will have to cooperate at the national, provincial, and municipal level to restore essential services, and then begin reconstruction of damaged homes and buildings. One of the greatest obstacles to reconstruction, is not just its financing, but the long, delicate process of removing improvised explosive devices (IEDs) from former IS-held territories such as Ramadi, Falluja, Sinjar, and Mosul.

The military campaign against IS led to the destruction of the aforementioned towns and cities, leading to a flood of internally displaced peoples (IDPs) within Iraq to refugee camps in the south and KRG. According to UN figures, there were 3,073,614 IDPs in Iraq as of March 2017[14]. Approximately 2.5 million were displaced by IS's invasion, 46% of which were forced to flee to the KRG. Thus, KRG experienced a sudden increase of its population by 28%[15].

Despite the military victories, these refugees will not be able to return to their homes, as most have been destroyed. Moreover, many of the refugees, mostly Arab Sunnis, are wary of returning to a post-conflict zone where the Shi'a militias are in control of their towns and cities.

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[14] Iraq Mission, Displacement Tracking Matrix, The International Organisation for Migration, 16 March 2017, http://iraqdtm.iom.int/

[15] P. Marr and I. Al-Marashi (2017), p. 325.

Finally, a good number of refugees belong to Iraq's minorities, including Christians, Yezidis, and Shabaks. Yezidis have begun to return to Sinjar, and Christians to town such as Bartella and Tel Kayf. However, the damage to their spiritual heritage, such as the destruction of Yezidi temples and Christian churches by IS, forced expulsion, and sexual slavery, will require reconstruction as well as investment in a mental health infrastructure, which is practically non-existent in Iraq or the KRG.

Political battles will ensue over who is going to secure and govern these areas, who will get to live there in the resettlement process, and how to reintegrate the IDPs. This problem will also hinge on the pace of reconstruction of the IS-held areas. But how will the central government manage this process? A good number of Arab Sunnis fear that after an IS victory, a Shi'a-dominated government will rule as a conqueror of this territory, largely supported by the Shi'a militias. Nowhere will this issue be more prevalent than in the city of Mosul. There is no political consensus over who will control the city after IS is expelled. In theory, the central government would: however, its governance led to the conditions that allowed IS to find fertile ground in Mosul in the first place. IS seizure of Mosul was a symptom of the failure of the Iraqi state. The question for Iraq's future remains as to how Arab Sunnis in this city, and Anbar and Salah al-Din provinces will reconcile with the central government.

In terms of reconstruction, Matthew Schweitzer, an Iraq Analyst at the Education for Peace in Iraq Center (EPIC), succinctly articulated a strategy for Iraq's future:

> Small, local, and flexible non-governmental and civil society organizations are best-positioned to undertake this work; by employing networks of volunteers from affected communities, they can maneuver political or military sensitivities, monitor humanitarian developments at the grassroots level, and quickly target aid to populations in the greatest need[16].

[16] M. Schweitzer, "Beyond a Military Victory: Reconstructing Iraq after ISIS", *The Global Observatory*, 17 January 2017, https://theglobalobservatory.org/2017/01/isis-iraq-united-nations-reconstruction/

If the central government and international governments and organisations adopt this strategy, it could promote a sense of local ownership in this post-conflict scenario, and provide an income for those in the affected regions.

Security sector reform

The IS offensive into Mosul in June 2014 and the ensuing collapse of the Iraqi security forces (ISF) took both Iraqi and international leaders by surprise. However, previous studies by ISPI in 2013, indicated that such an outcome should have been expected, given that there had been persistent problems plaguing Iraq's security force before the IS invasion of 2014[17].

From a security perspective, the behaviour of the ISF alienated it from elements of society. The use of ISF to attack protesters in the Iraqi Arab Sunni town of Hawija in April 2013 is one of the factors that fostered the resentment paving the way to the reemergence of IS. In terms of Iraq's future, the question remains as to how will Iraqi Arab Sunnis society, traumatised by both IS and the behaviour of Iraq's security forces, reconcile itself with the military institution representing the Iraqi state and nation. Security Sector Reform (SSR) will be crucial for dealing with the immediate problem of IDPs, creating security for the long-term reconstruction and the reintegration of areas formerly held by IS.

After his resignation in the summer of 2014 as a result of the fall of Mosul, al-Maliki had developed his own "praetorian guard," i.e. the Counter-Terrorism Force, otherwise known as the Golden Division, and derogatorily referred to as Maliki's "private army"[18]. This Division reported directly to Prime Minister al-Maliki, outside the chain of command of the regular armed forces. There were even rumours that this group

[17] For a discussion of the problems of security sector reform prior to the IS invasion see I. Al-Marashi, *Iraq's Security Outlook for 2013*, Analysis no. 197, Institute for International Political Studies-ISPI, 3 October 2013.

[18] D. Witty, *The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service*, Brookings Institute, March 2015.

would have launched a coup when al-Maliki first resisted his replacement as Prime Minister, Haider al-'Abadi. Since the IS invasion, the force has reformed itself, bearing the brunt of most of the urban combat in cities like Falluja, Ramadi, and Mosul, and emerging as one of the few professional, inclusive Iraqi military institution.

However, after the IS invasion, the issue of SSR has become even more complex due to the proliferation of armed para-military actors. With the army collapsing and IS on the outskirts of Baghdad in July 2014, the central government – first under Maliki and then al-'Abadi – faced a military emergency and a security vacuum, which was filled by the Kurdish Peshmerga and the Iraqi Shi'a militias. Given the time the U.S. needed to reconstitute the ISF, the defense of the government in Baghdad became dependent on militias, which supplemented, if not supplanted the regular military.

These militias were subsumed under the *Hashd al-Sha'abi* (Popular Mobilization Forces - PMF), an umbrella organisation that coordinated the wide array of para-military groups. As the Iraqi state did not have enough reliable ISF soldiers to be garrisoned at its bases for long periods, the Kurdish Peshmerga and Shi'a militias filled in the security vacuum in the rest of the country. Thus, the IS invasion allowed these sub-state actors to gain even more legitimacy as Iraq's only viable fighting forces.

Estimates indicated that the Shi'a militias' numbers ranged anywhere from 60,000 to 120,000 fighters, while the numbers of the Iraqi military after the fall of Mosul had dwindled to only 50,000 reliable forces[19]. The Iraqi Shi'a militias mobilised in response to the fall of Mosul in 2014, and the question remains as to whether these militias will be demobilised once IS is expelled from this city.

[19] The 60,000 figure comes from the Kurdish news portal Rudaw, rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/180520155. The 120,000 figure comes from the BBC, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32349379. The number of Iraqi military personnel comes from K. Katzman and C.E. Humud, "Iraq: Politics and Governance", Congressional Research Service, 16 September 2016, p. 12. There are no reliable figures for the number of IS fighters.

The leaders of some of the militias have already articulated a scenario in which they would not be demobilised, but rather continue fighting IS until they reach its capital in Raqqa, Syria[20]. As there are so many Shi'a militias, some may go to Syria, while others may stay in Iraq and increase their power by running in elections. There is also the possibility that some of the Shi'a militias may turn on each other: without a common enemy to unite them, they might rival each other for territory and authority.

A law, passed in November 2016, established the PMF as an official security force. Such a law essentially set up a system of "parallel militarism" – a system where branches of the military are not integrated but kept separate to suit the interests of the civilian leadership[21]. This system, devised by Saddam Hussein, was meant to deter the conventional Iraqi army from launching a coup by fostering a counter-army, the Republican Guard, with primordial connections to the regime. Maliki continued Saddam Hussein's practice of fostering smaller elite units loyal to the leader, alongside the regular Iraqi army. Al-'Abadi has not deliberately fostered this system, which has become a *de facto* reality as a result of the crisis of IS in 2014, and will continue to be so in the future.

Ironically, al-Sadr criticised this law and called for the dismantlement of Iraq's militias, despite being one of the first in Iraq to set up a Shi'a militia, the Mahdi Army, in 2003. He is now trying to dismantle the numerous Shi'a militias, a process for which he set a precedent, by 2017. In an interview in March 2017, he articulated his fear for Iraq's future: the fear that ethno-sectarian conflicts will worsen once the country no longer has an enemy to unite against in the form of IS[22]. In this volatile scenario, the opinion of al-Sadr is that too many militias would only increase the number of armed actors.

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[20] J. Steele, "Sectarian militias have no place in Iraq, says Muqtada al-Sadr", *Middle East Eye*, 20 March 2017, http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/muqtada-al-sadr-iraq-1637609574

[21] M. Kamrava, "Military Professionalism and Civil-Military Relations in the Middle East", *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 115, no. 1, Spring, 2000, pp. 67-92.

[22] J. Steele (2017).

The devolution of power

The notions of the territorial sovereignty of the central government will come to the fore not only over Mosul in a post-IS Iraq, but Kirkuk as well, which does not bode well for the already tense relations between the central government and the KRG. In this regard, the battle for territorial sovereignty will not only involve this city and its oil reserves, but also the complex issue of resource nationalism. Resolving the issues over Kirkuk and the allocation of oil will determine the survival of Iraq in the most optimistic scenario of a loose Shi'a-Kurdish alliance.

The question for the future is whether the Iraqi state will devolve more administrative powers to the Arab Sunni regions. One of the demands of Arab Sunni politicians is for a local national guard to maintain security in its areas. Al-'Abadi made efforts to arm the Arab Sunni tribes in Anbar, while the central government has sought to maintain control of their fighters combating IS by embedding them within the Shi'a-dominated PMF. Given that the PMF are controlled by the office of the Prime Minister, the state can claim that the militias function as an inclusive national institution, rather than a sectarian one[23]. A future looming debate is whether Arab Sunnis will demand an independent force, accountable to provincial governments, to maintain security, akin to the Peshmerga forces of the KRG.

Foreign influence

The last challenge for Iraq is dealing with foreign influence and control, as regional and international forces will continue to have considerable impact on Iraq's domestic political landscape. The U.S. withdrawal after 2011 was paired with an increase in the influence from regional competitors, especially Iran, and Turkey and Arab neighbours, such as Saudi Arabia.

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[23] H. al-Khoei, *How to Reclaim Iraq's Ramadi from ISIS*, Chatham House, Royal Institute of International Affairs, 19 May 2015, www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/17705

After 2014, the American military equipped and trained Iraqi forces to deal with the IS challenge, and as a result, both Iran and the U.S. vied with each other for influence in the domestic Iraqi arena, and will likely use their leverage to prevent the reemergence of IS. Iran's influence increased through training and equipping domestic Shi'a militias often outside of government control. New militias emerged, often with the Arabic word for "brigade" (*kata'ib*) in their name, such as Kata'ib Imam Ali and Kata'ib Hizbollah[24]. Qasem Suleimani, commander of the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, was often seen on the Iraqi frontlines, alongside Iraqi Shi'a militias.

The Shi'a militias, Iran, and the U.S. maintained an uneasy, *de facto* alliance against IS, and the question remains as to how this relationship will evolve after the expected defeat of the "Islamic State". Al-'Abadi declared that he would like U.S. trainers to remain in Iraq, even though its current number of 5,000 advisers might be reduced[25]. After the defeat of IS in Mosul, there is a chance that the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and its advisers will remain as well, becoming a likely flashpoint with the Trump administration, which appears to be looking for reasons to ratchet up tensions with Iran.

Turkey and the Gulf states will try to influence domestic politics to the benefit of their foreign policy goals. The Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, will try to limit Iranian influence by allying with local Arab Sunni parties. Turkey's policy has been to ally with one Iraqi Kurdish faction, the Iraqi KDP, in order to curtail the resurgence of Turkey's own Kurds in the PKK. Turkey has also trained its own militia of Arab Sunnis, *Hashd al-Watani* in the Iraqi town of Bashiqa. Al-'Abadi, though, considers this deployment a serious violation of national sovereignty. The leader of the militia is Athil al-Nujaifi, the ousted

[24] M. Al-Ghazi, "la nihaya lil-milishiyyat fil-'iraq," (No end to the militias in Iraq), *Al-Monitor*, 7 August 2016, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/originals/2016/08/jaish-al-moumal-muqtada-sadr-iraq-iran-shiite-militias.html

[25] J. Steele (2017).

governor of Mosul, who envisions his force securing the city of Mosul after IS is expelled. The central government has not agreed to his plan, laying the foundations for a future conflict.

Political elites on all sides have blamed and will most likely continue to blame foreign powers for domestic crises. Shi'a political elites blame regional Sunni powers, especially Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, for enabling the IS invasion, and will blame them for any future instability. Arab Sunni political elites blame Iran for dominating Iraq's domestic politics before and after the IS assault. Iraq will have to develop more domestic cohesion to be able to speak with one voice and to exercise a more significant regional role.

Conclusion

A vague sense of Shi'a identity has developed but has not translated into political unity even within the sect, much less extending to other ethno-sectarian groups. Dominant Shi'a groups were unable to formulate more comprehensive or inclusive models of a new national identity. Rather, Shi'a political elites will continue to remain focused on Shi'a parties and figures. The Kurdish-Arab divide, and the Shi'a- Sunni divide, has only widened after the rise of IS. This crisis, however, has failed to galvanize the leadership in Baghdad to invest in sustainable political solutions to the insecurity in Iraq, and it seems unlikely that these parties will engage in compromise and some method of sharing power with other communities. The leadership has instead concentrated on military solutions that could solidify their power, at least in the short term. The development of militias, challenging the monopoly of violence of the government and its army, point to future problems.

The challenge in the future remains as to how will Iraq's torn social fabric be repaired, and whether an inclusive sense of Iraqiness can be fostered on the political, elite level. Ongoing grassroots protests and local elections at provincial and even municipal levels will provide the potential for new leaders and

social outlets for political activities. In terms of Iraq's future, forging national consensus will more likely be embedded on the grassroots level or in terms of cultural and media productions to create a new Iraqi narrative. In time, reconciliation may be achieved by the grassroots rather than at the top.

Iraq's future remains uncertain, but notwithstanding the vicissitudes of its military campaign against IS, Iraq has reached a modicum of stability compared to other countries in the region such as Yemen, Libya, and Syria. Since 2003, democratic forms of governance have been introduced along openness to the outside world, but these forces of change have also been disruptive. The state of democracy in Iraq still offers some hope, even if it is an imperfect democracy. Relatively speaking, unlike in Syria, the idea of a state still exists in Iraq. Iraq's state bears similarities to the Lebanese state, which is a weak state, but still relatively stable in a post-Arab Spring Middle East.

2. The Land of Two Rivers Through Arab Shi'a Eyes

Giovanni Parigi

Last May, after protesters stormed the Green Zone perimeter, Prime Minister Haider al-'Abadi and the parliament Speaker Salim al-Jubouri checked out the damages done to the premises. When they stopped in front of a white sofa, someone took a picture, which went immediately viral on social medias thanks to the hashtag "My sofa_My prestige". Iraqi started to make fun of their politicians, apparently more concerned about a stained sofa than the performance of their governance. Indeed, the situation in Iraq is extremely serious and after fourteen years of democracy, the country is facing a dangerous crisis.

Paradoxically, after the recapture of Mosul and the decline of the deadly threat posed by IS, the underlying structural problems of Iraq shall quickly re-emerge even more acute. First, the Sunni node – or the lack of an effective political and economic inclusion of this community within the institutions and the power-sharing system – remains unresolved. Second, there is the gap between the federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), concerning the borders of disputed areas, the management of oil resources, and the identity and institutional structure of the Iraqi state. Third, there is the widespread popular discontent over the economic crisis, inefficient services, and poor governance of the allegedly corrupt[1] government in Baghdad. Finally, there are the consequences of the heavy influences by external actors.

Delving deeper into the Mesopotamian plight, the Shi'a-centric state-building process, radically rejected by Sunnis and only

[1] According to Transparency International's "Corruption Perceptions Index 2016", Iraq ranks at position number 166 on 176 states, https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2016

sporadically accepted by Kurds, was among the leading causes of Iraq's post-Saddam institutional fragility, its persistent security crisis, and the missed economic take-off[2]. Indeed, the demise of Saddam Hussein in 2003 had the indirect result of moving the political and institutional centre of gravity of the Iraqi state from the Sunni minority to the Shi'a majority; the following elections, in 2005 and 2010, stabilised such balance of powers. In other terms, the end of nearly 25 years of dictatorship ushered the country to a Shi'a political ascendancy, where a Shi'a ruling class – together with the Kurdish one – took control of all the ganglia of the state, filling the void left by the demise of baathist regime; Sunni community found little and precarious room in the new institutions, partly because of Shi'a's opposition, partly because of own Sunni baathist, nationalist and sectarian armed revanchism; furthermore, de-baathification policies and the disbandment of Saddam's army left the Sunni community without credible leaders and political structures. At the same time, the new power sharing system based on ethno-sectarian quota, the *muhasasah*, both disadvantaged Sunni minority and led to a polarisation of political and social dynamics, based on religious and ethnic identity and not on cross-communal political affiliation. In such a conflictual socio-political environment, it was easy for extremists of all sides to get the upper hand.

However, it is not only a question of ethnic or sectarian identities; it is not even only a question of clashing ideologies, but it is also a question of money and personal or political rivalries. Even if the conflicting polarisation between Arabs and Kurds as well as between Sunni and Shi'a is undeniable, in order to understand current Iraqi situation is necessary to take into account two further dynamics; the first is the high level of conflicts and competition inside each one of the three main Iraqi ethno-sectarian communities. As a matter of fact, between Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) there are heavy handed tensions, the Sunni landscape is fragmented in various competing neo-baathist, tribal,

[2] F. Haddad, *Shia-centric State-building and Sunni Rejection in post 2003 Iraq*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2016.

and local forces, while the Shi'a bloc is everything but cohesive and unitary. The second dynamic is the widespread loss of legitimacy and popular support by the political system and its representatives. Corruption, nepotism, and lack of public services created an increasingly deeper rift between Iraqi people and the "Caste of the Green Zone"; Iraq didn't have its "Arab Spring", but desperately needs radical and far-reaching reforms, which are avoided and delayed by the self-interest and political convenience of large part of the current political class.

The heavy influence of external powers, notably Iran, the U.S., and Turkey, is making matters worse. Thanks to the 2011 U.S. political and military disengagement, Tehran easily gained the upper hand but was unable to avoid the appearance of IS and to cope with it; consequently, Washington was forced to come back to Iraq and provide decisive military support, positioning itself again as an effective player on the Mesopotamian chessboard. Furthermore, Ankara has a growing interest in meddling with Iraqi internal dynamics[3], while Syrian civil war leaves a strategic depth to the "Islamic State" and an open door for the influences of a destabilising regional crisis.

The contentious brothers of the Bayt Shi'i

As explained above, the Shi'a community is central to Iraqi political, economic, and social dynamics. However, it is everything

[3] Turkey boosted KRG exports of oil independently of Baghdad, opening a pipeline reaching its Mediterranean terminals; a jab to Baghdad. Furthermore, in last few years, Turkish interventionism steeply escalated. Ankara has two main goals: the first is to fight hostile Kurdish movements, the second is to have a say in Iraqi internal dynamics, especially with regard to the Sunni community of northern areas of the country; as a matter of fact, many Iraqi Shiites have anti-Turkish sentiments since Ankara, in addition to his role of Turkman minority protector, is positioning himself as a relevant Sunni sponsor in Iraq and, lastly, because of its support to Sunni jihadists groups in Syria. Furthermore, Iraqi Shi'a disapproves Ankara's support to KRG, including the direct export of oil to Turkey, which is strengthening Kurdish claims on disputed areas.

but a cohesive and unified bloc. Competition, rivalry, intimidation, and violence characterised the relations among Shi'a different parties and movements even before Saddam's demise. To be honest, Shi'a movements were able to face together issues such as the first free election in 2005, forming a coalition as the United Iraqi Alliance and, in 2014, they attempted to counter IS with the establishment of *Hashd al-Sha'abi* (Popular Mobilization Forces - PMF). Notwithstanding that, their "winner takes it all" political culture is characterised by volatile alliances dictated by contingent and transient common interests, while parties and movements vie for power through control of public institutions and patronage networks.

In Iraq, the *Bayt Shi'i*[4] is hugely divided, given the contentious nature of Shi'a's identity, deeply differentiated due to opposing religious doctrines, different political visions or social attitudes, and openness to Iran and other regional players. Actually, different Shi'a movements competed in shaping the Shi'a identity, since in the post-Saddam Iraq, political dynamics moved along sectarian identities, which were then appropriated by the political discourse and exploited and sharpened by the politicians. As a matter of fact, current Shi'a movements and parties were mostly born during the Saddam's rule period, when the religious identities were polarised and manipulated by the regime. In that same period, the Da'wa, the Badr Corps, SCIRI[5] (now ISCI), and several others movements developed strong links with Iran, who hosted and protected their leadership and militants.

Therefore, in 2003 the U.S. ousted Saddam, the Shiite front was composed by those who re-organised in exile, as the SCIRI and the Da'wa, and those who survived in Iraq, like the Sadrist movement and Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani. The oldest political movement is the Da'wa, born at the end of the Fifties

[4] "House of the Shi'a community", and refers to all the Iraqi Shi'a institutions and organisations.

[5] Born in the 1980s as *Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq*, in 2007 renamed as Supreme Islamic Council of Iraq (ISCI).

by initiative of Shiite clerics willing to reverse the trend of secularisation[6] and marginalisation of their community[7]; even if Da'wa carried out subversive activities against the regime, it never developed an armed wing and, under Saddam's pressure, its leadership was exiled in Iran and London. Ideological rifts between those advocating Khomeini's theory of *velayat-e-faqih* and those sticking to the Da'wa's founder Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr political vision[8] led to a secession and the establishment of the SCIRI in 1982. Such ideological stance is alive nowadays: Da'wa endorses a strong national state where politicians also follows religious principles; in other terms, it opposes Iranian sponsored *velayat-e-faqih* but reserves to clerics an active and relevant role in political issues. Its pragmatic approach with Iran, its cooperative stance with the invading U.S. forces in 2003, its lack of an armed wing, together with the fact of being a relatively small but structured political party, allowed Da'wa to express all Iraqi Prime Ministers from 2005 onward. Thus, even if Da'wa is deemed somehow elitist, it managed to gain control of important positions in state institutions; in any case, the rise of Nuri al-Maliki and his autocratic tenure around 2014 led the party to a crisis, with a split between his supporters and Haider al-'Abadi's.

Another Shi'a's key player is ISCI, and it has a very different nature. As many other Iraqi movements, ISCI has a hybrid nature: it is not only a political party, but also an organisation active in the society, a religious player, and an armed actor. Since its inception, ISCI has been led by the al-Hakim, an eminent clerical family

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[6] For example, in 1960, the leading Ayatollah Muhsin al-Hakim issued a fatwa forbidding membership of the Iraqi Communist Party; see M. Farouk-Sluggett and P. Sluggett, *Iraq since 1958*, I.B. Tauris, 2003, pp.197-198.

[7] For an analysis of the origins of Da'wa and the socio-religious Shiite environment in the 1950s and 1960s, see F.A. Jabar (ed.), *Ayatollahs, Sufis and Ideologues,* Saqi Books, London, 2002.

[8] In an extreme simplification, Khomeini advocated the political leadership of the clergy, while al-Sadr advocated a sort of democratic governance. See T. Aziz "The Political Theory of Muhammad Baqir Sadr" chapter XV, in F.A. Jabar (2002).

from Najaf, granting to the party revenues from the religious shrines and institutions controlled by the family; furthermore, ISCI has developed an armed wing, the Faylaq Badr (the Badr Corps) trained and based in Iran. Following the fall of baathist regime, ISCI relocated in Iraq and joined the political process, opting for a pragmatic approach with the U.S. while maintaining strong links with Iran. It has also become an organised political party, backed by a strong military wing. The movement was able to exploit the U.S.-led state-building process, seizing control of the Ministry of Interior and its police; thus, large sections of the Badr Corps where enlisted in the security forces. However, right after the fall of Saddam, ISCI's popular support was limited by the fact of being perceived as an Iranian proxy. Consequently, the party "Iraqised", and its support for the *velayat-e-faqih* principle become more and more vague; the party even deleted from its name any reference to the Islamic revolution; as a matter of fact, ISCI is moving closer to Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani and his moderate political vision. In short ISCI, once a staunch proxy of Tehran, has aligned its social and political positions to those of the Iraqi middle class and traditional clergy.

By distancing itself from Iran, however, ISCI has lost control of its armed wing that, between 2007 and 2012, became a self-standing political party, the Badr Organisation, led by Hadi al-'Amiri.

Today the ISCI is weaker compared to the 2003-2009 period. In the 2010 election, weakened by the breakaway of the Badr, it was shadowed by al-Maliki and suffered the lack of leadership's continuity due to the death of Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim in 2003 and of his brother Abd al-'Aziz in 2009. In order to strengthen the party, current ISCI's leader Ammar al-Hakim established a new armed wing, the "Knights of Hope" and, in 2014, created the Muwatin parliamentary bloc rallying other minor Shi'a movements.

A third key Shi'a player is the Sadrist movement. Its ideological foundations and popular legitimacy draw from the Sadrein[9],

[9] Literally "the two Sadrs".

i.e, Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr and Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, both killed by the *ra'is*. As matter of fact, during Saddam's rule, the prominent religious family of the al-Sadr remained in Iraq, facing harsh repression but establishing nonetheless a widespread network of social, religious, and welfare services for the poor urban and rural areas. Therefore, the Sadrist movement, now led by Muqtada al-Sadr, has indigenous Iraqi roots and, even if it often waltzes ambiguously with Tehran, is probably the Iraqi Shiite movement less open to Iranian influences. When al-Sadr, after the 2005 election, took on a more nationalistic stance, opposing other Shi'a governing parties, Iran fostered the splintering of al-Sadr's Mahdi Army and the birth of militias such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (2006) and Kata'ib Hizbollah (2007); lately both became political forces, and this episode is a clear example of the Iranian *modus operandi*: *divide et impera*. In other terms, al-Sadr has difficult relations with Tehran, whose influence is seen as a threat as well as an opportunity to exploit by mean of tactical alliances.

Today, al-Sadr is a staunch opponent of any foreign influence in the country, and strongly endorses a cross-sectarian nationalistic stance, though one deeply imbued of Shi'a religiosity. Muqtada has not a high clerical status, but his political-religious position defies the traditional Iraqi Shi'a establishment, even if he opposes any influence from the Iranian clergy. From an ideological point of view, Muqtada al-Sadr seems to advocate the primacy of political leadership over the religious establishment, even if clergy must be devoted to the role of political advisers. The Sadrist movement is a manifold organisation, active on the social, religious and political level, and linked to a powerful but volatile militia, the "Peace Companies". In the past, al-Sadr has resorted to violence, clashing with the U.S.-led Coalition and al-Maliki; now, acknowledging the support of the lower strata of the population, al-Sadr took a populistic stand, waging a populistic crusade against corruption and the "Green Zone's Caste", and endorsing sit-ins, mass protests and occupation of public squares.

But in the Shiite community there is another very powerful and influencing player, the clergy, notably the Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani. Shi'a clerics have a fundamental role in shaping Iraqi society attitudes, and heavily influence political life. The most powerful and long-established religious families control a widespread network of welfare, social, cultural, and educational institutions as schools, charitable foundations, orphanages, hospitals, seminaries, mosques, and shrines. After 2003, finally free to intervene at a social and economic level, they started to take on state functions. Every shrine has its own "protection militia" and sponsors militias. Thus, due to the low level of basic services and security, the popular mistrust toward public institutions, and the delegitimisation of politicians, clerics are gaining a bigger role in Iraqi society and politics, despite the position of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani and his predecessor Ayatollah Abu Qasim al-Khu'i, both advocating a "quietist" role of the Shiite clerics as moral guidance but without direct involvement in politics[10]. Moral authority and effectiveness of religious institutions clash with the corruption and wastefulness of the state, pushing people to trust and rely on religious authorities more than state's ones. Clerics' influence affects foreign policy, since the relations with Iran are ambiguous, also due to the historical competition between Najaf and Qom; none of the Iraqi *Marja'*[11] advocates the *velayat-e-faqih*, the founding doctrine of the Iranian revolutionary state, and Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, the most revered and popular religious leader, has always backed a constitutional order based on inclusive politics.

Since 2003, Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani has had a unifying role for the Shiite community and a positive balancing influence in Iraqi society; in 2005, he fostered the establishment of the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), and in the following years of violence and civilian strife he repeatedly urged the Shiite not to take revenge on Sunnites; in 2014, when the Iraqi Army collapsed,

[10] In any case, the influence of clerics is extremely strong, as proved by the demise of al-Maliki when he lost the confidence of Sistani in 2014.

[11] Top Shiite religious authorities.

he incited Iraqis to take arms and stop IS; furthermore, his support or opposition was decisive for the popular legitimation of every Iraqi government. Now he is strongly backing the popular requests of reforms and al-'Abadi's fight against corruption. The issue is that al-Sistani is an octogenarian and, in case of his passing away, there will be two immediate consequences. The first is the lack of a clear and respected guidance for the Shi'a community; the second is the competition of different Shiite forces, Iran included, for filling the *vacuum* and gaining the primacy of the *marja'iyya*. Furthermore, the succession to Sistani may open the door to a change of the political-religious line of guidance, and that is a possible strategic political game-changer. For example, two of the potential successors of Sistani, Ayatollah al-'Uzma al-Najafi and Ayatollah al-'Uzma al-Fayadh both endorse the theory that clerics should not just have an advisory role, as advocated by Sistani, but should speak with legal authority.

The Shi'a ascendancy and the "perfect storm" of the "Islamic State"

In short, during the Eighties and the Nineties, the social, political, and religious panorama of the Shiite community was composed of religious movements, armed groups, and leaders, mostly influenced by Iran. When in 2003 the U.S. ousted Saddam, all these forces seized the opportunity to have their "historical revenge" and get the upper hand: they organised in parties and monopolised the state-building process of the new Iraq, cornering the Sunni. The post-Saddam Iraq took shape in the years spanning 2005-2010: it was heavily influenced by Shi'a-centred power balances, structures, and control of state institutions.

Then, in 2011, with the withdrawal of American forces and a substantial U.S. political disengagement, Prime Minister al-Maliki stacked the political deck, unbalancing the internal relations of the Shi'a bloc as well as the relations with Sunnis on the basis of his authoritarian tenure. Only the arrival of IS at Baghdad's gates allowed the other Shi'a forces to oust him.

In order to understand the complexity of the Shi'a's political panorama and the actual agenda of each one of them, it is useful to analyse two key moments of Iraqi history: the parliamentary election in 2005 and 2010.

