

Fragility and Resilience in Iraq

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FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
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ABSTRACT

Iraq is experiencing a crisis of authority and security. The country faces underlying and often overlapping political, socio-economic and security challenges that affect its prospects for stability and good governance. The complex web of interpersonal and inter-organizational structures that shape the Iraqi state and society allow both of them to remain resilient amid the plethora of challenges and conflicts confronting the country today. Greater appreciation of the interaction between the communal dynamics that shape the Iraqi society, as well as their significance vis-à-vis the Iraqi state and its institutions, is the key to understanding the country's surprising resilience.

Iraq | Economy | Domestic policy | Security | Terrorism | Civil society | Resilience

keywords

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Introduction

The crisis currently engulfing Iraq extends beyond the emergence and atrocities of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS). While the jihadis dominate headlines, it is Iraq's structural problems that have enabled the group's emergence. The crisis of authority and security in Iraq has resulted from weakened or partly collapsed institutions, the absence of the rule of law, dysfunctional and corrupt governance and the ascendancy of Shia militias and sectarian divisions that have produced an environment conducive to militancy. State fragility in the region and the proxy war between the Russia-Iran-Hezbollah coalition and its opponents in Syria have additionally exacerbated these challenges, stifling Iraq's efforts to stabilize and rehabilitate its institutions.

The challenges to Iraqi resilience today stems from the supremacy of the men with guns and cash instead of those with ideas and visions. Iraq's inability to provide security and public services, or to reconcile its disparate communities, will continue to enable the space in which militants and extremists thrive. While the territorial vestiges of the so-called "Caliphate" may have been defeated following ISIS's loss of territory in eastern Syria and central Iraq, the group will nonetheless maintain its capacity to conduct attacks, including terrorist atrocities. The infrastructure to do so is still intact and will continue to allow the group and its ilk to destabilize Iraq and exacerbate the ongoing humanitarian crisis that has seen close to three million people internally displaced since 2014 and 11 million in need of humanitarian assistance, of whom only six million have received aid from humanitarian organizations.¹

¹ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), *Iraq: IDPs Caught Between a Rock and a Hard Place As Displacement Crisis Deepens*, 30 June 2015, <http://www.internal-displacement.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/iraq/2015/iraq-idps-caught-between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place-as-displacement-crisis-deepens>.

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All this notwithstanding, the Iraqi state has remained resilient. Despite a bloody internal conflict, disastrous reconstruction policies, regional interference and proxy warfare, the economic crisis and the civil war in neighbouring Syria, the state has not disintegrated. This has as much to do with Iraq's contemporary history as it does with the role of its institutions, the strength of Iraqi identity and the substantial interactions between the state and communal structures such as tribes and religious leaders, civil society and armed groups that often function alongside the state security forces.

Iraq also has a thriving civil society that has played a critical role in fostering pluralism and co-existence, and in holding the corrupt elite to account. This civil society – comprised of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), charities and religious leaders – can be empowered.² Policy-makers often disregard the bottom-up, communal dynamics as a potential driver of resilience, much less as a driver for stability. Yet, it has been crucial in suppressing the ability of militant organizations to swell their ranks and of sectarian elites to exploit and widen the polarization within the Iraqi society.

State resilience in Iraq originates from the capacity of the state to interact and engage with the Iraqi society, while providing a national framework that is oriented around a common history, goals and aspirations. Societal resilience in Iraq hinges on the capacity of Iraqi society to contest government policies and influence national politics to address political, social and economic grievances within a framework that allows for dialogue and interaction with the state.

1. Resilience to what? Corruption, governance and security challenges

The fragile but nevertheless functioning governing mechanisms created by the Baath regime were disrupted by the 2003 American-led invasion of Iraq. However, the elements that made the state resilient in Iraq prior to 2003 are for the most part responsible for its resilience after 2003. Since the 1958 revolution that ousted the monarchy and established a republican system, the state has faced countless challenges, ranging from the Kurdish national liberation movement in the north to the Communist movement, Shiite Islamist opposition groups, and multiple domestic uprisings and regional conflicts, including the gruelling eight-year war with Iran that led to a million casualties.³ This is in part the result of the way the Iraqi state organized authority and power according to the challenges of the day,

² For examples of the interactions between these different components of Iraqi society, see: Zahra Ali, "Young Grassroots Activism on the Rise in Iraq: Voices from Baghdad and Najaf", in *openDemocracy*, 5 May 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/node/101859>.

