IRAQ IN TRANSITION:
Competing Actors and Complicated Politics

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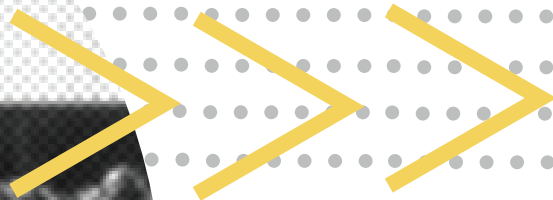
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INTRODUCTION

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Introduction

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The Republic of Iraq has faced considerable challenges after the American-led invasion in 2003 to oust Saddam Hussein, ranging from insurgency to endemic corruption and poor government services. Baghdad has emerged as the epicenter of a broader geopolitical struggle between the United States and Islamic Republic of Iran, two hostile adversaries at odds since the Islamic Revolution toppled the American-friendly Shah in 1979. Amidst these broader challenges, Iraq faced an existential security threat in 2014, after the Islamic State gained strength in Syria, augmented its ranks with foreign fighters, and took control over eastern Syria and parts of western Iraq, including the Iraqi city of Mosul, the country's second largest city. The war to defeat this group was brutal and fraught, with the Iraqi military bearing the brunt of the casualties fighting for control over densely populated urban areas and vast expanses of desert terrain. The fighting consumed Iraqi affairs for years, blunted the sharp tensions that underpin U.S.-Iran relations, and focused military efforts on the defeat of a common enemy.

In the year since the defeat of the Islamic State, the American role in Iraq has become less clear. The United States has undertaken an aggressive policy, dubbed "Maximum Pressure," to economically coerce the Iranian government to make a series of concessions, including limits on the development of ballistic missiles and foreign policy changes. This effort included the American withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the multi-national agreement that placed considerable limits on Iran's nuclear program and instituted an expansive inspection regime to verify the terms of the deal in exchange for Iran receiving American and European sanctions relief. The Trump administration's decision to reimpose sanctions severely complicated the arrangement, depriving Iran of the reward for its compliance and setting in motion a series of Iranian steps to try to coerce Europe to continue to uphold trade with the Islamic Republic. The United States, however, has threatened to sanction European entities should they not comply with American policy.

The tensions over sanctions have had a deleterious effect on stability in Iraq and the Middle East, more broadly. The Iranian government has gradually increased its efforts to impose a cost on the United States for using sanctions to end its export of oil, beginning with a series of attacks on oil tankers near the Strait of Hormuz, escalating to include missile strikes on important oil centers in Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq and Khurais, and then a shooting down an American surveillance drone. In response to rocket attacks inside Iraq, the United States has struck Iraqi militia's linked to Iran and, in January 2020, assassinated Major General Qasem Soleimani, the now-deceased leader of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp. (IRGC), and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, an Iranian-linked actor that oversaw Iraqi militias sympathetic to the Islamic Republic. In retaliation, the Iranian military fired a salvo of ballistic missiles at bases in Iraq, striking targets with precision, but luckily resulting in no American deaths. The strikes still resulted in over one hundred cases of traumatic brain injury in the soldiers at the targeted bases. The tit-for-tat underscores Iran's appetite for risk, particularly at time when its economy is under siege from U.S. actions.

Inside Iraq, the government has sought to remain neutral, balancing its vital relationship with Washington against its equally important relationship with Tehran. The Iraqi government is also facing a series of internal challenges: incessant protests about corruption as well as post-conflict challenges following the war against the Islamic State. To analyze the future of Iraqi politics, the Foreign Policy Research Institute has gathered five authors to analyze competing political actors and the issues affecting different constituencies and regions. Each chapter includes a series of policy recommendations for governments to consider as they try to assess Iraq's political landscape. The first chapter, co-authored by **Benedict Robin-D'Cruz** and **Renad Mansour**, evaluates Iraq's Sadrist movement and why, despite Shi'i cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's prominence in Iraqi politics, the group remains one of the most complex and frequently misunderstood movements in Iraq. The second chapter, by **Pishko Shamsi**, focuses on the Kurdistan Regional Government, the competing political actors, and how a failed independence referendum after the defeat of the Islamic State upended the region and prompted a re-evaluation of relations with Baghdad. The third chapter, by **Inna Rudolf**, assesses the Popular Mobilization Forces, with a focus on Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the militia leader killed alongside Qasem Soleimani in January 2020 in an American drone strike outside of the Baghdad airport. The fourth chapter, by **Ramzy Mardini**, examines Iraq's Sunni population and how they are coping with the tragedies faced during the illegitimate reign of the Islamic State and the challenges that they now face after the group's defeat. And the final chapter, by **Kirk Sowell**, explores Iraqi domestic politics, particularly how key political actors interact with the government in Baghdad and how sectarianism influences politics, and what that may portend in the near future.

This edited volume is intended to look beyond the U.S.-Iran competition in the country and explore the drivers of Iraqi politics to provide needed context for policymakers and practitioners studying the country. It was made possible by support from GPD Charitable Trust, an organization working to build partnerships that lead to a more peaceful, prosperous, and stable world, and in collaboration with the DT Institute.

MAKING SENSE OF THE SADRISTS: FRAGMENTATION AND UNSTABLE POLITICS

Benedict Robin-D'Cruz & Renad Mansour

FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE | MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM

Making Sense of the Sadrists: Fragmentation and Unstable Politics

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Abstract

Iraq's Sadrist movement, led by populist Shi'i cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, has been at the heart of Iraqi politics since 2003. The movement's political strategies have shifted dramatically during this time, encompassing militant insurgency, sectarian violence, electoral politics, and reform-oriented street protests. Consequently, despite their prominence, the Sadrists' shifting positions mean they remain one of the most complex and frequently misunderstood movements in Iraq. This is further compounded by the near total absence of engagement between the Sadrists and Western, particularly American, governments. As Sadr has changed his movement's politics again, this time toward a counter-protest stance, U.S. policymakers are once more grappling with the dilemmas posed by a movement that is both powerful and obscure.

Explaining Instability on Sadrist Politics

Iraq's Sadrist movement, led by populist Shi'i cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, has been at the heart of Iraqi politics since 2003. Its political strategies have shifted dramatically during this time, encompassing militant insurgency, sectarian violence, electoral politics, and reform-oriented street protests. Consequently, despite its prominence, the Sadrists' shifting positions mean it remains one of most complex and frequently misunderstood movements in Iraq. This is further compounded by the near total absence of engagement between the Sadrists and Western, particularly American, governments. As Sadr has shifted his movement's politics once more, this time toward a counter-protest stance, U.S. policymakers are once more grappling with the dilemmas posed by a movement that is both powerful and obscure.

Iraqi politics have been destabilized by the U.S. drone strike that killed Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani and de facto leader of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF, al-Hashd al-Sha'bi) Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. The strike also created a leadership vacuum for the country's Iranian-aligned Shi'i paramilitaries. Stepping into this space, Sadr is trying exploit the new situation to reclaim a powerful political role in Iraq. His strategy is to smother and extinguish Iraq's anti-establishment protests (which have been marked by anti-Iranian and anti-PMF sentiments) and to pressure former paramilitary rivals to coalesce around his Sadrist movement as the new central pillar of Iran's IRGC network in Iraq.

This strategy appears to contradict earlier stances taken by Sadr from 2015, which saw his movement cooperating with demonstrators and with secularist parties in a major protest movement.[1] These protests challenged Iraq's political elites, the PMF, and Iran's role in sustaining their grip on power. Even in the early phases of the October 2019 Revolution, Sadrists were active in the demonstrations, and Sadrist paramilitaries defended other protesters from the violence of state and Iranian-aligned parastatal forces. By contrast, Sadr's more recent stances have forced a reassessment of earlier hopes that his movement could play a role in advancing much-needed political reform and in pushing back against Iranian influence in Iraq. U.S. policymakers now are grappling with how to respond to the Sadrists, whose combination of raw power and unpredictable political behavior presents a perplexing and dangerous dilemma.

In fact, since 2015, Iraq's protest movements and the PMF[2] have become the two most powerful, but mutually antagonistic,[3] forces struggling not only for control of the Iraqi state, but also over competing concepts of statehood, national

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1 For context, see, Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, "Social Brokers and Leftist–Sadrist Cooperation in Iraq's Reform Protest Movement: Beyond Instrumental Action," *The International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* vol. 51, no. 2 (May 2019), pp. 257-280; and Faleh A. Jabar, "The Iraqi Protest Movement: From Identity Politics to Issue Politics," London School of Economics Middle East Centre, June 22, 2018, https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/88294/1/Faleh_Iraqi%20Protest%20Movement_Published_English.pdf.

2 Renad Mansour and Faleh Abdul Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future," Carnegie Middle East Center, April 27, 2017, https://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810; and Nancy Ezzeddine, Matthias Sulz, and Erwin van Veen, "The Hashd is dead, long live the Hashd! Fragmentation and consolidation," Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, July 2019, https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2019-07/the-hashd-is-dead-long-live-the-hashd.pdf.

3 On confrontations between protesters and PMF, see, Renad Mansour and Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, "The Basra Blueprint and the Future of Protest in Iraq," Chatham House, October 8, 2019, https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/basra-blueprint-and-future-protest-iraq; and Renad Mansour, "Iraq's New Republic of Fear: How Youthful Protests Provoked an Authoritarian Turn," *Foreign Affairs,* November 20, 2019. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2019-11-20/iraqs-new-republic-fear.

mythologies, narratives of martyrdom, and the fundamental categories of Iraqi political identity.[4] They also diverge in their orientations towards the American and Iranian roles in Iraqi politics.[5] The Soleimani-Muhandis assassination has further exacerbated this divide. While protesters voice their desire to extricate Iraq from U.S.-Iranian conflict, the PMF has prioritized what it calls "defense" of the resistance axis and vengeance for the killing of two of its revered military leaders. These groups, along with much of the Shi'i Islamist elite, are now prioritizing the removal of U.S. forces from Iraq. Yet this priority has only furthered their alienation from the younger generation of protesters, who regard such moves as a distraction from their priorities: employment; better services; and individual and collective dignity.[6]

The Sadrists have been uniquely located as a movement that straddles these increasingly important domains—protest politics and Shi'i paramilitarism. This alignment has given Sadr access to a greater diversity of political resources than many other Iraqi leaders. It has been Sadr's deft deployment of these resources that explains his intermittent success in carving out an important role in Iraqi politics. However, this aspect of the movement has contributed to its fragmentation, making a coherent Sadrist politic more difficult to fashion. In this sense, the Sadrists' main strength (diversity of resources) and weakness (lack of internal cohesion) are inexorably bound together.

This fragmentation has long historical roots, stretching back to the organizational structure of the movement's pre-2003 social base. Fragmentary dynamics also played a central role in the movement's decline from the height of its strength during the civil war (circa. 2006) to the splintering of its paramilitaries and Sadr's

political isolation and retreat to Qom by 2009.[7] However, from 2015, fragmentation in the Sadrist movement has reemerged and grown as conflict between the protest movement and the PMF has intensified. Nor are these dynamics contained to the Sadrists' fissiparous paramilitary wing—normally the focus of analyses—but are also visible in broader sections of the movement.

This chapter aims to make sense of the Sadrist movement since its reemergence as a major force in Iraqi politics from 2015. It argues that instability in Sadrist politics results from the movement's organizational fragmentation and, relatedly, Sadr's own reluctance and inability to be tied down to a concrete political vision or programme. This fragmentation not only impedes command and control over the movement, but also gives rise to various Sadrist factions with competing interests and distinct visions for the movement's place within Iraqi politics and society. The ties that bind the movement's core leadership to a younger generation of poor Iraqi Shi'a—who constitute its social base—are also under strain. As the Sadrist movement fragments, its political behavior becomes more unstable. Sadr's inconstancy and the violent Sadrist attacks on protesters mean that he has burned his bridges with former allies in Iraq's protest movement. However, he will struggle to maintain consistent relations with former rivals in the PMF. His accommodation with Iran entails a loss of autonomy. Yet, Iran will not regard Sadr as a reliable partner, but as merely a short-term fix to the post-Muhandis vacuum. Consequently, while today Sadr again looms large over Iraqi politics, it could be that his latest maneuvers will entail his long-term decline as an independent force. The remainder of this introduction provides an overview of the Sadrist movement, delineating its basic features and the historical roots of Sadrist

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4 Renad Mansour, "Iraq After the Fall of ISIS: The Struggle for the State," Chatham House, April 4, 2017, https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/iraq-after-fall-isis-struggle-state; and Fanar Haddad, "Understanding Iraq's Hashd al-Sha'bi," The Century Foundation, March 5, 2018, https://tcf.org/content/report/understanding-iraqs-hashd-al-shabi/?agreed=1.

5 These different orientations do not break down into pro-U.S. versus pro-Iranian camps. The protest movement seeks to position itself as rejecting both U.S. and Iranian interference. However, it is also far more critical of Iranian influence in Iraqi politics than those factions aligned with the PMF.

6 The Soleimani/Muhandis assassination has not galvanized Iraqi Shi'a behind an anti-U.S. politics nor re-sectarianized Iraqi politics. Rather, it produced a consolidation of the Shi'i Islamist bloc at the level of elite politics, while driving a further wedge between this elite and many ordinary Iraqi Shi'a.

7 Marisa Cochrane, "The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement," Institute for the Study of War, 2009, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Iraq%20Report%2012%20Sadrist%20Movement%20Fragmentation.pdf

fragmentation. It then surveys the Sadrists' shifting positions in Iraqi politics and how these have been variously interpreted by analysts and policymakers. Since many existing analyses have explored the rise and fall of the movement between 2003-2010,[8] the focus here is on the more recent period, 2015-2020, when the Sadrists reemerged. The introduction closes by drawing together these strands into a conceptual account of organizational fragmentation and how this destabilizes Sadrist politics.

The remainder of the chapter then applies this interpretive framework to the Sadrists by addressing three key facets of the movement. The first deals with Sadr and his leadership role, covering his political orientations and particularly his relationship with Iran. The second and third sections look beyond Sadr to broader components of the movement and unpack their involvement in popular protest politics and Shi'i paramilitarism. The chapter concludes with recommendations that show how this understanding of the Sadrists as a fragmenting movement can help policymakers to grapple with the dilemmas posed by its unpredictable behavior.

Who are the Sadrists?

Prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the importance of the Sadrists was initially overlooked by both Iraqi exile groups and those planning the Anglo-American war. However, during the 1990s, the movement, led by Sadr's father, Ayatollah Muhammad Sadeq al-Sadr (Sadr II), grew rapidly on the social terrain of Iraq's rural and urban Shi'a poor. These were communities deeply affected by years of war and sanctions. While Iraq's other Islamist movements had shifted their activities abroad, the Sadr II movement remained in Iraq. It became a powerful religious phenomenon, a millenarian movement promising spiritual salvation while also addressing the more this-worldly concerns of Iraqi Shi'a: dignity for those doubly marginalized on the basis of class and sectarian identity; and easement of material hardships through charitable works and social services.

The Sadr II movement transformed Iraq's Shi'i religious field into a site of rival leadership and loyalty to Saddam's Ba'thist state. It became the only significant internal opposition after the 1991 Intifada.[9] In taking on this role, Sadr II—never considered a credible religious authority by leading clerics in Najaf or Qom[10]—came to acquire a more unorthodox, but no less potent, status. He was a revered, even messianic, leader whose authority was characterized less by traditional markers of religious scholarship, and more by his proximity to ordinary Iraqis and his sharing in their suffering and ways of life. To his followers, Sadr II was the "White Lion," a reference to his white beard and courage in refusing to bow to Saddam Hussein. His assassination by the regime in 1999 elevated Sadeq al-Sadr to a level of exalted martyrdom that the even the Shi'i *ulema* in Najaf and Qom were forced to acknowledge and pay lip service to.

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8 "Iraq's Muqtada Al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabilizer?" International Crisis Group, July 11, 2006; Marisa Cochrane, "The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement," Institute for the Study of War, 2009; and Nicholas Krohley, *The Death of the Mehdi Army: The Rise, Fall, and Revival of Iraq's Most Powerful Militia* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2015).

9 Much debate surrounds the extent to which a formal or informal agreement between Sadr II and the Ba'th regime explains the former's rise to a dominant religious position in Iraq. If such an agreement did exist, then it had certainly broken down by the time of the Sadr II assassination. For those claim some form of agreement existed, see, Phebe Marr, *The Modern History of Iraq* (Philadelphia: Westview Press, 2012), p. 249; Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada: Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia Revival and the Struggle for Iraq* (London: Scribner, 2008), p. 79; "Iraq's Muqtada Al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?" International Crisis Group, July 11, 2006, p. 3; Amatzia Baram, "Sadr the Father, Sadr the Son, the 'Revolution in Shi'ism,' and the Struggle for Power in the Hawzah of Najaf" in *Iraq Between Occupations*, eds. R. Zeidel, A. Baram, and Achim Rohde eds. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 144; and for a counter view, see, Abbas Kadhim, "The Hawza Under Siege: A Study in the Ba'th Party Archives," *IISBU Occasional Paper 1* (June 2013).

10 In fact, in 1998, when Sadeq al-Sadr sent representatives to Qom with a view to building networks and establishing offices there, they were widely rejected by the Iranian clerical elite. This included Ayatollah Kazem Husseini al-Ha'iri, who expelled Sadr's representative, Abu Saif al-Waili, from his house and accused him of working for Ba'thist intelligence agencies, (ironic given that al-Ha'iri would later become—for a time—a *marja'* of the Sadr movement). See, Rashid al-Khayoun, *al-Islam al-Siyyasi fi-l-'Iraq* (United Arab Emirates: al-Mesbar, 2012), p. 383.

Supporters of Sadr's alliance in Liberation Square, Baghdad, celebrating after a successful election campaign in 2018 (Zoheir Seidanloo/Wikimedia Commons)

However, following his assassination, leadership of the Sadrist movement quickly fragmented and its already minor role in Iraq's exile opposition politics further diminished.[11] This compounded the Sadrists' insulation from broader transformations in Islamist politics during the 1990s, when ideological "moderation" and engagement in cross-ideological cooperation was noted in groups like Da'wa and the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (SCIRI).[12] Da'wa, in particular, had also developed into a more professional political group, acquiring systematic political ideas and a clearer division of labor between clerical and lay-political authority.[13] By contrast, the Sadr II phenomenon remained a clerical movement par excellence. To the degree that it sought political power, it was by subsuming politics under religious-clerical leadership. This was articulated by Sadr as an Iraqi version *wilayet al-faqih,* but without a fully developed notion of an Islamic state.

In fact, the Sadrists had little interest or use for formal politics (there was no space for contesting formal politics in Ba'thist Iraq) since the movement was focused primarily not on seizing the Iraqi state, but on wrestling control of Iraq's Shi'i religious establishment from its more traditional leadership, represented at the time by the *marja'iyya* of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. This struggle was intra-clerical—over Iraq's Shi'i religious institutions and resources and the foundations of religious authority. A politics of anti-imperialism (targeting America and Israel in particular) and social justice and equality were also prominent features of the Sadrists' ideological makeup. However, these appeared more as themes and motifs than as programmatic or systematic political ideas.

Post-2003, Sadr continued his father's anti-imperialist and social justice rhetoric and

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11 For more, see, Ali Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace,* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 61. The perspective of American war planners was largely shaped by these exile opposition groups.

12 These ideological changes were partly driven by the requirements of cooperation with non-Islamist groups in exile politics, and involvement with Western governments. During this period, according to Ali Allawi, Daʿwa, which was designated a terrorist group by the State Department in 1985, gradually shifted from a revolutionary to a "more acceptable social democratic party, with Islamic roots," while SCIRI, too, "began to accept the pragmatist imperative in its dealings with the west." Allawi, *The Occupation,* p. 74.

13 Laurence Louër, *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf* (London: Hurst & Co., 2008), p. 265.

set his sights—particularly between 2003-2004—on seizing control of the Najafi *hawza*.[14] However, Sadr's movement has diverged from its predecessor in several important ways. It participated in electoral politics from 2005 and competed with other political groups for control of the post-2003 Iraqi state. Today, Sadr oversees the largest bloc of Iraqi parliamentarians and controls many senior administrative positions within various ministries. The Sadrists have also mobilized one of Iraq's largest paramilitary groups (Jaysh al-Mahdi, rebranded Saraya al-Salam in 2014).

Yet, despite these diverse activities, the core of the movement, its most senior leaders and advisors, is populated by religious-clerical networks, many of whom constituted the nucleus of the Sadr II movement prior to the invasion.[15] Thus, while there are important continuities between the pre- and post-2003 Sadrist movements, they are not one and the same. Rather, post-2003, the Sadr II clerical networks and organizational base were repurposed by Sadr and his allies for militant insurgency and later, professional politics. Consequently, the movement's point of origin in the 1990s contains the roots of its post-2003 fragmentations.

The Roots of Sadrist Fragmentation

The Sadrist movement was built out of Sadr II's pre-2003 organizational and symbolic base constituted by clerical networks whose financial assets and authority were linked to their contestation of Iraq's Shi'i religious spaces. Control of these institutions and resources allowed the Sadr II movement to expand and penetrate deeper into local communities via the provision

of legal and social services. This base was a powerful one for social mobilization, helping the Sadrists to become a formidable force shaping Iraq's post-2003 politics. However, it contained the roots of the movement's fragmentation.

The organizational base—a network of religious and administrative institutions adopted and created by Sadeq al-Sadr and which later became known as the Office of Martyr al-Sadr (OMS)—spanned urban and rural divides and integrated with existing patterns of local social organization (e.g., rural-tribal structures). This rootedness in local contexts meant the movement was only weakly integrated hierarchically. Moreover, Ba'thist repression of the Sadrist movement during the 1990s targeted the networks of *wukala'* (agents or representatives) who played a key role in the transference and distribution of movement resources (including religious taxes and duties). One consequence of this repression was a further decentralization and informalization of the OMS network and its resources (i.e., these were collected and distributed locally, often by trusted *hawza* students).

A further factor for fragmentation related to the movement's clerical form of authority. This was generated and transferred primarily via informal-interpersonal relationships (proximity to Sadeq al-Sadr), not via institutionalized or formal rule-bound processes.[16] It was an inherently unstable process since status within the movement and access to movement resources were not anchored in a persistent institutional framework, but relied on fluid relationships that could be downgraded or terminated suddenly. This also made the question of succession following Sadeq al-Sadr's death a matter of intense intra-clerical competition. No formal rules determined leadership, and multiple clerics with close ties to Sadr II, religious standing reflecting their levels

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14 The Battle of Najaf and militant insurgency launched by the Sadrists, ostensibly against the U.S. occupation, was a war for control of the physical institutional apparatus of the Shi'i religious field. Sistani was forced to draw in tribal forces to repel Sadrist attacks. Ultimately, it was U.S. military power to secure a demilitarization of the Shi'i religious field and thus implicitly underwrote Sistani's dominance of the field.

15 Examples include: Mustafa al-Ya'cubi; Ahmad Shaibani; Mohammed al-Ya'cubi; Muhammad Tabataba'i; Riyad al-Nouri; Qais al-Khaza'li; Jabar al-Khafaji; Walid al-Kuraymawi; and Asa'd al-Nasiri, amongst others.

16 The importance of informal-interpersonal social ties in the transmission of clerical authority has been explored in other contexts. See, Elvire Corboz, *Guardians of Shi'ism: Sacred Authority and Transnational Family Network* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 44-45.

of *hawza* training, and their own social bases of support could stake a leadership claim.

These features of the pre-2003 Sadrist movement made it extremely adaptable for rapid mobilization following the Anglo-American invasion in 2003. Perhaps most crucial, its local embeddedness and its symbolic legitimacy owing to the movement's unique status as the main domestic opposition to the Ba'thist regime were resources lacked by the Sadrists' competitors—the exiled political groups that returned to Iraq after the U.S.-led invasion.

However, the leadership vacuum that followed Sadr II's assassination only intensified when the Ba'thist regime collapsed. The campaign to seize control of the movement was immediately and fiercely contested within its clerical stratum by various actors with their own religious authority and, crucially, personal ties to Sadeq al-Sadr.[17] Muqtada al-Sadr was never able to fully stamp his authority on the broader constellation of Sadrist trends. His movement continued the pattern of strong local organization, but weak hierarchic and institutional integration. Jaysh al-Mahdi—mobilized through the organizational framework of the OMS—thus came to reflect the same fragmentary pattern of powerful local control at street or neighborhood level, but weak central authority.

In the early post-invasion years, the Sadrists deployed their diverse resources (political, economic, coercive, and symbolic) to cement a powerful political role. The movement achieved this by acting as both spoiler (working outside the system through militancy and street politics) and stabilizer (participating in formal politics and the intra-elite pacts that anchored the political system). Nevertheless, fragmentation of the movement, particularly within its paramilitary wing, led to a series of crises that culminated in Sadr's temporary withdrawal from politics and suspension of his movement's paramilitary activities between 2008-2009. At this stage, the movement's political power was reduced, and it began an internal restructuring.

The Evolution of the Sadrist Movement 2015-2020

The 2015-2020 period saw a revitalization of the Sadrist movement as a political force. This was based partly on Sadr's success developing new relations with previously hostile societal and political groups. These bridge-building efforts can be traced back to 2010, but they only began to bear fruit from 2015.[18] At this stage, the Sadrists began openly cooperating with secularist groups involved in Iraq's 2015-2016 mass protest movement. This eventually developed into the 2018 electoral alliance, Sairoun lil-Islah (Marching Toward Reform), that went on to win the May 2018 national elections. However, the Sadrists did not abandon their engagement in other domains, whether formal politics, the administrative state, or the Shi'i paramilitary sphere. The contradictions inherent in these engagements led to various contrasting interpretations of what all this meant for Sadrist politics.

Sadrist involvement in the 2015-2016 protests, and in the Sairoun alliance, *appeared* to signify an important shift away from previously dominant forms of Islamist and identity-based politics.[19] Not only did the Sadrists break away politically from the sect-based Shi'i Islamist alliance,[20] but, within the context of the protest movement, the Sadrists also abandoned Shi'i Islamist and Sadrist symbols. Sadr, for instance, forbade his followers to raise images of either himself or Sadeq al-Sadr

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17 This included more senior clerics, such as Iraq-based Ayatollah Muhammad al-Ya'cubi (who was nominally head of Sadeq al-Sadr's Private Office in Najaf post-2003, but soon split with Muqtada al-Sadr to form the Islamic Virtue Party, or al-Fadhila); Iran-based Ayatollah Kazem al-Hairi; and more junior clerics within the Sadrist trend, such as Sheikh Qais al-Kha'zali and Sheikh Muhammad Tabataba'i.

18 Robin-D'Cruz, "Social Brokers"; and Benedict Robin-D'Cruz. "The Cultural Antecedents of the Leftist-Sadrist Alliance," POMEPS Religion, Violence and the State in Iraq, October 2019, pp. 75-89.

19 Faleh 'Abd al-Jabar described the protests as representing a shift "from identity politics to issue politics." See, Faleh A. Jabar, "The Iraqi Protest Movement: From Identity Politics to Issue Politics," LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series, June 22, 2018, https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/88294/1/Faleh_Iraqi%20Protest%20Movement_Published_English.pdf.

20 The National Iraqi Alliance (NIA)/The United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) first formed as an umbrella for Iraq's Shi'i Islamist movement to jointly contest the 2005 elections.

during protests.[21] Instead, the Sadrists adopted the more 'moderate' and universalistic politics of their newfound secular allies.

This focused on calls for ending the *muḥāṣaṣa ṭā'fiyya,* the informal sectarian quota system by which Iraq's political factions divide control over the Iraqi state and which protesters blamed for cementing corruption and sectarianism in Iraq's political system.[22] The movement also called for building *"al-dawla al-madaniyya"* (the civil state) and for a technocratic government committed to anti-corruption and improving Iraq's economy. Sadr even stated during a television interview: "I'll say this despite the *'amāma* [turban] on my head, we tried the Islamists and they failed miserably, it's time to try independent technocrats."[23]

On the surface, this seemed a radical reorientation for an Islamist movement previously known for its sectarian violence (particularly during the peak of the civil war between 2006-2008), messianic Shi'i religiosity, and puritanical social conservatism. The Century Foundation's Thanassis Cambanis wrote, "Sadr's political makeover amounts to a groundbreaking and encouraging transformation," which "sets an example for [those] interested in exiting the confining boxes of sectarianism and patronage and mobilizing

broader, more fluid and inclusive idea- or policy-based movements."[24] Cambanis also stated that Sadr had abandoned Islamism and fully embraced secularism,[25] and had mobilised his followers behind calls for the creation of a "civil, secular state."[26] Mehiyar Kathem, in a piece for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, echoed this interpretation, stating that Sadr himself was "championing . . . secular-oriented politics."[27] These analyses were accompanied by a shift in media narratives and policy debates towards viewing Sadr and his movement as "aligned with Western attempts to reign in Iranian influence," and even as "anti-Iranian."[28]

However, for other observers, the new Sadrist politics was merely further evidence of the movement's unpredictable and erratic nature, often attributed to Sadr's personal characteristics. He is sometimes portrayed as a skilled, power politics player, a "Machiavellian" operator who "fine tunes" his movement's political strategies to maximize his own power.[29] Alternatively, focus is frequently placed on Sadr's supposed mental instability and immaturity (or that of his followers), which is thought to render the movement's political behavior unpredictable. In this view, Sadr "lurches haphazardly to and fro, and his movements might as well be described as policy

21 Robin-D'Cruz, "Social Brokers."

22 For a discussion of the *muḥāṣaṣa ṭā'fiyya,* see, Toby Dodge, "Tracing the Rise of Sectarianism in Iraq after 2003," memo presented at The Comparative Politics of Sub-state Identity in the Middle East LSE MEC workshop, June 29, 2018, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/09/13/tracing-the-rise-of-sectarianism-in-iraq-after-2003/; and on its transition from a sectarian to a party-based logic, see, Fanar Haddad, "The Waning Relevance of the Sunni-Shia Divide," The Century Foundation, April 10, 2019, https://tcf.org/content/report/waning-relevance-sunni-shia-divide/?agreed=1.

23 Muqtada al-Sadr, November 21, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3c7WAefoUw0&feature=youtu.be.

24 Thanassis Cambanis, "Can Militant Cleric Moqtada al-Sadr Reform Iraq?" *The Century Foundation,* May 1, 2018, https://tcf.org/content/report/can-militant-cleric-moqtada-al-sadr-reform-iraq/.

25 Thanassis Cambanis, "Social Engineering in Samarra An Iraqi Shia Militia Experiments with Nationalism in a Sunni City," *The Century Foundation,* May 2, 2019, p. 1, https://production-tcf.imgix.net/app/uploads/2019/04/30131807/Cambanis_Samarra_FinalPDF.pdf.

26 Cambanis, "Can Militant Cleric Moqtada al-Sadr Reform Iraq?," p. 6.

27 Mehiyar Kathem, "Iraq's New Statesman," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*,* May 3, 2018, https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/05/03/iraq-s-new-statesman-pub-76244.

28 Michael D. Sullivan, "I Fought Against Muqtada al-Sadr. Now He's Iraq's Best Hope," *Foreign Policy,* June 18, 2018, https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/06/18/i-fought-against-muqtada-al-sadr-now-hes-iraqs-best-hope/.

29 Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada: Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia Revival, and the Struggle for Iraq* (New York: Scribner, 2008), p. 127; "Iraq's Muqtada Al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?" International Crisis Group, July 11, 2006, p. 24; and Michael Weiss, "Moqtada al-Sadr, the Donald Trump of Iraq," *Daily Beast*, April 13, 2017, https://www.thedailybeast.com/moqtada-al-sadr-the-donald-trump-of-iraq.

by divination."[30] These interpretations led some analysts to question Sadr's true intentions, and to cast doubt on his reliability as a partner in a reform-oriented project or as a vehicle for pushing back against Iranian influence.[31]

In reality, Sadrist politics are less stable and coherent than notions of "moderation" or a "groundbreaking transformation" would suggest. Nor does Sadr exert the sort of absolutist top-down control over the movement that the Machiavellian image of "fine tuning" denotes. However, the focus on psychology-oriented factors to explain the movement's incoherent and unstable politics has tended to obscure the important role of organizational fragmentation in shaping and constraining Sadr's behavior. The contradictions inherent in the Sadrists' post-2015 entanglements, i.e., broader contextual factors, have further exacerbated these fragmentary dynamics. Consequently, the Sadrists' victory in the 2018 parliamentary elections was not the first step toward a more coherent, programmatic, and reformist Sadrist politics, as some have argued.[32] Rather, it proved merely a staging post for further degeneration into a politic that is more chaotic and multi-directional.

A Conceptual Account of Fragmentation and Unstable Politics

An explanation of Sadrist politics should be rooted primarily in organizational and institutional factors, and not exclusively in analysis of Sadr and his intellectual and psychological characteristics. It is the effects of these organizational factors on the movement's ideological orientations, political interests and command and control mechanisms that best explain instability in Sadrist political behavior.[33] Three key features of the Sadrist movement are of central importance in this context:

1. The movement's **social embeddedness in local communities** means its resources and control processes are often bottom-up and resistant to vertical integration. This social embeddedness is rooted in the pre-2003 social base, which functioned as the organizational framework for the Sadrist movement following the 2003 invasion, including for the mobilization of Jaysh al-Mahdi. The result was multiple nodes of power anchored in local contexts, such as a Jaysh al-Mahdi commander who exerted control over a city street or neighborhood. Consequently, Sadr has consistently faced challenges from below and struggles to impose control and uniformity on local leaders emerging from these distinct bases.

30 Nibras Kazimi, "Iraq: What was that all about?" *Talisman Gate,* May 10, 2016, https://talisman-gate.com/2016/05/10/iraq-what-was-that-all-about/; Elijah J. Magnier, "Moqtada al-Sadr and Iran: A Long Love-Hate Relationship," *Middle East Politics,* September 15, 2019. This view of Muqtada's mental instability is widely held by his detractors. For example, during his interrogation by the Central Intelligence Agency, Qais al-Khaz'ali stated that "the core problem" with the Sadr movement was that "Muqtada himself is not stable, he is constantly changing his mind and this reflects on his followers. . . . This mind changing creates too much waste, obstacles, and hardships because you do not understand his right, clear thinking in order to dialogue or converse with him." "Qayis al-Khazali Papers: Tactical Interrogation Reports (TIR)," Report no: 200243-007, *Homeland Security Digital Library*, p. 17.

31 For examples of this skepticism from different sides of the political divide, see, Phillip Smyth, "Beware of Muqtada al-Sadr," The Washington Institute, October 19, 2016; https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/beware-of-muqtada-al-sadr; and, from the opposing political perspective, see, Elijah J. Magnier, "Moqtada al-Sadr and Iran: A Long Love-Hate Relationship," The Centre for Research on Globalization, September 15, 2019, https://www.globalresearch.ca/moqtada-al-sadr-iran-love-hate-relationship/5689495.

32 Thanassis Cambanis, "Can Militant Cleric Moqtada al-Sadr Reform Iraq?" *The Century Foundation,* May 1, 2018, https://tcf.org/content/report/can-militant-cleric-moqtada-al-sadr-reform-iraq/.

33 This explanatory framework draws on social institutional theory developed by literature dealing with the effectiveness of insurgent groups. See, Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (London: Cornell University Press, 2014).

Jaish al-Mahdi army military parade, Najaf,Iraq, 2014. (Demotix/Ahmad Mousa)

2. **Weak horizontal integration** further limits central control and fragments ideological coherence across the movement. This lack of integration applies both *between* and *within* different movement factions. Consequently, different factions acquire distinct interests and political perspectives that are not necessarily shared with other parts of the movement (e.g., paramilitary versus professional politics or clerical factions). Moreover, even *within* these distinct factions, the absence of horizontal integration can allow for diverse local interests to flourish at the expense of faction-wide coherence (e.g., Sadrist paramilitary commanders whose interests and perspectives may be highly parochial and resistant to integration into a more unified paramilitary organization with a coherent ideology).

3. Central control and ideological coherence are further limited by the Sadrist movement's **lack of hierarchic integration via institutional structures**. This issue relates to the movement's informal and highly personalized mode of authority, which primarily governs access to movement resources. Sadr's authority has also been repeatedly contested from within the movement's clerical elite by actors with their own personal ties to Sadeq al-Sadr. In all such cases, the underlying operation of authority remains personalized. Formal institutions—which would otherwise generate central

control, organizational stability, continuity and homogenizing integration—are secondary and often ad hoc. They fill-in for specific collective action problems that the movement cannot solve through its primary informal practices.

Taken together, these features produce a movement whose resources and forms of control are locally situated, whereas central discipline is weak. Sadr's leadership often consists in broker-type practices within, and between, heterogenous factions pursing different, and sometimes contradictory strategies and politics. To reveal how these features of the movement play out, the remainder of this chapter explores the diverse strategies of different Sadrist actors and groups who have contested the movement's politics. It will discuss the politics of Sadr himself as "the man in the middle" who mediates between these competing factions. It will then look beyond Sadr to other groups within the Sadrist movement and unpack two important spheres of action that have shaped their politics: first, Iraq's protest politics; and second, the PMF and Sadrist paramilitaries.

The Man in the Middle:
The Politics of Muqtada Al-Sadr

Current analyses of Muqtada al-Sadr's ideology and politics are not sufficient to explain the political behavior of the Sadrist movement partly because Sadr does not possess or seek to articulate a coherent and systematic political ideology. However, and perhaps more importantly, because organizational fragmentation prevents the emergence or imposition of a coherent politics by its leader. Nevertheless, Sadr is indisputably the most powerful single actor in the movement, and clarifying the contours of his political thinking, ideological influences, and the nature and limitations of his leadership role are the essential starting point for analysis of the broader movement.

Muqtada al-Sadr's Political Ideology

Sadr's ideology has typically been understood as a form of Shi'i Islamism structured around three poles. First, the religious-political authority of the *marja'iyya* of Ayatollah Sadeq al-Sadr (some have claimed Sadr, like his father, therefore supports the doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih* and ultimately seeks the status of *wali amr al-muslimin* in Iraq).[34] Second, anti-American/anti-imperialist politics infused with social justice tropes (this has Shi'i religious-Qur'anic roots as well as those linked to a more modern leftist-Islamist syncretism). And third, an Iraqi or Arab ethno-nationalism and a Shi'i-centric sectarian politics.

These characteristics are best understood not as coherent, stable core features, but as highly situational and often rhetorical. For instance, Sadr's anti-Iranianism, and his Arab ethno-nationalism, relate to intra-clerical struggle with the non-Iraqi or non-Arab *ulema* of the Najafi *hawza*. Consequently, its centrality in Sadrist politics has waxed and waned, in part, according to the fluctuating status of relations between Sadr and Sistani.[35] Similarly, anti-Iranian or Iraqi nationalist rhetoric has not stopped the Sadr from developing extensive ties with Iran, particularly via the latter's IRGC networks.[36]

Sadr's support for the doctrine of *wilayet al-faqih* is also ambiguous. It is reasonable to think that Sadr continues to embrace his father's stance on this crucial question. However, Sadr II's interpretation of *wilayet al-faqih* did not contain a fleshed-out theory of an Islamic State. This reflected the conditions in which Sadr II and his movement operated in 1990s Iraq, i.e. one in which contestation of the Iraqi state was not a viable avenue for political mobilization. Consequently, in contrast to Khomeini, the state itself was not present in a substantive way in the Iraqi ayatollah's thinking on religious leadership.[37] In 2013, Sadr himself stated that he was a follower of *wilaya ammah*.[38] This has been interpreted as expressing support for a maximalist interpretation of clerical leadership in politics. However, this too may be misleading, since *wilaya ammah* covers a wide variety of interpretations as to the range of prerogatives that the Shi'i *ulema* can take

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34 Amatzia Baram 'Sadr the Father, Sadr the Son, the "Revolution in Shiʿism," and the Struggle for Power in the Hawzah of Najaf' in *Iraq Between Occupations,* eds. R. Zeidel, A. Baram, and Achim Rohde (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 149.

35 Consequently, the nationalism of the Sadrist movement, particularly in the early post-2003 phase—during which its contestation of the Shi'i religious field was most intense—took a particular form of Arab ethno-nationalism (distinct from the form of nationalist politics the movement practiced from 2015).

36 Contrary to what has been claimed by Cockburn and others, that the Sadrist-IRGC relationship only began after the Battle of Najaf in 2004, it seems that it actually started almost immediately after the fall of the regime in 2003 and expanded after the Battle of Najaf.

37 See Sadr II's most important work, Ma Wara al-Fiqh.

38 Muqtada al-Sadr, interview on al-Hurra TV, 13 December, 2013.

over from the Imam (whose line of succession had ended).[39] The more maximalist position – represented by the Islamic Republic of Iran – is typically referred to as *wialya ammah mutlaqa* (i.e. absolute guardianship), which Sadr did not explicitly endorse. It is plausible that Sadr's statement regarding *wilaya ammah* was intended to be interpreted by Iraqis in the maximalist sense. However, this it is not definitive proof. Nor does it indicate Sadr's adherence to the model of *wilayet al-faqih* practiced in Iran since, like his father, Sadr does not possess such a coherent and systematic notion of an Islamic state.

From 2015, analysts, such as Thanassis Cambanis, Mehiyar Kathem, and Michael D. Sullivan argued that Sadr had undergone an ideological transformation, embracing political secularism and abandoning austere Islamism and identity politics for more issue-based politics. The evidence for this was his engagement in pro-reform protests and coalition politics with secular-leftist groups. However, arguments that Sadr has fully embraced political secularism,[40] the creation of a secular state,[41] or is championing a secular-oriented politics[42] are misleading. These narratives mischaracterize Sadr's politics on these specific issues and do not account for how Sadr's political behavior is not tied to any systematic ideological framework.[43] In reality, Sadr's own statements and actions reveal a more ambiguous picture regarding his political views, particularly on secularism and the civil state.

The view that Sadr has embraced political secularism and is seeking the creation of a secular state in Iraq, appears to be rooted in a conflation of two terms in Arabic with overlapping but not coterminous meanings: '*ilmaniyya* (secularism) and *madanī/al-dawla al-madaniyya* (civil/the civil state). These differences are significant since "civil state" has a broader and more ambiguous range of meanings than secularism, and has been adopted by a range of Islamist actors.[44] For some of these individuals and groups, the conceptual language of a "civil state" has cashed out in concrete terms as little more than a distinction between a civilian and military form of government.[45] In short, while "secularism" denotes a more-or-less coherent political doctrine, "civil state" frequently functions as a strategic discourse whose utility for a diverse range of ideological actors lies primarily in its ambiguity. It would be misleading, therefore, to regard Sadr's apparent endorsement of a civil state as expressing his support for political secularism.

Moreover, Sadr was initially resistant to the "civil state" language that was the ideological centerpiece of the 2015-2016 protests and subsequent Sairoun electoral coalition. In mid-2017, the two sides privately discussed substituting "civil state" with a "citizenship state" (*dawlat al-muwāṭana*), which Sadr felt had weaker secularist connotations. One senior political operative involved in these discussions told the authors at the time: "Sadr told us that talk of a civil trend, or a civil state, provokes the Islamists and creates opposition and distortion, so we say 'a citizenship state.' Sadr tells us 'we and you are national forces, a national and Islamic current, not civil [*madanī*] but national [*waṭanī*].'"[46]

39 See entry 'Wakālah al-ʿĀmmah,' in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World, http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0839?_hi=12&_pos=1* .