After the ad interim phase of governance between 2003 and 2005, Shi'a parties reached preeminence on the eve of the first post-Saddam election in 2005. Iran and Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani were able to push all the different Shiite movements into a unified electoral list, the UIA. At a national level, the outcome of the election was an accession to power by Kurdish and Shi'a representatives. Nevertheless, the unity of the Shi'a movements was hiding strong rivalries between Sadrists and ISCI. Thus, in order to overcome reciprocal vetoes, the Prime Minister was selected between the ranks of the smaller and weaker Da'wa. Al-Ja'fari's short tenure[12] was followed by two al-Maliki governments, from May 2006 to September 2014.

However, once the UIA seized power, it faced an internal struggle. Indeed between 2004 and 2008, the worst years of the Iraqi civil war, the conflict was not only between the U.S. and the Sunni insurgency, but also between the forces of ISCI and Badr on the one hand and against the Mahdi Army controlled by al-Sadr[13] on the other. Actually, the main divisive issue was the cooperation with the U.S., pragmatically exploited by ISCI and Da'wa in order to gain leverage in the state-building process, but energetically opposed by al-Sadr.

Thanks to this approach, between 2005 and 2009, ISCI was able to gain popular support and take root in state institutions and seized control of power and resources, which then exploited to broaden its popular support and promote its agenda. Even a weak movement such as Da'wa, after having gained control of key position in the institutions, was able to strengthen its position. In other terms, Da'wa, ISCI, and the Badr Organisation seemed more focused on taking control of the *dawla al 'amiqa*,

[12] It lasted from May 2005 to May 2006.

[13] In 2007 and 2008 Sadrist forces clashed with the U.S., other Shi'a paramilitary forces, and government's security units.

the "Deep State", rather than integrating the Sunnis into the new state institutions or achieve a stable relation with the Kurds; on the contrary, the KRG was focused on maintaining unscathed its de facto autonomy, establishing strong relations with Turkey rather than improving those with Baghdad[14]. With regard to the Sunni issue, it was the U.S. who eradicated Sunni insurgency with the "Surge" in 2007, coped with the *Sahwa*[15]. Then, in 2008, the defeat of the Mahdi Army provided a favourable environment for the rise of al-Maliki, whose centralising policy was intended as a way of strengthening the state. Once defeated, Sadr came to much more peaceful terms, taking a vocal but cooperative stance towards other Shi'a forces.

Unlike in 2005, the 2010 election saw a heightened electoral competition between the Shiite movements. Al-Maliki's coalition, Dawla al-Qanun (State of Law), was competing with the list Watany (Iraqi National Alliance) composed by ISCI, Sadr, the Badr Organisation, Fadhila, Hizbollah, and other movements. Iyad al-'Allawi, leading the cross-sectarian Iraqiyya, won the election, but a temporary rapprochement between Dawla al-Qanun and Watany, under the auspices of Iran, opened the door to al-Maliki's second term as Prime Minister.

This second term was exploited by the premier in order to establish control on state institutions at the expenses of the other Shi'a parties. Taking advantage of the U.S. disengagement from Iraq in December 2011, al-Maliki centralised state power and consolidated his personal grip, competing with other Shi'a parties for the control of the "deep state"[16], marginalising al-Sadr, and undermining competing coalitions; furthermore, al-Maliki coopted ISCI and Sadrist's splinters such as Qais al-Khazali, leader of Asa'ib Ahl al Haq, and Hadi al-'Amiri, leader of the

[14] KRG, and especially KDP, after the fall of Saddam rapidly became a political and economic partner of Ankara.

[15] See the chapter 4 by Myriam Benraad in this Report.

[16] Al-Maliki took control of the Central Bank, judiciary and legislative institutions, and independent commissions – Jabar, Mansur, Khaddaj, *Al-Maliki and the Rest: a Crisi within a Crisis*; Iraq Institute for Strategic Studies, Beirut, 2012.

Badr Corps, in order to get the support of powerful militias. As for the Sunnis and the Kurds, the authoritarian rule of al-Maliki dictated the marginalisation and repression of the former, and strong contrasts with the latter. Meanwhile, al-Maliki cooperated with Tehran on all common issues in order to get full support from Iran, while exploiting the terrorist threat constituted by IS in order to get support from Washington. This situation was exacerbated by corruption, mismanagement, and a brutal suppression of popular protests. Then, when the relations with KRG were almost broken and those with the Shi'a political front compromised, came the "Islamic State".

Actually, al-Maliki's policies as the disbandment of Sahwa's militias, a pushing de-baathification campaign, an army kept weak in order to avoid coups, and the prosecution of Sunni politicians[17] were among the main causes of the rise of IS; somehow, the "Islamic State" may be considered the response of the Sunni community to al-Maliki's marginalisation and oppression. The incredible success of IS in the summer of 2014 offered an opportunity to al-Maliki's opposition, while the Prime Minister lost the political endorsement of al-Sistani and the support of Iran; it is interesting to note that Tehran abandoned al-Maliki[18] after realising that a large part of the Iraqi political forces, backed by Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, was joining forces to oust the Prime Minister, while al-Baghdadi's advances were attracting U.S. intervention in Iraq.

Thus, with the country on the brink of collapse, al-Maliki was replaced by Haider al-'Abadi, another member of the Da'wa. The main and most urgent tasks of al-'Abadi were securing the national unity of Iraq and eradicating Da'esh; then, in the longer

[17] Vice-President al-Hashimi left the country following the issue of an arrest warrant, and Finance Minister Rafi al-Issawi resigned following several death threats.

[18] Incumbent Prime Minister has no ties or political roots with Iran; compared to al-Maliki, al-'Abadi adopted a much more independent stance on national and international policies. Tehran, somehow disturbed, seems now to be keeping the premier under pressure, sustaining PMF, fielding al-Quds pasdarans against Da'esh, supporting pro-Iranian religious institutions, and backing al-Maliki.

term, the new Prime Minister was expected to fix the state's dysfunctional political system, recover its economy and society from the wounds of the war against the Caliphate and, lastly, to ensure effective participation and inclusion of the Sunni and, as much as possible, of the Kurdish communities. In order to reach these objectives, al-'Abadi chose to launch far-reaching reforms, but his efforts were and are still opposed by a consistent part of the ruling political class – almost the same since 2005.

Furthermore, al-'Abadi has to face the emergence of new powerful players, such as the militias of the PMF. The rapid advance of IS in Sunni core provinces wasn't stopped by the feeble Iraqi army, but by the massive rush of volunteers called into action by the Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani's fatwa of 13 June 2014, invoking the "Right Jihad" and summoning "Citizens to defend the country, its people, the honour of its citizens, and its sacred places". Volunteers, mostly Shiites, flocked into the *Hashd al-Sha'abi* (PMF) militias or enlisted in the Badr Corps or Kata'ib Hizbollah, and stopped the jihadists; then, an executive order of al-Maliki formally sanctioned their role, which was later confirmed and regulated by al-'Abadi in July 2014. The PMF today enjoy widespread popular support and legitimacy, more than many of the political and military institution of the state[19]. The militias of the *Hashd al-Sha'abi*, rapidly imposed themselves not only as a military actor, but also as a political force. The Badr Corps, Kata'ib Hizbollah, and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, all sponsored by Iran, are, for all practical purposes, both militias and political parties ; other militias, such as the Sayara al Salam ("Peace Companies") of the Sadr faction, or the ISCI's Saraya Ashura (Ashura Brigades) and the Saraya Ansar al Aqidah (defenders of the creed brigades), are the armed wings of their political parties. However, several others militias – especially those established after Sistani's *fatwa* – do not have a political body or a political affiliation yet. In any case, many of these paramilitary forces act without an effective state control and are deeply sectarian. The armed Shiite factions

[19] Currently, PMF have a range of 70-130,000 volunteers.

are themselves divided on loyalty to Iran, and PMF militias' composition reflect the affiliation with different Shiite main players: a group of militias popularly named "Hashd Sistani"[20], is composed by followers of the Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani or groups affiliated to Shiite holy shrines under al-Sistani's supervision; main members of the Hashd Sistani are the Liwa' Ansar al Marja'iya, the Abbas Battle Group, Liwa' Ali al-Akbar, the Imam Ali Troop; the Kadhimin Battle Group gathers those who are motivated but unexperienced; another militia is the "Hashd Suleimani", trained and sponsored by Iran's Quds Force under its commander Qasem Suleimani; then there is the Hashd wilayet al Thalitha ("Third term Hashd"), composed by an array of militias supporting Nuri al-Maliki. The link between al-Maliki and several of these militias is strong: Hadi al-'Amiri, leader of the Badr Organisation, openly expressed its support for al-Maliki, who has direct contacts[21] with top Iranian leaders as Qasem Suleimani, leader of pasdaran's Quds Forces.

Given the weakness of the Iraqi army and security forces and the strong influence of Iran, as well as the conflictual and divisive political landscape of the Shiites, the future political role of the PMF shall be very incisive, especially in the light of the forthcoming election, probably in mid-2018. Moreover, as outlined above, several PMF's militias are already developing a strategy to become political and social entities. Last March, Qais al-Khazali, leader of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, announced his plan to open PMF branches in all Iraqi universities. These branches might easily gave him a strong leverage and political support, somehow even mimicking the cultural revolution of post-Sahah Iran in 1979. This plan faced strong and immediate opposition from the Ministry of Higher Education and several university deans. Given that the first PMF university's branch was in Tikrit – deep in the Sunni heartland –, and that several PMF already opened offices in all the main cities freed from IS,

[20] http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sunni-tribes-joining-Shi'a-militias-war-against-heats-iraq-1175770052

[21] http://www.farsnews.com/13950410000492 (in farsi language).

it is obvious that they are trying to gain control, or at least to have a strong presence, in Sunni provinces.

Given this, it is no surprise that the incumbent government is trying to limit the PMF's role on the battlefield and in the political context; in Mosul, the PMF has been deployed in the outskirts of the city, leaving the real burden of the battle to the army and security forces. Furthermore, al-'Abadi is trying to implement the law of 26 November 2016 on the PMF, which provides that members of PMF must have no political affiliations and must refrain from political activities.

Indeed, the sharp and invasive Iranian presence contributed decisively in splitting Iraqi Shi'a community. Iranian influence permeated every side of Iraq's life such as politics, economy, religion, and security. Actually, with regard to the Iraqi Shiite forces, Iran plays a *divide et impera* game, for example exploiting their tendency to internal factionalism, splintering, and leadership competition; which means that Iran doesn't put all its eggs in al-Maliki's basket, and is betting on multiple others Iraqi players. Therefore, if any of the party should win the election or gain power, it will be beholden to Iran. Indeed, Tehran considers the Shiite militias of the PMF as an invaluable force multiplier for its influence; in the region, militias are becoming Persia's preferred tool to serve its national interests. Tehran is also determined to prevent the rise of any autonomous Sunni territorial entity within Iraqi borders; meanwhile, Iran made the best of U.S. military presence, getting a piggyback ride against IS. Ultimately, the internal fault line of the Shiite forces revolves around the nature of the unavoidably close relation with Iran, in terms of complying with Tehran's agenda, or developing an independent line, compliant with Iraqi values and interests. On the one hand, al-'Abadi and Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani are trying to balance Iranian and U.S. influences, on the other there are pro-Iranian forces trying to exploit Tehran's weight to secure their own grip on power; al-Sadr, who is apparently refusing any influence form foreign players, is trying to carve out an independent position.

Now more than ever the Shiite political front is divided and conflictual, while new stakeholders, able to radically change previous political landscape to the benefit of Iran, are starting to emerge. The Shi'a rule, started in 2005, has reached a critical point: external threats and internal rifts have disintegrated the Shi'a front.

Current goals and agendas of the Shiite players

Today, the Iraqi political situation is complex and uncertain. Recently, Ammar al-Hakim announced that he wants to leave the leadership of the Shiite parliamentary bloc. Internal rifts inside the Shiite political front, formed three years ago by al-Hakim's Muwatin bloc, the State of Law Coalition led by al-Maliki, and the Sadrist movement or Ahrar bloc, led by Muqtada al-Sadr, are deepening. After the 2014 election, the alliance fell apart: the Sadrist Movement, Muwatin, and a part of the State of Law Coalition were backing Haider al-'Abadi, while the majority of the State of Law was pushing to reinstate al-Maliki. Nowadays, the internal rifts are structural and more evident, and the political balance and structure of the Shi'a front is changing. Al-'Abadi reformist efforts against corruption and mismanagement are backed by the Sadrist movement, which is endorsing popular protests; the Sadrists are also strengthening their links with liberal and secular parties, as well as with Iyad al-'Allawi. Al-Maliki is trying to gather the support of Shi'a hardliners, while al-Hakim seems to be closing the distance with al-'Abadi, increasingly promoting a political vision against sectarian divide and based on national reconciliation.

Actually, al-'Abadi doesn't enjoy a strong political parliamentary backing. He shares the same party, Da'wa[22], and coalition, the State of Law, with al-Maliki, and thus he receives feeble support from those two deeply divided political forces. However, he has gained both strong popular support and the backing

[22] The Da'wa, after the secession of al-Maliki, has become a "fluid" party, whose political alignment and internal cohesion are uncertain.

of Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, who basically shares his moderated and nationalist political vision; furthermore, the Prime Minister may rely on an ambiguous, tactical and temporary convergence of interests with al-Sadr, especially on reforms[23]. The problem is that the reformist requests of al-Sadr may sideline al-'Abadi and his plan[24]. As a matter of fact, they both enjoy strong popular support, but al-Sadr is able to mobilize the masses, while al-'Abadi is not. Thus, in order to avoid being sidelined by al-Sadr, al-'Abadi is somehow forced to implement his plan to remove the current government and replace it with technocrats selected by a committee. But parliament members of ISCI, Da'wa and Kurdish parties are opposing the cabinet reshuffle and want to keep the current power-sharing balance; in other terms, despite al-Sadr's support, al-'Abadi doesn't enjoy enough political power to implement his main reforms. In any case, Iran is against an al-Sadr-controlled government, due to his nationalistic attitude. Therefore, al-'Abadi "is stuck between Sadr wish to make him a puppet and the other Shiite forces that seek to maintain the status quo"[25]. Such a situation highlights how self-interest, opportunism and demagoguism are the rules of intra-Shi'a relations. At an international level, al-'Abadi is trying to balance the role of Iran and the United States, needed allies in the fight against IS, but whose influence is likely to be destabilizing and to limit the current Iraqi political autonomy.

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[23] "Moqtada Al-Sadr NRT Interview", *Lost in the Levant*, 19 January 2017, https://garethabrowne.wordpress.com/2017/01/27/moqtada-al-sadr-nrt-interview-1912017-english-transcript/: "... my brother Abadi has attempted reforms, I still want to take his hand and help to complete these reforms. I don't see him as corrupt. He has taken on many problems from the last government. Economic, Financial, Security – several cities were under ISIS' control".

[24] In 2016, al-'Abadi's government faced the resignations of the Ministers of Oil, Transporat, Housing and Construction, Water resources and Industry, as well as Interior. Thus, the premier called for the cabinet to include technocrats, and Muqtada al-Sadr, who organised several demonstrations asking for reforms, immediately endorsed his proposal.

[25] O. al Nidawi, *Abadi, Stuck Between Sadr and the Status Quo*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/abadi-stuck-between-sadr-and-the-status-quo

For example, on the one hand al-'Abadi states that, as soon as the struggle against Da'esh allows it, he wants a reduction of the U.S. contingent in Iraq; on the other, he already asked U.S. advisers to remain in the country and train the Iraqi army and security forces; the plan is to expand the training missions currently ongoing in Anbar, Nineveh, Salah ad Din, and Baghdad in all Iraq, and it is clearly a move to counterbalance Iranian's proxies presence and influence[26].

In terms of domestic policy, the Prime Minister pursues a moderate line, first of all seeking a rapprochement with the Kurds and the Sunnis. The problem is that both the Kurds and the Sunnis appear divided, fragile, and unstable; the contrast between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), on the one hand, and the PUK together to Gorran on the other, has almost led the Kurdistan Regional Government to an institutional paralysis. The situation of the Sunni community is just as much complicated. First, it is not yet clear how the Sunni political landscape will reconfigure after the flood of IS that, anyway, continue in its destabilising efforts. At a local level, the basic problem is to give an effective role to authorities that are perceived as truly legitimate by the population, while at a central state level it is to ensure effective political representation; otherwise, the Sunni discontent will continue to nourish the insurgency, already active in the liberated areas, that sooner or later shall again constitute a vital threat. In this regard, the institutional, economic, and infrastructural reconstruction of Sunni cities devastated by the conflict will be central. The Prime Minister must also address extremely challenging legislative nodes, such as the softening of the de-baathification laws: the opposition of the extremist Shiite parties will be rock-hard.

Moreover, al-'Abadi's attempts at state reform, such as reaffirming and strengthening the prerogatives of the institutions, are facing a strong opposition by many Shiite politicians.

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[26] M. Saadoun, "Will US keep military bases in Iraq after IS?", *Al-Monitor*, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/03/iraq-usa-security-mosul-iran-military-base.html

As a matter of fact, al-'Abadi's fiercest enemy is former Prime Minister al-Maliki, who is working behind the scenes and poses him the strongest political threat; for example, last autumn, al-Maliki was able to have the parliament dismissing the Defense and Finance Ministers. Al-Maliki is also teaming up with Shi'a's right movements like PMF militias, that are united in opposing 'Abadi's reforms, such as his political opening to the Kurds and his policy against the sectarianism; such a situation is also influencing Iraqi foreign policy, since al-Maliki backed Abu al-Muhandis, a PMF leader close to Iran, in his proposal to deploy Iraqi militias in Syria to pursue IS. The participation of Iraqi PMF Shiite militias to the Syrian civil war violated al-'Abadi's orders and strengthened Iran, all the while enabling the mobilisation of a sort of "international Shiite *jihad* "[27]. Furthermore, al-Maliki was able to gather a parliamentarian group, the Reform Front, unofficially controlled by him; this group is composed by more or less one hundred parliamentarians from the Da'wa, the State of Law, the Badr Organisation, and other stray politicians.

In other terms, al-Maliki has the backing of something like one third of the parliament and is trying to weaken 'Abadi's position, accusing of corruption his ministers and supporters. Thus, al-Maliki is still pushing to regain power in Iraq, and he can rely on a strong political bloc, the support of militias, and a discrete Iranian backing.

Apart from al-'Abadi, al-Maliki has also another irreducible enemy: Muqtada al-Sadr. He is openly against al-Maliki, that he dismisses as someone with a "militant mindset"[28], unable to provide stability to the country. Al-Sadr's nationalism clashes with the strong links that al-Maliki has with Iran and its sponsored militias. Last November, Muqtada al-Sadr outlined

[27] Thousands of Shiite volunteers had been recruited by Iran from half a dozen countries – Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan included –, in order to be trained and sent in Syria to fight.

[28] *Lost in the Levant* (2017): "The way he thinks is a militant way of thinking. Once he finishes one battle he wants to start another".

his vision of Iraq's political future in a document, "the Initial Solutions". The first step is to call local elections: that is why al-Sadr is asking for a reform of the electoral law and commission – otherwise, al-Maliki has strong chances to win, since he manipulated the system and still has a strong influence in the electoral institutions. Therefore, al-Sadr asked for UN intervention to write a new electoral law[29] and set up a new commission; however, UN Envoy Ján Kubiš declined, deeming the current electoral commission fit. Then he asked for UN funds for reconstruction and for a UN commission to monitor the respect of human rights and protection of minorities; he also suggested to set up a mechanism to investigate war crimes and prosecute the members of the "Islamic State", to support internally displaced people and foster the exchange of tribal delegations from the Shite south to the Sunni areas and vice versa, in order to reduce sectarian tensions.

As a matter of fact, Muqtada al-Sadr is calling for sectarian tolerance and national reconciliation, and asking for a disbandment of all militias[30], even going so far as to suggest to transform PMF headquarters into cultural and educational centres[31]; he doesn't want the PMF to intervene in Syria or even Yemen, and he repeatedly requested all foreign troops, U.S. and Iran included, to leave the country; he even asked to Bashar al-Assad to step down. Thus, among Shiite politicians, Muqtada al-Sadr is thought to be more open to dialogue with the Sunnis. Already in 2013, al-Sadr supported Sunni protests against the government in the Anbar province, speaking of an "Iraq's Arab Spring". A year later his coalition backed Sunnis' efforts to oust Prime Minister al-Maliki. Furthermore, his request to disband

[29] His proposed change of the electoral law is aimed to facilitate the role and participation of small political parties.

[30] His militia, the *Saraya as Salam*, is deployed north of Baghdad, defending Shite holy sites in Samarra. It is not fighting in Mosul.

[31] J. Steele, "EXCLUSIVE: Sectarian militias have no place in Iraq, says Muqtada al-Sadr", *Middle East Eye*, 20 March 2017, http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/muqtada-al-sadr-iraq-1637609574

the PMF after the IS emergency met Sunni's expectations. Al-Sadr doesn't advocate for the establishment of an Islamic state (such as Iran); he calls for a "civic state", based on political programs and policies and not on sectarian identities, and governed by an "independent technocratic group". However, his past behaviour and his controversial and confrontational figure might cast a doubt on the sincerity of Muqtada al-Sadr's policies. Even if nationalism, in Iraq, is a vague and contradictory principle – being often conceived exclusively on an ethnic or sectarian dimension –, al-Sadr seems to be interpreting it with a perspective overarching ethno-sectarian divides, even if advocating a marked Shiite identity. His nationalism is also marked by a staunch opposition to foreign influences, American and Iranian as well: given his nationalistic stance and bad relations with Iranian main allies such as al-Maliki, Muqtada al-Sadr doesn't have a stable relation with Iran. Unsurprisingly, al-Sadr is currently trying to strengthen links with Da'wa and ISCI, while his relations with the Kurds are bad. Since 2015, al-Sadr has been strengthening the links with secularist left wing movements and progressive parties: they share a common position on social justice and the fight against corruption. Given that the Sadrist movement is the only political force opposing al-Maliki's to have both an armed wing and well-rooted popular support, it could be the only armed player able to offset the militias affiliated to the former Prime Minister.

The last main political force is ISCI; it is led by Ammar al-Hakim, who also heads the Shiite coalition al-Muwatin and controls, or is linked to, several militias of the PMF such as Ansar al-Aqidah and the 'Ashura' brigades. For the time being, there are tangible hints that Ammar al-Hakim is leaning in favour of al-'Abadi. For example, the ISCI's leader has recently met exiled Sunni leaders in Amman and Beirut to bring them back into the political discourse[32]. Furthermore, al-Hakim has

[32] M. Saadoun, "Why Jordan thinks Baathists belong in Iraqi reconciliation", *Al-Monitor*, 3 January 2017, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/01/jordan-baathists-iraq-national-reconciliation.html

developed a plan, the "Historical Settlement", whose ambitions are so high that it has been accused of being rhetoric and unattainable; in his view, for example, the national reconciliation plan should be endorsed by all political parties, all-equal in the deal, discord among political entities should be avoided, and violence rejected. The plan calls for the rejection of any sectarian- or ethnic-based division of the country, full respect of the constitution, the disbandment of non-state militias, and fair distribution of national wealth. However, it is clear that this plan does not stand a chance: similar past attempts have systematically failed and now, given the post-IS ethno-sectarian polarisation and the internal rifts in each one of the three main Iraqi communities, the chances are even lower.

Over the last few years, tensions inside the alliance grew so tense that it is difficult to consider it still as the Bayt Shi'i (House of the Shiites) as it was in the past; today, the Shi'a bloc is a house divided, where many Shiite political players are differentiating their goals and agendas. In any case, the forthcoming election shall heighten internal competition and the process of differentiation is likely to increase. The next provincial elections were scheduled for the end of April 2017, while the parliamentary should take place in 2018. However, given the security concerns and the internally displaced persons' issues, the Independent High Electoral Commission decided to hold both in 2018.

The different positions of Shiite players on the future of Iraq

In short, Shiite political parties and movements are increasingly growing apart on several specific issues: on the name of the next Prime Minister; on the role of the PMF; on institutional reforms, and on the relations of the country with the regional powers.

Currently, the two top contestants are al-'Abadi and al-Maliki. The two have starkly different approaches to the main Iraqi dossiers and they enjoy a different degree of political support.

As already outlined, al-'Abadi is backed by a broad and miscellaneous array of reformist forces but, given the role of Muqtada al-Sadr, his bloc is weakened by a shaky and incoherent coalition. Notwithstanding that, the supporters of al-'Abadi share an inclusive inter-communal vision and a stance focused on preserving national unity. Thus, they have an inclusive attitude towards Kurdish and Sunni communities, as already proved by current al-'Abadi's policies. Moreover, they are keener to concede the devolution of powers al local level, but they will oppose any centrifugal attempt for Sunni autonomy or Kurdish secession[33]. At the international level, al-'Abadi and al-Sadr share a rejection of Iranian influence, but they are divided by the Sadrist staunch opposition to U.S. presence.

On the other side, there is al-Maliki, who is trying to gather and lead the pro-Iranian forces. He still enjoys a strong political support, and through the alliance with PMF militias he aims to address his weak point: the lack of an armed wing. Al-Maliki has embraced a sectarian approach, supporting a Shi'a-centred identity of the Iraqi state and therefore alienating Kurds and Sunnis. Al-Maliki, given his performance as Prime Minister and his pro-Tehran leanings, doesn't enjoy U.S. support, but also the Iranian one is somehow conditional. As a matter of fact, while Iran is the only and vital international ally of al-Maliki, Tehran is keeping its links with almost all Iraqi Shi'a players open; for example, there are rumours of Iranian support for the candidacy to the premiership of Hadi al-'Amiri, leader of the Badr Organisation, who is a member of parliament and head of a relevant political bloc participating to the State of Law Coalition; furthermore, he enjoys popular support, commanding a powerful militia and, above all, he has a close relation with Qasem Suleimani. He was appointed by the government as head of the PMF.

As for the Sunni issue, al-Maliki and al-'Abadi are miles apart. Al-Maliki's support to the PMF implies the acceptance of their

[33] "Abadi asks Kurds: Will you achieve your interests with independence?", Rudaw, 31 March 2017, http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/31032017

requests to remain active in Sunni provinces, even after the defeat of IS. Actually, several PMF militias are strengthening their presence in northern Iraq[34], claiming the need to fight terrorism and preserve territorial integrity from Kurdish claims. Their presence has already led to serious episodes of sectarian violence at the expense of Sunni communities[35] and the PMF are deeply unpopular among the local population. Furthermore, the main risk is that Shi'a extremists exploit the fight against IS terrorist networks as a tool to enforce sectarian discriminatory policies, as those of de-baathification[36].

Al-'Abadi, for his part, is opposing the opportunistic sectarian competition displayed by Shiite extremists and endorsed by al-Maliki, and is making genuine efforts aimed at an effective and inclusive participation of all Iraqi communities. For example, the Prime Minister is relying on his new Minister of Defence Arfan al-Hayali, a former army officer under Saddam. It is al-Hayali, on behalf of al-'Abadi, who is currently negotiating agreements with tribal leaders of the Sunni tribes in northern provinces[37]. However, the Premier faces the opposition of some top brasses of the Ministry of Defence, such as the head of the Iraqi National Intelligence Service Mustafa al-Kazemi; actually, he is pushing to strengthen the role of PMF inside the Iraqi Armed Forces. Al-Kazemi is the living evidence of al-Maliki's political resilience and his control of the deep state, given the fact that the officer is close to the Da'wa party.

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[34] M. Saadoun, "Shiite militias open offices in Iraq's liberated Sunni areas", *Al-Monitor*, 31 January 2017, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/01/shiite-militias-iraq-sunni-pmu-Falluja.html

[35] http://www.newsweek.com/baghdad-under-pressure-stop-Shi'a-militia-war-crimes-31367

[36] M. Weiss and M. Pregent, "The U.S. Is Providing Air Cover for Ethnic Cleansing in Iraq", *Foreign Policy*, 28 March 2015, http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/03/28/the-united-states-is-providing-air-cover-for-ethnic-cleansing-in-iraq-shiite-militias-isis/

[37] R. Bellantone, "ISIS in Iraq: dopo Mosul la guerra si sposterà ad Al Anbar", *Lookout News*, 30 March 2017, http://www.lookoutnews.it/iraq-isis-al-anbar-sunniti-sciiti/

After the fall of Mosul, the militias will face the zenith of their popularity, but at the same time they will lose their main *raison d'être*. The PMF may grant al-Maliki a wide electoral base and put his opponents' initiatives aimed at discrediting him for alleged corruption and negligence in Mosul in 2014 to a halt. In fact, for many Iraqi politicians the future of the PMF constitutes a more relevant and immediate issue than the relations among ethno-religious communities. The causes of this attitude are twofold, since on the one hand politicians want to exploit the popular support and legitimation enjoyed by the PMF for electoral gain, on the other hand they see the militias as a powerful tool for political contest. In other terms, Iraqi society and politics are increasingly militarised, since politicians are strengthening their links with militias, in order to get both votes and an armed support.

However, the PMF issue may also heavily affect the future identity of the Iraqi State. In short, the main PMF have a marked religious identity and are hybrid entities, with military, social and political dimensions; granting them a relevant role in the army entails diluting its *super partes* position, and its role as a champion of the national state. Furthermore, coopting them means to open the political arena to a kind of player who, in order to reach its goals, may easily rely not just on the ballots but on the bullets as well. In addition, Iran turned the PMF into one of its preferred tool for exerting influence in Iraq[38], thus reinforcing the role of militias in Iraqi politics and society. This would increasingly open the door to Iranian influence, allowing the creation of a parallel army that would not be fully serving the national interest. Indeed, while Iraqi politicians were quarrelling on whether to allow the PMFs to side with Bashar al-Assad and Iranians in Syria, several militias already moved there notwithstanding their government's ban and religious authorities fatwas[39].

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[38] Three main PMF Shi'a militias as the Badr Organisation, *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* and *Kata'ib Hizbollah*, are patently pro-Iranian and in several occasions expressed their loyalty not only to Iraq, but also to Ayatollah Khamenei.

[39] A. Mamouri, "Shiite Seminaries Divided on Fatwas for Syrian Jihad",

Officially, the Law on political parties bans military organisations from running for election, while the Independent High Electoral Commission already stated that PMF are to be considered as military forces and consequently cannot run in election. Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani clearly stated that the PMF have a temporary nature, and once the IS emergency is over, they will have to disband. Al-Sistani has also announced that the militia closest to him, the al-Abbas brigade, will not move into politics; Muqtada al-Sadr wants to disband them, merging them into the armed and security forces. Al-'Abadi is trying to limit their scope to the military level, but has been forced by events to transform them into an officially recognised independent military formation; however, for the time being he was able to put them, formally, under his direct control as commander in chief of the armed forces. Besides that, al-'Abadi had to relinquish his project to establish the Haras al Watany (the National Guard); the National Guard, recruited at a provincial level, was aimed to warrant protection to local communities, starting from the Sunnis. Unsurprisingly, the draft law bill is still waiting for parliamentary approval, being opposed by al-Maliki and the political forces close to Iran.

