



Clingendael

Netherlands Institute of International Relations

Iraqi imbroglio: the Islamic State and beyond

A brief analysis of the 2014
political-security crisis

Erwin van Veen
Nick Grinstead

CRU Report



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About CRU

The Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael' is a think tank and diplomatic academy on international affairs. The Conflict Research Unit (CRU) is a specialized team within the Institute, conducting applied, policy-oriented research and developing practical tools that assist national and multilateral governmental and non-governmental organizations in their engagement in fragile and conflict-affected situations.

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Executive summary

The Islamic State's rapid advance and brutality are both bewildering and terrifying. The group has shown itself to be a formidable force through the extent of its support and the fear it sows, as well as its advanced communication and military capabilities. International airstrikes are likely to have a limited effect on its operational ability for the moment because of its dispersed fighting methods, local support base, ruthless suppression of opposition and the absence of a viable international strategy for resolving the Syrian civil war.

At the same time, the Islamic State represents only the face of a much deeper political and security crisis in Iraq. This crisis stems from the poor quality of governance, the exclusionary operation of power and the intrusiveness of foreign interference over the past decade. On the back of multiple cycles of sectarian violence, Shi'a-dominated governments, political groups and militias have politically marginalised Iraq's Sunni and Kurdish minorities since 2005, after a long history of Sunni rule. Positively altering this trend towards more balanced governance is at the heart of addressing the Islamic State and keeping Iraq together. This challenge has been made all the more complex by a legacy of strategic errors made by the United States (US) during its occupation of Iraq, by the neighbouring Syrian civil war on which the Iraqi conflict feeds and by Saudi-Iranian rivalry. In the main, Saudi Arabia intensified the sectarian rhetoric that risks turning the largely imaginary Sunni-Shi'a divide into a reality on which the likes of the Islamic State thrive, and Iran supported several Iraqi Shi'a militias and parties with funds and military capabilities.

This quagmire has no short-term solution. Yet, there are several actions the international community can consider to support the resolution of Iraq's political crisis. These include: i) creating an international mechanism to monitor political and security developments in Iraq in order to improve the evidence base for policy and to align diplomatic action; ii) initiating a regional security dialogue to reduce mistrust, create a better understanding of fears and interests, and avoid further escalation; iii) focusing financial support on humanitarian assistance by making a fair contribution to the various humanitarian appeals and by admitting a sizeable number of refugees; and iv) exploring the possibilities of a UN-sanctioned, Arab-led peacekeeping mission to Iraq.

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1. Introduction

The initial shock of the Islamic State's capture of Mosul and the cruelties it has been committing has faded. What remains is repulsion for the extremely exclusionary and violent nature of the polity it seeks to establish, and bewilderment as to how the present situation could have come about with such speed. The resulting sense of crisis has caused news and diplomatic reporting to focus strongly on the Islamic State. It has also triggered one-dimensional international action that chiefly focuses on a military response to halt the Islamic State's advance.

However, the Islamic State (IS) is, in many ways, 'only' the face of a much deeper crisis that revolves around the triple issues of the quality of governance, the operation of power and the nature of foreign interference in Iraq. It has, above all, exposed the fragility of the Iraqi state that has been brought about by the confluence of the strategic errors made by the United States (US) during its occupation of Iraq, the abusive rule from Baghdad during Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's tenure, and the intrusive machinations of both Iran and Saudi Arabia. This process arguably commenced with the First Gulf War in 1991 and accelerated with the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 (see figure 2 for a timeline).¹ Iraq's increasing fragility must, however, also be considered against the backdrop of the Syrian civil war, the prospect of a resurgent Iran after a nuclear deal, and the legitimacy challenges facing the Gulf states since the 2011 Arab Spring. The consequence of this complex set of factors is that sectarian identity labels have become dominant, Iraqi society is fragmenting and large segments of its Shi'a, Sunni and Kurdish populations share a sharp sense of disenfranchisement that manifests itself in different ways.

Comprehensive analysis of the main drivers and features of such issues in connection with the present crisis unfortunately remains rare. There is a clear risk that this could lead to flawed strategies of engagement. In consequence, this report is a first step towards a deeper analysis of the Iraqi conflict that will be completed in the first half of 2015. It serves to inform the current debate in a timely fashion – with the caveat that it represents work in progress.

The report starts by discussing Iraq's present state of (in)security with a focus on the IS, after which it zooms out to analyse Iraq's domestic political arena and the conflict's regional entanglements. It ends by outlining broad areas for possible international engagement that could help create enabling conditions for the conflict's resolution.

1 Iraq's modern history is well described in: Cleveland, W. (2004), *A History of the Modern Middle East*, Third edition, Westview Press: Oxford; Gairdner, D. (2012), *Risk and Violence in Iraq's New Sectarian Balance*, Report of NOREF and the Clingendael Institute: Oslo; Allawi, A. (2014), *Faisal I of Iraq*, Yale University Press: New Haven.

2. The present security situation: Islamic State offensives and strategy

Key messages:

- The IS has captured most of western Iraq and presently is fighting against the Iraqi security forces, Kurdish Peshmerga and Shi'a militias on four fronts. The group is supported by Iraq's Sunni, a number of tribes, elements of the former Ba'ath regime and, to a lesser extent, foreign fighters. The fear it sows and its advanced combat operations make it a difficult-to-beat adversary.
- The IS controls territory by courting local support, eliminating opposition and providing basic services. It seems to struggle to maintain living standards. This struggle may degrade its local support base over time.
- International airstrikes are likely to have limited effect on IS operational ability because of its dispersed fighting methods, its local support base and its ruthless suppression of resistance.

Western Iraq is currently ablaze in an insurgency that pits mostly Sunni-supported groups² with strong elements of Saddam Hussein's former Ba'ath regime against Iraq's Shi'a-dominated government and its associated militias. The IS currently is the most powerful of these Sunni groups.³ This insurgency takes its place in a broader panorama of conflict between groups that enjoy either Sunni or Shi'a support in places such as Syria, Lebanon, Bahrain and Yemen.⁴ This tends to give the impression of a confrontation in the Middle East between Sunni and Shi'a under the presumed sponsorship of Saudi Arabia (Sunni) and Iran (Shi'a). Section 3 discusses this in more detail, but it should be noted here that sectarianism is used by many actors that fight in these conflicts as a convenient guise for naked struggles for power, and to legitimise their own interests in the eyes of the Muslim community and the West. Sectarianism does not necessarily drive these conflicts, let alone connect them (annex 1 provides a brief overview of selected Middle Eastern countries in relation to the Iraqi conflict).

2 Adnan, S. with A. Reese (2014), *Beyond the Islamic State: Iraq's Sunni Insurgency*, ISW: Washington DC.

3 While this analysis focuses on the domestic and regional actors that support or oppose the IS, it also has a foreign fighter component. Various sources estimate the number of foreign fighters present in Syria and Iraq together at 12,000 to 15,000 (see, eg, *New York Times*, 12/09/14, [online](#); *The Guardian*, 30/10/14, [online](#)). EU counter-terrorism officials claim that at least 3,000 of those originate from Europe (*ANSA*, 24/09/14, [online](#)) (all consulted 11/11/14).

4 Simply put, and apart from a number of lesser religious, ritualistic and liturgical differences, Sunni are of the view that the leadership of the Muslim community should fall to the most qualified individual, while Shi'a consider that legitimacy to rule devolves from the bloodline of the Prophet Mohammed. Sunni (from: sunna) means 'way' [of the Prophet], referring to political succession by quality instead of bloodline. Shi'a means 'partisans of Ali', referring to the Prophet Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib whose descendants they believe should rule. See: *Council on Foreign Relations* at <http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/sunni-shia-divide/p33176#1/>, (consulted 10/11/14); Esposito, J. ed. (1999), *The Oxford History of Islam*, Oxford University Press: Oxford.