³ Ian Black, "Iran and Iraq Remember War That Cost More Than a Million Lives", in *The Guardian*, 23 September 2010, <https://gu.com/p/2jqg6>.

but also because of the buy-in of Iraqi society.⁴

The Baath regime became explicitly sectarian during the 1991 Shia uprising, thereby losing support from large sections of the Shia population, particularly in the south where it had destroyed centres of learning, shrines and communities. From this environment of extreme poverty and violent repression emerged Mohammad Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr, a preeminent Shia cleric who established the Sadrist movement, a grass-roots organization that, under the leadership of his son Muqtada, currently constitutes Iraq's most powerful socio-political movement. Sadeq al-Sadr provided an outlet for political and economic grievances at a time of extreme hardship. He galvanized the Shiite masses by appealing to fierce Iraqi nationalist sentiments and anti-Western discourse. From the perspective of the Baath regime, this countered Iran's influence and provided a useful unifying ideology that could mobilize the Arab consciousness of Iraq's Shia community against what was framed as the alien Persian Shia.

While Iraq inherited many problems from the Baath regime, sectarianism has had the single most influential impact on the post-2003 state and society, manifesting itself in violent conflict, institutional mistrust and divisive ethno-sectarian political alliances that have collectively eroded Iraq's fragile social contract. Two competing orders that have shaped conflict and bloodshed in Iraq still remain very much in play. First are Iraq's Arab Shiite factions that have used the repressive rule of the Baath Party as a source of legitimacy, positioning themselves as the liberators of the country and the guarantors of the post-2003 political order. Their identity and existence is based around narratives of victimhood and the notion of preventing a Baathist resurrection that would return the country to repressive rule. This narrative has provided Shiite Islamist parties and militias with the capacity to mobilize cross-sections of the Shiite population. Conversely, for Arab Sunni actors – ranging from political parties to tribes, insurgent groups and jihadis – the pre-2003 period is invoked to elicit memories of an era of glory, free of militia rule, sectarian discord and Safavid (Iranian) as well as Western imperialism. The latter narrative has enabled ISIS and its previous incarnations to swell their ranks.

Post-2003 Iraq's confessional power-sharing mechanisms reinforced particularistic and sectarian politics; communities mobilized and coalesced around political objectives based on their ethnicity or sect, which came at the expense of a common national identity and the pluralistic politics of co-existence that is often a prerequisite for stabilization and good governance. Under the Baath, framing politics and governance through a nationalistic lens produced a resilient society that was able to resist disintegration into anarchy and that prevented the state from collapsing. After 2003, the policies pursued by the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and later by the US-backed Iraqi government,

⁴ Liam Anderson and Gareth Stansfield, *The Future of Iraq. Dictatorship, Democracy, or Division*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

compounded the sectarian fissures within Iraqi society.⁵ The most infamous of the CPA decisions was the de-Baathification of the Iraqi state and society. This policy removed all officials associated with the Baath party from public office when, in fact, membership in the party was a prerequisite for jobs and promotion. The ban struck civil servants and bureaucrats as much as it did teachers, academics, lawyers and engineers. Initially, some 30,000 ex-Baathists were expelled from various ministries. Half were eventually permitted to return after winning their appeals. All military officers above the rank of colonel were expelled as were all 100,000 members of Iraq's various intelligence services. Hundreds of thousands of trained soldiers, officers and intelligence officials become jobless overnight.⁶