Current government's administrative, economic, institutional, and political reforms are not just a matter of politics or ideologies: the Prime Minister's reformist efforts are hampered by parliamentarian stonewalling and challenged on judicial terms, by an assorted group of politicians, who simply wish to preserve the political and economic privileges acquired in the last decade; al-Maliki is instrumentally siding with this group, exploiting this critical mass in the attempt to replace al-'Abadi. But in this opposition to political and institutional reforms, there is something more: the proposed institutional and political reforms are likely to break a well-established vicious circle of dynamics involving the political class, institutions and the people. The lack of economic opportunities, unemployment,

Al-Monitor, 29 July 2013, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2013/07/syria--jihad-fatwas-shiite-clergy-iran-iraq.html

disproportionate dependency from state-provided jobs, poverty, and weakness of public services fostered the rise of a system were the society is prone to cronyism and political patronage dynamics, facilitating populist electioneering. This system fosters the creation of electoral networks based on ethnic or religious identity. In other terms, political parties gather support not because of ideological attachment but, mainly, because of patronage networks providing money, hand-outs, and jobs; but this system requires the control of public institutions, transformed in tools for party power[40], and such a system implies corruption and sectarianism. That means that the main root of Iraq's instability is not only sectarianism, but a dysfunctional institutional system overall, coupled with the lack of a democratic political culture. Indeed, widespread popular protests are simultaneously recurring in Kurdish, Shiite and Sunni provinces. For years, Shi'a forces had no real political programs, but contingent agendas dictated by short-term objectives. Actually, there is a lack of clarity and coherence even on fundamental issues such as the role of external players like Iran and the U.S., or that of clerics in politics.

Moreover, one of the main problems is the Constitution, which has proven insufficient to ensure a balanced power-sharing mechanism, and to lead to a viable system to regulate centrifugal pushes for autonomy.

At its conception, the current Iraqi Constitution enjoyed the opportunistic endorsement by the main political players at the time, i.e. the Kurdish PUK and PDK, and the Shi'ite SCIRI and Da'wa. SCIRI and the Kurdish parties backed the constitutional text since it granted a special status to the Kurdish community and was open to the possibility of a Shi'a region in southern

[40] Planning Minister Salman al-Jumaili announced in December 2014 that the number of civil servants who are affiliated with the central government reached 3 million people. This figure is the equivalent of nearly 45% of the total Iraqi workforce, according to a study by the Commission of Integrity, an Iraqi government body.

Iraq[41]. Nevertheless, the federal framework wasn't effectively implemented; Kurds enjoyed a *de facto* autonomy, while all the state powers were centralised in Baghdad, where Shi'a parties had a crucial influence; moreover, the Constitution continued to lack in regulations and secondary legislation. It is worth to remember that while the U.S. was supporting the constitutional process, Kurds and the main Shi'a parties pragmatically came to terms with Washington gaining a strong role in the new Iraqi institutions. On the contrary, the Sadrists and the Sunnis – who were at odds with the U.S. – were de facto excluded. Therefore, post-Saddam Iraq was born as a highly centralised state, with the Kurds gaining almost full autonomy in the KRG, and a central government featuring a sort of "duopoly" between Sunni and Shi'a. Sunnis emerged weaker from the deal, due to their initial outright rejection of the Iraqi state-building process, the political and economic hegemony imposed by Shiite parties and, later, al-Maliki's sectarian policies.

The puzzle of federalism and Iraq's relations with regional powers

Iraq, *de jure*, is born as a federal state; its Constitution is clear on this regard[42]; what is lacking is the political will and a clear and functional institutional mechanism[43]. As outlined above, with the exception of Kurdistan, post-Saddam Iraq developed

[41] A. Ali, *The struggle for Iraqi future - How corruption, incompetence and sectarianism have undermined democracy*, Yale University Press, 2014.

[42] Article 122 of the Iraqi Constitution provides for the provincial councils "administrative and financial authorities to enable them to manage their affairs, in accordance with the principle of decentralized administration"; article 110 limits the federal government's powers to things like foreign and fiscal policy, and article 115 states that anything that the federal government isn't responsible for, should be the responsibility of the provincial councils.

[43] Notions such as "region" and "federalism" are loosely defined by the Constitution, which is largely lacking the secondary legislation for its implementation.

as a highly centralised state. All post-Saddam governments have opposed any federalist thrust, fearing a disintegration of the country or the rise of internal strife; the lack of an agreement on the fate of Kirkuk[44] and other disputed internal territories speaks for itself.

Al-Maliki's tenure preserved this centralised structure, going as far as strengthening the powers of the Prime Minister. Just like under Saddam, the central government allocates resources to gain support and loyalty from local players; al-Maliki's strategy was to make local political, tribal, and religious networks dependent from Baghdad's institutions. Unsurprisingly, in 2013, al-Maliki sided against, and when it passed he did not implement, the amendments on Law 21 that granted very strong powers to provincial authorities[45], such as the full control over the appointment of government officials working in the province. The former Prime Minister opposed any Sunni request for devolution of powers, as well as any proposal to establish a Shiite region in the southern provinces.

Al-'Abadi is adopting a radically different stance, at least in terms of intentions and efforts. Being well aware of the consequences of years of corrupted and unbalanced governance, in April 2015 the premier unequivocally said that: "If we don't decentralize, the country will disintegrate"[46]. Therefore, he strongly advocates the unity of the country, proposing decentralisation as an answer to risky federalist projects or sectarian pushes for autonomy[47]. Coherently, in August 2015 the Prime Minister proposed a decentralisation program[48], which was in-

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[44] Article 140 of Iraqi Constitution states that the issue of Kirkuk should have been solved by "a date not to exceed the 31st of December 2007".

[45] M. Habib, "Could Law 21 Save Iraq?", *Niqash*, 24 July 2014, http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/3501/

[46] "Joint Motion for a Resolution", European Parliament, 26 October 2016, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=MOTION&reference=P8-RC-2016-1159&language=EN

[47] "Iraq's Abadi champions decentralisation against 'disunity'", *Kom News*, 23 March 2017, http://komnews.org/iraqs-abadi-champions-decentralisation-disunity/

[48] M. Al-Kadhimi, "Is it time to formally decentralize Iraq?", *Al-Monitor*, 16

cluded in a broader reform package. The core of the program was the decentralisation of administrative and financial powers to provincial councils, along with the devolution of other competences; he also proposed the establishment of a National Guard that, based on provincial recruitment and being accountable to governors, was intended to be a vehicle for Sunni tribal militias to become part of the Iraqi security forces, thus meeting Sunni's requests for local management of defence and security[49]. As of now, this decentralised system probably represents the best option for the Sunni provinces liberated from IS, which are already witnessing the circulation of vague projects for implementing regionalism or federalism[50]. Actually, IS itself may be interpreted as a sort of centrifugal secession effort by the Sunni community; therefore, al-'Abadi sees good governance as the best tool against the resurgence of a new wave of Sunni insurgency. The premier gave the Sunni community another sign of opening by limiting the role of PMF in the campaign against the "Islamic State"; on this point he again clashes with the intentions of PMF Shiite hardliners, who are close to al-Maliki.

Regrettably, the effective implementation of al-'Abadi's decentralised non-sectarian system is still stuck in parliament, together with several other proposed reforms. Financial constraints and political opposition are slowing down the efforts for the infrastructural and institutional reconstruction of urban areas damaged by the war as well.

Of course, a decentralised model may also appeal to the Iraqi southern provinces; particularly in Basra, where efforts to gain more autonomy are recurrent, given that the local population perceives the treatment by the central government as unfair.

September 2015, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/09/iraq-abadi-reform-decentralized-state.html

[49] S. Aldouri, *National Guard Law Would Help Iraq Regain Sunni Trust*, London, Chatham House, 20 August 2015, https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/national-guard-law-would-help-iraq-regain-sunni-trust

[50] "Sunni tribesmen favour Iraqi federalism – but with new leaders", *The National World*, 1 December 2016, http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/sunni-tribesmen-favour-iraqi-federalism--but-with-new-leaders

The province is a vital node for Iraqi oil exports, but the financial windfalls redistributed to the region by the government are deemed not proportionate to its role and importance. Poverty and scarcity of electricity, blamed on the government, are the two main leverages for pro-referendum forces, composed mainly by local religious parties, influent criminal organisations, and tribal circles. After several attempts, in 2015 the Electoral Commission gave permission to hold a referendum on the issue, but this is still on hold[51]. However, at a higher political level, Shi'a forces lack a unified and coherent position for a federalist project in southern Iraq[52]. As a matter of fact, the Shiite politi-

[51] In April 2015, an initial request for a referendum to be held to recognize Basra as an autonomous region was rejected by the Independent High Electoral Commission; the rejection was motivated by irregularities in the signatories' data. In August 2015, a second request was accepted. Demands to establish a southern province according to art. 4 of "Regions Law" no. 13 of 2008 increased since 2012, in response to the perceived marginalisation of Basra by the central government; actually, Baghdad has centralised control of Basra's oil&gas resources, while neglecting Basra's economic development. Thus, the request for an autonomous region is mainly motivated by the governorate's current lack of authority to approve development projects without referring to the central government. In order to bypass central government's opposition to the federalist project, in 2012 the Basra Provincial Council also promoted the "Basra, Economic Capital of Iraq" project, aimed at obtaining a greater percentage of oil revenues and wider powers; the project was ratified by the Iraqi parliament only last May, but its approval is actually a concession aimed to cool down Basra's pushes for autonomy.

[52] Actually, the autonomist ambitions of southern Iraq have a long-standing history, as they started at the beginning of the XX century under the Ottomans. However, after the First World War, the idea of an autonomous southern region was overshadowed by the nationalistic ideology and centralised structure of Iraq's monarchy and republican governments. However, with the demise of Saddam Hussein, it resurfaced; the debate about federalism in Iraq heated up in 2004 prior to the adoption of the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL). It is noteworthy that the majority of federalist projects developed in southern Shiite Iraq were allegedly non-sectarian and, substantially, centred on Basra's economic strength and oil resources. By the way, Shiite political forces were unable to develop a clear and shared project; for example, in 2003 the governor of Basra promoted the idea of the city as a single governorate federal unit, while in 2004 the governors of Basra, Maysan and Dhi Qar provinces promoted the plan of a three-governorate federal entity, the *Iqlim al-Junub*. Then, in 2005, on the eve

cal landscape is extremely fragmented, and al-Sistani advocates a cross-sectarian model for the Iraqi state, thus limiting the appeal of federalism. While Da'wa has always advocated a centralised system with a strong central government, within ISCI, both the deceased Abdulaziz al-Hakim and his son Ammar repeatedly expressed positive statements with regard to the federalist option for southern Shiite Iraq[53]. Indeed the federalist option, implemented in the framework of the Constitution[54], was advocated as a solution to preserve unity and cohesion within the country. While supporting a centralised system, Muqtada al-Sadr is not wholly against federalism; but, given that federalism may bring to the partition of the country, he currently appears to favour a federalist solution only for Iraqi Kurdistan. *Rebus sic stantibus*, al-Maliki appears everything but keen to grant self-governance and devolution of powers to the local Sunni administrations, while PMF leader al-Amiri appears to be advocating a regional federation of southern Iraqi provinces. On his part, al-Maliki openly opposes a federal system, which he considers as divisive and threatening[55] for the stability of

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of the successful election, ISCI enlarged its original project of a three provinces autonomous entity in southern Iraq, including all nine Iraqi central and southern Shi'a provinces; it was the *Iqlim al Wasat wa-al-Junub*, the "Region of the Center and South". In the meantime, the *Fadhila* party was promoting the establishment of a small southern region, while tribal political coalitions were sponsoring independently similar projects. Federalist ambitions for an autonomous southern region started to disappear in 2006-2007, when the central government strengthened its reach and control over local institutions. Furthermore, the idea of a single and separate Shi'a region promoted by ISCI was progressively downplayed, especially when the party suffered a step decline of popular support with January 2009 local election and March 2010 parliamentary ones.

[53] "Iraq: Baghdad Names Basra the Economic Capital, in Important Concession", Stratfor World View, 27 April 2017, https://www.stratfor.com/article/iraq-baghdad-names-basra-economic-capital-important-concession

[54] The executive procedures regarding the formation of a Region is available at: http://www.iraq-lg-law.org/en/content/executive-procedures-regarding-formation-region

[55] "Iraq PM rejects U.S. Congress call for federalism", Reuters, 28 September 2007, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-al-Maliki-idUSL2830043220070928

Iraq[56], and has done so since the beginning of his tenure as Prime Minister[57].

As a matter of fact, since 2008, al-Maliki portrayed himself as the defender of Iraq's territorial integrity, assuming a sort of confrontational stance towards the KRG and opposing the idea of a Kurdish secession; Kurdish rapprochement with Turkey was perceived as a threat[58]. While the issues related to the territorial disputes were frozen, in 2013 al-Maliki started to stop the allocation of federal funds to KRG because of a missing agreement on the management of oil resources[59]. Under al-Maliki, the relations between the two governments reached an all-time low.

Al-'Abadi moved in the opposite direction, meeting Barzani after a deadlock of five years, and reaching an agreement between the KRG and Baghdad over selling Kurdistan's oil and allocating Kurdistan Region's budget[60]. Al-'Abadi was able also to reach an agreement with Kurdish forces over their withdrawal from the disputed areas recaptured from IS; in return, the Iraqi Federal Government is bound to negotiate a joint solution with the KRG[61]. However, these agreements soon proved to be extremely fragile, and the relation with KRG volatile. Each

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[56] http://www.thesouthasiantimes.info/news-Al_Al-Maliki_criticises_US_vice_president_over_federalism-60352-International-17.html

[57] R. Visser, *Maliki, Hakim, and Iran's Role in the Basra Fighting*, 9 April 2008, http://www.historiae.org/iran.asp

[58] S. Cagaptay and T. Evans. *Turkey's Changing Relations with Iraq*, Policy Focus 122, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 2012, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus122.pdf

[59] M. Knights, *Iraq's Budget Threat Against the Kurds*, Policy Analysis, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 11 March 2013, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iraqs-budget-threats-against-the-kurds

[60] According to the agreement, Kurdistan Region is mandated to facilitate the export of 300,000 bpd from Kirkuk fields and a minimum of 250,000 bpd from fields within its own region. In return, the KRG will maintain their 17% share of national spending.

[61] O. Sattar, "Could Kurds hold independence referendum this year?", *Al-Monitor*, 10 April 2017, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/04/iraq-kurdistan-independence-referendum-iran-turkey.html

party is accusing the other of violating the oil agreement, but the main issues remain the threat of a Kurdish secession and the control of disputed territories.

Barzani's calls for a referendum on independence have two goals; on the one hand, they are aimed at boosting internal support and securing his own political survival. On the other hand, he is strengthening KRG's bargaining position with Baghdad. The threat of a common enemy, IS, has facilitated an Arab-Kurd rapprochement, but once the "Caliphate" will disappear, tensions are extremely likely to rise; indeed, the sectarian approach of many PMF may easily lead to tensions with the Kurdish community.

The relations between Kurdish and federal government are marked by animosity, suspicion, and brinkmanship. However, for the time being, in areas liberated from IS, rival forces loyal to KRG and the federal government were able to reach deals; for example, once their forces liberated the area, the city of Jalawla was left under the control of PUK Peshmerga, but in return the near city of Sa'adiya was moved under the control of fighters of the Badr Organisation. Similarly, after a deal was reached between the local tribal sheikh Abdulla Ajil al Yawar and representatives of the KDP[62], the city of Rabi'a was liberated by a tribal Shammar-peshmerga[63] joint force.

Conclusion

The fall of Mosul and the 2018 election will represent two turning points in Iraq's destiny. On the one hand, the liberation of the city constitutes a challenge, since it risks unleashing a multifaceted mess of conflicts with ethnic, sectarian, and regional implications. On the other hand, next year's election will be as decisive for the future of the country as that in 2005, when Iraq faced a radical shift in political balances. Notwithstanding some internal

[62] *Post-Isis Iraq*, IRIS Booklet, American University of Iraq, March 2017, http://auis.edu.krd/iris/publications/iris-booklet-series-post-isis-iraq

[63] The Shammar is a local Sunni tribe.

conflicts and a tense relation, the first decade of post-Saddam's Iraq was marked both by cohesion among Shi'a political forces, and a balance of power between them and the Kurdish bloc. Currently, this balance of power is at stake, given that the Shiite bloc is approaching both elections and the post-IS phase internally divided; internal strife and uncertainty are heavily affecting the Shiite political front, where the PMF are the new players in the game. Furthermore, despite the evident political polarisation of Shiite forces between al-'Abadi and al-Maliki, this is still a straightforward and superficial simplification, since the fluidity of internal dynamics of the Shi'a front may produce unpredictable scenarios. In any case, the internal divisions of the Shi'a front will probably hamper the much-needed inclusive policy toward Sunnis and Kurds. Indeed, given its demographic weight and established hegemony, Shi'as will be the dominant force in Iraqi politics, at least for the Iraqi Arab side, but a balanced relation with the other two main communities is not only critical for ensuring stability , but also vital to the very survival of the Iraqi state. Regional federalism and decentralisation are, probably, the solution, but they would require a strong and stable central government, able to renegotiate the balance of power with the provinces. Furthermore, Iraq needs a sensible foreign policy, aimed at safeguarding the national interest and the country's independence. The alternative is a conflictual division along ethno-sectarian lines, another round of civil war and, eventually, an implosion of the system.

The current government is on the right track, but it is weak and faces tough opposition. Nevertheless, if al-'Abadi will be able to sufficiently cope with the main challenges of the post-Mosul phase, his chances to win the following election will increase a lot. After all, the most encouraging wish for al-'Abadi and Iraq was written by 'Ali al-Wardi, the best known Iraqi sociologist, in 1965:

"To sum up, Iraq, more than any of the other Arab countries solution is democracy. This system may be marred by shortcomings and difficulties, but is a worthy goal"[64].

[64] 'Ali Wardi, *Understanding Iraq – Society, Culture and Personality*, Edwin Mellen Press, 2008, p. 116.

3. The "Other Iraq" after Mosul: What Future for the Kurdish Region?

Ofra Bengio

The notion of Iraq's territorial integrity has suffered severe setbacks in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraqi War, and even more so after the "Islamic State" seized vast areas of Iraqi territory during summer 2014. Three years on, the "Islamic State" seems to be on its last legs, while the drive for Kurdish independence has gathered momentum ever since. Indeed, in the last few years, the subject of Kurdistan's independence has gained momentum, with three schools of thought dominating the discourse about it. The first states that Kurdistan has all the trappings of a state in the making and it is only a question of time before it declares independence. According to the second, the talk about independence is merely tactical and, anyway, the obstacles are too high to be surmounted and make it happen. The third assumes that the Kurds' best interests lay in remaining part of Iraq and that this is the most viable alternative[1].

This essay will examine these sets of assumptions against the background of various historical, sociopolitical, and cultural developments and assess the probability of each of them. It will also evaluate the extent to which the Kurdish drive towards independence has reached a critical mass, making it impossible to turn the wheel back to the unified state which had informed Twentieth century Iraq.

[1] For the last assumption see for example, Zheger Hassan, "Iraqi Kurdistan: Is Independence a 'Foregone Conclusion'?", CPSA 2015 Annual Conference Ottawa, Canada. On page 14 he writes: "A federal, democratic, and united Iraq provides the Kurds with significant benefits. As such, we should not expect Iraqi Kurdistan to push for independence in the near future", https://www.assocsrv.ca/cpsa-acsp(closed)/2015event/Hassan.pdf

The *de facto* Kurdish State

Those who doubt the viability of a Kurdish state ignore the tectonic changes that have taken place in the Middle East: the upheavals in the region that shook the foundations of a few nation-states; the fact that Iraq has proved to be a failed state; the changing stance of world countries towards the Kurds; and, most importantly, the *fait accompli* of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

In the last 25 years, deep cultural, political, economic, and social processes have taken place in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) suggesting that the new entity in the making has developed a life of its own, autonomous from the central government in Baghdad. The more time goes by, the more its unique Kurdish identity sets it apart and distinguishes it from the Arab part of Iraq. The sense of Kurdish nationalism is reinforced significantly through the education system, various national symbols, as well as linguistic, ideological, economic, and political transformations.

The inculcation of Kurdish nationalism starts from a very early age, as reflected in school textbooks prepared under the auspices of the Ministry of Education in the KRG. The 2014 textbook for the first grade, for example, put great emphasis on Kurdish national identity. The first page of the textbook, teaching Kurdish alphabet, displays the Kurdish flag for the letter a, *alay* (flag)[2]. Kurdish national day, Newroz, which is celebrated on 21 March, has a special place in a long poem mentioning that it is the beginning of the Kurdish year and that the fire is a symbol of Kurdish success. The poem ends with a wish for the establishment of Kurdistan[3].

The 2016 textbook for the first grade goes even further in inculcating Kurdish patriotism. It opens with a poem on the importance of the Kurdish language, (*zimane Kurdi*), Barzani's

[2] *Xwandana Kurdi*, pola eke, Kurdistan Regional Government Iraq, Ministry of Education, 2014, pp. 3, 13, 20.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 63. On p. 84 it says "Kurdistan is a beautiful country (welat)".

sword and the hands of Peshmerga (Kurdish army). Illustrations depicting the school show the Kurdish flag on the way to the classroom, in the courtyard during playtime, and in the course of ceremonies[4].

The letters of the Kurdish alphabet are also associated with Kurdish identity. The letter "a" is associated with *alay*, the flag, the letter "z" with Newroz, and the letter "k" with Kirkuk, the oil-rich city and region claimed by the Kurds. The text regarding Kirkuk reads: "Kirkuk is a Kurdish city, Kirkuk is the heart of Kurdistan"[5]. Clearly, the term Kirkuk was added after the Peshmerga managed to take control of the region in the summer of 2014[6].

Another textbook explains to the children the symbolism of the Kurdish flag's colors. A child speaking about the flag says: "I am a Kurdish child who lives in Kurdistan. My flag is beautiful and nice. It has four colors… The red at the top stands for the blood of the Peshmerga, the white in the middle for peace, the green at the bottom for good and beauty, and the yellow in the centre for the sun". That same child adds that he dreams to be able to serve his homeland in the future[7]. It is clear then that the mental map of Kurdish children is based on Kurdistan, not on Iraq.

The same trend exists in schoolbooks for secondary schools, as well as in higher education in the KRI, where 28 universities are already teaching mostly in Kurdish, thus further alienating the students from Arab Iraq[8].

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[4] *Xwandana Kurdi*, pola eke, Kurdistan Regional Government Iraq, Ministry of Education, 2016, pp. 5, 11, 13, 17, 63, 64, 65, 66, 145. On p. 17, the child is told to fill the design of the flag with the right colors. On p. 103, a picture of Peshmerga.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 133.

[6] On the occasion of the celebrations of Nowruz 2017 the provincial council of Kirkuk raised the Kurdish flag at the government building of the city. Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani commented: "Congratulations on raising our flag in the Kurdistan Jerusalem", Rudaw, 29 March 2017, http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/280320175

[7] *Xuandana Kurdi* (2016), p. 28

[8] For an essay on textbooks for secondary school classes, see S. Kirmanj,

Kurdish culture is another important feature distinguishing the Kurds from the surrounding society. All areas of music, literature, poetry, and art have their unique characteristics. Kurds even wear distinctive garments: colorful dresses for women and special garments for men, fit for the purpose of fighting.

At the political-administrative level, which is one of the most important criteria for effective sovereignty, the KRI has all the trappings of statehood. These include the Kurdistan parliament, the KRG, and the presidency, as well as a separate judicial system. Economically, the region witnessed a boom for one decade in post-Saddam Iraq thanks to the huge quantities of oil which were found there, the big number of foreign oil companies that began drilling in the region a few years ago, and the oil pipeline built through Turkey (for the present crisis, see below).

Over the years, the KRG has developed its most important apparatus for attaining independence and safeguarding it, namely the Peshmerga – the Kurdish army. The experience of fighting against the "Islamic State" and the training and equipment from the West strengthened significantly the Peshmerga. In May 2017, the KRG announced a proposed plan designed by military advisors from the U.S., the UK, and Germany, in coordination with officials from the KRG's Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, aimed at establishing a modern and professional Peshmerga army[9]. Indeed, the Peshmerga has proved to be the most important symbol and prop for Kurdish statehood. The international community has also begun to realize the importance of the Peshmerga. Members of this force were invited to various capitals in Europe and the French intellectual Bernard-Henri levy shot a very sympathetic film about it[10].

"Kurdish history textbooks: Building a nation-state within a nation-state", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 68, no. 3, Summer 2014, pp. 367-384.

[9] "International Coalition's Project for Peshmerga to Be Reviewed by KRP", *Basnews*, 24 May 2017, http://www.basnews.com/index.php/en/news/kurdistan/352686

[10] P. Bradshaw, "Peshmerga review – an intellectually gripping tribute to Kurdish fighters battling Isis", *The Guardian*, 20 May 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/may/20/peshmerga-review-bernard-henri-levy-cannes-2016

Negative experiences and memories of past traumas under all previous Iraqi regimes have further estranged the Kurdish people from the Iraqi state, while strengthening Kurdish patriotism and the aspiration for independence. In fact, there is a certain gap between the leadership and the people. While the leadership and the political elites have been divided on the issue of independence, the people are overwhelmingly supporting it. According to a survey conducted in the summer of 2016, 84.3% of the population support independence. Interestingly, the survey also showed that 78.9% of the participants would support independence regardless of the political parties' stance[11]. Support among the younger generation is higher than among the older one due to their access to Kurdish education and the new media, as well as three decades of detachment from Arab Iraq and its culture.

On the ideological level, political Islam has never cut deep roots among the Kurds, even though the majority belongs to this religious denomination. Moreover, nowadays, the main challenge facing the Kurds comea from political Islam, either from the Shi'a-led government which is much more religiously-oriented than its Bathi predecessor, or the two radical Islamist movements: the Sunni "Islamic State" and the Shi'a militia Hashd al-Sha'abi. The "Islamic State" has been leading the fight against the Kurds since their conquest of Mosul in the summer of 2014, while the Hashd al-Sha'abi might become a real threat following the liberation of Mosul from the "Islamic State"[12]. On the whole, the encounter with different manifesta-

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[11] M. Dolamari, "Survey: 84.3 percent of Kurds favor independence", *K24*, 20 August 2016, http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/a7a08ee8-4520-435c-a481-aff1fea232f4/Survey--84-3-percent-of-Kurds-favor-independence. An earlier survey showed similar results, with 82% supporting independence. J. Wing, "2015 Public opinion poll over future of Iraqi Kurdistan & partisan divide amongst Kurds", *Ekurd Daily*, 6 January 2016. http://ekurd.net/public-opinion-poll-iraqi-kurds-2016-01-06

[12] Even before the total liberation of Mosul relations were strained between the Peshmerga and Hashd al-Sha'abi. K.S. Hewramî "Fermandarek heşdî şeibî gef li herêma Kurdistanê kirin!", *Basnews*, 20 May 2017, http://www.basnews.com/

tions of political Islam has helped develop more secular tendencies in the Kurdish society, while raising another barrier with the Arab part of Iraq. Thus, the two parts are now divided along religious, ethnic, political, and ideological lines[13].

In the past, the Kurds were mainly referred to as a minority, thus belittling in a way their aspiration for self-determination. In fact, one should look at the modern history of Iraq as a struggle between two national movements: the Kurdish and the Iraqi-Arab one. What hampered the most the Kurdish cause was the support that first Great Britain, then the rest of the world, granted to Iraqi-Arab nationalism against the Kurdish one. Thus, the Kurds were perceived as a destabilizing factor that should be fought against in order to safeguard the stability and integrity of the state. The British air-force bombing of Kurdish areas in the early years of the Iraqi state was a case in point[14]. However, things began to change following the 1991 Gulf War, when a coalition of more than 30 countries, including the US, Britain, and France, unleashed a war against Iraq followed by a decade of sanctions, slowly changing the balance of power between the Kurdish and the Arab part of Iraq, and hence between two nationalisms. In fact, nowadays, Kurdish nationalism appears to be much more cohesive and effective than the Arab one.

Kurdistan's most severe strategic disadvantage is its lack of access to the sea, which put the region at the mercy of Baghdad for the greater part of the Twentieth century and caused its lagging behind the Arab part of Iraq. However, things began to change following the 1991 Gulf War, when Kurdistan began to open up to the outside world in a large spectrum of areas thanks to individuals and organisations including NGOs, oil

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index.php/kr/news/kurdistan/351704

[13] The KRG's fight against radical Islam is manifested among others in the closure of some mosques and the arrest of 10-15 preachers who were preaching extremist ideas. "Iraqi Kurdistan intelligence chief Lahur Jangi Talabani, interview", *Ekurd Daily*, 23 November 2016, http://ekurd.net/kurdistan-lahur-talabani-2016-11-23

[14] D. McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2004, pp. 154-155, 179.

companies, archeological missions, military delegations, and diplomatic representations. Nowadays, the KRG has 40 diplomatic missions in different countries, while 36 foreign countries have missions in Erbil[15]. These contacts with the West helped modernise the region, opened it up to western values and orientated it towards it. The new media was another important tool for connecting with the outside world. Still, the vestiges of decades of Iraqi authoritarian rule could not be effaced overnight.

Formidable challenges?

The arguments concerning the improbability of independence are strong and substantial, including a wide range of concerns at the domestic, regional, and international levels. Domestically, the main argument is that the Kurdish camp is too fragmented to be able to reach independence. Let us examine the main groups and their historical, political, and ideological tendencies. The main antagonistic parties have been the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Ironically, there was a shift of roles between them. While historically Sulaymaniyya represented the centre of Kurdish nationalism and the PUK was the champion of Kurdish independence, this role is now being assumed by Erbil and the KDP. The fluctuating stance of the PUK should be analyzed against the background of its past close relations with Iran, strongly opposed to the idea of Kurdish independence, all the while entertaining special relations with the Kurdish Turkish Partiya Karkeren Kurdistane (PKK), which has changed its ideology from independence to "democratic autonomy".

The main question is, what is the relative power of these two camps? First, it should be emphasised that in both camps tribal or family ties are an important component of the political scene

[15] "Felah Mistefa:Zêdeyî 40 nûneratiyên me li derve weke balyozxaneyan kardikin hene", *Basnews*, 24 May 2017, http://www.basnews.com/index.php/kr/news/kurdistan/352752

impacting relations between them as well: the Talabanis for the PUK and the Barzanis for the KDP. Still, the PUK has the aura of being the more pluralistic and democratic of the two. Jalal Talabani, the charismatic leader who headed the PUK and had a crucial role in Kurdistan and the central government in Baghdad, when he held the post of the president of Iraq from 2005-2014, is now out of the scene because of a stroke he suffered from in 2012. His wife Hero and his sons Qubad and Pavel as well as the nephew Lahur Jangi do not carry the same acumen and clout in the PUK or the area under their influence[16].