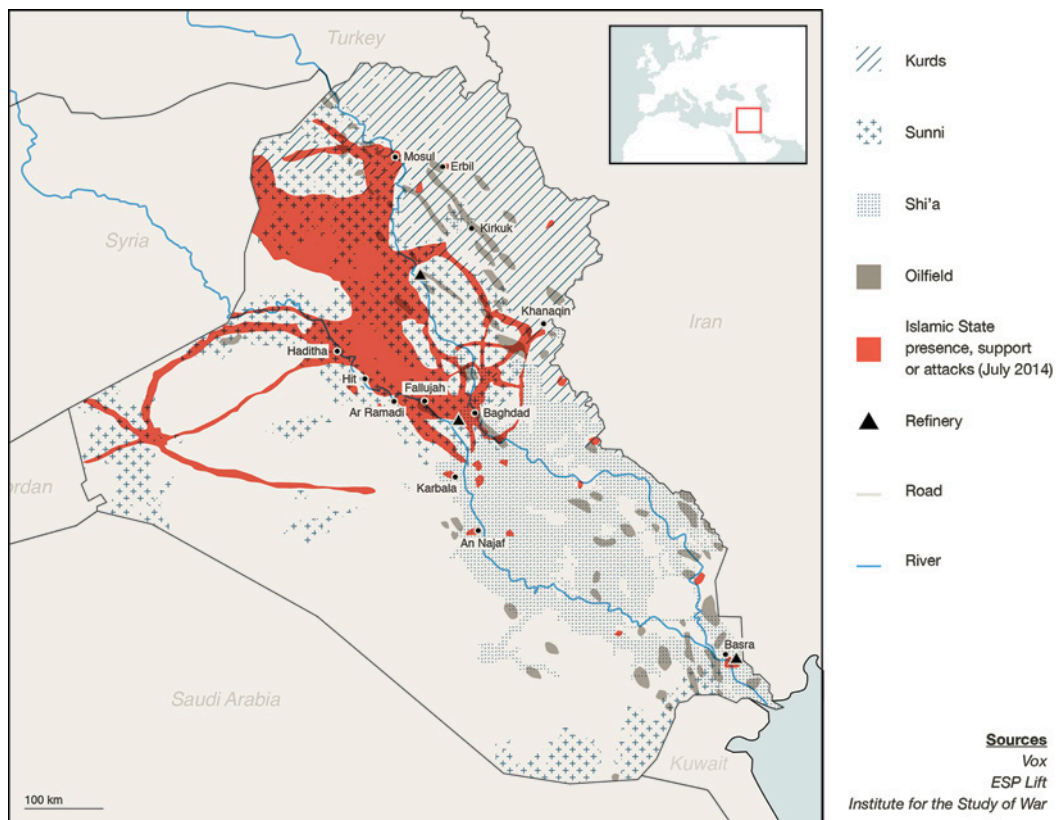


Figure 1. Islamic State presence in relation to Iraq’s ethnic groups and oil fields

In terms of military action, IS activity is currently concentrated on four main fronts (see figure 1). The group primarily seeks to consolidate its control over the lower Euphrates River towards Baghdad to safeguard its supply lines and establish an axis of control between Deir ez-Zour (Syria) and Fallujah (Iraq). Second and complementary, it fights along the lower Tigris River to capture the area between the great rivers. Success would provide the IS with greater operational mobility and enable it to threaten Baghdad from two sides. Third, it surprised the forces of Iraqi Kurdistan by devoting greater attention to its northern front than expected, using US-captured weaponry to beat back the Peshmerga in a number of surprising defeats that were only halted through international airstrikes. Finally, it advances on Baghdad itself, mainly through the volatile Sunni ‘Baghdad belts’ and from the western direction of Fallujah. In doing so, the IS has demonstrated an ability to launch regular attacks deep into the city, including core Shi’a areas, by means of vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (IEDs).⁵ Such attacks mainly serve the purposes of psychological warfare and inciting sectarian strife.⁶

It seems that international airstrikes against the IS have so far been successful in halting its advance in places and in limiting its operational mobility, but much less in reducing its

5 Between 2003 and 2008 a brutal and violent process of sectarian cleansing turned Baghdad into a much more segregated city than it used to be. Mixed Sunni-Shi’a neighborhoods have largely disappeared. For a powerful visual: <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.nl/2009/11/blog-post.html> (consulted 3/11/14).

6 This paragraph is largely based on analysis of the reporting by the Institute for the Study of War (ISW) Iraq’s blog ([online](http://www.institutefortheStudyofWar.org/iraq-blog): last consulted 07/11/14); see also: *Foreign Policy*, 27/10/14 ([online](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=65444): consulted 3/11/14).

ability to launch new attacks or in materially altering the frontlines described above.⁷ This may, of course, be a matter of time, but it also reflects experiences in Yemen, Pakistan and Afghanistan where airstrikes have been successful in limiting daytime movement, taking out top leaders and providing close combat support, but have not been able to reduce the overall level of militant and insurgent activity.⁸ The major handicaps of international strikes in Iraq are that they are less well coordinated with combat operations on the ground and they do not enjoy intelligence that is as reliable as elsewhere. This suggests that these airstrikes are largely a visible and expensive way to contain – not reverse – some IS military activity for the moment.

Turning from the frontlines to IS strategy, reports suggest that the IS combines sophisticated military tactics with ruthless violence and astute political measures in pursuit of its Caliphate. Many IS attacks are preceded by a sustained period of assassinations and suicide attacks. The fall of Mosul, for example, was well prepared by targeted violence against Iraqi security forces and by severing the highway between Mosul and Baghdad.⁹ Once targets are ‘softened’, IS conducts combined arms operations against enemy positions through bombardments, waves of dedicated fighters and, again, suicide attacks. Knowing that a cruel death by execution is a likely prospect, once captured, has further reduced resistance.¹⁰ The IS uses its online communications quite effectively to spread fear – making it abundantly clear the fate that awaits those who resist its advance. Less gruesome, but more insidious, is its large-scale destruction of symbols that socially united other communities. This is not random demolition, but conscious ‘cultural cleansing’ with the aim of disempowering and subjugating the ‘other’. Examples include the violent expulsion of the Yezidi in northern Iraq and the destruction of Mosul’s Nabi Yunus

Figure 2. Key political/security events in the history of Iraq

1921-1932: British mandate followed by independence in 1932
1979: Saddam Hussein president
1980-1988: Iran-Iraq war
1988: Al-Anfal chemical weapons campaign against Iraqi Kurds
1991: First Gulf War: no-fly zones installed
2003: US-led coalition invades
2004-2008: Insurgency against US forces followed by civil war
2004: Sovereignty reverts to interim government of Prime Minister (PM) Iyad Allawi
2005: Parliamentary elections, PM Al-Maliki comes to power
2006-2008: Sunni Awakening (Sahwa)
2010: Parliamentary elections, PM Al-Maliki’s second term commences
2011: Last US forces leave Iraq
2013 (April): Iraqi troops storm a Sunni protest camp near Kirkuk
2014 (April): PM Al-Maliki’s coalition wins elections but falls short of a majority
2014 (June): Islamic State captures Mosul
2014 (September): PM Al-Abadi forms a new government
2014 (August): US-led airstrikes begin against IS targets

7 See for example: *Military Times*, 11/08/14 ([online](#)); *ISW* Iraq Situation Reports for October 2014 and *The Daily Mail*, 01/10/14 ([online](#)) (all consulted 04/11/14).

8 Consider for instance the various reports of the International Crisis Group on Afghanistan: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-asia/afghanistan.aspx> (consulted 04/11/14).

9 *ISW*, 11/06/14 ([online](#)); consulted 04/11/14).

10 The phenomenon of applying ‘ultra-violence’ to establish credibility and legitimacy through the power of annihilation and elimination is, however gruesome, not new. For example, Algeria’s black decade (1990s) and the previous Sunni and Shi’a insurgencies in Iraq against US forces (2004-07), as well as the civil war between Sunni, Shi’a and Iraqi government forces (2006-2008) saw plenty of it. See for example: *Open Democracy*, 04/10/14a ([online](#)); consulted 8/10/14); Filkins, D. (2008), *The Forever War*, Vintage Books: New York.

