

Playing Identity Politics In Iraq

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ABSTRACT

While Iraq has achieved success in militarily defeating ISIS, it must now prepare for the difficult post-conflict reconstruction phase. The most important issue facing the country in the post-ISIS landscape is the challenge posed by sectarianism and identity politics, which helped ISIS in its campaign to control territory. Iraqi society is marred with sectarianism, and this paper examines its military, political, and economic components through case studies of the events that unfolded in Mosul, Baghdad, and Kirkuk. In order to move forward and avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, Iraq must integrate the anti-ISIS militia groups into the state military structure, incorporate Sunni voices and pursue political decentralization ahead of the 2018 parliamentary elections, and develop a dialogue with Kurds to reduce inter-community tensions and pave the way for a better future.

INTRODUCTION

After decades of violence, Iraq could finally be witnessing an end to conflict within its borders. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the latest threat to plague the country, was pushed from its last Iraqi stronghold in November 2017.¹ To undermine the government and create a Sunni caliphate, ISIS capitalized on the sectarian divisions in Iraq and created long-lasting schisms that extend beyond its physical presence in the region. The government of post-ISIS Iraq must now work on dismantling the sectarianism and identity politics that have weakened the country politically, militarily, and economically. Leaving group rivalry unaddressed will cause instability and could even lead to the rise of another faction that similarly capitalizes on the disunity within the country.

This paper will examine how strong religious and ethnic identities in Iraq remain at the core of the country's challenges. First, it will examine ISIS' growth and appeal as a unique policy issue within Iraq. Then, it will turn to how identity politics are present in the military, politics, and economy of the country, using Mosul, Baghdad, and Kirkuk respectively as case studies. It will then use the term identity politics to discuss not just sectarian issues but also ethnic divisions, namely between the Iraqi Arab and Iraqi Kurdish populations. Drawing from the analysis of each case study, it will close by providing policy recommendations that address the challenge posed by identity politics and provide suggestions to overcome this obstacle.

ISIS RISING: THE IMPACT OF THE U.S. INVASION ON IDENTITY POLITICS

Sectarian division in Iraq is not a new development. The issue had come immediately to the forefront after the US invasion in 2003 and the removal of Saddam Hussein. Under Saddam Hussein and his Baath party, Iraqis seemed to be less segregated along religious lines and rather according to the threat they posed to the authoritarian rule.² On one hand, Shia Muslim resentment towards Saddam's authoritarianism became more obvious after the U.S. invasion removed him from power. Shias, the majority within Iraq, had felt particularly victimized under Saddam and, as a result, welcomed US action. On the other hand, the regime change increased the perception of Sunni disenfranchisement and victimization under the new Shia-led government. The de-Baathification of Iraqi bureaucracy heavily reduced the power and role of the Sunni Muslim elites. The exclusion of Sunnis in the emerging post-invasion state structure, and increasingly sectarian rhetoric employed by the new Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, furthered the divide.³

It was in this environment that ISIS flourished. Breaking from its parent organization Al Qaeda in 2014, ISIS capitalized on Sunni frustration and state weakness to gain support and manpower. In Iraq, it drew its fighting force and expertise from marginalized former Baathists and Saddam-era officers, and smoothly took over key cities in north and west Iraq.⁴ To many Sunnis in these areas, ISIS provided an alternative to the Shia-led governing structure in Baghdad, and a fighting force that could overwhelm the weak Iraqi military.⁵ At its zenith, ISIS and its caliphate comprised a largely self-sufficient entity, relying on taxes and smuggling for revenue and Iraqi army veterans for military expertise.⁶

The Iraqi military, in coordination with the United States and its coalition partners, and with local and foreign militias, successfully reclaimed Iraqi territory held by ISIS. However, a military victory is only half the battle. If left unaddressed, the sectarian divides that were widened by the rise of ISIS will

continue to fester instability and preclude peace and progress in Iraq.