40 Cambanis, "Social Engineering in Samarra," p. 1.

41 Cambanis, "Can Militant Cleric Moqtada al-Sadr Reform Iraq?" p. 8.

42 Kathem, "Iraq's New Statesman."

43 Patrick Cockburn, for example, has argued, "The Sadrists had always been antisectarian and Iraqi nationalists . . . [and the] Sadrist movement was historical anti-Iranian." Cockburn, *Muqtada,* p. 167.

44 This includes the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the *marja'iyya* in Iraq. See, Annette Ranko & Justyna Nedza, "Crossing the Ideological Divide? Egypt's Salafists and the Muslim Brotherhood after the Arab Spring," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2016): p. 521; and Mark Farha, "Arab Secularism's Assisted Suicide A Brief History of Arab Political Discourse on Religion and the State," *The Century Foundation,* April 25, 2019, https://tcf.org/content/report/arab-secularisms-assisted-suicide/.

45 Farha, "Arab Secularism."

46 Interview conducted by authors in Iraq, August 6, 2017. The issue of secularism, and its relation to the country's leftist politics, is particularly charged in Iraqi political discourse owing partly to the infamous anti-communist fatwas issues in 1960 by Najaf-based Ayatollah Mushin al-Hakim, which forbade membership of the Iraqi Communist Party and charged the latter with atheism.

Nor was this ambivalence in Sadr's political thinking vis-à-vis secular and *madanī* politics merely a tactical matter. In part, such a portrayal would miss Sadr's reluctance to articulate, or be held accountable to, a concrete political vision of any sort. Clues pointing to this reluctance, but also to a persistent ideological divergence between Sadr and Iraq's secularists, can be gleaned from the guidance that Sadr provided to his followers. These are Sadr's responses to questions from ordinary Sadrists during the period of the secular-Sadrist convergence.[47]

Here, Sadr consistently refused to be drawn into giving definitive statements of his political ideology. Rather, he claims that politics is for the Iraqi people to decide and, by extension, not for clerics to impose. For instance, one question asks: "Are you a supporter of a pluralistic Islamic state which secures the rights of all Iraqis?" Sadr responds:

> *I am not an advocate of an Islamic state or any other type of state. I call for the political path to be in the hands of the people, and what the people decide should be the path that Iraq follows.[48]*

Similarly, another follower asks: "Should the Iraqi constitution be based on the noble Qur'an, or on positive [secular] law, and what is the position of the Sadrist line [al-khaṭ al-ṣadrī][49] on these two possibilities?" Sadr responds:

> *In truth, I absolve myself of this matter. I do not intervene in this question, whether it should be Islamic or non-Islamic. Personally, I prefer the Islamic, but it remains for the Iraqi people to decide the constitution.[50]*

This reluctance to "intervene" in questions of political ideology may seem strange given Sadr's active role in Iraqi politics. However, this political engagement should not obscure the fact that Sadr is both a religious and political actor. In other words, Sadr does not seek to predicate his own authority and legitimacy primarily on political terms, but to carefully calibrate an appearance of distance from politics. This approximates to a "supervisory" role, or, as Sadr himself frequently describes it, a "paternalistic" (*abawiyya*) relationship between clerical leadership and politics.[51]

On the question of the civil state, Sadr has given more a more detailed response. Thus, a follower asks: "There is wide circulation in Najaf for adopting the concept of a civil state. What do you understand by this concept, and the role of religion within a civil state?" Sadr's response reveals his reluctance to adopt the terminology of a civil state, preferring a "citizenship state," but also his broader opposition to secularism:

> *The civil state [al-dawla al-madaniyya] or, more properly, the citizenship state [dawlat al-muwāṭana] is one that gives everybody a single identity regardless of religion, sect or ethnicity. However, the point of dispute arises from the claim that this is not achieved unless secularism ['ilmaniyya] is followed by taking religion out of politics. [By contrast,] I say that this cannot be applied except through the Islamization of society and its culture on a fundamental level, and the organization of true Islam and the spirit of justice and equality through tolerance and genuine brotherhood.[52]*

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47 This is a religious practice—Istifta'—and therefore carries more weight than political rhetoric. It does not, however, seek to lay out a systematic political ideology. Sadr's responses to questions on the civil trend-Sadrist convergence have been collected in a single volume, see, al-Sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr, *Hiwar al-Tayyar al-Dini (al-Islami) ma' al-Tayyar al-Madani* (Najaf: The Institute for the Heritage of the Martyr al-Sadr, 2015).

48 al-Sadr, *Hiwar al-Tayyar,* p. 10.

49 Sadrists sometimes describe their movement using the phrase *al-khaṭ al-ṣadrī* (the Sadrist line) as opposed to *al-tayyār al-ṣadrī* (the Sadrist trend). The former emphasizes its religious-genealogical character.

50 al-Sadr, *Hiwar al-Tayyar,* p. 11.

51 Here Muqtada models himself on the Najafi *marja'iyya*.

52 al-Sadr, *Hiwar al-Tayyar,* pp. 40-41.

Secularism, therefore, is rejected in favor of a unity arrived at via the Islamization of society from below. This is a standard clerical position that seeks, again, to distance religion from politics by focusing on non-political aspects of Islamist activism. In this view, secularism is kept off the table, since in a fully Islamized society, the question of political secularism will not arise.

The Sairoun alliance eventually deployed the language of both a "civil state" and a "citizenship state," suggesting a shift in Sadr's orientation toward the former between 2015 and 2018 (when Sairoun was first launched).[53] However, this shift should not be over-interpreted. In Sairoun's manifesto, the "civil state" was couched primarily in terms that allude to questions of sovereignty, national independence, strong state institutions and security. More contentious issues around the role of religion in state and society were assiduously avoided.[54]

This points to the potential strategic utility of the "civil state" language for Sadr in the particular context of his movement's competition with Iranian-backed elements of the PMF.[55] In this view, the language of a civil state functions as a useful means of differentiation by which Sadr seeks to delegitimize these rivals and position himself as the defender of the sovereignty and integrity of the Iraqi state, particularly its security apparatus. Consequently, its wider ideological implications vis-à-vis Sadr's perspective on secularism may be limited.

Muqtada al-Sadr and Iran

Sadr has frequently been described as "anti-Iranian."[56] However, while Sadr has often challenged Iranian interests in Iraq, this relationship is not a zero-sum conflict, nor does it reflect Sadr's consistent application of an Iraqi nationalist ideology. Rather, Sadr is engaged in multiple competitive arenas (e.g., religious, paramilitary, political), each of which structures the dynamics of his cooperation and conflict with Iran in distinct ways. Consequently, Sadr's orientation toward Iran is ambiguous and frequently confounds analyses that want to place him in a pro- or anti-Iran box. Boxing Sadr in this way is largely unhelpful to understanding how the relationship between the Sadrist movement and Iranian religious, political, and military actors varies according to context.

In the religious sphere, the basis of Sadr's own authority and his ideological center of gravity remains the *marja'iyya* of Sadeq al-Sadr. At times, this has implicated Sadr in similar dynamics of intra-religious struggle as those practiced by his father. This applies to both Najaf and the Iranian clerical establishment based in Qom. Today, however, Sadrist competition with the Najaf-based *marja'iyya* has largely dissipated, as Sadr has, for now, accepted a subordinate status in the religious sphere. One of his political advisors told the authors that Sadr tends to discuss his political moves (typically through indirect channels, but sometimes directly) with Sistani and seeks to ensure alignment and harmony between them.[57]

The irremovable commitment to the *marja'iyya* of Sadeq al-Sadr remains a limiting factor on Iranian ideological penetration of the Sadrist movement as a whole. One implication is that Iran is not likely to regard the Sadrists as dependable partners since their integration with the IRGC cannot progress as far along the ideological axis as other Iraqi Shi'i paramilitary groups. This explains Iran's preference with splintering Sadrist paramilitaries

53 Sairoun launched under a banner reading: "For building a civil state [*al-dawla al-madaniyya*] . . . a state of citizenship [*dawlat al-muwāṭana*] and social justice." Sairoun launch event, January 15, 2018.

54 A full translation of Sairoun's manifesto can be found in appendixes of Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, "The Leftist-Sadrist Alliance; Social Movements and Strategic Politics in Iraq" (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2019), pp. 300-304.

55 Renad Mansour, "Iraq Votes 2018: Electoral Mobilization Strategies," Institute for Regional and International Studies, May 18, 2018, http://auis.edu.krd/iris/sites/default/files/IraqVotes2018_MobilizationStrategies1.pdf.

56 Michael D. Sullivan, "I Fought Against Muqtada al-Sadr. Now He's Iraq's Best Hope," *Foreign Policy,* June 18, 2018, https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/06/18/i-fought-against-muqtada-al-sadr-now-hes-iraqs-best-hope/; and Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada: Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia Revival, and the Struggle for Iraq* (New York: Scribner, 2008), pp. 166-167.

57 Interview conducted by the authors with senior Sadr political advisor, November 15, 2019.

Following the assassination of Soleimani and Muhandis in January 2020, Sadr saw an opportunity to revive his political fortunes by seizing a more central role within the resistance axis. The removal of Muhandis, in particular, threw the Shi'i Islamist paramilitary sphere open to greater contestation. Sadr saw an opportunity to step into this space as his best hope of securing a new political role for himself that aligns more closely and consistently with Iranian interests.

Muqtada al-Sadr & Qusim Soleimani in Tehran, September 2019. (Wikimedia Commons)

and subordinating them to a broader military structure that falls under Iranian ideological as well as operational control (i.e., the PMF under Muhandis).

Nevertheless, it is the paramilitary dimension of the Sadrist movement that has proven the most conducive to Iranian influence. Here, the imperatives of paramilitary mobilization and collective military action have allowed for deeper penetration of Sadrist networks by the IRGC and its Iraqi allies.[58] It is not surprising, therefore, that current fragmentary dynamics in the Sadrist movement are emerging around some of its clerical leadership, who are more committed to the protest movement, and its paramilitary leadership, who are more closely linked to Iran and embedded in the IRGC's paramilitary networks in Iraq.[59] Iranian leverage over Sadr thus correlates with the varying centrality of violence and coercion within Sadr's strategies.

Politically, Sadr has consistently probed the limits of his autonomy from Iran and, until quite recently, has been the most powerful Iraqi political actor challenging Iranian interests in Iraq.[60] However, particularly since the Sadrists' electoral victory in May 2018, Iran has sought to rein in Sadr's disruptive politics. The explosion of a mosque in Sadr City in June 2018—where Saraya al-Salam was said to have stored munitions—killing 20 and wounding over 90, came during a critical period of negotiations between Sairoun and Fatah over government formation. Although reported as an accident, Sadr likely interpreted the incident as a punishment or a threat from the IRGC.

Iran has used Sadr's presence in Lebanon and Iran to exert greater pressure and influence over him and to isolate Sadr from "negative influences" (secular activists and politicians who had close relations with Sadr from 2015). Sadr's aides insist that he is resident in Iran for religious training in Qom and to spend time with family (Sadr's surviving brother, Murtada al-Sadr, resides permanently in Iran).[61] However, Sadr had become increasingly concerned for his own survival in the face of threats emanating from Sadrist splinters and other paramilitaries within the IRGC's Iraq-based networks whose power has grown considerably in recent years.[62]

A drone strike on Sadr's home in Najaf in early December 2019 was only one particularly visible manifestation of these threats.[63] One important narrative that circulated in Iraq was that Sadr had bowed to Iranian pressure to step aside and not obstruct the violent crackdown on protesters by the Iraqi government and IRGC-linked paramilitaries. When questioned about these theories, one senior Sadrist refused to directly link specific threats to Sadr's residence in Iran, but did confirm that Sadr has consistently been subject to dangers of this sort.[64] Thus, despite victory in May's elections, Sadr found himself in a defensive posture, his political role diminished as he appeared to retreat to the periphery once more.

However, following the assassination of Soleimani and Muhandis in January 2020, Sadr saw an opportunity to revive his political fortunes by seizing a more central role within the resistance

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58 For a full discussion of these actors and networks, see, Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, "The Leftist-Sadrist Alliance: Social Movements & Strategic Politics in Iraq," (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2019), chp. 3.

59 For example, see, discussion bellow on dispute between Sadrist cleric Sheikh Asa'd al-Nasiri and Saraya al-Salam Commander in Chief Kazem al-Issawi (AKA Abu Do'a al-Issawi).

60 Although Sadr cooperated with Hadi al-'Ameri's Iran-backed Fatah Alliance in the 2018 government formation process, he resisted Iranian plans vis-à-vis particular ministerial appointments (e.g., Minister of Interior), and conflicted with Prime Minister 'Adil 'Abd al-Mahdi and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis over the formation of a Hashd air force in September 2019. Iraq analyst Kirk H. Sowell has argued: "For all of the negatives that can rightly be said about them, Sadr's bloc has been the most steadfast force against Iran-backed militias' creeping effort build a permanent militia sub-state." Nevertheless, this resistance to Iranian interests and allies in Iraq occurs within fluid but powerful limits explored in this chapter.

61 Based on multiple conversations with senior Sadrists in late 2019 and early 2020.

62 The recent growth in strength of these different formations has been detailed most closely by Michael Knights. See, Michael Knights, "Iraq's Expanding Militia Army," *CTC Sentinel*, August 2019.

63 "Drone attack targets Iraqi cleric's home following deadly attack on protesters," *France 24,* December 7, 2019, https://www.france24. com/en/20191207-drone-attack-targets-iraqi-cleric-s-home-following-deadly-attack-on-protesters.

64 Interview conducted by the authors with senior Sadr political advisor, November 15, 2019.

axis. The removal of Muhandis, in particular, threw the Shi'i Islamist paramilitary sphere open to greater contestation. Sadr saw an opportunity to step into this space as his best hope of securing a new political role for himself that aligns more closely and consistently with Iranian interests. The Soleimani-Muhandis assassination may have convinced Sadr that he is also on a U.S. hitlist, pushing him further into Iranian arms.[65] Sadrist social media frequently cites the threat of a U.S. drone strike on Sadr as justification for his residence in Iran. Sadr's leverage with Iran depends largely on the demonstrative effect of his ability to mobilize and de-mobilize protesters. In other words, for Sadr, the protest movement became a bargaining chip, which he seeks to trade with Iran to shore up his future position in what he expects to be Iran-dominated Iraqi politics.

The reality of Sadr's attempt to reach a new accommodation with Iran became visible as his rhetoric towards the protest movement became more critical. Sadr warned of the protesters' "intransigence," criticized their messaging vis-à-vis the religious authorities, and rebuked their "deviation" from the "correct path."[66] Equally significant, on January 13, 2020, Sadr was pictured at a meeting in Iran with important PMF commanders: Abu Wala al-Walai (Kata'ib Sayyid Al-Shuhada); Laith al-Khaza'li (Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq); Akram al-Ka'bi (Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba); and Abu Dua Al Issawi (Saray al-Salam). This meeting generated controversy given that most protesters blame these PMF factions for much of the violence directed at the protest movement.[67] Following this meeting, a pattern of tit-for-tat violence between Saraya al-Salam and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq—ongoing since the start of protests in October—came to a halt.

In late January 2020, Sadr attempted to withdraw his followers from the protest movement. By early February, he was using Sadrist paramilitaries—the so-called "Blue Helmets"—to violently seize control of protest spaces (including the famous Turkish Restaurant in Baghdad's Tahrir Square). Following public outrage over this anti-protest violence, and particularly an incident in Najaf that left seven killed and scores wounded, Sadr announced a demobilization of the Blue Helmets. However, this has been a demobilization in name only, with Sadrist paramilitaries removing their distinctive hats, but remaining in the streets. Saraya al-Salam now controls access to the deserted Turkish Restaurant, the symbol of Iraq's October Revolution.[68] Sadr was never a revolutionary, but from the perspective of broad sections of Iraq's protest movement—many of whom had always doubted Sadr's authenticity as a reformer—he had now definitively become a counter-revolutionary actor.

The Sadrist defense of Sadr's behavior towards the protest movement hones in on five main issues. First, they argue that removing the U.S. presence in Iraq is a necessary first step to curtailing Iranian influence in Iraqi politics since it is the U.S. presence that provides the pretext for Iran's own involvement. Second, provocative U.S. actions and rhetoric (especially the assassination of Soleimani and Muhandis) have pushed the Sadrists into closer alignment with Iran. Third, they argue the protest movement itself is too fragmented and has failed to come up with plausible candidates for prime minister. As one senior Sadrist told the authors, "Many will regret the wasted time and blood of the protests." Fourth, they argue elements of the protest movement have been infiltrated, or are being manipulated, by political entities, including those beholden to the United States and the Gulf countries. And finally, they claim Sadr is still supporting the core demands of the protesters, including their calls for electoral reform and early elections.[69]

This moment is a transformative one for Sadr, who is now defying the popular sentiments driving

65 This message is likely being fed to Sadr during his residence in Qom.

66 This appeared to be based on hoax materials created to discredit the protest movement. See, Salih Muhammad al-Iraqi, Twitter, January 9, 2020.

67 Renad Mansour and Benedict Robin-D'Cruz, "The Basra Blueprint and the Future of Protest in Iraq," Chatham House, October 8, 2019.

68 This is based on conversations between the authors and several protesters who regularly attend Tahrir Square.

69 This is based on multiple conversations and interviews with various middle-ranking and senior Sadrists between January 27, 2020 and February 3, 2020.

January 2020 protests in Baghdad. (Kariot/Wikimedia Commons)

protests across central and southern Iraq. The sense of betrayal among former allies and friends of the Sadrists is palpable. One senior activist involved in cooperation with the Sadrists wrote that, no matter what moves Sadr makes next, the cleric has "terminated all partnership with the protesters," and "shattered the framework for cooperation."[70] A line has thus been crossed that Sadr cannot reverse; he will not be able to recover what he has now lost. At the same time, Iran and its Iraq-based paramilitaries, also, do not see Sadr as a dependable ally, and will look to isolate and side-line the cleric when the opportunity arises. There are also important sections of the Sadrist movement that are disappointed and dismayed by Sadr's reorientation. In seeking to exploit a crisis for short-term gain, Sadr risks a return to political isolation and may well have sealed his fate—in the long term—as a declining force in Iraqi politics.

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70 Renad Mansour and Benedict Robin-D'Cruz. "After Latest Turn, is Muqtada al-Sadr Losing Influence in Iraq?" Chatham House, February 12, 2020.

PROTEST POLITICS AND THE SADRIST MOVEMENT

Sadr's positions vis-à-vis protest politics in Iraq since 2015 have been shaped and constrained, at least in part, by the distinct perspectives and orientations of sections of the Sadrist movement who have become more deeply involved in this form of politics, but also elements who have resisted engagement with secularist groups. Consequently, this section looks beyond Sadr to these broader parts of the movement, addressing its base (meaning ordinary rank-and-file members), the clerical elite, and Sadrist intellectuals and cultural activists. It will also draw into the analysis the role of secular activists and political figures who engaged with the Sadr movement from 2015.

A key difference between the 2015-2016 protests and those starting in October 2019 has been the comparative absence of these secular intellectual and political elites from prominent leadership roles. From 2015, these "civil elites" exerted considerable effort in influencing Sadr personally and in building an organizational and programmatic framework for cooperation with the Sadrist movement.[71] Their underlying strategic aim was to drive a wedge between the Shi'i Islamist elite and prevent that elite deploying its coercive apparatus to crush political resistance. They also sought to direct and shape the cultural and political perspectives of ordinary Sadrists in a way that would make the movement less dangerous and more capable of playing a constructive role in Iraqi politics. This was a high-stakes political gamble, and while the first part of the wager has ended in failure, the effects of the second less tangible strand to the strategy have yet to fully play out.

The Followers of Muqtada al-Sadr

Both scholarly and media analyses frequently claim that Sadr controls his movement's base and can call it into the streets, or out of the streets, at will.[72] However, in 2015, the dynamic was different, with many ordinary Sadrists joining the protests before any direct instruction from the movement's leader. This should not be surprising given the socio-economic profile of Sadr's followers (mainly from economically marginalized urban and rural poor in Baghdad and southern Iraq). However, this spontaneous mobilization created a dilemma for Sadr. One source close to Sadr, and prominent in the organization of the 2015-2016 protests, told the authors:

> *When the protests started, the demands were for electricity and services and this affected the Sadrists too, perhaps more than others, so they came to the first protests. Sadr thought that he had lost his base, or part of his base, and saw that the civil trend was providing an alternative leadership, so he had to take a step.*[73]

In this way, the movement's social base, mobilizing spontaneously around bread-and-butter issues, has been able to exert a seldom-acknowledged capacity for upward pressure on its leadership.

This dynamic was seen again in Iraq's October 2019 protests when ordinary Sadrists in Basra, Maysan, Dhi Qar, Baghdad, and other locations

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71 Robin-D'Cruz, "Social Brokers and Leftist-Sadrist Cooperation"; and Jabar, "The Iraqi Protest Movement."

72 A typical example of this in media analyses appeared in *France 24*'s coverage of Iraq's October 2019 protests: "The onetime militiaman has earned himself a cult-like following in Iraq which he can mobilise with a single tweet to crown -- or bring down -- a government." See, "Iraq's Moqtada Sadr: cleric and kingmaker," *France 24,* October 30, 2019, https://www.france24.com/en/20191030-iraq-s-moqtada-sadr-cleric-and-kingmaker. Jabar writes, "Mass participation by the Sadrist movement in the protests in Baghdad followed Muqtada al-Sadr's instruction." Jabar, "The Iraqi Protest Movement," p. 22.

73 Interview conducted by the authors with senior political figure, Erbil, Iraq, on August 6, 2017.

Sadrist participation in the protests, despite the absence of formal organizational structures for cooperation, led to forms of solidarity and mutual identification between ordinary Sadrist protesters and other social groups in the broader protest movement

October 2019 protests in Baghdad (Wikimedia Commons)

mobilized spontaneously without orders from above.[74] Although rarely mentioned in media accounts, as many as half the tents and a significant number of the protesters occupying Tahrir Square since October have been Sadrists.[75] Sadrists to whom the authors spoke highlighted the commitment of the movement's ordinary members (and paramilitaries) to the protest movement. One, for example, stated:

The Sadrists have been active participants in the protests, and we have given many martyrs and injured [protesters]. Sadrists have given the most support to the protesters in terms of food, drink, medicines, and have played a fundamental role in protection of the protests as happened at Sinak Bridge and Khilani Square[76] when they defended protesters from the armed groups who intervened to kill and break up the demonstrations.[77]

Thus, Sadrist participation in the protests, despite the absence of formal organizational structures for cooperation, led to forms of solidarity and mutual identification between ordinary Sadrist protesters and other social groups in the broader protest movement.[78] These features can be traced back to deeper Sadrist involvement in protest politics alongside other social groups from 2015.

Gareth Browne, a journalist who spoke to demonstrators in Tahrir Square following Sadr's apparent withdrawal of support for the protests, encountered a shift in the attitudes amongst some of the Sadrists present. He told the authors:

Several Sadrists said they would stay in the squares rather than withdraw as Muqtada had told them. Among them, there was a sense of betrayal; even usually loyal Sadrists seemed to be concerned that Muqtada was leaving some of the most vulnerable at great risk by withdrawal from the protests. In some cases, I saw individuals begging their fellow Sadrists to return or stay in Tahrir Square. They made a very conscious and passionate decision to go against Muqtada, in many instances for the first time.[79]

In other words, the Sadrist base has become more firmly anchored in popular protest politics, leaving Sadr himself torn between his need to retain credibility and influence with his base, and the demands of other elite actors and Iran that he assists in reasserting and stabilizing the political system and Iran's dominant role therein.

Consequently, Sadr's ability to reorient the movement's base has proven to be limited. In mid-January, he attempted to shift its protest politics into coherent alignment with the PMF and resistance axis. This manifested in the so-called "million-man march" focused on forcing a U.S. troop withdrawal.[80] However, turnout at the march, while significant, was not as high as expected and was not sustained for more than a few hours. This was despite massive quasi-official logistical support. This reorientation has also involved a Sadr's revival of a more conservative Islamist politics, including criticism of protesters for their alleged consumption of alcohol and Sadr's demand of gender segregation at

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74 There is little evidence that this group was mobilised around support for the civil trend or its particular symbolic politics, as opposed to more bread-and-butter issues. Rather, the civil trend controlled the protest space and thus able to impose on it a particular ideological footprint.

75 Based on conversations between the authors and Iraqis who have visited Tahrir Square or participated in protests there since October 2019.

76 These are references to instances where the Sadrists' so-called "Blue Helmets" (discussed below), apparently intervened to protect protesters from armed groups seeking to kill and injure protesters and break up their demonstrations.

77 Interview with Sadrist contact on condition of anonymity anonymous, February 10, 20202.

78 Gareth Browne, Twitter, January 25, 2020, https://twitter.com/BrowneGareth/status/1221146154848661510?s=20.

79 Based on discussion between the authors and Gareth Browne, January 30, 2020.

80 Although well-attended, the million-man march was a one-off, staged event that benefitted from quasi-official state support and logistical resources (buses transported protesters from southern cities to Baghdad). It is, therefore, difficult to compare this mobilization with the October 2019 protest movement, which has been sustained for many months in the face of extreme violence from the Iraqi state and its paramilitaries.

demonstrations (widely mocked by protesters).

A significant portion of ordinary Sadrists (anecdotal estimates put the figure around twenty percent) have remained engaged in the October protest movement, with the Sadrist withdrawals occurring primarily in Baghdad. Thus, one Sadrist told the authors at the end of January:

> *Some Sadrists withdrew, especially those providing logistical support, food and drink in Tahrir Square [more linked to Sadrist paramilitary organization]. This was after many demonstrators abused Sayyid Muqtada al-Sadr. However, most of the withdrawals occurred in Baghdad, but in the other provinces, the withdrawals were very few.[81]*

At the time, conversations between the authors and those involved in protest organization suggested at least some sections of the protest movement were seeking for ways to reintegrate the departed Sadrists. They indicated that negotiations were taking place to find a face-saving means by which Sadr could reverse his withdrawal.[82] For this purpose, a delegation of senior figures from Iraq's civil elites attempted to make contact with Sadr in Qom, but without success (pointing to a breakdown in their communication channels).[83] In any case, Sadr's more aggressive anti-protest actions in early February made such efforts largely redundant.

Sadr's attempt to reorient his base away from solidarity with the broader protest movement and bread-and-butter issues towards a more conservative Islamist politics with axis of resistance themes risks weakening the ties that bind him to ordinary Sadrists. In particular, the young generation of Iraqi Shi'a in Sadrist strongholds like Sadr City relate less to Sadr's claims to divine authority. For them, his appeal has been rooted more in their perception that Sadr has stood in solidarity with a more this-worldly struggle for dignity and an improvement in their quality of life.

A glimpse of this generational cultural shift can perhaps be seen in the recent popular trend among adolescent males in Sadr City for expressive forms of flamboyant dress, hairstyles, makeup, and dancing, earning them the nickname *al-atwani* (after the wedding photographer Zuhair al-Atwani who has documented their exploits).[84] While not necessarily an indication of receding religiosity and secularization, the *atwani* certainly provide a contrasting image to the usual Sadrist stereotype. They appear to resonate less with an austere Islamic conservatism. Sadr's recent actions show his intuitive feel for the cultural and political currents moving his base—and particularly its youngest elements—may be deserting him.

The Sadrist Clerical Elite

The second Sadrist group that supported the Sadrist movement's engagement in protest politics and cooperation with secular-leftist forces from 2015 has been a small but influential number of senior Sadrist clerics. Some of these clerics were Sadr's advisors and confidants at the time, e.g., Sheikhs Saleh al-Obeidi, Muhammad al-Aboudi, Karim al-Manfi, and Sadeq al-Hasnawi. One senior political operative who played a key role in negotiating between the Sadrist movement and Iraq's civil elites told the authors about the crucial role this group of clerics played:

> *There is a section amongst the clerical leadership who believe that reform is a religious and national duty, a humane duty, and they are very convinced by Muqtada al-Sadr and claimed that 'Muqtada al-Sadr precedes us in analysis by around a year or two years.' I only came to recognise this due to friendships that emerged between*

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81 Interview conducted by the authors with a member of Sadrist movement on condition of anonymity, January 29, 2020.

82 Interview conducted by the authors with senior civil trend organizer on condition of anonymity, January 25, 2020.

83 Interview conducted by authors with senior Sadrist on condition of anonymity, February 3, 2020.

84 Examples can be viewed on Zuhair's Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/zahiraleutwanii/.

us, not just with Muqtada al-Sadr, but with several leaders amongst those to close him. These people could obtain benefits from the system, be members of parliament or ministers, but they distance themselves from such worldly things. They have a sort of satisfaction with a Sufi religious asceticism, they are genuine revolutionaries and they want genuine reform. To be frank, I was shocked by the positions and actions of some of these people, such as [Sheikh] Salah al-Obeidi, for he was truly convinced by the words of Muqtada al-Sadr and the reform project.[85]

This small network of senior Sadrist clerics is distinguished by their personal proximity to Sadr. This grants them greater autonomy vis-à-vis the incentives and constraints, which these other domains (e.g., political or paramilitary) impose on different strata of the Sadrist movement.[86] However, their status within the movement is highly dependent on their personal relationship to Sadr, thus challenging his decisions publicly carries great risks.

Nevertheless, the October 2019 protests precipitated intra-clerical divisions. Thus, the authority of Sadr's attempt to withdraw the movement's base from the protest movement in late January came into dispute. Some Sadrist clerics have made recourse to a religious ruling from Sadeq al-Sadr in which the ayatollah gave his followers permission to disavow any order he might give to abandon their oppositionist activities vis-à-vis the Ba'thist regime. The intention of this ruling was to circumvent a situation in which the Ba'th might coerce Sadeq al-Sadr into issuing an order for disengagement. The argument being made by some Sadrist clerics is that Sadr has been coerced by Iranian pressure into calling for a disengagement from the protests, and thus Sadeq al-Sadr's ruling can justify their refusal of this call. The mainstream of the Sadrist movement strenuously rejects this interpretation.[87]

One such case appears to be that of Sheikh Asa'd al-Nasiri, a prominent Sadrist cleric and formerly *khaṭīb al-jumu'a* at al-Kufa Mosque. Nasiri caused controversy when he expressed solidarity with protesters in Dhi Qar province and his rejection of Iran's involvement in repressing the popular protests, stating: "The threats of Iranian soldiers do not scare me, no one will be able to silence me except death!"[88] He also stated that he "does not belong to any religious or political faction," indicating a split with Sadr because of the latter's failure to fully support the protest movement. Nasiri camped out in Nasiriyah's main protest site in al-Habobi Square, where violent confrontations between protesters and PMF factions have been particularly intense.

Nasiri's case is instructive, capturing all the dimensions of organizational fragmentation outlined in the introduction. First, Nasiri has his own local social base in Nasiriyah, and is prioritizing solidarity with this base over his status within the broader movement. Second, he can challenge Sadr, in part, by drawing on his own independent sources of authority. These are premised on his personal ties to Sadeq al-Sadr (he was a prominent pupil of Sadeq al-Sadr pre-2003). This has deeper roots than the present context. Sadrist contacts told the authors that Nasiri's conflicts with Sadr date back to his role post-2003 in the intra-clerical struggle for control of the OMS network between Sadr and Sheikh Muhammad al-Ya'cubqi (who split from Sadr to form al-Fadhila). Nasiri later reconciled with Sadr, but these intra-clerical conflicts have been reignited by Sadr's recent positions on the protest movement. While Nasiri has his sources of authority, openly challenging Sadr required his stepping outside of Sadr's movement. His prior position within the movement hinged almost entirely on the management of personal relations with Sadr, which could be instantly transformed.

Third, there has also been a rift between Nasiri and Sadr's chief "jihadi advisor" (head of Saraya al-Salam) Kazem al-Issawi (AKA Abu Do'a). This

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85 Interview conducted by the author with senior ICP operative on condition of anonymity.

86 The limitations of this autonomy were clarified in 2008 when Sadr's brother-in-law and senior clerical advisor, Shaykh Riyad al-Nouri, was assassinated after he called for disbanding Jaysh al-Mahdi.

87 Based on interview with senior Sadrist source on condition of anonymity, January 3, 2008.

88 Asa'd al-Nasiri, Twitter, January 19, 2020, https://twitter.com/asaadalnaseri/status/1218808558084677632.

rift dates to the latter's surprise expulsion from the Sadrist movement in May 2019. At that time, Nasiri spoke critically of Issawi and his involvement in corruption.[89] However, Issawi has since been rehabilitated by Sadr.[90] The Nasiri-Issawi dispute could be a sign of intra-Sadrist struggle between its more pro-Iran elements (located in the movement's paramilitary wing) and those more anchored in Iraq's anti-establishment protest politics (including sections of the clerical leadership). The Nasiri-Issawi dispute is reminiscent of Sadr's brother-in-law Sheikh Riyad al-Nouri, who was assassinated in 2008 after he called for Jaysh al-Mahdi to be disbanded. The crucial point here being the persistent horizontal fractures between clerical and paramilitary wings of the Sadrist movement.

How representative Nasiri is of the broader Sadrist clerical strata is difficult to judge. Certainly, many remain loyal to Sadr, and there is another strand within this group that consistently opposed Sadr's earlier attempts to build cooperation with non-Islamist forces (indicating the absence of intra-factional ideological coherence). For this latter group, the Sadrists' tilt towards what they regarded as form of secular-liberal politics was perceived as a threat to clerical and religious hegemony over the movement. The opposition of this group spilled out into the open in 2017, when a prominent Sadrist cleric, Sheikh Usama al-Musawi, publicly denounced other parts of the movement.[91] In a long statement to his Sadrist followers on social media, Musawi identified "an internal conflict within the Sadrist movement," which involves Sadrist "political leaders" and "journalists, writers, and philosophers who constitute a 'secular-liberal trend'" that is "a purely political group which thinks that all the human, economic, military and even religious capacities should serve only a single goal: the domination of authority and governing without any sacred or divine aspect."

Sadrist Intellectuals and Cultural Activists

One of the Sadrist groups that Musawi was targeting with this criticism was Sadrist intellectuals and cultural activists (i.e., lay activists without religious training in the *hawza*). This group has been particularly supportive of Sadrist engagement in protest politics and cooperation with secular-leftist forces. In part, this reflects their distinct social backgrounds and networks, i.e., their greater degree of social integration with Iraq's secular intelligentsia.[92] These elements of the movement are the closest in ideological terms to secular-liberal trends, which manifests in greater willingness to criticize former Sadrist behaviors and their stated desire to "open up" the movement, moderate its image, and engage in forms of cross-ideological politics. This group also tends to regard Sadrist engagement in formal politics as a mistake that entangled the movement in corruption. They regard protests and popular politics as closer to the movement's pre-2003 roots and preferable to formal politics. One prominent Sadrist intellectual discussed his views on the movement and the role of its intellectual strata with the authors, stating:

> *The Sadrist trend today is not what it was several years ago as it has developed in constructing its consciousness and as a national project. It has left behind the chaotic emotionalism by which it was previously characterized, and today seeks an active participation in the construction of Iraq and its salvation. The Sadrists now have an open disposition towards all Iraq and are the Islamist trend that is closest to the secular civil groups.[93]*

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89 Interview with Sadrist contact on condition of anonymity, January 29 2020.

90 His prominence in Sadr's inner circle was seen in his role in delivering Sadr's address to the "million-man march" at the end of January 2020. His was also pictured with Sadr at a meeting with other prominent PMF leaders in Iran on January 13, 2020.

91 May 27, 2017, Usama al-Musawi on Facebook.

92 Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The politics of religious dissent in contemporary Saudi Arabia* (London: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 31, 136.

93 Interview conducted by authors in Iraq, August 6, 2017.

He further elaborated on what he saw as a process of ideological transformation in the movement and how this affected its relationship with other Islamist factions and Iran:

> *The Sadrist trend today is trying to be a national trend, fundamentally, far from religious-sectarian affiliations. Consequently, the movement is at odds with most of the Shi'i religious parties and movements, because of this moderation it has adopted and calls for. Even our relationship with Iran has become somewhat disturbed and thrown into doubt.*

It is not argued here that what is described above applies to the Sadrists as a whole. Rather, it reflects an uneven process of ideological change localized in particular sections of the movement. These Sadrist intellectuals and cultural activists also played an important role in mediating relations between the Sadrist movement and Iraq's secular intellectual and political forces as the two camps began exploring possibilities for cooperation from 2015.[94] The absence of an organizational framework for cooperation between the Sadrists and other social groups involved in the October 2019 protest movement has meant that the role of this stratum in shaping its politics has diminished. Moreover, Sadr's pivot towards a counter-revolutionary stance, and the centrality of Sadrist paramilitaries in pursuing this strategy, has pushed the movement's intellectuals and cultural activists further to the margins.

The Strategic Gamble of the Secular-Sadrist Alliance

Each of these different factions, along with leaders from Iraq's secular and leftist political and intellectual elites, competed for influence over Sadr, who mediated between their distinct interests and political strategies. This process was an inherently unstable one, reflecting the relative balance of power between these factions and not merely Sadr's own political beliefs or calculations. Like the IRGC, those secularist groups who sought alliance with the Sadr movement from 2015 were seeking to exploit tactical openings presented by Sadrist fragmentation.

In other words, behind the surface rhetoric of a broad ideological alignment around more moderate, civil (*madanī*) politics, lay a more strategic political gamble. One senior leftist political operative explained their thinking to the authors in 2016, stating:

> *How can we change the balance of forces if we do not penetrate the system? We must, therefore, penetrate the system in order to break the system. This system is built on Sunni, Shi'a and Kurd, but the Shi'i alliance is the strongest, and is constituted by the Sadrists, Da'wa and the Supreme Council. Da'wa cannot join us, and nor can the Supreme Council. So, we search for a framework, for possibilities of joining with the Sadrists. If we can join the Sadrists to us, and thereby weaken the Shi'i alliance and render it unstable, then if the Shi'i alliance is weak, the system as a whole will be shaken.[95]*

The secular-leftist/Sadrist alliance, then, was not anchored in a stable ideological framework reflecting the Sadrist movement's wholesale transformation toward a secular politics. Rather, it was a highly strategic political gamble that sought to exploit small pockets of social and ideological integration and alignment between the two movements to leverage the Sadrists as a whole out of the Shi'i Islamist bloc, and out of Iran's orbit, and to thereby destabilize Iraq's political system. As a political and programmatic project, the gamble did not pay off. However, it is too soon to judge its lesstangible effects in reshaping the cultural and political perspectives of parts of the Sadrist movement and the anchoring of its base more firmly in broad-based protest politics prioritizing political reform.

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94 Robin-D'Cruz, "Social brokers."

95 Interview conducted by the authors with senior leftist political operative on condition of anonymity.

Sadrist Paramilitaries

Sadrist paramilitary groups have been a source of organizational fragmentation and the main conduit for Iranian penetration within the movement since 2003. The militia developed a fragmented structure consisting of multiple bases of power characterized by effective local control, but weak hierarchic institutional integration and horizontal cohesion. A further factor reducing cohesion was Jaysh al-Mahdi's lack of important ingredients for effective war fighting. This included fighters with experience in jihadi and clandestine operations and social networks for trafficking weapons and materiel. Consequently, although Jaysh al-Mahdi could mobilize many fighters in a short space of time, the nature of its organizational structure, and the characteristics of its fighters, rendered the group more vulnerable to internal fragmentation.

This fragmentation took two main forms, which interacted in a mutually reinforcing dynamic: first, external penetration by the IRGC (fragmentation from above); and second, internal dissent and competing local power bases (fragmentation from below). The underlying driver in either case was competition for economic, coercive, and ideational power. The latter factor of ideational power—whether the use of sect-based versus nationalist discourses, or the positioning as a protector or opponent to protests—represents major fault-lines within the Sadrist paramilitary space that is seldom addressed. This section focuses on how these dynamics have shifted since 2003 and the role of Sadrist armed groups within the movement in the present day.

The Roots of Fragmentation within Sadrist Paramilitaries

After the Anglo-American invasion toppled the Saddam Hussein regime, the Sadrist movement became known primarily for its militant opposition to the U.S.-sponsored political order. Jaysh al-Mahdi amassed a significant following drawing from the lower classes of Iraqi Shia society in Baghdad and southern Iraq. The roots of this force stemmed back to a loose network of armed fighters who would protect Shi'i pilgrims during religious festivals that were banned by the Ba'th regime but persisted clandestinely in some limited forms. However, post-2003, Jaysh al-Mahdi became the largest Shia militia fighting the American occupying forces, growing to a force with tens of thousands of fighters.[96] The rapid expansion of the militia occurred via the Office of the Martyr al-Sadr network of local administrative offices and religious institutions, inherited from Sadeq al-Sadr's pre-2003 movement. Consequently, Jaysh al-Mahdi came to reflect the same structure of local social embeddedness and weak central control that typified other parts of the movement.

Initially, Sadr positioned Jaysh al-Mahdi as the resistance to the United States and other foreign occupation forces. When an insurgency broke out in Fallujah in spring 2004, rejecting the U.S. occupation and the U.S.-sponsored political process in Baghdad, Jaysh al-Mahdi was sent to help Sunni militants with aid and blood donations.[97] In the same year, the Sadrist militias fought against the Americans in Najaf and other parts of the south.

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96 Including thousands from Saddam's Fedayeen who had lost their jobs from CPA order 2.
97 Cockburn, *Muqtada,* p. 149.

However, the exigencies of war fighting exacerbated the fragmentation of Sadrist paramilitaries. After heavy losses to U.S. troops during the Battle of Najaf, there was a meeting between Sadr and the heads of several of Jaysh al-Mahdi's most powerful fighting units. At this meeting, it was decided to reconstitute these groups in a more effective military structure, breaking them out of Jaysh al-Mahdi to form better equipped and more disciplined units with a greater degree of operational autonomy from the core of Jaysh al-Mahdi.[98] It is not clear whether Sadr welcomed this arrangement as a means of distancing himself publicly from militant activities, or if this new arrangement was forced on him by commanders that sensed his weakened position (these two interpretations are not mutually exclusive). This point marks the emergence of the so-called Special Groups (SGs), a force that grew to 5,000 elite militant fighters and over which Qais al-Khaza'li was meant to have operational control.[99]

However, from this period, certain SGs commanders began working more closely with Qasem Soleimani, who had designed his own military structure that interfaced effectively with smaller units without a centralized command structure.[100] The splintering of Jaysh al-Mahdi into several paramilitary units thus allowed for smoother integration into IRGC networks. According to Khaza'li, by this stage, Sadrist paramilitaries were receiving around $2 million per month from Iranian sources (and this does not include extensive training and other materiel).[101] Thus, although the fragmentation of Sadrist paramilitaries partly reflected characteristics of the militias social base, and the organizational framework through which it was mobilized, it was also greatly exacerbated "from above" by the model of paramilitary organization adopted by the IRGC.

The fragmentation of Sadrist paramilitaries and greater Iranian penetration of their networks further eroded Sadr's overall control over the Special Groups. At times, units would not comply with Sadr's orders. Different factions would pursue their own strategic interests and visions—e.g., pursuing mafia-style economic practices, or Iraqi nationalist versus Shia-centric state-building—and make their down choices vis-à-vis tactics, e.g., rules of engagement and methods of violence.