Mosque on 24 July this year.¹¹ The IS complements this ability to wage violence with two methods that obviate the need to fight in the first place: sleeper cells and tribal co-optation. Sleeper cells were planted months in advance of actual combat operations in places such as Hit and Mosul, to be suddenly activated as ‘fifth columns’, rendering resistance ineffective. Moreover, the IS has also honed the art of obtaining the loyalty of key tribal sheikhs in exchange for funds and leadership roles. This helps explain its rapid capture of the towns along the Euphrates River between Albu Kamaal and Deir ez-Zour (Syria) in the summer of 2014, some of which used to be strongly anti-IS.¹² In other words, IS effectively fuses criminal tactics, aspects of classic warfare and psychological elements into a dispersed, fearsome and lethal form of violence that has proven to be effective.¹³

Once it has occupied an area, the IS rules in a decentralised manner through the elimination of opponents and the provision of basic social services. A decentralised governance structure that devolves significant authority to local leaders enables it to act swiftly and flexibly. By mercilessly eliminating any remaining opposition, often sheiks and influential preachers but sometimes large groups, it facilitates control through terror. It also seeks to avoid a repeat of the 2006–08 Awakening (‘Sahwa’) during which key Sunni tribes in western Iraq sided with US forces against Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in exchange for payment and future government jobs.¹⁴ To this end, the IS employs informant schemes that build on the fear it sows and deploys intelligence officials from the former Ba’ath regime. Finally, the IS provides two types of social services in the areas under its control by way of carrot and to strengthen its state-like claims.¹⁵ Administrative services include elementary and religious education, Islamic outreach, law enforcement and tribal affairs. Muslim services include humanitarian aid and the provision of food, water and electricity. While this suggests an ambition to run a fully functional state, reports have already emerged that indicate a dramatic deterioration of living conditions under IS rule.¹⁶

11 On IS use of social media see: *The Atlantic*, 16/06/14 ([online](#): consulted 04/11/14); *Al-Monitor*, 18/08/14 ([online](#): consulted 04/11/14); for the Islamic State’s magazine *Daqib* see: [online](#) (consulted 3/10/14); on cultural violence: *Open Democracy*, 4/10/14b ([online](#): consulted 8/10/14).

12 Sleeper cells are clandestine groups of operatives that remain inactive for a prolonged period after their initial creation. On sleeper cells see: *The Daily Star* (Lebanon), 27/10/14 ([online](#): consulted: 29/10/14); on tribal cooptation: *The Guardian*, 26/10/14 ([online](#): consulted 28/10/14).

13 A more in-depth discussion of the phenomenon of ‘new wars’ can be found in: Kaldor, M. (2013), *New and Old Wars*, Third edition, Stanford University Press: Stanford.

14 *Al-Monitor*, 28/10/14 ([online](#): consulted 30/10/14); Benraad, M. (2011), Iraq’s Tribal “Sahwa”: Its rise and fall, in: *Middle East Policy*, vol. 18, no. 1 ([online](#): consulted 3/11/14).

15 Caris, C. and S. Reynolds (2014), *ISIS Governance in Syria*, Institute for the Study of War: Washington DC; *The Guardian*, 27/10/14 ([online](#)).

16 Such impressions are reinforced by the first issue of *Daqib* that calls for doctors and engineers to emigrate (‘hijrah’) to the Caliphate. See: Islamic State (2014), *The Return of Khilifah*, *Daqib* issue 1 ([online](#)); also consider IS’s recent recruitment drive for an oil refinery manager (*Iraqi news*, 02/11/14 ([online](#))) (all consulted 02/11/14).

3. Power and governance: the state of play of Iraqi domestic politics

Key messages:

- IS ascendancy has deep roots in the several insurgencies and cycles of sectarian violence between 2003 and 2014, triggered by the US-invasion, in an historic context of Sunni domination.
- The exclusionary rule and Shi'a favoritism of Al-Maliki was only the latest episode in a series of several strategic errors that disadvantaged Iraq's Sunni population after 2003, such as the de-Ba'athification process, the disbandment of Iraq's security forces and the mishandling of the Sunni Awakening by US forces and the Iraqi government.
- The style and composition of Prime Minister Al-Abadi's government represent welcome improvements compared to past Sunni and Kurdish marginalisation, but do not suggest radical change despite the vast challenges the government faces to restore order and maintain Iraq's integrity as a state.

To understand the origins of the security situation discussed above, one needs to examine how power has operated in Iraq since its inception as a modern state in 1932, when the country gained independence from its British mandate conferred by the League of Nations. An important feature of rule in Iraq since then is that it has typically been in the hands of a small Sunni elite coming from the country's Sunni minority (today around 35% of the population compared to around 62% Shi'a). This started with the British 'appointment' of Faisal bin Hussein bin Ali al-Hashimi as the first King of Iraq. As a member of the Hashemite family, he ruled mainly through Sunni Iraqi officers of the former Ottoman army and Baghdad's Sunni elites.¹⁷ This situation continued up to the time of Saddam Hussein, whose rule relied in large part on his Sunni relatives and on co-optation of Sunni tribes, at the same time as conducting brutal campaigns against Iraq's Kurds in 1986-89 (Al-Anfal) and 1991, and against Shi'a in the wake of the First Gulf War.¹⁸ This is not to say that government policy and action exclusively favoured Iraq's Sunni minority during this time, but rather that there were deep perceptions and grievances about minority rule and majority oppression long before the ascendancy of the IS.

The times are changing: starting with Iraq's Kurds

The first sign of change away from Sunni domination of power arguably came in the form of the no-fly zones that international coalition forces established north of the 36th parallel and south of the 32nd parallel in 1991. This effectively prevented the regime's aerial attacks on Iraqi Shi'a and Kurdish areas. The latter especially took advantage by setting up governance structures that increasingly acquired proto-state characteristics. Although the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) were often at (violent)

¹⁷ While he was sensitive to Shi'a religious-political opinion and interests, he did not involve them in a way that reflected their popular majority or effectively addressed their concerns. See: Allawi (2014), *op.cit.*

¹⁸ Cleveland (2004), *op.cit.*

odds with each other throughout the 1990s, by 2003 Iraqi Kurdistan was relatively well organised and quickly established a positive relationship with US forces, which willingly provided further protection and sponsorship.¹⁹ The Kurds have reaped the benefits of the resulting positive image up until today – with the important exception of international support for outright secession.²⁰ It should, however, be noted that Iraqi Kurdistan remains a tribal society in which power is contested between Masoud Barzani (KDP) and Jalal Talabani (PUK) and where patronage systems are common.²¹ Moreover, while the Peshmerga currently operates as a willing partner in the confrontation with the IS under cover of US-led aerial support, this strategy is likely to meet its limits at the frontiers of Iraqi Kurdistan. Kurdish forces are likely to be reluctant to advance into Arab Sunni areas where the IS has popular bases – at least not until an attractive deal with Baghdad is on the table. In sum, it appears it is the Kurds who have so far ‘benefited’ most from the rise of IS in the sense that it has improved their international relations and support. The ‘battle for Kobani’ (Syria) has also been instrumental in putting the Kurdish question firmly back on the international agenda.

Fatuous mistakes

However, 2003 marked the turning point from Sunni minority rule to Sunni minority suppression in Iraq. Two decisions opened the door to a partial reordering of power in both Iraq and the wider Middle East. The US-led Coalition Provisional Authority’s (CPA) order no. 1 of May 2003 removed all officials associated with the Ba’ath party from public office and barred them from holding office in the future. In one fell stroke, it removed many capable bureaucrats, engineers, scholars and administrators from public life. As membership of the Ba’ath party was a condition for professional advancement, it basically created a governance vacuum in large parts of Iraq for a crucial few years. Although this order was formally annulled when sovereignty transferred back to the Iraqi Interim Government in 2004, the momentum of the de-Ba’athification process carried on and proved to be a powerful source of political power. This led to Kafkaesque situations such as 511 candidates being banned from standing shortly before the 2010 parliamentary elections by a commission of whom some members were candidates themselves, including its figurehead Ahmed al-Chalabi.²² Apart from creating grievances and unemployment, the order also led to a substantial drop in public service provision that degraded the quality of life over time. CPA order no. 2 disbanded the entire Iraqi security apparatus. As both the government administration and the security institutions were largely Sunni staffed, de-Ba’athification essentially meant ‘de-Sunnisation’. In consequence, the combination of both orders created a vast reservoir of resentment against the US and put

19 Al-Ali, Z. (2014), *The Struggle for Iraq’s Future: How Corruption, Incompetence and Sectarianism have Undermined Democracy*, Yale University Press: New Haven; Filkins (2008), *op.cit.*

20 For example, several Western countries have or will dispatch weapons and/or troops to the Kurdish Peshmerga. While this currently seems the safest bet in combating the IS through ground forces, it is difficult to predict the long-term consequences thereof for relations with Turkey and the prospects of violence in its Kurdish areas. The Turkish strategy vis-à-vis Iraq seems to consist of building a positive relationship with Iraq’s Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) with the purpose of countering Iranian-Iraqi-Syrian influence, increasing its energy security and restraining both the PKK and Syrian Kurds (PYD). However, now that the plight of the Syrian Kurds has forcibly connected the KRG to the PYD and laid bare the Turkish government’s Kurdish strategy, its success remains to be seen. See: *Al-Monitor*, 7/10/14 ([online](#): consulted 3/11/14); *The New Yorker*, 10/10/14 ([online](#): consulted 17/10/14); Cagaptay, S. and T. Evans (2012), *Turkey’s Changing Relations with Iraq: Kurdistan Up, Baghdad Down*, Policy Focus 122, The Washington Institute: Washington DC. The role of Turkey in the Iraqi crisis merits further investigation.

