

# Potential for Intercommunal Violence in Iraq and Syria

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As the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) gradually loses its sway in both Iraq and Syria, questions for both countries about the strength of their social fabric and prospects for coexistence became more pertinent than ever. The rise of sectarian sentiments, ethno-nationalist aspirations, communal grievances about government neglect, and outside intervention have increased the possibilities of intercommunal violence, which could result in the cantonization of the region into ethnic or sectarian enclaves—anathema to both stability and security.

Indeed, with Iraq facing with serious political, economic, and social problems originating from decades of authoritarian rule, foreign intervention, and civil wars and terrorism, the social fabric uniting its communities is exposed to wrenching pressures. And with Syria undergoing its seventh year of civil war—a period that follows decades of authoritarianism and repression—sectarian and ethnic divisions threaten the future of the intercommunal cooperation needed for post-conflict reconstruction. It is thus imperative to investigate the root causes that might lead both countries to further fragmentation and possible partitioning.

### **Potential for Civil War in Post-ISIL Iraq**

According to James Fearon and David Laitin, leading experts on civil war theories, ethnic diversity does not make communal violence more likely. Instead, political conditions such as abysmal insecurity, weak government, economic crisis, organized recruitment for

competing groups over material resources, and susceptibility of foreign meddling are the main drivers of violent cycles. Similarly, one can posit that weak and exclusivist states are most vulnerable to ethnic strife. In post-ISIL Iraq, such conditions remain ripe.

### *Insecurity of Internal Refugees, Social Trauma, and a War-torn Economy*

The humanitarian crisis in Iraq is staggering after the devastating war against ISIL. According to UN reports, 11 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance. Iraqi officials estimate that tens of billions of dollars are needed to reconstruct destroyed cities; however, they have had trouble getting a pledge for urgent and immediate assistance of one billion dollars (as estimated by the United Nations). Whereas the liberation of Iraq's second largest city, Mosul, was celebrated by the global community, the international aid and investment funds to liberated towns have been sparse. The reluctance partly stems from skepticism over the Iraqi government's capacity to distribute the funds, in addition to being accused of generally mismanaging humanitarian funds. In town after town in Iraq where ISIL lost most of its territory in the past two years, only one-third of the 3.4 million displaced people have returned.

Thus, the financial prospects for liberated Sunni areas look grim. The fundamental question is: who will undertake the intense burden for immediate reconstruction of wrecked Sunni cities and heal the wounds of civilians, before extremists take advantage of such a situation?

Will Sunni towns be left to become open prisons or ghost refugee camps? Ostracized and traumatized under brutal warfare, unemployed youth may suffer from further alienation—a condition that will incubate yet another Sunni insurgency.

Now, the looming threat to Iraqi unity is competition over oil resources along ethnic and sectarian lines. Shi`a militias and Kurdish Peshmerga have utilized the battle against ISIL to overreach in disputed territories and have caused demographic changes. Specifically, Kurds have seized around 40 percent more land, compared to the KRG's (Kurdistan Regional Government) territory in 2014. As Kurdish leaders aim to increase their leverage over Baghdad with an independence referendum, the question of oil-rich disputed territories will be a major concern for the Sunni Arab population. Kirkuk, perhaps, is the best example. Despite being a multiethnic city with huge oil reserves, Kurdish finances depend heavily on Kirkuk: half of the almost 600,000 barrels of oil per day exported directly to Turkey come from the Kirkuk oil fields, which are not under the authority of the KRG. Sidelining Sunni Arabs from the future of Mosul and Kirkuk will exacerbate ethnic and sectarian competition in the next decade.

### *The Problem of a Weak and Exclusionist State*

Building the economic infrastructure of devastated towns is part of the larger challenge of efficient representative governance and trust building. How will Baghdad win the hearts and minds of locals who have suffered long from

extreme social trauma and ethnic and sectarian fears? Without a roadmap that brings various Sunni tribes to cooperate with each other, Baghdad's already reduced legitimacy will erode quickly.

One major cause that weakens the Iraqi state is the ambiguous status of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), which are estimated at around 100,000 soldiers. Baghdad passed legislation to incorporate the PMF into the Iraqi army. Although the groups that participate in the PMF structure are diverse, the critical composition of the forces is of militias directly linked to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, such as the Ali Akbar Brigades, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, the Badr organization, Kata'ib Hezbollah, and Saraya al-Khorasani.