For their part, the Barzanis hold the most important posts in the KRG: Mas'ud Barzani is the President, Nechirvan, his nephew, is the Prime Minister, Masrur the President's son is the Chancellor of the Kurdistan Region Security Council, in addition to many other posts held by Barzanis. Clearly both camps suffer from blatant nepotism, but which one is more effective?

Since the early sixties, The Talabani-led PUK opposed the Barzani-led KDP, but it never managed to stop its rival's drive towards autonomy. In fact, the Talabani camp has suffered from various weaknesses. First, it has changed allies and alliances many times. For example, in 1966 the PUK formed an alliance with Iran, but following the rise of the Ba'th in 1968 it teamed up with this regime. Ironically, however, the Ba'th belittled its power and, in 1970, it joined forces with the KDP and accorded autonomy to the Kurds while disbanding the Talabani camp[17].

Another serious drawback was that, upon its establishment by Jalal Talabani in 1975, the PUK was composed of three different groups. This fragmentation, in the longer run, impacted the future of the party. Gorran split in 2009, casting itself

[16] Qubad is Deputy Prime Minister in the KRG, Bafel does not hold an official post and Lahur Jangi is head of the Iraqi Kurdish region's intelligence and counter-terror agency Zanyari, http://ekurd.net/kurdistan-lahur-talabani-2016-11-23; S. Qashqayee, "The Second Coming of Talabani; Who Is Bafel Talabani?", Kurdish Policy Foundation, 28 December 2016, https://kurdishpolicy.org/2016/12/28/the-second-coming-of-talabani-who-is-bafel-talabani/

[17] O. Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq: Building a State within a State*, Lienne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, 2012, pp. 48-49.

ever since as the main opposition party in the Kurdish region. Furthermore, within the PUK itself there have been a lot of internal conflicts among the three-pronged leadership by Hero Talabani, Kosrat Rasul, and Barham Salih[18]. Recently, a short lived tactical alliance between PUK and Gorran, with the aim of divesting the KDP from its monopoly of power, had little success[19]. On the whole, the disappearance of Jalal Talabani from the political scene was extremely harmful not only to the PUK itself but to the KRI as a whole, because with his charisma and mediating abilities he could have come to terms with the KDP in spite of historical enmities.

The Barzani camp, which sets the tone on independence, symbolizes the continuity in the Kurdish struggle against the central government and for the right of self-determination. This struggle started at the end of the Ottoman Empire and went on intermittently throughout the last century up until now. Its main symbol was the legendary leader Mullah Mustafa, who led the struggle for four decades from the 1930s until the middle of the 1970s, while his son Mas'ud has been carrying on this struggle for four decades now. The Barzani camp is much more cohesive than its rival; it has a clear-cut goal and controls most of the economic, political, and military power, as well as the running of foreign affairs. Mas'ud Barzani has managed to put the Kurds and himself on the international map, and most world politicians conduct relations with him. Barzani is now persona grata in the West, as well as in Russia and the Arab world, especially in the Gulf countries. As a matter of fact, at present, he has no rival either in the Talabani camp or among any other leader in Greater Kurdistan.

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[18] For such disputes see I. Malazada, "Political accusations fly in Iraq's Kurdistan region", *Al-Monitor*, 14 September 2016, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/09/patriotic-union-of-kurdistan-iraq-sulaymaniyah.html

[19] For a discussion of the complicated relations between the KDP, PUK and Goran, see C. Sagnic, "The Shifting Balance of Power in Iraqi Kurdistan: Division or Independence?", *Tel Aviv Notes*, 29 May 2016, http://dayan.org/content/shifting-balance-power-iraqi-kurdistan-division-or-independence

The Barzani camp has its own severe shortcomings. The legitimacy of its rule was put into question especially by the Gorran party, the second biggest party in the KRG and its main rival nowadays. The main problem has been that President Barzani declined to leave office in spite of the fact that his term came to an end two years before, thus hampering the legitimacy of his rule. While continuity is Barzanis' trademark, it also comes with severe problems of nepotism, dogmatism, corruption, and undemocratic performances.

The deteriorating economic situation was often cited as a main roadblock for independence. Indeed, after a decade of economic boom, the region is undergoing a severe crisis for the following reasons: the need to accommodate about 2 million refugees and internally displaced people; the falling price of oil; high military expenditures; the total dependence on oil income; and, most importantly, the ongoing dispute with Baghdad over the budget and oil revenue share agreement. Part of the problem is the fact that the KRG took control of oil-rich Kirkuk in the summer of 2014. In October of that same year, Baghdad cut the budget to the KRI because of disagreements on unilateral export of oil by the Kurds. Accordingly, some leaders in the KRG deem independence as the only way for solving the intractable economic problems with Baghdad.

The most severe roadblock and a recurring issue in discussing the feasibility of independence might be the fact that the KRI is a landlocked region whose very survival depends on its neighbours. The argument goes that the surrounding countries, namely, Turkey, Iran, and Syria would never allow the establishment of a Kurdish state in Iraq for fear of jeopardizing the territorial integrity of their own state. One proponent of this view argues that "it is strong and assertive regional states, namely Turkey and Iran, that will influence the trajectory of the Kurdistan Region. Unless these conditions fundamentally change, the Kurdistan Region will continue to exist in political limbo while seeking to leverage its interests in a weak Iraqi

state"[20]. Another argument is that the international community would also be reluctant to support the creation of a Kurdish state for fear that it would destabilize Iraq and the neighbouring countries.

Strategies for independence

Nobody is more aware of the challenges facing the establishment of a Kurdish state than the Kurdish leadership itself, and yet it did take a strategic decision to go for it. This decision gathered momentum in the aftermath of the rise of the "Islamic State" in June 2014. It was prompted by a number of factors: namely, the extreme weakness of the central government evidenced by the collapse of the Iraqi army in front of the "Islamic State" in the summer of 2014; by the ongoing conflict with Baghdad over various economic, political, and geographical issues; and, most importantly, by the Kurds' own success in taking control of disputed territories, especially oil-rich Kirkuk.

The strategy devised by the Barzani leadership includes propagating the idea of independence, mending fences with the Kurdish opposition, mobilizing Kurdish society, initiating talks with Baghdad, and lobbying among politicians, decision makers, and journalists in the regional and international arena.

For some years now, President Barzani has been hammering home the idea of independence and the approaching establishment of a Kurdish state. Two examples may give the general tone. On one occasion, he stated very bluntly: "Since we could not achieve a real partnership with Baghdad, let us try becoming peaceful neighbours"[21]. Similarly, in an interview with *The Washington Post*, he declared that "the time has come" for a fully

[20] D. Natali, "Stalemate, not statehood for Iraqi Kurdistan", *Lawfare*, 1 November 2015, https://www.lawfareblog.com/stalemate-not-statehood-iraqi-kurdistan

[21] M. Dolamari, "Kurdistan independence seekers may face problems: Iranian Parliament Speaker", *K24*, 7 December 2016, http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/c8aec017-cdf1-4f1c-be87-1927e1523fcc/Kurdistan-independence-seekers-may-face-problems--Iranian-Parliament-Speaker

independent Kurdistan recognised as a nation-state. "It is neither a rumour nor a dream. It is a reality that will come true. We will do everything in order to accomplish this objective, but peacefully and without violence"[22].

Critics from the Kurdish camp itself and outside it either doubt the feasibility of such venture or maintain that the call for independence is merely tactical. One scholar described Barzani's moves as Machiavellian, being based on tactics of brinkmanship, and stated that "despite the traumatic history, Barzani's recent announcement [on independence] may have to do more with Machiavellian strategies for his political survival in the future, rather than escaping the horrors visited upon Iraqi Kurdistan in the past"[23]. In the Kurdish camp itself there were those who perceived the independence bid as a Barzani maneuver to save Iraqi Kurdistan from the economic turmoil[24].

It was against this background of misgivings and doubts that the KDP initiated in end-2016 and early-2017 several rounds of talks with the PUK to unify the Kurdish camp, break the PUK's ad hoc alliance with Gorran, and end a two-year stalemate in the government apparatus caused by the closure of the parliament in October 2015 due to a conflict between the KDP and Gorran party. Indeed, the reconciliation between the KDP and PUK moved the latter to speak and act more forcefully for independence. Thus, the PUK political bureau declared in early April 2017 that "independence is a democratic and

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[22] L. Weymouth, "Kurdish president: Independent Kurdistan is 'neither a rumor nor a dream'" *Washington Post*, 19 January 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/kurdish-president-independent-kurdistan-is-neither-a-rumor-nor-a-dream/2017/01/19/0a832f62-ddbb-11e6-acdf-14da832ae861_story.html?utm_term=.1944a3c72e2c

[23] I. Al-Marashi, "The Kurdish referendum and Barzani's political survival", *Al-Jazeera*, 4 February 2016, http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/02/kurdish-referendum-barzani-political-survival-iraq-160204111835869.html

[24] M. Gurbuz, "Iraqi Kurdistan's bid for independence: Challenges and prospects", Arab Center Washington D.C., 26 January 2017, http://arabcenterdc.org/policy_analyses/iraqi-kurdistans-bid-for-independence-challenges-and-prospects/

absolute right of Kurdistan people, [and] referendum for independence as a right to self-determination in Kurdistan region and other parts outside the region is a historic goal of PUK"[25]. Furthermore, the clearing of atmosphere between the parties enabled the formation of a common front *vis-à-vis* Baghdad especially with regard to the initiative for holding a referendum on independence[26]. Another important move was the decision to reopen the parliament in order to appease Gorran and encourage it to join the referendum[27]. Meanwhile, President Barzani notified the UN of the KRG's intentions to hold a referendum in 2017, while Masrur Barzani discussed this project in Washington[28].

The referendum scheduled for 25 September 2017 will pose one question to the entire population in the KRI including those in the disputed territories, Thus, the referendum is designed to legitimize the move for independence as well as to attempt to solve the thorny problem of the disputed territories.

Concurrently, the KDP initiated talks with Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-'Abadi in order to reach "amicable separation". No doubt the crux of the matter is Baghdad's stance towards a

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[25] "PUK: independence is absolute right of Kurdistan people", Patriotic Union Kurdstan, 1 April 2017, http://www.pukpb.org/english/cgblog/1085/15/PUK-independence-is-absolute-right-of-Kurdistan-peopleenglish

[26] For the talks and the agreement between the two parties, see "Kurdish parties forego past problems in talks to end political deadlock", Rudaw, 26 December 2016, http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/261220161; "KDP issue statement, urge holding referendum", Patriotic Union Kurdstan, 2 April 2017, http://www.pukpb.org/english/cgblog/1087/15/PUK-KDP-issue-statement-urge-holding-referendum-read-full-textenglish

[27] "Officials: Kurdistan to reactivate parliament; Gorran to preside over first session", Rudaw, 13 June 2017, http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/130620177. As of this writing Goran did not agree to the conditions attached to the opening of the parliament. Rudaw, 3 April 2017, http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/030420173

[28] Rudaw, 23 May 2017, http://www.rudaw.net/arabic/world/220520177; S. Sattar, "Masrour Barzani Meets with White House, National Security Advisors", *Basnews*, 16 May 2017, http://www.basnews.com/index.php/en/news/kurdistan/350651

possible Kurdish secession and even more so the fate of the disputed territories. In this regard, it must be noted that, throughout modern history, Baghdad has never managed to effectively govern Kurdistan or integrate it into the Iraqi state. It did control certain areas at certain times, but this was thanks to the British air-force in the early years of the state and then Iraq's own armed forces, the secret services, and various other means of coercion. Second, Iraq is unique among the other states with a Kurdish minority in having acquiesced at times of extreme weakness to autonomy for the Kurds – in 1970, and then, to a federative formula, in 2005. Due to the civil war that has been ranging in Arab Iraq since 2003, there was further erosion in Baghdad's standing so that the balance of power shifted further to the benefit of the KRG.

The main question is, what can Baghdad do if Erbil does declare independence? One possible scenario is opening a war against the KRG. However, as we have seen even at the peak of its power, the Iraqi army did not succeed to solve the problem by military means. Moreover, because of the war against the "Islamic State", the rift between the Shi'a-led government and the Sunnis, and the severe struggle for power within the Shi'a camp itself, it is unlikely that the central government in Baghdad, in the short and medium term, will master the power to open a new front against the Kurds. Moreover, the battle-hardened Peshmerga has proven its skills in fighting the "Islamic State", emerging as a formidable force *vis-à-vis* the Iraqi army as well.

The dire straits in which Prime Minister al-'Abadi found himself has pushed him to reconcile with the KRG after a long period of conflictual relations. In the summer of 2016, he was even quoted saying that the Kurds have "Undisputed right" to self-determination[29]. On the face of it, such a declaration seems to be tactically motivated by the need to coordinate with the Peshmerga for liberating Mosul. Other tactical motives could be the need to weaken the Nuri al-Maliki-PUK-Gorran axis, seeking to oust him from power, as well as the Shi'a militia Hashd al-Sha'bi,

[29] "Iraq's PM sees Kurdish referendum as 'undisputed right'", Rudaw, 26 August 2016, http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/26082016

which forms a counterweight to the Iraqi army. Nevertheless, this very utterance may turn it into a fait accompli in the longer run. Al'Abadi's calculation might also be that Shi'a interest could be better served without the Sunni Kurds, as this would turn the Shi'is into the absolute majority in Iraq[30]. Certainly, neither Maliki nor the Hashd al-Sha'abi, nor other Iraqi groups are likely to accept this easily and smoothly, especially if the Kurds insist on including Kirkuk and the other disputed regions in the Kurdish state. However, the earlier precedents of Kurdish autonomy and federation could signal future acceptance of independence.

If Baghdad is not strong enough to resist the separation of Kurdistan, will Iran assume this role, since it has declared often times its opposition to Kurdish independence? Iran's motives have to do with its reluctance to see a new Sunni political entity on its border, its fear of spillover effects on its own Kurds, as well as the need to reinforce the Shi'a- led government in Baghdad and spread its influence in the region through it. Iran's main strategic vision is to turn Iraq into its area of influence as well as a bridge for reaching Syria, Lebanon, and the Mediterranean. In this sense, a strong Kurdish entity might challenge such a strategy. Iran's ongoing attempts to torpedo any move towards independence was done through the formula of divide and rule, by attempting to pull to its side the PUK and Gorran and cementing their alliance with Maliki against the KDP camp. Another important instrument is using its proxy Hashd al-Sha'bi as a leverage against the KRG. Still, representatives of the Iranian government have told a visiting Kurdish delegation that Tehran will "understand" further independence of the Kurdistan Region from Iraq if "it does not pose a threat" to the neighbouring Islamic Republic[31]. True or not, Iran too is battling with the idea of Kurdish independence in Iraq.

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[30] Estimations put the Shiites at 60-65% and the Kurds at 15-20%. Central American Agency, *The World Factbook*, 12 January 2017, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html

[31] "Tehran wants assurance Kurdish independence won't 'threaten' Iran's security, official says", Rudaw, 20 February 2017, http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/200220171

Mobilizing international support

For some years now, President Barzani has been roaming the world with a view to preparing the ground for recognition of a Kurdish state. He and his various emissaries do not lose any opportunity to propagate the idea of independence in Washington, in Munich[32], in Davos, in meeting with world leaders, and in Kurdistan itself. The two key players, whose support might tip the balance for independence, are Turkey and the U.S.

Common wisdom has it that, like Tehran, Ankara too will do its best to thwart the establishment of a Kurdish state in Iraq. However, Turkish stance and calculations might be totally different from Iran's. Since 2008, Turkey has developed a dichotomised strategy towards the Kurds by differentiating between the "good" Kurds in Iraq and the "bad" ones in Turkey and Syria. This goes a long way to explain the fact that both President Barzani and Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani have been frequenting Turkey since 2008 with the aim of developing close relations with Ankara. This dichotomy allowed Ankara to develop strategic relations with Erbil while fighting unabatedly the others. An important aspect of this strategy was allowing the KRG to set up an independent oil and gas pipeline via its territories against the will of Baghdad. The pipeline, which started piping oil in early 2014, has enhanced inadvertently the region's economic independence.

In addition to the important economic relations, Turkey needs the Kurdish entity in Iraq for various other strategic considerations, namely as a buffer against Shi'a Baghdad, as a counterbalance to the growing Iranian influence in that country, and as a launching pad or a pretext for assuming a role in post-"Islamic State" Iraq. Turkey also uses its relations with the KRG as a showcase for demonstrating its goodwill towards the Kurds

[32] The Kurdish delegation held in Munich meetings with delegations from ten countries, including U.S. and Kuwait. The delegation of the U.S. congress was reported to be more enthusiastic about Kurdish independence than the Kurds themselves. Rudaw, 18 February 2017, http://www.rudaw.net/arabic/kurdistan/180220172

in Turkey, by showing that it is not against the Kurdish people, but against those it terms terrorists, namely the PKK and the Democratic Union Party (PYD). The fact that the KDP's leaders have been frequenting Ankara even at the height of the Kurdish crisis in Turkey illustrates Ankara's dualistic policies. Often times, Ankara has also used KRG leaders as mediators with its own Kurds[33].

Turkey's exceptional policy towards the KRI was illustrated earlier this year. On 26 February 2017, President Barzani visited Turkey as he had done often times in the past. However, this visit was unique in that, for the first time, the Kurdish flag was hoisted alongside the Iraqi flag at the airport reception and also at Barzani's meeting with Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım[34]. No doubt this gesture was addressed to Kurds in Turkey with the aim of garnering their support in the referendum on Erdoğan's presidency scheduled for less than two months later. Nevertheless, it unintentionally legitimised the Kurdish unique entity in Iraq, as proved by the controversy it raised in Turkey[35]. In the past, Ankara hinted that it might back a Kurdish move towards independence[36]. An analyst in the British *The Independent* even went as far as to suggest that Turkey might be one of the first countries to recognize a Kurdish state[37]. Accordingly, such a scenario no longer sounds as absurd

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[33] "Iraqi Kurdistan's leaders head Turkey-PKK mediation", *Ekurd Daily*, 14 November 2011, http://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2011/11/state5573.htm

[34] M. Bozarslan, "Kurdish flag controversy continues, in Turkish court", *Al-Monitor*, 7 March 2017, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/03/turkey-iraqi-kurdistan-krg-flag-sparks-turkish-debate.html

[35] Head of Turkish Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) Devlet Bahçeli described the hoisting of the flag as "scandalous, careless and a disgrace". M. Rojkan, "MHP Leader Criticizes Turkey for Flying Kurdistan Flag", *Basnews*, 28 February 2017, http://www.basnews.com/index.php/en/news/middle-east/333480

[36] For example Hüseyin Çelik, a spokesman for Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) stated in June 2014 that "the Kurds of Iraq can decide for themselves the name and type of the entity they are living in". "Turkey's AKP Spokesman: Iraq's Kurds Have Right to Decide Their Future", Rudaw, 13 June 2014, http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/130620142

[37] G. Kent, "Kurdish independence is coming – but the Kurds themselves have

as it used to be in the past, but critics raise the specter of the Kurdish entity's total dependence on Ankara and the danger of possible arbitrary changes in the latter's attitude.

The other key player is the US, and in this case too the picture is neither static, nor monolithic. On the one hand, the American declared policy has been that of safeguarding the integrity of the Iraqi state. But on the other hand, its actions on the ground produced willy-nilly opposite results. When, in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, the US helped establish the no-fly zone over the Kurdish region, it unintentionally helped establish a genuine Kurdish autonomy. Similarly, American backing for a federative formula for post-Saddam Iraq gave further impetus to the idea of a separate Kurdish entity.

On another level, the military cooperation between the American-led coalition and the KRG, which was cemented during the 2003 Iraqi war, was boosted significantly in the ongoing fighting against the "Islamic State", becoming a kind of strategic alliance. The KRG has been receiving all kinds of military aid including training, modern weapons, as well as coordination and cooperation in military operations. According to Kenneth Pollack, a very positive development was that the US agreed in early 2016 to provide military funds "to pay many of the Peshmerga's most important costs – including food, medical supplies, and other basic needs – to the tune of several tens of millions of dollars per month. This is a big boost for the Kurds, and by itself will reduce the Kurdish budget deficit to a considerable extent"[38].

Concurrently, there is a change of stance in American public opinion whereby various politicians, intellectuals, and

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to secure it", *The Independent*, 20 May 2017, http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/kurdish-independence-is-coming-but-the-kurds-themselves-have-to-secure-it-a7040736.html

[38] K.M. Pollack, "Iraq situation part III: Kurdistan", Brookings Institute, 30 March 2016, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/03/30/iraq-situation-report-part-iii-kurdistan/

columnists state their support for Kurdish independence[39]. One example is former US ambassador to the UN John Bolton, who stated: "Today's reality is that Iraq and Syria as we have known them are gone… Also emerging, after years of effort, is a de facto independent Kurdistan". He further estimated that the Kurds were moving "inexorably toward de jure declaration of a 'Kurdistan'" and that this could be in America's favour[40].

One can also perceive a difference of attitude between the State Department and the various security apparatuses, with the first reflecting the more traditional stance of a unitary Iraqi state, while the latter, which have the strongest ties and interests with the KRG, displays a more flexible position. The Kurds also pin great hopes in President Donald Trump, whose advisers have already shown a more favourable position towards Kurdish statehood than his predecessor[41]. In an attempt to engage the new Trump administration, President Barzani was reported to have discussed "very seriously" the issue of Kurdistan's independence with American Vice President Mike Pence in a meeting in Munich in February 2017[42]. The result of this talk is not known but, for example, Director of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) Vincent Stewart assessed in May 2017 that "Kurdish independence is on a trajectory where it is probably not if, but when"[43]. Given the traditional American wavering and zigzagging stance, such initial declarations are not a guarantee for future policies. Nonetheless, should the U.S.

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[39] Admittedly there are others who continue to oppose it altogether.

[40] "John Bolton Supports Independence of Kurdistan", NSNBC international, 16 November 2016, https://nsnbc.me/2016/11/16/john-bolton-supports-independence-of-kurdistan/

[41] D. Romano, "Trump's triumph and the Kurds", Rudaw, 10 November 2016, http://rudaw.net/english/opinion/10112016

[42] "President Masoud Barzani discuss independence 'seriously' with Vice President Pence", Rudaw, 18 February 2017, http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/180220174

[43] P. Stewart, "Kurdish independence in Iraq likely 'not if but when': U.S. general", Reuters, 23 May 2017, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-iraq-kurds-idUSKBN18J2WT

support a Kurdish move, or at least not oppose it, this will be a game changer for KRI's independence.

How about the stance of other states? In other parts of the world too one can observe growing acceptance of the idea of an independent Kurdistan. This new stance is, of course, a reflection of the geostrategic changes in the region and the emerging power of the KRG. In Europe, for example, Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán stated that the government of Hungary supports nations striving for independence, including the Kurdistan region of Iraq, which he said can play a stable role in the Middle East: "The Hungarians reiterate their love and respect for the Kurdish [region's] efforts for independence"[44].

Britain's foreign affairs committee report of January 2015 was said to be "a major intellectual counterweight to the inertial force of the One Iraq policy" when it concluded that "if the Kurdistan Region is to become independent, it should be with the consent of the rest of Iraq… But the UK and its international partners should stand ready to help ensure that any clear expression of will in favour of independence, and on reasonable terms is accepted and respected"[45].

In 2014, the European Parliament "gave a tacit nod to Kurdish aspirations of independence" when, for the first time, its motion over the Iraq conflict did not stipulate that the country must stay together[46]. Rudaw reported already in 2014 that "the United States, France, Italy, Britain, Turkey, Jordan, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates are among states that have assured the [Kurdish] officials they will show understanding, should Kurdistan declare independence"[47]. It was also estimated that Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, as

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[44] "Iraqi Kurdistan News in brief", *Ekurd Daily*, 11 May 2015, http://ekurd.net/iraqi-kurdistan-news-in-brief-may-11-2017-2017-05-11

[45] The land between two anniversaries: Reports on a parliamentary fact-finding delegation in November 2015. Printed and published by Russel Press Ltd, p. 6.

[46] D. Serinci, "European Parliament Gives Tacit Nod to Kurdish Independence", Rudaw, 17 July 2014, http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/17072014

[47] D. Serinci, "Europe's Kurds Rally for Kurdish Independence", Rudaw, 14 July 2014, http://www.rudaw.net/mobile/english/kurdistan/140720141

well as Jordan, were likely to support or at least not oppose the establishment of a Kurdish state[48]. Such stance is explained by these countries' fear of Iran's expansionist policies and its strong basis in Baghdad. An illustration of this emerging new stance was United Arab Emirates' Police Deputy Lieutenant General Dhahi Khalfan, who stated recently that the Kurds deserve an independent state, calling on Iran and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) chief Qasem Suleimani – who is against independence – not to interfere in Kurdish affairs[49].

Will there be a *de jure* Kurdish state?

The KRG is said to have missed two opportunities to declare independence: in 2003, following the fall of the Ba'th, and in 2014, after taking control of the disputed territories. Indeed, the Kurdish leadership's declarations and policies did show vacillation, likely due to pressures from outside powers, and especially from the U.S.; to fears of the severe consequences of an untimely move; to the expected challenges from regional countries; and last, but not least, to important economic concerns. Some Kurds believe that 2017 could be their last chance: after IS is pushed out of Mosul, the international community might not be inclined to support the idea of Kurdish independence.

Weighing the pros and cons, it is possible to say that, at this point in time, the pros tip the balance. There is strong popular aspiration for independence, the leadership is committed to and has clear strategy for such a move, the world is attuned to such a possibility like never before, and there is growing consensus for taking such a bold action. After all, independence is taken and never given, especially since the instinctive reflex of

[48] Interview with a person close to President Barzani who preferred to remain anonymous.

[49] "Dubai police chief supports independent Kurdistan", *Ara news*, 13 April 2017, http://aranews.net/2017/04/dubai-police-chief-supports-independent-kurdistan/

the international community is to block the emergence of any newcomer into its midst. To quote the director of the American DIA, the question, therefore, it is not if, but when. For this to happen, creeping independence seems to be the best formula.

4. Mosul, Sunni Arabs and the Day After

Myriam Benraad

Since June 2014 and the "Islamic State"'s (IS) takeover of Mosul, a succession of dramatic events has put the endless Iraqi crisis back to centre stage, bringing back memories of the chaotic experience of Sunni Arabs since the Saddam Hussein regime was overthrown in 2003[1]. More than any other, the Sunni Arab experience is emblematic of the socio-political hyper-fragmentation that has been undermining Iraq's fragile nation-state for years, and whose logics defy many conventional assumptions[2]. Indeed, one cannot stress enough that the Iraqi conflict is by no means reducible to a simplistic, denominational confrontation which exclusively opposes Sunni and Shiite communities. Admittedly, IS' rise to power over the last years and subsequent violence have accentuated sectarian tensions, but violence has been similarly intense among Sunni Arabs themselves.

Informed observers all agree that normalising the status of Sunni Arabs' populations, which has been a longstanding question for Iraq, constitutes a prerequisite for long-term security and stability, and for the restoration of a state and citizenship presently in tatters. The future is very uncertain, however, given that the conditions which, in 2013-2014, allowed the dazzling advance of the "Islamic State" group in a context of widespread protests in Sunni Arab provinces have not fundamentally

[1] See author's book *Irak, la revanche de l'Histoire. De l'occupation étrangère à l'État islamique* (Iraq, the Revenge of History. From Foreign Occupation to the Islamic State), Vendémiaire, Paris, 2015.

[2] While Iraq's politics remains deeply dysfunctional, it has moved beyond basic sectarian cleavages. On the flawed narrative of Shiites versus Sunnis, see for example H. al-Khoei, "Is the conflict in Iraq really sectarian in nature?", *The Guardian*, 8 January 2012.

evolved[3]. Many Sunni Arabs continue to share suspicion and hostility towards the established elites and the political system as a whole, especially with regard to the ruling Shiite coalition and militias that dominate national politics. Their socio-economic situation is as deplorable as it was before the war, when not accentuated by the level of destruction and displacements caused by the jihadist shockwave. The feeling of marginalisation, which has long prevailed among them, has now turned into abandonment, susceptible to give rise to lasting violence.

To make things worse, Sunni Arabs are deeply divided as to the definition of their identity and destiny within a decaying Iraqi entity[4]. The political domination exerted over them by the "Islamic State" for almost two years has strengthened pre-existing cleavages and the vicious circle of reprisals, which promises to be even more virulent as the jihadists lose their strongholds. Fractures are noticeably deepening between parties, armed factions, tribes and clans, civilians in search of vengeance and justice, and often within Sunni Arab families themselves[5]. The following chapter aims to shed light on this unprecedented state of fragmentation by raising two essential questions for the near and farther future: what do these divisions within the Sunni Arab constituency mean as we near the end of the ongoing military operations in Mosul and for the post-IS governance in Iraq's second largest city? What do the current circumstances imply when it comes to relations with other ethno-sectarian groups, in particular with the Shiites and the Kurds, and to prospects for long-term national reconciliation and reconstruction?

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[3] K.H. Sowell, "Iraq's Second Insurgency", *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Hudson Institute, August 2014.

[4] R. Mansour, *The Sunni Predicament in Iraq*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's Middle East Center, March 2016.

[5] T. Arango and F. Hassan, "A War of Brothers in Iraq: 'I Will Kill Him with My Own Hands'", *New York Times*, 18 June 2016.

Sunni Arabs and the Mosul interlude

The cascade of events in 2014 has most often been approached through sensationalism, characterised by a media coverage more concerned with immediate developments than with the longer history that they could reveal[6]. Yet, the circumstances that surrounded the fall of Mosul deserve a more critical retrospective examination for they raise as many questions about this specific period as they do about the sequence that will likely open up once the confrontation between the "Islamic State", Iraqi troops, and coalition forces reaches its final breaking point. Two main narratives have structured the crisis in this respect: first, the commonplace notion of a *blitzkrieg* campaign led by the jihadists, while their offensive has been a much more gradual process; second, the supposed unswerving support that Sunni Arab civilians provided them, in Mosul in particular. A more detached view could actually help unveil the much more complex configuration that unfolded on the ground.