21 See for example: Filkins, D. (2014a), *The Fight of Their Lives*, 29 September, The New Yorker: New York.

22 Al-Ali (2014), *op.cit.*

hundreds of thousands of trained soldiers, officers and intelligence officials at the service of a potential Sunni insurrection – which today goes by the name of the IS.²³

This insurgency broke in 2004 in full force, initially taking the form of vicious fighting between Sunni militant groups and US forces, resulting, for example, in the wholesale destruction of the town of Fallujah in November of that year. Lest it be overlooked, however, the Shi'a did not stand aside during this insurgency. To some extent, they were incited to violence against Iraq's Sunni community by purposeful provocative acts carried out by Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), such as its destruction of the Al-Askari Shi'a shrine in Samarra in 2006. However, Iraq's Shi'a also engaged US forces as part of Iran's 'bleed-US-forces-by-proxy' strategy, as well as out of their own opposition against the occupation.²⁴ Key moments in the Shi'a uprising include the 2004 capture of large parts of southern Iraq by the Mahdi Army (the militia of the Shi'a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr) and of Basra in 2008. However, the permanent toll of high-frequency suicide attacks, assassinations by death squads, and kidnappings committed by both Sunni and Shi'a insurgents were the more defining features of the period 2004-08 for most Iraqis.

Those two initial errors were compounded by several additional ones. To start with, there seems to have been a lack of strategic thinking behind US preferential treatment of Iraq's Shi'a parties, such as its alleged efforts to bring Al-Maliki to power in 2006.²⁵ As many leading Shi'a distrusted the US due to their perceived abandonment after their 1991 US-encouraged uprising under Saddam Hussein and their general discontentment with the occupation, it was a risky gamble from the start. Meanwhile, the Iranians had co-opted, albeit to different degrees, various Iraqi Shi'a parties and set these up against the US.²⁶ The implications thereof for the present situation are twofold. First, Iraq's main Shi'a parties and militias continue to be mistrustful of the US, which means that deploying US ground forces is not really an option, regardless of what the US or Iraqi governments may agree to. Muqtada Al-Sadr's recent announcement that Shi'a militias currently leading the fight against the IS would withdraw from the frontlines if US ground forces became active is telling.²⁷ Second, the capture of IS-held Sunni areas by either Shi'a militias or Iraqi security forces would be met with deep distrust by their Sunni inhabitants, given the legacies of the past. The recent idea of creating a National Guard consisting of Sunni forces in Sunni areas to ensure public order and fight the IS would address this problem to some extent, but would be difficult to put into practice as long as open conflict rages.²⁸

Furthermore, the US 2006 strategy of mobilising Iraq's Sunni tribes (the Awakening or 'Sahwa') against AQI with the promise of payment and future jobs with the government's

23 The Iraqi security forces had approximately 660,000 personnel in 2003 (ca. 380,000 in the armed forces, 280,000 in the police). See: Pfiffner, J. (2010), US Blunders in Iraq: De-Ba'athification and Disbanding the Iraqi Army, in: *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol. 21, No. 1. These forces simply left their uniforms and provisions behind, kept their guns and went home – a harbinger of the difficulties of defeating an urban insurgency with popular support.

24 See for example: Filkins, D. (2013), *The Shadow Commander*, 30 September, The New Yorker: New York

25 Filkins, D. (2014b), *What We Left Behind*, 28 April, The New Yorker: New York.

26 Such as the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI, with its Badr militia; now ISCI), Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (closely related to Iran's Quds force) and the Islamic Dawa party (to which both Al-Maliki and Al-Abadi belong). See: Filkins (2008), *op.cit.*; Al-Ali (2014), *op.cit.*; Filkins (2014b), *op.cit.*

27 *ISW*, 16/09/14 ([online](#); consulted 30/10/14).

28 Reconstitution of the Iraqi National Guard was first proposed on 9 September 2014 by the Iraqi Parliament. See: *Az-Zaman*, 09/09/14 ([online](#); consulted 11/11/14) (Arabic); *New York Times*, 10/09/14 ([online](#); consulted 11/11/14). Its previous version was disbanded in 2004 by the Iraqi Interim Government and merged with the army because it was viewed as ill-disciplined and suspected of links with insurgent groups.

security services backfired completely in 2008-09 when US forces turned the project over to the Iraqi administration. Payments were discontinued, jobs did not materialise and protection was withdrawn by a mistrustful, Shi'a-dominated government, of whom many considered Sahwa members to be sectarian rebels. This rapidly created another layer of grievance and deeper mistrust. It also exposed Sahwa members to retaliatory attacks by AQI. Hundreds of assassinations, including Sahwa leader Abd al-Sattar al-Rishawi, have reportedly been the result.²⁹ This has had two further consequences that continue to reverberate today. To start with, the ranks of the Islamic State in Iraq have been swollen by thousands of former Sahwa members for reasons of pragmatism, self-interest and grievance. Moreover, current talk of inciting a second Sahwa seem like wishful given the handling of its original, the intrusive levels of IS control discussed above, and the current lack of a coherent Sunni leadership. Tribal resistance against the IS in west Iraq – for example by the Shamaar tribe in northwest Iraq or the Albu Nimr tribe around the town of Hit– should not be equated to the presence of sufficient tribal support to repeat the Sahwa at scale. A recent meeting between US General John Allen and a number of tribal chiefs is said to have gone poorly precisely because of the history of US engagement.³⁰

Finally, the exclusionary rule of former Prime Minister Al-Maliki proved to be the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. This included the extension of his personal control over the ministries of the Interior and Defence, stimulating Shi'a dominance of the security forces, treating the Kurds with contempt, marginalising the electoral victory of the relatively secular Iraqqiya alliance in 2010 and violently seeking to suppress the 2012-14 Sunni protests in Anbar province.³¹ It is particularly remarkable that entire Shi'a militias, such as the Badr corps, were put into quasi-governmental service at some point. This added the injury of seeing known killers now in uniform to the insult of mishandling the Sahwa.³² It should not be surprising that Iraqi security forces are deeply mistrusted in many parts of the country. Finally, the combination of former Prime Minister Al-Maliki's efforts to disband the Sahwa, his marginalisation of the Iraqqiya alliance and the choice of a number of Sunni leaders to cooperate with the government throughout the 2012-14 Anbar protests resulted in a dispersal and loss of credibility of the Sunni leadership at national level. The consequence thereof today is that there is no recognised and coherent representation of the Sunni community. Even if there was a great deal on offer from the Al-Abadi government, it would be hard to find someone to countersign. Instead, there is an atmosphere charged with low trust and high disenfranchisement, which will require a comprehensive and sustained effort going well beyond a military component. Given the multiple cycles of sectarian violence in Iraq one could say that distrust between the Kurds and the current Shi'a-dominated government in Baghdad is based on political disagreement, while the distrust between Sunni and Shi'a parts of Iraq is steeped in blood.

29 See Benard (2011), *op.cit.* At its height, the Sawha is estimated to have numbered around 80,000 Sunni fighters.

30 Orient Advisory Group (2014), A Revolt by Obama's General's Erupts, in: *Middle East Briefing*, vol. 2, issue 51 (3 November); *Foreign Policy*, 30/10/14 [online](#): consulted 06/11/14).

31 On the Iraqqiya episode: Wicken, S. (2013), *Iraq's Sunnis in Crisis*, Middle East Security Report II, ISW: Washington DC; Al-Ali (2014), *op.cit.*; during the Anbar protests the security forces were, for example, ordered to raid the home of Sunni Finance Minister Rafia al-Issawi (2012) and to clear a protest camp in Ramadi (2013), resulting in 17 deaths. See: *Human Rights Watch*, 04/01/14 [online](#): consulted 3/11/14).

32 Filkins (2008), *op.cit.* The terrible havoc that Shi'a militias have created among Sunni communities over the past few months is reminiscent of the dark echoes of the 2006-07 Sunni-Shi'a civil war. Its arbitrary and violent nature is well described in: Amnesty International (2014), *Absolute Impunity: Militia Rule in Iraq*, Amnesty: London.