It is unclear how Baghdad would respond to Iran's quest to penetrate Iraq's security apparatus in the long term. Increasing Sunni representation in the Iraqi Army is essential. The atrocities perpetrated by Tehran-backed militias against Sunni civilians, however, complicate the prospects for Iraqi national reconciliation.

The looming threat of Iran's meddling also triggers other outside powers, such as Turkey, to interfere heavily in Iraqi politics. Political power play in the region is a serious obstacle for post-conflict stabilization, which plagues the future of both Iraq and Syria.

This may be why the recent visit by the Iraqi nationalist Shi`a cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr, to the

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has revived hopes for Iraqi unity and communal healing. The Sadrist movement announced its embrace of a new moderate religious discourse (read: anti-sectarian) and ordered its followers to remove all anti-Saudi images and banners they posted in Iraqi streets. The leadership of al-Hashd al-Shaabi, or the PMF—also known as Shi'a militias—welcomed Sadr's visit, adding that "Iraq is an Arab country and cannot abandon its Arab (roots)." In return, Saudi Arabia promised an additional financial help package to Baghdad for internally displaced persons. Saudi support appears to be essential for Iraq's rebuilding, especially in the Sunni Arab cities devastated by the war with the Islamic State.

While skeptics question the usefulness of Saudi efforts to seek an Iraqi Shi'a ally by exploiting long-term divisions in the Shi'a community, others perceive an opportunity for lessening tensions in Iraq through further economic integration with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Moreover, it is believed that a Baghdad-Riyadh rapprochement may be beneficial only if the root causes of ISIL recruitment are addressed seriously, with the full support of the United States. Despite the retreat of ISIL, both Iraq and Syria have turned into weak states that are too vulnerable to eruptions of ethnic and sectarian violence, thus necessitating a positive regional gesture such as the one Saudi Arabia provided.

### **Worrisome Ethnic and Sectarian Fragmentation in Syria**

Although ethnic and sectarian fractures in Syria pose the greatest challenge to the country's future and to the United States, the Trump Administration lacks a clear perspective on post-ISIL stabilization efforts. Consider the recent remarks of Brett McGurk, the Special Presidential Envoy to the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS: "Whenever I hear 'the Sunnis,' I really bristle a little bit because there is no such thing, and there are many divisions obviously amongst the Sunnis...and this kind of grievance narrative is also something that I bristle at, because the number one victim of ISIS are the Sunnis." In other words, in his perspective at least some of the Sunni Arabs may have no grievances about developments in Iraq today simply because they reject ISIL, a perspective that should not govern how the world perceives the entire community.

Journalistic accounts from the field, however, suggest otherwise. Alienated young Sunni men who express their wish to die due to unbearable circumstances are not rare. Post-stabilization plans for Raqqa are a case in point. US officials envision a local administrative body with Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which announced the formation of the Raqqa Civilian Council in Ain Issa to take over after ISIL is fully expelled. Like other SDF-sponsored councils, however, most council members are officials on paper without influence, whereas the Kurdish YPG (People's Protection Units)/PYD (Democratic Union Party) cadres in fact run the administration. Indeed, PYD leaders did not

hide their intention to incorporate Raqqa into their bid for an autonomous Kurdish region, Rojava.

Such conditions appear to be a recipe for ethnic conflict in post-ISIL Raqqa. Aside from Turkey's hostility against the YPG, Sunni Arab groups such as the Syrian Elite Forces, which recruited locals from Raqqa, resist the idea of being governed by the Kurdish YPG. There is also growing suspicion that the YPG might cut a future deal with the Syrian regime at the expense of Arabs in Raqqa, reminiscent of earlier deals of the parties in the Afrin region.

Most tellingly, some Sunni Arab suspicion of US plans has reached such an unimaginable point that even the Asad regime is able to exploit them. Rather than fighting against ISIL, and supposedly having been abandoned by Washington to deal with Asad's rage, some rebel leaders have decided to defect from the US coalition and have reached an agreement with regime forces at the strategic tri-border area near al-Tanf. Such conditions of mistrust will also play in favor of al-Qaeda affiliates in the Idlib region.