LIBERATING MOSUL: THE SECTARIAN SPECTER OF THE POPULAR MOBILIZATION UNITS

Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) are non-governmental fighting forces, developed in response to the Sunni threat stemming from ISIS. However, these militias are largely Shia in composition, with their units answering to Shia leaders both in Iraq and Iran. While these militias were formed to purge ISIS from Iraq, they have also exacerbated the problem of identity politics. The city of Mosul, taken by ISIS in 2014, provides an example of an area where the sectarian tensions and factions dominant within the military and PMUs were at the forefront. Mosul is a majority Sunni city, and the use of PMUs to liberate Mosul from ISIS revealed the challenge posed by sectarianism and identity politics in the military.

THE SHIA CALL TO ARMS

After the rise of ISIS and the collapse of the Iraqi army, Shia groups, within and outside Iraq, formed militias and coalesced as an anti-ISIS force under the auspices of the PMU. The PMUs are predominantly Shia, and often used appeals to identity to recruit members. Many of the militias are also supported by Iran, which rushed to aid the Iraqi Shia population against ISIS while also pursuing its hegemonic ambitions. Although the PMUs were important partners in liberating cities such as Mosul, their continued presence in Iraq undermines the reconstruction process, and also makes Iraq vulnerable to extended Iranian influence. In order to diminish the pervasive influence of sectarian politics on Iraqi defenses, it is imperative to disband the PMUs completely, either by integrating members into the state security apparatus or de-militarizing them altogether.

Under Nouri al Maliki, the militias that ultimately coalesced under the PMUs were allowed to proliferate. During the battle against ISIS, there were anywhere from 60,000 to 140,000 fighters in the PMUs, creating a formidable non-governmental force within Iraq.⁷ Many of these units are still deployed in areas across the country.⁸ While Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has praised the PMUs, and considers them legitimate fighting forces affiliated with the state, he is wary of their independence from the state and influence on the post-ISIS security landscape. In February 2016, he passed Executive Order 91, which designates the PMUs as part of an independent military formation within the Iraqi security forces, ostensibly bringing them under state jurisdiction.⁹

The PMUs are not an unmitigated good, however, and public opinion regarding their effectiveness and dispensability falls largely along sectarian lines.

Some Iraqis consider the fallen PMU fighters as martyrs, and dedicate songs, commercials, and banners to celebrate and honor them. Others, however, feel that their continued presence and effectively extra-judicial status is problematic. Indeed, the militias have been accused of war crimes, stoking sectarianism, and providing Iran an outlet to wield influence within Iraq.¹⁰ Thus, while the PMUs provided invaluable support in the fight against ISIS, they continue to represent the identity politics of the pre-ISIS era that is detrimental to future stability and reconciliation.

WAR CRIMES AND THE IRAN FACTOR

Within the PMUs there are three distinct factions: militias organized and loyal to Ayatollah Khamenei of Iran, Ayatollah al-Sistani of Iraq, and Iraqi cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. All three factions are Shia, but the pro-Sistani and pro-Sadr factions support the government and have demonstrated more willingness to integrate into the military. The pro-Khamenei factions consider the current Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi weak and inept, and seem resistant to integration within the state.¹¹ These divisions demonstrate not just a split within the Shia population in Iraq, but also an opening that Iran can exploit for its own geopolitical gain. The presence of largely unregulated militias, many of which answer to Iran, will weaken the legitimacy of Iraqi authorities and create instability as they are given *carte blanche* to re-establish security in the way they deem necessary.

The primacy given to Iranian-backed PMUs in the wake of ISIS and their abuse of power reflects the deep divisions caused by the complexity of identity politics in Iraq. It is estimated that in 2017, 50,000 PMU fighters were taking direction from the Quds Force, the irregular foreign operations wing of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The Quds Force was originally established in the 1980s during the Iran-Iraq War as a military arm designed to create proxy networks and spread the Islamic Revolution abroad. Using the networks of Quds Force, Iran continues to influence Shia areas in Iraq to achieve its hegemonic aims. The control exerted by Iran seeps into Iraqi security as well as politics, and could result in PMU leaders running in the May 2018 elections.¹²