Present rulers: on policies and challenges

This brings the analysis to the composition of the current Iraqi government and the major policy issues it faces. Prime Minister Al-Abadi has been described as ‘suave, open-minded and flexible’, and has so far struck a far more conciliatory tone than his predecessor.³³ For example, he has made several tangible gestures of goodwill to Iraq’s Sunnis and Kurds by appointing a Sunni Minister of Defence (Khalid al-Obeidi), a Kurdish Minister of Finance (Hoshyar Zebari) and a Shi’a Oil Minister who is more pro-Kurdish (Adel Abdul Mahdi), and by sending two of nine months’ worth of revenue owed to the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG).³⁴ However, his new cabinet has also been criticised from the outset on several counts. First, Sunni hold fewer ministries than during the second Maliki government. Second, members of cabinet are largely those who have been involved in policymaking since 2003. In other words, they represent a significant degree of continuity with the Al-Maliki era. Third, local Sunni leaders who are resisting both the IS and the central government are poorly represented, in particularly tribal politicians from Anbar and Salah al-Din.³⁵ Finally, Al-Abadi has appointed Mohammed Salem al-Ghabban as Interior Minister (which includes responsibility for the police). Al-Ghabban is a prominent member of the Shi’a dominated Badr corps, a militia that played a significant role in the sectarian violence of 2006–08, both on its own account and through the Ministry of the Interior into which it became incorporated.³⁶

At face value, the above suggests limited prospects for any movement towards more inclusive governance. It appears that just enough changes have been made to represent at least an optical break with the past, but not enough to enable more radical changes (section 4 proposes a number of indicators to monitor political change in the near future). The relatively large number of small parties that the Iraqi Parliament is composed of strengthens this impression (see table 1 below). While Shi’a parties hold slightly over 50% of all seats on paper, these parties do not necessarily see eye to eye on many issues.³⁷ In addition, informal power brokers – such as militia commanders, certain political operatives, clerics and tribal leaders – have great influence in Iraq, which is not necessarily reflected in cabinet appointments or the composition of the parliament. A more detailed analysis of how informal power operates in Iraq is a matter for further research.

33 *Today’s Zaman*, 23/08/14 ([online](#): consulted 04/11/14).

34 *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 09/09/14 ([online](#): consulted 04/11/14); *Al-Jazeera*, 18/10/14 ([online](#): consulted 04/11/14).

35 See *The Wall Street Journal*, 09/09/14 ([online](#): consulted 04/11/14) and Visser, R. (2014), Iraq’s New Government and the Question of Sunni Inclusion, in: *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel*, vol 7, issue 9.

36 It was the armed wing of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), a key Shi’a political party, until about 2007. Both ISCI and the Badr corps are supported by Iran. Anecdotal is this recent picture of Hadi al-Ameri (head of the Badr corps) with General-Major Qassem Suleimani, head of the Al-Quds force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps: *Rudaw*, 26/10/14 ([online](#): consulted 04/11/14). Some analysts have ventured that Mohammed Salem al-Ghabban is little more than a proxy for Hadi al-Ameri. See: *Rudaw*, 19/10/14 ([online](#): consulted 04/11/14).

37 Iraq’s Shi’a community is far from homogenous, with divisions along tribal, class and ideological lines. For a more in-depth analysis: Nakash, Y. (2003), *The Shi’is of Iraq*, Revised edition, Princeton University Press: Princeton. The same can be said about its Sunni community.

Table 1. Overview of Iraq's main political parties at national level (unicameral parliament)

	Shia		Sunni	Kurdish
Party name	State of Law coalition	Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (Al-Muwatin bloc)	Muttahidoon	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
Party leaders	Nouri al-Maliki and Haider al-Abadi (Islamic Dawa party)	Ammar al-Hakim	Usama al-Nujayfi	Barham Salih
No. of seats (out of 328)	92 (28%)	29 (9%)	23 (7%)	21 (6%)
Associated militias or security forces	-	Used to be Badr Organization, now Knights of Hope	-	Peshmerga
External sponsor	Iran	Iran	Turkey	-
	Shia		Sunni	Kurdish
Party name	Al-Ahrar Bloc (Sadrist Movement)	National Iraqi Alliance (Watani List)	Al-Arabiya	Kurdish Democratic Party
Party leader	Muqtada al-Sadr	Ayad Allawi	Saleh al-Mutlaq	Masoud Barzani
No. of seats (out of 328)	34 (10%)	21 (6%)	10 (3%)	25 (8%)
Associated militias	Used to be Mahdi Army, now Saraya al-Salam	-	-	Peshmerga
External sponsor	-	-	-	Turkey, Iran

From an external perspective, Prime Minister Al-Abadi's government faces a number of pressing and major issues that include:

- *Halting the IS advance:* While the combination of airstrikes, arming the Peshmerga and Shi'a militia mobilisation will probably halt the IS advance, reversing it or securing Baghdad will prove more difficult. Neither the Iraqi security forces nor Shi'a militia have much credibility among its Sunni population. However, in the absence of international ground forces, they will have to do the job. Practically, it would help to re-establish trust if a public example was made of some of the recent atrocities committed by Shi'a militias.³⁸ Additionally, it would be useful if Sunnis were re-integrated into the command structures of the Iraqi army and police, especially in units posted in the Sunni parts of Baghdad. However, in reality, this problem will probably be difficult to solve in the short term, which means continued insecurity.
- *Rebuilding confidence between and in Iraq's leading political figures:* The less divisive person of Al-Abadi might be sufficient to return a sense of normality and working confidence to Iraq's national political elite but it should be recalled that many of the earlier stakeholders, such as Al-Maliki himself, have not disappeared from the scene. If Al-Abadi's intention is positive, he may well need support from relatively neutral figures with standing. One consideration in this regard is Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani and his political office. He appears to have remained aloof from most political and sectarian

38 See: Amnesty International (2014), *op.cit.*

turmoil over the past decade. This has prevented him from being seen as biased or suffering a loss of credibility. In fact, he has intervened rather positively in protection of Iraq's nascent democracy at crucial moments, such as in 2010 when he endorsed the quasi-secular Iraqqiya list and in 2014 during the government formation impasse when he impressed on the Dawa party the need to select a consensus candidate (ie, not Al-Maliki) despite Iran's initial wishes.³⁹ Whether and how he is willing to undertake such a role would need further examination.

- *Keeping Iraqi Kurdistan within the Iraqi state:* In material terms, this mostly amounts to resolving the status of Kirkuk, as well as agreeing on the rights and duties of regions and the state in respect of oil exploration and exportation to the satisfaction of both the Kurds and Al-Abadi's political support base.⁴⁰ On the oil issue, presumably some sort of revenue-sharing formula could be agreed, possibly with international expert advice and ex-post facto international verification of accounts, if the parties were willing to negotiate in good faith. However, the end-of-2014 deadline that Kurdish politicians have given the prime minister to solve the issue is unrealistic and looks like bluster.⁴¹ An agreement on principles and a credible roadmap within that time frame might go a long way towards addressing the issue and rebuilding some confidence.
- *Convincing and empowering the Sunni community to discontinue its support for IS:* This issue breaks down into two challenges. The first is to rebuild confidence with a fragmented Sunni leadership of local politicians and tribal leaders in a climate of deep mistrust. Although Sunni participation in national politics increased in the 2009-10 elections, its national leadership has all but disappeared or lost credibility since.⁴² A few hard-to-reverse confidence-building gestures – such as fast-tracking the passage of the revised 'de-Ba'athification law' (formally the Accountability and Justice law) and a public promise to turn some Sunni provinces into regions – may well be essential. Second, it will be important to materially enable Sunni communities and tribes to resist the IS on the battlefield. The difficulty here is, among others, that Sunni tribal sheikhs like Lawrence al-Hardan, Naeem al-Ga'oud and Wisam al-Hardan are asking for weapons that the government is reluctant to provide for fear of these falling into IS hands.⁴³ Further research is required to assess such risks and to explore potential operating modalities more fully.

39 *ISW*, 11/08/14 ([online](#): consulted 03/11/14); *Al-Monitor*, 20/08/14 ([online](#): consulted 05/11/14); *Al-Monitor*, 08/10/14 ([online](#): consulted 04/11/14); Al-Ali (2014), *op.cit.*; Nadimi, F. (2014), *Iran's Expanding Military Role in Iraq*, Policy Watch 2312, The Washington Institute: Washington D.C.; *Al-Jazeera*, 30/07/14 ([online](#): consulted 05/11/14); A copy of Grand Ayatollah Al-Sistani's letter to the Dawa party can be found [here](#) (Arabic) (consulted 05/11/14).