For example, during operations Fardh al-Qanun (Impose the Law) and Saulat al-Fursan (Charge of the Knights),[102] Sadr issued orders for Jaysh al-Mahdi to stand down and not resist these counter-insurgent operations. However, his lack of control over the increasingly fragmented Sadrist paramilitaries meant that many factions continued to fight. These conflicts were eventually brought to a halt through the mediation of Soleimani, clarifying where real power over Sadrist militias lay.[103]

This concentration of Iranian penetration within Sadrist paramilitary networks was spelled out during the 2007 Central Intelligence Agency interrogation of Qais al-Khaza'li (who eventually split with Sadr to form 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, the Iranian-linked militia active in Iraq).[104] Khaza'li was asked what would happen to the Sadrist movement if Iranian funding was withdrawn altogether, to which he responded: "It would not have any effect on the Office of the Martyr al-Sadr side of the movement, but it would have a

98 "Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR – March 23, 2007," pp. 64-65.

99 "Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR – March 24, 2007," p. 70. The 5,000 figure was given by Khaza'li for the size of SG around the time of his capture, see, "Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR – March 28, 2007," p. 121. Joel Rayburn, *Iraq after America: Strongmen, Sectarians, Resistance* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2014), p. 181.

100 Interview with Qasem Soleimani advisor in Sulaimania, April 2018.

101 "Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR," Report no: 200243-008, 21-23; 200243-016, pp. 43-44; and "Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TI, March 25, 2007," pp. 85-86.

102 An attempt in early 2008 by Iraqi and coalition forces to retake parts of the capital and Basra as part of the wider "surge" of U.S. military and Iraqi Security Forces to pacify Iraq and quell the insurgency

103 Marisa Cochrane, "The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement."

104 Sheikh Qais al-Khaza'li was a pupil of Sadeq al-Sadr and emerged as one of Sadr's closest allies post-2003 until the relationship between the two began to deteriorate following the Battle of Najaf in 2004.

The fragmentation of Sadrist paramilitaries and greater Iranian penetration of their networks further eroded Sadr's overall control over the Special Groups. At times, units would not comply with Sadr's orders. Different factions would pursue their own strategic interests and visions—e.g., pursuing mafia-style economic practices, or Iraqi nationalist versus Shia-centric state-building—and make their down choices vis-à-vis tactics, e.g., rules of engagement and methods of violence.

great and negative effect on Jaysh al-Mahdi."[105] Moreover, as the IRGC model succeeded in transferring operational control over parts of Jaysh al-Mahdi from the loose, informal Sadrist networks to its own more coherent structure, it also incrementally lost one mechanism of leverage over Sadr, i.e., it became less embedded in the movement.

Reorienting Sadrist Paramilitaries and the Emergence of Saraya Al-Salam

Following a series of military defeats in early 2008, Sadr announced a pause on the policy of violent resistance.[106] In its place, he established three new organizations: a latent guerrilla force, Liwa' al-Yawm *al-Ma'ud* (Brigade of the Promised Day); a social and cultural wing, al-Mumahidun (Path-Layers); and a religious and charitable wing, al-Munasirun (the Supporters).[107] However, the rise of the Islamic State in 2014 would lead Sadr to re-mobilize his militia, which was called Saraya al-Salam (Peace Brigades). While part of the PMF, as Brigades 313 and 314, Saraya al-Salam's relationship with the other militias, and particularly former Sadrists now represented by groups like 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, remained fraught.[108] At times, Sadr spoke alongside Khaza'li and others in the fight against the Islamic State, and, at other times, he singled out competing paramilitary groups for criticism, calling them the "imprudent" militias.

According to conversations with leading Sadrists, Saraya al-Salam has a virtual capacity to build a 100,000-strong army, and the number of those registered on the Sadrists' volunteer list may exceed that number. Their actual capacity is constrained not by the number of volunteers, but by a lack of resources, specifically money, military hardware, and training because, unlike the groups more integrated into IRGC networks and the pro-Khamenei factions, the Sadrists were largely cut off from Iranian funding and, more critically, training. This dynamic fueled competition between Saraya al-Salam and other splinter groups from the Sadrist movement, such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Harakat al-Nujaba, as well as other groups that Sadr views to be too close to Iran.

As with Jaysh al-Mahdi, Saraya al-Salam is socially embedded via webs of economic and social ties in the locales where it is deployed (e.g., Samarra, north of Baghdad). As a result, the paramilitaries inevitably develop fairly autonomous strategic and economic interests that are bound up with local politics. At the same time, there is little horizontal social embeddedness between the Sadrist paramilitaries and other parts of the movement. Jawad al-Musawi, who would become a Sadrist MP for the Sairoun alliance following the 2018 national elections, stressed that Saraya al-Salam had no links to the political sphere.[109] Similarly, a leading Sadrist advisor told the authors on a number of occasions that he had no involvement or awareness of the military side of the movement, which according to him, was purposely kept in its own realm.[110] This separation meant that Sadr's political followers had no influence or awareness of the movement's military operations and would often deflect questions by acknowledging their ignorance.

The local embeddedness of Sadrist paramilitaries and the absence of effective hierarchic integration produced forms of horizontal and vertical fragmentation within the militia. Weak central control has meant Sadr was not always able to direct his commanders and fighters who frequently develop relatively autonomous fiefdoms within local contexts where they deploy

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105 "Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR, April 3, 2007," p. 168.

106 "Qayis al-Khazali Papers, TIR, April 3, 2007," p. 168.

107 Michael David Clark, PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2017.

108 Renad Mansour and Faleh Abdul Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future," Carnegie Middle East Center, April 27, 2017, https://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810.

109 Shelly Kittleson, "Sadr urges technocrats as armed factions look beyond border,"*Al-Monitor*, January 20, 2019, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/01/iraq-baghdad-sadr-city-muqtada-sadr-saraya-salam.html#ixzz640zdZbmV.

110 Interview with senior Sadrist politician.

coercive power to control the flow of resources in and out of neighborhoods and districts. In an effort to preserve his authority, Sadr has frequently purged paramilitary commanders whose local power bases have become a threat to him. A further effect of this practice has been the erosion of organizational and strategic coherence within the movement's militias.

This practice has applied even to the most senior commanders, such as Abu Muhammad Shibl (commander of Jaysh al-Mahdi during the Battle of Najaf in 2004), who was expelled from the movement in 2005; Akram al-Ka'bi (one-time second-in-command of Jaysh al-Mahdi), who was expelled in 2007; and Kazem al-Issawi AKA Abu Do'aa (the top commander in Saray al-Salam), who was expelled unexpectedly in May 2019 before being reinstated months later. However, senior Sadrists point out other reasons for purging commanders in the movement's paramilitary ranks, e.g., removing those thought too close to IRGC, or for reasons of discipline. For instance, one Saraya al-Salam official explained to the authors, "After the end of Jaysh al-Mahdi we had to clean the movement and remove the parts of the movement that were responsible for the crimes that had occurred in the early years."[111]

Similarly, in 2018, the movement decided to sack a number of senior Saraya al-Salam commanders, including Naji al-Mariani, who was the top commander in Samarra (the movement's primary deployment), along with Hassan al-Gharawi, Wasifi, and Ahmed Lifta.[112] According to a letter issued by Saraya al-Salam, members of militia are not allowed to work in any commercial or economic project under the military name and these individuals had violated the internal rules.[113] Again, under the banner of anti-corruption and internal by-laws, the Sadrist movement effectively

removed its most senior commanders from its most significant military operations.

Saraya al-Salam, and the Sadrist movement's engagement in paramilitary activity, clarifies the distinct and sometimes contradictory constraints and incentives imposed on the movement by its implication in distinct spheres of action. Sadrist militias have worked alongside and opposed other groups in the PMF. Many leading Sadrist politicians and advisors remain fundamentally against the proliferation of militias, which are viewed as an impediment to state-building. Meanwhile, Sadr himself has spoken out against the militias, but has not completely disbanded his forces. He has often made statements ordering the shutdown of his brigades.

In summer 2019, for instance, Saraya al-Salam announced that it was no longer connected directly to the Sadrist movement. Spokesman Safa al-Tamimi announced that it would no longer have a distinct name associated with the Sadrist movement, but would be part of Samara Operations of the PMF.[114] Moreover, in the south, Saraya al-Salam started using the name "blue hats."[115] However, despite the name change, the network of Sadrist fighters remains connected to Sadr's base.

Saraya al-Salam fulfills several important strategic functions for Sadr and the Sadrists, which make decoupling the movement from its paramilitary wing practically difficult. First, the paramilitaries are a significant part of Sadrist patronage network, providing employment, which becomes another revenue-generating mechanism for the movement.[116] Second, the Sadrist paramilitaries allow for forms of economic extraction and local forms of political power. For example, a tribal leader from Samarra stated, "they [Saraya al-

111 Authors' interview with Saraya al-Salam commander, Baghdad, February 2018.

112 The letter can be found at: "Sadr Expels a number of Peace Brigades Leaders," *Al-Kawthar TV*, November 3, 2018, alkawthartv.com/news/170752.

113 "Sadr Expels a number of Peace Brigades Leaders," *Al-Kawthar TV*, November 3, 2018, alkawthartv.com/news/170752.

114 "Saraya al-Salam reveals its new name and new leader: We have become a separate force from Muqtada al-Sadr, *Shafaaq News*, July 3, 2019. ,https://tinyurl.com/v76aubf.

115 "Spread in the protests of Nasiriyah […] Who are the heads of the Blue Hats?" *Nas News*, October 27, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/ttzss64.

116 The movement employs tens of thousands of Saraya al-Salam members, and some of these members tax at checkpoints and engage in other business schemes.

Salam] didn't allow displaced Sunnis to return to the city and they extracted bribes from merchants at their checkpoints."[117] Third, according to one Saraya al-Salam commander, Sadr requires the presence of an armed force as an insurance policy as long as his enemies, such as Qais al-Khaza'li and other PMF groups, maintain their own forces and continue to constitute a potential threat.[118] Finally, Saraya al-Salam's role in Samara protects a sacred Shi'i shrine. In this context, Saraya al-Salam is a source of symbolic power allowing Sadr to play the role of protector of Iraq's Shi'i community.

Following the assassinations of Soleimani and Muhandis, Sadr's rhetoric shifted abruptly to refocus on anti-Americanism and pursuing a full withdrawal of U.S. forces. This rhetoric included a statement declaring that he would re-establish Jaysh al-Mahdi (although he later backtracked on this commitment and focused on political mechanisms to achieve a U.S. withdrawal). The U.S. strike and the vacuum from Muhandis' killing provided Sadr with an opportunity to take more control over the PMF and, in particular, to regain power over groups that broke away from his leadership.

Previously, this space was becoming problematic for the Sadrists. During the October 2019 protests, Sadr's armed wing had initially sympathized with demonstrators. They stood against the violent response that the Iraqi state and allied PMF pursued in their counter-protest campaign. At one point toward the end of October, Sadrist armed actors came close to fighting against Khazali's militiamen engaged in attacks on protesters (in Maysan). However, in the weeks after the U.S. strike, Sadr appeared to be realigning his armed wing to come together with the pro-Iranian PMF groups.

However, just as in the past, this maneuverer is unlikely to re-solidify Sadrist paramilitaries, and may even open further cleavages within the movement, potentially setting elements in the Sadrist base and its paramilitaries on opposing sides of the struggle around Iraq's protest

politics. Some Sadrist paramilitaries could resist the new orientation, particularly if it involves their engagement in a broader campaign of repression against protesters. These groups could look for new leadership from clerics within the broader Sadrist constellation willing to step into the space left by Sadr's pivot towards the PMF and Iran.

117 Cambanis, "Social Engineering in Samarra."
118 Interview with Saraya al-Salam commander, February 2018.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This chapter has tried to make sense of Iraq's powerful Sadrist movement by linking the group's unstable politics to Sadr's lack of concrete political vision and to forms of organizational fragmentation within the movement. This fragmentation results in a factional and heterogeneous leadership with different Sadrist groups pursing distinct, and sometimes contradictory, agendas. These competing leadership strata compete for influence over the movement's social base, a young generation of poor Iraqi Shi'a whose tight alignment with Sadr and other movement leaders can no longer be taken for granted. Sadr himself is not an absolutist ruler who "fine tunes" his movement's strategies, but often acts more as a broker who mediates relations between, and within, these different factions and the movement's rank-and-file members.

External actors seeking to predict, and adapt to, Sadrist politics must grapple with this instability. At the same time, these intra-movement cleavages present strategic opportunities. They function as points of entry where external actors can seek to build influence within the Sadrist movement and attempt to shape its politics. This strategy has been pursued by Iran and, more recently, by some of Iraq's secular intellectual and political elites.

The recent assassination of Soleimani and Muhandis have tilted parts of the Sadrist movement, and particularly Sadr himself and his paramilitary forces, back toward the Iranian orbit. However, this chapter's core argument—that the movement as a whole is heterogeneous and fragmented, not characterized by a homogenous set of political ideas or interests—should caution policymakers against making assumptions about a future Sadrist role in Iraq based on an "Iran and its proxies" framework. Instead, policymakers should be looking toward decentering Sadr himself within their overall strategic approach to the movement, recognizing that Sadr is both

unable to sustain a consistent political orientation and that his power as an autonomous force in Iraqi politics may be waning.

This final section sets out policy recommendations designed to help international actors better cope with the unstable politics of the Sadrist movement and to utilize the opportunities this instability presents:

Addressing knowledge gaps.

- The emphasis on trying to decipher Sadr's behavior means that other strata of the movement, particularly beyond the paramilitary sphere, have seldom been the subject of research. Little is known about the cultural and political perspectives of the movement's social base, its broader clerical leadership, Sadrist intellectuals and journalists, and other cultural activists. Nevertheless, all these groups play a role in shaping and contesting Sadrist politics. More sociological and ethnographic analyses of the Sadrist movement should be prioritized. Partnering with local Iraqi research capacity could be oneviable route.

Pressing for accountability for anti-protest violence.

- Many Iraqi protesters and activists are deeply dissatisfied with what they regard as a feeble international response to the sustained violence used against them by Iraqi state and parastatal forces. The tendency to view the PMU as non-state actors obscures the reality of contiguity and integration between the PMU and the Iraqi state. Iraqi

protesters do not make these differentiations, understanding that the violence they face is coming from a coherent network of coercive forces that constitute the Iraqi state. U.S. interests align with the cultural and political currents moving Iraq's protest movement. However, the U.S. is also wary that overt support for the protesters could expose them to greater dangers and ultimately prove counterproductive. One measure the U.S. could take would be to tie its sanctioning of Iraqi parastatal actors more explicitly to their role in violence against protesters. This should include Sadrist paramilitaries who have been prominent in anti-protest violence in recent weeks. However, the imposition of accountability mechanisms should not be limited to the PMU and Saraya al-Salam. This would absolve other important parts of the Iraqi state and political class of their responsibility for violence. It would also facilitate their strategic use of ambiguities between formal and informal components of the state to deploy coercive repression.

Reappraising Saraya al-Salam's position within the PMF.

- Much of the messaging from Saraya al-Salam leaders since 2014 overlapped with U.S. messaging, including the need to hold to account pro-Iranian factions of the PMF. As such, policymakers have refrained from grouping Saraya al-Salam as part of a monolithic Iran-aligned PMF, seeking to highlight and reward differences in practices between the Sadrist movement and the more pro-Iranian factions. If Sadr pursues a more dominant role within the PMF or seeks to align Saraya al-Salam with its Iranian-supported groups, this approach of differentiating Sadrist paramilitaries needs to be rethought. Instead, policy should focus on subjecting Saraya al-Salam to similar scrutiny and accountability mechanisms designed to constrain the worst abuses of other PMF groups.

Improving channels of communication.

- Policymakers' understanding of the Sadrist movement and its ways of thinking and acting politically are hampered by extremely weak lines of communication. Interactions between Sadrist leaders and U.S./UK government agencies are rare and typically pass through intermediaries (sometimes with distorting effects). The authors broached the question of opening direct U.S.-Sadrist channels with one of Sadr's representatives. His response was that Sadr was not opposed to this in principle, but had certain conditions, namely, a guarantee that the U.S. would not interfere in Iraqi politics and would apologize and pay compensation for its "crimes" in Iraq.

- Since this is not plausible, developing other channels of communication should be a priority. Many members of the Sadrist movement work in diplomatic missions. The UK., in particular, has recently seen a number of high-profile Sadrist-linked appointments to Iraq's embassy in London. These could potentially play a useful role in improving communication channels with the Sadrists. Workshops and more general meetings, such as Track II events and think tank conferences that include Sadrists and U.S. officials, could be a starting point to indirect engagement.

Identifying the limits of shared interest.

- Policy objectives, such as political stability, meaningful reform, and curtailing Iranian influence in Iraq, are typically seen as bound together. The Sadrist movement has a role—whether positive or negative—in each of these objectives. It has been the most powerful Iraqi political actor to consistently challenge Iranian power. At the same time, its recent behavior has indicated a receding autonomy from Iran and a weakening of the movement's desire and capability to carve

out its own space in Iraqi politics. Moreover, the Sadrist movement is not anti-Iranian and will not explicitly partner with the American government. The priority, therefore, should be identifying issues where tacit forms of cooperation could strengthen Iraqi political institutions and reformist currents, including those within the Sadrist movement.

Adapting to Sadrist fragmentation.

- The Sadrist movement is more structurally differentiated and ideologically heterogeneous than is commonly thought. Post-2003, Iran exploited the Sadrists' lack of hierarchic integration, resources and expertise in the paramilitary sphere to penetrate the movement and shape its politics. From 2015, parts of Iraq's secular-leftist civil trend utilized a similar strategy, but this time targeting the Sadrists' clerical and intellectual strata. Both strategies adapted to different forms of Sadrist fragmentation by building ties into the movement's leadership in order to gain influence and leverage over Sadr. These strategies could function as a blueprint for external actors seeking to influence the Sadrist movement and shape its politics. However, strategies that depend on influencing Sadr personally are likely to end in failure. Sadr is not able to inhabit, or carry forward, a consistent political orientation. Consequently, strategies targeting the Sadrist movement should consider "decentering" Sadr himself and focusing instead on broader elements of the movements. This may also involve curtailing the ambitions that such strategies hope to achieve. Nevertheless, even if Sadr himself pivots into a more Iranian-aligned position, other parts of the movement should not be written off or assumed to have followed him down this path.

THE FUTURE OF THE KURDISTAN REGION AFTER THE DEFEAT OF ISIS AND THE FAILURE OF THE 2017 INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUM

Pishko Shamsi
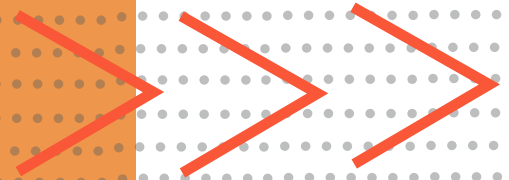
The Future of the Kurdistan Region after the Defeat of ISIS and the Failure of the 2017 Independence Referendum

About the Author

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Abstract

In 2017, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq held an independence referendum, which triggered severe backlash, including the loss of control over the oil-rich city of Kirkuk. The backlash from the independence referendum prompted the regional government (Kurdistan Regional Government) to urgently shift policy and re-engage with Baghdad. Since then, the region has recovered politically and has implemented a pragmatic strategy to revitalize the economy and internal affairs. The KRG also launched diplomatic initiatives to restore relations with Iran and Turkey, and has pursued a policy of neutrality to manage the Region's myriad of crises. Moreover, the KRG has pursued tactical alliances with Iraqi political parties to secure short-term gains, including the resumption of budget transfers from Baghdad.

The KRG's deal-making with Baghdad, however, has fallen short of translating into a sustainable policy, and many of the gains are fragile and dependent on Baghdad's changing political scene. Without a long-term strategy, the KRG's new leadership is unlikely to be able to deliver much needed institutional reforms to help curb corruption, improve governance, and enhance transparency in public affairs. And while the KRG has committed to reform politically, it remains unclear if it will bring about meaningful change and address structural challenges, such as entrenched crony networks, rentier economics, and partisan control over the public sector and security forces.

Turmoil Abounds

The territorial rise and fall (2014-2017) of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS) had vast impact on the political, military, and socio-economic situation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. As ISIS swept through and seized control over one-third of Iraqi territory, Kurdish security forces (Peshmerga) consolidated *de facto* control over the totality of the Disputed Territories, including the oil-rich region of Kirkuk.[1]

Relations between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the central government in Baghdad deteriorated when former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (2006-2014) was in power and slightly improved after his successor, Haider al-Abadi, assumed power in September 2014. The KRG gained considerable international attention at the diplomatic and military level as a result of the war against ISIS. The U.S. and Global Coalition support to the Peshmerga's efforts in fighting ISIS emboldened Kurdish officials' perception of the events of 2014 as being a historic turn that could lead to the ultimate collapse of the Iraqi state and the possible dawn of an independent Kurdish state.[2] In July 2014, a month after the fall of Mosul to ISIS, KRG President Masoud Barzani assigned a Kurdish parliamentary commission to prepare an independence referendum, which was held on September 24, 2017.[3] This call had strong popular appeal among Kurds in Iraq as it warooted in a familiar narrative on Kurdish national aspirations for an independent state—a long-held dream for many Kurds.[4] Barzani's political rivals and opponents, however, challenged the referendum as nothing more than a populist plea for Kurdish nationalism to divert attention from widespread grievances in Kurdish society related to corruption, nepotism, and poor governance.[5]

As expected, the independence referendum had a high turnout of 72%, with approximately 93% of votes cast in favor of independence.[6] The aftermath of the vote, however, resulted in a major political and security failure for the KRG, including loss of control of Kirkuk and other Disputed

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1 The Disputed Territories, according to article 140 in the Iraqi constitution, are three regions in Nineveh, Kirkuk, and Diyala governorates, bordering the Kurdistan Region, where the Ba'th regime altered the demographic composition and administrative boundaries for political ends. The article charters a resolution procedure to reach a political and administrative settlement in the post-Ba'th era between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the central government in Baghdad.

2 "Arming Iraq's Kurds: Fighting ISIS, Inviting Conflict," International Crisis Group, May 12, 2015, p. 4 https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/arming-iraq-s-kurds-fighting-inviting-conflict.

3 "Iraq: Kurdish president proposes independence referendum," *Guardian*, July 3 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/03/iraq-kurdish-president-barzani-proposes-independence-referendum.

4 Adam Taylor, "What Iraq's Kurds Want, and Why it may Get Complicated: A Referendum on Independence may be Coming within Months, but that Won't Solve Everything," *Washington Post*, July 2, 2014.

5 Dylan O'Driscoll and Bahar Baser, "Independence referendums and nationalist rhetoric: the Kurdistan Region of Iraq," *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 11 (May 2019): pp. 2016-2034.

6 Bethan McKernan, "Kurdistan referendum results: 93% of Iraqi Kurds vote for independence, say reports," *Independent*, September 27, 2017, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/kurdistan-referendum-results-vote-yes-iraqi-kurds-independence-iran-syria-a7970241.html.

Territories.[7] Furthermore, as the Iraqi government imposed a flight ban and the Republic of Turkey and Islamic Republic of Iran closed down their border points to the KRG, blocking trade and flow of goods, the landlocked region faced the prospect of economic strangulation.

Relations between the two top political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), hit rock bottom as they traded accusations and blame for the fiasco.[8] The failure was unmistakable to both sides, but the liability was quarreled over. Yet, the urgency of the situation escaped neither of them; as their credibility plummeted, it forced a chaotic turn away from the referendum policy.

Only two weeks after the debacle in Kirkuk and the Disputed Territories, President Barzani announced his resignation.[9] It was described as an "act of statesmanship during a difficult period" by the United States, and characterized as a first step towards a rapprochement between Erbil and Baghdad.[10] The referendum result was retracted when the KRG formally respected the ruling of the Iraqi Supreme Court on the unconstitutionality of the independence referendum. This measure was face-saving, meant to offer KRG leaders an exit short of *mea culpa*. KRG leaders had to find a new path, and promptly embarked on efforts aimed at "national dialogue between Erbil and Baghdad to resolve all disputes."[11]

This chapter will focus on how decision makers in the KRG reshaped their post-ISIS policies and how it translated regionally and vis-à-vis Baghdad. Moreover, it will examine the prospects and challenges of the new KRG policy for its intra-Kurdish and geopolitical relations. In doing so, it will closely examine its emerging strategy to restore political and economic relations with Baghdad and neighboring countries, along with ongoing efforts to maintain neutrality as broader intra-state tensions have marred stability in the Middle East.

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7 In 2010, a combined security mechanism between the Iraqi army and Peshmerga Forces had been established with U.S. support, which involved joint checkpoints, patrols, and coordination centers. Both groups had to remain outside the city. Iraqi local police and Kurdish police force (Asayish) remain in charge of internal security in the city. In 2012, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki established the Tigris Operations Command based in Kirkuk, overseeing security for Kirkuk, Salahuddin, and Diyala. Kurdish leaders responded by moving additional forces into the Disputed Territories to confront the Tigris Operations Command, and demanded its disbandment. Despite the tension, and several reports of military stand-offs between the two sides, they co-existed without further escalation until the ISIS surge in 2014 when KRG established full security control in Kirkuk and other Disputed Territories. See, Maria Fantappie, "Contested Consolidation of Power in Iraq," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2013, pp. 11-12, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/contested_consolidation.pdf; and "Iraq and The Kurds: Confronting Withdrawal Fears," International Crisis Group, March 28, 2011, pp. 14-15, https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/103-iraq-and-the-kurds-confronting-withdrawal-fears.pdf.

8 Jamie Dettmer, "Rival Parties Trade Blame Over Kirkuk Amid Fears of Kurdish Split," *Voice of America*, October 19, 2017, https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/rival-parties-trade-blame-over-kirkuk-amid-fears-kurdish-split.

9 The KRG's president stated he would not "extend the term of his presidency under any conditions," but the announcement was reported as an effective resignation. See, Isabel Coles and Ali Nabhan, "Iraqi Kurdish President Steps Down After Independence Push Backfires" *Wall Street Journal*, October 29, 2017, https://www.wsj.com/articles/iraqi-kurd-leader-to-step-down-as-president-following-independence-vote-1509279415.

10 "Political Transition in Iraqi Kurdistan Region," Office of the Spokesperson of the U.S. Department of State, October 30, 2017, https://www.state.gov/political-transition-in-iraqi-kurdistan-region.

11 "KRG Statement on the Iraqi Federal Supreme Court's Interpretation of the Article 1 of the Constitution," November 14, 2019, http://previous.cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?s=040000&l=12&a=56019.

Regional Recalibration: Generational Shift and Elections

The aftermath of the 2017 independence referendum began a new chapter in the Kurdistan Region's politics, characterized by a change in the power balance between the two leading Kurdish parties and generational shift in both parties' leadership.

Since its creation, the KRG has been led by two main parties, well-known for their guerrilla war against multiple Iraqi regimes in the 20th century: the KDP, which controls the Erbil and Duhok governorates; and the PUK, which is dominant in the Suleymaniyah governorate. In 2007, the KDP and PUK concluded a "strategic agreement" splitting control over the region's financial revenue, security forces, and governance posts. The Gorran Movement emerged in 2009 as a splinter from the PUK as a criticism of the duopoly over the political system. Other opposition parties are the Kurdish Islamic Union (KIU), Islamic Group of Kurdistan (Komal), and the New Generation Movement; these three parties are represented in the KRG's regional parliament.

As the founders of both parties got older or passed away, younger figures who hailed from the same families replaced them at the helm of the parties' leadership. During this period of turbulent transition, the KDP presented itself as the strongest actor that could preserve Kurdish interests—having the ability to maintain internal coherence, succession of leaders, and manage intra-party rivalries (between its top figures Masrour Barzani and his cousin Nechirvan Barzani). The PUK and the Gorran Movement, in contrast, were in a state of internal disarray,

Peshmerga soldiers prepare to conduct a combined arms live-fire exercise near Erbil, Iraq, Oct. 11, 2016. (Sgt. Lisa Soy/Wikimedia Commons)

having recently lost their founders, Jalal Talabani and Nawshirwan Mustafa.[12] In February 2020, Bafel Talabani and his cousin Lahur Sheikh Jangi were elected as new co-presidents of the PUK.[13] If the concept of family-based political parties had been clear to the public in the Kurdistan Region, then it was cemented during the generational shift in leadership over the past two years.[14]

The KDP quickly consolidated its political power on September 30, 2018 when it won 45 seats in the parliamentary elections. The PUK and Gorran won 21 and 12 seats, respectively. The election results were eventually accepted by all of the political parties, despite widespread allegations of election fraud.[15] The government formation process took more than eight months and resulted in a KDP-led cabinet with Masrour Barzani

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12 Mark McDonald, "Jalal Talabani, Kurdish Leader and Iraq's First Postwar President, Is Dead at 83," *New York Times,* October 3, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/03/obituaries/jalal-talabani-kurdish-dead.html; and Histyar Qader, "Death Of Kurdish Leader Further Disturbs Shaky Political Equilibrium," *Niqash*, May 25, 2017, https://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/5583.

13 "PUK elects Lahur Sheikh Jangi, Bafel Talabani as its co-leaders," *PUK Media*, February 18, 2020, https://www.pukmedia.com/EN/EN_Direje.aspx?Jimare=58387.

14 Maria Fantappie and Cale Salih, "Kurdish Nationalism at an Impasse," Century Foundation, April 29, 2019, https://tcf.org/content/report/iraqi-kurdistan-losing-place-center-kurdayeti.

15 "World Report 2019 – Iraq," Freedom House, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/iraq.

Raising the Iraqi flag (Masterworld224/Wikimedia Commons)

leading the ministerial cabinet as prime minister and Nechirvan Barzani serving as Kurdistan's president, a largely ceremonial post.[16] The PUK kept its long-standing secondary role, securing the position of deputy prime minister and eventually speaker of parliament. While its traditional dominance in the Sulaymaniyah governorate was contested by Gorran and New Generation, the party nonetheless maintained control over the security forces, local economy, and influence in Baghdad through the Iraqi presidency.[17] Instead, Gorran, which had represented the cornerstone of political opposition against the KDP, allied with its former opponent to counter the PUK in Sulaymaniyah and secure ministerial positions in the new cabinet, at the price of losing much of its initial platform.[18]

The formation of the new Cabinet inaugurated a new phase in the KDP-PUK power balance. The days of "50-50 shares" were palpably over, and the two parties moved away from the strategic agreement.[19] A new political power-sharing formula was signed between the two sides, which would serve as a "compass and guideline" for future cooperation while reflecting the stronger position of the KDP vis-à-vis the PUK, its now clearly inferior partner.

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16 Bilal Wahab, "Iraqi Kurdistan's New Government," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 11, 2019, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iraqi-kurdistans-new-government.

17 Since 2006, the Iraqi presidency has been allocated to a Kurdish candidate, particularly from the PUK; Jalal Talabani (2006-2014), Fuad Mahsoum (2014-2018), and Barham Salih (2018-present) have served in the position.

18 Mera Jasem Bakr, "Gorran and the End of Populism in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 8, 2019, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/gorran-and-the-end-of-populism-in-the-kurdistan-region-of-iraq.

19 "KDP-PUK deal paves way for new regional government," *Rudaw*, March 4, 2019, https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/040320191.

Post-Referendum, a 180° Shift in Policy

The independence referendum prompted severe backlash, pitting the KDP against the PUK and challenging local perceptions of the United States in the KRG. Generally labelled as pro-Western and secular, the Kurds are often viewed as being "among America's best friends in the Middle East," despite having often been "sacrificed" in favor of U.S. interests with the region's central governments in the 1970s and 1990s.[20] In 2014, the United States reinvigorated its partnership with Erbil when Kurdish forces joined the U.S.-led Global Coalition's operations against ISIS. However, this did not insulate the Kurds from Washington siding with Baghdad over their broader interest in independence.

During the run-up to the independence vote, the United States condemned the referendum, predicting it would undermine the gains in the fight against ISIS and encouraging the Kurds to refocus on the stabilization of the disputed areas. The U.S. rejection was also in line with its long-standing policy of supporting the territorial integrity of Iraq as well settlement of constitutional disputes between the KRG and Baghdad through peaceful dialogue.[21] Turkey and Iran expressed strong opposition to the referendum.[22] These tensions eventually led to political disaster when the Iraqi army launched a military attack on Peshmerga positions in oil-rich Kirkuk. The

Peshmerga forces withdrew immediately under chaotic circumstances, with KDP and PUK commanders blaming each other for the failure and making accusations of "treason."[23] As a result of these operations, the KRG now controls less territory than before the vote. In the aftermath of the vote, Iraqi Kurdistan was under embargo from all sides. Baghdad imposed an international flight ban, and Iran and Turkey closed their borders crossings stopping all exports to the region. This forced the KRG to shift from a policy of confrontation to re-engagement with Baghdad and resume balanced relations with Tehran and Ankara as the only way to survive economic and political strangulation. The KDP was eventually able to recover during the national and regional elections in 2018.

Beginning in 2009, rival political movements, based mostly in PUK strongholds, have emerged. These parties, for example the Gorran Movement and Coalition for Democracy and Justice (CDJ), were run by ex-PUK officials and promoted a different vision for Kurdistan's future. Notably, Barham Salih, the founder of CDJ, rejoined the PUK shortly after the May 2018 national elections before becoming the President of Iraq. These political differences were shunted aside during the ISIS war because of the existential threat that the terror group presented to the region.[24] However, once the war against ISIS ended, the

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20 Jon Schwarz, "The U.S. is now betraying the Kurds for the eighth time," *The Intercept*, October 7, 2019, https://theintercept.com/2019/10/07/kurds-syria-turkey-trump-betrayal; and Rick Noack, "The long, winding history of American dealings with Iraq's Kurds," *Washington Post*, August 7, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/10/17/the-long-winding-history-of-american-dealings-with-iraqs-kurds-2.

21 Eli Lake, "Tillerson Letters Show U.S. Nearly Averted Kurdish Referendum," *Bloomberg*, October 13, 2017, https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2017-10-13/tillerson-letters-show-u-s-nearly-averted-kurdish-referendum. See, also, full text of Tillerson's letter, https://assets.bwbx.io/documents/users/iqjWHBFdfxIU/rsJkyXsgEaig/v0.

22 Barin Kayaoglu, "Ankara hardens opposition to KRG referendum," *Al-Monitor*, September 14, 2017, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/09/turkey-supports-iraqi-parliament-reject-krg-referendum.html; and "Iran: KRG referendum, Israel's conspiracy to partition Iraq," *Iran Daily*, September 26, 2017, http://www.iran-daily.com/News/201330.html.

23 Paul Iddon, "'Treasonous elements colluded to surrender Kirkuk,' says deposed Kurdish governor," *The New Arab*, November 13, 2017, https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2017/11/13/treasonous-elements-colluded-over-kirkuk-says-deposed-kurdish-governor; and Sangar Ali, "PUK Peshmerga Commander: 'traitors' planned to bring Iraqi forces, Shia militias into Kurdistan," *Kurdistan24*, December 27, 2017, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/8bdcaf5f-fcf3-452e-b7f3-d249d8e5e5aa.

24 Omer Taspinar, "ISIS and the false dawn of Kurdish statehood," Brookings Institution, December 13, 2019, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/12/13/isis-and-the-false-dawn-of-kurdish-statehood.

schisms within Kurdish society re-emerged.

Regional support for the KDP and PUK has dropped sharply in recent years, and the credibility of the parties was undermined by the botched referendum. Critics of the referendum, such as Bafel Talabani, son of the PUK founder Jalal Talabani, lambasted it as a colossal, strategic mistake and unrealistic policy.[25] Fierce opponents referred to it as "political gambling," with the narrow aim of advancing a populist KDP agenda, camouflaged under the banner of Kurdish nationalism. KDP officials responded to such criticism by underlining that an overwhelming majority of Kurdish political leaders, including in the PUK, lent public support for the referendum during the campaign. The PUK had hesitantly supported the referendum bid, despite divisions within its leadership over the timing of the vote and divergent positions on whether it should be held in Kirkuk, the city that both Baghdad and Erbil claimed as falling under their political control before the referendum. Gorran "did not support the referendum until the last day when it stated that its followers were 'free to vote how they choose.'"[26]

The public debate in the aftermath of the independence referendum extended to all segments of the Kurdish public. The idea of independence is culturally rooted in Kurdish communities, not as a political objective per se, but as a ubiquitous allegory and reference to historic injustice of being a nation without a state.[27] No Kurdish political movement in Iraq has defined independence as a political objective since the 1940s. The KDP and PUK are no different and the goal of independence is not listed in either of their party programs and is not used in official discourse. The political and armed struggle has predominantly been centered on self-administration or federalism. Kurdish leaders often describe independence as unrealistic or impossible, and associated with considerable geopolitical risks. Nevertheless, most politicians also admit that "every Kurd dreams of independence."[28] Kurdish politicians, therefore, balance the popular desire for independence with realistic policymaking, grappling "with what their heart tells them and what their head tells them."[29]

Consequently, for fears of backlash against criticism, even critics reasserted caveats on the natural right of the Kurdish people to exercise self-determination, at least in principle. The military clashes in Kirkuk and other disputed territories between Kurdish and Iraqi forces further reinforced a sense of vulnerability as a minority and a propensity for self-preservation amid fears that the security situation could further deteriorate.[30]

KRG leadership viewed the U.S. and Coalition forces inaction in allowing the Iraqi forces to attack their positions in Kirkuk as a form of betrayal.[31] This perception ultimately led the KRG to counterbalance its partnership with the United States by strengthening relations

25 Marc Perelman, "Kurdish referendum a 'colossal mistake', says son of late president Talabani," *France24*, October 20, 2017, https://www.france24.com/en/20171020-interview-bafel-talabani-kirkuk-barzani-sulaymaniyah-puk-abadi-baghdad-referendum-turkey.

26 Christine Van den Toorn, "Internal Divides Behind the Kurdistan Referendum," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 11, 2017, https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/73359.

27 Bafel Talabani, son of PUK founder Jalal Talabani, and a key PUK figure in the Kirkuk crisis, while being highly critical of the referendum, stated: "It is the dream of every Kurd, an independent Kurdistan, but an independent Kurdistan need to be worked for, we need to be in a position of strength for our negotiations, we have to be realistic with the expectations of our allies." Perelman, "Kurdish referendum a 'colossal mistake', says son of late president Talabani," *France24*.

28 Tim Arango, "Iraq's Factional Chaos Threatens to Disrupt a Kurdish Haven," *New York Times*, January 3, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/04/world/middleeast/anxious-turning-point-for-kurds-in-iraq.html.

29 Jane Araf, "Iraq's unity tested by rising tensions over oil-rich Kurdish region," *CSMonitor*, May 4, 2012, https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2012/0504/Iraq-s-unity-tested-by-rising-tensions-over-oil-rich-Kurdish-region.

30 For a discussion on the KRG leadership's misreading of U.S. foreign policy, which also has a historical record, see, Behnam Ben Taleblu and Merve Tahiroglu, "Kurd Your Enthusiasm The U.S. Needs to Talk About Its Favorite Allies," *Foreign Affairs*, November 8, 2017, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-11-08/kurd-your-enthusiasm; Bruce Riedel, "Masoud Barzani and the roots of Kurdish distrust of the United States," Brookings Institution, November 2, 2017, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/11/02/masoud-barzani-and-the-roots-of-kurdish-distrust-of-the-united-states; and Joost Hilterman, "The Kurds Are Right Back Where They Started," *Atlantic*, October 31, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/10/history-of-the-kurds/544316.

31 Jane Arraf, "After Iraqi Kurdish Independence Vote Backfires, 'I Do Not Regret It,' Says Barzani," *National Public Radio*, November 7, 2017, https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/11/07/562514981/after-iraqi-kurdish-independence-vote-backfires-i-do-not-regret-it-says-barzani.

The public debate in the aftermath of the independence referendum extended to all segments of the Kurdish public. The idea of independence is culturally rooted in Kurdish communities, not as a political objective per se, but as a ubiquitous allegory and reference to historic injustice of being a nation without a state.

with the Russian Federation. Following this decision, the KRG expanded on a cooperation agreement (from February 2017) with Russian oil company Rosneft on hydrocarbon resources and infrastructure in the Kurdistan Region, reaching a production agreement on five oil blocks.[32] The reaction from the Iraqi oil ministry was strong, stating that any foreign deals in the energy sector must go through Baghdad first.[33] This tension was gradually resolved.[34] In mid-2018, KRG Minister of Natural Resources Ashti Hawrami extended the cooperation to gas development by signing additional deals with Rosneft and in mid-2019, the oil giant reported that implementation proceeded according to existing agreements, including exports through the Iraq-Turkey pipeline.[35]

KRG leadership justified its 180-degree political turn to negotiate with Baghdad after the independence referendum prompted violence in Kirkuk. Underscoring that the Kurdish people (again) had suffered historic injustice, it argued that new efforts had to be made to continue the struggle through a different strategy. A sense of fear and vulnerability was reinforced, as many Kurds self identify as a minority group that has suffered persecution from multiple Iraqi governments in the 20th century.[36] Despite the excessive and bitter blame game over the referendum failure, the KDP and PUK swiftly agreed on the necessity to find rapprochement with Baghdad as the central government provides the main part of the KRG's financial budget and airport access. Even the more hawkish supporters

of the referendum bid concurred since this was the only existing option. The re-engagement was dictated by a desperate need for a political "reset," particularly after violent clashes between Iraqi and Kurdish forces for control over Kirkuk in October 2017. Among all Kurdish officials, Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani was the best suited Kurdish official to lead the negotiations due to his reputation for pragmatism; he was also eager to compromise with Baghdad and was not outspoken during the run-up to the referendum.

Adopting a conciliatory posture, the KRG made its first attempts to re-engage with the government in Baghdad. The negotiating priorities were set on the most pressing issues, such as de-escalating military clashes south of Erbil, re-opening border crossings for trade with Turkey and Iran, lifting international flight bans at Erbil and Sulaymaniyah airports and ensuring transfer of the KRG's budget share for payment of public sector salaries.[37] The United Nations and influential Western states offered to facilitate new dialogue between the two sides. There was, however, little maneuvering space for the KRG— as Baghdad conditioned the start of negotiations on the nullification of the referendum's results.[38] A senior Iraqi government official described the first KRG delegation in Baghdad in November 2017 as "very amenable."[39] In the period leading up to the May 2018 Iraqi national elections, a new Kurdish discourse emerged which centered on respect and implementation of the Iraqi constitution, including article 140 on the Disputed Territories.

32 Ahmed Tabaqchali, "Rosneft in the Kurdish Region: Moscow's Balancing Act," *Iraq in Context*, November 3, 2017, https://www.iraqincontext.com/single-post/2017/11/03/Rosneft-in-the-Kurdish-Region-Moscows-Balancing-Act; "Rosneft and the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq Signed an Offtake Contract," Rosneft, February 21, 2017, https://www.rosneft.com/press/releases/item/185769; and *"*Rosneft and The Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq signed Gas Business Development Agreement for Kurdish Region of Iraq," Rosneft, May 25, 2018, https://www.rosneft.com/press/releases/item/191055.

33"Baghdad slams oil deal between Russia's Rosneft and Kurds," *France24,* October 19, 2017, https://www.france24.com/en/20171019-baghdad-slams-oil-deal-between-russias-rosneft-kurds.

34 "Issue of agreements between Rosneft and Iraqi Kurdistan resolved, says deputy minister," *TASS*, September 10, 2019, https://tass.com/economy/1077496.