Ultimately, the Shia-led PMUs are operating with impunity and very little accountability, further hampering reconciliation amongst Iraqis. Emboldened by their military successes against ISIS, the PMUs have overstepped their military support on the battlefield and have been accused of violating humanitarian law.¹³ According to a January 2017 Amnesty International report, "PMU militias have carried out a systematic pattern of violations, including enforced disappearance, extrajudicial executions and other unlawful killings and torture of Sunni Arab men and boys, seemingly in revenge for IS attacks,

and at times to extort money from the families of those they have abducted.”¹⁴

One notable militia accused of such acts is ‘Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, or League of the Righteous, created in 2005 during the U.S. invasion and connected to General Qassem Suleimani, head of the Iranian Quds Force. Following a January 2016 suicide attack on a Shia-owned café in the Diyala governorate, militias including ‘Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq went on a rampage, killing and abducting Sunni men, destroying Sunni mosques and property in the town of Muqdadiya. As the report indicates, there have been no prosecutions or convictions of PMU members involved in these attacks, and fear of retribution on Sunni populations remains high.¹⁵ Reining in these forces and re-orienting them into the greater Iraqi security apparatus will be important to prevent such gross violations and improving reconstruction efforts in cities across Iraq.

REBUILDING MOSUL AND INTEGRATING PMUs

Prime Minister Abadi’s declaration of victory in Mosul in July 2017 was a major victory for the Iraqi army.¹⁶ While the liberation of Mosul, in coordination with U.S. coalition forces, was largely successful, the role of the militias was contested. Prior to the battle, the Nineveh provincial council, voted that PMUs should not be involved in the liberation of the city. Baghdad overruled the concerns of the council and included the additional forces.¹⁷ Identity politics again played an important role, as the sectarian identity of those who would enter to fight ISIS was a matter of contention. With a Sunni majority, Mosul residents feared the use of Shia PMUs as well as Kurdish Peshmerga.¹⁸ Given this background, how Iraqis perceive of the militias and their use by the state is significant for reconstruction efforts in cities like Mosul.

Rebuilding Mosul, like many of the other predominantly Sunni formerly ISIS-held towns in Iraq, will be a long and difficult process that requires unity throughout the country. In a speech at the United States Institute of Peace in March 2017, Prime Minister Abadi said that while he believed many of the PMU volunteers were fighting for Iraq, others were motivated by something else, stressing the need to bring the militias within state jurisdiction. Abadi’s solution, then, is to integrate militias into the state, keeping them active but accountable to Baghdad.¹⁹ An alternative solution is to integrate the militia members individually rather than in entire units, which diminishes the sectarian element while recognizing the military significance and manpower of the fighters.²⁰ Reducing sectarian tensions on the ground is paramount to successful reconstruction but, as Iraqis prepare to vote by the end of this spring, keeping identity politics out of Baghdad will be necessary. This is especially true as the PMU leadership is vying for public office in Iraq’s upcoming parliamentary elections.

BAGHDAD: POLITICAL SECTARIANISM AND THE 2018 ELECTIONS

Sectarianism remains at the heart of national politics in Iraq. Baghdad, Iraq's centrally located capital, is the site where identity politics will either manifest itself or wither. As the spring 2018 parliamentary elections draw close, Iraqis are still divided on sectarian lines. Both Sunni and Shia leaders are working to articulate their platforms and deciding how to best represent their constituency, whose need of humanitarian aid and rapid reconstruction is tantamount in post-ISIS Iraq. Given this, it is important to strengthen and solidify the Sunni bloc, clarify the Shia position, and prevent the militarization of politics through active PMU leaders running as candidates. Taking these factors into consideration, the United States can help address this issue by partnering with Baghdad to create platforms that are representational of all Iraqis and incorporate elements of decentralization in order to devolve power to local communities.