From this standpoint, it is indisputable that the territorial gains achieved by IS took a majority of analysts, including the most knowledgeable, by surprise. Many continue to question the factors that led to the capture of Mosul in the absence of an official version or unanimous account, apart from stories of mass desertions among the Iraqi security forces (ISF) stationed in the Nineveh province at the time[7]. It is clear, nevertheless, that the jihadists had long planned their military assault and enjoyed significant support in and around the city, in particular among local religious leaders and tribes willing to knock heads with Baghdad and the Nuri al-Maliki cabinet. Rumours of a jihadist offensive had circulated long before the actual fall of Mosul and many combatants had *de facto* taken control of entire areas before the summer of 2014. Several jihadists arrested as

[6] T. Abdulrazaq and G. Stansfield, "The Enemy Within: ISIS and the Conquest of Mosul", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 70, no. 4, Autumn 2016, pp. 525-542.

[7] N. Parker, I. Coles and R. Salman, "Special Report: How Mosul fell – An Iraqi general disputes Baghdad's story", Reuters, 14 October 2014.

early as May the same year confessed their objectives to the Iraqi intelligence, against the backdrop of the early capture of towns such as Falluja and parts of Ramadi in the al-Anbar province.

While still in charge, former Prime Minister al-Maliki had greatly underestimated the group's appeal among entire sectors of the Sunni Arab population, as well as its determination to fight the government forces. After he stepped down, parties and political figures, starting from his successor Haider al-'Abadi and leaders of Shiite militias, omitted for their part that not all Sunni Arab citizens had welcomed IS in their areas – far from it. It is worth recalling that in Mosul, the local population split as soon as the jihadist coup started, divided between its declared supporters, passive or indifferent communities, and its open enemies[8]. Such contrasted attitudes reflect divisions that remain relevant three years later. Many Sunni Arabs who rejected the "Islamic State" from the onset fled and accused the army of having abandoned them, and even "sold" their city to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Others were left to themselves or simply unable to find shelter; they often stayed to provide for their relatives, out of uncertainty and also out of fear of a more dangerous and precarious situation had they escaped[9].

IS salient resilience

Beyond this differentiated landscape and extremely shifting circumstances, the "Islamic State" is still profoundly rooted in Iraq, astonishing for its resilience. The military and human setbacks suffered by the group since the launching of the U.S.-led Inherent Resolve operation have only partially questioned its presence and pan-Islamist enterprise, especially among the disenfranchised Sunni Arab youth that are still seduced by

[8] T. Abdulrazaq and G. Stansfield, "The Day After: What to Expect in post-Islamic State Mosul", *RUSI Journal*, vol. 161, no. 3, 2016, pp. 14-20.

[9] F. Hawramy, S. Mohammed and K. Shaheen, "Life under Isis in Raqqa and Mosul: 'We're living in a giant prison'", *The Guardian*, 9 December 2015.

its revolutionary cause. The Iraqis, who along Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi played a central role in the group's formation, remain its first fighters on the ground, well above foreign fighters. The movement's sociology speaks for itself: in 2017, local Iraqis represent nearly 90% of its membership, including militarily active or mere accomplices and sympathisers. Started in 2005, the "Iraqification" of the "Islamic State" has not given way to the constitution of a more autonomous foreign militant base. From a local perspective, the jihadist group remains much more than an insurgency; it is a deeply-seated socio-political reality, a phenomenon durably anchored beyond its misfortunes.

A set of combined factors account for this resilience, beginning with the extreme atomisation of the Sunni Arab constituency, marked by a structural crisis of leadership that highlights why many initially saw in the jihadist project an alternative to the political vacuum. In the absence of other ideological options, the allegedly unifying utopia offered by IS retains resonance among parts of the Sunni Arab society, especially the young generation that did not experience the Baathist era and utterly lacks political benchmarks. Both the American and Iraqi authorities recognise this pattern and the fact that IS keeps considerable recruiting capacities among young Sunnis aged between 16 and 25, often poor, unemployed, and deprived of education because of years of war. This generation has been shaped by a long process of desocialisation, started during the embargo decade and protracted under foreign occupation. In most cases, this generation has trivialised violence, consecrating it as quasi norm. Often, the youngest have only experienced violence throughout their lifetime, therefore becoming the ideal breeding ground for the "Islamic State" and other insurgent factions.

Besides, many of these young men originate from local tribes that swore allegiance to al-Baghdadi in 2014 and onwards. Examples are numerous and vary from one province and city to the other. In June 2015, for instance, al-Anbar dignitaries of the influential al-Jumaili clan in Falluja publicly joined the jihadist group following a meeting with its local members. To justify

their choice, they evoked their rejection of foreign intervention and the continuing discrimination carried out by the central government against Sunni Arabs, targeting the refugees from Ramadi in particular. The growing military involvement of Iran-backed Shiite militias, also represented within the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF)[10], was another motivation for their rallying. In the case of other Sunni Arab tribes, many have been afraid of suffering the same fate as those who had opposed the jihadists, like the Albu Nimr, whose men were mass murdered at the end of 2014. In the last three years, the al-Jumaili provided hundreds of fighters and several senior officials to IS[11].

Towards sectarian hyperpolarisation

The "Islamic State" being so entrenched, including in regions taken back from the group since 2015 in the context of the allied Iraqi and coalition operations, has allowed the jihadists to withstand military pressures and carry out their strategy of destroying Iraq's society through civil war. On the one hand, their two-year rule over entire sections of the Iraqi territory has translated into an even more acute exacerbation of inter-communal tensions. In this regard, the radical viewpoint of jihadists, guilty of countless atrocities, has met the brutal response of other belligerents. Sectarian Shiite militias, in particular, nurture strong anti-Sunni feelings due to the continued attacks carried out against their community and killings of civilians by IS. This dynamic is not new: these militias and the jihadists have clashed on numerous occasions during the Iraqi conflict,

[10] Known in Arabic as *Hashd al-Sha'abi*, the PMF are an Iraqi state-sponsored movement that is mainly composed of Shiite militiamen, but also includes a number of Sunni Arabs, tribes in particular. It was formed in the immediate aftermath of the "Islamic State"'s assault and has heavily relied on the involvement of volunteers beyond more organised paramilitary groups.

[11] Among them was, for example, Iyad al-Jumaili, a former Baathist intelligence officer also known in Iraq as Abu Yahya and allegedly killed in April 2017 in a U.S. strike in the al-Qaim area.

most notably in 2006[12]. Obviously, the recent period has led to an even greater and deadlier confrontation between them, from the Camp Speicher massacre of June 2014, when IS affiliates killed more than one thousand Shiite Air Force cadets in Tikrit, to the looting, torture, murder, and even ethnic cleansing imputed to Shiite paramilitaries against Sunni Arab populations[13].

It is useful to point out that Shiite militias were not initially supposed to join the fighting in the Nineveh plains and Mosul, and that resistance to their involvement on the Sunni Arab side was violent. Like most other sub-state players, these militias do not follow a distinctly Iraqi agenda – or it is at least inspired by a very selective reading of what "Iraq" means. On the contrary, they obey well-understood interests, namely increasing their sphere of influence, both territorial and political, through concrete military successes. Some have in fact replaced failing institutions in the areas recaptured from the jihadists, and the margin of manoeuvre of central and provincial authorities seems limited in this regard. Many Shiite militias have also infiltrated units of the federal armed forces, infusing even greater sectarianism. Moreover, in November 2016, the PMF were institutionalised by a controversial law transforming them into a government entity alongside the regular army. In fact, these militias are almost totally independent. Such autonomy makes it difficult to control their excesses and prevent authorities from holding them accountable for many of the current misdeeds. Imbued with pure revanchism, they often make no distinction between actual IS fighters and mere civilians, who are systematically suspected of supporting and colluding with the jihadist groups, and therefore beleaguered.

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[12] N. Rosen, "Anatomy of a Civil War", *Boston Review*, 8 November 2006.

[13] For an overview of the devastating impact that the conflict has recently had on civilians, including war crimes and crimes against humanity, see Amnesty International's report "*'Punished for Daesh's Crimes': Displaced Iraqis Abused by Militias and Government Forces*, October 2016. In some instances, like in the Mount Sinjar, Kurdish Peshmergas were also accused of reprehensible drifts. S. Dagher and B. Kesling, "Arabs Accuse Kurds of Exploiting War With Islamic State to Grab Land", *Wall Street Journal*, 25 November 2015.

Such intrusion of overtly hostile militias in the affairs of territories, which have otherwise been distant from Iraq's Shiite realities, is considered by most Sunni Arabs as unacceptable and frightening. Virtually wherever they settled down, Shiite militias have turned their back on local residents. Mosul, as such, constitutes a powder keg waiting for the formal defeat of the "Islamic State" to explode: Shiite presence there was historically almost non-existent and Moslawis have witnessed the rise of political Shiism after 2003 with bewilderment. It has contributed, in a direct manner, to their alienation. Perhaps even more disturbing is the fact that the more Shiite paramilitary influence spreads, the more some Sunni Arabs may be tempted to turn around, including those cooperating with ISF and the international coalition. Iraq is familiar with circumstantial and brittle alliances. On the whole, Sunni Arabs do not trust either the "liberation" that they have been promised or the ability of the Iraqi government to ensure their security against their so-called "liberators".

In search of a post-Jihadist renewal

Widespread resentment boiling among Sunni Arabs in the face of misconduct by ISF and of militia reprisals, combined with the unparalleled destruction caused in their areas by coalition and government airstrikes, emboldens their potential comeback to and backing of the "Islamic State". As in any civil war, cumulative violence provides key resources to the jihadists, as they currently seek to regroup in several Iraqi provinces, such as Diyala (Baquba, Muqdadiyya…)[14]. In addition, most of the socio-political and socio-economic grievances and demands that IS exploited in the first place to secure support have not vanished and are even worsened by the massive displacement

[14] M. Knights and A. Mello, "Losing Mosul, Regenerating in Diyala: How the Islamic State Could Exploit Iraq's Sectarian Tinderbox", *CTC Sentinel*, October 2016, pp. 1-7.

of populations over the period 2014-2017[15]. This is more particularly the case in areas where Iran-backed Shiite militias have increased their presence but are far from welcome, such as Tal Afar, west of Mosul, a traditional stronghold of Sunni insurgents.

In 2014, it was around Sunni Arab alienation and the loss of confidence in Baghdad and local authorities that the "Islamic State" built a large part of its popularity: it had promised a new state to those who would swell their ranks, against the deliquescence of formal institutions, corruption, the lack of basic services, and the reprehensible attitude of the Iraqi army. The inhabitants of Mosul complained of major abuses and shortages brought about by the government. The broad sense of ostracism and injustice that overwhelmed them at the time was strategically used by IS, whose combatants were able to negotiate the allegiance of dignitaries and notables well before their military offensive and the conquest of Mosul and other provinces[16]. The commitments made by the jihadists were manifold: the rapid improvement of living conditions, the return to public order, the restitution of political authority to the dispossessed, more specifically the tribes. This promise of a jihadist welfare state was enticing in a context of simmering anger against the system. Symbolically, the buildings of the Nineveh provincial government were taken in the very first hours of Mosul's fall, while former governor Athil al-Nujaifi escaped.

IS pan-Islamist project was nothing new, though: as of its emergence in the autumn 2006, in its original version, the

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[15] According to the Iraqi Ministry of Migration and Displaced, since 2017 and the start of the assault on western Mosul, approximately 100,000 civilians have been displaced due to the intensity of airstrikes and urban fighting. Most have joined overpopulated refugee camps. According to the United Nations, as many as 800,000 civilians would also still be trapped by the battle and unable to ensure their security.

[16] As of January 2014, Falluja was overrun by the radical militants in a context of boiling discontent towards the al-Maliki government. The "Islamic State" sought to win over local populations by claiming that its fighters were there to protect Sunnis, and thus requesting their full co-operation.

group was entirely oriented toward the creation of a dissident state reserved to Sunni populations. Many civilians were already at odds with – if not in a state of war against – the central government, seen as lost to ultra-sectarian, corrupt, and discriminating Shiite factions. Therefore, in the "Islamic State" many saw the first stages of a return to power, as well as collective revenge and regained dignity. Current clashes in Mosul and other regions are far from extinguished beyond the official narrative put forward by the Iraqi government. IS shadow is indeed omnipresent. Yet, most Sunni Arabs who lived under its yoke for months can testify to its ferocious management, and the fervour of those who had first believed in its secessionist ambition has largely eroded, leaving behind confusion and disenchantment. Many made the bitter experience of a utopia which turned into tyranny, amidst intensification of fighting and widespread devastation.

In the midst of this vacuum, salaries have not been paid to civil servants in Mosul since June 2015 and the state is only a ghost. Each local player acts as a state within the state. None of the government ministers has visited the area since the liberation of the eastern bank in January 2017. Infrastructure, hospitals, schools, and the university are destroyed, while access to water, electricity, roads, and sewages remains limited. However, the main wish of Iraqi citizens is the return to the rule of law, and security. On which basis, using which power-sharing formula, with which forces? No aspect of the post-jihadist governance and relations between the forces involved was negotiated before the battle began last October. Quite the contrary: the logics of conquest and control prevail, around diverging visions of the new political system to emerge. In liberated towns such as Tikrit, Baiji, Falluja, and Ramadi, everything related to governance is basically blurred[17].

[17] Since September 2016, IS militants have killed dozens in Tikrit. For example, in April 2017, 31 were killed and more than 40 wounded in a series of suicide attacks later claimed by the group. It was reported by several press outlets that men wearing police uniforms had entered the city in the preceding hours.

Conflicting definitions of nationhood

Rebuilding an Iraqi state also means re-founding a citizenship beyond cleavages, a national feeling wrecked by nearly 15 years of conflict[18]. More than any other social group, Sunni Arabs have suffered the consequences of dismantled institutions and the cycles of violence that followed. Any true common belonging needs to be shaped by the state. Yet, Iraqi nationalism has almost entirely disappeared from the socio-political spectrum, replaced by a plethora of sub-nationalisms of ethno-sectarian nature, like the Shiite and Kurdish ones. Further reinforced by the struggle waged against the "Islamic State"'s own Sunni religious nationalism, these sub-national affirmations remove any real perspective of reconciliation for the moment. Indeed, Shiite and Kurdish national feelings have little echo among Sunni Arabs, often unable to define their collective identity in concise terms.

On the one hand, pan-Islamist religious nationalism, as advocated by the "Islamic State", is not entirely extinct in 2017 and still benefits from the wide rejection of the al-'Abadi government by Sunni Arabs. Despite its territorial losses, the jihadist so-called "caliphate" is set to be an active force in the near future, even under a more clandestine form and with more scattered cells of support. Unfortunately, as many Iraqi officials rightly put it, IS is here to stay. In addition, the group has managed to socialise large parts of Sunni Arab society, often versed in extreme religiosity (Salafism) and estranged from the Iraqi nation-state, both as a concept and a material reality[19].

The best illustration of this process is perhaps how Sunni Arab political figures seeking to put Iraqi nationalism forward

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[18] See H. Al Qarawee, *Imagining the Nation: Nationalism, Sectarianism and Socio-Political Conflict in Iraq*, Rossendale Books, Lancashire, 2012; K.F. Osman, *Sectarianism in Iraq: The Making of State and Nation Since 1920*, Routledge, Abingdon/New York, 2015.

[19] More broadly on this question, see the report authored by R. Dar, S. Hamid and W. McCants, *Islamism after the Arab Spring: Between the Islamic State and the nation-state*, Brookings Institution, January 2017.

have either been ignored or perceived as "traitors". To this day, they have not been able to present a united front, a coherent definition of what a post-IS phase would mean and look like. Many are desperately fighting for representativeness. Among them are figures like Saleh al-Mutlak, former Deputy Prime Minister, Jamal al-Karbuli and Iyad al-'Allawi, whose relations with ruling Shiite parties have been very versatile since 2010, to say the least[20]. More pragmatic are those who opted for a rapprochement with the Shiite coalition to strengthen their partisan base and political role, like Ahmad 'Abdallah al-Juburi, 'Abd al-Rahman al-Luwaizi and its Sunni Union, or Sa'adoun al-Dulaimi. All try to position themselves more strongly in Baghdad and Sunni Arab provinces, and have called for reforms. In January 2017, the head of the Iraqi Forces Alliance parliamentary bloc Ahmad al-Masari declared that the political process was still on a wrong base, explaining the "Islamic State"'s continued infiltration of entire areas.

Sunni Arab political formations and alliances are far from pursuing a centralising agenda as some of their counterparts in Baghdad would like them to. An influential politician such as Usama al-Nujaifi, leader of the Mutahidun bloc, has been calling for an Iraqi confederation formed around one or several semi-autonomous Sunni regions: modelled on Kurdistan, it would assemble the al-Anbar, Salah al-Din, and Nineveh provinces in particular. He and his allies consider such an evolution as the only viable answer and the best outcome to Iraq's structural crisis, as well as the only guarantee for the country's unity. A Sunni Arab region would be endowed with its own borders, armed forces, and legislation. Others, such as parliament spokesman Salim al-Jubburi, consider for their part that strengthening the prerogatives of provincial councils is sufficient and that greater fragmentation of the territory must be countered. This option would also allow for tightened co-operation with the central government, seen as more realistic.

[20] See S. Wicken, *Iraq's Sunnis in Crisis*, Middle East Security Report 11, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), May 2013.

The spectrum of renewed insurgency

Intra-Sunni Arab political rivalries and clashes, which in August 2016 led to the destitution of Defence minister Khaled al-'Ubaidi before the beginning of the Mosul battle, are creating new opportunities for IS to resurge. The announced end of military operations in the Nineveh province will certainly not terminate the Iraqi Sunni insurgency, which began more than a decade ago. On the one hand, the ongoing confrontation in Mosul and other places have not repaired the conditions which originally led to the "Islamic State" catastrophe in 2014 and had radicalised a peaceful protest movement[21]. On the other hand, there is no real plan for the day after, no negotiated agreement as to the next local administration. The claimed triumphs against IS since 2015 have paradoxically provided operational room to the group and other insurgent factions. Lacking stability, Sunni Arabs areas globally remain an environment conducive to insurgency.

The "Islamic State" has regained a foothold in many of the allegedly "liberated" territories, and in fact, never left them, most notably historic bastions like Falluja. In some cases, members of local tribes favourable to the group have also facilitated its return, like in Ramadi a few months after the city was "cleaned" by ISF. A series of suicide attacks hit several areas in the past months, where IS members preserve underground networks of accomplices and some ideological and tactical support among residents. In the early days of the offensive launched to retake Mosul, the group launched an assault on the ethnically mixed city of Kirkuk, where Iraqi forces have postponed their operations[22]. Since then, armed attacks, targeted assassinations, and suicide bombings have been on the rise everywhere, at a frantic

[21] See *Make or Break: Iraq's Sunnis and the State*, Middle East Report 144, International Crisis Group (ICG), August 2013.

[22] In May 2017, the "Islamic State" executed nine men over accusations of collaboration with Iraqi security services in the town of Hawija, which fell into its hands in mid-2014.

pace. This includes other provinces such as Basra in the south, where the security situation has deteriorated[23].

Beyond IS, other Sunni Arab movements, whether initially aligned on radical jihadism or not, plan on carrying on the fight against the coalition and the Iraqi authorities[24]. The present conditions objectively help such continuation, including the violence of the anti-Shiite sentiment among significant sectors of the population. These formations include the Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order (*Jaysh Rijal at-Tariqa al-Naqshbandiyya*, or JRTN), which became an enemy of the "Islamic State" after temporary co-operation in 2014, or the Brigades of the 1920 Revolution, linked to Muthanna al-Dhari's Association of Muslim Scholars, as well as al-Qa'ida, which intends to forward the banner of the Sunni cause in Iraq and portrays itself as a local force[25]. At least on a rhetorical level, these groups, hitherto eclipsed by the "Islamic State", seek to demonstrate that they are the best protectors of Sunni Arabs and the best alternative to both IS, the Shiite-led government, and Iranian influence. They wish to benefit from the rout of the radical jihadists in Mosul and from clear disillusionment among civilians to regain some level of control.

In substance, the causes for the resistance of these groups to the "Islamic State" have not varied since the first dissensions occurred between them in 2007. They are essentially ideological and tactical. IS has been blamed for its ultraviolent methods, against Sunni Arab civilians in particular, routinely imprisoned, tortured, arbitrarily killed, or taken as human shields in fierce battles such as Mosul. Their members are reported to have infiltrated the flood of internally displaced persons and

[23] While many could think so, southern Iraq has not been spared by the jihadist attacks. Very recently, several civilians and Iraqi soldiers were killed in a suicide car bombing on a highway near Basra's oilfields.

[24] S. Adnan and A. Reese, *Beyond the Islamic State: Iraq's Sunni Insurgency*, Middle East Security Report 24, Institute for the Study of War (ISW), October 2014.

[25] On 25 August 2016, al-Qa'ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri called on the Sunnis to resist the "Safavid-crusader occupation" in Iraq and to resume long guerilla war to reverse territorial losses at the hands of their opponents.

humanitarian camps to recruit partisans, offering religious courses and basic assistance to otherwise ungoverned populations, in addition to their attempt to co-opt defectors of the "Islamic State", like in the Euphrates valley.

Sunni Arabs and the regional game

As in the case of the Shiite community, Sunni Arab hyper-fragmentation has facilitated the growth of regional interference in a country where sectarianism does not account for all the rivalries but remains a key fault line[26]. During the years of occupation, Sunni Arab religious, tribal, and political figures sought support from their coreligionists or sometimes took refuge in neighbouring countries in the face of the various accusations and threats that they faced. In January 2017, the Iraqi government renewed the arrest warrant targeting the former Nineveh governor Athil al-Nujaifi, dismissed by the parliament in 2015 and forbidden from entering Mosul. Other Sunni Arab players have also been targeted by similar measures, like former vice-president Tariq al-Hashimi in December 2011 and Finance minister Rafi al-Issawi who resigned in 2013. Baghdad publicly accused al-Nujaifi of having allowed Turkey to penetrate Iraq during the course of his mandate and station its troops at the Bashiqa base, north-east of Mosul, a manoeuvre considered a violation of sovereignty. Nujaifi's supporters, conversely, describe Ankara's increased role as a paramount guarantee of survival in the face of current Shiite expansion in northern Iraq.

Against the grip of Baghdad and its Sunni Arab allies, al-Nujaifi carried out a complex and twofold rapprochement with Erbil's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Ankara, with the formation of a paramilitary brigade made of about

[26] On sectarianism in Iraq and the broader Middle East, see F. Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity*, Hurst & Co., London, 2011; and N. Hasheemi and D. Postel, *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, Hurst & Co., London, 2017.

3,000 volunteers, trained and assisted by Turkish forces. The al-Nujaifi clan sees this move as the only way to ensure the security of the Nineveh province as the anticipated end of military operations in Mosul approach[27]. Until now, the members of this brigade have been prevented from taking part in the struggle, in this case by the PMF, for which they represent a threat and that reject Turkish interference in Iraqi affairs, as well as any form of mediation by Ankara. However, the force under Nujaifi's command has concretely let Turkey get a foothold in the local game and strengthen its alliances with Sunni forces (Arab or not) hostile to Baghdad like the Iraqi Islamic Party, led by Iyad al-Samarrai and historically linked to the Muslim Brotherhood.

In the present circumstances, the search for regional support has become a priority for many Sunni Arab forces. Despite pressure from the central government and their Sunni Arab rivals, who often emphasise their alleged complicity with IS and their attempts at dividing the nation, several meetings were held in Ankara and Geneva over the last months to discuss the future of the country. On 8 March 2017, one of these meetings – supported by Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and the United States – brought together key figures[28], including a number of Sunni Arab lawmakers, tribal leaders, and clerics. In its wake, it aroused the ire of Iraqi authorities. In fact, this

[27] The so-called National Mobilisation (*Hashd Watani*) emerged in 2015 under Athil al-Nujaifi's tutelage and with the support of both the KRG and Turkey. Around 4,000 fighters compose this all-Sunni force based on the military base of Zalikan in Sheykhan, a town situated in Mosul's vicinity. For months, these men have received training and arms. Their number is set to further rise in the near future. In October 2016, this paramilitary force rebranded itself as the Nineveh Guard (*Haras Ninawa*).

[28] Among them was Khamis al-Khanjar, closely linked to the al-Nujaifi family and leader of the Arab Project. Al-Khanjar is a native of Falluja and for years has been fighting against the marginalisation of Sunni Arabs while advocating a federalised solution to their existential crisis. In his eyes, this move would facilitate a greater degree of autonomy. Al-Khanjar is also among the strongest Sunni Arab proponents of a civil and secular state.

conference did not result in any unified position or agreement regarding the safe governance of Mosul and its surroundings. Rather, it once again underscored a highly-divided Sunni Arab political scene lacking a lucid vision for the communities that it purports to represent.

Conclusion

The long sequence of power exercised by the "Islamic State" and the operations launched by a constellation of local and foreign players to defeat the group will have painful and longstanding effects on Sunni Arabs. Against the backdrop of radicalised inter-communal tensions and destruction in all their provinces and other parts of Iraq, the Sunni Arabs have never been as divided as today. This equally applies to their relations with Baghdad and the Shiite-dominated ruling coalition, in which the majority has no confidence, and to their interactions with local elites. As such, the victory proclaimed against the "Islamic State" is not really a victory, since the movement already managed to redeploy itself across the country. Above all, this "victory" does not solve the issues which in the first place led to the jihadists' rise.

The fear is enormous that underlying conflicts will detonate once the battle of Mosul is over. There is indeed a genuine risk that the various warring parties will split around the control of power, local resources, and civilian populations in this city. Beyond their inability to project themselves into what remains of Iraq's nation-state, Sunni Arabs are, in this respect, extremely polarised. Their intra-sectarian rivalries will undoubtedly be just as brutal as the current confrontations. Dysfunctional institutions, endemic corruption, and the selfish calculations at play will likely reinforce the prospect of long-term violence, not to mention the weight of external interference that presently makes an Iraqi peace process almost impossible.

In this fragile context, the members of the international coalition, particularly Europeans, are critically exposed to the

deleterious effects of Iraq's crisis through unprecedented migratory waves and a series of historic terrorist attacks. A first step would consist in recognizing that increased military force and security measures will never be enough to curtail the long-term consequences of Iraq's collapse and that of neighbouring countries. The European Union should invest additional efforts in terms of institutional support brought to local Iraqi forces and attempt to mediate their conflicts. It has become crucial to identify players among Sunni Arabs who have credible capacities to move toward greater reconciliation with Shiites and Kurds and kick off genuine reforms, without which the state of hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced persons will remain unresolved for the time to come.

5. The Liberation of Mosul in the Middle Eastern Balance of Power

Marina Calculli

For centuries, the city of Mosul has been at the heart of a land dispute between Seljuks and Crusaders, Ottomans and Persian Savafids. Courted and feared by the British, since the early XX century Mosul has usually been perceived as an inhospitable, resilient, and yet crucial stronghold for whoever has strived to control what is now Northern Iraq and its surroundings[1]. Not surprisingly, the liberation of Mosul from the "Islamic State" (IS) is a matter of regional and international concern. To be more specific, IS does not constitute a major military threat per se. Indeed, with a pre-war population of 2 million people, Mosul represents IS' major territorial gain. However, with some 8,000 fighters left (in June 2016), compared to the manifold forces arrayed in both Iraq and Syria against the jihadi group, there is no doubt that IS will be *militarily* defeated. Its expulsion from Mosul is rather *politically* important for those who have a stake in the "liberation" of the city, and are willing to control the Nineveh governorate (*muhafazah*) after the defeat of IS. Amidst the reordering of the Arab Levant and the opportunities created by the conflict in Iraq (since 2003) and Syria (since 2011), the race between regional and local players to take part in the military campaign against IS points to the ambition of different state and non-state actors aiming at *i)* improving their positioning in the regional power hierarchy, and/or *ii)* balancing and resisting rival attempts to marginalise their role.

[1] S.E. Holden, *A Documentary History of Modern Iraq*, Ebook Central, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2012, pp. 20-33.

Incidentally, the viability of retaking Mosul from IS does not automatically imply the viability of governing the city in the aftermath. In fact, it was the inability to constitute a new "social pact" after 2003 – corroborated by the corruption and incompetence of the BG – that eventually allowed IS to easily take over Mosul in 2014[2]. The crucial conundrum for the Iraqi government in the wake of Mosul's liberation concerns the possibility of producing a sustainable pact between rulers and ruled. If these conditions are not met after the IS defeat, it is likely that the jihadi group will continue to exist in the shadow, even if it loses Mosul, Raqqa, and all of the territories it controls between Iraq and Syria. Just like al-Qa'ida after the 2007 U.S. surge in Iraq, it IS could resort to *inhiyaz,* a "temporary retreat" in the desert, in order to set up a new strategy to reappear on the scene at some point stronger than before[3].

Yet, the Iraqi government is not the only actor to be blamed for the fragmentation of the country. Regional powers – namely Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey – have projected their influence over the country since 2004. External interference has contributed as much as domestic political viciousness to set the conditions for and exacerbate the territorial parcelling of Iraq, the militarisation and sectarianisation of internal political rifts, and – eventually – the rise of the "Islamic State".

This chapter aims to shed light on the political and strategic meaning of expelling IS from Mosul in 2017, by exploring the rationale of regional powers' engagement in Iraq before and after IS takeover of Mosul in 2014. More specifically, it focuses on the role of the Iraqi government, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey in the liberation of Mosul, in light of the longstanding

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[2] Z. Al-Ali, *The Struggle for Iraq's Future: How Corruption, Incompetence and Sectarianism Have Undermined Democracy*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2014; D. O' Driscoll, "Liberating Mosul: Beyond the Battle", *Middle East Policy*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2016, pp. 61-73, doi:10.1111/mepo.12233.

[3] H. Hassan, "The Islamic State after Mosul", *New York Times*, 24 October 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/24/opinion/the-islamic-state-after-mosul.html

struggle for power in the Middle East and the transformation of the US strategy in the region under the presidency of Donald J. Trump.

Post-occupation Iraq in the regional struggle for power

The way in which the Iraqi political system was refashioned after 2003, under U.S. international tutelage, only favoured the exacerbation of sectarianism in the country and the manipulation of religious and ethnic identities by external powers aiming at manoeuvring the "new Iraq". After the purge of the Ba'th party, the Iraqi political system was restyled under the supervision of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), by adopting a power-sharing formula similar to Lebanon's consociational model, and based on sectarian modes of representation and distribution of public offices (*ta'ifiyya*). As a result, however, not only the boundaries between sectarian belonging and political loyalty blurred, but they were *de facto* institutionalised. Relatedly, it became inconvenient for political leaders to implement policies of national unity. As it has been designed, the electoral system encourages the adoption of policies aimed at reinforcing sectarian affiliations[4]. On the one hand, as Shi'a parties notoriously became hegemonic in the political system, a major feeling of Shi'a preponderance and Sunni marginalisation ignited sectarian tensions. On the other hand, Kurdish autonomist claims rejuvenated as the 2005 Iraqi constitution introduced federalism, and recognised Kurdistan as an autonomous region of Iraq.