Between 2006 and 2007, Shia militias were engaged in a turf war with Arab Sunni militant groups, including remnants of the Baath regime, Arab Sunni tribes, Al Qaeda in Iraq and foreign jihadists. A coalition of unlikely bedfellows emerged as the Mahdi Army, the capital's unofficial police force (dominated by members of the Badr Brigade militia) and armed gangs mobilized between 2006 and 2007 to engage in a sectarian war that claimed the lives of 34,452.⁷ Estimates put the number of Arab Sunnis killed by Shia militias at 1,000 per month,⁸ and 365,000 civilians were forced from their homes. Many of Baghdad's historically mixed communities underwent major demographic changes as a result of forced displacement.⁹

The rampant corruption in the security forces not only rendered the Iraqi armed forces ineffective, allowing Shia militia groups to use their failures to justify their existence. It also has a more sinister element, creating an informal economy of abuse and exploitation by officials. Due process and the rule of law have given way to a lucrative market where families of innocent detainees face extortion from corrupt officials.¹⁰ A significant proportion of the public payroll goes to those known as "ghost employees" or "ghost soldiers" – employees who receive salaries but who do not exist. There are an estimated 30,000 ghost soldiers in Iraq's military, whose salaries are pocketed by corrupt officials. The fall of Mosul in 2014 was in part attributed to the corruption that had engulfed the Iraqi security forces, in addition to the endemic problem of corruption in public procurement.¹¹

Corruption has, at the same time, filled the pockets of sectarian entrepreneurs and corrupt elites, especially by blocking accountability measures and oversight of the

⁵ Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq. Winning the War, Losing the Peace*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2007.

⁶ Judith S. Yaphe, "Iraq's Sunni Arabs: Part of the Past, Part of the Future?", in *Sada*, 25 November 2003, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/21507>.

⁷ Sabrina Tavernise, "Iraqi Death Toll Exceeded 34,000 in 2006, U.N. Says", in *The New York Times*, 17 January 2007, <https://nyti.ms/2k2HD13>.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, "Corruption in Iraq: 'Your Son Is Being Tortured. He Will Die If You Don't Pay'", in *The Guardian*, 16 January 2012, <https://gu.com/p/34kq7>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

state's expenditures, ultimately to the detriment of moderate, pluralistic voices. The colossal state-building resources invested in Iraq by the international community since 2003 have had little or no oversight. The management and distribution of these resources would have constituted an administrative challenge for most advanced democracies that have an organized and professionalized public sector, while the Iraqi state was effectively dismantled and functioned in a disorderly manner after 2003. Billions of dollars in US and international resources were poured into the country. More recently, however, the US Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction has estimated that 40 percent of reconstruction projects assessed in 2013 had deficiencies, including overcharging by subcontractors, unaccounted expenditures, waste and fraud.¹² According to estimates, 300 to 350 billion dollars has gone missing from government coffers since 2003 because of graft.¹³ Transparency International ranked Iraq as one of the most corrupt countries in the world, placing it 170th out of 175 countries in 2015.¹⁴

These structural challenges do not bode well for a country that is almost wholly dependent on oil revenues. Iraq is 95 percent reliant on oil revenues but loses its revenues to mismanagement, corruption and low productivity.¹⁵ The bloated Iraqi state has been engulfed in an economic crisis since the decline of oil prices after the great recession of 2008-9. Salaries and pensions cost the government more than 3 billion dollars a month. The public payroll is roughly estimated to be 7 million from a population of just over 21 million. Productivity is extremely low: in 2016, public sector workers were estimated to have been granted 184 days of leave, which – economists have estimated – costs the country three billion dollars a year in lost productivity.¹⁶ This economic model is not sustainable in the long run, as the Iraqi government has realized since the decline of oil prices. While historically this dependence on oil reserves has provided a degree of state resilience, it is no longer sustainable.

In this crisis of governance, there is dissatisfaction among a rapidly increasing, and young, population. Iraq's population is currently estimated to be 33 million and is expected to double in size within the next 10–15 years. Youth dissatisfaction constitutes a ticking time bomb that could explode in the near future with disastrous consequences. Nearly half of the population is under 19, yet opportunities for the youth to engage in politics or civic activities are limited.¹⁷ The number of youth aged 15 to 24 in Iraq is expected to double in the next 30 years, an increase of six

¹² US Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction, *Learning from Iraq*, March 2013, <http://www.dtic.mil/get-tr-doc/pdf?AD=ADA587236>.