SUNNIS SCRAMBLE FOR COHESION

After losing their position of power under Saddam, and facing immense destruction in the wake of ISIS, Sunnis have failed to reach a consensus on the best way forward. Without a strong cohesive identity and any readiness to play the political game after years of uncontested rule, Sunnis are now being forced to find their voice and contend with the comparatively stronger Shia platform. As Renad Mansour wrote during the anti-ISIS campaign:

“Distrust of the Shia-dominated central government in Baghdad and fear of Tebran’s influence in Iraq have kept Sunni Arabs from attempting to combat the Islamic State, even though Sunni Arab leaders remain staunchly against the group. They wonder what the use is of spilling blood in battle if ultimately the Shia will come and take over. This zero-sum mentality plagues initiatives to liberate lands under Islamic State occupation.”²¹

Sunni leadership is also hesitant in supporting the Abadi government in Baghdad, because of perceptions of corruption and lack of Sunni representation. On the other hand, without a Shia ally they risk losing political power altogether. Therefore, Sunni politicians are scrambling to engage more fully and create a platform that will keep them viable for the upcoming elections.²²

The elections, however, pose a problem not just for Sunni politicians, but for their constituents as well. The fight against ISIS helped intensify sectarian rhetoric in Iraq and also created a need for massive reconstruction in Sunni

areas, both of which could impact voter turnout. With over 3.1 million Iraqis - mostly Sunnis - displaced from their homes, there is a sense among many that Prime Minister Abadi has abandoned the reconstruction needs of the people, opting instead for closer ties with Shia Iran. With most of the displaced populations living in camps or temporary homes, it remains unclear whether they will have access to voting centers or will even show up to vote.²³ Lacking a history of oppositional politics or a strong identity to bind them, Sunnis remain disenfranchised and abstain from politics, adding to the problems in Iraq.

The road to creating a unified Sunni bloc is also fraught with failure. Because Sunnis have a comparatively small portion of seats in parliament - 78 compared to the Shias' 182 based on population proportions - it is all the more important that Sunnis agree on issues such as reconstruction and how to most effectively position themselves for 2018.²⁴ One example of a successful Sunni bloc was the Iraqiya coalition, which in 2010 was an overwhelming favorite of Sunnis and won the most seats in parliament.²⁵ A largely secular bloc, the Iraqiya coalition was able to attract both Sunni and Shia followers due to its non-sectarian nature and focus on issues that steered away from the sectarian rhetoric dominating politics at the time.²⁶ The Iraqiya coalition set a precedent in Iraq for moderate politics that could strengthen the Sunni position while also appealing to a cross-sectarian audience. Comparatively, the most recent attempt to create Sunni solidarity under the auspices of Turkey, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and the United States ended without consensus on a post-ISIS roadmap for Iraq. It also further divided Sunni leadership as the meeting devolved into in-fighting. Iraqi Shias condemned the meeting altogether for its sectarian exclusivity.²⁷ Without strong leadership and an articulated course, it is likely Sunnis will enter the upcoming elections deeply fragmented and as weak as before.

THE SHIA PLATFORM IS CO-OPTED BY IRAN

The Shia political position, spearheaded by Abadi, is also fragmenting, as the Prime Minister loses support ahead of elections and external actors ramp up support for Shia militia leaders. Several figures have emerged to contest Abadi's position, including former Prime Minister Maliki and cleric-cum-militia leader Muqtada al-Sadr. Although all these candidates are Shia, each commands a different section of Iraqi society and all contribute to the deepening divisions within the Shia community.²⁸

Indeed, ascendance of each leader would have different implications for Iraq and would reveal the fault lines caused by the prevalence of identity politics in the country. The return of Maliki to politics is largely due to his popularity amongst different PMUs and his State of Law Coalition, which is also politically linked to the PMUs.²⁹ The PMUs' involvement in politics

would reduce the divide between the political bureaucracy and the militias, and increase the influence of Iran in Iraq. Institutionalizing militia members into the political system is cause for concern, as fear of election violence could decrease voter turnout. Already, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, backed by Iran and accused of human rights abuses as previously mentioned, has received a license to compete as a political party.³⁰ These candidacies also open Iraqi politics to Iranian coercion, which could provoke sectarian tensions as Iran pursues its own agenda at the expense of Iraqis and reconstruction.