35 "Rosneft: Operating Results for Q1 2019," Rosneft, May 13, 2019, https://www.rosneft.com/press/releases/item/194935.

36 Balint Szlanko and Philip Issa, "Iraqi forces push into disputed Kirkuk as Kurds withdraw," *Associated Press*, October 17, 2017, https://apnews.com/0b3b6bf13cce47ada980c2170d7b36ac/Kurds-withdraw-as-Iraqi-forces-push-into-disputed-Kirkuk; and Maher Chmaytelli and Mustafa Mahmoud, "Iraqi forces seize oil city Kirkuk from Kurds in bold advance," *Reuters*, October 16, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds-kirkuk/iraqi-forces-seize-oil-city-kirkuk-from-kurds-in-bold-advance-idUSKBN1CK0XL.

37 "UNAMI Acknowledges Kurdistan Region's Government Statement Announcing Respect for the Federal Court Ruling on unity of Iraq," United Nations, November 15, 2017, https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/unami-acknowledges-kurdistan-region-s-government-statement-announcing-respect-federal.

38 "Kurds 'reject' Baghdad's demand to nullify referendum results," *Deutsche Welle,* October 15, 2017, https://www.dw.com/en/kurds-reject-baghdads-demand-to-nullify-referendum-results/a-40956560.

39 Interview with advisor of senior Iraqi government official, Baghdad, Iraq, 29 July 2018.

Deal-making or Policy?

As a landlocked entity, the KRG is dependent on external trade to supplement oil revenues. The KRG has sought to maintain cordial ties with Turkey and Iran. Both countries resisted the independence referendum because of how it may affect nationalist sentiments among their own Kurdish populations as well as their commitment to the territorial integrity of Iraq. Following the loss of Kirkuk, the KRG faced an economic blockade from its neighbors. Turkey had closed its border but had continued its policy of facilitating the independent export of oil pumped in Kurdistan outside of the control of the central government. Iran, which assisted the Peshmerga in the fight against ISIS, played a role in Baghdad's retaking of Kirkuk. The KRG sought to balance ties with Turkey and Iran, returning to previous relations and strong economic ties and restoring credibility with the United States diplomatically and as a partner in the war against ISIS. Turning a new page in relations with Baghdad was also essential for the KRG to address urgent financial challenges. This strategy proved largely successful in quickly setting the KRG on a new political track.

Regional Relations: Iran and Turkey

The KRG returned to balanced relations with Iran and Turkey to resume trade and alleviate economic pressure after both took action to punish the KRG for its independence referendum. The KDP and PUK, moreover, reduced any engagement that expanded beyond KRG borders, including in neighboring Syria, where the Democratic Union Party (PYD) was fighting with U.S. support against the ISIS. The PYD is the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), an insurgent group active in Turkey, which also has a branch in Iran. As a result, Tehran and Ankara have sought to militarily defeat the group and share an interest in putting military pressure on the PKK inside Iraq. To appease Tehran, the KRG ensured that no Kurdish insurgent activity by Iranian-Kurdish opposition groups would be allowed on its borders with Iran, and it would deny the group safe haven.[40] The KDP also silently accommodated increased Turkish military activity in the Kurdistan Region against the PKK, including allowing new Turkish military bases in the region, stepping up intelligence cooperation and tolerating targeted airstrikes against PKK leaders and bases.[41]

Moreover, the KRG has attempted a delicate balancing act between the United States and Iran as their coexistence in Iraq became tense. The KDP and PUK shared a vision that Iran was key to their political recalibration in Baghdad.[42] In the aftermath of the referendum backlash, the KRG aligned with Iranian interests as a way to ensure progress on key issues in its negotiations with Baghdad.[43] In January 2018, Prime Minister Barzani led a delegation to Tehran and met with Iranian officials to explain his efforts in readjusting the KRG's policy, with the aim of correcting previous mistakes related to overreliance on the United States, Europe, and Turkey. As a European diplomat explained, "The Kirkuk debacle and setbacks suffered by the KRG at the hands of, among others, Iran-backed parts of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), did not push them

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40 Fazel Hawramy, "Iraqi Kurds maneuver to get closer to Iran," *Al-Monitor*, February 6, 2018, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/02/iran-krg-relations-barzani-tehran-visit-opposition-groups.html#ixzz64sqdTSqM.

41 Interview with senior PKK leader Duran Kalkan on Turkish military activities in Iraqi Kurdistan, *Firatnews*, July 6, 2019

42 Entessar, "Uneasy Neighbors: Iran and the Kurdish Regional Government." *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2, (2018), pp. 73–84.

43 Hawramy, "Iraqi Kurds maneuver to get closer to Iran," *Al-Monitor*.

away from Iran. On the contrary, it pulled them closer."[44]

Poster for the elections of the Parliament of the Iraqi Kurdistan general election, 2018. (Hamaredha/Wikimedia Commons)

New Engagement in Baghdad

The aftermath of the referendum saw an unprecedented effort from the KRG to re-engage with Baghdad. The KRG tried to create conducive conditions to start real dialogue with Baghdad by making reconciliatory statements and sending technical and parliamentary delegations to the capital. Moreover, internal consultations among all Kurdish political parties were launched with the aim to speak with a unified voice and avoid partisan or unilateral negotiations.[45]

The United States and Iran supported a fast-track normalization of Baghdad-Erbil relations to fix pressing economic issues.[46] It was debatable how this could be achieved prior to the 2018 Iraqi national elections, as both sides pressed the Kurdish parties to support their preferred Shite bloc. Some argued that Prime Minister Abadi was merely interested in accommodating an initial deal and leave incentives for the Kurdish leadership to support his candidacy to complete the deal in a post-election phase.[47] Nevertheless, by March 2018, less than six months after the stand-off in Kirkuk, agreements had been reached on lifting the flight ban and paying KRG employees. The political rapprochement had yielded results, and a new policy vis-à-vis Baghdad was consolidating.

The Iraqi Kurds had something to offer the political parties vying for power in Baghdad. As the campaign for the 2018 national election began, the dominant parties in Iraq sought to

win over Kurdish support for their parliamentary blocs. For example, Prime Minister Abadi's Nasr bloc discussed potential Kurdish support, and United States applied diplomatic pressure to try to make that happen. Yet, the KDP and PUK had incentives to align their interest with the Iran-backed Fatah bloc as this would enable them to reach a quick deal on partial withdrawal of the PMF from parts of the Disputed Territories in Nineveh.[48]

With eyes set on gaining a partial kingmaker role in the formation of the new government, the KDP and PUK refrained from siding with any of the main blocs prior to the national elections in May 2018.[49] Their representatives discussed post-election scenarios with all political actors in Baghdad to prepare grounds for their active participation in the new government, regardless of who led it. This included an open attitude towards politicians previously viewed as staunchly hostile to the

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44 Interview with European diplomat in Iraq, Baghdad, February 10, 2019.

45 "Nechirvan Barzani: Kurdistan Region is going through tough times," *PUK Media*, November 21, 2017, https://www.pukmedia.com/en/EN_Direje.aspx?Jimare=42222.

46 Fazel Hawramy, "Iran willing to normalize ties with KRG, but not without change," *Al-Monitor*, December 21, 2017, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/fa/originals/2017/12/iran-krg-normalization-trade-referendum-leadership-change.html.

47 Andrew Snow, "Iraq's Impasse with Kurds Puts Post-ISIS Stabilization at Risk," U.S. Institute of Peace, January 11, 2018, https://www.usip.org/index.php/publications/2018/01/iraqs-impasse-kurds-puts-post-isis-stabilization-risk.

48 "After Iraqi Kurdistan's Thwarted Independence Bid," International Crisis Group, March 27, 2019, p. 15.

49 "Iraq PM Abadi orders reopening of Kurdish airports for international flights," *Reuters*, March 15, 2018 https://www.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds-airports/iraq-pm-abadi-orders-reopening-of-kurdish-airports-for-international-flights-idUSL8N1QX3Z8; and "Baghdad to Pay Salaries of Peshmerga, Civil Servants in Kurdistan," *Asharq al-Awsat*, March 18, 2018, https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1209981/baghdad-pay-salaries-peshmerga-civil-servants-kurdistan.

Prime Minister Masrour Barzani and Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani discuss the latest developments in the Kurdistan Region, Iraq, and the Middle East, January 2020. (gov.krd)

KRG, like former Prime Minister Maliki.[50]

After the national elections, KRG leadership made shaping a new partnership with Baghdad a key priority. The election results gave the Kurdish parties a solid negotiation position, despite widespread reports of election fraud and irregularities in the new electronic voting system.[51] The KDP won 25 seats, the PUK 19, Gorran 5, and Young Generation 4, with the smaller parties winning a few seats as well.[52] In response to the election, a KDP member of parliament—paraphrasing Niccolò Machiavelli—emphasized a return to «pragmatism" saying, "Kurds should take steps that can yield direct results for them, not think of how things ought to be, or how they are ideally. We need to reach agreements with those with real power in Baghdad."[53]

During the government formation process, the KDP and PUK, even if rivals in Iraqi Kurdistan and no longer part of a unified parliamentary bloc in Baghdad, still pursued their interests together in negotiations with the largest groups in the Iraqi Parliament, Fatah and Sairoun. Based on behind-the-scene-deals, KRG leadership secured the key position of finance minister in the new cabinet and carefully traded political support for specific demands for allocations from the 2019 federal budget to support KRG finances and to increase payments to support Peshmerga and public sector salaries. After securing these concessions, Kurdish officials welcomed the nomination Adel Abdul Mahdi as prime minister, whom they viewed as promising for future Erbil-Baghdad relations, given his good relations with the Kurdish leadership.[54]

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50 "VP Maliki says Iraq has to help Kurdistan before it's too late," *Rudaw*, December 23, 2017, https://www.rudaw.net/english/interview/23122017.

51 "World Report 2019 – Iraq," Freedom House, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/iraq.

52 Toon Mansour, "The 2018 Iraqi Federal Elections a Population in Transition?," LSE Middle East Centre, July 2018, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/89698/7/MEC_Iraqi-elections_Report_2018.pdf.

53 Interview with KDP member of Council of Representatives of Iraq, August 15, 2018, Baghdad, Iraq.

54 Interview with KDP member of Council of Representatives of Iraq, August 15, 2018, Baghdad, Iraq.

Déjà Vu?

The Iraqi Kurds now find themselves pursuing political accommodation with political leaders in Iraq by sharing influence, positions, and financial interests. This pattern is like KDP and PUK actions in every election since the 2003 U.S. invasion.[55] Ostensibly, forging tactical alliances in Baghdad helped realize some Kurdish priorities in 2018, with the exception of a settlement on Kirkuk and the Disputed Territories. Yet, such deal-making renders short-lived results and is by itself an insufficient step towards building a sustainable policy. A sudden change in domestic politics or escalation between the United States and Iran could break the fragile deals between Kurdish and Shiite parties and reverse the KRG's political gains.

The tactical alliance with the major blocs that make up the Adel Abdul Mahdi government has held up but is at risk of collapsing as Mahdi resigned following the outbreak of mass protests in October 2019. As protests erupted, KRG leaders stressed that instability in Baghdad will have negative consequences for the Kurdistan Region and that the situation presents a challenge for both the KRG and Iraq's federal government.[56] As a result, KRG leaders reiterated their commitment to the Mahdi government, but have sought to appease the protesters by signaling support for political changes that they are demanding.[57] KRG leadership emphasized that Mahdi deserved more time to address the grievances, which include corruption, unemployment, and urgently needed reforms. Yet, Mahdi's resignation has encouraged some Shiite political parties, previously in convenient alliance with the Kurds, to leverage threats to change the constitution's previsions on the Disputed Territories and budget transfers to pressure the KRG into supporting their preferred candidate.

Similarly, during the peak of the U.S.-Iranian escalation over rocket attacks and the killing of Qasem Soleimani, a major general in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and commander of its Quds Force, the KRG sought to remain neutral, owing to its strong relations with Washington and Tehran.[58] When Shiite political blocs convened parliament to vote on a bill calling for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq, Kurdish lawmakers in Baghdad boycotted the session on the grounds that it lacked necessary consultations and that ISIS still posed a security threat to Iraq and Kurdistan region.[59] Top KRG officials stressed that their priority in the crisis was the safety of the people in the Kurdistan Region and that all Kurdish parties stood united in supporting de-escalation and exercised efforts to not be entangled in the instability.[60] This prudent approach allowed the KRG to balance relations with two states.[61] Former KRG President Barzani described this approach as the "path of reason and wisdom,"

55 "After Iraqi Kurdistan's Thwarted Independence Bid," International Crisis Group, p. 9.

56 "Interview with Masrour Barzani, KRG prime minister," MERI Forum, November 6, 2019, https://bit.ly/32N8qiQ.

57 Dana Taib Menmy, "Iraqi Kurdistan authorities decry protest suppression," *Al-Monitor*, February 12, 2020, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/02/iraq-protest-kurdistan-allawi.html.

58 Lauren Williams, "The Kurds are again caught in the crossfire, now between U.S. and Iran," Lowy Institute, January 22, 2020, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/kurds-are-caught-crossfire-between-us-and-iran.

59 Hamza Mustafa, "Kurdish-Shiite Dispute over US Troops Ends their 'Historic Alliance' in Iraq," *Asharq Al-Awsa*, January 18, 2020, https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/2088461/kurdish-shiite-dispute-over-us-troops-ends-their-%E2%80%98historic-alliance%E2%80%99-iraq.

60 KRG presidency, press conference read-out, January 8, 2020, https://president.gov.krd/it-is-not-in-iraqs-interest-to-fall-into-the-problems-of-the-region; and KRG prime minister press statement, 8 January 2020, https://gov.krd/english/news-and-announcements/posts/2020/january/krg-discusses-the-latest-developments-in-iraq-and-the-middle-east.

61 Amberin Zaman, "Iraq's Kurds weigh opportunities, risks in wake of Soleimani killing," *Al-Monitor*, January 7, 2020, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/01/iraq-kurds-opportunity-risk-soleimani-killing-iraq-tensions.html#ixzz6AqHDLBbG.

Prime Minister Barzani speaks to the Kurdistan Parliament after his inaguration, 2019. (gov.krd)

which would not allow the Kurds to get involved in any proxy war.[62] However, maintaining perfect neutrality may not be possible, especially as the Kurds measure which potential political party offers them the best options for Kurdish interests during negotiations.

The tactical alliances in Baghdad allowed the KRG leadership to focus political attention and resources on internal affairs, following tumultuous years of war, economic and humanitarian crisis, and policy setbacks. The downside of this approach is the lack of longer-term strategic engagement, as a result of individual leaders' maneuvering to maintain influence and positions in KRG and Iraqi politics. A PUK parliamentarian stated, "In our Middle East neighborhood, there is currently nothing 'long-term,' we have to live and survive this turbulent period. If we manage to do that, we will gradually focus our efforts on longer projects and strategies. Today, that is not possible; not only for us, but everyone, look at the entire region."[63]

For the past year, KRG officials have expressed a serious commitment to resume playing an active role in Baghdad at federal institutions following the disastrous outcome of the independence referendum.[64] There is no clear outline for this "active role" even though it draws on experiences from the 2003-2006 period when the KDP and PUK sincerely participated in creating the constitutional and governmental framework of post-Saddam Iraq. Their role is instead shaped gradually through interaction at the parliament, presidency, and various ministries. It remains to be seen how, or if, it can consolidate outcomes.

The KRG has repeatedly faced challenges in forming a long-term and comprehensive policy for governance in the KRG and for relations with Baghdad. It is essential for the KRG to identify mid-term goals for its Baghdad policy beyond its main focus on resolving the Disputed Territories, revenue sharing agreements, and oil and gas legislation. While these disputes have existed for a long time, the KRG should identify and develop a strategy that could ensure the region leverage

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62 Masoud Barzani, Twitter, January 7, 2020, https://twitter.com/masoud_barzani/status/1214602424062816258.
63 Interview with PUK MP in Kurdistan Parliament, Erbil, Iraq, August 22, 2018.
64 Interview with senior Kurdish official in KRG, Erbil, Iraq, September 28, 2018.

Prime Minister Masrour Barzani with President Barham Salih in Baghdad, July 2019 (gov.krd)

in the central government's decision-making despite recurrent cycles of instability.

Building long-term commitment and capacity to engage in broader policy issues in Baghdad is key for the KRG. Its active engagement in federal institutions should not be limited to ministerial positions, but also comprise mid and senior levels. The KRG's protectionist rationale during the war against ISIS had failed to see Kurdish interests beyond its immediate demographic borders, banking on misinterpreted promises of Western support. The KRG is in the process of broadening and conceptualizing a new vision for its role in Baghdad and regionally, which requires leadership and strategy—as the past offers limited guidance.

An important resource in this regard, beyond members of parliament, is the remaining Kurdish civil servants and diplomats in Baghdad, who started their careers in 2005-2006 working in different Iraqi ministries and who have developed relevant competencies for engaging in governmental and parliamentary processes in Baghdad. A Kurdish senior official in an Iraqi ministry stated:

As Kurds, we should have invested more at national level in Baghdad, it is easier to preserve and advocate Kurdish rights and self-rule in Baghdad, admittedly, than in Ankara or Tehran. At a point, we shifted our attention to external actors. There have unquestionably been grave failures in Baghdad's policies in the past ten years, indeed part of it against the KRG, we know this well and do not make illusions about the challenges here, but we can consolidate and advance Kurdish affairs here. This potential should not be lost.[65]

In Baghdad, however, dynamics in governmental institutions are not what they were in the formative years of 2004-2008 when the new Iraqi political system was created. How the KRG's leadership can navigate in Baghdad at a time when street protests have challenged the government and the entire political establishment remains to be seen. In February 2020, the KRG was still diligently pursuing negotiations with Prime Minister-designate Mohammed Tawfik Allawi on budget, security, and appointing new ministers.[66]

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65 Interview with senior Kurdish civil servant in the Iraqi government, Baghdad, Iraq, August 23, 2018.
66 Mohammad Rwandzy, "Iraq's Allawi is committed to Kurdish share of federal budget: MP," *Rudaw*, February 20, 2020, https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/200220201.

Regional Policy: Stability and Reform

The new KRG government is focused on securing regional consensus by offering Kurdish residents economic recovery, security, and political stability. Prime Minister Masrour Barzani's official discourse is focused on developing a "strong and prosperous Kurdistan region" through committed and effective leadership to reduce corruption and bureaucratic dysfunctions.[67]

Barzani appointed predominantly new faces to ministerial positions, with the objective to advance social and economic life. A large part of the KRG's ambitious agenda is focused on financial and administrative reform aimed at improving governance.[68] This focus is believed to have wide public appeal and has long been a key demand of the younger generation. There are no indicators that the main structural problems in KRG, such as cronyism, rentier economy, and partisan control over public sector and security forces, will be uprooted or even significantly tackled through the reform package.[69]

The new government, nevertheless, intended to present a reform bill before parliament within 100 days.[70] Two reform committees have been established for negotiations with Baghdad on budget and oil revenues, and on security in the Disputed Territories.[71] A prominent Gorran parliamentarian stated, "There are two ways to address the need for reform in the KRG, first is to criticize and condemn corruption, theft, mafia rule, you name it, and in the end you gain nothing, or second, is to lobby for the reform law, to enrich it, and extend it to the budget, custom revenues, energy resources, etc."[72] It is unclear to what extent Prime Minister Barzani can deliver on the proclaimed reform program and how his leadership will distinguish itself from his predecessors. In a speech marking his first 100 days in office, Barzani publicly announced achievements in improving relations with the federal government of Baghdad, fighting corruption, restoring transparency in public affairs, strengthening e-governance, and ending excessive bureaucratic procedures across government offices.[73] Opposition figures claimed that it was too early to assess efficiency, and that it ultimately was the "people who should evaluate the government's performance."[74]

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67 "KRG Convenes to Discuss the Latest Developments in Iraq," Kurdistan Regional Government, October 30, 2019 https://gov.krd/english/news-and-announcements/posts/2019/october/krg-convenes-to-discuss-the-latest-developments-in-iraq.

68 "KRG Outlines of New Cabinet Agenda," Kurdistan Regional Government, https://gov.krd/english/government/agenda.

69 Robert Smith, "Reading Polanyi in Erbil: understanding socio-political factors in the development of Iraqi Kurdistan," *Globalizations*, vol. 15, no. 7 (August 2018), pp. 1045-1057, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14747731.2018.1498178; "The Kurdistan Region of Iraq—Reforming the Economy for Shared Prosperity and Protecting the Vulnerable," World Bank, May 30, 2016, http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/672671468196766598; Kawa Hassan, "Kurdistan's Politicized Society Confronts a Sultanistic System," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 2015, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC_54_Hassan_11.pdf; and Triska Hamid, "Corruption and Cronyism Hinder Kurdistan," *Financial Times*, September 5, 2012, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/ea716668-f759-11e1-8c9d-00144feabdc0.html.

70 "Draft reform law to be sent to the Kurdistan parliament soon: KRG," *NRT*, November 4, 2019, http://www.nrtagency.com/En/News.aspx?id=16452&MapID=1.

71 Qubad Talabani, Deputy KRG PM, Interview with GKSAT, November 19, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=424184954940322.

72 Ali Hama Saleh, MP Gorran, Interview with Rudaw, November 25, 2019, https://bit.ly/2sheGTj.

73 "KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani's Speech Marking Cabinet's First 100 Days in Office," Kurdistan Regiona Government, January 7, 2020, https://gov.krd/english/government/the-prime-minister/activities/posts/2019/december/prime-minister-masrour-barzanis-speech-marking-cabinets-first-100-days-in-office.

74 Zhelwan Z. Wali, "Parties divided on KRG's first 100 day track record," *Rudaw*, December 10, 2019, https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/101220191.

The KRG's defense sector reform effort is a useful case study for comparative purposes. The defense reform effort has been guided by an "enhance and professionalize" rationale, combining capacity building with institutional reform.[75] Its objectives were set on increasing capabilities, ensuring efficient administrative procedures, modernizing training and equipment, and most challengingly, restructuring and unifying command lines. Also known as the "Peshmerga reform," the program was jointly developed by the KRG with the United States, United Kingdom, and Germany. The reform outlined a 31-point implementation plan covering legislation, ministerial re-organization, regional strategy, and federal cooperation.

Progress has been slow, according to international advisors working on the defense reform effort. The main challenges are related to well-known structural problems, such as "party politics and on-going vested interests of KDP and PUK political elites," along with the continued focus on short-term objectives.[76] Partisan control over security forces is an essential part of the parties' economic and political power, which is held tightly by the political elite. Over-estimating new equipment and technology in transforming overall performance and strategy has been among the clearest signs of short-sightedness. Institutional reform programs are ultimately political processes that require strong commitment from the KRG leadership; it cannot be resolved through technical expertise and capacity building only. Bringing party-controlled forces under the sole authority of the Peshmerga ministry has not yet occurred, despite continued technical support and pledges by KRG officials.[77]

Other parts of the reform plans—for example, reforms related to digitizing systems and electronic governance, or modernizing administrative procedures, which are more technical in nature—may nonetheless be implementable and successful.[78] Several international experts working in previous reform programs within the KRG—for example in defense, crisis management, and law enforcement—have underlined this point. One such official noted:

> There is a clear understanding and openness at ministerial and general director level in the KRG on the need for reform and change. My colleagues and I feel this on a daily and weekly basis: they want to improve, even when they don't exactly know how at a technical level. We see gradual change, even if slow. And this makes our engagement meaningful, yet again, the political 'firewalls' are the real problems, they need to be resolved.[79]

Such sector reforms and the willingness to implement them effectively have been easier to address at the technocratic level, but political buy-in remains elusive. For example, since 2014, the KRG has enhanced its crisis management capacity through the development of the Joint Crisis Coordination (JCC) center in the Ministry of Interior. The center reshaped administrative management through bureaucratic and technical reforms, which changed coordination and emergency response mechanisms in humanitarian or natural disasters.[80]

More broadly, critics have warned that this government, like the previous ones, will fail in advancing reforms related to reinforcing independent institutions, impartial oversight mechanisms, civil society engagement, or

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75 William Davies, "Peshmerga Reform Building an Accountable, Affordable, Capable Force for KRI and Iraq," Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance - International Security Sector Advisory Team (ISSAT), March 11, 2019, https://issat.dcaf.ch/fre/download/141717/2903611/Peshmerga%20Reform%20Overview%20%28ISSAT%29.pdf.

76 Davies, "Peshmerga Reform Building an Accountable, Affordable, Capable Force for KRI and Iraq," p. 3.

77 "KRG President reiterates support for Peshmerga Ministry reform," Kurdistan Regional Government, October 15, 2019, https://president.gov.krd/kmr/kurdistan-region-president-meets-top-uk-military-advisor/.

78 "KRG Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs Launches Portal for Job Seekers," *NRT*, November 6, 2019, http://www.nrttv.com/en/News.aspx?id=16521&MapID=1.

79 Interview with international advisor on crisis management capacity in the KRG, October 20, 2018; and Interview with international advisor on security sector reform, October 21, 2018.

80 "First ever crisis coordination and disaster preparedness centre in Kurdistan," *UNDP Iraq*, May 17, 2015, https://www.iq.undp.org/content/iraq/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2015/05/17/first-ever-crisis-coordination-and-disaster-preparedness-centre-in-kurdistan.html.

For the new generation in the Kurdistan Region—the millennials—the reforms should elevate government performance and ease the dependency of the youth and middle class on party networks. Like elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa region, historical legacies—such as the Kurdish struggle against Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath regime—fail to conceal social injustice and regression in democratic norms.

reducing nepotism.[81] Independent media and journalists have continued to face threats and remain vulnerable in the KRG. International human rights and press advocacy organizations have repeatedly called on the KRG to protect press freedom and freedom of expression more broadly.[82] Impunity in cases of violence against journalists is still of grave concern, and the lack of a truly independent judiciary and press regulation body has entrenched the structural problems.[83] One approach to dissent has also been to co-opt journalists through expansive partisan media platforms. A worrying trend in this context is that local fiefdoms have emerged in which party figures with far-reaching influence and control over security elements crackdown on journalists and dissidents.[84] The reference to fiefdom is to further contextualize the conduct of certain political branches or local leaders, rather than only portraying an overarching repressive apparatus per say. Leading political figures in the KRG have, during internal feuds, made such allegations publicly.[85]

Compared to the rest of Iraq, the Kurdistan Region has enjoyed relative stability and not faced mass protests akin to those in Basra in 2018 and the recent protests in Baghdad. Some of the root causes that have driven the protests in south and central Iraq, including corruption and lack of youth employment, are largely prevalent in the KRG. However, disappointment in previous waves of mass protest, tightened security control, crackdown on dissidents, and fear of political instability have discouraged similar levels of street mobilization in the Kurdistan Region.[86]

For the new generation in the Kurdistan Region—the millennials—the reforms should elevate government performance and ease the dependency of the youth and middle class on party networks. Like elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa region, historical legacies—such as the Kurdish struggle against Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath regime—fail to conceal social injustice and regression in democratic norms.[87] Geopolitical reverberations, in particular the disarray of the United States' announced withdrawal from Syria's Kurdish-populated areas and the subsequent Turkish invasion, shocked many Iraqi Kurds and may reinforce the impression that with all its shortcomings, the KRG remains the most stable and successful political experience of Kurdish autonomy. KRG officials regularly refer to this belief, stating that people want to return to normal life and that their top priorities are security, social peace, economic stability, and growth.

81 Kamal Chomani, "Kurdistan Region In a Time of Kurdish Crown Princes," *1001 Iraqi Thoughts*, December 28, 2018, https://1001iraqithoughts.com/2018/12/28/kurdistan-region-in-a-time-of-kurdish-crown-princes.

82 "Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Protesters Beaten, Journalists Detained," Human Rights Watch, April 15, 2018, https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/04/15/kurdistan-region-iraq-protesters-beaten-journalists-detained.

83 "Press freedom on 'brink of extinction' in Iraqi Kurdistan, journalists say," Committee to Protect Journalists, September 9, 2019, https://cpj.org/blog/2019/09/press-freedom-extinction-iraqi-kurdistan-puk-pdk.php.

84 "'There's no free media right now in Kurdistan': Kamal Chomani," *Deutsche Welle*, July 4, 2019.

85 See, tweet with video from Kurdsat News, where deputy prime minister refers to abuse of power, including attacks on journalists, by party figures. December 26, 2017, https://twitter.com/abdullahawez/status/945404008818249729.

86 Mariya Petkova, "Why are Iraqi Kurds not taking part in protests?," *Al Jazeera*, November 11, 2019, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/iraqi-kurds-part-protests-191111125744569.html.

87 Fantappie and Salih, "Kurdish Nationalism at an Impasse," Century Foundation.

KRG at a Crossroads

This chapter discussed how the KRG recalibrated its regional and external policy vis-à-vis the central government in Baghdad. It showed how new engagement with Baghdad emerged after the independence referendum controversy and military stand-off in Kirkuk and the Disputed Territories, which had resulted in a major failure with devastating political and economic consequences for the KRG.

By adopting a highly pragmatic strategy, KDP and PUK leadership managed to recover and consolidate their political stature in national and regional elections, despite serious reports of fraud and vote-rigging in several locations. The PUK also concluded its generational shift by electing Bafel Talabani. The elections brought forward new faces and a younger generation of politicians, who assumed ministerial and parliamentary seats.

But the new faces have not masked the old structures and might be set to maintain the status quo: partisan control over public institutions and security forces; oversized public sector; rentier economy; and high import dependency.

At a crossroads, KRG is in urgent need for reforms and improved governance. These are among the most critical demands of its young population—a generation that has no memory of the armed struggle against the Ba'th regime of Saddam Hussein. The KRG's top leadership has committed—at least rhetorically—to a policy that addresses public grievances. It is unclear if it can turn the tide, which in part depends on how well it can deliver on promised reform programs, and partly how it can change old patterns cemented by the old guard in the KDP and PUK, the traditional centers of power.

THE FUTURE OF THE POPULAR MOBILIZATION FORCES AFTER THE ASSASSINATION OF ABU MAHDI AL-MUHANDIS

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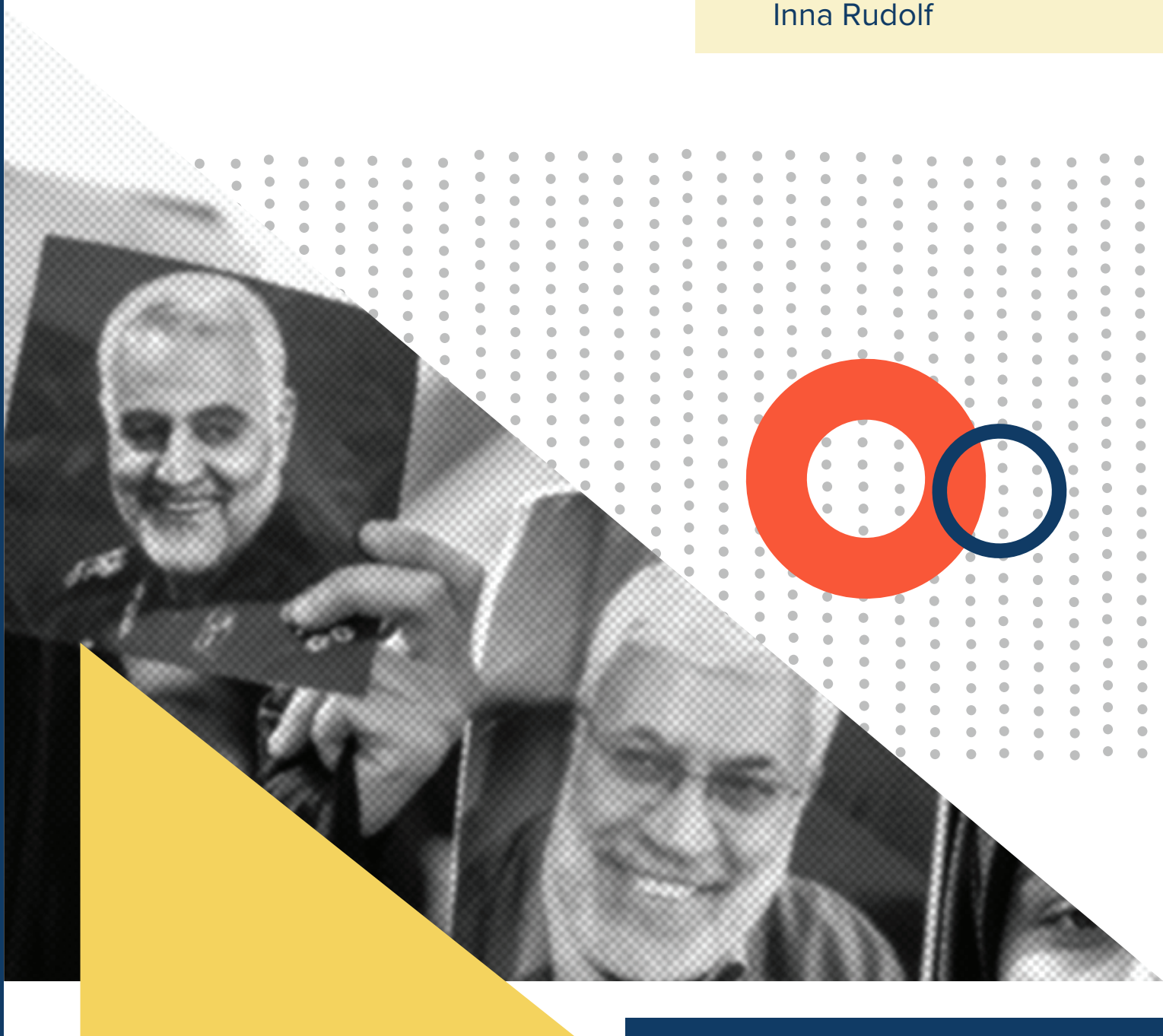
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The Future of the Popular Mobilization Forces after the Assassination of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis

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Abstract

By depriving the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) of its leading strategist, the assassination of Abu Mahdi Muhandis, the chief of staff of the PMF, delivered a significant blow to what U.S. officials regard en masse as Iran's Trojan Horse in Iraq. Building on interviews with PMF commanders and Iraqi officials, this chapter seeks to identify the imminent organizational hazards that arise for the still-amorphous paramilitary structure. Furthermore, the author explores the long-term opportunities for an incremental security sector reform tailored to the specificities of the Iraqi context. For that purpose, the author illustrates the instrumental role of the so-called resistance factions in the formative stages of the PMF, elaborating on the vision of Muhandis for institutional consolidation and concentration of systemic capabilities. In the aftermath of the assassination and subsequent leadership vacuum, the PMF's main shareholders must act in concert to safeguard the group's systemic gains. The different centers of gravity had to identify—and most importantly impose—a unifying figure with the authority and credibility to manage the inherited patronage networks. The intra-organizational diversity of opinions along with the factions' often contradictory agendas would require the newly appointed successor to appease those that are less well-connected and eager to renegotiate their hand within the contested PMF Commission.

Unknown Consequences

Never one to shy away from a bold and aggressive move, on the night of January 2, 2020, U.S. President Donald Trump authorized the assassination of Iranian Quds Force Major General Qasem Soleimani. The missile that hit Soleimani's convoy near the Baghdad airport also killed Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the chief of staff of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), known in Arabic as *al-hashd al-sha'abi* (*hashd* for short). Whether the American leadership considered eliminating Muhandis, one of the highest-ranking security officials of Iraq, beneficial or collateral damage remains unknown. Nevertheless, his legacy as an icon of the resistance, especially one designated as a terrorist by the United States, is likely to shape the institutional future of the PMF project.

What is clear is that, at least initially, the killings appeared to work against American interests in Iraq because they temporarily united a broad array of pro-Iranian factions, who are often in fierce competition for turfs and spoils, under the banner of anti-Americanism. Seizing the momentum of an immense wave of outrage over the U.S. violation of Iraqi sovereignty, these *muqawamist*[1] ("pro-resistance") factions then united nearly all political forces that represent Iraq's Shiite population into supporting, however reluctantly, their agenda of ending the American military presence in Iraq. On January 5, the Iraqi parliament passed a non-binding resolution calling on the government to cancel the agreement to host U.S. troops in Iraq, and caretaker Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi has since repeatedly vowed to implement this decision.

As illustrated, the killings seemingly ushered in a (potentially short-lived) honeymoon period within the habitually fractious section of Iraq's "axis of resistance."[2] Nevertheless, the cost of bringing closer the resistance-themed factions has not outweighed the serendipitous benefit to the United States.[3] By depriving the PMF of its leading strategist, the strike delivered a significant blow to what U.S. officials regard en masse as Iran's Trojan Horse in Iraq.[4] Building on interviews with PMF commanders and Iraqi officials, this chapter seeks to identify the imminent organizational hazards that arise for the still-amorphous paramilitary structure. Furthermore, the author will explore the long-term opportunities for an incremental security sector reform tailored to the specificities of the Iraqi context.[5] Moving beyond the Westphalian state-centric conceptualization of security will allow for reducing the tension between the ideal type of a state monopoly on the use of force and its flawed application on the ground.[6] For that purpose, the author will focus on the instrumental role of the so-called resistance factions in the formative stages of the PMF, elaborating on the vision of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis for institutional consolidation and concentration of systemic capabilities.

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1 Daniel Gerlach, "Are Shia Militias Jihadist?," Zenith, December 20, 2017, https://magazine.zenith.me/en/politics/jihadism-vs-muqawamism.

2 Elijah J. Magnier, "Fragmentation in the 'Axis of Resistance' Led to Soleimani's Death," Centre for Research on Globalization, January 5, 2020, https://www.globalresearch.ca/fragmentation-in-the-axis-of-resistance-led-to-soleimanis-death/5699939.

3 Rufat Ahmedzade, "With Soleimani Gone, Iran's Regional Hegemony Faces Setbacks," LSE Middle East Centre Blog, February 12, 2020, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/02/12/with-soleimani-gone-irans-regional-hegemony-faces-setbacks/?fbclid=IwAR2hZ1yF4mPVsSRRiD0OeCnvYyBlrd5JVN6mDCqbOIqa--fxKPf170V8Hzs.

4 Ranj Alaaldin, "What will happen to Iraqi Shiite militias after one key leader's death?" Monkey Cage Blog, *Washington Post*, February 29, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/02/29/what-will-happen-iraqi-shiite-militias-after-one-key-leaders-death/.

5 Inna Rudolf, "The Hashd's Popular Gambit: Demystifying PMU Integration in Post-IS Iraq," ICSR Report, November 12, 2019, https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/ICSR-Report-The-Hashd's-Popular-Gambit-Demystifying-PMU-Integration-in-Post%E2%80%90IS-Iraq.pdf.

6 Ursula Schroeder & Fairlie Chappuis, "New Perspectives on Security Sector Reform: The Role of Local Agency and Domestic Politics," *International Peacekeeping* vol. 21 (June 2014); and Nadine Ansorg and Eleanor Gordon, "Co-Operation, Contestation and Complexity in Post-Conflict Security Sector Reform," Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding vol. 13, no. 1 (January 2019): pp. 2–24.

Qasem Soleimani (left) with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (right) at a 2017 ceremony commemorating the father of Soleimani, in Musalla, Tehran. (Fars News Agency/Wikimedia Commons)

U.S. paratroopers assigned to 1st Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division deploy to the Middle East following the Baghdad airstrike, 4 January 2020. (Spc. Hubert Delany/Wikimedia Commons)

Rising from the Shadows

While the creation of the PMF is primarily associated with the collapse of the Iraqi army in the face of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS) and its ragtag militias in summer 2014, the original plans for setting up structures for popular mobilization predated the fall of Mosul to Islamic State fighters in early June of that year. According to discussions held during a strategic meeting of the Shia-led National Alliance in April 2014, a blueprint for creating so-called popular defense units had long been in the making.[7] Aware of the alarming state of Iraq's internally polarized security forces, then-Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki had given the green light for the creation of so-called *mujahideen* wings. This breed of militants was to be grounded in the spirit of the transnational Islamic Resistance movement and to act as an insurance policy for the survival-driven Shia-led state project.

As Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis indicated in an interview with the author, the raw material for this experiment was to be provided by the abundant cadres of Shia resistance veterans who had been formally, though never effectively, demobilized.[8] While the majority of the units reactivated in 2014 had accumulated insurgent know-how while fighting American forces during the post-2003 invasion period, others such as the Badr brigades, could look back on decades of guerrilla experience resisting Saddam Hussein's Ba'th Party regime with Iranian support.

Therefore, despite omitting Shia-specific references and calling upon the entire able-bodied population to enlist in the ranks of Iraqi security forces, the historic fatwa by the supreme Shiite religious authority, Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, bestowed moral legitimacy upon a scheme for security sector hybridization already in motion. The debilitating vacuum following the disintegration of the Iraqi army justified the envisioned popular mobilization, whose advocates were keen on resorting to those pre-existing factions. Due to the groups' experience with logistics, procurement, and administration, their reactivated units were tasked with managing the overflow of volunteers, eager to respond to Al-Sistani's call to arms.

Moreover, the intended ambiguity of the catchphrase *'fasa'il'* (factions)—used widely within the Iraqi public discourse—allowed PMF-affiliated figures and *hashd* proponents to shrug off responsibility by implicating a semi-anonymized collective of autonomously operating warlords. The latter were then held accountable for the PMF's track record of sect-coded human rights violations.[9] Claiming on numerous occasions that these factions' leadership did not exceed 10% of the overall PMF membership, representatives of the now state-sanctioned agency argued that the externally driven preoccupation with the veteran militia elements should, by no means, eclipse the sacrifices of the thousands of young volunteers who had given their lives to defend Iraq.[10]

Despite the patriotic touch, such whitewashing attempts fail to conceal that despite their perhaps limited quantitative representation,

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7 Nibras Kazimi, "The Origins of the PMUs," *Talisman Gate*, July 1, 2016, https://talisman-gate.com/2016/07/01/the-origins-of-the-pmus/.
8 Author interview with Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, Baghdad, April 22, 2018.
9 "Iraq: Possible War Crimes by Shia Militia," Human Rights Watch, January 31, 2016, https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/31/iraq-possible-war-crimes-shia-militia; "Iraq: Turning a Blind Eye: The Arming of the PMU," Amnesty International, March 1, 2017, https://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/iraq-turning-a-blind-eye-the-arming-of-the-pmu/; and "Iraq: Fleeing Civilians Being Punished for Daesh's Crimes," Amnesty International, February 16, 2017, https://www.amnesty.org.uk/iraq-isis-is-daesh-crimes-revenge-attacks-fleeing-civilians.
10 Inna Rudolf, "From Battlefield to Ballot Box: Contextualising the Rise and Evolution of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Units," ICSR Report, May 30, 2018, https://icsr.info/2018/05/30/battlefield-ballot-box-contextualising-rise-evolution-iraqs-popular-mobilisation-units/.

Mourners in Azadi Square, Tehran. (Maryam Kamyab, Mohammad Mohsenifar/Wikimedia Commons)

battle-hardened resistance factions, such as Kata'ib Hezbollah (Hezbollah Brigades), Badr, and their various outgrowths, still dominate key directorates under the cosmetically reformed command and control structure of the PMF.[11] Pursuing his reading of a Nash equilibrium (a competition wherein which no participant can gain by a unilateral change of strategy if the strategies of the others remain unchanged), Muhandis established a complex system of selective power redistribution.[12] Access to state funding and the veneer of legality that came with the institutionalization of the PMF incentivized these factions' commanders to

keep one foot in the newly created Popular Mobilization Commission (PMC) under the token leadership of Chairman Falih Al-Fayyadh. The informal arrangement allowed the groups to preserve underground facilities, scaling up their clandestine military operations unimpeded, and enhancing extralegal economic activities.[13]

11 Michael Knights, "Iran's Expanding Militia Army in Iraq: The New Special Groups," *CTS Sentinel*, vol. 12, no. 7, August 2019, https://ctc.usma.edu/irans-expanding-militia-army-iraq-new-special-groups/.