Similar to Iraq's problem of independent Shi'a militia units, Syria's future will be highly dependent on the precarious nature of local and foreign militias. With Iran's support, Hezbollah has expanded its influence in southern Syria, the home of diverse communities such as Sunnis, Christians, and Druze. Given the region's strategic border with the Golan Heights, tensions in southern Syria may be

generating a renewed conflict between Hezbollah and Israel.

### **A Priority for the United States**

In the overall complex picture in Iraq and Syria, Washington's best response to the resurgence of ethnic and sectarian identities appears to be de-confliction and stabilization at local levels, instead of state-building.

In the absence of a clear strategy, calls for partitioning and state-building gain ground. For example, in support for Iraqi Kurdistan's independence bid, a panel of retired US generals recently criticized the "one-Iraq" policy as delusional. "Sykes-Picot is dead and we can't bring it back," stated former Lt. Gen. Jay Garner, former director of the post-2003 invasion Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance in Iraq. Such sentiments have received currency recently in American policy circles, and these were reflected earlier in a RAND report. The report suggested the following as starting premises for a realistic policy: (1) Syria and Iraq are now de facto partitioned states as certain groups are no longer likely to accept the central authorities in Damascus and Baghdad; (2) the conflict that began in Syria to oust Asad has transformed into a wider sectarian conflict between Sunni and Shi'a in the region; and (3) a divided-state solution, reminiscent of the Dayton Accords in Bosnia, should be considered both for Syria and Iraq to lessen the tensions.

The argument for the proliferation of states wrongly assumes that ethnic and sectarian strife

would diminish after partitioning the land. As the literature on civil wars indicates, such partition efforts may turn counterproductive and dangerous.

An alternative to the one-Iraq policy is not necessarily three Iraqi states. A decentralized Iraq that incorporates the Sunni Arab population by providing it real stake in local decision-making may well be a way forward. As military operations against ISIL near their end in Iraq, a political roadmap for Washington is imperative. By supporting decentralization as the sole arbitrator among competitor groups, the United States will not only gain Sunni tribal trust but also leverage over Baghdad and Erbil. Similarly, the recipe for Syria is unlikely to be the proliferation of states, but rather, the strengthening of local representative governance to alleviate ethnic tensions.

### **A Window of Opportunity?**

For Washington, there is a window of opportunity to exert its political leadership. As the only arbitrator among the Sunni, Shi`a, and Kurds in Iraq, Washington can play a critical role in helping Baghdad to craft a path for decentralization. Without the help of the United States, the Baghdad government appears to be too weak to call for such a reformist and inclusive vision. After the victory of the Mosul operation, an emboldened PMF leadership wants to carve out more influence in shaping Iraqi politics. The upcoming Kurdistan independence referendum also calls for Washington's diplomatic arbitration skills in disputed territories. Representative local

governance is especially critical in Mosul's surrounding Nineveh region, where the population is most diverse, including Turkmen (both Sunni and Shi`a), Kurds, Yazidis, Shabak, and Christian Arabs. Destroying the social fabric and playing on inter-group fears have been staple strategies of al-Qaeda in Iraq and ISIL.

Because Washington is now seen as reluctant to take the role of arbiter, regional actors are seeking to expand influence in Iraq's contested territories. In Sinjar, for instance, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has established a stronghold, which led to intra-Kurdish armed clashes between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the PKK. Turkey also warns about conducting a military intervention in Sinjar against the PKK. Such power struggles may further complicate local dynamics, and thus, threaten stabilization efforts.

Similarly, in Syria, the United States should consider brokering a deal between Turkey and the PKK rather than promising a Kurdish statelet in northern Syria. Capitalizing on its diplomatic power, Washington may halt Ankara's drift into Moscow's orbit. A peace-brokering role in northern Syria will also help Ankara-Washington cooperation over Idlib's future to challenge not only al-Qaeda-linked groups but also to address power-sharing settlements and local empowerment.

Washington's moment of opportunity will not last for long. After the defeat of ISIL, when US armed assistance is no longer needed, Iraqi

politicians will play in an increasingly nationalist atmosphere where anti-American discourse will prevail. The current GCC-Baghdad rapprochement needs to be supported to make substantial changes in the everyday lives of Sunni locals. The United States may facilitate diplomatic talks over Sunni local

autonomy as well as the future status of Shi'a militias. These talks should not only include influential Shi'a clerics, such as Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and Muqtada al-Sadr, but also various Kurdish leaders whose cooperation will be essential for a stable Iraq.