Although historically a sectarian militia leader, Muqtada al-Sadr might be the best antidote for sectarianism within Iraq today. Al-Sadr's widespread appeal stems from the U.S. invasion of Iraq when his militia fought against American occupation. Al-Sadr's Mahdi army, however, also contributed to sectarianism in Iraq as it came into conflict with Sunnis within the insurgency. It provided a model for future Iranian-backed militias that combated ISIS. Transforming himself for the political sphere, he remains popular through the Sadrist movement, which could curb Iranian influence in Iraqi politics, as it creates a strong Shia social base that benefits from the social services the movement provides them. Al-Sadr also has appeal that extends beyond the Shia community and Iraq's borders. He has condemned corruption within the Iraqi government and recently visited Sunni Gulf states in an attempt to bridge the sectarian gap.³¹ While fractures still exist, Al-Sadr's project of reducing the importance of identity as a dividing factor in Iraqi politics is a step in the right direction.

DECENTRALIZATION AS AN END TO POLITICAL SECTARIANISM

At the national level in Baghdad, it is important to emphasize dialogue between and within groups, especially to counter Iranian influence. In his November 2017 speech at the United States Institute of Peace, Vice President Osama Al Nujaiifi stressed the importance of partnership between all groups and coalition building for the sake of Iraq's future. He claimed that one of the immediate dangers to Iraq is the "militarization of Iraqi politics," and that dialogue amongst groups in power can reverse this trend as well as minimize the extent to which Iran can get involved.³² Thus, dialogue is not just a political tool for coming to consensus on issues such as reconstruction, but also has the potential to reverse Iraq's path towards a dangerous future by strengthening ties based on nationalism rather than sectarianism, undermining Iranian influence, and encouraging better cross-sectarian relations.

At the local level, however, given the persistence of PMUs on the ground, the best way to give all Iraqis a voice in politics regardless of identity is to pursue a policy of decentralization. The weakness of the central government, especially after the invasion, has made it difficult to have consistent leadership, political

parties, or effective resource allocation, which allowed ISIS to flourish.³³ The plan for decentralization from Baghdad has been in the works for years. Law 21, which was first introduced in 2008, would give provinces money, security, and autonomy. However, effective decentralization has not happened yet, largely due to slow bureaucracy and a lack of expertise and qualifications to maintain local governments.³⁴

As identity politics still plays a major role in Iraq, both in national politics and in the military, it is important to give cross-sectarian communities, especially via local government, a voice for the future. A decentralization plan that allows local leadership to act as interlocutor between communities and parliament, strengthens decision-making on the ground by province and area, and encourages dialogue at the community level will reduce inter-communal tensions and allow government to be more responsive to all Iraqis.

KIRKUK: THE ECONOMIC COST OF THE KURDISH REFERENDUM

As ISIS stoked sectarian tensions across Iraq, another group was able to assert itself across the north. The Iraqi Kurds, ethnically distinct from Arabs yet largely Sunni, were on the frontlines in the fight against ISIS. When ISIS attempted to take the city of Kirkuk, a historically Kurdish city that underwent “Arabization” under Saddam, Kurdish fighters repelled the threat and took the city for their own. The city, however, was economically important for Baghdad, as the biggest oil fields in Iraq lie in Kirkuk province.³⁵ After reclaiming Kirkuk for its own, Baghdad has continued to quash the Kurds’ dream of autonomy. Taking Kirkuk from the Kurds has had a negative effect on the Kurdish region and, without this large share of the province’s oil wealth, there is little left to support its autonomy. While the Kurdish question is not a sectarian issue, it highlights the ethnic tensions still present in Iraq that could likewise weaken the state’s future and leave it vulnerable to external influence and internal unrest.