40 *Wall Street Journal*, 25/09/14 ([online](#)); *Hurriyet Daily News*, 13/10/14 ([online](#)). Both consulted 04/11/14.

41 Although estimates of revenue generated from selling oil explored in northern Iraq by the Kurds differ, most sources suggest that it will not compensate for the monthly installments Kurdish Iraq is entitled too as its share of the national oil wealth (around \$1 bn/month) in the short to medium term. For example: Knights, M. (2014), *Resetting the U.S.-Kurdish-Baghdad Relationship*, Policy Watch 2313, The Washington Institute: Washington D.C. Most oil is currently produced in the south of Iraq (see figure 1), generating USD 88.9 billion in government revenue in 2011, USD 94 billion in 2012 and USD 89 billion in 2013 (*EITI*, [online](#); *Global Post*, 22/01/14) ([online](#)). Both consulted 06/11/14.

42 See for example: Wicken, S. (2013), *Iraq's Sunni's in Crisis*, Middle-East Security Report II, ISW: Washington D.C.;

43 *Reuters*, 30/10/14 ([online](#): consulted 04/11/14).

In addition, there are countless issues that need to be addressed in the longer term if security and prosperity are to be divided more equally across Iraq and conflict relapse is to be avoided. These include addressing the inevitable corruption surrounding the country's public procurement systems and its massive oil revenues, unlocking its full socio-economic potential by reconsidering gender roles and opportunities, and countering radicalisation.⁴⁴ How such issues are best addressed in Iraq's present crisis requires deeper analysis. For now, section 4 proposes a few indicators that can be used to monitor political developments in the near term.

44 On corruption and electoral campaign financing: *Financial Times*, 14/4/14 ([online](#): consulted 05/11/14). There is limited gender data available on the impact of the crisis on women. In general terms, Iraq was ranked 120th out of 187 countries in respect of gender inequality. *UNDP* (2013), [online](#) (consulted 06/11/14).

4. Regional dynamics, alliances and power politics

Key messages:

- The Syrian and Iraqi civil wars feed off each other and are rooted in histories of ruthless dictatorship (Syria) and violent civil strife (Iraq). Eastern Syria and western Iraq in particular are contiguous conflict zones. International engagement in Iraq without a viable plan for engagement in Syria is likely to deliver partial and temporary gains at best – and vice versa.
- Gulf rulers instrumentalise the Shi'a threat for the purposes of shoring up their own autocratic rule and framing Iran as the arch-disrupter of peace and security in the Middle East. This downplays both their own agency and the domestic contexts in which many Shi'a groups are grounded.
- Resolution of the conflict in Iraq requires a more moderate tone from a number of Gulf-based clerics to reduce the radical socio-religious animosity on which the IS and similar groups thrive.

Even a cursory glance at the conflict's regional dimensions multiplies its complexity significantly. A popular frame of reference is that of an existential Sunni–Shi'a conflict, courtesy of Jordan's King Abdullah II 2004 metaphor of a Shi'a crescent stretching from Beirut to Tehran.⁴⁵ Unsurprisingly, reality is much more nuanced than his slightly self-serving warning. At least three interlinked issues must be examined to understand the Iraqi conflict: the manner in which the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts (have) influence(d) each other; Iranian–Saudi rivalry in the context of major shifts in the region's geopolitics; and the broader challenges to the legitimacy of rule in the Gulf countries.

The Syrian connection

It is difficult to state with confidence whether international neglect of the Syrian civil war enabled the IS to gather forces in Syria before expanding into Iraq, or whether its informal control over parts of the Iraqi provinces Anbar and Nineveh enabled it to enter the Syrian carnage. It is also immaterial.⁴⁶ What matters is to appreciate the longer-term structural factors that created a climate conducive to sectarian violence in eastern Syria and western Iraq, and to view these areas as part of the same tapestry of conflict.

The various insurgencies in western Iraq during the 2003–10 US occupation have contributed significantly to the Syrian civil war in an indirect manner. For example, there are strong indications that the Syrian government allowed Islamist fighters not deemed a threat to Syria to enter Iraq unhindered during the 2007–08 AQI insurgency, out of which the IS arguably

45 Interview with Chris Matthew of NBC News on 09/12/04 (minute 02:09) ([online](#): consulted 06/11/14).

46 Van Veen, E. and I. Abdo (2014), *Between Brutality and Fragmentation: Options for Addressing the Syrian Civil War*, Clingendael Conflict Research Unit Report, Clingendael: The Hague.

morphed.⁴⁷ In addition, several Arab countries contributed funds and fighters to various Sunni insurgent groups in Iraq, in fear of expanding Iranian influence and a Shi'a ascendancy after the US-led 2003 overthrow of the Hussein regime (more on this below). While it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which governments have been involved, it is fairly clear that charities and wealthy individuals (who may also have held government positions) played a large role. Governments may have acquiesced. This included Western 'allies' such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan and some of the Gulf states. It is a pattern that has been repeated since 2011 in the Syrian civil war.⁴⁸ Such support has enabled Islamist groups to proliferate and expand in both Syria and Iraq.

Perhaps more importantly, there are multiple cross-border links between eastern Syria and western Iraq (eg, tribal, criminal and militant groups). Against a backdrop of popular distrust of the Iraqi security forces, poor border control and chaos in Syria, the illicit versions of these links have thrived, enabling better organisation and preparation of armed groups. For example, IS's capture of Mosul was in part enabled by its cooperation with the Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqah al-Naqsabandia (JRTN) movement, an armed group consisting largely of former Ba'athist officers.⁴⁹ It is only to be expected that the 'Iranian-sponsored Shi'a threat' – emanating from both the Assad government in the west and the Baghdad government in the east – will be used to frame perceptions and further mobilise these cross-border connections for violence. The upshot is that international engagement in Iraq without a viable corresponding plan for engagement in Syria – with the aim of either bringing both conflicts to a halt or reducing the footprint of the IS – is likely to deliver partial and temporary gains at best.

Iranian–Saudi rivalry

During the modern, post-colonial history of the Middle East, Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia have been its most powerful states, alternating cooperation with competition.⁵⁰ Inevitably, major events that disrupted their balance have resulted in periods of greater mistrust and sometimes conflict by proxy before a new *modus vivendi* could be developed. Three such events have a bearing on the current Iraqi conflict and merit a brief discussion.

To start with, the Iran–Iraq war was in many ways a direct consequence of the fear in the Sunni world, Iraq in particular, of a Shi'a-led revolution sweeping across the region as the revolutionary language of Iran's new rulers burned hot with passion and missionary zeal at the time.⁵¹ To contextualise such fear, it must be kept in mind that there are significant Shi'a minorities and majorities present in most countries in the Gulf and Levant (see annex 1).

47 Fishman, B. and J. Felter (2007), *Al Qaeda's foreign fighters in Iraq: A first look at the Sinjar records*, Combatting Terrorism Center: West Point; *Wall Street Journal*, 22/08/14 ([online](#): consulted 05/11/14); Davies, E. and Cordesmann, A. (2007), *Iraq's Insurgency and the Road to Civil Conflict*, Volume 1, Praeger: Santa Barbara. The US State Sponsor of Terrorism list continues to cite Syria's involvement in Iraqi extremism ([online](#): consulted 05/11/14).

48 Van Veen and Abdo (2014), *op.cit.*; Dickinson, E. (2013), *Playing with Fire: Why Private Gulf Financing for Syria's Extremist Rebels Risks Igniting Sectarian Conflict at Home*, Analysis paper no. 16, Saban Center at Brookings: Doha.

49 For an overview of the plethora of Sunni armed groups that exist next to the IS: Adnan (2014), *op.cit.*

50 This was not always so: Iraq was more of a battleground between the Ottoman and Saffavid empires between roughly 1500 and 1700 AD. See for example: Cleveland (2004), *op.cit.*

51 Hourani, A. (1991), *A History of the Arab Peoples*, Faber and Faber Limited: London; Wehrey, F. (2014), *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings*, Columbia University Press: New York.