[4] N. Younis, "Set up to Fail: Consociational Political Structures in Post-war Iraq, 2003-2010," *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1 January 2011, pp. 1-18; M. Calculli, "Middle East Security: Conflict and Securitization of Identities," *International Relations of the Middle East*, Louise L'Estrange Fawcett, 4th ed., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 218-35.

It is against this background that the role of neighbouring powers – Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey – can be properly understood. Whereas Riyadh and Tehran supported regime change in Baghdad (as Saddam Hussein was as uneasy neighbour for both), Iran and Saudi Arabia diverged strongly about the role of Iraq in the post-2003 Middle East. While Iran sought to stabilise the country and turn Baghdad into a centre of its influence over the Arab world, the Saudi regime wanted to keep Iraq weak and under international tutelage. Both powers used confessional identity (Shi'a and Sunni) as a tool for dividing societies and creating new transnational loyalties. Therein lies the eruption of a "new Middle Eastern cold war" – as Gregory Gause characterised it – that is a struggle for regional domination between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Unsurprisingly, Iraq was turned into the "hot" battleground in this rift: both states sponsored proxy armed groups, respectively waving the flag of Shi'a or Sunni identity. Turkey was instead concerned with the question of Kurdistan's autonomy, which Ankara vehemently opposed. However, Turkish pragmatism, especially in the years of former Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's "zero problems with neighbours", avoided escalating tensions between Ankara and Baghdad. After 2005, Ankara developed a strong economic interdependence with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), in order to use its asymmetric political influence to marginalise the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and prevent a Kurdish state from emerging[5]. Yet, Turkey's influence over northern Iraq has not grown unchallenged: Iran has constantly engaged in balancing Ankara's influence over the region, through supporting the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Also, Iran supported Kurdish independence since 2003, even at a time in which Turkey staunchly opposed it. However, Iran's domestic troubles under the presidency of Ahmadinejad have curbed Iran's potential influence over Iraqi Kurds, leaving Ankara gaining the upper hand over the KRG.

[5] D. Romano, "Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkey: Temporary Marriage?", *Middle East Policy*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1 March 2015, pp. 89-101.

In this context, U.S. decision to dismantle the Iraqi army after the 2003 occupation of Iraq further catalysed the militarisation of political disputes, the strengthening of both Shi'a and Sunni irregular militias, the exacerbation of sectarian violence, and the deepening of foreign powers' entrenchment into Iraqi domestic affairs. From Erbil, the disbandment of the Iraqi army and the collapse of the Iraqi State looked like (and was used as) a contrasting paradigm of Kurdish accomplishment of full-fledged statehood: the cohesion of the Peshmerga and the KRG, as well as the rapid economic development of Erbil – all served to underpin claims for Kurdish independence. By contrast, the infamous performance of the U.S.-sponsored Iraqi government of Nuri al-Maliki – together with the failed attempts of the U.S. to implement policies of external state-building and to promote a "New Way Forward" after the 2007 U.S. surge[6] – allowed al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI) to proliferate and paved the way for the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) to emerge in 2010[7].

The Syrian catalysis and the logic of regional powers' interference

With the start of the anti-Assad revolt in Syria in March 2011 and, more crucially, the militarisation of the civil strife in July/August 2011, Iraqi havoc merged with the Syrian conflict. Violence in Syria and Iraq developed along similar lines: on the one hand, State repression and employment of sectarian paramilitary groups (e.g. regime-sponsored *shabiha* in Syria; Shi'a paramilitary groups in Iraq, close to the Baghdad government) contributed to radicalise anti-government opposition; on the other hand, elite fragmentation and political havoc opened up

[6] C. Tripp, "The United States and State-Building in Iraq", *Review of International Studies* vol. 30, no. 4, 2004, pp. 545-558; T. Dodge, "Iraq: The Contradictions of Exogenous State-Building in Historical Perspective", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2006, pp. 187-200.

[7] R. Redaelli and A. Plebani, *L'Iraq contemporaneo*, Roma, Carocci, 2013; A. Plebani, *Jihadismo globale. Strategie del terrore tra Oriente e Occidente*, Firenze, Giunti, 2016.

an opportunity window for Kurdish autonomist movements to (re)emerge. External interference of regional and international actors crucially accelerated and aggravated the merging of Syrian and Iraqi socio-political dynamics and patterns of violence. Iran supports the governments of Damascus and Baghdad; Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries have long attempted to destabilise the Iraqi government and push for regime change in Syria; Turkey tries to project its leadership over the Arab world, with the primary aim of annihilating the PKK (present in both Syria and Iraq).

After 2011, many Salafi jihadists operating in Iraq saw Syria as the new territorial horizon for their struggle. They contributed toward turning the core socio-economic background of early anti-Assad protests into a "struggle against the Shiites", labeled as "apostates" (*murtadd*). Private businessmen from the Gulf (especially Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates) have funded thousands of these militants, who entered Syria from Iraq in late 2011 to form the bulk of what later became known as Jabhat al-Nusra (a group affiliated to al-Qa'ida until 2016, and rebranded as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in 2017)[8]. Iranian involvement in support of the Assad regime, as well as the participation of Hizbollah (the Lebanese Shi'a party and armed group) in the Syrian conflict after 2013, also played a role in sectarianising the violent rift. On top of all, in 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proclaimed the "Caliphate" from Mosul, whilst its adepts dismantled the Syrian-Iraqi border, expanding their territorial control onto the eastern part of Syria and rebranding the group as Islamic State for Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Following on the steps of former AQI leader Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, ISIL adopted a sectarian strategy of organised violence to mobilise support amongst Sunni populations in neglected areas of both Iraq and Syria[9]. By demonising the

[8] J. Cafarella, *Jabhat Al-Nusra in Syria*, Institute for the Study of War, 2014, http://www.understandingwar.org/report/jabhat-al-nusra-syria.

[9] F.A. Gerges, *ISIS. A History*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 34-36.A

Shi'a and other minorities, the jihadi group annihilated them wherever it managed to wave its black flag.

The proclamation of the "Caliphate" in Mosul in 2014 came as a consequence of the war in Syria, rejuvenating decade-long tensions in Iraq. The struggle for regional leadership is not the sole explanation for such a development. Yet, regional powers have catalysed the amalgamation of Syrian and Iraqi violence after 2011, as well as the triumph of sectarianism over other socio-economic and political motives of anger, revolt, and sedition in order to gain influence and undermine rivals. Not surprisingly, contrasting geopolitical interests are hiding in the shadow of the 2017 liberation of Mosul, which parallels the liberation of Raqqa (the Syrian capital of the "Islamic State"). Whilst trying to secure U.S. political protection and financial support, the Baghdad government is trying to cope with (and benefit from) the struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia for the control of the Arab Levant, as well as to contain Turkish power projections over Northern Iraq in order to annihilate the PKK and divert U.S. support for the Kurds.

The Iraqi government in search for a "new" international legitimacy

Since its start on 16 October 2016, the battle of Mosul has created an opportunity for the Iraqi government of Haider al-'Abadi to reassert its national and international legitimacy. In so doing, al-'Abadi has tried to rise as the arbiter between domestic players and regional actors involved in the liberation of Mosul, whilst coping with U.S. interests in the region. More specifically, al-'Abadi has tried to uplift the role of the Army in Mosul, thus containing the various Shi'a paramilitary groups that are participating in the fight against IS under State authority. Also, Baghdad has tried (so far unsuccessfully) to mediate between the Nineveh Provincial Council (*majlis muhafazat ninwa*) and the KRG over the setting of territorial and political boundaries between the two entities of the federal government.

The major challenge for Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-'Abadi is relinquishing the disastrous legacy of former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, whose sectarian policies produced widespread corruption and deep-rooted marginalisation of Iraqi Sunnis, especially in the northern governorates of the country[10]. As the capital of the Nineveh governorate, Mosul is a case in point: the relative easiness by which ISIL took the city in 2014 has been seen as a function of the total lack of popular trust toward the Iraqi Army – a consequence of the systematic abuses of power perpetrated by high-ranking officers against the population. Although al-Maliki rejected post-2014 reports about the vicious behaviour of the Army in Nineveh – slamming them as a plot of "Ankara and the Kurds against [him]"[11] – evidence of the entrenched military corruption is copious and unassailable[12].

Yet, the combination of political vacuum and moral havoc after the fall of Mosul has undoubtedly stimulated the appetite of different local and regional actors. The KRG, in particular, has seen the Mosul battle as an opportunity to proclaim independence. Such move has unsurprisingly disappointed the Iraqi government, which instead seeks to reinstate the image of territorial unity and sovereignty, through the liberation of Mosul.

At the international level, while Baghdad aims at stabilising its relations with its neighbours and its main international sponsor, the U.S. is also prone to exploit the clash of interests over the Nineveh province, and hedge its bets with different foreign actors. With U.S. President Donald J. Trump openly supporting the Saudi kingdom in its project to destabilise Iran, Iraqi attempt to align with the Saudis is anyway subject to structural constraints, and may entail significant risks – especially as Iran is not willing to lose its decade-long influence over

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[10] Z. Al-Ali, *The Struggle for Iraq's Future*, 2014.

[11] H. Mustafa, "Iraq: Ex-PM Maliki rejects Mosul report findings", *asharq al-awsat*, 19 August 2015, https://english.aawsat.com/hamzamustafa/news-middle-east/iraq-ex-pm-maliki-rejects-mosul-report-findings

[12] D. O' Driscoll, "Liberating Mosul. Beyond the battle", *Middle East Policy*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2016.

the country. Also, U.S. support for Kurdish independence can put Baghdad in an uncomfortable position, especially as – after the Mosul battle – the KRG may unprecedentedly threaten the formal territorial unity of Iraq.

Iran and Saudi Arabia in the shadow

While disputed and contested from regional and domestic actors, Iranian influence over Iraqi politics and security has been unparalleled from 2004 to present. Especially after 2013, Iran has improved its presence both in Syria and Iraq, supporting military groups and providing them with direct advice and support, as well as deploying its Quds force outside Iranian borders. Since 2013, the leader of the Quds Force, Major General Qasem Suleimani, has visited the battlefield in both countries at various points in time. Iran-Iraq ties have been strengthened over the last years, especially in the wake of the Mosul battle.

However, since the inauguration of Trump's U.S. presidency in January 2017, Haider al-'Abadi has been developing a multidirectional foreign policy, trying to improve Iraq's relations with Gulf monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia. Iraq has remained neutral in regional disputes (e.g. the 2017 Saudi-Qatar dispute), and al-'Abadi has tried to promote himself as a "mediator of Sunni-Shi'a reconciliation in the region"[13]. However, not only are Iran and Saudi Arabia far from reconciliation; they are even escalating their proxy wars in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq.

The Iraqi Army and Shi'a paramilitary groups

Since 2014, a number of Shi'a paramilitary forces have embarked into stripping Iraqi territories from the hands of IS, following a *fatwa* issued by Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, declaring

[13] BBC, "Saudi-Iran row: Iraq offers to mediate as tensions soar", 6 January 2016, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-35241398

anti-IS fight a "sacred defence" (*al-difa' al-muqaddas*). Most of the Shi'a militias that are taking part in the Mosul battle fall under the umbrella of the *Hashd al-Sha'abi* (Popular Mobilisation Forces - PMF), a force of over 60,000 fighters. The PMF have conducted operations in al-Anbar, Salah al-Din, Diyala, and have been crucial in retaking major Iraqi cities from IS, including Tikrit, Falluja, and Ramadi. Iran has sponsored a number of these groups – especially the strong Munazzama Badr. Yet, some of these militias remain independent, most notably the Saraya al-Salam responding to Shi'a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr – a former fierce opponent of U.S. invasion, who reinvented himself as a challenger of al-'Abadi and of Iranian interference in the region, to the point of urging Syrian President Assad to step down[14]. Over 2016 and 2017 al-Sadr also proved himself able to mobilise thousands of people against the government in several protests that took place in the Iraqi capital[15]. It remains unclear whether al-Sadr will be capable of reshuffling the domestic game. Yet, intra-Shi'a rivalries can escalate in a novel geopolitical context, marked by growing U.S. hostility towards Iran after the election of Donald J. Trump.

In addition, since 2016 the PMF is operating by law under the umbrella of the State, and is working toward asserting and normalising its security role in the country and the region. Its militias, however, have contributed to the fight against IS as much as they have favoured its entrenchment: often driven by sectarian feelings of revenge, they have "liberated" entire villages from IS rule, only to reproduce similar abusive practices of power and coercive control. A full-fledged normalisation of their role will probably continue to provide Iran with a huge capacity of influence – literally "embedded" into State security

[14] "Moqtada al-Sadr urges Assad to quit", *Middle East Eye*, 8 April 2017, http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/controversial-shiite-iraqi-cleric-sadr-urges-assad-step-down-1344377597 See also chapter 2 by Giovanni Parigi in this Report.
[15] M. Weiss and A. Hawez, "How Moqtada al-Sadr Could Take Down Iraq's Government", *The Daily Beast*, 5 January 2016, http://www.thedailybeast.com/how-moqtada-al-sadr-could-take-down-iraqs-government

– but is also likely to aggravate the recalcitrant refuse of State authority by Sunni neglected populations of Iraq. More crucially, Iran's future capacity to lead Iraqi politics and security from behind will resent renewed U.S. attempts to destabilise the Islamic Republic and marginalise their regional role.

Baghdad between the U.S.-Saudi alliance and Iran

Donald J. Trump met Haider al-'Abadi in March 2017, soon after becoming U.S. President, and expressed willingness to continue the "war on terror" and liberate Mosul from IS. The two leaders also agreed on improving their commercial ties and political co-operation. Yet, by virtue of his staunch aversion against Iran and intention to destroy every bit of Obama's legacy (including the nuclear deal with Iran), Trump is prone to exert his pressure on Baghdad to turn Iraq into a bulwark of U.S. pushback against Tehran.

Incidentally, under the auspice of Donald J. Trump's election to the White House, Baghdad has significantly restructured its relationship with Riyadh. Incidentally, only in September 2016, the Iraqi government formally asked Saudi Arabia to replace his ambassador in Baghdad, after the latter accused Iran-sponsored militias of having attempted at his life in Falluja. Also, al-'Abadi met with Iran-backed Houthi delegations in Iraq and openly criticised Saudi Arabia for his war conduct in Yemen[16]. However, with the end of Obama's presidency, al-'Abadi committed to upgrading Iraqi relations with the Saudis and other Sunni Gulf neighbours. Saudi Foreign Minister 'Adil Al-Jubayr visited Iraq in February 2017 (right after the start of Trump mandate) – the first official Saudi Foreign Minister's visit to the country since 1990. Premier al-'Abadi also visited Riyadh in June 2017. This diplomatic rapprochement undoubtedly signals a recalibration

[16] M. Salama, "Behind the Saudi ambassador's scuffle in Baghdad", *Middle East Eye*, 2 September 2016, http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/saudi-ambassador-baghdad-packs-his-bags-while-iran-calling-shots-1616916936

of Iraq's unconditional support for Iran and a breakdown of Saudi-Iraqi past tensions.

At the same time, in spite of the fact that Iranian influence over Iraq is not unconditionally accepted by all Iraqi Shi'a political players, it is unlikely that Iraq will completely turn its back on Tehran. In recent years, Iran and Iraq have improved their economic relations. More crucially, Iran-sponsored Shi'a militias are not likely to be disbanded after the liberation of Mosul, as they constitute a cohesive and efficient military corps and the very bulk of Iraqi security forces. Once the Mosul battle is over, it is not unlikely that they will cross the Iraqi border and join pro-Assad and Iran-sponsored armed forces in their fight against rebel groups in Syria.

Incidentally, with the start of the Mosul battle, Damascus and Baghdad set the ground for border control co-operation. Damascus allowed the Iraqi aviation to bomb IS facilities in Syria during the anti-ISIL campaign. Furthermore, in March 2017, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad received Iraq's National Security Advisor, Falah al-Fayad, in Damascus, to talk directly about boosting military co-operation between the two countries[17]. Trump's initial stance on Assad's removal as not being amongst U.S. priorities may have implicitly encouraged such developments. However, Trump made a U-turn on the Assad regime after the Khan Shaikhun chemical attack in Syria (April 2017), when he decided all of a sudden to bomb the Syrian Shayrat air base. Such hectic international developments can derange Syrian-Iraqi understandings accordingly. Furthermore, as Iran is trying to rebuild the territorial connection between Tehran, Baghdad, and Damascus, which IS and other rebels interrupted after 2013, the U.S. have started escalating their competition with Iran along the Syrian-Iraqi border.

In late May 2017, the Badr militia (one of the most prominent amongst the PMF) kicked IS out of the villages of Wasi

[17] "Syrian President Assad, Iraqi security advisor discuss 'direct' military co-operation", Rudaw, 18 May 2017, http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/18052017

al-Midar and Taru, and reached the border with Syria, west of Shingal. This move clearly exceeded the scope of anti-IS fight, and was meant to reopen the passage for Iranian weapons directed to Assad, Hizbollah, and other Iranian proxies in Syria. In early June 2017, the U.S.-backed Free Syrian Army, supported by U.S. Special Forces, confronted pro-Assad militias around the al-Tanf military base in eastern Syria. Also, whilst fighting IS in Raqqa, the U.S. aviation has shot down a Syrian airplane and Iran-made drones along the border[18]. As the liberation of Mosul and Raqqa is expected to be over soon, the next stage of violence will probably entail more direct confrontation between the U.S. and Iran.

Between Ankara and Mosul

Turkey's "war on terror" is only partially concerned with the elimination of the "Islamic State". Ankara's priority is the eradication of the PKK, which is considered a terrorist organisation by the Turkish State. Incidentally, Turkey's links with jihadi groups, including IS in its early stages, has been exposed in many venues. Erdogan seems to have long turned a blind eye on the transit of jihadi fighters on Turkish soil. This is because IS has not only confronted the Syrian regime, but also the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People Protection Unions (YPG). Interestingly enough, these Kurdish militias operate in Syria under the umbrella of the U.S. However, as IS terror attacks have also hit Turkish soil – especially after Ankara rapprochement with Moscow (the main sponsor of the Assad regime) in 2016 (following an attempted *coup d'état* in Istanbul) – Turkey has tried to show more commitment to the war on the "Islamic State". Also, as a NATO-member, Turkey's free-riding has put the Turkish government

[18] M. Saadoun, "Tehran, Washington set for proxy clash on Syrian-Iraqi border", *Al Monitor*, 1 June 2017, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/06/syria-iraq-mosul-anbar-pmu-us-iran.html

at odds with Western countries. By supporting Kurdish armed groups both in Syria and Iraq, the U.S. has openly challenged Turkey's attempt to exclude the Kurds from the game of re-drawing of the political geography of Iraq and the Arab Levant.

Since the start of the Mosul battle, Turkey's willingness to put boots on the ground in Iraq has generated staunch opposition by the government in Baghdad. The Iraqi government has tried to contain Turkey's longstanding appetite for Nineveh. Since 2004, Ankara has constantly pushed the limits of its interference in Iraqi domestic politics, by establishing direct relations with former Nineveh governor, Athil al-Nujaifi, against whom the Iraqi government issued an arrest warrant. Turkey also supported al-Nujaifi's followers, who formed the armed group Hashd al-Watany. Furthermore, Turkish troops stationed in the Bashiqa camp, near Mosul, until early 2017, blatantly rebuffing Baghdad's continuous request to withdraw. Finally, Ankara has not openly engaged against IS in Nineveh, but has rather signed deals with Turkmen communities all around Mosul, and has bombed YPG/PKK positions in Iraq at different points in time during the military campaign. Whereas Turkey's war on the PKK has had the KRG as a supporting ally, Kurdish claims of independence have cooled down the relationship between Ankara and Erbil.

Ankara *vis-à-vis* the KRG independence bet

The KRG has interpreted the liberation of Mosul (to which its Peshmerga have largely contributed) as an opportunity to draw the border between Kurdistan and Iraq on its own terms[19], and to boost and accelerate claims of full independence. Rich in oil and gas, since 2016 the Kurdish region has started to export independently from Baghdad – what the KRG has officially justified as a measure to recover from the financial burnout,

[19] The Kurds have long coveted the strip of contested land around the village of Khazir, encompassing a territory spanning Kirkuk, Diyala, Niniveh, and Salahuddin provinces, as part of their homeland.

due to post-2014 insecurity. Erbil also sneaked away from the 2017 Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) production cuts, that the Iraqi government has instead to comply with[20]. These shades of independence turned into staunch assertions when, on 7 June 2017, Erbil announced that a Kurdistan's independence referendum would be held on 25 September 2017.

Not surprisingly, the announcement sparked opposition in Baghdad, Ankara, and Teheran, as both the Turkish-sponsored Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Iran-backed PUK agreed on fast-tracking the referendum. Erbil's potential secession from Baghdad would certainly weaken the al-'Abadi government and is likely to generate an appetite for further secession in the country – especially in the *muhafazat* of Nineveh and Anbar. With Kurdish separatist movements operating in both Turkey and Iran, Ankara and Teheran fear that Kurdish independence would reinvigorate Kurdish irredentist claims in both countries, although both KDP and PUK are at loggerheads with the PKK and PKK-affiliates operating in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran.

Certainly, Turkey-KRG relations are strong and corroborated by commercial ties, whilst Iranian sponsorship is crucial for the PUK to sustain its political viability. Turkey remains a crucial commercial partner for the KRG, especially as the rise of IS and the consequent military mobilisation of Peshmerga have widened up KRG's debt, which in January 2017 exceeded $22 billion[21]. It is true that in 2014, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) spokesman Huseyin Celik declared that "[t]he Kurds, like any other nation, will have the right to decide their fate… Turkey has been supporting the Kurdistan region till

[20] "Kurdistan oil exports not subject to OPEC reduction agreement", Rudaw, 25 May 2017, http://www.rudaw.net/english/business/250520171

[21] Denise Natali, "Is Iraqi Kurdistan heading toward civil war?", *Al Monitor*, 3 January 2017, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/01/kurdistan-civil-war-iraq-krg-sulaimaniya-pkk-mosul-kurds.html

now and will continue this support"[22]. However, independence claims are raised whilst Ankara is fighting a war with the PKK in south-eastern Turkey, as well as against the PYD-ruled Syrian Rojava.

The U.S. claims that a Kurdish referendum represents the "legitimate aspirations" of Kurdish People seem to be Ankara's major concern[23]. In fact, in spite of KRG-PKK rivalry, the U.S. has strategically supported PKK-affiliates in both Syria and Iraq, using them as proxies in the war on IS, whilst the Turkish aviation has bombed them in both countries[24]. In spite of widespread regional opposition, U.S. support for the Kurds is galvanising the political aspirations of the KRG, PKK, and PKK-affiliates. Also, the KRG may find a new ally in Saudi Arabia, as Riyadh is willing to pressure Baghdad over its alliance with Iran[25]. With Erbil raising the stakes, tensions with Baghdad may easily escalate after the Mosul battle, leaving room for a new Iraqi civil war.

Conclusion

It is hard to see how the battle for the liberation of Mosul can put an end to political violence in Iraq. All major regional states agree on wiping IS out of the map of the Middle East, but they do not agree on the future of the Nineveh province – as Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia are all trying to expand their influence over Iraq and Syria. In this respect, Mosul's liberation

[22] D. Romano, "Why good relations with Turkey are not optional for the KRG", Rudaw, 3 June 2017, http://www.rudaw.net/english/opinion/03062017

[23] "Iraqi and foreign reactions to Kurdish referendum plan", Rudaw, 9 June 2017, http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/turkey/09062017

[24] "Support for PKK/YPG/PYD not befitting of alliance with Turkey, security council says", *Daily Sabah*, 31 May 2017, https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2017/05/31/support-for-pkkypgpyd-not-befitting-of-alliance-with-turkey-security-council-says

[25] S.J. Frantzman, "Kurdistan Region Sets Independence Referendum", *Jerusalem Post*, 9 June 2017, http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Kurdistan-region-sets-independence-referendum-496343

from IS is more likely to represent another stage in a broader violent competition for primacy in the region.

The U.S. aggressive stance toward Iran – especially Trump's statements on cancelling Obama's Nuclear Deal with Iran (or make it ineffective) – is likely to jeopardise the prospects of reducing violence in Iraq. As Iran is poised to regain full control over the Syrian-Iraqi border, in order to consolidate its influence over the Arab Levant and strengthen the Assad regime, there is an expectation that the U.S. and Saudi Arabia will continue to fuel the proxy war in Iraq and Syria.

Finally, the liberation of Mosul has galvanised Kurdish separatism. Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria all oppose the territorial fragmentation of Iraq that could inspire and motivate other Kurdish and non-Kurdish separatist movements. However, Saudi Arabia and Israel seem to indirectly support KRG's secession, as it may contain Iraqi (existing and potential) economic and strategic power. As IS is no longer the main concern of Iraqi security, the question of "Kurdish independence" seems to be the most compelling potential trigger of further violence in the country.

6. After Mosul: What Fate for IS in Iraq?

Andrea Plebani

Mosul has represented the epicentre of the "Islamic State" (IS) hold on north-western Iraq. Its liberation epitomizes a defining moment in the anti-IS campaign and an important victory for Baghdad. Still, it cannot be considered the "silver bullet" able to eradicate IS from the "land of the two rivers". In the last 15 years, the group led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has demonstrated again and again an incredible resilience that allowed it to survive multiple deadly blows and to regenerate, each time giving birth to spawns deadlier than their predecessors. In order to understand challenges and opportunities related to the fall of Mosul, the essay briefly outlines the evolution of the movement founded by Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi and the reasons that allowed it to re-emerge from its ashes in 2010. Particular attention is dedicated to the unique selling points embraced by the "Islamic State" in terms of internal organisation, relations with the Iraqi social fabric, and message, as well as to the reasons that pushed it to elect the Jazira region as the epicentre of its bid over Syraq. Such a choice was based on a series of factors rooted in the past of an area that maintained a significant internal coherence despite having been divided by the Syrian-Iraqi border. The last part of the chapter focuses on IS future moves in Iraq, outlining the status of its remaining strongholds, the options at its disposal, as well as a series of countermeasures that could prove determinant to avoid its full-scale resurgence in the land of the two rivers.

From Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi to Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi: rise and fall of the "Islamic State" in Iraq

"The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heart will continue to intensify – by Allah's permission – until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq"[1].

Inserted at the beginning of every new release of the online magazine Dabiq, this quote, attributed to Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, represents a sort of testament to the critical role played by the Jordanian terrorist in the ascendance of the auto-proclaimed "Islamic State".

Albeit widely recognised as the forefather of one of the most successful actors in the history of the jihadist galaxy, at the onset of the Iraqi civil war al-Zarqawi's stature in Iraq was far from being prominent. His group, Tawhid wa al-Jihad (TwJ) was just one of the hundreds of movements composing the Iraqi insurgency. Devoid of significant linkages to the Iraqi social fabric and limited by the foreign character and the scarce number of its fighters (a situation aptly epitomised by the term "*Gharib*[2] paradox" coined by Brian Fishman[3]), TwJ appeared to be destined to play just a minor role. Yet, despite all these limitations, the group succeeded in becoming one of the most feared actors of the insurgency and in attracting the support of thousands of people from all over the world. This result was achieved mainly through a *modus operandi* able to differentiate TwJ from its main competitors, both at the operative and the propaganda levels. The brutal tactics employed, its selection of objectives characterised by high symbolic value and media resonance[4], its

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[1] Al-Hayat Media Center, "The Return of the Khilafah", *Dabiq*, no. 1, 5 July 2014

[2] Stranger, outsider.

[3] B. Fishman, "After Zarqawi: The Dilemmas and Future of Al Qaeda in Iraq", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 4, Autumn 2006.

[4] Among the most significant operations conducted by TwJ were the 2003 attack against the UN complex in Baghdad that killed more than twenty people including the UN envoy Sergio Vieira de Mello and the assassination of Western hostages attired in orange clothes recalling the prisoners detained in Guantanamo. These acts

focus on Shi'a targets[5], and its ability to exploit the opportunities offered by the web all contributed to present TwJ as one of the leading forces fighting against the U.S. and its allies, thus filling the gap with groups that could count on much wider cadres and territorial control.

Al-Zarqawi's rapid ascendance inside the Iraqi battlefield did not go unnoticed. Soon he became one of the leading figures of a jihadi galaxy that was still recovering from the fall of the Afghan sanctuary and the significant losses inflicted to al-Qa'ida and other key-jihadist groups by the "war on terror" declared by the Bush administration. It is in this context that in 2004, after pledging his loyalty to Osama bin Laden, al-Zarqawi was appointed *amir* of al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI). Despite their differences, the two agreed to celebrate a classic marriage of convenience[6]. On the one hand, al-Qa'ida needed to prove it was still able to wage its offensive against the United States after the fall of its Afghan sanctuary, and in order to do so it needed a charismatic leader on the ground able to unify the ranks of the hundreds of *mujahidin* who flocked to Iraq after the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime. On the other, al-Zarqawi needed Osama bin Laden's blessing to expand TwJ ranks, acquire more significant operational capabilities, and enhance his stature

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were presented as legitimate responses to the abuses purportedly conducted by the U.S. and its allies against the Islamic community in Iraq and in various parts of the *dar al-islam*. The effectiveness of this approach was further increased by the Abu Ghraib scandal whose emergence in April 2004 contributed to increase dramatically the flow of volunteers willing to join the battle against the US-led coalition.

[5] This feature, that in a second moment would have represented one of the main sources of contention with other key-figures of the jihadist community (Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi *in primis*), marked al-Zarqawi's *modus operandi* since the beginning of his presence in Iraq. One of the main attacks attributed to the Jordanian leader in 2003 was the one that resulted in the assassination of Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, a prominent Shi'a cleric leading the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), one of the main Iraqi parties of the time that could count on a powerful military wing (the Badr Brigades) and on solid relations with Teheran.

[6] See F. Gerges, *ISIS: a History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2016.

among the Iraqi insurgency and the cadres of foreign fighters who entered Iraq to respond al-Qa'ida's call.

AQI's formation had a significant impact over the Iraqi insurgency, projecting al-Zarqawi's movement at the very epicentre of its struggle against the international coalition, the nascent Iraqi security forces (ISF) and a broad array of Shi'a militias that were keen to exploit the security and the socio-political *vacuum* left by the collapse of State institutions[7]. Notwithstanding AQI increased status, al-Zarqawi did not dominate the insurgency (that comprised groups with high operational capabilities and significant local backing with distinct agendas), nor the bulk of the Iraqi Sunni community[8] that, while praising his efforts against a common enemy, kept considering him and his followers as strangers[9].