12 Mustafa Hasan, "Abu Mahdi's Legacy and the Future of Sunni-Shi'a Relations in Iraq," LSE Middle East Centre Blog, March 4, 2020, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/03/04/abu-mahdis-legacy-and-the-future-of-sunni-shia-relations-in-iraq/.

13 Tim Eaton, Christine Cheng, Renad Mansour, Peter Salisbury, Jihad Yazigi, and Lina Khatib, "Conflict Economies in the Middle East and North Africa," Chatham House Report, June 2019, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2019-06-21-Conflict-Economies-MENA_0.pdf; and Mac Skelton and Zmkan Ali Saleem, "Iraq's Disputed Internal Boundaries after ISIS: Heterogeneous Actors Vying for Influence," London School of Economics, February 2019, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100100/.

The Making of a Popular Architect

Delving into Muhandis' biography, this section will track his evolution into an icon of the armed resistance, which granted him unparalleled leverage over the majority of the aforementioned Iran-aligned militia factions. When discussing a sequence of public disagreements between Al-Fayyadh and Muhandis, a prominent commander from the resistance factions' camp attributed the clash of opinions to the following critical distinction between the two profiles: "Falih Fayyadh is, after all, an official figure, while Abu Mahdi is a warrior (*mujahid*), a revolutionary (*tha'ir*). You can't expect him to engage in diplomacy."[14] Muhandis' jihadist legacy had earned him a competitive advantage vis-à-vis his nominal superior, who lacked his militaristic charisma. Born in 1954 in Basra, Jamal Ja'far Mohammed Ali Al Ibrahim, a.k.a. Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, graduated in 1977 from the Baghdad School of Technology. After completing his mandatory service, he worked as a civil engineer at the Basra Iron and Steel Factory, earning himself his popular *nom du guerre* Muhandis (the engineer/architect). As he recounted in an interview for the Persian language platform *Raja News* in 2010, he joined the Daʿwa Party in the early 1970s, when prominent party leaders were severely persecuted by the Ba'th regime.[15]

Upon being implicated in anti-regime activities following the arrest and execution of Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir Al-Sadr, the ideological godfather of the Islamic Daʿwa Party, Muhandis fled to Kuwait in 1980, where he was later accused of having co-orchestrated the 1983 bombings of the American and French embassies—an act of terrorism he persistently denied. Wanted by Saddam Hussein at the same time, Muhandis relocated to Iran. Leaving the Daʿwa Party to

dedicate himself to the armed resistance, he then entered the Iraqi Mujahideen circle, which had consolidated around the figure of Abu Hussein Al-Khalisi in the conviction that jihad and violent confrontation with the Ba'th regime were "the only way forward." Establishing a reputation within the Badr Corps, Muhandis rose to the rank of commander, joining the organization's Supreme Assembly in 1985 and attaining a position in the eight-member Command Council headed by Sayyid Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim.[16]

Despite relinquishing his position with the Badr Corps in 2002 over reported "differences in opinion," Muhandis underlined that he maintained a constructive exchange both with his comrades in arms and the leadership of Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), renamed the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI or SIIC) in 2007. After the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, he returned to Iraq, where he proudly claimed to have navigated the negotiations around the formation of the Iraqi Interim Government headed by Ayad Allawi, also supposedly contributing to resolving disputes with Muqtada al-Sadr. According to his account in the *Raja News* interview, the Americans never came to terms with the role he played in facilitating the National Iraqi Alliance and sought, therefore, during the term of then-U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad to marginalize his influence by releasing a row of allegedly fabricated accusations.[17]

In January 2008, the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated Muhandis "for threatening the peace and stability of Iraq and the Government of Iraq," condemning his ties with

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14 Author interview with a PMF Commander, Najaf, October 2019.

15 "Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes kist? [Who is Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis?]," *Raja News*, March 19, 2015, http://rajanews.com/news/205949.

16 "Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes kist? [Who is Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis?]," *Raja News*.

17 "Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes kist? [Who is Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis?]," *Raja News*.

Ali Khamenei and other Iranian officials mourn Soleimani (Wikimedia Commons)

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Lebanon-based Hezbollah.[18] Without downplaying his longstanding relations with the IRGC and his friendship with Qasem Soleimani, Muhandis underlined that these ties and the mutual trust had evolved during an intense period spent as a regime dissident on Iranian soil: "I have lived in Iran for 20 years, how can I not have relationships? I was a military and political official in the Iraqi opposition, and I wanted to establish connections with different sides, but to think Iran works in Iraq through me is stupid."[19] More importantly, Muhandis never ceased to frame his engagement with the Iran-backed pro-resistance factions as a conscious act of alliance-building, serving Iraqi national interests first, which he, in turn, defined and interpreted per his own cognitive biases.[20]

His self-perception as a devout patriot with at least

a proclaimed preference for a representative political system accommodating all of Iraq's ethno-sectarian identities is also reflected in his strategic push for greater inclusivity within the PMF's rank and file.[21] Despite emphasizing the authority of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in his video testament released after his death, Muhandis implied in first-person plural narration that the goal of the PMF's volunteers (to which he proudly counted himself) is to serve all segments of Iraqi society, "no matter if those are Sunnis, Shiites, Christians or Yezidis."[22] As this author has argued elsewhere on the roots of Sunni participation in the PMF, Muhandis understood the added value of projecting a cross-sectarian image, especially with PMF-majority Shia factions standing accused of the violent repression of their compatriots in liberated areas.[23] Muhandis, therefore, did not hesitate to reach out to Sunni tribal elements

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18 "Treasury Designates Individuals, Entity Fueling Iraqi Insurgency," U.S. Department of the Treasury Press Center, January 1, 2008, https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp759.aspx.

19 "Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes kist? [Who is Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis?]," *Raja News.*

20 Daniel Gerlach, "The Man Who Died by Suleimani's Side," *Zenith*, January 14, 2020, https://magazine.zenith.me/en/politics/iraqi-militia-leader-abu-mahdi-al-muhandis.

21 "Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes kist? [Who is Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis?]," *Raja News.*

22 "The will of the martyr Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis," *Al Alam TV*, January 3, 2020, https://www.alalamtv.net/news/4652496/شهاد-بالفيديو--وصية-ابا-دي-الشهيد-مهدي-المهندس.

23 Inna Rudolf, "The Sunnis of Iraq's 'Shia' Paramilitary Powerhouse," The Century Foundation, February 13, 2020, https://tcf.org/content/report/sunnis-iraqs-shia-paramilitary-powerhouse/.

Iraqi women attend the funeral of Qassem Soleimani, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and eight others in Baghdad. (Middle East Online)

and minority communities, offering their leaders a lucrative entry point into the PMF parallel economy, access to funding, and a rubber-stamped mandate to defend their hyper-local interests and assets. Nevertheless, as pointed out by the former head of the Anbar Salvation Council Hamid al-Hais, the extent of institutional inclusion remained heavily dependent on those leaders' loyalty and did not entail veto powers.[24] And yet, the overall bonus package tied to a formalized PMF affiliation seemed attractive enough to brush off the shortcomings, as well as the implied reputational damage of being perceived as a Muhandis lackey—regardless of whether one was self-driven, bought off, or coerced.

The unmatched ability to forge connections with unlikely allies helped Muhandis to win over political opportunists and long-neglected underdogs, who granted him, if not their heartfelt trust, then at least the benefit of the doubt in the hope that cooperation with him would eventually be beneficial for their self-interests. The emotional outpouring of condolences after his recent death from his most devoted Sunni mourners, such as Iraqi cleric Khaled al-Mulla and

PMF commander Yazan al-Jabouri, is a testimony to Muhandis' undisputed charisma, which often transcended all sorts of sectarian, tribal, and ethnic cleavages.[25] This hard-won confidence, along with his battlefield credibility recognized across the various units, allowed him to pursue unchallenged his game plan for institutional consolidation. His systemic approach was aimed at concentrating decision-making power and core operational capabilities in the hands of tried, proven, and trusted cadres of the so-called Islamic Resistance factions. Brought to prominence by Muhandis in 2007, one of these primary beneficiaries has remained Kata'ib Hezbollah. The Kata'ib Hezbollah brand stands for a nebulous network-like organization with multiple spin-offs and a fluid chain of command.[26] Designated in July 2009 by the U.S. Department of State as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, Kata'ib Hezbollah belongs to the "syndicate" of Iran-sponsored Shi'ite militant "special groups," which have been held responsible for the death of at least 603 American troops serving in Iraq.[27]

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24 Author interview with Hamid al-Hais, Baghdad, December 4, 2018.

25 Inna Rudolf, "The Sunnis of Iraq's 'Shia' Paramilitary Powerhouse;" and @yazanjiboury, Twitter (in Arabic), January 3, 2020, https://twitter.com/yazanjiboury/status/1213150894801539074/photo/1.

26 Official Arabic Homepage of Kata'ib Hezbollah, http://www.kataibhizbollah.com/; Walter Posch, "Shiite Militias in Iraq and Syria," Report for the Austrian Ministry of Defence, December 2017, https://www.academia.edu/34182023/Schiitische_Milizen_im_Irak_und_in_Syrien; and "Kata'ib Hezbollah: We're Ready to Fight American Troops in Iraq," Middle East Institute, September 15, 2017, https://www.mei.edu/content/io/kata-ib-hezbollah-we-re-ready-fight-american-troops-iraq.

27 Kyle Rempfer, "Iran killed more US troops in Iraq than previously known, Pentagon says," *Military Times*, April 4, 2019, https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2019/04/04/iran-killed-more-us-troops-in-iraq-than-previously-known-pentagon-says/; and "Treasury Designates Individual, Entity Posing Threat to Stability in Iraq," U.S. Department of Treasury, https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg195.aspx.

Selective Institutionalization

This section investigates how different steps paving the PMF's path towards institutionalization fed into Muhandis' vision for a self-governing, yet state-endorsed, security agency with a distinct ideological underpinning. Keen on codifying the status of the fledgling Popular Mobilization Commission in accordance with the Iraqi constitution, on February 22, 2016, then-Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi released Executive Order No. 91, stipulating that the PMF should be organized along the model of Iraq's renowned Counter-Terrorism Services (CTS).[28] Accordingly, the PMF should be "an independent military formation," while remaining embedded within the Iraqi armed forces, answering directly to the prime minister as Commander-in-Chief. In its original text, the order subjected the PMF body to the same legislation applied to any regular military branch, "except concerning age and education requirements."[29] In its fifth article, the order emphasized that its members were obliged to cut ties with all sorts of socio-political or partisan formations.[30] The enforcement remains problematic as even in the case of a formally announced dissociation from the military wings of their political movements, leaders like Qais al-Khazali have still preserved a level of influence over their PMF-registered brigades.[31]

Building on Executive Order No. 91, the Iraqi parliament passed in November 2016 the

highly debated Hashd law.[32] Following a similar structural logic, the law stipulated that the PMF is to remain "an independent military formation and part of the Iraqi armed forces," answering to the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. Accordingly, its members will continue to be subjected to the aforementioned existing military regulations and are further prohibited from maintaining any links to political, partisan, and social organizations.[33] The legislation's wording cemented the duality already licensed through the designedly ambiguous executive order.[34] By bestowing upon the PMF a veneer of legality without curtailing the prerogatives of their state-sanctioned "independence," the law has allowed the majority of the infamous Iranian-backed factions to interpret this ambivalence to their advantage. Preserving their presence within the PMF Commission has thus enabled them to selectively play the state actor card with hardly any strings attached, let alone standardized penalties.[35]

Follow-up efforts to enforce binding disciplinary measures included, among others, former Prime Minister Al-Abadi's March 2018 decree.[36] In exchange for equalizing salaries with members of the Iraqi security forces, the decree once again sought to impose upon all PMF members the same military code of conduct as the one observed by employees of the Ministry of the Interior and

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28 "Al-Abadi orders the restructuring and reorganization of the Popular Mobilization," *Al-Nasriya*, July 26, 2016, http://www.nasiriaelc.com/2016/07/89972.

29 "Al-Abadi orders the restructuring and reorganization of the Popular Mobilization," *Al-Nasriya*.

30 "Al-Abadi orders the restructuring and reorganization of the Popular Mobilization," *Al-Nasriya*.

31 Author interview with a PMF Commander, Karbala, October 2019.

32 "The Hashd al-Sha'bi Law," full text in Arabic, *Al Sumaria*, November 26, 2016, https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/187029/السومرية-تنشر-نص-قانون-الحشد-الشعبي.

33 "The Hashd al-Sha'bi Law," *Al Sumaria*.

34 "The Hashd al-Sha'bi Law," *Al Sumaria*.

35 Inna Rudolf, "From Battlefield to Ballot Box: Contextualizing the Rise and Evolution of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Units," ICSR Report, May 30, 2018, https://icsr.info/2018/05/30/battlefield-ballot-box-contextualising-rise-evolution-iraqs-popular-mobilisation-units/.

36 "Iraq's Abadi Inducts Iran-Linked Militias into Security Forces," Middle East Eye, March 9, 2018, http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraqs-abadi-inducts-iran-linked-militias-security-forces-1660597837.

the Ministry of Defense.[37] Nevertheless, the prospect of government-funded entitlements did not seem to tempt any of the staunch pro-resistance figures into contemplating scenarios of a formalized assimilation within the Iraqi Ministry of Defense, let alone dissolution within the structures of the Iraqi army.[38] Preserving an autonomous standing vis-à-vis conventional state security bodies was perceived as an absolute must to protect the PMF's mission-driven volunteers from the corruptive influences that had allegedly "compromised the military morale and integrity of the armed forces' rank and file."[39] And yet, Muhandis acknowledged that greater institutional independence also required more efficient practices of self-regulation.

Responding to pressure to rein in undisciplined elements and clear the organization's reputation, in March 2019, the PMF Commission launched an ambitious policing campaign targeting so-called "fake units" accused of running sham offices without any formal PMF authorization.[40] Among those targeted was the head of the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Forces (to be differentiated from Liwa Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas LAFA), Sheikh Aws al-Khafaji, referred to by Al-Tamimi as a "Sadrist splinter" following his clash with Muqtada Al-Sadr.[41] Despite having gained prominence by mobilizing Iraqi Shi'ite fighters on the side of the Syrian regime, Al-Khafaji had not refrained from harshly criticizing Bashar Al-Assad's Iranian allies

for their interference in Iraq's domestic affairs.[42] In interviews with the author, Iraqi security analysts have pointed out that Al-Khafaji's open condemnation of Iranian policies in the country has to an extent invited the PMF's leadership to send a warning reminding that certain unwritten red lines are not to be crossed.[43] As Al-Khafaji's scarecrow episode demonstrates, the publicized arrests were not merely limited to improving the cohesion within the heterogeneous and internally divided umbrella. Moreover, the punitive measures were designed to curb bureaucratic infighting and tighten further Muhandis' administrative grip on the PMF Commission.[44]

Any further steps undertaken by then-Prime Minister Mahdi could therefore hardly impede Muhandis' march towards greater authority. On July 29, Mahdi had released Executive Order No. 237, which was prematurely celebrated as a decisive move towards reining in the "troublemakers" within the PMF.[45] Despite some initial wishful interpretation of the content by Iraq watchers as an overture to comprehensive military integration, one could infer that Muhandis' grand design for a semi-autonomous and institutionally entrenched PMF had now been rubber-stamped by the Commander-in-Chief, with some fixable stipulations.[46] Indeed, the document prohibited the pursuit of commercial interests as well as any involvement in the political process. Nevertheless, neither of the two requirements

37 "Iraq's Abadi Inducts Iran-Linked Militias into Security Forces," Middle East Eye.

38 "PMF Rejects Being Merged into Iraqi Security Institutions," Asharq al-Awsat, March 10, 2018, https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1200331/exclusive-pmf-rejects-being-merged-iraqi-security-institutions.

39 Author interviews with PMF Commanders, Baghdad, March and September 2019.

40 "Al-ḥashd al-sha'abi mustamirratu bi-ghalaq al-maqarrat wa- 'itiqāl al-ashkhās al-ladhīna yad'ūn 'intimā'ihim zawran li-hay'ati l-ḥashd al-sha'bi [The Popular Mobilization Security Directorate continues to close headquarters and arrest people who falsely claim to belong to the Popular Mobilization Commission]," Twitter @teamsmediawar, February 10, 2019, https://twitter.com/teamsmediawar/status/1094704515796869121.

41 Aymenn al-Tamimi, "The Arrest of Aws Al-Khafaji: Looking at the Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Forces," Blog of *Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi*, April 2, 2019.

42 "Tribe of arrested IMIS's Khafaji threatens to close crossing with Iran," *Baghdad Post*, February 11, 2019, https://www.thebaghdadpost.com/en/Story/36211/Tribe-of-arrested-IMIS-s-Khafaji-threatens-to-close-crossing-with-Iran.

43 Interviews with Iraqi security analysts and members of parliament conducted in Baghdad in March 2019.

44 Renad Mansour, "Why Are Iraq's Paramilitaries Turning on Their Own Ranks?," *Washington Post*, February 18, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2019/02/18/why-are-iraqs-paramilitaries-turning-on-their-own-ranks/.

45 "ra'īs majlis al-wuzāra' al-qā'id al-'āmmu li-l-quwwāt al-musallaḥa al-sayyīd 'Adil 'Abdul Mahdy yuṣdiru al-'amr al-diwāniyy al-muraqqam 237 [Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, Adel Abdul Mahdi issued Diwaniya Order No. 237]," Twitter @IraqiPMO, July 1, 2019, https://twitter.com/iraqipmo/status/1145735482518724608.

46 "ra'īs majlis al-wuzāra' al-qā'id al-'āmmu li-l-quwwāt al-musallaḥa al-sayyīd 'Adil 'Abdul Mahdy yuṣdiru al-'amr al-diwāniyy al-muraqqam 237 [Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, Adel Abdul Mahdi issued Diwaniya Order No. 237]," Twitter @IraqiPMO, July 1, 2019, https://twitter.com/iraqipmo/status/1145735482518724608.

Flag of the Popular Mobilization Forces (Wikimedia Commons)

stood a realistic chance of jeopardizing the PMF's lion share in Iraq's post-conflict economy, even in case its formal franchises in urban areas were to be closed indefinitely.[47]

A comparatively more emboldened attempt at curtailing Muhandis' executive power was reflected in Executive Order No. 331, issued in September 2019. The new organizational structure outlined in the official release completely abolished the role of Vice Chairman of the PMF, occupied by Muhandis as Faleh al-Fayyadh's Deputy.[48] Instead, the order created the position of a Chief of Staff, envisioned to take the lead on the following issues: Intelligence, Procurement, Administration and Human Resources, Fighters Affairs, and Operations, thereby coordinating with five designated assistants—ideally graduates from one of

Iraq's military colleges.[49] Despite this cosmetic reshuffling of the responsibilities, interviews with PMF Commanders and security sector officials in October 2019 in Baghdad signaled that Mahdi's experiment to diminish the leverage of Muhandis and neutralize the footprint of partisan, tribal, ethnic, and sectarian affiliations within the PMF has yet to yield results.[50]

But even though the amended mandate had not managed to weaken Muhandis' position within the PMF,[51] his prominence as a champion of the Islamic resistance among Iran-backed Khamenei loyalists was at risk. The more entangled he became in bureaucracy, the less confidence he could project vis-à-vis his revolutionary peers, some of whom had started to look upon him as "a state servant"—be it one instrumental for the common cause.[52]

47 Inna Rudolf, "The Hashd's Popular Gambit: Demystifying PMU Integration in Post-IS Iraq," ICSR Report, November 12, 2019, https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/ICSR-Report-The-Hashd's-Popular-Gambit-Demystifying-PMU-Integration-in-Post%E2%80%91IS-Iraq.pdf.

48 Media Directorate of the Popular Mobilisation, "ra'īs al-wuzāra' al-qā'iid al-'āmmu li-l-quwwāt al-musallaḥa yuṣādiqu 'ala l-haykal al-tanẓīmiyy li-hay'at al-ḥashd al-sha'bi [The Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces approves the organisational structure for the PMU Commission]," *Al-Hashed,* September 21, 2019, http://al-hashed.net/2019/09/21/ئيسير-الوزراء-القائد-العام-للقوات-المس2/; and "ra'īs al-wuzāra' yuṣādiqu 'ala l-haykali al-tanẓīmiyy li-hay'at al-ḥashd al-sha'bi [The Prime Minister approves the organisational structure for the PMU Commission]," *Iraq News Agency,* September 21, 2019, http://www.ina.iq/94603/ئيسير-الوزراء-يصادق-على-الهيكل-التنظيمي-لهيئة-الحشد-الشعبي.

49 "ba'd 'inḥiyāz 'Abdul Mahdy li-l-Fayyāḍ...haykala al-ḥashd taqṣī Al-Muhandis [After Abdul Mahdi sided with Fayyadh: The structure of the PMU moves away from Al-Muhandis]," *Al Arabiya,* September 21, 2019, https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/iraq/2019/09/21/بعد-انحياز-عبدالمهدي-للفياض-هيكلة-الحشد-تقصي-html.

50 Author interviews with PMF Commanders, Baghdad and Najaf, October and November 2019.

51 "Sulaimany fi Baghdād sirran [Sulaimany on a secret visit to Baghdad]," *Al Arabiya,* September 18, 2019, https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/iraq/2019/09/18/السليماني-في-بغداد-سرًا-دعوة-لضبط-مصالح-أميركا-html.

52 Author interview with PMF Commanders and resistance factions' leaders, Baghdad, October 2019.

The Resistance and its Frontrunners

This section evaluates more recent dynamics within the resistance current, commenting on their immediate positioning following the assassination of Muhandis. Recovering from the initial shock of the deaths of Soleimani and Muhandis, leaders of the Islamic resistance factions did not hesitate to channel their thirst for revenge into political action. Paradoxically, the blood of their beloved icons unlocked long-awaited momentum to push forward one of Iran's main security priorities regarding Iraq: the expulsion of all U.S. troops from the country.[53] The United States' blatant violation of Iraq's sovereignty prompted Iran-aligned militia elements and their state counterparts to ramp up their aggression against the protest movement that has been challenging the Iraqi political elite since October 2019.[54] Previously criticized for unwittingly enabling the agendas of 'evil foreign powers', protesters were now more than ever vilified as traitorous elements seeking to undermine Iraq's stability and territorial integrity.

As Iran's IRGC staged a retaliatory strike on military bases in Erbil and Ain al-Assad in the first week of January, different protagonists of the so-called "resistance axis" opted to freeze their rivalries and power games, gathering opportunistically around the godfather of the Mahdi army: Shia cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr.[55] Nevertheless, Al-Sadr's ability to tie up all the loose ends and impose himself as a credible patron of the paramilitary umbrella has proven limited. To begin with, Al-Sadr's position vis-à-vis the institutional future of the PMF project has remained ambivalent. Despite having repeatedly advocated for the dissolution of the PMF,[56] his loyalist *Saraya al-Salam* fighters, registered officially within the PMF under Brigade 313 and Brigade 314, are unlikely to voluntarily give up their access to state-funded employment benefits.[57] Moreover, shortly after the aforementioned resistance factions' reunion meeting in Qom following Muhandis' assassination, Al-Sadr once again resorted to his usual call for dismantling the PMF as an independent body. Having successfully staged what was branded as a "million-man march" against the U.S. presence in Iraq on January 24, Al-Sadr used his concluding remarks to declare that the PMF should be integrated under the structures of Iraq's Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Interior.[58] As to be expected, arguing in favor of PMF's assimilation and appealing for a truce with "the occupying force" did not play to Al-Sadr's advantage among Iran-aligned circles who were growing weary of his tactical double-dealing.[59]

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53 Hamdi Malik, "Iran rallies religious leaders to expel US forces from Iraq," *Al Monitor*, March 4, 2020, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/03/iraq-protests-iran-us-resistance-axis.html#ixzz6G0iUBu76.

54 Mac Skelton, Hamzeh Al-Shadeedi, and Zmkan Ali Saleem, "The US Presence in Iraq: Emerging Positions of Iraqi Political Parties," LSE Middle East Centre Blog, January 22, 2020, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2020/01/22/the-us-presence-in-iraq-emerging-positions-of-iraqi-political-parties/.

55 Mustafa Saadoun, "What's in store for Iraq's PMU after death of top commander?," *Al Monitor*, January 21, 2020, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/01/iraq-iran-pmu-muhandis-sadr.html#ixzz6EWhOvvUn; and "Iraqi militias meet in Iran as splits appear," *Baghdad Post*, January 14, 2020, https://www.thebaghdadpost.com/EN/Story/45458/Iraqi-militias-meet-in-Iran-as-splits-appear.

56 "Abadi Rejects Al-Sadr Call to Dissolve Hashd Al-Shaabi," August 5, 2017, *Al Jazeera*, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/08/abadi-rejects-al-sadr-call-dissolve-hashd-al-shaabi-170805153517075.html.

57 Al-Tamimi, "Hashd Brigade Numbers Index."

58 Yasser Al-Jubouri, "Al-Sadr calls for a temporary halt on resistance operations," Twitter @YasserEljuboori, January 24, 2020, https://twitter.com/YasserEljuboori/status/1220618251052503040/photo/3.

59 Renad Mansour and Ben Robin-D'Cruz, "After Latest Turn, Is Muqtada al-Sadr Losing Influence in Iraq?," Chatham House, February 12, 2020, https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/after-latest-turn-muqtada-al-sadr-losing-influence-iraq.

Reportedly facilitated through mediation by Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah, the rapprochement was meant to bring all these individual actors under the common cause of protecting the Shia-led Iraqi state project and the PMF's hard-fought institutional assets within it.[60] And yet, the most pressing issue requiring the PMF's main shareholders to act in concert was the choice of Muhandis' successor, who would then be responsible for safeguarding the systemic gains.

The different factions had thus to identify—and most importantly impose—a unifying figure, with the authority and credibility to manage the inherited patronage networks. The intra-organizational diversity of opinions along with the factions' often contradictory agendas intuitively call for a "digestible" enough leadership profile, who could funnel rights and privileges among the different groups and individuals, without utterly alienating those that are less well-connected. Though in the first weeks, none of the names discussed behind closed doors ended up convincing the main veto players to take a leap of faith—not even the head of the Fatah Alliance and the leader of the Badr Organization, Hadi Al-Ameri. In comparison to Muhandis, who had consciously sought to steer away from politics, Al-Ameri had been marketing himself for the past two years as a politician who took a sabbatical from the battlefield, rather than a non-partisan military technocrat.[61] His proven ability to navigate between the military barracks and the hallways of parliament did not seem to qualify him to fill in the vacuum left by Muhandis.

On February 20, 2020, Muhandis' replacement as Chief of Staff of the PMF was finally chosen. Following a special committee meeting, including senior figures such as Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada commander Abu Alaa Al-Wala'i, Laith Al-Khazali (the brother of Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haqq leader Qais Al-Khazali), and former PMF spokesperson Ahmed Al-Asadi, Associate Deputy Chairman of the PMF Abu Ali al-Basri announced that Abdul Aziz Al-Muhammadawi, alias "Abu Fadak," was chosen to succeed Muhandis.[62] Known also under his notorious nickname "Al Khal" (the uncle), Abu Fadak has been treading upon the path of resistance since the 1980s, asserting himself as an aide to Al-Ameri within the ranks of the Badr organization, assigned with intelligence operations.[63] Refusing to disarm after 2004, Abu Fadak became engaged with Muhandis and Imad Mughniyah, Hezbollah's international operations chief. Committed to terminating the U.S. military presence in Iraq, Abu Fadak is said to have supported Muhandis in the process of establishing Kata'ib Hezbollah, which Abu Fadak temporarily headed as the group's secretary-general.[64]

Whether Abu Fadak's battle-hardened profile can adequately empower him to push forward Muhandis' vision remains questionable. Despite Abu Ali Al-Basri's statement to the *Iraqi News Agency* (INA) that the appointment of Abu Fadak is expected to be signed off by the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces through an Executive Order, four of the PMF formations aligned with Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani and Iraq's Holy Shrines (Al-'Atabat al-'Aliyat) rejected the decision in a statement published on February 22, 2020.[65]

60 "Hezbollah Steps in to Guide Iraqi Militias after Soleimani Killing," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, February 12, 2020, https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/2127421/report-hezbollah-steps-guide-iraqi-militias-after-soleimani-killing.

61 Author interview with Hadi Al-Ameri, Baghdad, April 25, 2018.

62 "The Popular Mobilization Commission appoints 'Abu Fadak' to succeed the martyr," *Al Mayadeen*, February 20, 2020, http://www.almayadeen.net/news/politics/1381529/مرسال-لمديانين-هيئة--الحشد-الشعبي--تقرر-تعيين-أبو-فدك-خلف/;

63 "The Intelligence Man…Who is Abu Fadak, the successor of Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis in the Popular Mobilization?," *Raseef 22*, February 21, 2020, https://raseef22.net/article/1077289- رجل-الاستخبارات-من-هو-أبو-فدك-وارثة-أبو-مهدي-المهندس-في-الحشد-الشعبي-العراقي

64 "#Al-Khal Abu Fadak Al-Muhammadawi," Twitter @hushamalhashimi, February 22, 2020, https://twitter.com/hushamalhashimi/status/1230744753387388929.

65 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Four factions of the Popular Mobilization deny having been informed of the appointment of a new vice-chairman of the PMU," Facebook, February 22, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10162944482675363&set=a.10155425973555363&type=3&theater; and "Imam Ali Combat Division, Al-Abbas Combat Division, Ali Al-Akbar Brigades and Ansar al-Marjaiya Brigades: There is no legal context for the appointment of Abu Fadak as a successor to Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis," *Al Iraq Net*, February 23, 2020, https://aliraqnet.net/فرقة-الإمام-علي-واللواء-العباس-القتالية-واولو/.

The factions commonly referred to as *Hashd al-Marjiʻi* due to their affiliation with Iraq's Shiite religious authorities (marjaʻiyya) denied having been previously informed of, let alone consulted on, the inauguration of Abu Fadak, questioning the legality of such an appointment "in the context of two governments, one of which being a caretaker government, and the other one still lacking an official mandate."[66]

Increasing the pressure onto the Iran-leaning current, the Middle Euphrates Operations of the Popular Mobilization revealed on March 19 details of a meeting between Grand Ayatollah Al-Sistani's Representative Sayyed Ahmad Al-Safi and the leaders of the aforementioned "shrine brigades": Ali Al-Hamdani, heading the Ali Al-Akbar Brigade; Maytham Al-Zaidi, leading the Abbas Combat Division; Hamid Al-Yasiri, the commander of the Ansar Al-Marjaʻiyya units; and Taher Al-Khaqani, the commander of the Imam Ali Combat Division. According to a summary published on the social media channels by the Ali Al-Akbar Brigade and the Abbas Combat Division, Ahmed Al-Safi had discussed with the four commanders the necessity to preserve the PMU as a military body serving national interests first.[67] Moreover, Al-Safi had encouraged the leadership of the shrine brigades to stand their ground vis-à-vis those seeking to exclude them from the governance structure of the PMF: "The fighters who fought, and won victory have the full right to occupy high administrative positions within the commission."[68]

In his criticism, Al-Safi had also addressed the problem of favoritism and the unequal distribution of monetary compensation and resources among the different brigades.[69] Experiences of loyalty based discrimination have been repeatedly raised by Al-Abbas Combat Division Commander Maytham Al-Zaidy.[70] Demonstratively exploring the path of partial integration into the Iraqi army, Al-Zaidy had facilitated in 2017 the official registration of 1,000 of al-Abbas' fighters with the Iraqi Ministry of Defence.[71]

Most importantly, w-ith the patience in Najaf running low, Al-Safi's critical remarks regarding the state of affairs had left the door open to many options—including the possible split-up of the shrine brigades from the increasingly polarized PMF structure.[72] The four commanders had been especially keen on implying such a scenario—not least by advertising their recent talks with members of the Ministry of Defence.[73] The threat of dissociating themselves from the PMF further raises the stakes for Muhandis' successor. The vocal discontent from unappeased elements of the PMF signals that an internal pain threshold has been reached. Those who have received less than what they thought they were entitled to in the scheme that the "engineer" devised now demand a reshuffling of the cards.[74]

66 "Hashd al-Marji'i deny having been informed of the naming of a Vice President of the Popular Mobilization Commission: timing is not appropriate," *Nas News*, February 22, 2020, https://www.nasnews.com/حشد-المرجعية-نفي-علم-بتسميم-نائب-لرئ/.

67 Official Facebook Page of the Ali Al-Akbar Brigade, "Sayyid Al-Safi addressing Hashd leaders," Facebook, March 19, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/pg/ak.lewaa/posts/; and Official Facebook Page of Al-Abbas Combat Division, "Sayyid Al-Safi: The idea - the mechanisms - the implementation – they all must be patriotic," Facebook, March 19, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/pg/alabbas.combat/posts/

68 "After the three No-s from Najaf: Will the PMF turn into an assembly of 'wala'i' (Iran aligned) factions?," *Nas News*, March 20, 2020, https://www.nasnews.com/بعد-لا-ءات-النجف-الثالثة-ل-تحو ل-هيئة/.

69 "After the three No-s from Najaf: Will the PMF turn into an assembly of 'wala'i' (Iran aligned) factions?," *Nas News*.

70 Bahaa Haddad, "A source tells the 'Al-Aalam Al-Jadid' details of the argument between Muhandis and Al-Zaidy," Al-Aalam Al-Jadid, March 2, 2018, https://al-aalem.com/news/48508-مصدر-يوري-العالم-ال-جديد-تفاصيل-ال-مشا.

71 "'Akkada al-mushrif 'alā firqat al-'Abbās al-qitālīyya al-shaykh al-Maytham al-Zayyīdī al-'aḥad 'anna al-firqat lam wa lan takhruj min hay'at al-hashd al-sha'bi" [The supervisor of al-Abbas Combat division assured that the group has not and will not dissociate from the PMU commission], *Byarq News*, July 24, 2017, http://byarqnews.com/index.php?name=News&file=article&sid=1834.

72 "Marja'iya factions leaving the Hashd to join the ranks of the Ministry of Defense," NRT TV, March 19, 2020, https://www.nrttv.com/AR/News.aspx?id=24221&MapID=2.

73 "Marja'iya factions leaving the Hashd to join the ranks of the Ministry of Defense," NRT TV.

74 Suadad al-Salhy, "Iran and Najaf struggle for control over Hashd al-Shaabi after Muhandis's killing," *Middle East Eye*, February 16, 2020, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-and-najaf-struggle-control-over-hashd-al-shaabi-after-muhandis-killing.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The aftermath of the PMF's succession crisis may also unlock opportunities for Iraq's Western and Gulf allies to address their concerns regarding the PMF's alignment with Iran. Nevertheless, the external sponsorship of the Iran-backed resistance factions should be extracted from the larger policy debate on Iraq's security sector reform. Drawing a clear line between the "proxy warfare" dimension and the administrative dealings of the paramilitary body would allow preempting the *whataboutism* often adopted by PMF leaders as an excuse to dismiss structural recommendations. Their main criticism directed at any Western advisers and diplomats so far has been their viewing of the PMF exclusively through the prism of the so-called "maximum pressure" strategy against Iran.

Perhaps counterintuitively, this would necessitate suspending (at least temporarily) the issue of the PMF's relations to Tehran, and instead require engaging in an open exchange on possible scenarios for sustaining the PMF's status as a state-sanctioned body. The anxiety regarding the survival of the five-year-old organization following the killing of Muhandis may, to an extent, incentivize its more pragmatic institution-builders to renegotiate the common denominator between the resistance-leaning, Iran-beholden elements and those advocating for assimilation under the structures of Iraq's Ministry of Defence.

With a conventional Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) approach remaining likely off limits, the aim of such talks should be to ensure a higher level of discipline across factions.[75] This would require the leadership to agree on binding measures able to dissuade any 'wanna-be-Hezbollah' elements from challenging the authority of the Commander-in-Chief and acting autonomously from Iraq's recently boosted Joint Operations Command. Financial penalties, legal procedures, and the threat of expulsion in case of violations should be implemented at the individual fighter level.

To illustrate, after the nomination of Kata'ib Hezbollah-affiliated Abu Fadak, the U.S. State Department sanctioned on February 26, 2020, Ahmad al-Hamidawi, one of the alleged current leaders of Kata'ib Hezbollah as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) under Executive Order No. 13224.[76] Shortly after the announcement, the military spokesperson of Kata'ib Hezbollah, Abu Ali Al-Askari, issued on February 29, 2020, a warning to all Iraqi citizens, including national security agencies such as the PMF and the CTS, to cease collaborating with U.S. forces by March 15, 2020.[77] Following this ultimatum, the group accelerated its provocation campaign by publicly accusing National Intelligence Agency Director Mustafa Al-Kazemi of being involved in the assassination of Soleimani and Muhandis.[78] The emboldened moves backfired, unleashing retributive action by

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75 Nicole Ball and Luc van de Goor, "Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration: Mapping Issues, Dilemmas, and Guiding Principles," Clingendael Institute, August 2006.

76 "State Department Terrorist Designation of Ahmad al-Hamidawi," U.S. Department of State, February 26, 2020, https://www.state.gov/state-department-terrorist-designation-of-ahmad-al-hamidawi/.

77 Original Tweet by Abu Ali Al-Askari, Twitter @Saraa_Sepid, March 1, 2020, https://twitter.com/Saraa_Sepid status/1233891167428907010/photo/1

78 "Hezbollah Brigade Intelligence: We are ready to provide information regarding the crime of assassinating victory leaders," Kata'ib Hezbollah, March 4, 2020, https://kataibhezbollah.com/news/3072; "#Iran-backed Iraqi Hezbollah Intelligence accuses Iraqi Intelligence Service Chief," Twitter @BaxtiyarGoran, March 4, 2020, https://twitter.com/BaxtiyarGoran/status/1235262973561769984/photo/1; and "The Hezbollah Brigades challenge the intelligence apparatus: available information confirms Al-Kazemi's involvement," Shafaaq, March 4, 2020, https://www.shafaaq.com/ar/أمن/كتائب-حزب-الله-تتحدى-جهاز-المخابرات-معلومات-متوفرة-تؤكد-تورط-الكاظمي/.

Iraq's intelligence service, which then detained several senior members of Kata'ib Hezbollah.[79] Moreover, publishing an official statement, the Popular Mobilization Commission distanced itself from these statements against the Iraqi Intelligence Service, negating any affiliation of Abu Ali Al-Askari with the PMF in the function of a military spokesperson.[80] This sequence of miscalculations on behalf of Kata'ib Hezbollah in response to what the group's media narrative has framed as "the devil's accusations" has thus demonstrated the utility of separating the resistance agenda of the factions' leaders from the institutional fate of the PMF as a catch-all conglomerate.

Similar to the sanctions against Al-Hamidawi, any further penalties issued by the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) against units implicated in human rights violations should be designed in a manner that allows to differentiate between fighters registered with the PMF Commission and individuals merely affiliated with a militia that has a formal presence within the PMF. When infractions occur, all those on the PMF payroll should be prosecuted according to Iraq's military law, as applied to other state-sanctioned entities.

Last but not least, one should bear in mind that even the best-case scenario of reforming the PMF into a professional law-abiding security agency would not resolve the security hazards of having externally backed and ideologically driven elements using areas and resorts of limited statehood as a safe haven for their "extracurricular" economic ventures and commissioned military strikes. Completing the institutional integration of the PMF cannot guarantee the neutralization of these die-hard resistance factions. In their mind, preserving the capacity to conduct attrition warfare outside the control of the state is essential to protect Iraq—or, more precisely, the vision of Iraq they subscribe to: a solid pillar of a transnational

resistance alliance and a reliable partner of Iran in its quest to challenge U.S. and Israeli designs on the region.

79 "Iraqi Intelligence Launched A Campaign of Arrests Against The Hezbollah Brigades," *Al Seyassah*, March 4, 2020, http://al-seyassah. com/الأخبار-العراقية-تشن-حملة-اعتقالات/.

80 "An explicit and clear statement from the Presidency of the Popular Mobilization," Twitter @hushamalhashimi, March 3, 2020, https://twitter.com/hushamalhashimi/status/1234898811249733632; and "The Hashd Commission confirms the absence of a military spokesperson," *Al Sumaria*, March 3, 2020, https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/أن336239/هيئة-الحشد-تؤكد-عدم-وجود-متحدث-عسكري-ناطق-باسم/.

PREVENTING THE NEXT INSURGENCY: A PATHWAY FOR REINTEGRATING IRAQ'S SUNNI POPULATION

Ramzy Mardini

Preventing the Next Insurgency: A Pathway for Reintegrating Iraq's Sunni Population

About the Author

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Abstract

Since the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the "Sunni community" has been imprisoned within a cycle of upheaval and violence. In its latest iteration, the Islamic State (ISIS) monopolized a Sunni rebellion that emerged in 2013-2014 to resist a domineering and repressive central government in Baghdad led by Shiite elites of the ruling Dawa party of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. In short order, the militant organization rapidly expanded in summer 2014, through Sunni-populated territories in central and northern Iraq and central and southeastern Syria. At its peak, the Islamic State had displaced the modern borders drawn after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and administered and extracted resources from a vast territory the size of Britain, governing the lives of up to 12 million people.

While categorized as an abrupt "event," the emergence of the Islamic State was much more of a long-running evolutionary process, intertwined with Sunni grievances and fractures within society—furnishing opportunities to exploit them. The rise of ISIS was not only the result of the government's sectarian behavior toward the Sunni population, but also the result of a more local dynamic of settling-scores between Sunnis, both within and between tribes and across the rural-urban divide. With over a year since the liberation of Iraq was concluded, the war has left behind enduring legacies and newfound grievances that are likely to cause the next conflagration. Today, division, destruction, and despair mark Sunni society like never before, and the cycle of reconstruction and deconstruction of the community has led to an ever-fragmented Sunni polity.

This chapter focuses on the current state of turmoil of the Sunni community. It impinges on important questions related to Sunni identity, organization, and participation vis-à-vis the Iraqi state. Despite the rise of great power politics, regional security competition, and growing uncertainty of the American role in the Middle East, intra-Sunni dynamics within Iraq have demonstrated before to hold an oversized impact on the country's stability, and even to regional and international security. It is important, therefore, for Western policymakers to remain engaged and informed about the issues confronting the post-ISIS Sunni landscape. Even as it appears that the group is physically defeated, conditions within the community are likely to determine the potential and parameters of future insurgency in Iraq.

An Exclusionary War

The war against the Islamic State, fought to liberate mainly Sunni-dominated territories, was largely waged by non-Sunni armed forces. This had consequences on the post-war order because it further undermined the consolidation of a Sunni political elite, which forced Sunnis to seek legitimacy by aligning with political elites Baghdad or Erbil and serve as their local political proxy.[1]

The Sunnis have long been disadvantaged. The 2003 U.S.-led invasion and the subsequent de-Ba'thification of state and society initiated by the Western occupying authority had left Iraq's Sunnis without any formal political organization, or unified political movement to support. This varied with their counterparts in the Shiite and Kurdish communities, which had alternative and longstanding elements of organization that predated the U.S. occupation, from religious lineages and establishments to political parties, respectively. Moreover, since insurgencies against the Ba'thist regime were driven by Kurdish nationalist and Shiite Islamist groups, both communities were bequeathed with pre-established armed entrepreneurs that had come to cement political power after the fall of Saddam, and which grew following the invasion.