¹³ Loveday Morris, "Beyond Terrorism, Iraq's Leader Is Struggling to Fight Corruption", in *The Washington Post*, 21 August 2015, <http://wapo.st/1PCu90Q>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "Long Weekend: Iraqis 'Worked Just Six Months' in 2016", in *The New Arab*, 19 April 2017, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/blog/2017/4/19/long-weekend-iraqis-worked-just-six-months-in-2016>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ See the website of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Iraq: *About Iraq*, <http://www.iq.undp.org/content/iraq/en/home/countryinfo.html>.

million.¹⁸ One in five Iraqis lives below the poverty line. Every single year, more than half a million Iraqis enter the job market.

Attempts to reform Iraq have been undertaken on a number of occasions. Since 2015, Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi has been emboldened by the vociferous backing of Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, Iraq's highest Shia authority and the leading Shia clergyman in the world, who has led calls for an end to corruption and government reforms.¹⁹ His role as both mediator but also as someone who empowers more moderate actors within the Shia political class, should not be understated. He has truly been a fundamental driver of societal resilience. Sistani is widely regarded in Iraq as a reconciler. At 87, this revered and leading clergyman of the Shia Islamic world has functioned as a crucial check on the power of Iraq's corrupt ruling elite and weak institutions that are paralyzed by ethnic and sectarian divisions. Sistani's early interventions after the 2003 war included pressuring the United States and Iraqi officials into ensuring that an elected assembly wrote the country's new constitution, contrary to the wishes of the United States and others, who sought a closed-door process. Sistani also convened warring Shia factions in 2005 to ensure that they contested parliamentary elections as a unified bloc, lest infighting among various Shia groups and militias should embolden a resilient Sunni insurgency composed of Baathists and Al Qaeda in Iraq. In 2006, Sistani helped contain, although he could not stop, a new wave of sectarian violence in Iraq that erupted after Al Qaeda in Iraq bombed the Al-Askari Shrine, a sacred Shia mosque in the Sunni-dominated city of Samarra. Sistani has therefore played an important role in curbing the level of bloodshed by calling for unity and moderation. This did not prevent Iraq from sliding into civil war, but Sistani's interventions almost certainly helped to constrain state-backed Shia militias and prevented them from committing genocide against Iraq's Sunni population.

With his backing, popular protests in 2015 saw security details for politicians cut by 90 percent, which freed up to 20,000 personnel for other duties.²⁰ In January 2016, the federal government, in coordination with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), also agreed on an economic reform agenda that aims to reduce the dependence on oil and is focused on the collection of customs duties and income tax.²¹ This was followed by a 5.34 billion dollar loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in July 2016, which has spurred efforts to reform the macro-

¹⁸ Farzaneh Roudi, *Youth Population and Employment in the Middle East and North Africa: Opportunity Or Challenge?*, Paper presented at the United Nations Expert Group Meeting on Adolescents "Youth and Development", New York, 21-22 July 2011, http://www.un.org/esa/population/meetings/egm-adolescents/p06_roudi.pdf.

¹⁹ "Iraqi PM Abadi pledges corruption drive after Sistani criticism", in *Reuters*, 9 January 2016, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-abadi-corruption-idUKKCN0UN0JC20160109>. See also Martin Chulov, "Post-war Iraq: 'Everybody Is Corrupt, from Top to Bottom. Including Me'", in *The Guardian*, 19 February 2016, <https://gu.com/p/4gq93>.

²⁰ Loveday Morris, "Beyond Terrorism, Iraq's Leader Is Struggling to Fight Corruption", cit.