The 1979 uprising of the Saudi Shi'a in Qatif strengthened such fears.⁵² However, the inconclusive but extremely costly Iran-Iraq war significantly cooled the former's revolutionary ardour so that this risk reduced significantly in the 1990s. In addition, Shi'a minorities across the Gulf have gone to great lengths since the 1990s to frame their grievances of socio-political disenfranchisement and economic marginalisation within the domestic context of their respective countries, for example by trying to create cross-sectarian alliances with domestic Sunni dissidents. In the main, they have purposefully kept their distance from Iran to avoid being discredited as a 'fifth column'.⁵³ Nevertheless, this has not stopped Gulf rulers from instrumentalising the Shi'a threat for the twin political purposes of shoring up their own autocratic rule and framing Iran as the puppet master of Shi'a proxies and arch-disrupter of peace and security in the Middle East.⁵⁴ This is overblown to the extent that it downplays the respective domestic contexts in which Shi'a groups such as Lebanon's Hezbollah, Yemen's Houthi movement and Iraq's Sadr bloc are predominantly grounded.⁵⁵

Second, the 2003 US invasion of Iraq was rapidly perceived as an opportunity by both Saudi Arabia and Iran to expand their influence. Where Saddam Hussein and his security apparatus had hitherto effectively controlled a relatively secular state, his removal created a vacuum. This turned Iraq into a regional proxy war long before the Syrian civil war commenced. The Iraqi civilian population has borne the brunt of its fury. In all likelihood, Iran provided weapons, finance and IEDs while cultivating relations with key Shi'a groups. This culminated in the expulsion of US forces by 2011 (the contribution of several Gulf countries to Iraq's Sunni insurgency has been discussed above).⁵⁶ While Iran initially seemed to be the informal winner of this contest, it is now experiencing the downside of Al-Maliki's exclusionary rule with blowback effects hitting its interests in turn.

Third, the nuclear negotiations hold the promise of undoing Iran's international isolation and so unlocking its full potential. It is clear that this would be detrimental to the relative power of Saudi Arabia and Israel in the region. Hence, irrespective of how well grounded fears of Iranian nuclear ambitions or deceit are, it is obvious that these countries have an interest in depicting Tehran in the worst possible light. As they have the advantage of enjoying a relatively favourable Western perception, good relations with the US and part of the West, and dominate the international headlines, this makes partisan framing of the Syrian and Iraqi conflict relatively simple. Undoubtedly, it also makes for much political advocacy behind the scenes that, for example, the Syrian rebels, Iraqi Sunni or Iran are not able of mobilising.⁵⁷

Finally, in the present context of the 'IS crisis', it is worth noting that Iran was the only state willing to provide immediate and full-fledged assistance to Iraq (including advisers and (heavy) weapons) when the IS took control of Mosul. In part this was done in support of

52 Wehrey, F. (2013), *The Forgotten Uprising in Eastern Saudi Arabia*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Washington DC.

53 For an in-depth analysis of Shi'a protest in the Gulf: Wehrey (2014), *op.cit.*

54 Consider for example Prince Turki's (House of Saud) comments here: *Orient Advisory Group*, 03/11/14 ([online](#): consulted 05/11/14); see *The Economist* of 01/11/14 for a recent attempt to paint a more nuanced picture of Iranian politics and society.

55 This is not to say Iran does not support some of these actors (the more hardline elements of the IRGC probably do, see: Filkins (2013), *op.cit.*), but rather to suggest it is conscious strategy of some of the Gulf countries to emphasise Iran's agency and to downplay their own.

56 Filkins (2014b), *op.cit.*

57 See Trita Parsi's twitter feed for good analysis of the nuclear negotiations, Iran's interests and views (@tparsi).

the militias it backs, such as Asaib al-Haq and the Badr corps, but also in support of the Peshmerga.⁵⁸ This not only increased its influence, but also generated gratitude among sections of the Iraqi elite and population: while Baghdad and Kurdistan were under immediate threat from the IS, Iran stepped in when no one else was willing or able.

Legitimacy, religion and radicalism in the Gulf

A broader factor that influences the Iraqi conflict is the legitimacy challenge that many Gulf countries face. These countries are largely ruled by authoritarian regimes grounded in tribal societies and religious support, and buoyed by vast natural resource revenues. While they are at various stages of transition to socio-economic modernity on the surface, this journey is not taking place on the basis of growing pluralism, secularism and democracy. Instead, it proceeds on the basis of loyalty, tribal-based citizenship and personalised rule.⁵⁹ The results are likely to be markedly different from the West's liberal and democratic societies. What is important for the Iraqi conflict is to understand the responses of their rulers to the religious challenge posed by the 1979 Iranian revolution and the political challenge of the 2011 Arab Spring.⁶⁰

The Iranian revolution swept its ruling, US-allied, Pahlavi monarchy away and replaced it with an anti-Western Islamic theocracy ruled by Shi'a clerics. In brief, it presented a threefold challenge to the autocratic Sunni regimes of the Gulf. First, it challenged the notion of religiously sanctioned royal-cum-tribal rule that is common in the Gulf through the Iranian doctrinal notion of clerical rule (*Wilayat al-Faqih*). Second and closely related, it challenged the religious Sunni basis of the Gulf regimes by reinvigorating Shi'ism as an alternative belief and value system. Third, the combination of its initial zeal to export the revolution and the long-time existence of transborder links between Shi'a communities was perceived to undermine the loyalty of the Gulf's Shi'a to their rulers.⁶¹ An important part of the Gulf's response was the export of Wahabism, the ultraconservative interpretation of Islam that underpins the legitimacy of the House of Saud.⁶² This had fateful consequences. It led not only to Gulf sponsorship for jihads, for example from Afghanistan, Chechnya and Iraq – which ultimately gave rise to radicalised and ultra-violent groups such as AQ and the IS – but also doubled down on sectarian rhetoric by condemning Shi'a and other Islamic sects as non-Muslim apostates and polytheists.⁶³ While Iran arguably softened its tone after the Iran-Iraq war and reduced its efforts to foment unrest in the Gulf (although not necessarily elsewhere),

58 *Al-Jazeera*, 30/07/14 ([online](#)); Nadimi (2014), *op.cit.*; *The Guardian*, 14/07/14 ([online](#)); *Al-Monitor*, 28/09/14 ([online](#)) (all consulted 05/11/14).

59 For a fascinating account of these transitions: Cooke, M. (2014), *Tribal Modern: Branding New Nations in the Arab Gulf*, University of California Press; Berkeley.

60 Given that the financial resources of these countries are not about to run out soon (unlike in Tunisia and Egypt), challenges to their ability to maintain standards of living are unlikely to materialise. See: Aarts, P. et al. (2012), *From Resilience to Revolt: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*, University of Amsterdam: Amsterdam.

61 Aarts (2012), *op.cit.*; Wehrey (2014), *op.cit.*

62 For a nuanced discussion of Wahabism's inherent tensions and Saudi counter-terrorism strategies: Meijer, R. (ed.) (2012), *Counter-Terrorism Strategies in Indonesia, Algeria and Saudi Arabia*, Clingendael Institute: The Hague.

63 For example, Saudi-based Salafi clerics released a torrent of abusive anti-Shi'a and anti-Iranian fatwas after the Iranian revolution. They repeated this during the Sunni-Shi'a civil war in Iraq around 2006-08 in addition to implicitly stimulating jihad against US forces in Iraq (Wehrey (2014), *op.cit.*).

some Gulf countries continued along their antagonistic path.⁶⁴ For example, it was only in August 2014 that the Saudi Grand-Mufti, Abdelaziz Ben Abdallah al-Sheikh, roundly condemned the IS by pronouncing the group the ‘number one enemy of Islam’.⁶⁵ The upshot thereof for the conflict in Iraq is that a more moderate religious tone from Saudi Arabia’s clerical establishment, combined with an active socio-religious campaign of tolerance, is necessary to shift the radical socio-religious context in which the IS and similar groups thrive.

The Arab Spring posed a slightly different – and arguably more manageable – challenge to the Gulf regimes by providing a potent demonstration of what popular unrest and civic resistance can achieve. However, the initial success factors of the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen, such as dissatisfaction with ageing discredited republican autocrats, increasing socio-economic hardship and disloyal militaries, were mostly not in place throughout the Gulf. For example, the Saudi security forces displayed such overwhelming and dedicated force when its Shi’a population planned their local version of the ‘Day of Rage’, that protests were effectively smothered and Shi’a leaders rapidly clarified their allegiance to the House of Saud.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, an implication for the conflict in Iraq is that the Arab Spring seems to have made the foreign policies of the Gulf countries more conservative and confrontational (consider, for example, recurrent Saudi calls for the violent overthrow of Assad and the elimination of the IS). Against a perceived context of Sunni–Shi’a strife this will not contribute to addressing the deeper grievances underlying the Iraqi civil war.