As the U.S.-backed military campaign against the Islamic State began in 2014, Sunni leaders made numerous requests to U.S. diplomats and military officials to help train and equip their tribal members to liberate their own lands.[2] Although partaking in the liberation campaign would involve

casualties inflicted on their tribe, it was important for Sunni *sheikhs*, or tribal leaders, that they not be excluded from ensuring local security and overseeing governance because participation also meant access to post-war authority and influence over their territories. But instead of directly partnering with Sunni tribes as they had during the pre-2011 occupation, the United States informed Sunni leaders that wanted to partake in the liberation that they would have to acquire sponsorship by either the central government in Baghdad or the Kurdistan regional government in Erbil. While the United States, in a supporting role at the invitation of the Iraqi government, could not work outside formal security institutions, elites within the Sunni community often point at the inconsistency of allowing state-sanctioned Shiite and Kurdish paramilitaries, while the state denied weapons requested by the Sunni tribes to defend themselves.[3]

Thus, the access points to determine and vet which Sunni armed contingents would fight to liberate predominantly Sunni areas were controlled by Shiite and Kurdish political leaders. This diverged from previous counterinsurgency experiences (2006-2008), when the U.S. military directly aided Sunni tribal militias, known as the "Awakening" movement, when combatting al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the precursors to the Islamic State, and holding their own territories in partnership with the American armed forces.[4] In 2014, American diplomats attempted to reconstitute a new iteration of Sunni tribal militias, but the initiative failed to convince the *sheikhs* to fight ISIS without first securing political guarantees from the Iraqi

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1 Isabel Coles, "Iraq's Shi'ite Militia, Kurds Use U.S. Air Strikes to Further Own Agendas," *Reuters*, September 9, 2014.

2 Jamal Al-Dhari, "To Save Mosul, Arm the Sunnis," *New York Times*, September 26, 2016; and Rafe Al-Essawi and Atheel al-Nujaifi, "Let Sunnis Defeat Iraq's Militants," *New York Times*, July 27, 2014.

3 Renad Mansour, "The Sunni Predicament," Carnegie Middle East Center, March 2016

4 For information on the Awakening Movement, see, Timothy S. McWilliams and Kurtis P. Wheeler (eds.), *Al-Anbar Awakening: American Perspectives, Volume 1*, U.S. Marines and Counterinsurgency in Iraq, 2004-2009 (Quantico, Virginia: Marine Corps University, 2009); and Gary W. Montgomery and Timothy S. McWilliams, *Al-Anbar Awakening: Iraqi Perspectives, Volume 2*, U.S. Marines and Counterinsurgency in Iraq, 2004-2009 (Quantico, Virginia: Marine Corps University, 2009).

U.S. Army Paratroopers, deployed in support of Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve and assigned to 2nd Battalion, 319th Airborne Field Artillery Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, fire an M777 towed 155 mm howitzer in support of Iraqi security forces in northern Iraq, August 15, 2017. (CENTCOM)

government. Because the United States failed to deliver on promises of militia integration for the Awakening forces into the government's security and civilian sectors after 2008, it left them exposed to marginalization and exclusion by Maliki's government.[5] This had significantly damaged credibility for the United States as a broker in the eyes of Sunni tribal *sheikhs*, closing the window of opportunity in the early stages of the war to recreate something akin to an Awakening 2.0, where provincial-based national guard units would be set up and locally recruited, to fight ISIS as a part of the country's formal security apparatus receiving salaries from the government.[6] But since the U.S. military returned to Iraq in 2014 on the basis of a diplomatic exchange of letters, its capacity and role had been dramatically limited and circumscribed compared to its previous experience in 2006-

08, when it was an occupying force with troops on the ground. This situation meant it was more dependent on the decisions and politics of the host government when taking any initiative with regards to the war effort. As a result, the U.S.-backed national guard initiative, which would empower Sunni governors and arm Sunni tribes, failed to launch due to the political resistance from ruling Shiite parties.[7]

The United States could not replicate the necessary conditions to facilitate a broad-based anti-ISIS coalition among Sunni tribes as it had done in the past against AQI.[8] The lack of U.S. credibility among Sunni leaders and the U.S. military's circumscribed role in the war effort were not the only constraints working against favorable conditions. The threat perceptions on the ground did not align against ISIS as they had against

5 Tim Arango, "Iraqi Sunnis Frustrated as Awakening Loses Clout," *New York Times*, May 3, 2010; and Timothy Williams and Duraid Adnan, "Sunnis in Iraq Allied With U.S. Rejoin Rebels," *New York Times*, October 16, 2010.

6 Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, "Saudi Arabia Will Grant U.S. Request for Anti-ISIS Training Program," *New York Times*, September 10, 2014. For problems with the national guard initiative, see, Frederic Wehrey and Ariel Ahram, "The National Guard in Iraq: A Risky Strategy to Combat the Islamic State," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 23, 2014.

7 Tamer El-Ghobashy, "U.S.-backed Plan for Iraqi National Guard Falters," *Wall Street Journal*, October 15, 2014.

8 For information on U.S. attempts to gain greater Sunni participation in the fight against ISIS, see, Kirk Semple, "Under New Plan, Iraq's Fight Against Militants May Fall to Its Provinces," *New York Times*, September 18, 2014; and Kirk Semple, "Coalition Leader Warns of Long Fight Against ISIS in Iraq," *New York Times*, October 3, 2014. According to General John Allen, who was tapped by the White House in 2014 to take charge of U.S.-led efforts against ISIS, including outreach to Iraq's Sunni tribes, said in 2016: "The Awakening as we knew it occurred because of a series of conditions that don't exist today in Iraq. What we want is not the Awakening as an entity to be replicated. What we want is the effect of the Awakening. And that is ownership by the Sunnis in the outcome. And that's what we want." See, transcript of full interview: "Gen. Allen: Empowering Iraqi Forces is Key to Controlling ISIS," National Public Radio, January 3, 2016.

U.S. Army Capt. Mark G. Zwirgzdas, deployed in support of Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve, assigned to 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, discusses operations during the offensive to liberate West Mosul from ISIS with 9th Iraqi Army Division leaders near Al Tarab, Iraq, March 19, 2017. (CENTCOM)

AQI. "The Sunni community has two options," described one Anbari tribal sheikh. "Fight against ISIS and allow Iran and its militias to rule us, or do the opposite. We chose ISIS for only one reason. ISIS only kills you. The Iraqi government kills you and rapes your women."[9]

Moreover, given that U.S. policymakers prioritized the defeat of ISIS, Washington was less willing to peg its military support on condition that Baghdad embrace a comprehensive form of inclusion of the Sunni tribes in the liberation campaign.[10] Instead, Shiite and Kurdish armed forces, which included dozens of militias, were mainly deployed into Sunni-dominated and mixed territories.[11] To the extent there were local Sunnis that partook in the liberation effort, it reflected a representation of political allegiances to the ruling parties and personalities in Baghdad and Erbil, and not a genuine representation of the Sunni tribal components of local society within the ISIS-held territories. This bipolar structure had reinforced

intra-Sunni competition and tensions, including within the same tribe—as some aligned with Erbil to balance against competitors that were aligned with Baghdad, and vice versa.

In effect, the exclusionary dimension of the war meant that Iraq's communities would internalize varied narratives and experiences about the war, reinforcing its fractured set of identities. Victory over the war's outcome would become a particularistic, rather than a collective, memory among the Iraqi people, as the Sunni community, by and large, were denied access to share in the experience of a victorious war.

9 David Ignatius, "Iraq and the U.S. are Losing Ground to the Islamic State," *Washington Post*, October 23, 2014.

10 Anthony H. Cordesman, "Iraq, Syria, and the Gulf: The Cost of an ISIS-Centric U.S. Strategy," Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 9, 2016; and Ramzy Mardini, "Don't Defeat ISIS, Yet," *New York Times*, September 27, 2016.

11 "How ISIS is Forging Unlikely Alliances," *CBS News*, February 19, 2015.

Roots of Instability

Prior to 2014, American policymakers believed that the Islamic State of Iraq, the predecessor of the Islamic State, was organizationally defeated.[12] This was the narrative after April 2010, when American and Iraqi forces eliminated the group's top leaders in a single joint operation. In the subsequent years to follow, senior U.S. officials would often emphasize that violence was at all time lows in Iraq and that politics (not violence) had become consolidated as the primary mechanism for resolving disputes. As a result, by the time the U.S. military exited the country in December 2011, U.S. officials believed Iraq had turned a corner, and its relapse to civil conflict was as unlikely as ever.[13]

The belief that another Iraqi insurgency was not probable stems from the way insurgency is conceptualized within the policy community— as an exterior disease on society, to be rooted out, rather than a violent symptom derived from what ails society.[14] For example, successes in counterinsurgencies are primarily measured by their physical attributes, such as body counts and territories captured. This, in turn, narrows the parameters of how threat assessments are formed and makes them inapt at depicting the disruptive impact that war has on society and its social fabric. Hence, policymakers become unaware (or at least unappreciative) of the feedback loops between the nuanced tensions from within society, often happening at a local level, and how those tensions can reproduce future conflict, sometimes incorporated into other conflicts happening on a broader scale.[15]

A dominant view is that the Islamic State was an invader on society. In reality, it had emerged through a rapid consolidation of a multiparty rebellion in Iraq during summer 2014. This allowed it to mobilize newfound resources, while absorbing a larger wave of foreign fighters, to expand its territorial control in Syria. However, despite its seeming abruptness, the Islamic State was not the effect of a single cause or event, as often depicted. It was the byproduct of many interacting dynamics that occurred over a long time horizon, including those spurred by the collapse of state institutions, a foreign occupation mobilizing armed resistance, and a civil war that tore through the social fabric and hardened group identities.

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12 David Alexander, "Al Qaeda in Iraq Struggling After Leadership Blow: US," *Reuters*, June 4, 2010.

13 See, speech by Antony J. Blinken, then national security advisor to Vice President Joe Biden, at the Center for American Progress, March 16, 2012; and Antony J. Blinken, Norman Ricklefs, Ned Parker, "Is Iraq on Track: Democracy and Disorder in Baghdad," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2012.

14 Despite the declared doctrinal focus on population-centric counterinsurgency as codified in the U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual 3-24, in practice, the U.S. military has transitioned to a counterterrorism-centric approach in efforts to degrade or destroy insurgent groups. This includes the "By-With-Through" mechanism of empowering and partnering with local partners to conduct military operations in Iraq and Syria. See, Morgan Kaplan, "Thinking Critically About 'By, With, Through' in Syria, Iraq, and Beyond," *Lawfare*, January 20, 2019. For emphasis on the targeting process through special operations, see, LTG Michael K Nagata's comments in Brian Dodwell and Don Rassler, "A View from the CT Foxhole: LTG Michael K. Nagata, Director, Directorate of Strategic Operational Planning, NCTC," *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 10, no. 6, June/July 2017: "Given my Special Operations background, what I'm most conversant in and what I have the most practical experience in has been this rather extraordinary journey that military and intelligence organizations have taken—not just in the United States but around the world—in rapidly improving our ability to identify, to track, to pursue, and to precisely target. It's become almost doctrine in the U.S. counterterrorism community—something that General Stanley McChrystal is often cited as the pioneer for, the 'find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze, disseminate' (F3EAD) philosophy." For more information on F3EAD, see, Jeremy Scahill, "Find, Fix, Finish," *The Intercept*, October 15, 2015.

15 For intelligence failures leading up to the rise of ISIS, see, Erik J. Dahl, "Not Your Father's Intelligence Failure: Why the Intelligence Community Failed to Anticipate the Rise of ISIS," in *The Future of ISIS: Regional and International Implications*, eds. Feisal al-Istrabadi and Sumit Ganguly (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2008), pp. 41-66. For an academic perspective on localized dynamics leading to widespread violence, see, Séverine Autesserre, *The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

The Islamic State's capital Raqqa suffered extensive damage during the battle of Raqqa in June–October 2017. (VOA/Wikimedia Commons)

The Islamic State is often interpreted through the lens of religious doctrine and religious extremism.[16] However, in reality, multiple motivations and rationales led Iraqis from various sectors of society to join the organization's rank-and-file. In policymaking circles, ISIS was the result of sectarianism and the government's marginalization of a religious minority. However, while the failure of reconciliation along the sectarian Shiite-Sunni divide is important, it misses how divisions and tensions within the Sunni community also contributed to the rise of ISIS. Politics of exclusion and marginalization played a role at the national level, particularly among elites, but failed to explain mechanisms at the local level, especially how intra-Sunni politics, vendettas, and schisms played into the rapid expansion of the Islamic State.

Oftentimes, descriptions in Washington about the consequences of the Iraq war are aggregated as empirics measuring "blood and treasure." But these tangible and physical categories of measurement fail to shed light on the destabilizing and ongoing changes that have impacted Iraqi society in irreversible and non-linear ways.

This inherently makes it difficult to grasp the enduring damage inflicted upon Iraqi society since 2003—and the spawn of second and third order effects that, over time, can regenerate new causes for rebellion. As such, U.S. policymakers in Washington underestimated the rise and rapid expansion of another Sunni insurgency in Iraq.[17]

The disruption and disorder ushered in by the U.S. invasion of Iraq helped form and solidify the collective identity of a "Sunni community," but it also created fractures and friction within it. These intra-communal fault lines were essential in securing societal inroads for ISIS, including the latter stages of its predecessor organization, helping to anchor it within local networks. The sources of these inroads into the Sunni community were brought on by fractures caused by major local shifts in power and the emergence of new stakeholders following the fall of the Ba'thist regime, the advent of new political cleavages bifurcating the community's traditional forms of social structure and authority, and the influx of migration due to internal displacement and proliferation of informal settlements.

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16 Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, May 2015; William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (St. Martin's Press, 2015); Robert Manne, *The Mind of the Islamic State: ISIS and the Ideology of the Caliphate* (Prometheus Books, 2017); and Hassan Hassan, "The Sectarianism of the Islamic State: Ideological Roots and Political Context," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 13, 2016.

17 David Ignatius, "James Clapper: We Underestimated the Islamic State's 'will to fight,'" *Washington Post*, September 18, 2014; and Peter Baker and Eric Schmitt, "Many Missteps in Assessment of ISIS Threat," *New York Times*, September 29, 2014.

U.S. M1 Abrams battle tanks patrolling Tal Afar on February 3, 2006. (USAF)

Across central and northern Iraq, ISIS represented a multi-purposed vehicle in its relationship across Sunni-inhibited territories. Depending on the context, the organization was utilized, as a form of empowerment, not only against the government and its repressive apparatus, but also as a mechanism to address local grievances: to carry out revenge and settle longstanding scores that have accumulated within the Sunni community. The mobilization and expansion of ISIS in summer 2014 had coalesced with a deeper unraveling of the Sunni tribal system, with many tribes and communities, even at the village level, experiencing splits between those that facilitated and backed ISIS and those that resisted or fled.[18]

This fragmented landscape complicated the deployment of local partners in the liberation campaign. In each area—be it a village, town, or major city—those that fled the initial advance of ISIS had incurred motives of revenge to reclaim their areas from those that stayed, often perceived as collaborators of ISIS. For example, the Shiite Turkmen community that fled Tal Afar in 2014 had been reorganized as a militia with the explicit aim expressed by its members to cleanse the city of its Sunni Turkmens.[19] Even at the village level, tribesmen that had fled would later form militias made up of their own clan to return during liberation, exacting revenge against members of their tribe that had stayed and joined ISIS. "There is no other solution than to behead them," said a Sunni Arab *sheikh* of his tribal cousins who were fighting on the side of ISIS in a town near Mosul, "because it will teach their wives, children, sons, and relatives."[20] This behavior could potentially set up new cycles of violence in the years ahead.

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18 For efforts to mend intra-tribal tensions and splits in liberated territories, see, Osama Gharizi and Haidar al-Ibrahimi, "Baghdad Must Seize the Chance to Work with Iraq's Tribes," *War on the Rocks*, January 17, 2018; Khitam Alkhaykanee, "Justice and Security Needs in Iraq after ISIL: Understanding Displaced Populations' Concerns with Returning Home," U.S. Institute of Peace, Special Report 389, August 2016; and Haley Bobseine, "Tribal Justice in a Fragile Iraq," The Century Foundation, November 7, 2019.

19 Author's interviews with Shiite Turkmen militia leaders, Kirkuk, 2015.

20 The comment was made by Sheikh Nazhan Sakhar al-Lehibi from the village of Hajj Ali, just south of Mosul, who led hundreds of tribal militiamen to reclaim territory against ISIS. See, Associated Press Video Archive: "Hajj Ali – 9 August 2016," AP Video, Story Number: 4049828, August 10, 2016.

THE POST-WAR LANDSCAPE

From mass graves to systemic efforts to erase symbols of identity and culture, the Islamic State is the source of a new collective trauma for Iraq that endures today across all of the country's ethnic and religious communities. However, since the rank-and-file of the organization in Iraq was mainly derived from different sectors of the country's Sunni population, its occupation and networks were entrenched and intertwined with the social terrain. The rise and fall of ISIS not only left behind a trail of physical devastation to infrastructure and property, but also caused ruptures within the social fabric between and within communities. Today, the Sunnis face a communal-wide "existential crisis"—uncertain of what cumulative fragmentation spells for their community and its future within a country heavily influenced by Shiite militia parties.

The onslaught of ISIS and the war of liberation led to the mass displacement of millions of Iraqis, with the overwhelming majority being Sunnis. During the peak of the war, at least 5.8 million Iraqis were internally displaced.[21] As the fighting dwindled and towns were stabilized, the majority of the displaced population returned to their homes, but over a million remain in displacement camps and informal housing arrangements. The process of post-war reintegration in Iraq has been uncertain and slow, as the barriers to return vary from one place to another. As one local Sunni tribal leader from Diyala province affirmed, "Who gets to return home has become a random practice."[22] Exhibiting both physical and political dimensions, these barriers are likely to reproduce grievances within the Sunni community and serve as underlying drivers of future instability.

Soldiers from 416th Civil Affairs Battalion and Turkish military observers speak with local officials assessing the damages to local infrastructure in Tal Afar. (Blair Larson/Wikimedia Commons)

Work on the iron bridge near Fajullah, Iraq. (UNDP Iraq/Flickr)

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21 Alexandra Saieh, Dhabie Brown, and Padraic McCluskey, "The Long Road Home: Achieving Durable Solutions to Displacement in Iraq: Lessons From Returns in Anbar," a collaborated report by the Danish Refugee Council, International Rescue Committee, and Norwegian Refugee Council, February 2018; and Belkis Wille, "Iraq: Not a Homecoming," *Human Rights Watch*, June 14, 2019.

22 Hamza Hendawi, "Shattered by War, Sunni Arabs Despair Over Future in Iraq," *Associated Press*, September 10, 2017.

LACK OF REVITALIZATION

At its apex, the Islamic State controlled a diverse stretch of territory across Iraq and Syria, but its level of entrenchment varied from one place to another—in addition to its ties to the local Sunni population. A mixture of army, counterterrorism, and militia forces fought to wrench control of territory out of the militant group's hands, and ISIS fought hard to keep them—resulting in devastating urban warfare in many Sunni-dominated cities at the provincial, district, and sub-district levels. In addition, the war overwhelmingly relied on American air power, and the Iraqi military, augmented by irregular militias, on the ground had an incentive to rely on its cover when facing resistance. For example, the capital city of Anbar province, Ramadi, was reported to have been 80% destroyed by the military campaign to liberate it from ISIS.[23]

The physical barriers to entry stem from a lack of revitalization of those areas, including the devastation to critical infrastructure, the absence of any centralized reconstruction effort, and a lack of employment opportunities. "ISIS was a tsunami that swept away the Sunnis," said Sheikh Ghazi Mohammed, a tribal leader of Rabia, an Iraqi city on the border with Syria. "We lost everything. Our homes, our businesses, our lives."[24] One report summarizes the devastation to the Sunni community more succinctly: "Most of the 5 million displaced persons in Iraq are Sunnis. And most of the tens of thousands of Iraqis who were killed, raped, or kidnapped by ISIS jihadists are Sunnis. Nearly every city left in ruins by the fight to expel ISIS – from Fallujah and Ramadi to

Mosul – is predominantly Sunni."[25]

More than two years since Iraq declared ISIS defeated, the government has failed to allocate enough funds for the reconstruction of these cities, where private citizens are taking the lead to rebuild. The industries thriving in these cities before ISIS have not received enough investment to revive or hire any workers. As a result, many families who were displaced during ISIS's rein or during the campaign to oust it have opted to remain in displacement camps, where they have access to shelter, water, food deliveries, medical care, and schools for their children. In Baiji, multi-story buildings pancaked by U.S.-led air strikes remain flattened. The western side of Iraq's second largest city of Mosul, where ISIS resistance was entrenched, remains largely destroyed. The U.S. military used 29,000 munitions in the form of bombs, rockets, and artillery during the campaign to liberate Mosul—decimating basic infrastructure, including the health sector, which went from having ten hospitals to only one to service a city of over two million.[26] As a result, Mosul has been gripped by "reverse displacement," as up to 25 families per day leave the ruined city to head back to camps, its migration office said last year.[27]

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23 Ben Hubbard, "Ramadi, Reclaimed by Iraq, is in Ruins after ISIS Fight," *New York Times*, January 7, 2016.
24 Liz Sly, "ISIS: A Catastrophe For Sunnis," *Washington Post*, November 23, 2016.
25 Scott Peterson, "How Sunnis' post-ISIS crisis is leading some to a new Iraqi nationalism," *Christian Science Monitor*, December 27, 2017.
26 Linah Alsaafin, "One Year after Battle for Mosul, a City Lies in Ruins," *Al-Jazeera*, July 10, 2018. Data on munitions comes from Airwars, an organization based in the U.K. that tracks civilian casualties due to airstrikes, cited in Victor J. Blue, "After the 'War of Annihilation' Against ISIS," *Time*, April 6, 2019.
27 Raad al-Jamas, "Finding Homes in Ruin, Destitute Iraqis Return to Camps," AFP, August 24, 2019.

Militia Control

The weakness of the state, and the presence and influence of a patchwork of militias across the post-war landscape, has produced political barriers that have hindered reintegration. Their influence is especially active in places where demographics are mixed, given the incentive to tip the ethnic and religious balance in their favor. For example, Shiite and Kurdish armed groups seized many mixed areas as they liberated them from ISIS, but have since placed additional obstacles or barred displaced Sunnis from returning to their homes and communities. Today, these areas suspected of undergoing a campaign of demographic manipulation are under militia control, and many Sunnis fear that their denial to return will become a permanent feature of their lives.

This is concerning for future stabilization, as forced demographic manipulation is one of the contributing factors in driving insurgency in the "disputed territories" between Iraqi Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmen. Beginning in the 1960s and intensifying in the mid-1970s, the Ba'thist regime pursued an "Arabization" campaign to secure Arab domination of northern Iraq, forcefully displacing ethnic minorities, most notably hundreds of thousands of Kurds.[28] In 2003, following the overthrow of the Ba'thist regime, Kurdish expansionism set off to roll back the process and regain lost territories, resulting in a rise in ethnic tensions with Sunni Arabs and Turkmen. And as a Sunni insurgency swept through northern Iraq in 2014, Arabs and Turkmen from the "disputed territories" that were impacted by the cycle of demographic manipulation, joined the rank-and-

file of ISIS as a measure of revenge and settling scores against Kurdish power.[29]

The fear of return is also a factor undermining reintegration. In the city of Fallujah, Shiite paramilitary groups (operating alongside federal police forces) detained over a thousand men, releasing hundreds for medical reasons as many displayed the physical markings of torture, including rape, cuts, and burns.[30] Many Sunni families — either displaced or back in their communities — have missing relatives taken away by government security forces or militias. In response, the Sunni community has formed local councils to contact government officials and seek information in order to retrieve their missing family members.[31] But the effort has not helped, as there appears to be no Iraqi authority to hold accountable. As such, despite the passage of years, there have been no criminal proceedings for those missing, and many do not know where their family members are being held or even whether they are still alive.[32]

Apart from their role in placing barriers to reintegration, Shiite militias have also transformed their territorial control of liberated areas into political influence and economic gains. For instance, in many towns and cities, mayors and governors removed from power during political disputes have often been replaced with those that have good relations with nearby armed groups.[33] Militias also exploited post-ISIS areas as streams of economic extraction through a variety of illicit activities, including oil smuggling, looting, kidnapping and ransom, and extortion and taxation of the local Sunni population, especially

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28 John Fawcett and Victor Tanner, "The Internally Displaced People of Iraq," The Brookings Institution-SAIS Project on Internal Displacement, October 2002.

29 Author's interviews with Iraqi security officials.

30 "Iraq: Fallujah Abuses Test Control of Militias," Human Rights Watch, June 9, 2016.

31 Author's interviews with local NGO workers involved in post-ISIS reconciliation, Iraq, October 2019.

32 Author's interviews at displaced camp in Humam al-Alil in Ninawa, Iraq, March 2019.

33 Lahib Higel, "Iraq's Displacement Crisis: Security and Protection," Minority Rights Group International, March 2016.

A U.S. Army Paratrooper deployed in support of Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve and assigned to 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, leaves a tactical assembly area during an operation to advise and assist Iraqi security force partners, near Mosul, Iraq, June 7, 2017. (CENTCOM)

through checkpoints on the transportation of commercial goods.[34] In addition, they have used their political influence and military muscle to gain significant influence over economic markets. One example was the role of militias in cornering of the lucrative scrap metal market in Mosul, making millions of dollars off the sales of the wreckage brought on by the war.[35] For some groups, particularly the Sunni tribal militias that serve as local proxies of Shiite militias to govern the urban areas, armed and privileged status have been used to set up their own system of taxation, often serving as their only source of income. Not only has this sustained a sense of disempowerment and grievance among Sunnis

in post-war areas towards Shiite militias, but it has also added resentment within the community against those Sunnis aligned with them.

34 "Iran's Network of Influence, Chapter: 4: Iraq," in Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East, International Institute for Strategic Studies, November 2019.

35 John Davison, "Exclusive: Iran-Backed Groups Corner Iraq's Postwar Scrap Metal Market – Sources," *Reuters*, February 13, 2019.

BARRIERS TO REINTEGRATION

The most sensitive and complicated challenge to effective reintegration concerns the families of ISIS members. This, too, is a problem that persists due to a weak and fragmented government, which has lacked a centralized plan or common standards and guidelines to tackle the more arduous task of managing post-conflict stabilization. In addition, this may have severe security implications for the country in the future. As one Western observer noted after a visit to Iraq, "Until those in the camps are either freed or processed into the country's criminal justice system, they constitute a growing threat to security, governance, and justice throughout Iraq, and especially in the areas where ISIS still commands support and inspires fear. The longer these people languish in legal and physical limbo, the greater the chance of an eventual ISIS revival."[36]

At one level, the fear from the government's perspective is that allowing these families to return would give ISIS members on the run or in hiding a social base to return and reintegrate back into their communities. But on another level, there is concern that the return of families would provoke local violence. Hence, reintegration of ISIS families is not only a national-level concern, but also a local one among community leaders. This highlights a new societal fault line in post-conflict areas between those who were victimized by ISIS members and those who are family members of the ISIS recruits. "A lot of [Sunnis] lost their sons to ISIS," said one Sunni tribal leader, warning about the prospect of score settling within the community, "and they want revenge."[37]

Thus far, first-degree family members (e.g. brothers, fathers, sons) have been the primary security concern by the government and its security apparatus. But Baghdad alone cannot determine the outcome of their status. Since the government lacks a monopoly over the use of force, other actors are empowered in the process of determining the fate of the families of ISIS members. As a result, there exists wide variation from one place to another given the local context and circumstances. Provincial-level political authorities, in addition to local tribal and community leaders, also play a role in determining the parameters of reintegration. Because risk of acceptance is varied for these actors, differences not only exist from one province to another, but also within the same province given the varied tribal makeup of Iraqi society.

One common parameter, however, is the requirement for families to get a government-issued security clearance to return to their areas of residence.[38] This involves a months-long process that includes a court visit to issue a statement disavowing any relatives accused of having joined ISIS, effectively cutting all ties. In the event of contact from the ISIS family member, these families are required to report any information about their whereabouts to security authorities.

Families must also have sponsors present in court to support the disavowal statement and serve as a guarantee for their compliance. Ordinarily, multiple and particular sponsors are required to show up in court, such as second-degree family members, tribal or clan leaders, and the

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36 Thanassis Cambanis, "The Coming Emergency in Iraq: Neglected Prison Camps are Incubating a New Extremist Threat," *Foreign Affairs*, November 1, 2019.

37 Scott Peterson, "How Sunnis' Post-ISIS Crisis is Leading Some to a New Iraqi Nationalism," *Christian Science Monitor*, December 27, 2017.

38 "Northern Iraq: Security Situation and the Situation for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in the Disputed Areas, including Possibility to Enter and Access the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)," Country Report, Country of Origin Information, Danish Immigration Service, November 2018.

(UNDP Iraq/Flickr)

mukhtar—or local administrative representative at the village or neighborhood-level. But again, there are differences from one place to another given local circumstances. In some areas, such as the sub-district of Hawija in Kirkuk province, only one sponsor is required instead of three as there is concern that if the barriers are too high, it would de-populate the area given that far too many residents have first-degree family members who joined ISIS. In other areas, such as in the sub-district of Rabia in Ninawa province, the Shammar tribe has gone as far as rejecting the return of any second-degree family members of accused ISIS members.

As of today, the Iraqi government continues to lack a uniform policy or mechanism for bringing the status of ISIS family members closer to resolution. In fact, at one point, Iraqi authorities had considered an internment camp be created to relocate and house all families of suspected ISIS members—be they alive, dead, or captured—which would isolate and stigmatize future generations coming from that community. While the government does not have a way to

determine the number of ISIS family members, most estimates are in the hundreds of thousands. The systemic lack of data on this question has led to stigmatization by government and society against the displaced community at large, regardless of having relational ties or not to members of ISIS.

Beyond the lack of an overarching policy, the Iraqi government has also neglected to take partial steps that would make immediate and tangible progress towards a resolution of the issue. For instance, many Sunni families lost their official identification documents during ISIS's reign or in the ensuing war. The central government has been slow to expedite the issuance of new documents, which further undermines state-building initiatives to rebuild areas and reintegrate the impacted populations after war.

Many children born under ISIS do not have a government-issued birth certificate. However, the problem extends beyond those only recently born under the Islamic State. According to one estimate, up to 40,000 children that already

(UNDP Iraq/Flickr)

should be in public schools cannot attend because they lack proper documentation.[39] In addition, many families struggle to make their way back home as the lack of those documents reinforces suspicion and stigmatization of being families of ISIS members. Without papers, they cannot leave camps or cross checkpoints to seek medical care if their areas of residence lack hospitals. "No documentation means a lot," said one local NGO worker spearheading reconciliation efforts in post-conflict areas, "they cannot get a job, they cannot get married, they are not Iraqis."[40] Indeed, this includes certificates of birth and death, marriage and divorce, in addition to other forms of identification that relate to citizenship and welfare, such as passports and ration cards used for public distribution of government benefits, like basic food. [41]

The loss of identification impacts basic and property rights, inheritance, employment, mobility, and all forms of state-based programs, services, and benefits. This not only negatively impacts the everyday life of many Sunnis in

Iraq, but also leads to a failure in repairing the social fabric within liberated territories. In effect, these ongoing disparities exhibited in Iraq's post-war integration process will foster a growing stateless population, unanchored to state or society, which breeds grievances from within the Sunni community and can be easily exploited by armed groups to recruit locals and informants to penetrate and produce social bases of support.

Last year, government-imposed closures of a number of displacement camps came "with no coherent policy on how to continue supporting vulnerable people and communities upon their return," whereby many are "thwarted by fiefdoms of power that control their access to land, housing, and property rights, or citizenship documents."[42] The primary problem is the government's lack of legibility of society. This highlights its limited capability—from both a physical capacity and legal standpoint—to establish a stable post-war order in liberated territories. Weak legibility and information leads to indiscriminate actions that undermine the hope for effective reintegration,

39 Author interview with NGO official, Iraq, November 2019.
40 Author interview with NGO official, Iraq, November 2019.
41 "Iraq: Families of Alleged ISIS Members Denied IDs," Human Rights Watch, February 25, 2018.
42 Hafsa Halawa, "The Forgotten Iraq," Middle East Institute, Policy Paper 2020-7, March 2020.

(UNDP Iraq/Flickr)

in addition to regenerate grievances within the Sunni community.

For example, one major challenge undercutting legibility lies in over-aggregation. This conundrum is reflected in two interrelated ways. The first is *definitional*: what are the legal parameters that constitute membership in ISIS? Without a working definition, there has been a tendency to broaden the scope where no legal consensus exists to help distinguish between Iraqis that voluntary joined the organization's apparatus versus civilians who cooperated or colluded with the group for a variety of reasons. Radicalism and ideological affinity for the militant cause has been the overarching assumption when Iraqi authorities attribute motivations to ISIS recruits. But in reality, it was a diverse array of motivations—from local to national, opportunistic to defensive—driving Sunnis to join or collaborate with the group.

The second way over-aggregation is exercised is in the *measurement* of the distribution of justice. Currently, the national government in Baghdad and its security establishment do not distinguish

between varying roles and actions in ISIS. Instead, they treat membership with one broad brush.[43] The consequence of this leads to a rigid and binary legal approach, simplified as one (1) for membership and zero (0) for non-membership. This allows for no space for Iraq's judiciary to distribute varying degrees of legal punishment as a case-by-case basis in corresponding with a particular crime. Hence, despite the complexities that underlie all insurgencies, members of the group—regardless of their role in the organization or their rationales to join it—are treated equally and subject to the same degree of punishment. Iraq has already sentenced many of its own nationals, as well as non-Iraqis, to death under its counterterrorism law in speedy trials that human rights group worry may rely on circumstantial evidence or confessions obtained through torture.[44]

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43 According to a Human Rights Watch report, "The judiciaries of the Iraqi government and the KRG are relying on their respective counterterrorism courts to rapidly prosecute all of these ISIS suspects on charges brought under their counterterrorism laws, primarily and often exclusively on the charge of membership in ISIS, with no distinction made for the severity of the charges brought against suspects and no effort to prioritize the prosecution of the worst offenses." See, "Flawed Justice: Accountability for ISIS Crimes in Iraq," Human Rights Watch, December 5, 2017.
44 "Flawed Justice: Accountability for ISIS Crimes in Iraq," Human Rights Watch, December 5, 2017.

The Prospect of Militant Resurgence

Within the policy community in the West, debate over the future of ISIS occupies two extreme ends of a spectrum: between the belief that it is militarily defeated and the belief that its comeback is inevitable. These policy debates, however, are not only over-simplifications, but also reflect differences in how threat assessments conceptualize ISIS. From one end, ISIS is treated as a physical organization that has been militarily routed from any meaningful existence, whereas the other treats it as an ideology that cannot be vanquished, least not by the use of force.[45] But regardless of which framework is used to define what ISIS represents, conditions on the ground—especially within the Sunni community in Iraq—will determine its evolution and future.

Since the Islamic State lost its last territorial stronghold in 2019, security experts have warned about the dangers of its future resurgence.[46] This, along with the belief that the U.S. military's withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 led to the rise of ISIS, has translated into government policies that advocate for an enduring U.S. military presence in Iraq and Syria. "We cannot allow history to repeat itself in Syria," argued then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in January 2018. "ISIS presently has one foot in the grave, and by maintaining an American military presence in Syria, it will soon have two."[47] However, the belief that an enduring American military presence in the Middle East will prevent another insurgency is misguided.

Moreover, there exists wide variation on the status of the organization and its current threat assessment.[48] For example, the *New York Times* reported in August 2019 that there remained 18,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria, whereby "sleeper cells and strike teams have carried out sniper attacks, ambushes, kidnappings and assassinations against security forces and community leaders."[49] This followed a 2018 report by the United Nations that claimed the organization had somewhere between 20,000 to 30,000 fighters left.[50] The U.S. government estimates of current ISIS membership, however, are more conservative. According to the Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve, there are between 14,000-18,000 "members" across Iraq and Syria, including up to 3,000 of them being foreigners.[51] But the Department of Defense's Inspector General admits that the numbers and figures vary widely, both within and outside government.

Unlike in the years prior to the 2011 withdrawal, the situational awareness of the U.S. military's presence in Iraq has now become circumscribed due to limitations to its capacity and role, by-and-large confined to military bases. Today, U.S. military officers heavily depend on the

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45 Jenna Jordan, "The Death of Baghdadi Isn't the End of ISIS," *Washington Post*, November 5, 2019; Michael W.S. Ryan, "Defeating ISIS and Al-Qaeda on the Ideological Battlefield: The Case for the Corporation Against Ideological Violence," Center on Irregular Warfare and Armed Groups, United States Naval War College, 2018; and Abdelillah Bendaoudi, "After the 'Almost 100 Percent' Defeat of ISIS, What About its Ideology?," Al-Jazeera Centre for Studies, May 8, 2018.

46 Ben Wedeman and Lauren Said-Moorhouse, "ISIS has lost its final stronghold in Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces says," *CNN*, March 23, 2019.

47 Statement by Rex Tillerson, seen here: https://twitter.com/statedept/status/953725614694965248

48 Ben Hubbard, Rukmini Callimachi, and Alissa J. Rubin, "Leader's Death Will Damage ISIS, but Not Destroy It," *New York Times*, October 27, 2019.

49 Eric Schmitt, Alissa J. Rubin, and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "ISIS is Regaining Strength in Iraq and Syria," *New York Times*, August 19, 2019.

50 Bethan McKernan, "Up to 30,000 ISIS Fighters Remain in Iraq and Syria, says UN," *The Independent*, August 15, 2018.

51 Figures cited in "Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress," April 1, 2019 – June 30, 2019.

Iraqi Federal Police snipers march onto the rifle range to conduct training during an Iraqi security forces-led course, supported by advisers from Combined Joint Task – Force Operation Inherent Resolve, near Mosul, Iraq, May 16, 2017. (CENTCOM)

cooperation of their various Iraqi counterparts to verify and share intelligence on the ISIS threat and counterterrorism operations.[52] This has undermined the ability of the U.S. military to perform independent intelligence assessments about the current and future threat of militancy in Iraq. In addition, there is concern over the stability of those partnerships with the Iraqi intelligence and security community going forward, especially given heightened U.S.-Iran tensions, which impacts Iraq's political landscape and pressures domestic actors to choose sides.

While disparity and variety of intelligence data represent a challenge in making accurate threat assessments, a more comprehensive and enduring problem remains a weakness in definition over the broad spectrum of membership in the Islamic State. Throughout its self-declared territorial state across Iraq and Syria, the boundaries between the militant organization and society can be muddled. Formally, many recruits who joined the group in a given area originated from the local communities; informally, many who did not join in rank-and-file occupations had collaborated in civilian roles in a number of ways. Hence, the parameters of a threat assessment cannot rely on the narrowed framework of an armed soldier or official administrator because the depth and

scope of collaboration by civilians has an impact, especially when measuring organizational resiliency.

In addition, to what extent was civilian collaboration a behavior motivated by voluntary support or in reaction to preserve survival? Was voluntary support to further the cause of the organization's goals or to leverage the organization to further the cause of the individual's parochial aims (e.g., revenge by way of settling a local score)? These questions, in theory, are central to understand if and where the Islamic State has fertile ground within a society to rebuild its network infrastructure. However, as stated earlier, the government lacks the capability and willingness to approach post-conflict stabilization outside its current black-and-white framework, which is bound to reproduce grievances rather than reconcile them.

The only reliable way to assess and manipulate the ISIS threat over the long term is to identify and address grievances within the Sunni community. Without a favorable social base and opportunities to exploit tensions and grievances among Sunnis, the organization would be unable to regenerate new social networks in Iraq, let alone strong enough to reclaim and hold territory.

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52 Discussions with multiple U.S. military officers, Iraq, December 2019.

A Societal-Centric Approach

The rise and fall of the Islamic State leaves behind a legacy in Iraq that has forever impacted state and society. For the Sunnis, the trauma brought on by the atrocities and wreckage of war will continue to haunt the community and impact its future generations. But even as physical infrastructure and homes are rebuilt in liberated areas—and should life return to some degree of normalcy—the social fabric will take decades of reconciliatory efforts to repair. Given that the organization was derived from the community itself, the ISIS upheaval has altered aspects of the Sunni society in irreversible ways. To avert history repeating itself, Western engagement with the government of Iraq should shift away from prioritizing a military approach toward one focused on a fragmented society, namely on reconciliation, reintegration, and reconstruction within the post-war territories.

The policymaking community in Washington and European capitals are deeply concerned about the resurgence of the Islamic State. However, they often depict the militant organization as a constant threat just over the horizon, waiting for the opportune moment to take advantage of an opening and regain control over its lost territory. If there is any easing off the foot-pedal on combatting ISIS, Western policymakers fear its return is inevitable. Today, resources and attention may be diverted away from the anti-ISIS military effort due to the loss of Western military capability to operate in Iraq, internal unrest inspired by the anti-government protest movement, and rising tensions between the United States and Iran, especially after the January 2020 U.S. assassination of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani.[53]

But based on the impression of ISIS as an organization today—as some sort of "caliphate-in-waiting"—the assumption underlying its constant persistence is flawed. It also reinforces a policy that advocates and prioritizes a preventative military approach, which requires a foreign military presence that endures into the foreseeable future. In reality, in order for ISIS to regain the organizational capacity to recapture and govern territory—rather than merely hold the capability to wage an asymmetrical low-grade insurgency—the group requires new social networks to be reproduced through social grievances. This would not be possible without conditions within the Sunni community that allow the group to barnacle onto grievances and exploit them to receive support from the local population.

The predecessor of ISIS, for example, was determined by many experts to have been militarily defeated in 2010; shortly thereafter, it controlled and governed huge swaths of territory with an army and administration. This radical reversal in fortune for the extremist group did not occur due to any preexisting military or economic capabilities, or any changes of its ideology. The difference had been that a large segment of the Sunni population, more so than at any other time since 2003, mobilized into a state of rebellion against the government. But even prior to the outbreak of violence or mass mobilization to rebel, extortion and racketeering networks of ISIS's predecessor—supported by wider availability and participation of locals as informants—had penetrated Mosul as a "shadow government," collecting taxes from civilians and business owners.[54] While strong and professional policing institutions are lacking in Iraq, more securitization does not dispel the multivariate

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53 Vivienne Walt, "Why Iraqis are Worried about an Islamic State Resurgence after Soleimani's Death," *Time*, January 8, 2020.
54 Author's interviews with civilians and local business owners in Mosul, July 2019. For more information about financing of ISIS's predecessor, including extortion and racketeering, see, Patrick B. Johnston, Mona Alami, Colin P. Clarke, and Howard J. Shatz, "Return and Expand? The Finances and Prospects of the Islamic State After the Caliphate," RAND Corporation, 2019.

Members from the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service present Marine Gen. Joseph F. Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, with a flag from Bartilah, a town recaptured just outside of Mosul from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.
(Dominique Pineiro/U.S. Department of Defense)

root causes that drive locals to participate in explicit and implicit acts of rebellion.