²¹ "Abadi and the Kurdish Delegation Agree to Adopt Economic Reform Program to Reduce Dependence on Oil" (in Arabic), in *Al-Sumaria TV*, 31 January 2016, <http://www.alsumaria.tv/news/158410>.

economic environment so as to expand the private sector and reduce dependency on the state. The impact of the loan, in the short term at least, will be piecemeal and could even prompt social unrest as a result of the austerity measures that the loan requires.²²

2. Iraqi society fights back

Despite the plethora of challenges thrown at them, Iraqis have maintained their capacity to confront the Iraqi state. This is, after all, a population that has revolted on multiple occasions, even during the brutal Baath era. Since 2003, there have been countless contestations against a combination of the occupying forces, the Iraqi government as well as regional powers. There are communal networks collectively comprised of economies worth hundreds of millions of dollars and vast sums of religious donations from around the world that are used to finance projects that are autonomous of the state. The Shia religious establishment in Iraq presides over an extensive web of local and national institutions that enables it to contest the government in unparalleled fashion. Sistani, for example, has vast social and religious networks that enable local governance, provide services and support other public programmes such as schools, hospitals and libraries. Harnessed in the right way, these networks can help lead the way toward establishing a stronger civil society across Iraq, in partnership with other civic organizations. These include a vast network of institutions and charitable organizations, along with construction companies and printing presses.

Since the emergence of ISIS and the ensuing humanitarian crisis, these organizations have used their status and wealth to provide sanctuary to IDPs, including Arab Sunnis and Iraq's different ethnic and religious minorities. In a similar vein, Iraq's Arab Sunni-dominated heartlands in the north saw periods of stability after 2007 when the US re-engaged local tribes and other communal actors. Functioning through dialogue and co-operation, including an integration of tribal communities and former members of the Sunni insurgency into the government, these communal grassroots actors are overlooked by policy-makers as potential drivers of stability. Yet they have a proven capacity to function autonomously from the corrupted political process in Baghdad, whilst also having a moral authority that can be capitalized on to combat militancy and nudge armed groups into disarming and demobilizing.

Since 2011, protests have escalated and Iraqi society has fought back against corrupt and sectarian governance, albeit with mixed and often disappointing results. In 2011, against the backdrop of the Arab Spring uprisings, so-called "Day of Rage" protests gripped Baghdad and led to violent clashes with the Iraqi security forces.

²² International Monetary Fund (IMF), "Iraq Gets \$5.34 Billion IMF Loan to Support Economic Stability", in *IMF News*, 14 July 2016, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2016/07/12/14/31/NA071416-Iraq-Gets-IMF-Loan-to-Support-Economic-Stability>.

There were no calls for overhauling the government, but for improved public services and jobs.²³ Then, in 2013, political upheaval in Baghdad led to protests in northern Iraq that provided the staging-ground for ISIS's seizure of multiple towns and cities in 2014. Resentment among Arab Sunni communities was exacerbated when former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, in an attempt to consolidate his hold on power, moved against his Arab Sunni rivals after years of reorganizing key state institutions into patronage networks. Protests in 2013 erupted after Maliki controversially arrested the bodyguards of prominent Arab Sunni politician and former finance minister, Rafi Issawi. The arrests came just a year after the equally controversial arrest warrant issued against the country's former vice-president, Tarek al-Hashimi, also a prominent Arab Sunni politician.

The protests that erupted in northern Iraq, in Anbar province specifically, criticized the Shia-led government's marginalization of Arab Sunnis as well as poor services and indiscriminate (as well as disproportional) anti-terror raids and arrests in Arab Sunni communities. These criticisms were specifically targeted at Prime Minister Maliki, whose corrupt and sectarian governance and management of key institutions like the Iraqi armed forces, has been widely blamed for the emergence of ISIS in 2014.²⁴ In addition to providing the social conditions that could allow ISIS to project itself as an alternative to his rule, Maliki also led to the weakening of the Iraqi security forces. Hence, in 2013 Maliki reactivated Shia militias in an attempt to fill this security vacuum, in tandem with which there was a spike in sectarian atrocities.