The situation was further worsened by the 2005 election, which divided the community between those who wanted to participate in the political process and those who rejected it. The January 2005 vote witnessed a substantial non-participation of the Sunni community, but the monopoly exerted over the nascent Iraqi institutions by Shi'a and Kurdish representatives led many to reconsider their positions. While al-Qa'ida totally opposed the electoral process, various segments of the insurgency adopted a much less radical stance and several political leaders campaigned for a strong participation in the electoral process. As a result, Sunnis turned out *en masse* for both the October constitutional referendum and the December election[10]. Despite their defeat, they nevertheless signalled a

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[7] T.S. Mowle, "Iraq's Militia Problem", *Survival*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2006, p. 41-58; and International Crisis Group, "Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?", *ICG Middle East Report*, no. 55, July 2006.

[8] With the term "Sunni" the author refers mainly to Arab (and to a lesser extent Turkmen) communities of Sunni descent.

[9] A. Hashim*, Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq*, C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, London, 2006.

[10] P. Marr and I. Al-Marashi, *The Modern History of Iraq*, Westview Press, Boulder Co., 2017; and A. Dawisha, *Iraq. A Political History from Independence to Occupation*, Princeton University Press, Princeton - Woodstock, 2009.

propensity to modify the Iraqi system from within that was perceived by al-Zarqawi as an existential threat.

The Jordanian leader decided then to modify his stance and adopt a multi-level strategy: he launched a process aimed at strengthening al-Qa'ida's direct control over much of central-western Iraq, infiltrating the Tigris and Euphrates basins and exploiting the porous Syrian-Iraqi borders to allow for a constant flow of fighters and resources[11]. He also reunited the insurgent groups closer to him in a platform, the *Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin fi al-'Iraq* (Mujahideen Advisory Council – MSC), aimed at diluting the externalities connected to the "*Gharib* paradox" and co-opting the remaining jihadi organisations active in the country[12]. Finally, he redefined the priorities of the movement stepping up its operations against Shi'a militias as well as civilian, religious, and political targets. This choice was aimed at spurring a civil war that would have made any reconciliation process impossible, at the same time presenting the jihadi movement as the only force able and willing to protect the Iraqi Sunni community from its internal and external enemies[13].

Despite the important resources poured in the process, these measures failed to deliver the expected results, and 2006 represented a turning point for the organisation. The attack launched in February against the al'Askari shrine of Samarra[14] marked the beginning of an all-out war that opposed the insurgents spearheaded by the MSC to a broad array of actors. Baghdad

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[11] J. Denselow, "Iraq's Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Syrian-Iraqi Border Since 2003", *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 1 no. 5, May 2008. See also B. Fishman, "Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records", *CTC Report*, December 2007; B. Fishman (ed.), "Bombers Bank Accounts and Bleedouts: al-Qa'ida's Role In and Out of Iraq", *CTC Report*, July 2008.

[12] N. Kazimi, "The Caliphate attempted", *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 7, 2008, pp. 5-6.

[13] B. Fishman, "After Zarqawi: the Dilemmas and Future of Al Qaeda in Iraq", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 4, Autumn 2006.

[14] One of the holiest Shi'a shrines in Iraq

became the epicentre of the fight, with Shi'a militias (like the Mahdi Army and the Badr Brigades) bearing much of the brunt of the confrontation. These were *de facto* backed by important segments of the ISF thanks to the inroads they made in the Ministries of Interior (MoI) and Defense (MoD)[15]. They could also count on the parallel war fought by the U.S.-led Coalition against the militants aligned with al-Qa'ida. After an initial phase marked by a substantial equilibrium, the disparity of resources at the disposal of the opponents began to exact its toll. Neighbourhood after neighbourhood the insurgents were expelled from their strongholds, triggering a sectarian cleansing that dramatically altered the demographic equilibrium of the capital. In 2007, the battle of Baghdad was lost and with it the hopes of the insurgents to reverse the process begun with the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime.

The defeat represented a critical blow for the jihadist forces that had to cope also with the loss of their leader, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, killed by a U.S. strike in June 2006 and succeeded by Abu Hamza al-Mujahir.

Moreover, the group had to face growing internal dissent. The tentative to extend its control over the territories comprising the "historical" Sunni heartland, certified by the proclamation in October 2006 of the "Islamic State" of Iraq (ISI) with Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi at its helm, was met by stiff local opposition[16]. While praising al-Qa'ida's contribution to its struggle, the huge majority of the insurgency (and of the Sunni community) neither endorsed ISI *weltanschauung* nor accepted its bid to become their sole guide. Despite the significant resources poured in and the establishment of a formal administrative apparatus led by a cabinet divided into ministries in charge of various sectors (defense, agriculture, oil, health, etc.) ISI failed to live up to its promises and to deliver even basic services to the population. Even more important, the proclamation of the

[15] See chapter 2 by Giovanni Parigi in this Report.

[16] N. Kazimi, "The Caliphate attempted", *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 7, 2008.

Islamic State in Iraq pitted ISI forces directly against rival insurgent groups and tribal *shuyukh*[17] for the control of fighters, resources, bases, and illicit trafficking networks[18]. The battles that ensued significantly weakened ISI cadres, exposing them to retribution by those groups that were the subject of specific attacks aimed at demonstrating the effectiveness of the jihadist cadres and at certifying their monopoly over the use of force in the areas part of the "Islamic State".

Fig. 1 - Iraqi territories claimed by ISI in 2006[19]

The clashes between pro and anti-ISI factions exposed the

[17] Tribal leader (sl. *shaykh*).

[18] D. Kilcullen, "Field Notes on Iraq's Tribal Revolt Against Al-Qa'ida", *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 11, no.11, October 2008; B. Fishman, "Dysfunction and Decline: Lesson Learned From Inside al Qa'ida in Iraq", *CTC Report*, March 2009.

[19] According to ISI stated intentions, the group intended to extend its authority over an area comprising both Arab Sunni majority areas (like Nineveh, al-Anbar and Salah al-Din governorates) and territories where Sunnis were one of the

inner fractures of the insurgency. The U.S. forces on the ground realised the potential of these rifts and seized the opportunity to defeat the insurgency from within. They supported the formation of *sahwa* (awakening) councils largely made up of former insurgents first in al-Anbar, and then in the whole central Iraq. In exchange for their support against ISI, these militants obtained not to be targeted by U.S. and Iraqi forces and *de facto* non-persecution for their previous crimes, as well as money and weapons[20]. Even more important, the initiative provided an exit strategy for a significant section of the Sunni community that felt cornered in a battle impossible to win[21]. The program was decisive in rooting the forces of the Islamic Emirate out of most of its strongholds and obliging the group to relocate in the north-western province of Nineveh[22].

The failure to hold onto territory, the infight that fragmented the insurgency, and ISI's inability to provide services for its people left deep scars on the organisation. In 2008, ISI was just a shadow of the movement that emerged under the leadership of al-Zarqawi. When Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Mujahir were killed (April 2010), their elimination was hailed as a death blow. As the following years would have demonstrated, it was just the beginning of a new phase.

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dominant communities (like Baghdad and Diyala) or even a minority (like in Babil, Wasit and Kirkuk). See M. Weiss and H. Hassan, ISIS. Inside the Army of Terror, Regan Arts, New York, 2015, p. 62.

[20] On the crucial role played by the *sahwa* forces between 2006 and 2008 see M. Benraad, "Iraq's tribal "Sahwa": its Rise and Fall", *Middle East Policy*, vol. 13, no. 1, Spring 2011; A. Long, "The Anbar awakening", *Survival*, vol. 50, no. 2, April/May 2008; M.M. Eisenstadt, "Tribal Engagement: Lessons Learned", *Military Review*, September-October 2007; and J. McCary, "The Anbar Awakening: an Alliance of Incentives", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2009.

[21] T. Hallberg Tønnessen, "Destroying the Islamic State Hydra: Lessons Learned from the Fall of its Predecessor", *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 9, no. 8, 2016, pp. 1-6.

[22] A. Plebani, "Ninawa Province: Al-Qa'ida's Remaining Stronghold", *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 3, no. 1, January 2010.

Back with a vengeance: 2010-2014

Despite his relatively young profile, the decision to appoint Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim 'Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai (better known by his *nom de guerre* Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi) to the helm of ISI represented one of the factors that impacted the most on the group resurgence[23]. Under the new *amir*, ISI succeeded, in just a few years, in turning from a *pariah* disdained by "friends" and foes alike into a key geopolitical actor, able to extend its influence over an arch of crisis that, while centred in Mesopotamia and the Levant, stretched from North Africa to South-East and Central Asia. Al-Baghdadi's ability to reorganise and consolidate ISI ranks, to take advantage of the increasing volatility of the region, and to exploit the vulnerabilities of societies marred by heightened socio-political strife and polarisation were determinant in this sense. Equally critical for the fate of the movement were the diminished international pressure applied to the group (exemplified by the withdrawal of the U.S. forces stationed Iraq) and the crisis that invested Syria and Iraq in 2011.

Acknowledging the importance of the Syrian civil war for the future of ISI, al-Baghdadi devoted significant resources and manpower to the formation of Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN), maintaining close relations with its top echelons led by Abu Muhammad al-Julani. Since its inception, thanks also to the proximity of the remaining ISI stronghold to the Syrian operation theatre, the Iraqi leader backed JaN struggle against the Syrian regime and fully endorsed its non-confrontational stance towards other opposition forces and the local population. The military successes scored by Jabhat al-Nusra against the regime, its collaboration with the different souls of the Syrian insurgency, and the good feedback from the local population increased its local and international stature and attracted volunteers from all over the world, as well as new funding and visibility. While not acknowledged

[23] For a description of al-Baghdadis' ascendance inside ISI ranks see M. Weiss and H. Hassan, *ISIS. Inside the Army of Terror*, Regan Arts, New York, 2015, pp. 116-120.

at that time, the important results achieved by JaN had a direct impact also over ISI. The deep influence exerted by al-Baghdadi over the Syria-based group and the presence in its ranks of militants of different jihadi orientations allowed him to expand ISI cadres and to increase its military capability. Even more important, by pledging its support to a battle aimed at toppling a brutal regime perceived as un-Islamic and deeply hostile to the Sunni community, ISI succeeded in recovering, albeit partially, from the huge damages inflicted to its image by the internecine struggle that pitted it against its former allies and coreligionists in Iraq. In a certain sense, while Jabhat al-Nusra was widely considered as the Syrian node of the al-Qa'ida network, ISI succeeded in nesting into it and preparing the ground for the takeover that, in 2013, would have led to the proclamation of the "Islamic State" in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)[24].

Equally determinant in ISI resurgence has been the crisis that invested Iraq during the second Nuri al-Maliki's term. Since its re-appointment in late 2010, the country witnessed a growing polarisation along ethno-sectarian lines that affected primarily the Sunni community, with several key political leaders marginalised, imprisoned, or forced to abandon their positions, thousands of protesters arrested, and whole segments of the community barren from political and administrative positions in line with the expanded provisions of the anti-terrorism and the de-baathification laws[25]. Fuelled by discrimination and neglect as well as by the non-respect of the so-called "Erbil agreement", which was instrumental in licensing the

[24] A. Zelin, "The War Between ISIS and al-Qaeda", Research Notes no. 20, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2014.

[25] P. Marr and I. al-Marashi (2017); K.H. Sowell, "Iraq's Second Sunni Insurgency", *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 17, 2014; T. Dodge and B. Wasser, "The Crisis of the Iraqi State", in T. Dodge and E. Hokayem (eds.), *Middle Eastern Security, the US Pivot and the Rise of ISIS,* Adelphi Series, 2014; and M. Sullivan, "Maliki's authoritarian regime", *Middle East Security Report*, no. 10, Institute for the Study of War, 2013.

second al-Maliki government[26], growing segments of the Sunni community stepped up their opposition against the executive branch, accusing it of being biased and under Tehran's control[27]. After a series of failed mediations (of whom even the leaders of the protest movement were partly responsible), the government resorted to heavy-handed tactics. The confrontation reached its apex in April 2013, when the security forces were ordered to storm one of the major protest sites in Hawija – a move that left hundreds of victims and injured from both sides. The crisis escalated in the following months creating the ground for the outbreak of Iraq's second Sunni insurgency[28]. For most Sunnis, the Iraqi institutions could not be trusted anymore. Far from being considered as a neutral arena where different positions and interests could be articulated, they came to be associated with a post-2003-order inherently hostile to the Sunna and as such to be eliminated at all costs. In this way, the ideal conditions for a gradual return of ISI militants in the same areas they were expelled from a few years before were set.

Between late 2012 and the first half of 2014, the group led by al-Baghdadi succeeded in re-infiltrating an area stretching from al-Anbar in the west to Diyala in the east. By exploiting the heightening destabilisation of the country, the movement launched a huge and prolonged anti-government offensive

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[26] A power-sharing agreement ending a stalemate lasted of several months that led to the formation of a national unity government presided by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. A. Plebani, *Iraq Towards 2014 Elections: a Social Political Perspective*, Analysis no. 196, ISPI, September 2013.

[27] E. Hokayem and B. Wasser, *Iran, The Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War*, in T. Dodge and E. Hokayem (eds.) (2014). See also E. Sky, *The unraveling. High hopes and missed opportunities in Iraq*, Atlantic Books, London, 2016, pp. 345-363.

[28] For an accurate account of the events that led to the uprisings preceding IS ascendance see K.H. Sowell, "Iraq's Second Sunni Insurgency", *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 17, 2014; and R. Mansour, *The Sunni Predicament in Iraq*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016. See also International Crisis Group, "Make or Break: Iraq's Sunnis and the State", *Middle East Report*, no. 144, August 2013.

coupled with a campaign of selected assassinations of politicians, security officials, and members of the *sahwa* forces[29]. At the beginning of 2014, ISIS was able to move relatively freely over an arch of crisis spanning over the whole central Iraq and to back the formation of enclaves *de facto* not under the control of the federal authorities, as it already happened in Falluja[30]. It was the beginning of a new phase, with al-Baghdadi launching an all-out offensive against the Iraqi State that culminated in the battle of Mosul and the proclamation of the "Islamic State"[31].

From insurgents to State Makers: reasons, modalities, and implications of IS rule in Iraq

In a matter of few weeks, al-Baghdadi's forces penetrated deeply inside the Iraqi territories, allowing IS to control most of al-Anbar and Nineveh, as well as significant swaths of Diyala, Tamim, and Salah al-Din provinces. The offensive, launched towards a two-pronged axis reverting around the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers and centred around the Jazira region[32], was halted only by the decisive backing provided to the Iraqi forces by Washington and Teheran, as well as by the *Hashd al-Sha'abi* (Popular Mobilization Forces - PMF)[33].

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[29] M. Knights, "ISIL's Political-Military Power in Iraq", *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 7, no. 8, August 2014.

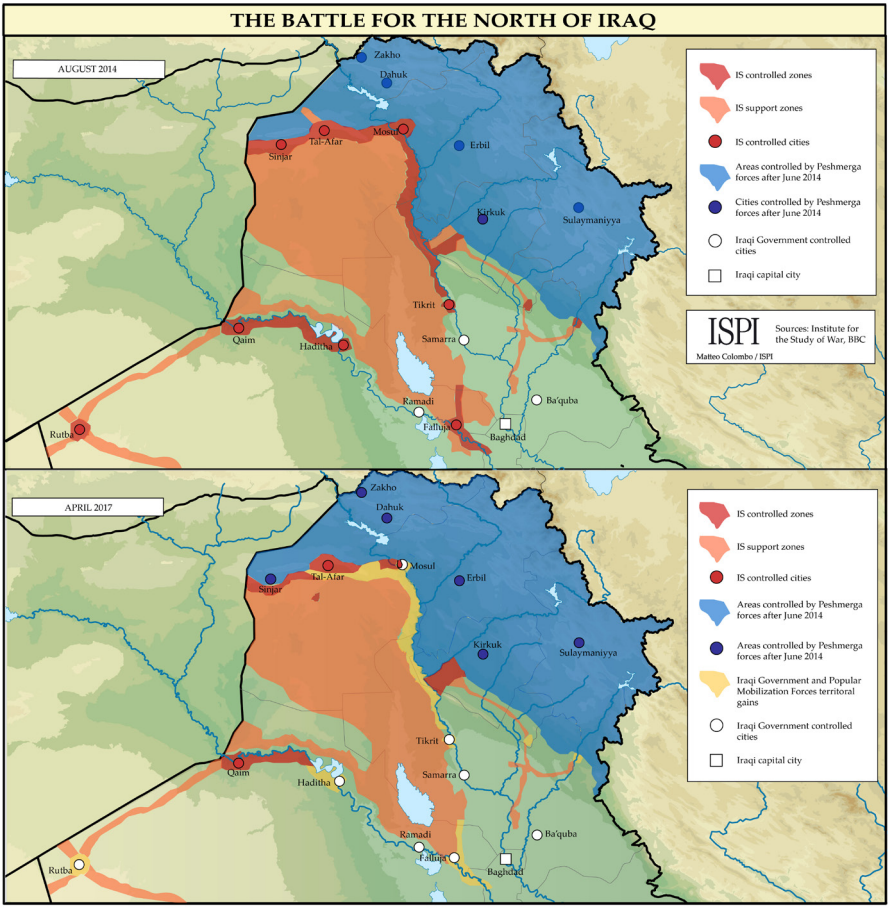
[30] See International Crisis Group, "Falluja's Faustian Bargain", *Middle East Report*, no. 150, 28 April 2014.

[31] A. Plebani, "The Unfolding Legacy of al-Qa'ida in Iraq", in A. Plebani (ed.), *New (and Old) Patterns of Jihadism: al-Qa'ida, the Islamic State and Beyond*, ISPI, Milano, 2014.

[32] Literarily "island". The term designates a region mainly comprised between the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers. Today the area is divided in two halves by the Syrian-Iraq boundary. It roughly coincides with the Syrian governorates of Raqqa, Hasakah and Deir el-Zor and with the Iraqi provinces of Nineveh and most of Salah al-Din and al-Anbar.

[33] A broad array of mainly Shi'a militias that was established in June 2014 by the Iraqi government. The move was sparked by Grand Ayatollah 'Ali al-Sistani *fatwa*

Fig. 2 - IS in Iraq 2014-2017



urging Iraqi citizens to mobilize in order to defend Iraq and counter IS offensive. F. Haddad, *The Hashd: Redrawing the Military and Political Map of Iraq*, Middle East Institute, 9 April 2015. See also chapter 2 by Giovanni Parigi in this Report.

In the first half of 2015, IS reached its maximum expansion. After bringing under control most of the Syrian-Iraqi Sunni heartland, IS reached the limits of its "natural expansion". The group was surrounded by hostile communities protected by forces with important military capabilities, ready to fight to the death and often backed by significant external patrons. It is in this context that the group was forced to pass from an offensive to a primarily defensive posture and, in this sense, mid-2015 represented a turning point. While still able to coordinate important operations (like the ones launched in May 2015 that resulted in the simultaneous occupation of Ramadi in Iraq and Palmira in Syria) IS started to lose one stronghold after another: Tikrit, Sinjar, Ramadi, and Falluja fell between March 2015 and June 2016, and equally important defeats were registered in Syria.

At the time of writing, the group has lost most of the territories it once controlled in Iraq and it retains only the towns of Tal Afar and Hawija and a string of villages along the Euphrates in al-Anbar. But focusing only on the actual status of the organisation and on the degradation it went through since 2015 risks to miss an essential element: despite all the seatbacks suffered, IS still retains important operation capabilities and it still poses an existential threat to the integrity of Iraq and the stability of the whole region.

While it is true that the group has been severely weakened, we cannot ignore the fact that for more than a year and a half it was able to keep faith to its motto, *baqiya wa tatamaddad* (remaining and expanding), and that it resisted for over 3 years to offensives unleashed by a series of loose coalitions including over 60 countries among their ranks. It is then fundamental to understand the strengths that allowed IS to maintain such a pivotal role.

Surely, one of the main reasons behind the ascendance of the group has been its articulated structure, able to exploit the strengths of its previous incarnations and to overcome most of their weaknesses. Since the foundation of *Tawhid wa al-Jihad*, the "*Gharib* paradox" represented an important hindrance for

the group. Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, Abu Hamza al-Mujair and Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi tried to overcome this limit in vain. Despite their efforts, the vast majority of the Iraqi Sunni community kept seeing them as foreigners devoid of a common cultural background, unable to understand their plight, and not in line with their aspirations. The ascendance of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi at the helm of ISI marked an important shift. Since his proclamation, the new *amir* has worked tirelessly to "Iraqify" the movement and to overcome the deep mistrust that followed ISI expulsion from the Sunni heartland. Despite the significant ideological differences separating Saddam's Iraq from the "Islamic State", the possibility to join IS represented, for thousands of ex-Baathists, members of Saddam's security apparatus, people associated with the previous regime, and even common citizens the opportunity to regain their honour and reverse the fate of marginalisation and irrelevance imposed to them after 2003. It is not by mere coincidence then, that, especially from 2012 onwards, al-Baghdadi ordered a series of spectacular attacks against some of Iraq's main prisons[34]. While mainly aimed at freeing his fellow *mujahidin*, the "breaking the walls" campaign also intended to reach out to the largely untapped "pool" of Saddam loyalists who were spending their lives in jail. The military and strategic prowess of these prisoners, together with their knowledge of Iraq's complex human terrain and their linkages with crucial tribal and local actors, proved extremely valuable to the success of the organisation. Aside from their military capabilities, they represented a crucial diplomatic asset for the movement to re-establish direct relations with key local tribes, to co-opt rival insurgent groups, as well as to make significant inroads in the Iraqi Sunni communities[35].

Another crucial element in IS rise has been represented by the decision to elect Jazira as the epicentre of its state-in-the-making.

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[34] J. Lewis, "Al Qaeda in Iraq's "Breaking the Walls" Campaign Achieves its Objectives at Abu Ghraib", Institute for the Study of War, update no. 30/2013, 28 July 2013.

[35] F. Gerges (2016).

Since 2003, the Tigris and the Euphrates river basins have been extraordinary vectors for the jihadist forces. But, unlike his predecessors, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi succeeded in exploiting the importance of the two rivers not only in military and logistic terms but also at the socio-political and geopolitical level. For al-Zarqawi, the Tigris and the Euphrates, while important, were part of a strategic scheme centred around Baghdad and the so-called "Sunni triangle"[36]. For al-Baghdadi, instead, the territories comprised between and along the two rivers, roughly coinciding with the historical Jazira region, had to become the "centre of gravity" of his bid over the Syraq. An "island" defined by the mid-upper sections of the Euphrates and the Tigris (along whose shores lay, respectively, the cities of Raqqa, Deir el-Zor, Albu Kamal, Haditha, Ramadi and Falluja and the urban centres of Mosul, Baiji, Tikrit, Samarra and Baghdad, just to mention the more relevant) that was slated to become the epicentre of the "Islamic State" political project[37]. A scheme that, despite some differences, bore partial similarity with the ones exposed between 1918 and early-1920 by the secret society al-'Ahd (the Covenant)[38], whose members tried in vain

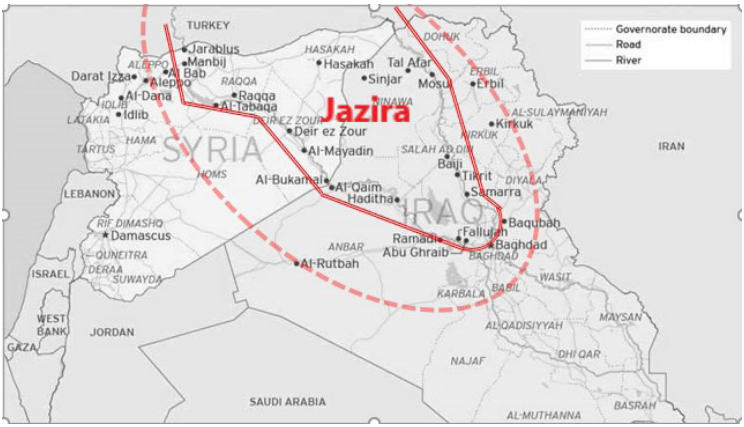
[36] A term, used during the first years of operation Iraqi Freedom, to indicate a mostly Sunni inhabited area including the cities of Baqubah, Baghdad, Falluja, Ramadi, Samarra, and Tikrit that became the epicentre of the Sunni-led insurgency.

[37] P. Marr and I. al-Marashi (2017).

[38] Founded in 1913, the al-'Ahd society attracted several officers of Iraqi descent since its inception. The movement gradually shifted its positions. While at first it demanded the creation of autonomous national entities under the clout of the Ottoman empire, it later championed the formation of a dual Turko-Arabic empire akin to the Austro-Hungarian. During the WWI, several of its most prominent members took part in the Arab Revolt and served in Faysal bin Husayn's Syrian army, developing a more Arab-centric form of nationalism revolving around the Hashemite dynasty. Divisions among al-'Ahd ranks led to the split of the organisation in two branches: a Syrian (al-'Ahd al Suri) and an Iraqi one (al-'Ahd al-Iraq). See E. Tauber, *The Arab Movements in World War I*, Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, Ilford, 1993; and *The Formation of Syria and Iraq*, Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, Ilford and Portland, 1995. On the al-'Ahd al-Iraqi political platform

to transform the Jazira in the cornerstone of a Syraq under Hashemite rule[39].

Fig. 3 - The Jazira region and its surrounding areas



see India Office Records, The British Library, IOR/L/PS/11/158, *Mesopotamia League: Transcriptions from the Minute Book of the Mesopotamian Pledge Party (Al-Ahd)*, APO Damascus, 6 August 1919-3 January 1920, P. 6710/19.

[39] The group was responsible for a series of military operations between 1919 and 1920 in an area stretching from Deir el-Zor to Albu Kamal, Tal Afar, and Mosul. The first, launched in December 1919, succeeded in wresting Deir el-Zor from British control and it posed the city under the authority of the Sharifian government based in Damascus. The more ambitious May 1920 raid on Mosul, instead, preceded by the takeover of Tal Afar, was thwarted by the intervention of a British force. Curiously enough, these operations, together with the fall of the Arab Kingdom of Syria in July 1920, proved determinant for the definitive division of the Jazira along the actual Iraq-Syria boundary. For the description of the events, as reported by the British officers on duty in Iraq at that time, see Cabinet Papers, The National Archives, CAB 24/111/1, *Report on the recent attack at Tel Afar*, L. F. Nalder, June 25th, 1920, P. 8-9 and Foreign Office, The National Archives, FO 371/5128, *Report on the events at Dair ez-Zor during November and December 1919*, A. Chamier, January 2nd, 1920, P. 93-107. For an in-depth resume of the events see E. Tauber, "The Struggle for Dair al-Zur: the Determination of Borders between Syria and Iraq", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 23, no. 3, 1991, pp. 361-385.

Apart from these distant antecedents, the *raison d'etre* behind al-Baghdadi's attempt to unify this region rested mainly over a series of extremely pragmatic considerations. Despite having been largely neglected by the media and analysts alike, the specific features of the bordering areas comprising the Jazira have proved ideal for IS' ascendance and endurance. As aptly described by James Denselow in an essay published in 2007, while formally divided by the Syrian-Iraqi border, the Jazira presents a significant degree of internal cohesion based on extensive cultural and blood linkages, solid tribal relations, a distinct regional identity, and even a local economy built on historic cross-border relations[40]. These traits have been exploited by al-Baghdadi to transform largely peripherical territories in the main connecting point of his Iraqi and Syrian domains, as well as in the symbol of a new era marked by the dissolution of the Syrian-Iraqi frontiers – a moment celebrated by the IS media apparatus with the "smashing the borders" campaign[41]. Focusing on Jazira and its human, strategic, and geopolitical linkages has also allowed the group to present itself as an alternative to purely Syrian and Iraqi national identities that pushed the Sunni community at the margins of the socio-political space. As we will see, albeit far from being universally accepted, this vision proved a powerful tool in the hands of al-Baghdadi.

IS tribal strategy proved to be another unique selling point. AQI/ISI relations with the Sunni tribes of Iraq have always been marked by a deep mistrust and rivalry. With the proclamation of the "Islamic State" in Iraq in 2006 and the launching of the *sahwa* initiative these rivalries, that remained relatively latent during the first phase of the insurgency, emerged in all their depth and pitted most of the clans against their former allies. Having learned the lesson, al-Baghdadi adopted a two-folded approach aimed at avoiding the possibility that history could repeat itself. On the

[40] J. Denselow, "Mosul, the Jazira Region and the Syrian-Iraqi Borderlands", in R. Visser and G. Stansfield, *An Iraq of its Regions. Cornerstones of a Federal Democracy?*, Hurst Publishers LTD, London, 2007, pp. 99-122.

[41] See for instance al-Hayat Media Center, "Smashing the Borders of the Tawaghit", *Islamic State Report*, no. 4, 2014, pp. 1-3.

one hand, he offered to the *shuyukh* who pledged their allegiance to him the opportunity to play a prominent role in his organisation, as well as to increase their status, and to benefit from significant financial resources[42]. On the other, he made clear that any opposition and violation of their promises would have resulted in certain death. It is in this framework that both the campaign of selected assassinations that targeted prominent members of the *sahwa* movement, and the atrocities inflicted over whole clans that resisted the IS take-over of the Iraqi Sunni heartland have to be read. Clear examples of this *modus operandi* were both the killing of *shaykh* Hazem Hajem al-Jawali and of tens of *sahwa* militants between July and September 2013[43] and the massacre of more than 700 members of the Albu Nimr tribe in October-November 2014[44]. However, IS "tribal policy" did not exert its influence only on tribes, clans or lineages. The huge fluidity of the Iraqi tribal system and its extreme intra- and extra-systemic competition have been exploited by the group to pit one tribal segment against the other, to mediate between different groups, and even to influence the outcome of intra-tribal feuds, usually supporting younger generations against older leaders[45]. Thus, IS has succeeded not only in controlling significant segments of the Iraqi tribal system but also in infiltrating it, laying the foundation for a lasting influence that neither the liberation of Mosul nor the conquest of its other remaining strongholds in Iraq alone can completely eradicate.

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[42] See the beautiful analysis written by K. Al-Mulhem, *Le Tribù di Ninive. La Base dello «Stato Islamico»* (Nineveh's Tribes. The Base of the Islamic State), in M. Trentin (ed.), *L'ultimo califfato. L'Organizzazione dello Stato Islamico in Medio Oriente* (The Last Caliphate. The Organisation of the Islamic State in the Middle East), Il Mulino, Bologna, 2017, pp. 77-96.

[43] D. Gartenstein-Ross and B. Moreng, "Al-Qaeda's offensive against Iraq's Sahwa", *War on the Rocks*, 30 September 2013.

[44] D. Gartenstein-Ross and J. Sterling, "The role of Iraqi Tribes after the Islamic State's Ascendance", *Military Review*, July-August 2015, pp. 102-110.