AS IRAQ REBUILDS, KURDS DREAM OF INDEPENDENCE

Despite the support for independence among the Kurds, the September 25, 2017 Kurdish referendum failed to generate any positive change, and pushed Baghdad to clamp down on Kurdistan. The Kurdish Regional Government, led by Masoud Barzani, pursued the vote despite significant opposition from both the Iraqi government and the international community.³⁶ Countries with heavy Kurdish populations such as Iran, Turkey, and Syria also strongly opposed the move in fear of similar calls for independence occurring within their own borders.³⁷

The referendum was also largely ineffective and its backfiring had

considerable ramifications for the Kurdish region. Before any votes were cast, internal divisions within the Kurds were set to undermine its success. Kurdish leadership was split on whether a referendum was a good idea, but Barzani, in an apparent bid to consolidate his legitimacy, went ahead with the decision regardless.³⁸ As predicted, Kurds voted overwhelmingly in favor of independence, prompting Baghdad's intervention in Kirkuk. On October 20th, a coalition made up of Iraqi security forces and PMUs overran and took over the city of Kirkuk, without any sustained resistance from the Kurdish Peshmerga fighters.³⁹

The Kurds had taken Kirkuk in 2014, when Iraqi forces had fled the region under attack from ISIS. Taking control of Kirkuk represented an opportunistic moment for the Kurds, as they consider it to be part of a historic and future Kurdistan. The cost of losing the oil-rich city was also too much for Iraq to bear, desperate as it is for additional revenue. Indeed, the cost of post-ISIS reconstruction is enormous. U.N. estimates suggest that Iraq has an immediate humanitarian need of \$985 million, with only \$423.5 million pledged as of July 2017. Furthermore, Iraqi officials estimate reconstruction costs at \$100 billion. The international community remains hesitant to invest in rebuilding given high levels of corruption in Baghdad, so the government has turned to private investors who, although more willing to invest, have not been able to cover the costs in their entirety.⁴⁰ It was important, then, to hold on to every stream of revenue possible and gain command of Kirkuk's oil wealth.

THE DREAM IS SHATTERED: BAGHDAD TAKES KIRKUK

By the end of October, the Iraqi government once again had full control over Kirkuk, a major oil city. The army took over the North Oil Company, the refinery, oil fields, and its air base.⁴¹ Within days, the Iraqi army was able to take 14,000 square kilometers from the Kurds, reclaiming territory that the Kurds had taken during the ISIS years. Kirkuk was simultaneously an economic victory for Baghdad and a significant blow to Erbil. The oil from the city, totaling 8,000 million barrels, with 600,000 a day piped to Turkey, had been a boon for the Kurdish economy.⁴² Without this oil wealth, Kurdistan was significantly crippled and will struggle to manage its finances, another aspect that will help the Iraqi government in strengthening its grip on the Kurdish territory.

Again, Kirkuk has become a theater in which identity politics are at play. In the wake of the military offensive, both Prime Minister Abadi and the Quds Force's General Suleimani were there to claim victory. A veritable melting pot, Kirkuk is an ethnically diverse city with Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmen. The Kurds, however, were in double jeopardy as an ethnically and religiously different group caught in the crosshairs of predominantly Shia Arab forces. As one senior PMU official said in reference to the Kurds, "We were never

going to let a Zionist project like this claim Kirkuk. Kirkuk is central to Iraq's economy and it will never belong to Barzani."⁴³ Although Kirkuk has cultural, political, and economic significance to the Kurds, the need out of Baghdad to gain greater economic means and assert control over the whole of Iraq was a far more important motivator than recognizing the societal tensions between the Kurds and Arabs that could result from military action.

RECONCILING DIFFERENCES AND EMBRACING ALL OF IRAQ

While many believe that an independent Kurdistan would weaken the already fragile Iraqi state, not recognizing the decision-making power of local populations could be equally as damaging. Cities like Kirkuk that are home to diverse populations, continue to struggle in post-ISIS Iraq as identity politics remains a source of tension. Because of the localized nature of these conflicts and the need to address them on the ground, Najmaldin Karim, governor of Kirkuk, devised a solution that could apply to other cities in Kurdish areas. His solution involves giving the city a degree of autonomy for five to ten years, and then asking the population to decide whether to join the Kurdish region or not.⁴⁴ Deferring to local actors' decisions would not only empower Iraqis of all stripes, but would also encourage a process of debate and dialogue on the ground in order to decide their future for themselves.