64 The ruling elites in both Iran and Saudi Arabia are not monolithic entities. Policies and actions are contested between hardliners and pragmatists in each country. Understanding such domestic complexity and framing it in the context of the Iraqi conflict is a matter for further research, as are the consequences of the religious-political ecology of the Gulf for its neighborhood.

65 *Saudi Press Agency*, 19/08/14, part 0072 ([online](#): consulted 05/11/14) (Arabic). The timing may in part reflect the greater priority that Saudi Arabia puts on containing Shi’a Iran, emphasising the fight against President Assad, than that of reversing the rise of the IS (Metz, S. (2014), *U.S. Support for Syrian Rebels Serves Political, not Military, Purposes*, *World Politics Review* ([online](#): consulted 05/11/14).

66 Aarts (2012), *op.cit.*

5. Looking ahead: What can be done?

Halting the rise of the Islamic State and reversing some of its gains require addressing a deep sense of Sunni disenfranchisement. Lacking the organisation and resources of Iraq's Kurds, Sunni grievances have manifested themselves through support for a range of armed groups that have created a cross-border shadow world between Iraq and Syria of violence, crime and radicalism. It can only be exposed and reduced by credibly showing Iraq's Sunni minority that it has a stake in the country's future.

Ensuring that Iraq remains a single state adds another challenge: the need to address Kurdish grievances and aspirations. After a long period of oppression, Iraq's Kurds finally find themselves in a situation of relative security, prosperity and international support. However, declaring independence would be an adventure with uncertain outcomes. For this reason, the Kurds may yet opt to stay if both *de jure* and *de facto* autonomy can be guaranteed within a federal Iraqi structure, underpinned by greater respect.

In short, at the heart of the Iraqi imbroglio lies the question of how inclusive power can be exercised in Baghdad, and whether confidence can be rebuilt between the country's main sectarian groups. Actions that the international community could consider undertaking in support of this elusive quest include the following:

(1) Create an international mechanism to monitor the political and security developments in Iraq on a recurrent basis. The current situation is of such complexity that longitudinal and shared in-depth analysis is necessary to really understand developments, feed policy and prevent fragmentation of diplomatic initiatives. This could be done through a group of bilateral like-minded donors with dedicated analytical capability at its disposal that could be closely connected to policy discussions. Ideally, it would happen under the EU or UN banner to ensure greater institutional anchorage and longevity. The indicators below provide starting points for such a monitoring framework.

A strategy for dealing with the Syrian civil war should be developed in tandem with such an ongoing monitoring exercise.⁶⁷ This would probably have to use different channels and formats given the deadlock in the UN, which calls for creative links between an Iraq-focused monitoring exercise and a Syria-focused conflict-resolution strategy. One option to accomplish this would be through the good offices of selected UN member states.

67 For a set of initial ideas: Van Veen and Abdo (2014), *op.cit.*

Table 2. Rough indicators for monitoring the prospects for more inclusive governance in Iraq

State of security	Domestic politics	Regional dimension
- Concrete disciplinary action by officials against excesses committed by Iraqi security forces and/or Shi'a militia ⁶⁸	- Transfer of the remaining seven months' worth of national budget from Baghdad to the KRG	- Increases in the frequency of conversations between high-level US, Iranian and Saudi representatives (other than for the nuclear negotiations)
- Development of a concrete and feasible idea to establish a National Guard Force with adequate guarantees	- Extent of participation of respectively Kurdish and Sunni ministers in cabinet, as well as Kurdish and Sunni parliamentarians in parliament	- Increase of efforts by Turkey, Jordan and the Gulf states to reduce illicit financial transfers to Iraq/Syria, prevent jihadist travel and crack down on sectarian rhetoric
	- Passage of the stalled oil bill providing a clear regulatory framework for the rights to extract, sell and export oil	

(2) Initiate a regional security dialogue to reduce mistrust, create a better understanding of fears and interests, and avoid further escalation. As this would be a long-term endeavour, it is probably best conducted under the sponsorship of the United Nations (in the form of a dedicated political mission for instance, which complements the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI) or the Arab League).

- Create a formal platform that brings together representatives of Iraq's government (including all its sectarian groups) and its neighbours. Such a dialogue could be led by a relatively neutral Arab state such as Jordan, Oman or Morocco and supported by a small secretariat akin to the work of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) during the Cold War. It must involve Iran, Turkey as well as Saudi Arabia.
- In addition, launch/support an informal, 'track two initiative' that brings together religious and civil society representatives and academics from the region to develop ideas and contribute reflections. Its set-up would have to account for the nature of some of the region's regimes and could be facilitated by UNAMI to stimulate impartiality.

(3) Focus financial support on humanitarian assistance by making a fair contribution to the various humanitarian appeals and by admitting a sizeable number of refugees.

- The humanitarian plight that the current crisis has caused is likely to last and the Iraqi government does not have the mechanisms to react appropriately to it. At the moment, the UN's 2014 Strategic Response Plan for Iraq is overfunded thanks to a one-off Saudi grant of US\$500 million. Yet, these funds are bound to run out. Both the international community and the Iraqi government need to prepare financially for that moment by lining up further contributions to the UN's Central Emergency Response Fund and to Iraq-specific humanitarian funds.

68 The recent shake-up by PM Al-Abadi of Iraq's military by relieving or retiring 36 army commanders may help to improve the professionalism of Iraq's army, yet it will likely do little to improve negative perceptions of its accountability for excesses committed outside of the law. See: *Yahoo News*, 12/11/14 ([online](#): consulted 14/11/14).

- In the meantime, a generous asylum policy could help relieve the pressure in the region that might trigger further conflict. The best scenario would see a common EU position towards Iraqi refugees, including a refugee quota per EU member state on the basis of its population.

Financial assistance beyond a contribution to meet Iraq's humanitarian needs appears less obvious given the country's oil wealth. If well managed, Iraq has the funds to take its longer-term development into its own hands. The challenge is one of effective and inclusive governance.

(4) Explore the possibilities for a UN-sanctioned, Arab-led peacekeeping mission to Iraq. Reversing the IS militarily requires qualitatively different ground forces in Iraq. Two of the three available options are unattractive in the short term. Strengthening the Peshmerga is unlikely to have much effect beyond the Kurdish internal frontiers (unless an attractive political deal with Baghdad is on the table that stops short of independence), while transforming the Iraqi security forces – so that they become more accountable, trusted and representative, as well as more effective – will take a long time. In short, once airstrikes have halted the IS, and Iraqi forces have retaken some terrain, a coalition of ground forces from Arab or Islamic states like Algeria, Pakistan, Tunisia and Morocco might be the best available option to create a temporary window of opportunity in which the Baghdad government could reach out to its marginalised populations. Practical requirements would include a UN mandate, perhaps implemented via the Arab League, Western logistical, aerial and intelligence support, and endorsement of the region's major powers: Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Annex 1

Basic facts of selected countries in the Middle East in relation to the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars

Country	Head of government	Type of government	Main sectarian groups*	Position vis-à-vis US	Participation in air strikes in Iraq?	Participation in air strikes in Syria?
Iran	President Hassan Rouhani	Theocratic revolutionary democracy	95% Shia	Long-time enemy, recent thaw	N	N
Saudi Arabia	King Abdullah	Theocratic monarchy	85-90% Sunni 10-15% Shia	Long-time ally, recent tensions	N	Y
Turkey	President Raycip Erdogan	Democratic republic	80% Sunni 19% Shia	Long-time ally, current disagreement on Syria	N	N
Syria	President Bashar al-Assad	Secular dictatorship	73% Sunni 15% Shia 10% Christian	Current enemy	N	n/a
Jordan	King Abdullah II	Monarchy	97% Sunni 2.2% Christian	Long-time ally	N	Y
United Arab Emirates	Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan	Monarchy	76% Sunni 15% Shi'a 9% Christian	Long-time ally	N	Y
Qatar	Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani	Monarchy	77% Sunni 8% Christian	Ally, but support for Muslim Brotherhood	N	Y
Israel	Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu	Democracy	75% Jewish 16% Sunni 5% Christian	Long-time ally, recent tensions between Obama and Netanyahu	N	N
Lebanon	Prime Minister Tamman Salam	Sectarian democracy	40% Christian 27% Sunni 27% Shia	Neutral	N	N

* The figures are as of 2014 and based on the CIA Factbook. Iraq and Bahrain had/have Sunni rulers but Shi'a majorities (ca. 62% and 65-75% of their population), while Kuwait has a Shi'a minority (30-40%). Percentages should be considered indicative.

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