Regardless of how "resurgence" is defined and measured, for ISIS to repeat its historical success of territorial control will require the remobilization of social bases of the Sunni community to participate in rebellion. However, in its ongoing counter-ISIS campaign, the West continues to place an overemphasis on military operations. This is largely reflected in the kinetic actions taken through airpower, targeting remnants of the group in desert and mountain ranges. But this overlooks the real danger of civil war recurrence brought on by unaddressed grievances, which can only be mitigated and managed through political efforts at the local and national level. To this end, the key to mitigating the risk of another wave of Sunni insurgency is to deprive ISIS, or future extremist groups, of local social networks to regenerate their membership and organizational apparatus. Here, three zones of concern are highlighted that require policy attention: ongoing inter-tribal and intra-tribal divisions, the proliferation of informal settlements, and the uncertainty surrounding

displaced and excluded communities.

First, the issue of tribal reconciliation and reintegration with the state and society is imperative to post-conflict stabilization. Because the rise and rule of ISIS involved the active participation of many Iraqi Sunnis, the motive to settle scores after its defeat for the crimes it committed will remain a factor risking another cycle of violence.[55] The group's rise was buttressed by pre-2014 motives of revenge that played out not just between tribes, but also between families within the same tribe, leading to tribal fragmentation. To offset the risk of future waves of settling scores within the Sunni community, targeted dialogue at the local level between tribal leaders requires a sustained effort by third-party mediators and non-government organizations that specialize in conflict resolution.[56] This requires expansive and stable partnerships between international organizations and appropriate authorities in Iraq, as well as engagement at all levels of government: local, provincial, and national.

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55 Isabel Coles, "Iraqi Yazidis Take Revenge as Islamic State Atrocities Unearthed," *Reuters*, February 10, 2015; and Isabel Coles, "As Bodies Wash Up from the Tigris, Some See Signs of Score-Settling," *Reuters*, April 19, 2017.
56 Osama Gharizi and Haidar al-Ibrahimi, "Baghdad Must Seize the Chance to Work with Iraq's Tribes," *War on the Rocks*, January 17, 2018.

Second, given Iraq's decades-long history of turmoil, which included devastating economic sanctions and international and civil wars, urban peripheries experienced a boom in informal settlements, or self-built illegal housing communities. Their lack of integration into formal governance institutions or city urban plans had practically led to stateless communities, exacerbating the urban-rural divide. This problem was especially pervasive on the western outskirts of Mosul, and served as a breeding ground for local ISIS facilitation and recruitment in the years prior to its self-declared caliphate. The problem of informal settlements is likely to exacerbate given the recent wave of internal displacement, and the government's weak capacity and willingness to tackle the issue.

Finally, barriers to reintegration placed against displaced Sunnis, in addition to the societal exclusion of families of ISIS members, are factors of destabilization that will have a cumulative impact on current and future generations. If families are not reintegrated back into their communities, grievances are likely to intensify over the coming years and invite radicalization within the camps. This serves as ground for extremist groups to recruit. Without sustained pressure and support from the international community, it is unlikely Iraqi leaders will be able to mobilize the political will to tackle issues surrounding reintegration. The removal of barriers to entry will require the demobilization or removal of militias from Sunni areas. This is unlikely without stronger state capacity and a security apparatus able to fill the vacuum to provide safety and certainty to returnees.

Today, local Sunni elites across the former territories of the Islamic State desire that the central government in Baghdad to move away from its binary approach and adopt a different legal framework to incorporate variation. A justice system that reflects varying types of membership and degrees of crimes committed to correspond to different levels of punishment is essential to mitigate the risks of conflict recurrence. This would allow opportunities for reintegration in the future, especially for those who do not have blood on their hands. Since all tribes in Sunni areas have members who joined the militant organization in one form or another, there is a collective interest

to create legal space for members (and their families) to eventually be reintegrated back into their local communities.

Moving into the new decade, Western engagement with a post-war Iraq should focus on these three broad issue areas, which will help national and local elites mitigate individual and group motivations to correct grievances through opportunistic violence. A strategy to counter ISIS's ideology as a way to advance de-radicalization policies is insufficient because ISIS was the byproduct of various motivations—many inspired by legitimate grievances that were unrelated to Salafi-jihadism or a commitment to Sunni statehood. To prevent conflict recurrence, a concerted effort is needed at the local level to repair and reconcile the local divisions within the Sunni community, and at the national level to reintegrate that community into the wider network of state infrastructure, governance, and service provisions.

Without these state and nation building mechanisms in place, revisionist armed actors are bound to find fertile ground, establish network ties, and expand and penetrate different segments of the Sunni population.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN IRAQ'S SUNNI POLITICS: SUNNI ARAB POLITICAL TRENDS, FACTIONS, AND PERSONALITIES SINCE 2014

Kirk H. Sowell

INTRODUCTION

The year 2014 was a horrible one for Iraq. The national election held in April was preceded by two ominous trends: an increasingly strong, armed insurgency from the Sunni Arab population and an increasingly sharp sectarian conflict within the mainstream political system, driven by actions of both the Shia Islamist-dominated government and Sunni Arab political leaders. A divisive election with a disputed result was followed by a strong insurgency, and while both pan-Arab and Iraqi Sunni media tended to frame it as a "revolution" driven by oppressed Sunni tribesmen, the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS), a brutal terrorist group with a globalist Salafi-Jihadist ideology, was its primary driver.

The crucible event of the year was the fall of Mosul, Iraq's most populous Sunni-majority city in the northwest province of Nineveh, to ISIS jihadists on June 10. The city did not fall without resistance, as is sometimes said, as federal police units fought a four-day gun battle for the city, while army divisions, including two garrisoned right outside the city, watched on. Once resistance in the city collapsed, several Iraqi army divisions, weakened by sectarian divisions and riddled with corruption, collapsed almost overnight, and terrorists overran much of northern and western Iraq. These events were a watershed for Iraq, and especially for its Sunni Arab population, and it is Sunni Arab politics since 2014 which is the focus of this chapter.

The first section sets the stage, discussing the state of Sunni politics on the eve of catastrophe. Even now, one might debate whom to blame first: Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's divisive and conspiracy-driven governing style or Sunni leaders' equally divisive identity grievance-driven style of politics—led by Speaker Osama al-Nujayfi—that blamed all problems on Shia leaders and ignored threats from Sunni militants. Either way, they fed on each other, and wiser Sunni leaders would not have simplistically claimed Baghdad was waging a war against Sunnis given

that it faced constant terror attacks coming from within Sunni-populated areas.

The second section deals with the period of sectarian conciliation that began with the election of Haider al-Abadi to replace Maliki as head of government and the election of Salim al-Jiburi, a soft-spoken lawyer, as a Sunni Arab to head parliament in place of Nujayfi. Sunni leaders who most strongly voiced Sunni sectarian claims were marginalized and discredited, while the reduction in Sunni participation in the polarized 2014 vote led to an absolute Shia Islamist majority in parliament for the first time. The country faced both a war for existence and a deep fiscal crisis, and most political conflict at the federal level was between rival Shia leaders. The conflict with the Kurdistan Region in late 2017 following a Kurdish independence effort caused many Sunnis to rally around Abadi's leadership, further marginalizing Sunni leaders.

The third section focuses on politics in the Sunni-majority provinces of Anbar, Nineveh, and Salah al-Din. Discredited at the national level and facing a sharp fiscal squeeze, the Sunni establishment might have tried to work together to improve the lot of citizens in their provinces, many of whom were displaced. Instead, they engaged in what can best be described as a bar room brawl, using all means fair and foul against local Sunni rivals to control what such sources of patronage as still existed. Eventually, a single man came to dominate each province, but people living in them, who would have faced hard times even with good governance, saw dysfunction led by one scandal-disgraced leader after another.

The fourth section covers the May 2018 election and the rise of then-Anbar Governor Muhammad al-Halbusi, who was elected speaker of parliament in September of that year. Parliamentarians, once elected, are free to change parties at will without facing reelection, and so many MPs changed alignments—some Shia as well, but especially among Sunnis—that the results of the election

were severely undermined. Furthermore, after parlaying his smashing win as leading candidate in Anbar into elevation to the speakership, Halbusi, one of Iraq's youngest politicians when elected governor of Anbar in 2017, skillfully took advantage of overreach by Sunni figures who had aligned themselves with Iranian-backed parties and formed a new coalition which by late 2019 dominated the Sunni political scene.

The fifth section focuses on the Sunni role in the political crisis that emerged after Prime Minister Adil Abd al-Mahdi, Abadi's successor in 2018, was pushed to resign after hundreds of protesters in Shia-majority protests were killed by security forces, up through the election of Mustafa al-Kathimi in early May 2020. Halbusi's dominance by this point was so great that the Sunni role in the five-month crisis consisted entirely of Halbusi's own actions either as speaker or as head of the largest Sunni coalition. Various Shia and Kurdish leaders played key roles at various points, but no other Sunni leader played a significant role.

The sixth section concludes with the new status quo as of early fall 2020. Halbusi remains the central figure in Sunni politics, although a series of figures who have been his rivals form a second tier of Sunni leaders, most notable among them being Nujayfi and Salah al-Din's Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi. It remains unclear when the next election will be held, but it seems most likely that when it happens voters will at most be able to only shift the balance of seats that exists between Halbusi and his rivals. Post-2014 lack of security, extreme material deprivation, and displacement have made Sunni areas of Iraq poor grounds for the birth of more genuine, non-patronage-based politics, and the extent to which activists have tried to rear their heads over the past couple of years, security forces controlled by the kleptocracy have kept them down.

The 2014-2020 period has been one of both continuity and change for Iraq's Sunni politics. The main point of continuity has been the centrality of individual leadership, with political parties based on individuals rather than an ideology or political program. Halbusi himself has no discernible ideology and no self-expressed political agenda aside from benefitting the citizens of the provinces his coalition represents. Prior to 2014, there was

some division between Sunnis who were secular and centralist and others who were "Islamist" and favored the creation of Sunni autonomous regions, but these differences mostly grew out of expressions of sectarian political identity; there were few specific policy differences between Nujayfi and his rivals. The other point of continuity has been the full preservation of Iraq's corrupt system of allocating offices and thus control of patronage on a party and ethno-sectarian basis, one which enfeebled the Iraqi state in 2014 and continues to do so today. This kleptocracy includes leading figures of all backgrounds, Shia, Sunni Arab, and Kurdish, and much of the story below relates to the intra-Sunni struggle for control of their portion of the patronage pie.

There have also been two key changes in how Sunni Arab politics works. One is the dramatic and welcome reduction in inter-sectarian hostility that existed through 2014. While parties still function and allocate offices on a sectarian basis, they no longer engage in incendiary rhetoric against one another, so the country is run by a fully cooperative kleptocracy. And while Shia militias tied to Iran are a serious problem, the main conflict is between these Shia militias, on the one hand, and secular Shia activists, as well as Sunnis, on the other. Furthermore, with Shia dominance of the federal government secure, nationally oriented Shia leaders are locked in conflict with Iranian-aligned political parties, and their cooperation with Sunni parties has prevented the Iranian takeover of Iraqi politics, which some had predicted.

The second major change is the nature of the existential challenge that Iraq faces. While security threats from Sunni militants remain, Iraq faces a far greater threat of fiscal collapse, driven by many years of public sector expansion and private sector weakness, combined with the long-term decline in oil prices. As a result, such policy disputes which exist are not Sunni-Shia, but between the current government, determined to bring structural change to the system, and parliamentarians, both Shia and Sunni alike, overwhelmingly in favor of retaining it.

Setting the Stage: Sunni Politics Before the 2014 Cataclysm

The core dynamic of Sunni politics in the years leading immediately to the 2014 catastrophe was the division between those focused on standing up to Maliki and framing Baghdad as responsible for the country's problems and those taking a conciliatory approach to Baghdad, often for reasons of self-interest, while framing the ambitions of Kurdish leaders as the primary threat.

The Sunni Arab push for an autonomous region, or for provinces to be given autonomous status from Baghdad, similar to that existing in the Kurdistan Region, was the sharpest form of friction during Maliki's second term. While Sunnis had strongly opposed autonomous regions just years earlier, Osama al-Nujayfi, speaker of parliament during the term, began talking the issue up in 2011. Then, later that year, there were votes for autonomy by the provincial councils of Salah al-Din and Diyala to which Maliki responded by illegally imposing martial law.[1] Meanwhile, Osama's younger brother, Uthil al-Nujayfi, elected governor of Nineveh in 2009 when their party won a sweeping majority, spent the entire term engaged in a public struggle for control of security institutions in the province.

Adding to the polarization was the fact that the Nujayfis, previously backers of a strong Arab nationalist line and hostile to Kurdish ambitions, flipped during this period and allied with Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). This was in line with a policy change in Turkey, which went from opposing Kurdish autonomy in Iraq to attempting to turn it into a commercial colony and source of oil and gas imports. That the Nujayfis appeared to many to be open instruments of Turkish policy, and now accommodating to the

Kurds, was controversial among Sunni Arabs and enraged officials in Baghdad.

In contrast to the Nujayfi line, there was another current in Sunni politics, which was centralist and pro-Baghdad. Salih al-Mutlak of Anbar, deputy prime minister during this term, symbolized this group, and the landmark 2013 budget first prohibiting independent Kurdish oil exports was passed only with his support.[2] Then-Governor of Anbar Qasim al-Fahdawi was also pro-Baghdad, and Salah al-Din Governor Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi, like Fahdawi elected in 2009, initially supported the autonomy effort, but started tilting toward Baghdad as well.

The Sunni protest movement of 2013 was central to the events of 2014, even though it seems clear that many Sunnis involved did not want armed conflict. The movement was based on a range of grievances, some such as illegal arrests and debaathification were fairly reasonable, and others about Sunni representation not so much (as Sunnis had their share of ministers and the budget in the government). Broadly speaking, it had two main wings. One was the "mainstream" wing, which was already part of the political process, represented by the Nujayfis, who backed a major protest camp in Nineveh, autonomists and Islamists in Anbar and Salah al-Din, and mainstream clerics in each province. The other wing was much more militant and consisted mainly of front groups for insurgent forces. The most important of these was a front group for the Ba'th Party called the Intifada Ahrar al-Iraq.[3]

Between these two groups and Sunni leaders closer to Baghdad there existed a negative three-way feedback loop that ensured collective

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1 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 30, 5-11, January 3, 2012.

2 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 57, 2, March 20, 2013.

3 Kirk Sowell, "Iraq's Second Sunni Insurgency," Current Trends in Islamist Ideology," Hudson Institute Report, August 9, 2014.
https://www.hudson.org/research/10505-iraq-s-second-sunni-insurgency

Iraqi police officers carry posters of Iraq's President Jalal Talabani and Prime Minister al-Maliki in Najaf, 20 December 2006. (army.mil)

failure: the militant wing of the protests made it harder for Baghdad to compromise with the more moderate Nujayfi-Islamist wing, while the "moderate" protest wing rejected any attempt by Sunni ministers in Baghdad, such as Mutlak, to negotiate with Maliki over Sunni complaints. Not only did protest leaders in Anbar hold a major rally to reject compromise, but Nujayfi, acting as speaker, scuttled a compromise deal between Maliki and Mutlak over debaathification on the grounds that it was insufficient. The result was a continued rise in tensions, insurgent groups—including the Ba'th, but also ISIS jihadists—became more active, and by the first quarter of 2014, an armed insurgency was gaining speed.

Sunni parties went into the April 2014 election polarized into two major camps consistent with the framework described above. One was an expanded coalition led by Nujayfi, with the name of the 2010 coalition amended to Mutahidun for Reform after Jamal al-Karbuli's al-Hal joined. Consistent with the general nature of Sunni politics, Mutahidun included a collection of leaders whose parties were the main pro-autonomy party in their area: Nujayfi himself in Nineveh and Karbuli in Anbar, plus Jamal al-Karbuli, Thafir al-Ani, and Ahmad Abu Risha in Anbar; Ahmad al-Masari in Baghdad; Salim

al-Jiburi in Diyala; and Ammar Yusuf Humud in Salah al-Din. To these traditional allies, Nujayfi was able to add two more leaders who had been alienated by Maliki: Karbuli in Anbar and Talal al-Zoubi (Baghdad Belt Assembly) in the Baghdad area. While the coalition was highly diverse, most of it consisted of the political wings of the non-insurgency wing of the 2013 protest movement, merging Turkey-backed autonomy supporters with the Qatar-backed Islamic Party (of which both Jiburi and Humud were members). The fact that this was the coalition of the Turkish-Qatari regional axis further increased the polarization.

Karbuli in particular had never supported Nujayfi's political agenda, but he had made a deal with Nujayfi's allies in Anbar to gain the chairmanship of the provincial council in mid-2013. Maliki retaliated by having security forces raid his party's office in Baghdad, seizing their computer equipment; after years of allegations of corruption at the Industry Ministry, Karbuli's brother Ahmad, the minister, found himself under investigation. His quid pro quo with Maliki now a dead letter, Karbuli had nothing to lose by throwing his lot in with the premier's enemies. Ahmad would flee Iraq, and a fire in the contracts office of the ministry would slow the investigation.[4]

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4 "Questions About the Spread of Fires to Cover Up Corruption in the Iraqi Ministry of Industry," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, January 22, 2015.

Mutahidun party logo. (Wikimedia Commons)

The other main coalition was Mutlak's Arab Coalition, the core of which was his Dialogue Front faction. As deputy prime minister, Mutlak had a clear vulnerability, and he tried to immunize himself by criticizing Maliki and claiming he had no authority. He nonetheless defended his role in the government with the budget, which again had a strong centrist imprint, which Nujayfi had continued to block in alliance with the Kurds. Iyad Allawi, a secular Shia figure himself, was also a competitor in the Sunni space as the base of his Nationalist Coalition was heavily former Ba'thist and Sunni Arab. Allawi's bloc split the polarization by being strongly critical of Maliki, but without Nujayfi's pro-autonomy stance. These factions competed with some who were Maliki-aligned, such as those of Fahdawi, the former Anbar governor, and Defense Minister Saadun al-Dulaymi, also of Anbar.

The result of the election was a pyrrhic victory for Nujayfi's Mutahidun. Winning a plurality of Sunni seats in a divided field, Muthahidun factions went into the election with 45 seats and came out with 27. This corresponded with a decline in the total number of combined seats held by Sunni Arab or secular Shia (Allawi bloc) parliamentarians,

from 101 to 76. Allawi and Mutlak saw smaller declines from 24 to 21 seats and from 15 to 11 seats, respectively; to make matters worse, Allawi failed to expand his Shia vote share, but instead cannibalized part of Nujayfi's Sunni base. This was clear from comparing results in the 2013 provincial elections in Baghdad to the 2014 election. In 2013, the Shia Islamist lists won 73% of the Baghdad vote, with Nujayfi winning a slight majority of the remainder and with Allawi and Mutlak respectively taking 23% and 21% of the remainder. In 2014, the Shia Islamist share increased to 75%, but among the remainder, Allawi's vote surged, and Allawi and Nujayji's respective shares roughly flipped.[5] Nujayfi's weak showing in Baghdad was likely due to Allawi's strong stance against autonomous Sunni provinces as Baghdad Sunnis had reason to fear that Nujayfi's agenda would leave them isolated in an overwhelmingly Shia-dominated state.

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5 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 85, 3-4, May 21, 2014.

The Abadi Era: Sectarian Conciliation Amid Sunni Weakness, 2014-2018

The collapse of the Iraqi army and the fall of much of northern and western Iraq to ISIS terrorists in June 2014 destroyed Maliki's credibility, leading to the election of Haider al-Abadi in September. Like Maliki, Abadi was a lifelong member of the Dawa Party, and as an MP and chairman of parliament's Finance Committee, he had been a strong supporter of Maliki's centralist policies, especially on issues related to the Kurdistan Region. Yet, he had no history of involvement in sectarian conflicts with Sunnis. Abadi spent his exile period in Britain rather than Iran and Syria, as Maliki had, and yet despite supporting Maliki's reelection prior to Mosul's fall, his personality could not have been more different. Iraq, and Iraq's Sunnis especially, were fortunate to have a prime minister with Abadi's calm, conciliatory manner during this period.

The cataclysm of June 2014 and related tragedies in the months that followed had an even stronger impact on Sunnis. Thus having suffered one blow during the April elections, the collapse of resistance to the Islamic State takeover in most Sunni areas dealt a further blow to the credibility of the Sunni elite. And this was true more for Nujayfi and his Mutahidun, closely associated with the 2013 Sunni protest movement, than for others. Furthermore, the Nujayfi properties and personal residence outside of Mosul fell into the jihadists' hands, and his brother, Uthil al-Nujayfi, still governor of Nineveh, was publicly visible during the attack on Mosul, at one point being photographed walking grandly with a shotgun in his hand. After fleeing the city, he set up a temporary administration in Talkayf, in the part of northern Nineveh, which had always been controlled by KDP Peshmerga. Declaring that

he was forming "popular committees" of armed local citizens who would take back Mosul, Nujayfi insisted on an all-Sunni chain-of-command for a force which would be armed either nationally or internationally, a demand that Baghdad could never accept, especially as it was blaming him for conspiring against the army. Nujayfi also unrealistically talked up working with secular elements of the insurgency, including the Ba'thist Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandiya (JRGN), but even had the other side possessed the desire or capability to fight the Islamic State, Shia leaders interpreted Nujayfi's statements on working with Ba'thists as just confirming their suspicions about him.

Another key Sunni figure to suffer a blow to his credibility was Khamis Khanjar. Khanjar, who is from Anbar but had long been based outside Iraq, was an influential figure in Sunni politics, but mainly behind the scenes as a funnel for money from Sunni Arab states. For example, he was widely believed to be a key financer of the predominately Sunni "Iraqiya" coalition in 2010.[6] By 2014, Khanjar moved more directly into the spotlight, sponsoring a coalition called "Kirama," which ran a vast number of ads on Sunni-oriented TV channels. (Khanjar was still not a candidate himself, but he was much more visible.) The first blow Khanjar took was a loss in the elections, as Kirama only won a single seat, in Salah al-Din. But then, after the fall of Mosul to ISIS, Khanjar made his standing quite a bit worse by giving a highly enthused interview on al-Arabiya on June 28 in which he all but endorsed the terrorist group. He praised the "liberation of Mosul" and declared that "the revolutionaries are at the gates of Baghdad" at a time when it was clear that the Islamic State was the dominant element in this "revolution."

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6 "Al-Hal Movement: Khamis al-Khanjar Supports Iraqiya Financially but He Does Not Control its Decision-Making," *Buratha News*, September 18, 2011. http://ftp.burathanews.com/arabic/news/136467

Haider al-Abadi at a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin. (kremlin.ru)

At a time when most Iraqis—and much of the world—were horrified by the group's crimes and what it might do after the army's collapse, Khanjar declared: "We support this revolution. . . . I call all tribal leaders, businessmen and people of good will to support this revolution."[7]

Then, in early August, both Sunni Arabs and Kurdish leaders suffered another black mark, one that seems destined to be remembered more historically, with ISIS' genocide against the Yezidi religious minority in Sinjar, a district in west Nineveh, and simultaneous mass enslavement of thousands of Yezidi women and girls. Local Sunni Arab tribes participated in these crimes, and KDP Peshmerga that controlled the area simply fled and ran, leaving the Yezidis defenseless.

The weakening of rhetorically aggressive Sunni leaders coincided with the rise of Salim al-Jiburi, who became the country's most important Sunni figure on July 15 when he was elected speaker of parliament, replacing the elder Nujayfi. Jiburi was a relatively young, soft-spoken lawyer and

MP from Diyala who chaired the Human Rights Committee in the previous term. Jiburi was a long-time member of the Islamic Party, but the party had long given up any real Islamist agenda in favor of Machiavellian political maneuvering. Jiburi was, as noted above, part of Nujayfi's 2014 electoral coalition, but nonetheless the change from the combative Nujayfi to the mild-mannered Jiburi complemented the similar personality change from Maliki to Abadi.

At the national level, the collapse of the federal army was turning the entire country into a militia state, as existing Shia militias ramped up recruitment, and Shia leaders without personal militias—including Prime Minister Maliki—rushed to form them.[8] They were broadly referred to as the "Popular Mobilization," or Hashd, but individual military units were controlled by specific political figures. The trend reached the absurd level to the extent that Shia politicians would turn up on political talk shows wearing military fatigues.[9]

7 "Interview with Khamis Khanjar," *al-Arabiya*, June 28, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=47kuL0VnOC8
8 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 111, 5-10, July 20, 2015. Pages 6-8 have a full listing of militias by political affiliation.
9 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 88, July 3, 2014.

It was within this context, as it was clear that ISIS was going to control Mosul for some period, that Osama al-Nujayfi reacted to the failure of his brother's initial gambit to get back into Mosul by going full warlord: In early August, he established a local militia called the "Mosul Battalions," which he said the "people of Mosul" had chosen him to lead.[10] Nujayfi was not alone in doing this among Sunnis, given what Shia leaders were doing, with members of parliament forming their own militias. In Nineveh, MPs Ahmad al-Jiburi and Abd al-Rahman al-Shamari were the most prominent, and MP Mishaan al-Jiburi set up a Sunni militia in Salah al-Din. But these other Sunni figures were setting up militias in coordination with the Iranian-dominated national Hashd administration, formally known by late 2014 as the "Hashd Commission." Nujayfi, by contrast, set himself up as a defender of Sunni rights in opposition to Iranian domination.

Still, among Sunni leaders associated with the 2013 protests, Nujayfi, who supported the new Abadi government when he replaced Maliki in September, was a relative realist. Others drove themselves into complete irrelevance by their denialism over the nature of ISIS and the crimes it was committing. Abd al-Malik al-Saadi, a deeply respected Sunni cleric long in exile in Jordan who had boosted the protest movement in Anbar, backed the "revolution" while criticizing some of ISIS' crimes for damaging the revolutionaries' image. The Gathering of Nineveh Scholars and Preachers (GNSP), Nujayfi's clerical ally in his home province, was silent. The Muslim Scholars Association (MSA), a group prominent in pan-Arab media whose armed wing, the 1920s Brigades, participated in the previous war (2003-2009) and in 2014 was backing the new insurgency, rejected both ISIS' expulsion of Christians from Mosul and

its announcement of the caliphate that June, but still supported the insurgency.[11]

As late as October 2016, as the operation to liberate Mosul began, MSA leader Muthanna al-Dhari, appearing on al-Jazeera, framed the effort to retake the city from the Islamic State as being part of Iran's historical drive to dominate Iraq. While Dhari did not expressly endorse ISIS, he compared the American-led international coalition to a "crusade" and said talk of "terrorism" in Iraq was just a pretext.[12] Indeed, al-Jazeera and other pan-Arab media outlets played a vital role in providing the Islamic State with propaganda, usually framing the uprising as a "tribal revolution" by oppressed Sunnis.[13]

Incidentally, Dhari mentioned an idea that though usually unspoken underlay much Sunni-Shia conflict through 2014: that Sunnis were the demographic majority in Iraq. This idea was fostered by the Ba'th regime, including a spurious census in the 1980s that purported to show Sunni Arabs as a plurality and, including the Kurds, Sunnis as a clear majority. In 2013, Nujayfi raised eyebrows with a comment on al-Jazeera that Sunnis were "either about the same number as Shia, or there may be a Sunni majority."[14] When asked about this post-2014, Nujayfi demmured on commenting on the issue, and no mainstream Sunni politician would assert this today, but the ferocity with which Sunnis fought in the two sectarian conflict periods (post-2003 and in 2013-2014) is hard to imagine without the prevelance of this belief.[15]

That Nineveh was entirely outside of federal control meant that political conflict focused around the Nujayfis' continuing efforts to form an autonomous Sunni-led force. As referenced

10 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 90, 3, August 5, 2014.

11 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 90, 6-7, August 5, 2014.

12 "Without Borders: The Fate of Iraq's Sunnis after the Battles of Mosul with Muthanna al-Dhari," *Al-Jazeera Arabic*, October 26, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S9LskfLO2uM

13 Kirk Sowell, "The Islamic State's Eastern Frontier: Ramadi and Fallujah as Theaters of Sectarian Conflict," Perspectives on Terrorism, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2015). http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/449

14 Interview with Osama Najafi, *Al-Jazeera Arabic*, Feb. 19, 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyKG7lwLR6o

15 In historical fact, Iraq was a Sunni-majority country until roughly a century ago, when the conversion of Sunni tribes in south-central Iraq beginning in the late 19th century created a Shia majority. Using election results as a proxy, Shia were probably a bare majority of just over 50% post-2003, but the displacement of Sunnis in conflicts through 2014 created the last two parliaments, which are about 60% Shia or more.

Ninevah Guards (Facebook)

above, this included former police from Mosul under Uthil's command and another group to be formed as part of the "Mosul Battalions" renamed as the "Nineveh Guard." With government formation in September 2014, Osama had "failed upwards," going from being speaker to one of three vice presidents, along with former Prime Ministers Nuri al-Maliki and Iyad Allawi. In January 2015, Nujayfi made a high-profile visit to the ethnically Kurdish federal Army 5th Division headquarters in Makhmur. Nujayfi claimed to have authority over the new Sunni force in formation from President Fuad Masum, but this claim was rather awkward since the prime minister is commander-in-chief and Iraq's constitution gives the presidency no such authority.

Highlighting Baghdad's weakness—to add insult to injury in a sense—in December 2015 Turkey established a military base in Bashiqa, a town in northeast Nineveh controlled by Kurdish Peshmerga. The primary purpose of the base—Turkey has long had other bases farther

north focused on the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)—was for Turkish troops to train Nujayfi's forces. Especially given Turkey's role facilitating the growth of Islamist armed groups in Syria, this caused outrage in Iraq, bringing universal condemnation from Shia as well as many Sunni Arab leaders. The fact that Kurdish leader Masud Barzani had traveled to Ankara and negotiated the deployment as if the Kurdistan Region were a sovereign authority in Nineveh made it all the more controversial.[16]

Nujayfi's renaming of his force to the "Nineveh Guard" was an attempt to bandwagon off of an effort backed by the United States to legislatively establish a new "National Guard," and the debate over and ultimate failure of this effort was the key "Sunni" political issue from late 2014 through 2015 and 2016. The Abadi cabinet approved the idea in principle on January 27, 2015[17] and published a draft of it in early February.[18] The draft was disappointing to Sunni autonomists on two grounds. One, it contained a clause saying that

16 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 121, 2, December 3, 2015.
17 "Decisions of the Council of Ministers from Hearing Number 4 on 1/27/2015," Republic of Iraq General Secretariat for the Council of Ministers, January 27, 2015. http://www.cabinet.iq/ArticleShow.aspx?ID=5728
18 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 102, 14, March 4, 2015.

members of each guard would be recruited from those "residing" in each province, raising the prospect that Shia militia members who by this point were present in Sunni-majority provinces would be recruited into them. Two, the clause dealing with command posts gave the prime minister rather than the governor the power of appointment, with the only concession to autonomy being that the provincial council would be able to choose one among three commanders nominated by the premier.

Yet, the kind of provincial countrol Nujayfi and others demanded could never pass parliament for the precise reason that Shia parties would not fund military units that might be controlled by Sunni leaders like Nujayfi who were backed by regional Sunni states. While a cynical desire for domination by Shia parties with militia wings was part of this dynamic, the concern was not without basis given that Sunni leaders, such as Nujayfi and Khanjar, were backed by regional states that were viewed as backing Sunni insurgents in the ongoing war. (At a minimum, Turkey was allowing a wide range of Sunni armed groups to use its territory to gain access to Syria and Iraq, and funding was coming from Arab states.) This debate was carried on intermittently for two years, during which time the Shia-dominated Hashd factions, along with Sunni factions tied to them, continued to grow in numbers and strength.[19] The Hashd itself existed without statutory basis, as an extension of executive orders first by Maliki and then by Abadi.

Finally, in November 2016, the Shia majority in parliament settled the issue by passing the "Popular Mobilization Commission Law of 2016" based on Abadi's executive order from February of the same year. The law was passed by the Shia majority over Sunni opposition,[20] and Shia leaders simply declared it to be an alternative to the putative "National Guard" law, which was now a dead letter.

Thus, in Iraqi politics, Shia dominance during this period was so thorough that national-level conflicts were largely intra-Shia. This was illustrated during the primary parliamentary crisis of Jiburi's tenure, in March-June 2016, when a self-proclaimed "Reform Front" was formed in parliament to challenge the Abadi government. Jiburi nearly lost his post, but this was mainly due to the fact that he was viewed as being allied with Abadi, not for pushing any Sunni-specific agenda. This new front was dominated by Shia MPs tied either with Maliki or Muqtada al-Sadr, and whether Shia or Sunni, were individuals involved in corrupt parties and militias which formed under Maliki.[21] While the front quickly collapsed due to the rivalry between Sadr and Maliki, the central dynamic of national politics between 2014 and 2017 was an intra-Shia struggle for power.

Another key conflict in national politics in 2016 was the impeachment of two of Abadi's lead ministers, Defense Minister Khalid al-Obaydi, a Sunni Arab, and Finance Minister Hoshyar Zebari, a Kurd. While both were ostensibly removed over corruption allegations, both efforts were highly political. What Obaydi and Zebari had in common is that they were the leading ministers who were tied to what might be called at that time the "Barzani-Nujayfi Axis"—i.e., the political alliance between Barzani's KDP and Nujayfi's Mutahidun, which both backed ethno-sectarian autonomy agendas and were close to Turkey. (Obaydi had been a military advisor to Nujayfi before taking office, although he worked closely with Abadi, and Zebari is a Barzani family member.) While Iran-aligned Shia factions were hostile to Obaydi both for his former ties to Nujayfi and then-close ties to Abadi, there was a strong intra-Sunni element to the effort as the corruption allegations were driven by Speaker Jiburi and Anbar MP Muhammad al-Karbuli of al-Hal. According to Obaydi, Karbuli had offered him an alliance in exchange for corrupt actions, but when he refused, Karbuli tried to extort him by accusing him of corruption, followed by the impeachment effort. During a fiery parliament session on August 7, 2016, Obaydi defended himself while attacking Jiburi and Karbuli, but the balance of forces was against him, and he was

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19 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 111, July 20, 2015.

20 "Iraqi Parliament Session in which the PMF Bill was Approved in the Absence of Sunni Representatives," *Al-Jazeera Arabic*, Nov. 26, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RbmkmryppVo.

21 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 129, April 20, 2016.

removed from office.[22] This episode needs to be remembered when, as discussed below, Obaydi would run for parliament in May 2018, allied with Abadi. He came in first by a wide margin, a result showing how little regard Sunni voters have for parliament.

The elevation of Abadi and Jiburi as the country's leading Shia and Sunni leaders, respectively, the discrediting of the Sunni establishment concurrent with total Shia dominance in Baghdad, and the empowerment of the "Hashd" Shia militia movement all led to something unimaginable under Maliki: a dramatic decline in sectarian conflict in federal politics. While Sunni politicians would frequently complain of a lack of monetary support for liberated areas or displaced persons from Sunni provinces, all Sunni leaders, including Nujayfi, stressed their support for the Abadi government. The presence of Shia militias backed by Iran in Sunni-majority provinces was a constant source of tension, but as Abadi was correctly viewed as being in political contention with the militias' political wings—such as Hadi al-Amiri's Badr Organization—this made the Iranian role a cross-sectarian concern, a trend which only increased with time.

Each of the two episodes mentioned above, the "Reform Front" gambit and the Obaydi-Zebari impeachments, were examples of this reduction in sectarian conflict. Both involved Shia and Sunni MPs allied against their respective intra-sectarian rivals—Abadi and Jiburi in the first case, and Abadi and Obaydi in the second. The second episode also contained an intra-Kurdish element, as the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), acting in a way unimaginable in years past, refrained from opposing the impeachment of a leading Kurdish minister, as he belonged to the KDP. The KDP and the PUK had fought a civil war in the 1990s, but had successfully unified under the umbrella of the Kurdistan Alliance in federal politics post-2003. This impacted Sunni politics indirectly because it meant that Nujayfi's alliance with "the Kurds" was really just an alliance with Barzani and the KDP. Just as Sunni Arab politics evolved post-2014 from Sunni-Shia conflict to intra-Sunni conflict,

Kurdish politics during this period increasingly became intra-Kurdish.

Abadi did preside over a major conflict with the Kurdistan Region after Kurdish leaders overreached in a September 2017 independence referendum that attempted to unilaterally seize control of ethnically mixed territories. But Abadi's centralist policy—which followed from his record on budget issues while in parliament—was widely supported by Sunni Arabs, and this further sidelined Sunni leaders at the national level. Indeed, Abadi's nationalist, non-sectarian leadership during the war paved the way for cross-sectarian electoral lists with Shia leaders in the May 2018 election, including one Abadi led himself.

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22 "Dr. Hanan Alfatlawi's Interrogation Session for Defense Minister," Dr. Hanan Alfatlawi YouTube Channel, Aug. 7, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1R__NqR8wE

The Fight for the Provinces

Having less to fight for nationally freed Sunni parties to focus on power struggles at the provincial level. In this regard, it is important to note that there is a fundamental difference between provincial politics between Kurdish and federal provinces and, among the latter, between Shia and Sunni-majority provinces. Provincial intrigue is minimal in the Kurdistan Region because the two dominant Kurdish parties are better able to dictate local dynamics, and this is especially true in Kurdistan Democratic Party-dominated Erbil and Duhok. But in federal provinces, the multi-party fights over the governorships and council chairmanships are intense. Yet, between Sunni and Shia, there is another difference: since Shia are the majority and dominate leading posts, Shia leaders are nationally focused, allowing second-tier figures from their parties to fight over local posts. For Sunnis, by contrast, provincial posts are more important, as they are the primary levers of patronage for their supporters.

The three key Sunni-majority provinces are Nineveh, Salah al-Din, and Anbar. While Sunni Arabs were perhaps half the population in Diyala before the displacements, they were on the defensive, and in 2016, the governorship shifted to the Shia when Muthanna al-Tamimi of Badr was elected. Sunni Arabs are also probably close to 40% of Kirkuk's population, but until October 2017, Kirkuk city was Kurdish-controlled. After the federal takeover that month, Abadi appointed Rakan al-Jiburi, the province's deputy governor, as "acting" governor, a post he has retained to this day. Sunnis were an even more distinct minority in Baghdad, and in each case, these proportions shape the dynamics of provincial politics.

In Nineveh, Uthil al-Nujayfi, while residing in Kurdish-controlled areas, initially held on as governor even as Iraq itself no longer had control of it, but quickly came under attack from rivals who blamed him for its fall. Indeed, the blame game over the fall of Mosul became something of a national pastime. Maliki, who as prime minister was commander-in-chief of the armed forces, attributed the collapse of several divisions to a "conspiracy" that he said was driven by the Kurds[23] (or sometimes the United States, or Sunnis, or some combination). Another line of attack was against Uthil himself, and a August 2015 "report" produced by parliament's Security & Defense Committee framed him as primarily responsible; it also criticized Maliki.[24] This report was produced by the committee's chairman, Hakim al-Zamili, a Sadrist who is notorious as a former militiaman and is not credible. Zamili's report concluded that Nujayfi was complicit with the terrorist takeover of Mosul, and the primary evidence of Nujayfi's support for terrorism was his public statements critical of the Iraqi army (for local abuses).[25]

Widespread corruption (the purchase of positions) and demoralization in the Iraqi army is a better explanation. But the fall of Mosul was too useful a political weapon to admit that the problems were systemic. Given that Maliki had appointed every senior officer in the military for eight years, he merited primary responsibility.

The Nujayfis' failure to get the kind of National Guard bill they wanted coincided with a more direct defeat in Nineveh—or to be more precise, over control of the Nineveh Government-in-Exile, as Mosul remained in enemy hands. On May 28, 2015, parliament exercised its authority under the

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23 Maliki has given variations on this conspiracy on a wide range of occasions. For an example focused on the Kurds, see:
Interview with Nouri al-Maliki, *al-Sharqiya*, Oct. 19, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28B8YeQo-fQ
24 "In Pictures… the Findings of the Final Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Fall of Mosul," *Rudaw Arabic*, August 17, 2015. https://www.rudaw.net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/1708201511
25 Ibid. See p. 2 of the embedded document.

Atheel al-Nujaifi, former governor of Ninevah. (Wikimedia Commons)

2008 Provincial Powers Law to remove Uthil al-Nujayfi as governor upon motion by Prime Minister Abadi (the law stipulates that the prime minister must initiate the motion).[26] This led to a months-long period in which the council-in-exile, meeting at times in the Kurdish-controlled Nineveh town of Alqosh, north of Mosul, struggled over a replacement. The contest was narrowed down to a Nujayfi-backed candidate, Amin Ibrahim al-Fanash, against Councilman Nufal Hamadi al-Akub, resulting in a two-vote victory in the 39-seat council for Akub on October 5 of that same year. Akub himself was elected in 2013 on a list called Fidelity to Nineveh, which aside from his seat won only one other seat, and then merged into the Arab Nahda coalition, which, along with the Kurds, reelected Nujayfi in 2013. Nahda subsequently fell apart; the defection of Akub's two-seat faction turned the tide, and Akub was rewarded with the governorship.[27] Kurdish council members were not happy, but they accepted the result and vowed to work with him,

and Akub visited Erbil to mend ties.

Akub's election was a clear rebuke to the Nujayfis, but of course not a final defeat, as they continued to maintain public visibility as leaders of their Mosul Brigades militia. Yet, they were further disadvantaged by Abadi's nomination of General Najm al-Jiburi as commander of a new Nineveh Operations Command, as Jiburi signaled his intention to recruit tribal allies to the army from rural areas of Nineveh. The rural/urban divide is an important aspect of Nineveh politics, as Akub represented the rural Sunni vote, while the Nujayfis' base was in Mosul proper, and this created the potential for rival Sunni armies recruited from different parts of Nineveh.[28]

Much of the remainder of Akub's term, which ran through March 2019 when he was removed, was taken up with petty squabbles with rival council members. After the liberation of Mosul in May 2017, a key low point came when Akub was first impeached in November of that year. By this point, the Nineveh government was split in two, with Akub governing from Mosul, while opposing council members resorted to meeting in Alqosh because Akub was threatening to use local police to arrest them for terrorism. By the following month, a local court had issued arrest warrants for three opposing council members allied with Nujayfi.[29] One Kurdish councilman also claimed Akub threatened to kill him, though there was dirt on both sides, as about this time a tape recording was released which a Nujayfi ally on the council was heard offering a Toyota Land Cruiser to two fellow councilmen in exchange for turning against Akub.[30]

26 Hamza Mustafa and Dilshad Abdullah, "The Iraqi Parliament Fires al-Nujairi and the Judiciary Revokes the Decision to Terminate al-Jiburi's Membership," *Asharq al-Awsat*, May 29, 2015.

27 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 117, 8-10, October 19, 2015.

28 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 162, 8-9, September 8, 2017.

29 Rezan Ahmad, "Arrest Warrants on 'Terrorism' Charges Against Supporters of the Governor of Nineveh's Dismissal from the Provincial Council," *Bas News*, December 17, 2017. https://www.basnews.com/ar/babat/400675

30 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 166, 6, November 8, 2017.