[45] M. Weiss and H. Hassan (2015), pp. 200-209.

The IS communication style has represented another crucial factor behind its ascendance and endurance. Backed by a sophisticated media strategy, the IS *weltanschauung* has been crucial to mobilize thousands of volunteers from Iraq and from all over the world, underlining its differences with its sister organisation, al-Qa'ida. While both shared the common goal of reinstating the caliphate, bin Laden has always stressed the long temporal frame required by this objective, preferring to focus on the battle against the far enemy (i.e. the United States) instead of laying the foundation for local emirates or self-appointed states. On the contrary, al-Baghdadi considered the creation "here and now" of a "new Medina" as the cornerstone of a process destined to restitute "dignity, might, rights, and leadership"[46] to the *umma* and to reforge a world-order considered antithetical to the "true" Islam. As such, it appealed to the whole Islamic community, making no difference between fighters and physicians, scholars and engineers, men, women, and even whole families[47]. It called every "real" believer to wage a new *hijra* and reach the only territories free from corruption, and to contribute with their talents to the success of a state set to become a model for the whole word. An appeal that contributed dramatically to attracting thousands of volunteers from all over the world[48].

However, to al-Baghdadi it was of same, if not more, importance to win the "hearts and minds" of the local population through a strategy aimed at underlying IS "otherness" and superiority as compared to other state modes.

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[46] Al-Hayat Media Center, "A Message To the Mujahidin and the Muslim Ummah in the Month of Ramadan", 1 July 2014, p. 2.

[47] Al-Hayat Media Center, "The return of the Khilafah", *Dabiq*, no. 1, 5 July 2014, pp. 5-6.

[48] "Foreign Fighters. An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq", Soufan Group, December 2015; "Final Report of the Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighters Travel", Homeland Security Committee, 2015; and B. van Ginkel and E. Entenmann (eds.), "The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union", International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague (ICCT), Profiles, Threats & Policies, April 2016.

"You have tried all kinds of secular regimes, the monarchy, the republican, the Baathist and the Rafidhiya (a degrading term for Shi'as), and you were stung by their fire and flames. Now it is the age of the Islamic state and its Khalifa, Abu Bakr Al-Qarashi, and you will see – by God's help – how hugely different an unjust secular government... and a Qarashi Imama whose approach is the god's revelation..."[49].

It is in this context that we must account for the important resources poured in by the movement to reward its local supporters but also to fight crime and corruption, improve basic services, build new infrastructures, and redefine education programs. The attention shown by IS towards the needs of the Iraqi communities under its control, while not to be overestimated and difficult to be exactly evaluated, marked a significant shift in the treatment these same groups experienced in the post-Saddam era, and especially during the last al-Maliki's tenure. Despite its extreme brutality and all its flaws, and notwithstanding the opposition shown towards the group by significant segments of the Iraqi Sunni community, IS succeeded in exploiting Sunnis anger and hatred. By bringing Iraqi Sunnis back to the fore, the group obtained the connivance, if not the direct support, of thousands of people who felt deprived of their legitimate aspirations, abandoned by the international community and marginalised under the post-2003 Iraqi system. For many Sunnis, IS represented one of the few opportunities, albeit paradoxical, to recover the prestige and centrality lost after 2003 – a consideration that explains why so many insurgent groups not formally aligned with IS decided to support its offensive in 2014, before being phagocytised or eliminated[50]; for

[49] H.H. Al-Qarawee, "The Discourse of ISIS: Messages, Propaganda and Indoctrination", in M. Maggioni and P. Magri (eds.), *Twitter and Jihad. The Communication Strategy of ISIS*, ISPI-Epokè, Milano, 2014.

[50] T. Hallberg Tønnessen (2016), pp. 1-6; J. Fromson and S. Simon, "ISIS: The Dubious Paradise of Apocalypse Now", *Survival*, vol. 57, no. 3, June/July 2015, pp. 7-56; and T. Abdulrazaq and G. Stansfield, "The Enemy Within: ISIS and the Conquest of Mosul", *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 70, no. 4, Autumn 2016,

many others, IS represented just the lesser of two evils, with the Tehran-Baghdad axis perceived as the main threat[51].

IS after Mosul

While much has been written on the future of Iraq, there is no consensus on what the next moves of IS will be. For sure, the several setbacks suffered on the battlefield forced it to undergo a significant revision of its propaganda, gradually limiting the references to its old motto *baqiya wa tatamaddad* (remaining and expanding) in favour of narratives emphasizing the importance of remaining steadfast, patient, and vigilant (often referred to with the concepts of *sabr* and *taqwa*) even in front of calamities and afflictions[52]. Heightening military and economic pressure, coupled with continuous territorial losses in Syria and Iraq, were reflected by a growing emphasis on the importance of its other battlegrounds, the necessity to join the jihadist ranks in multiple parts of the Islamic word, and the importance of striking Western targets and countries. The very decision to release a new magazine (*Rumiyah*) in place of *Dabiq* after the fall of the namesake Syrian town in 2016 underlines this shift, that goes hand in hand with a more evident international vocation reflected by the quote attributed to Abu Hamza al Muhajir that opens each issue: "O muwahhidin, rejoice, for by Allah, we will not rest from our jihad except beneath the olive trees of Rumiyah (Rome)".

How this shift will translate on the Iraqi operational theatre is still uncertain. Surely, Mosul has represented a critical asset, and it was only after its seizure that al-Baghdadi felt legitimised to declare the restoration of the Caliphate and the birth of the "Islamic State". While not as crucial as Raqqa for IS survival,

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pp. 525-542.

[51] F. Gerges (2016).

[52] See in particular al-Hayat Media Center, *Rumiyah*, no. 4, December 2016 and no. 8, April 2017. This shift in IS media contents and message was first noticed by Dr. Paolo Maria Leo Cesare Maggiolini who signaled it to the author.

Mosul represents the epicentre of the Jazira region and retains a crucial symbolic and geopolitical value for the Iraqi Sunna that is second only to Baghdad. Does this mean that the fall of Mosul could be a deadly blown for the IS' schemes in Iraq? The answer, unfortunately, appears to be no.

In the last two years, IS has lost most of Iraqi areas under its control. Still, it retains important strongholds in Tal Afar, the upper section of the Iraqi Euphrates, and Hawija. Whatever its residual operations capabilities might be, the fall of Mosul will probably represent a game-changer for the fate of the movement in the land of the two rivers. Tal Afar is already encircled by the PMF and it will probably be the next target of the offensive launched by Prime Minister al-'Abadi. While protected by an important garrison and its role as a potential flashpoint for Baghdad-Ankara relations[53] its fate appears sealed. Despite its

[53] Tal Afar hosted an important Turkmen Shia community that was forced to flee the city in 2014 after IS exerted its control over the area. This factor, coupled with the fact that several Tal Afaris of Sunni descents played a crucial role in IS ascendance and were rewarded with top position, risks to transform the city in a potential flashpoint for a sectarian crisis not limited to the sole Iraqi theatre. Several Iraqi factions closely tied with Tehran have already declared their intention to purge the city from IS and to restitute it to their "legitimate" owners. Similar operations conducted by the Hashd al-Sha'abi in Amerli, Falluja and Tikrit resulted in atrocities and episodes of ethno-sectarian cleansing that brought several analysts and officials to underline the risk that Tal Afar liberation coincides with a complete "de-sunnification". Apart from its implication for the deeply polarised Iraqi socio-political theatre, such an outcome would impact directly also on regional equilibriums. The proximity of the city to the Syrian border, to the areas under the influence of the Ankara-aligned Kurdistan Democratic Party and to Mosul confer to this zone a high strategic value. Turkey has already declared how it perceives the Nineveh governorate as part of a sphere of interest that partially reflects its Ottoman past and stated clearly its intention to protect the Iraqi Turkmen (especially Sunni) community. Ankara dispatched a small contingent of its forces in Bashiqa, ostensibly to train local Sunni forces led by former governor Athil al-Nujaifi in their battle against IS, but refused to withdraw them despite Baghdad formal requests, opening a diplomatic crisis whose implications is still too early to assess. See chapter 4 by Myriam Benraad in this Report.

historical presence in the area, the IS hold on the upper section of the Iraqi Euphrates is under strain too. Devoid of significant urban bases and insulated in the western corner of Iraq, al-Baghdadi's militants could choose to retreat to the remaining areas controlled by the group on the other side of the border, or to hide into its rear bases in the Anbari desert to reorganise their ranks. The case of Hawija is somehow different and it represents a more complex operational terrain. Despite being neglected by the media, the city has been one of the areas where the Sunni hatred towards the Iraqi government has emerged the most. As already mentioned, the area registered in 2013 a series of deadly clashes that contributed dramatically to the escalation of the crisis that invested the country. This obviously played into IS' hands, favouring the rapid fall of the city and its environs under al-Baghdadi's authority in mid-2014. From that moment onwards, Hawija has become one of the main axis of IS presence in Iraq, also thanks to its proximity to the strategic areas of Kirkuk, Diyala and Salah al-Din. Its urban environment, the presence of a significant contingent of jihadist forces, and the symbolic importance the city still retains for the Sunni community makes it a particularly difficult operational theatre. Yet, it does not seem to represent an insurmountable obstacle for the ISF, especially considering the experience it acquired in the past two years, the relative isolation of the jihadist base, and the impact the fall of Mosul might have on the morale of al-Baghdadi's forces.

Whatever the fate of these territories, even their liberation would not represent a deadly blown for IS' ambitions. The group has already demonstrated its ability to regenerate and restructure its ranks so as to make every new spawn deadlier than its predecessor. While not as intense as in the past, its attacks keep inflaming whole swaths of Iraqi land, and there are increasing signs that it is trying to rebuild its presence in areas from which it was expelled only a few months ago, with al-Anbar and Diyala considered as the most promising locations.

The first represents an obvious candidate. Its historical opposition towards post-2003 Iraqi governments, the harshness of the military campaigns it was exposed to, its huge dimensions, as well as its human and geographic terrain makes it the perfect breeding ground for terrorist groups. The sparsely inhabited governorate spans over a third of Iraq, bordering Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Syria, and it is dominated by desert except along the shores of the Euphrates river. This flows from the north to the east and connects Ramadi and Falluja to the border town of al-Qaim and Syria, making it a natural trail used since ages to move people, goods, and resources. In more recent times, it was considered as a vital junction for the Iraqi insurgency and its jihadi offshoots. The province is mostly inhabited by Arab Sunni communities tied by strong tribal bonds (before being renamed al-Anbar it was known as Liwa al-Dulaim, referring to the name of the tribal confederation that controlled the area for centuries[54]), which traditionally resent any form of external control, as demonstrated by the thousands of victims generated by the conflicts that invested the country since 2003 and by the cycles of vendettas they sparked. In al-Anbar, the U.S. forces lost most of their members during the first years of operation Iraqi Freedom and it was in al-Anbar that IS made its official comeback in Iraq when in January 2014 the group seized the city of Falluja[55]. It is highly likely that it will also be one of the locations from where the group will try to recover the positions lost since 2015.

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[54] M. Farouk-Sluglett and P. Sluglett, "The Transformation of Land Tenure and Rural Social Structure in Central and Southern Iraq, c. 1870–1958", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 15, no. 4, November 1983, pp. 491-505. For an analysis of the area at the beginning of the British mandate see Colonial Office, The National Archives, CO 696/3, *Administration Report of the Dulaim Division for the Year 1920*, Baghdad, Government Press, 1922, (miscellaneous), P. 1-7. See also G. Bell, *Mesopotamia: Review of Civil Administration*, Parliament, Papers by command. Cmd. 1061, His Majesty's Stationary Office, London, 1920.

[55] See "Falluja's Faustian Bargain", *Middle East Report*, no. 150, International Crisis Group, 28 April 2014.

Diyala, on the other hand, represents an entirely different scenario. While being affected by significant periods of instability, the governorate has never been completely overthrown by jihadi forces that failed to transform it in a major stronghold both at the peak of civil war and at the height of the IS' offensives. Despite this, the area presents a series of unique features that could make it an ideal fallback location for IS. In contrast to al-Anbar, the social fabric of the province is extremely variegated and the area is increasingly polarised along different ethno-sectarian axis: Sunnis traditionally represent the majority of the population, but their primacy has been increasingly questioned by the reversal of the Arabisation campaigns launched by the Saddam regime, by the heightening status of Arab and Turkmen communities of Shi'a descent that have benefitted from the baking of important military and political patrons based in Baghdad, as well as by the assertiveness of Kurdish forces, especially in the north, around the disputed town of Khanaqin[56]. The growing marginalisation of the local Sunni community, coupled with the reports of incidents and crimes associated with the presence of important Shi'a militias that are *de facto* in charge of the security of the province, could represent a powerful tool for IS to exploit, just as al-Zarqawi did in the past. Apparently, these factors do not bid well for the transformation of Diyala in a major IS stronghold: however, this might not to be the main intent of the group. Al-Baghdadi and his predecessors have always considered the province as an ideal fallback area to be infiltrated and exploited through the creation of safe-havens in rural environments benefitting from particular geographic conditions[57]. The dense palm groves dominating large swaths of the Diyala river delta have in fact been used to reorganise IS forces fleeing from other battlefield and to build a series of rear bases used to wage a terroristic campaign against

[56] R. Mansour, "The Sunni Predicament in Iraq", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016, p. 10-12.

[57] M. Knights and A. Mello, "The Islamic State after Mosul. How the Islamic State Could Regenerate in Diyala", *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 9, no. 10, October 2016.

IS' enemies not limited to the province alone. Diyala represents an important geographic hub connecting several militant operating areas in Salahaddin, Tamim, Baghdad, and even in the very heart of Shi'a majority areas in central-southern Iraq. It is not by mere chance then, that one of the worst terroristic attacks that hit the capital on 3 July 2016, the Karrada bombing, was planned and executed from Diyala[58]. The region also borders Iran and it could represent an important launching pad for an offensive against the country, elected by IS as its nemesis, as already shown with the 7 June attacks against the parliament and the Mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini.

Surely, anticipating where IS will concentrate its efforts after the fall of Mosul is vital to limit its capabilities, but focusing only on a series of operational theatres might be counterproductive. For instance, in 2009, Iraqi authorities were perfectly aware of ISI bases in Nineveh and especially in Mosul, but this did not prevent its resurgence. The risk that this situation could re-emerge with even more intensity is far from impossible. IS' ability to control for years over a third of the Iraqi territory allowed it to enlist scores of militants whose identities remain largely unknown to the intelligence. While thousands have been killed, the risk that a significant portion of these survivors might have gone underground to re-infiltrate Iraqi cities and rural areas is concrete. Even more dramatic is the situation of the younger generations exposed to IS. In the past 3 years, tens of thousands of children, adolescents, and young adults have been subjected to a massive indoctrination campaign. While it might be too early to ascertain its effects, it is highly likely that it left a lasting influence, doomed to produce its effects for years to come[59].

This is one more reason why it is extremely important not to limit the response to IS to the military level only. As we have seen, the group ascendance in Iraq has been linked to specific socio-political, economic, and geopolitical issues that played a pivotal role in the "perfect storm" that invested the country

[58] *Ibid.*

[59] See chapter 4 by Myriam Benraad in this Report.

with growing intensity especially from 2013 onwards. Without addressing the root causes of the IS phenomenon, the return of al-Baghdadi's forces in Iraq will be more a matter of "when", not "if".

Therefore, the marginalisation of the Iraqi Sunni community represents a crucial point. While it is fundamental to bring to justice those who joined IS and were responsible of atrocities and heinous crimes, it is equally important to revise the rationale behind the de-baathification process and the anti-terrorism laws, whose misuse contributed significantly to the estrangement of the Iraqi Sunni community. It is equally important to devise and enact a real reconciliation program aimed at "bringing the Sunnis in" and at redefining the bases over which the new Iraq has been built. For the "Iraq project" to succeed, Iraqi citizens of Sunni descent have to perceive themselves as part of a national community with equal rights and obligations and not as second-class citizens. In this regard, it is of outmost importance to support the redefinition of the Iraqi Sunni political spectrum that took years to emerge from the ashes of the Saddam regime and that has been erased by the IS' ascendance and decline.

At the moment, despite the promises made by Prime Minister al-'Abadi and his attempts to reach out to the Sunni community, the above mentioned goals appear as distant as ever[60]. Tikrit, Falluja, Ramadi, and several other cities freed by IS continue to lay in ruins with millions of citizens unable to return to their homes and no serious reconstruction effort in sight[61]. The Prime Minister's decentralisation program partially responds to the demands emerged inside the Sunni circles, but it faces important opposition in Baghdad. Al-'Abadi's inability to have the National Guards Law approved, coupled with the institutionalisation of the Hash al-Sha'abi (accused of widespread crimes

[60] H.H. Al-Qarawee, "From Maliki to Abadi: The Challenge of Being Iraq's Prime Minister", *Middle East Report*, no. 100, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, June 2016, pp. 1-8.

[61] See chapter 1 by Ibrahim Al-Marashi in this Report.

against Sunni communities especially in IS-liberated areas[62]) further exacerbated Sunnis fears and increased their mistrust towards the government. These factors underline the huge challenges Iraq will have to face and partially explain while, despite not supporting IS, the huge majority of the Sunni community did not mobilize against the group as it did in 2006-2009 against AQI/ISI. Surely, IS was much stronger than AQI/ISI ever were and the insurgency was much weaker and fragmented than it was when it battled the jihadists group. But this is not the only reason. As aptly delineated by Abdulrazaq and Stansfield in 2016, a key element in this stance has been the deep mistrust towards the Baghdad government:

> The primary fear of Maslawis appears to be not continued IS rule, but a vengeful Shia army descending onto the city, branding its people as IS collaborators and sympathisers, and commencing a sectarian genocidal campaign of imprisonment, torture and murder. Few Sunni Arabs, especially in Mosul, will forget that the ISF committed the extrajudicial murder of Sunni detainees as its forces withdrew in the face of IS' advances. Similarly, few can forget the graphic images of Sunnis murdered by Shia terrorist organisations being hung from electricity poles in the city of Baquba, or of PMF[63] fighters hanging Sunnis upside down over a fire […][64].

Another crucial element in the fight against IS is represented by the regional and international dimension. As already discussed, the Syrian crisis proved essential for IS, favouring its gradual re-emergence in the Iraqi scenario and benefitting the group with a strategic depth that was crucial to its success. However, the fluctuating postures adopted by key local,

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[62] See Amnesty International, *The State of the World's Human Rights*, report 2016/2017, 2017, pp. 196-199; Human Rights Watch, *Iraq: Events of 2016*, World Report, 2017.

[63] *Hashd al-Sha'abi*.

[64] T. Abdulrazaq and G. Stansfield, "The Day After: What to Expect in post-Islamic State Mosul", *The RUSI Journal*, vol. 161, no. 3, 2016, p. 17.

regional, and international players *vis-à-vis* the "Islamic State", officially denounced as a bitter enemy to be defeated at any cost but *de facto* treated, if not as an ally, at least as a resource to be exploited to weaken their competitors, were equally important. Damascus and Ankara represents perfect examples of this approach. While directly threatened by al-Baghdadi, they have constantly been accused of employing an opaque strategy towards the group. The former, despite having declared since 2011 that the crisis that wrapped the country had been spurred by terrorist organisations, avoided for years to clash with IS forces, preferring to focus its efforts against other opposition groups allegedly in force of a tacit agreement with the movement led by al-Baghdadi. The latter, while having publicly condemned IS and having been the only country opposing Bashar al-Assad to launch a massive ground offensive in Syria, has avoided to seal its border with Damascus till 2016, *de facto* granting the "Islamic State" a series of rear bases around the city of Gaziantep and a trail renamed by media and experts alike as "jihadist highway". The NATO-member country also exploited the crisis set by the emergence of IS in the land of the two rivers to expand its area of influence in the north, strengthening its relations with Erbil, as well as with key Sunni local actors[65], at the same time presenting itself as the protector of the local (Sunni) Turkmen community. This series of moves posed it in direct contrast with Baghdad nationalist circles. Paradoxically, Tehran too somehow benefitted of the crisis that invested the Iraqi state, allowing it to expand its influence in the country at all levels: political, military, and economic. This shift is aptly exemplified by the leading position assumed by Major General Qasem Suleimani (Head of the Quds Forces of the Guardian of the Islamic Revolution) in the struggle against IS, as well as by the influence exerted by the Islamic Republic over key socio-political and military actors, PMF *in primis*. In her chapter, Ofra Bengio clearly underlined how the crisis spurred by IS

[65] See chapter 4 by Myriam Benraad in this Report.

provided Iraqi Kurdistan with a unique opportunity to expand the areas under its control (especially the key-city of Kirkuk) and to strengthen dramatically its position *vis-à-vis* Baghdad[66]. And this does not even consider the role played by key-international actors like Russia and the U.S., whose re-involvement in the region has been directly connected to the IS' ascendance. These competing agenda benefitted dramatically al-Baghdadi, allowing him to lead, for more than three years, a self-proclaimed state formally at war with an international coalition of tens of different countries. In order to eradicate IS, then, it is fundamental to devise a regional dialogue able to soothe current rivalries, to define the future status of the areas affected by IS, and to contribute to their stabilisation. The governorate of Nineveh, with its mixed social fabric, its heightened ethno-sectarian fissures, its important geo-political and strategic position, and its lacerated soul represent a crucial test neither Iraq nor the international community cannot afford to fail.

[66] See chapter 3 by Ofra Bengio in this Report.

Policy Recommendations for the EU

Andrea Plebani

Mosul has fallen and, with it, the hopes of the "Islamic State" to remain a dominant force in Iraq. But this neither marks the complete defeat of IS in Iraq, nor it necessarily signals the end of the crisis affecting the country.

While severely weakened, the movement led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi continues to control important areas of Syraq; it also demonstrated to possess resilience, adaptability, and sufficient operational capabilities to wage a prolonged offensive against cities and territories formally purged by its presence. In this sense, the vision expressed by IS in the 2014 article "*From Hijra to Caliphate*" embodies a blueprint that large parts of the jihadi galaxy still support and adhere to[1]. Far from representing a mere description of the story of the "Islamic State" and the steps that led to the proclamation of its "caliphate", it presents a process considered not as a one-way road marking the "end of history", but as a methodology able to regenerate and perpetuate the IS saga in different areas and times. And the defeat in Mosul will not change this. Several reports indicate that IS has restarted to go underground, rebuilding its presence in the same areas it was expelled from only a few months ago. The current situation is not too different from the one witnessed at the peak of the anti-ISI campaign in 2006-2010. With the difference that ISI has never been as powerful as IS, and could only count on a tiny fraction of the forces Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi succeeded to mobilize.

On the other hand, while it is impossible not to hail the liberation of Mosul as an important victory for Baghdad and to celebrate the crucial blow inflicted to the "regime of fear" moulded

[1] Al-Hayat Media Center, "The Return of the Khilafah", *Dabiq*, no. 1, July 2014.

by IS over the ashes of the Saddam era, it is equally impossible to dream of a return to the *status quo* preceding the spiral of violence that invested Iraq during the last five years. A moment that, with all its challenges, seemed destined to fulfil the promise of a better future well epitomised by the 2011 speech given by president Obama, announcing the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq[2]. That confidence, while not completely shattered, is light-years away from the current state of a country choked by heightening inter- and intra- ethno-sectarian polarisation, marred by political infighting and widespread disillusion, and threatened by a set of competing external agendas as never before.

Yet, the Iraqi system has the potential to recover from the current crisis and lay the foundations for a future of hope in response to the aspirations of millions of people that went through decades of wars, dictatorship, and civil strife.

In this framework, the international community has the real chance to make a difference. It is not only a way to repay the moral debt incurred with the Iraqi people, but also a way to stabilise an area that has been at the core of an arc of instability. A maelstrom that, while centred in the Middle East, has managed time and again to project its destabilising effects all over the world. The European Union, in particular, is directly affected by this challenge and cannot abstain from intervening, if only to limit the threats stemming from an area that is inevitably much more crucial for Brussels than for Washington. In this sense, the EU appears particularly well suited to lead these stabilisation efforts, due to its longstanding commitment and partnering in support of Iraqi institutions and to the crucial

[2] "Tomorrow, the colours of United States Forces-Iraq […] will be formally cased in a ceremony in Baghdad. Then they'll begin their journey across an ocean, back home. […] Iraqis future will be in the hands of its people. America's war in Iraq will be over. […] Now, Iraq is not a perfect place. It has many challenges ahead. But we're leaving behind a sovereign, stable and self-reliant Iraq, with a representative government that was elected by its people". *Transcript: President Obama Iraq Speech*, BBC News, 15 December 2011, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-16191394

importance assigned to a set of universal values that, day by day, appears increasingly under attack, by friends and foes alike. Despite its ongoing crisis and all its flaws, the European Union has the capacity and the motives to play a decisive role in Iraq reconstruction and stabilisation.

What follows is a set of policy options[3] with the precise intent to suggest a number of measures that could have a direct impact on the Iraqi crisis, transform the battle of Mosul in a real turning point for the land of the two rivers, and contribute to the rebirth of a population we cannot leave alone.

Proceeding with reconciliation and de-radicalisation programs

The liberation of Mosul will deprive IS of its most relevant stronghold in Iraq, but it will not delete the root-causes that allowed its emergence, nor will it assuage the fears of the parties involved in the conflict. The harshness of the military operations and reports of atrocities have further spread fear among the different communities, strengthening the ethno-sectarian polarisation of the Iraqi social fabric and creating the conditions for new cycles of retribution whose impact would be dramatic for the sustainability of the Iraqi state.

A real reconciliation process is then fundamental to soothe the fractures threatening to tear the Iraqi society apart. But in order to succeed, such process has not to be limited to the upper echelons of the Iraqi system or to focus on abstract concepts only; it also has to address multiple dimensions, operating at the political, religious, economic, local, and even tribal level. For instance, the EU could promote, in collaboration with its Iraqi counterparts, the creation of a network of local committees able to mediate between different factions and interests,

[3] The author would like to thank the other contributors for their precious suggestions that have been incorporated in this section, and in particular Dr. Giovanni Parigi.

mutating a traditional model that proved successful in multiple contexts and especially at the tribal level[4].

Whatever the fate of the several disputed areas punctuating the Iraqi soil or the outcome of the September 25th referendum will be, it appears evident that Iraq cannot be partitioned adopting purely sectarian criteria. Mixed areas and mixed communities have always been one of the main features of the Iraqi social fabric, and will remain so even in the future. It is of outmost importance, then, to launch a series of confidence-building measures operating at all levels in direct coordination with Iraqi institutions and social groups, NGOs, and foundations, to restore the culture of diversity that has defined the Iraqi model for decades, to strengthen the bonds between communities inhabiting areas affected by significant ethno-sectarian polarisation, and to promote a serious dialogue over Iraq identity and future. An element, the latter, whose absence is particularly felt nowadays, 12 years after the adoption of a constitution drafted at a "microwave oven's pace" and largely still lacking an effective implementation[5].

Equally essential is the development of a de-radicalisation process able to counter the narrative adopted by the "Islamic State" and to provide a recovery program tailored to those who joined IS out of fear or interests but were not involved in major crimes. Otherwise, the risk is to enact a second "de-baathification process" that would irremediably alienate crucial sectors of the Iraqi society. In this regard, specific efforts will have to be dedicated to the thousands of children and teenagers who have been exposed to the IS message of hate and risk to fall prey to its future incarnations, but also to public marginalisation and social stigma.

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[4] K.B. Carroll, "Tribal Law and Reconciliation in the New Iraq", *Middle East Journal*, vol. 65, no. 1, 2011, p. 11-29.

[5] I. Al-Marashi, "Iraq's Constitutional Debate," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2005.

Promoting international symposia and track-2 initiatives

The crisis that invested Iraq also exposed the country to increased external influence and to the formation of patron-client relations that, if unchecked, could dramatically affect its stability. The existence of foreign competing agendas in the land of the two rivers, while representing a clear limitation of Iraq's sovereignty, cannot be denied; it actually needs to be addressed before escalating to a major crisis or open conflicts. In this context, the EU could promote and host a series of public and closed initiatives aimed at soothing the fears of the different players operating at the local and international level, allowing them to present their interests, and harmonizing their positions. In the past, international conferences and track-2 meetings proved to be particularly useful, providing a neutral arena for different actors with very different visions and allowing them to articulate their positions, discuss common initiatives and, ultimately, cooperate for the stabilisation of Iraq. Italy, in particular, could play a leading role in this process, due to its strong relations with all the major local and international stakeholders active in Iraq, to its steady commitment to the land of the two rivers, and to the important record it has in this field.

Supporting refugees and internally displaced people

Well before IS occupied Mosul, hundreds of thousands of people abandoned their homes to find shelter in other parts of the country as internally displaced people (IDP) or fled abroad. The situation worsened dramatically from 2014 onward, and represents a critical challenge for the future of Iraq, bearing not only untenable human costs, but also exerting a direct impact on the delicate Iraqi social fabric and its geopolitical dynamics. If IS has to be defeated and a true reconciliation process has to be enacted, the repatriation of Iraqi refugees and the return and

reintegration of IDPs are fundamental. Europe already supported similar operations (especially between 2008-2011) and can build on this experience to maximize its success.

EU efforts could focus in particular on providing expertise in removing improvised explosive devices (IEDSs), unexploded ordinance (UXO), and unexploded bombs (UXBs), as well as explosive remnants of war (ERW) in former IS-held territories, to speed up the return of these areas to normality. It will be equally important to support the rehabilitation of water and sanitation systems, the restoration of the electric power supply, and the reconstruction of the urban centres damaged by the war – also through direct economic support for returnees' re-settlement. This objective could also be sustained through the formation of vocational centres to train and support local artisans and small enterprises, so that they can contribute directly to the reconstruction process.

Providing assistance to Iraqi Institutions and drafting *ad hoc* programs tailored for war-thorn areas

The EU and its Member States have devoted relevant resources to institution-building initiatives in Iraq. This is inevitably a long-term process that becomes even more important after the liberation of Mosul. In this sense, the EU should reinforce its current programs aimed at "strengthening the efficiency and credibility of the criminal justice system and enhancing the rule of law"[6]. Particular emphasis should be devoted to areas previously ruled by the "Islamic State", not only to rebuild a judicial system that has been completely erased, but also to strengthen the trust of local communities in State institution – a *vulnus* that, from 2010 onward, proved determinant for IS emergence. Equally important is the definition of capacity

[6] https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/iraq/2356/strengthening-efficiency-and-credibility-criminal-justice-system-and-enhancing-rule-law_en

building programs tailored to war-thorn areas to improve the full spectrum of governance capacities – especially at provincial and municipal levels –to raise the effectiveness of state institutions, and to counter the perception that these territories have been abandoned by the state.

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