Political dialogue at the national level between Baghdad and Erbil is also important and, like with the citizens of Kirkuk, both sides should feel like equal partners in determining the country's future. The relationship between the Iraqi and Kurdish capitals is complicated by questions of sovereignty and authority. For his part, Abadi hopes to incorporate the Peshmerga, a group of roughly 300,000 Kurdish fighters, into the Iraqi security apparatus.⁴⁵

Rather than drawing the Kurds closer to the center, another option might be to create a confederate-style state in which the Kurds receive semi-autonomy.⁴⁶ Beneficial to both the Sunni Arabs and the Kurds, this option would let regions operate according to their needs and help stimulate the Iraqi economy as a whole. Allowing areas to organically grow and manage their finances could lead to a far more diversified economy and wean the country off its oil dependency, encouraging privatization and curbing bad practices that have weakened the Iraqi economy in the past.⁴⁷

Ultimately, it is of the utmost importance to generate a sense of Iraqi nationalism that supersedes the boundaries of identity. The Kurdish experience in Iraq is indicative of the multitude of identities at play within the state. Whether navigating ethnic or religious differences, it is important that every Iraqi feels they are part of Iraq and therefore part of its reconstruction. By giving every group an equal seat at the table, every Iraqi will feel invested in making Iraq stronger and less divisive.

CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

At its zenith, ISIS had control over 40% of Iraqi territory and roughly 10 million people.⁴⁸ Although the group has been militarily defeated, it will remain a challenge for Iraq to overcome the detrimental effects identity politics continue to have in the country. The long-term U.S. strategy in Iraq must recognize these factors and encourage solutions that help incorporate all Iraqis into reconstruction and rebuilding.

Militarily, ensuring that non-state actors do not challenge state sovereignty will require a strong and professional military force, especially in the fragile phase of reconstruction. Given the need for stability, Iraq must ensure the readiness, effectiveness, and accountability of its forces. In this process, institutionalization of militias and PMUs as well as creating cross-sectarian solidarity in the military will be necessary, both to maintain sectarian harmony and reduce the influence of Iran. The U.S. can and must support efforts to reconstruct the Iraqi army, as it has done in the past, by providing military assistance, training, and oversight, and preparing Iraqi military commanders for better leadership.

Politically, the United States will need to partner with Baghdad to ensure all Iraqis are included in the upcoming elections and that Iranian influence is diminished. The U.S. should work with Iraq to establish standards for free and fair elections, ease voting procedures for displaced Iraqis, clarify criteria for candidate eligibility, and devise a monitoring plan to decrease the possibility for voter intimidation.

In the long-term, however, all Iraqi citizens must develop confidence that they have a voice in their government and that their leaders diligently represent them. This type of accountability can be achieved through a policy of decentralization: strengthening regional and local governorates and councils to determine the needs of their constituency and help rebuild Iraq in a way that is most beneficial for all. Devolving power can also reduce identity-driven tensions by allowing for representation according to population and a commitment to communities uninfluenced by what pressure external powers might try to exert.

Economically, decentralization or a confederal state structure will also allow regions to specialize and diversify, generating economic growth and development and working towards rebuilding at the local level and on the ground. This is also true of the Kurds, whose drive for independence has been stymied. The U.S., as an ally of the Kurds, should encourage decentralization as a means to support the Kurdish agenda as well as promote economic diversity that can benefit the U.S. as a trading partner and encourage international investment. As displaced Iraqis return home, and continue to do so in the near-

term, they should be encouraged to work within their communities to piece it back together, both in coordination with local government as well as with the oversight and financial support of Baghdad.

The localized nature of these conflicts cannot be overstated, as each community faces its own set of challenges in the wake of decades of unrest. Drawing a line from the fall of Saddam to the rise of ISIS shows a clear trend in the mobilization of identity politics for narrow political, military, and economic ends. As the world turns its attention to the long-term stability of Iraq, it must measure progress by keeping its sights on every citizen and region of the country.

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