Nonetheless, Akub held on, and following a legal appeal, the federal Administrative Court invalidated the vote impeaching him.[31] In a sense, Akub had a valid defense, but not one which cleared him publicly: The 2008 law governing the removal of governors requires that the council follow certain procedures, including an in-person questioning of the governor, but this was impossible with the governor threatening to arrest them. To prevent the situation from deteriorating further, in December, Prime Minister Abadi issued an executive order suspending Akub from exercising executive authority in response to Akub's blatant use of police authority.[32]

This led to a period in which two people claimed to be governor, as First Deputy Governor Abd al-Qadir Sinjari, a member of the KDP, claimed to be "acting governor" with the support of what appeared to be a majority of the council.[33] Bear in mind that large portions of Mosul had been destroyed during the seven-month military campaign to liberate it from the Islamic State, so by early 2018, the province was not only in ruins, but also without unified administration, with large parts of the population displaced from their homes.[34]

Akub nonetheless managed to make it through 2018, aided by the fact that the federal political class was absorbed in the campaign for the May parliamentary elections, a voting fraud scandal that engulfed it, and the process of forming a new government that was only resolved in the last week of October. Given the widespread destruction in Mosul and very limited amount of funds provided for reconstruction, even a set of politicians more competent and public-spirited than those who governed Nineveh would have struggled. Observers have generally found that reconstruction has been limited, with the exception of a few small projects conducted by local civil society groups and foreign non-governmental organizations.

Anbar, like Nineveh, also moved in a direction of conciliation toward Baghdad post-2014, but with much less internecine conflict. Following the 2013 provincial elections, Nujayfi's Mutahidun was able to take over the province's governorship from Qasim al-Fahdawi, a former subordinate of Ahmad Abu Risha who struck out on his own and focused on cooperation instead of confrontation with Baghdad. He was replaced that year by Ahmad Khalaf al-Dhiyabi (al-Dulaymi), an active figure in the 2013 Sunni protests. Dhiyabi's repeated conflicts with Maliki, especially over control of the police, were a central part of the breakdown of order in the province during 2014.[35] He spent a period incapacitated after a mortar attack in September, and then on December 23, 2014, Mutahudun-aligned factions replaced him with Suhayb al-Rawi of the Islamic Party, which had governed the province from 2005 to 2009.

Although Rawi made a comment about the autonomy agenda after his election, changes in political environment—the abject failure of Sunni establishment figures in the face of the jihadist takeover and the change in Baghdad from Maliki to Abadi—required a change in tactics. Fallujah, Anbar's second city, had fallen to insurgents immediately, and government forces were barely hanging on in Ramadi, the provincial capital, and so talk of forming an autonomous region in Anbar was out of place. Rawi dropped talk of autonomy completely.

Rawi mirrored Abadi in having a more low-key personality than his predecessors, and the two worked together closely through Anbar's liberation from ISIS. There was a disastrous military retreat from Ramadi in May 2015, but by December of that year, federal forces had retaken central Ramadi, and on December 30, Abadi issued an executive decree creating an inter-ministerial committee to rebuild Anbar, and he put Rawi in charge of it.[36]

31 "Member of the Nineveh Council: The Reply to the Council's Decision Regarding the Dismissal of the Governor is an Administrative Procedure," *al-Sumariya*, Nov. 29, 2017.

32 "Inside the Document: al-Abadi Freezes the Powers of the Nineveh Governor for 60 Days," *al-Aalem*, December 28, 2017.

33 "Nineveh Council Seeks to Prove 52 Charges Against the 'Frozen' Governor," *Sotaliraq*, December 12, 2017.

34 "Two Governors Compete to Administer the Destroyed Nineveh," *Asharq al-Awsat*, January 12, 2018.

35 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 76, 4-8, January 8, 2014.

36 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 122, 2, January 7, 2016.

Ninevah (Wikimedia Commons)

There was a temporary political armistice, and efforts to remove Rawi only began after Ramadi was back under federal control. The second strongest faction in the council was Karbuli's al-Hal, and it led an effort to successfully impeach him in June 2016, but the vote was overturned by the Administrative Court in Baghdad.[37] The council tried again and impeached Rawi a second time in August, but that vote was also overturned by the court in November.[38]

Neither Rawi nor Karbuli's parties had a majority in the council, and following the defection of other council members from Rawi's side, a third successful impeachment vote passed in May 2017.[39] This time, the court let the vote stand, and on August 29, MP Muhammad al-Halbusi was elected governor.[40] Rawi's tenure was further darkened by the revelation in November, after he was out of office, that he had been convicted of corruption and under an amnesty law had been allowed to pay 650 million dinars (about $550,000) to avoid jail.[41]

While Rawi's term in office was much quieter than that of Nujayfi or Akub in Nineveh, it marked a major turn in the political cycle in which power alternated between the Islamic Party and a secularist pro-Baghdad alternative. Then, Ahmad Abu Risha hit his high point with the 2009 election, leading to the governorship of Qasim al-Fahdawi, followed by a return to Islamic Party and its allies and now Karbuli dominance through Halbusi's election. The latter would prove to be a pivotal moment in Sunni politics given Halbusi's success the following year.

In Salah al-Din, provincial politics during the parliamentary term of 2014-2018 had its twists and turns, they were within a much narrower range of possibilities than in Nineveh—whereas Nineveh politics was polarized between the Nujayfi group tied to Turkey and Kurdistan against mostly rural Sunni Arabs who were more pro-Baghdad—in Salah al-Din all leading Sunni figures were Baghdad-aligned, and differed more in tactics than ideology. Furthermore, while Tikrit and most of northern Salah al-Din fell to ISIS, the southern shrine city of Samarra—protected

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37 The Administrative Court is part of the Justice Ministry, and the author's observation is that when it comes to the impeachment of governors, those on good terms with the prime minister tend to get a good result.

38 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 143, 5, November 21, 2016.

39 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 161, 7, August 24, 2017.

40 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 163, 10-11, September 23, 2017.

41 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 169, 11, January 6, 2018.

by Shia militias, most notably Muqtada al-Sadr's "Peace Companies" (the new name for the Mahdi Army)—kept the city in federal control. Meanwhile, the large Jibur tribe was divided, but a very large portion of Sunni Jiburis held the government line. Thus, rural areas were contested, but large portions of the province were never dominated by ISIS.

The broader element of continuity was the political dominance of Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi, the strongman of Salah al-Din. First elected governor in 2009, Jiburi has never had an absolute majority, as Uthil al-Nujayfi obtained that same year, but his coalition won a plurality in every election, both provincial and federal. Part of Jiburi's staying power has been his ability to steer a middle course between excessive opposition to Baghdad and sycophancy. In dealing with Shia militia dominance post-2014, Jiburi would work with them, balancing pragmatism with criticism and the claim that he could more effectively work for the return of citizens displaced during the war than others.[42]

When Abadi's government was formed, Jiburi, who had been elected a member of parliament, took a ministerial position as State Minister for Provincial Affairs, and resigned the governorship in favor of a nephew, Raed Ahmad al-Jiburi. Raed maintained the existing policy of holding firm to Baghdad and worked more openly with Shia militias than governors in Nineveh or Anbar.[43] Yet, the Raed al-Jiburi interregnum was limited— Abadi's "reforms" in response to protests in August 2015 included a reduction in the size of his government, including the elimination of Ahmad Abdullah's provincial affairs post. Thus, in April 2016, Raed resigned, and the council reelected Ahmad Abdullah to the post. During his first year back, Jiburi's governance remained unchallenged, and he claimed slow but steady progress in the return of displaced residents while continuing his balancing act toward Shia militias.[44]

Jiburi naturally made enemies in Sunni politics, and throughout this period, he was variously accused of life-long criminality[45] and subjected to attempts on his life (although Jiburi's claim to have survived a total of 84 assassination attempts[46] strains credulity). His enemies struck their first successful blow against him on the legal front in June 2017 when he was sentenced to two years in prison for corruption.[47] Yet, this barely slowed him down, and he was reported to have initially continued signing papers in prison before being moved to a more secure facility. Whether legitimately or not, his legal appeal was accepted within two months, and by September, he was a free man. As the council had not in the interim elected anyone to replace him, Jiburi went strait from jail back to the governor's office.[48] And he held on, without significant challenge, through the May 2018 elections.

42 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 161, 6.; Inside Iraqi Politics 169, 8-9, August 24, 2017.

43 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 103, 6-7, March 19, 2015.

44 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 145, 8-9, December 22, 2016.

45 "In Documents… Governor of Salahaddin Ahmad al-Jiburi Sentenced to Life Imprisonment in 1993 (Episode Three)," *al-Masalah*, March 10, 2016.

46 Ahmad al-Dalimi, "Governor of Salahaddin Dr. Ahmad al-Jiburi Announces He Has Been Subject to 84 Assassination Attempts Since 2005," *West News Agency*. https://westnewsiq.com/?p=5139

47 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 161, 6, August 24, 2017.

48 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 169, 8-9, January 6, 2018.

2018: The Rise of Muhammad al-Halbusi

The central story of Sunni politics from parliamentary elections in May 2018 to the present has been the centrality of Muhammad al-Halbusi. The son of a tribal sheikh from eastern Anbar and currently speaker of parliament, Halbusi came into politics with al-Hal as a protégé of Jamal al-Karbuli's younger brother, Muhammad al-Halbusi, who was also an MP. Born in 1981 and one of Iraq's youngest senior politicians, Halbusi was first elected as an MP during the 2014-2018 term, when al-Hal was part of Nujayfi's electoral coalition, then became chairman of the Finance Committee in 2016 before being elected governor of Anbar in August 2017. Halbusi has been publicly vague about what kind of business he was in before entering politics, but it is believed that he got started doing sub-contracting for the U.S. military.[49] The story of Halbusi's rise would continue with his smashing success in the 2018 election itself, followed by his election as speaker of parliament, the leading national post reserved for a Sunni Arab, then to the formation of his own political coalition and his pivotal role in the crisis surrounding the selection of a new prime minister in late 2019 and early 2020.

There were three main Sunni Arab currents in the election of May 12, 2018. The most high-profile was the contest between Nujayfi and Khalid al-Obaydi, the impeached former defense minister, in Nineveh. Nationally, Nujayfi was running with Khamis Khanjar as part of the Iraqi Decision Alliance coalition, and Nujayfi's failure to strongly defend him during his impeachment drove Obaydi closer to Abadi. Part of what made the Nineveh race so high-profile was not only Obaydi's status, but also the fact that Nujayfi built

his campaign around the claim that candidates such as Obaydi were illegitimate because they were running on Shia-led lists and that they be used to elect Shia leaders to senior posts in Baghdad.[50] (What he meant was Abadi's effort to be reelected to another term.) While Nujayfi was trying to reestablish a dominant position he had lost, the campaigns in the other two Sunni-majority provinces involved dominant factions—the Karbuli faction in Anbar and Ahmad Abdullah al-Jubiri's party, Coalition of the Forces of the Patriotic Masses, in Salah al-Din—defending a status quo.

In Nineveh, Obaydi crushed Nujayfi in their head-to-head match. While Nujayfi was reelected, Obaydi led the province with 72,690 votes, the second most of any candidate nationwide (after Nuri al-Maliki in Baghdad) and the most of any Sunni.[51] Nujayfi's 11,650 votes were sufficient to meet the threshold for a seat, but due to Obaydi's result, the Nasr Coalition received seven seats in Nineveh and Nujayfi's coalition only three. This would result in Nujayfi complaining that the election was fraudulent.

Halbusi's results on election day dominated the Anbar election, and the Karbuli-led list, Anbar is Our Identity, had three of the four top candidates. Halbusi received 43,432 votes and Muhammad al-Karbuli, the second-place candidate, received 12,028. Further highlighting Halbusi's standing was that the judicially supervised recount stripped Karbuli of so many of his votes that he no longer made the threshold. He was able to get into parliament as a replacement MP by giving the party's third candidate, Ali Farhan al-Dulaymi, the governorship when Halbusi resigned later to

49 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 163, 10-11, September 23, 2017.
50 "Number One with Dr. Hamid Abdullah: Featuring Osama al-Nujayfi, Head of the Iraqi Decision Alliance," *Fallujah TV*, May 3, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oExz-1W1do
51 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 178, June 2, 2018, contains all of the election results.

U.S. Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo meets with Iraq's Council of Representatives Speaker Muhammad Halbusi and members of the Council of Representatives Foreign-Relations Committee, in Baghdad, Iraq, on January 9, 2019. (U.S. State Department)

become speaker.[52]

In Salah al-Din, Jiburi's list duplicated his success going back to 2009 of winning a narrow plurality in a divided field. Jiburi's personal total of 20,405 votes was nearly double the next most successful Sunni candidate, Muthanna al-Samarrai, but this was only enough to win his list three seats with four other competing lists winning two seats each. Samarrai, running on Iyad Allawi's Nationalist Coalition list, would later split with him and join Halbusi's new coalition in 2019. The second candidate overall was Shia Turkmen, the Badr Organization's Muhammad Taqi al-Amerli, for whom the area around Tuz Khurmato in northeast Salah al-Din is largely a captive base.

What separated Halbusi from Obaydi was that only Halbusi was positioned to capitalize on his electoral success and make himself an independent coalition leader. While the Obaydi-affiliated Bayariq al-Khayr won a couple of seats separately from him, Obaydi himself ran under the banner of Abadi's Nasr Coalition in Nineveh, and while he has usually acted on his

own rather than as a surrogate for Abadi, Obaydi has remained a member of the Nasr Coalition to this day. Similarly, Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi and Muhammad al-Karbuli, both more established than Halbusi, would end up playing second-fiddle to the younger man during the term.

The weeks following the election saw major shifts in Sunni alignments. The main prize was the speakership, the most important post reserved by custom for a Sunni, and as Halbusi became a favorite, reports appeared of his willingness to break with his patrons, the Karbulis, to get the post.[53] Ultimately, the Karbulis, with Halbusi coming along, brought al-Hal into a broader Sunni coalition that included Jiburi called the "Axis Alliance,"[54] which then joined the Bina Bloc led by Hadi al-Amiri and his Iran-aligned Fatah Alliance, an electoral collection of the political wings of militias backed by Iran.

The move toward Iran was a major shift from Karbuli's historical stances, which were critical of Iranian influence in Iraq, but it was a less radical shift than Khanjar's decision to join Bina. Khanjar's

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52 "Source Reveals Details of 'Deal' Allowing Muhammad Karbuli to Take Seat in Parliament," *Buratha News*, August 18, 2018. http://burathanews.com/arabic/news/336684 "Source: Karbuli Gains Parliamentary Seat After the Withdrawal of a Winning Candidate from His Bloc," *Hathalyoum*, August 16, 2018.
53 "Sources Confirm: Al-Halbusi is Willing to Negotiate Independently of Karbuli After he is Elected," *al-Noor News*, May 15, 2018.
54 "National Axis Shakes Up Bifurcated Sunni Scene," *al-Sharqiya*, August 18, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1OFZ0xjRGU

"Arab Project" party—as its name suggested— was the most radical supporter of Sunni Arabism, one which constantly railed against Iran and its proxies. But Khanjar's cheerleading for the "tribal revolutionaries" of 2014 had come back to haunt him, creating not only potential legal risks, but also a risk of militia abduction were he to travel to Baghdad (Khanjar, who is from Anbar, conducted every event of his electoral campaign in Kurdistan and Kurdish-controlled areas of Nineveh). Khanjar had run on a joint list with Nujayfi at the national level, and Nujayfi accused Khanjar of selling out to resolve his legal problems.[55]

These Sunni realignments played a role in creating a national bifurcation between the Bina Bloc and an opposing Islah Bloc. Nujayfi thus joined Amiri's Shia rivals, and he formed "Islah" along with former Prime Minister Abadi, Muqtada al-Sadr, Iyad Allawi, and Ammar al-Hakim, who all became the pillars of the opposing side. Abadi was still holding out hope for a second term when this group formed the "seeds of the largest bloc," but then morphed into a rival coalition against Bina once Abadi gave up hope of a new term in August.[56] The tenuousness of Halbusi's ties to the opposition coalition is shown by the fact that he initially signed up to join Abadi's group before switching sides.[57]

The climax of the contest between the two groups to form the largest bloc came on September 15 when Halbusi was narrowly elected speaker, by a four-vote margin, with Bina's support. Multiple Sunnis from both sides ran, and part of the process involved Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi, the former Salah al-Din governor, standing down after making a deal to support Halbusi in which Jiburi himself would become the Axis Alliance's leader in parliament. The ultimate vote tally was 169 votes for Halbusi, 89 for Khalid al-Obaydi, 19 for Osama al-Nujayfi, four for Muhammad al-Khalidi, and one vote each for Talal al-Zoubai and Raed al-Dahlaki. As a concession to the Sadrists, who had opposed Halbusi, Sadr City Mayor

Hassan al-Kaabi became first deputy speaker in the same vote. This vote also included a deal with the Kurdistan Democratic Party in which Bashir al-Haddad was elected as the second (Kurdish) deputy speaker. It would be the last time Bina— the "largest bloc"—would win a majority vote in this parliament.[58]

Halbusi and his allies also found success in the formation of the government of Adil Abd al-Mahdi, formed in the early hours of October 25, 2018. This included the election of Industry Minster Salah al-Jiburi and Sports Minister Ahmad Talib al-Obaydi. Jiburi, of Salah al-Din, was a member of Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi's party, which dominates that province, and Obaydi was a cousin of the Karbuli brothers. Given that al-Hal already had the speakership, and that another Karbuli brother, Ahmad al-Karbuli, was in exile over corruption allegations from his stint as industry minister (2010-2014), this was a very good result. (Karbuli was sentenced in absentia to four years in prison in 2016.[59]) They also managed to prevent the election of Islamic Party leader Iyad al-Samarrai to head the Planning Ministry, one of the cabinet's most powerful posts because other ministries must coordinate most of their projects with it.[60]

Khanjar was also less successful, and Abd al-Mahdi's promise to give him the Education Ministry would become a black mark on his government. As there were no women in the cabinet, and there was no other ministry the parties want to give to a woman, and also no ministers from Nineveh, so Khanjar's nominees for education were a series of women from Mosul. From his election until the submission of his resignation (following the deaths of protesters in Shia-majority provinces) on November 29, 2019, Abd al-Mahdi spent nearly the entire period nominating one Khanjar candidate after another to the post without success. Saba Khayr al-Din al-Tai was voted down on the day the government was formed. On December 4, 2018, Tai was rejected again,

55 "Iraqi Decision Alliance Announces Split with Khanjar," *al-Mirbad*, June 9, 2018. https://www.almirbad.com/Details/22408
56 "Announcement of Alliance to be the 'Seeds of the Largest Bloc' in Parliament," *Deutsche Welle Arabic*, August 19, 2020.
57 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 184, September 22, 2018.
58 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 184, 13-17, September 22, 2018.
59 "Four Years Imprisonment for the Former Iraqi Minister of Industry in Corruption Cases," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, August 17, 2016.
60 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 186, October 26, 2018.
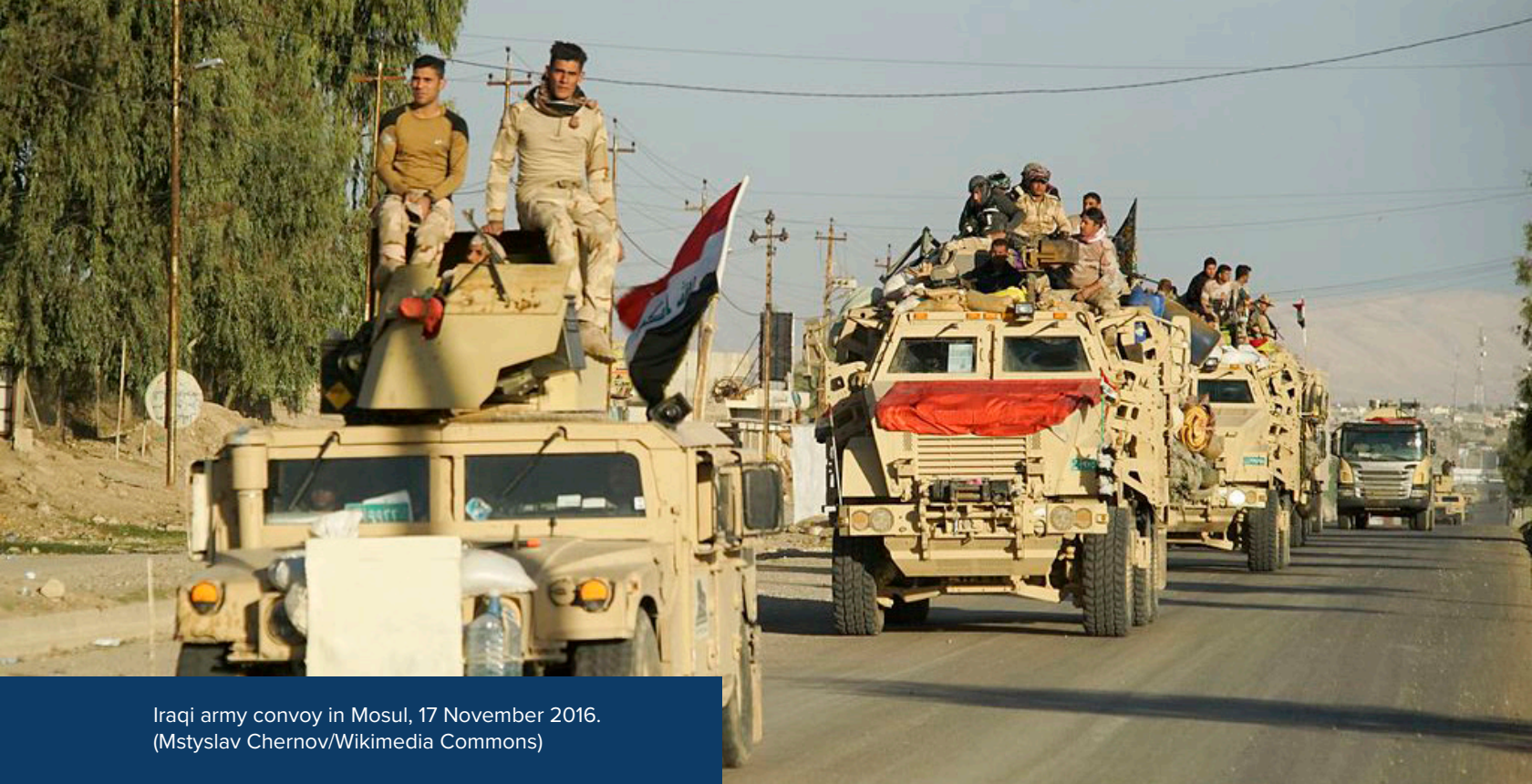
Iraqi army convoy in Mosul, 17 November 2016.
(Mstyslav Chernov/Wikimedia Commons)

along with three of six other candidates to fill vacancies. One Sunni rejected that day, Nuri al-Dulaymi, an Anbari loosely associated with the Islamic Party, as candidate for the Planning Ministry, was elected on December 18.[61]

On December 24, Abd al-Mahdi tried to complete his cabinet again, and this time, one of two approved ministers was a Sunni, Shayma al-Hiyali, Khanjar's new candidate to head the Education Ministry. Hiyali's election proved a disaster, though, as within days a controversy exploded after a video appeared in which Hiyali's brother was shown speaking as a member of the Islamic State.[62] Hiyali insisted that her brother had been coerced into joining ISIS. Then, the Nujayfis, who now had an interest in undermining Khanjar, claimed that Hiyali's father had been working as a security guard in parliament when Osama al-Nujayfi was speaker and had quit the job in 2014 to join the terrorist group.[63] Hiyali tendered her "resignation," and Abd al-Mahdi responded by noting that since she had not sworn in, the

ministry remained vacant. The fight dragged on, and on October 10, 2019, Abd al-Mahdi was able to confirm Suha Khalil al-Ali, another woman from Mosul nominated by Khanjar, to head the Education Ministry.[64]

The saga over Khanjar's education nominees was concurrent with a lengthy controversy over Sunni ministers already in office, namely those mentioned above tied to Karbuli and Jiburi, Ahmad al-Obaydi and Salah al-Jiburi. At the time, he presented his cabinet on October 24-25, 2018, Abd al-Mahdi had submitted his nominees' CVs to parliament just hours before the vote and, in violation of the constitution and the law, had failed to allow the relevant ministries to screen them for disqualifications (confirming that nominees have the degrees they claim, do not have a criminal record, and are not subject to the debaathification law aimed at excluding former senior members of the Ba'th Party). Abd al-Mahdi pleaded with MPs to approve his slate anyway, saying "the sanction will be severe" if any minister

61 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 189, 11, December 24, 2018.
62 "An Iraqi Minister Resigns Because of a Video," *al-Hurra,* December 30, 2018.
63 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 190, January 12, 2019.
64 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 203, October 24, 2019.

lied to get appointed.[65] Within less than a month, several ministers faced accusations; in Obaydi's case, he along with another minister was subject to debaathification, and Obaydi himself faced an allegation that he committed homicide in 2004. Jiburi, who was dean of the Pharmacy College at the University of Tikrit before election, appears to have had a clear record to that point, but was accused of trying to sell the office of director of prison operations as soon as he took office.[66] (In Iraq, a wide range of state offices are alleged to be sold, with the officeholder making his money back through bribes.)

Efforts to remove both of these Sunni ministers from office were ongoing when Abd al-Mahdi's resignation made the issue moot in November 2019. Yet, their survival in these posts showed the value of holding the speakership. While Halbusi never defended either Salah al-Jiburi or Ahmad al-Obaydi, he controlled parliament's schedule. There were attempts to impeach both these men for nearly their entire tenures, and also to interrogate Abd al-Mahdi, but Halbusi used procedural maneuvers to run out the clock.

Halbusi's increasing ambitions toward national Sunni leadership intersected with the fight for control in the provinces in early 2019. In Nineveh, Nufal al-Akub had never held firmly to office, and his tenure was dominated by the stalemate discussed above. Then, on March 21, a tragic ferry accident on the Tigris River in Mosul leading to the drowning of over 100 people and the appearance of negligent safety regulation provided the occasion for a federal takeover. Acting under the 2008 Provincial Powers Law, Prime Minister Abd al-Mahdi proposed that parliament remove Akub from office, and on March 24, parliament did so unanimously. Since parliament also impeached

the province's two deputy governors on the same day, Abd al-Mahdi appointed a triumvirate led by General Najm al-Jiburi, still chief of the Nineveh Operations Command from Abadi's term, to run the province on an interim basis.[67]

The controversial election of MP Mansur al-Mareid as governor of Nineveh on May 13[68] to replace Akub turned out to be the trigger for Halbusi's split from the Bina-allied Axis Alliance. Mareid was a Sunni MP and leader of a Sunni "tribal hashd" armed faction during the war against ISIS who was elected on the "Giving Movement" list of Falih al-Fayyad during the 2018 election.[69] (The Fayyad list, and thus Mareid, ran on Abadi's list, but were among the post-election defections to Bina.) As with other Sunni political figures who formed a Hashd group, Mareid's Hashd was small and inconsequential in the war, and mainly signified political alignment with the Amiri-led wing of the Shia political establishment, which then appeared on the rise. Maried's election was achieved through a deal with the Kurds[70] on the council amid allegations that Sunni council members had been bribed.[71]

The Mareid controversy was the proximate public cause of a break between Halbusi and Amiri-allied Sunnis, such as Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi and Khamis Khanjar who had backed Maried. The main aftershock was the formation of the Alliance of Iraqi Forces (AIF) as the leading Sunni national coalition. (In a sense, this was a reformation since a Sunni alliance of this name headed by Nujayfi appeared near the beginning of Abadi's term, but it did nothing of consequence and was omitted from the narrative above.) Since there had been leaks and rumors of Halbusi's plan to form a new coalition the previous month, it is clear that the fight in Nineveh—and the installation of a Shia

65 The comment quoted from Abd al-Mahdi appears shortly after 1:10:00. "Ninth Session – 25-24 October 2018 – Session for Granting Confidence," Iraqi Parliament YouTube Channel, October 24, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-WpIoFMWQXU&t=4s

66 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 188, 3, November 26, 2018; Inside Iraqi Politics No. 189, December 24, 2018.

67 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 193, March 25, 2019.

68 "The Election of MP Mansour al-Maraid as Governor of Nineveh," *al-Hurra Iraq*, May 13, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtwlBgZDgfU

69 See this post about Maraid's pre-campaign biography, which, among other things, mentions his formation of a Hashd faction: Mansour al-Maraid Facebook Page, April 14, 2018. https://www.facebook.com/141785886506177/posts/162357644449001/

70 "Iraq… Agreement Between the Kurds and the Shia for Control Over the Position of Governor of Nineveh," *al-Khaleej*, April 19, 2019.

71 "Iraq: al-Maraid Chosen as Governor of Nineveh with Support from al-Fayyad and Barzani, Amid Accusations of Bribery," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, May 13, 2019.

militia front-man as governor—was simply an opportune moment to make the break. This led to a nasty public fight between Halbusi and Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi, who was accused of bragging that he could buy the votes of councilmen in Sunni-majority provinces.[72]

The result was a public relations coup for Halbusi, who was quickly able to draw a wide range of Sunni MPs elected on various coalitions to join the AIF. Bearing in mind that Halbusi himself had not run as the head of a coalition in 2018, but just as a leading candidate of the Karbuli-dominated "Anbar is Our Identity" list (the core of which was Karbuli's al-Hal), Halbusi was first able to engineer a split between the Karbuli brothers, with Muhammad and most of al-Hal joining the AIF. In addition, the new coalition was joined by MPs from the Axis Alliance who had been originally elected on the lists of Shia leaders, such as former Prime Ministers Haider al-Abadi and Iyad Allawi. Of the 68 Sunni MPs in parliament, Halbusi had at least 50, leaving only Khanjar and Ahmad Abdullah in the Iran-aligned camp and Osama al-Nujayfi's allies on the anti-Iran side, allowing the AIF to frame itself as the "moderate" coalition representing the broad majority of Iraqi Sunnis. No one had voted for this coalition in May 2018, but as a de facto matter, Halbusi had now added to his authority as speaker the status of having the largest Sunni Arab coalition.[73]

Halbusi enhanced the dominance of his coalition following a legal showdown with Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi in late 2019. At some point in November, rumors began to circulate that the former Salah al-Din governor was in jail, a point which his office felt the need to publicly deny, and to prove he was not in jail, on November 20, Jiburi published a video from a supporter's residence in Erbil. But he was in Erbil to avoid arrest, and he needed to avoid arrest because on November 25, Halbusi had written a letter to the judiciary, marked secret but leaked, to the effect that previous court

requests to have Jiburi's parliamentary immunity lifted might now be granted if there were another request.[74] This has happened repeatedly in Iraq over the years: when someone becomes persona non grata in Baghdad, an arrest warrant is prepared, and he is given advanced notice so that he can flee the country or to Kurdistan. The Integrity Commission confirmed on November 25, the day of Halbusi's letter, that an arrest warrant had been issued for Jiburi. Parliament issued a document removing his immunity the next day.[75]

The stalemate lasted about two months. By early February, Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi was back in Baghdad and involved in parliamentary politics, his legal problems resolved, but now speaking as a member of Halbusi's coalition.[76] This left just Nujayfi and Khanjar as the only significant Sunni leaders outside of the Halbusi camp.

It is important to note what has not happened in the years since 2014 is the development of substantial political activity or organization outside of the establishment parties. This is partly because the catastrophe of 2014 left Sunni areas flat on their back, with much of the population either displaced or struggling to survive. Another factor, most clearly in Anbar, has been the determination of the local security services not to allow protest activity along the lines taking place in Shia-majority provinces since late 2019. Of particular mention in this regard has been Anbar Governor Ali Farhan al-Dulaymi, who was hand-picked by Halbusi for the post when he became speaker. A further factor killing off political activity across provinces was parliament's decision to abolish the provincial councils throughout Iraq in November 2019 by statute. (This was on the basis that, having been elected in 2013, they no longer represented the public.) This has deprived oppositionists of a traditional forum for criticism and left the governor in each province the dominant figure.

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72 "Ninawa Provincial Council Responding to MP Abu Mazen: Our Province is Not a Commodity for Sale," *Bas News*, June 3, 2019. http://www.basnews.com/ar/babat/524924 "Abu Mazen" is the patronymic used by Ahmad Abdullah.

73 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 195, May 14, 2019; Inside Iraqi Politics No. 196, May 26, 2019.

74 Inside Iraqi Politics No. 206, 10-12, January 7, 2020.

75 "Parliament Publishes a Document Confirming the Lifting of MP Ahmad al-Jiburi's Immunity," *al-Daae*, November 26, 2019.

76 Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi Rejects Proposed Muhammad Allawi Government, February 1, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/Dr.Ahmed. Abdullah.al.Jubouri/posts/2554614681454033/

Halbusi's Role in National Crisis of 2019-2020

Halbusi's centrality was highlighted during the political crisis that followed Abd al-Mahdi's resignation on November 29, 2019. Iraq's constitution does not contain a provision governing the resignation of the prime minister. The cabinet's bylaws, which are published as legal regulations, stipulate that he should submit his resignation to the president. Yet, Abd al-Mahdi submitted his resignation to parliament. Halbusi, claiming that he had "consulted" with leading judges but without a formal legal option, combined Article 75, which says that the president resigns to parliament, with Article 62, which says that the prime minister stays on as "caretaker" for 30 days when he is impeached, to come up with a result that Abd al-Mahdi could resign to parliament and then stay in office.[77]

The need for this imaginative solution was to avoid what would have happened had the constitution been implemented strictly: Article 81 provides that if the prime minister's office "becomes vacant for any reason" (without mentioning resignation), then the president becomes the prime minister, and in case there is no vice president, as was the case here, the speaker of parliament would become president. This would have created two problems. One, it would have meant that President Barham Salih, a Kurd, would have become commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Two, even if Halbusi might have enjoyed being president for a period, he would have known that the Kurds would have wanted the position back once a Shia figure was elected prime minister, and he had no way of being sure he could get his job as speaker back at that point. This is the reason that Abd al-Mahdi stayed on as prime minister for over five months into early May

2020 with the election of Mustafa al-Kathimi.

Halbusi's dual role as parliament speaker and Sunni political leader meant that he played a key role in the stalemate that lasted until early May. First, in December, there was a stand-off between the Iran-aligned Bina Bloc, from which Halbusi had become estranged without formally leaving, and much of the rest of the political class. Iraq's constitution gives the "largest bloc in parliament" the right to nominate the prime minister after an election, and interpreting this to mean it could now nominate Abd al-Mahdi's replacement, Bina informally floated a series of candidates. While the president has the duty of designating the candidate of the largest bloc to form a cabinet, Salih tried to stall in the hope that Bina would nominate someone not associated with the established parties, given the force of protests then taking place and the possibility of public disorder. While Halbusi in his capacity as speaker confirmed, when asked by Salih, that Bina was the largest bloc, his coalition responded to Bina's imminent nomination of Qusay al-Suhayl by declaring that his bloc would not support him.[78] While Suhayl himself is not a controversial figure, he is tied to the coalition of former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, and Sunni Arabs widely blame Maliki for the catastrophe which befell their provinces in 2014.

Bina responded to this rebuke by nominating Basra Governor Asaad al-Idani, a move that immediately brought protesters to the streets. Added to this, the withholding of support by not only Halbusi's coalition, but also other Shia parties, led Salih to conclude that Iraq would go into even deeper crisis if he nominated Idani. Recognizing he lacked the authority to refuse, he

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77 "The 20th Session," Iraqi Parliament, December 1, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZiqPwoR5v5o
78 "The Alliance of Iraqi Forces Addresses its Partners in the al-Binaa Alliance Regarding the Nomination of al-Suhail for the Prime Minister Position: Document," *Tasrebat*, December 23, 2019.
https://tasrebat.com/archives/149648

Former Prime Minister Abd al-Mahdi in Tehran in 2019 (farsi.khamenei.ir)

wrote a letter to Halbusi offering to resign.[79] As Salih surely expected, parliament held no vote to accept the resignation (as Halbusi had with Abd al-Mahdi). As noted above, Salih's resignation, with no vice president, would have resulted in Halbusi being forced to give up his post in order to become interim president.

This turn of events led to another month of paralysis while there was a short-lived effort, mainly supported by Amiri and Bina, to keep Abd al-Mahdi in office. With the political class unable to agree, Salih threatened to nominate whomever he wanted, and was able to get Amiri and Muqtada al-Sadr to agree to support former Communications Minister Muhammad Tawfiq Allawi to form a government. Allawi (a cousin of Iyad Allawi who had been living in Beirut for several years) promptly alienated the political class by declaring that he would choose his own ministers. While Halbusi initially tried to conciliate with Allawi, he came out strongly against his election after failing to make progress.[80] As a result of opposition from Halbusi, as well as some Shia and Kurdish leaders, Allawi failed to form a government.

Allawi's failed nomination was followed by the failed nomination of former Najaf Governor Adnan al-Zurfi in March and early April. While Halbusi backed Zurfi, opposition to him from Amiri's Bina blocked his election. Zurfi's withdrawal was immediately followed by the nomination of Mustafa al-Kathimi, who had been appointed director of the National Intelligence Service by Abadi in 2016. Exhausted from the months of political paralysis, on May 7 parliament approved about two-thirds of Kathimi's cabinet, allowing him to take office.[81] All the Sunni blocs supported Kathimi, who is perceived to support closer ties with the West. The number of Sunni MPs in parliament is simply too small for them to have an impact if the Shia are united, but when they are divided, Halbusi—and presently only Halbusi among Sunni leaders—can shift the balance.

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79 "Barham Salih: I Refuse to Assign al-Aidani and He is Ready to Resign,"*Nas News,* December 26, 2019. https://www.nasnews.com/view.php?oldid=169053

80 Two high-profile interviews with Halbusi in which he explains his opposition to Muhammad Tawfiq Allawi: "A Frank Dialogue with Speaker of Parliament Muhammad al-Halbusi," *al-Sharqiya*, February 25, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YmHJW93LCR0 "Speaker of Parliament Muhammad al-Halbusi – The Maneuver – Episode 80," *Alsumaria*, February 26, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B9ZbF6L8iZE

81 "First Session of the Hearing to Grant Confidence to the Government, Thursday, May 6, 2020," Media Department of the Prime Minister's Office YouTube Channel, May 6, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UrVTNkSpL0Q

The Sunni Scene in 2020 & Beyond

Thus, in May 2020, as the Kathimi government began, Muhammad al-Halbusi stood out as Iraq's preeminent Sunni leader, with Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi now subordinate to the younger man. Long-timers, such as Nujayfi, Khanjar, and Karbuli, retain media presence, but none has exerted any legislative influence during this term, nor is there any reason to think that they will. Nujayfi tried to reboot by announcing the formation of yet another coalition, the National Front for Salvation & Development, last September.[82] While Nujayfi's rhetoric has cooled substantially since the heated election of 2014, it is clear that this new coalition will take up the line as the more anti-Iran of the Sunni blocs, but with no more talk of autonomous regions or ties to Turkey. Furthermore, Nujayfi's main attack line, the role of Shia militias and the idea that Sunnis are marginalized, has lost much of its saliency due to the rise of anti-government protests in Shia-majority provinces over the last year. While Iran-backed militias, such as Kata'ib Hezbollah, remain a serious problem, secular Shia protesters and the Kathimi government itself are openly in conflict with them.

Whether Khanjar has any political future at all is questionable given his flip-flop from Sunni Arab champion to Iranian ally in 2018. Jamal al-Karbuli remains in the public eye mainly because his TV channel, Dijla, is popular with the public. After sparring publicly with Halbusi for months—as recent as May calling him an "adolescent"[83]—Jamal seems to have accepted Halbusi's preeminence. Among other notable figures, Khalid al-Obaydi remained active as a sitting MP without capitalizing on his 2018 electoral success, but, on September 14, he was

appointed as deputy director of operations for the Iraqi National Intelligence Service (INIS), the country's leading intelligence office. And as Prime Minister Kathimi has retained his post as director, this makes Obaydi de facto head of the agency. Obaydi likely has more of a future than the others, although his standing could be impacted by perceptions of the performance of the country's counter-terrorism efforts. Najm al-Jiburi seems secure in his governorship in Nineveh, but does not appear to have broader ambitions, and Kirkuk Governor Rakan al-Jiburi will probably do well just to hold on where he is. Former Speaker Salim al-Jiburi remains active, but holds no office. The governors of Anbar and Salah al-Din remain part of the party machines of Halbusi and Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi, respectively, and have no independent base.

Halbusi's dominance was bound to bring reaction, and recent weeks—in October and November—have seen the emergence of a new challenge to Halbusi, but it faces an uphill struggle. Announced on October 24 by Osama al-Nujayfi who was accompanied by a couple dozen Sunni MPs, a new "Iraqi Front" claimed to be a new parliamentary bloc which would remove Halbusi from office and address problems in Sunni-majority provinces, claiming the support of 35 MPs[84] from a range of factions.[85] The effort was quickly undermined with Khanjar, from whose party the group's opening statement had claimed support, disclaimed the effort. More recently, there are unconfirmed reports that Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi has also abandoned the group,[86] which would definitively undermine the effort. Such an effort was always going to be difficult because even if Nujayfi's claim to have

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82 "Speech of Mr. Osama Najafi During the Announcement of the Formation of the National Front for Salvation & Development 9/14/2019," Party for a United Iraq YouTube Channel, September 14, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9GmkRxBx0V4

83 "Al-Karbouli Describes al-Halbusi with 'Event' and Attacks 'Policy Contractors,'" *Iraqi 24,* May 5, 2020.

84 "Osama al-Nujayfi: 35 MPs Have Agreed to Form the Iraqi Front to Relieve Citizens of Their Oppression," Mutahidun Facebook Page, October 24, 2020. https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3004197996347044

85 "New Sunni Front to Remove Halbusi," al-Ghad, October 2020.

86 "Halbusi Successfully Breaks Open Opposition Group by Neutralizing Khanjar and and Abu Mazen [Ahmad Abdullah al-Jiburi]," Iraqi 24, November 14, 2020.

35 Sunni Arab MPs could be taken at face value, they would have to convince Shia leaders to replace him, and any effort to increase focus on the Sunni-majority provinces, especially one led by Nujayfi, is inherently implausible.

With provincial elections, last held in 2013, indefinitely postponed, and national elections earlier than 2022 in question, challengers to the status quo will need to bide their time, taking their shots on TV where they can get them. Prime Minister Kathimi has recently called for early elections on June 6, 2021, but he lacks the authority to force the issue and must wait for parliament to dissolve itself. In late October, parliament finally completed the appendix to the new law with district and seat allocations so that a new election could be held, although parliament would still need to vote to dissolve itself within 60 days of the proposed date. As a matter of self-interest, MPs who vote for dissolution will be giving up stable, well-paying jobs that many will not retain, and the fact that they deleted the clause funding the election from a recent bill funding government operations generally provides a strong hint as to their intentions.

With civil society weak in Sunni-majority provinces and even limited protest activity restricted by the security services, the next election, whenever it is held, will likely be dominated by the established parties. Sunni Arabs, now able to vote in a physically stable environment, will likely increase their share of seats, but not enough to fundamentally change the balance of power in the country. While the dramatic reduction in sectarian conflict is welcome, the sectarian polarization of 2003-2014 has been replaced by a system in which posts are still allocated on an ethno-sectarian basis, and Sunni leaders are fully integrated members of a kleptocracy that lurches from crisis to crisis and has done little to actually develop Iraq. Absent a dramatic change at the street level, Sunni voters will be represented in the next parliament by the same figures, and at most will only be able to redistribute the share of seats held by the powers that be.

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