While the population in northern Iraq has not had the space to protest and express its grievances given ISIS's brutal occupation since 2014, this has not stopped other sections of the population from mobilizing against the government.²⁵ Since 2013 mass protests and demands for reform have spread throughout the country. In August 2015, amid rising temperatures and the availability of electricity for only a few hours, Iraqis took to the streets. While the government could dismiss protests in northern Iraq as an Al Qaeda-inspired effort to challenge the post-2003 political order, the 2015 protesters were overwhelmingly Shia and protests took place in Baghdad and Shia-dominated provinces in the south. Unlike protests in northern Iraq, these protests were met with the moderating hand of the Abadi government (the 2011 protests faced a military response, under the orders of the former Prime Minister Maliki). The protests also received the endorsement of Grand Ayatollah Sistani, which helped legitimize and swell their ranks, while also providing Prime Minister Abadi with a popular mandate to push for necessary reforms.²⁶

²³ Jack Healy and Michael S. Schmidt, "Demonstrations Turn Violent in Iraq", in *The New York Times*, 25 February 2011, <https://nyti.ms/2jYcf3I>.

²⁴ "Iraq Ex-PM Nouri Maliki Blamed for Mosul Fall to IS", in *BBC News*, 16 August 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33952451>.

²⁵ For an overview of protests in the Kurdistan Region, see Ranj Alaaldin, "Kurdistan Comes Alive", in *OpenDemocracy*, 16 March 2011, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/node/58538>.

²⁶ AFP, "Thousands of Iraqis Protest against Corruption and Power Cuts", in *The Guardian*, 7 August 2015, <https://gu.com/p/4bbqn>.

Fundamental to societal (but also state) resilience has been the role of Shia militias and other armed groups, and their place within the Iraqi state and society more generally. Among the outstanding and critical issues that Iraq will have to address after the Mosul operation and the eventual end of the so-called “Caliphate”, is the status of the plethora of armed groups that are currently fighting alongside each other against ISIS. In some instances, these forces are autonomous and do not answer to the federal government in Baghdad, while at times work in coordination with other Iraqi security forces. If indeed the post-ISIS territorial configurations, the balance of power and issues of governance are to be addressed – namely who it is that will be doing the rebuilding in an effort to stabilise Iraq and replace the ensuing power vacuum that will follow ISIS’ demise – then appraising the status and role of armed groups will require going beyond the paradigm that treats them as either threats to the state and society, foreign proxies or criminals.

Each of the armed actors engaged in the Mosul operation has a complex and contentious socio-cultural status and political background. Each has staked its claim in the future of northern Iraq and overlaps to some degree with the local population. Shia militia groups, for example, are generally dismissed for being Iranian proxies or criminal groups that enable the space in which militant groups like ISIS operate. However, while some of these groups – including both Arab Sunni tribal militias and Shia militias – have committed sectarian atrocities, they also have substantial popular legitimacy and interact significantly with the Iraqi state.

Far from the criminal or Iranian proxy paradigm, Shia militias can also function as drivers of resilience at the state and societal level. Their product is, and will continue to be, violence and disorder and their prominence enables groups like ISIS to swell their ranks with alienated Arab Sunnis. However, their discourse is often steeped in Iraqi nationalism and the most powerful militias overlap and interact extensively with the Iraqi state. Some Shia militia heads, for example, have held ministerial posts and tens of thousands of militia fighters have been integrated into the state security forces. There are multiple identities that comprise these groups. For example, Iraq’s most powerful militia, the Badr Brigade, is a state-aligned militia force with strong ties to Iran and can function autonomously from the state and yet has also militarily cooperated with the US. Badr has fully integrated itself into the political system and its head, Hadi al-Ameri, has held ministerial posts.

At the same time, the dynamic nature of Iraq’s Shia militia groups has helped preserve the resilience of the Iraqi society against external actors, particularly where these actors attempt to exploit instability for their own objectives. For example, there are multiple militia factions within the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) that include powerful, vehemently nationalistic Iraqi actors such as Muqtada al-Sadr’s Peace Brigades. While this militia may refuse to submit to the federal government, it also opposes Iranian interference in Iraqi affairs and espouses a nationalistic discourse.

Further, the Shia religious establishment plays a far-reaching role that strengthens the resilience of society. In addition to the moderating role played by Grand Ayatollah Sistani, there are state-aligned militias that are managed by the holy shrines (which are controlled by Sistani) and that include the Imam Ali Brigade, Ali al-Akhbar Brigade and Abbas Division. Sistani and the shrines have a large following within the PMF and command respect across the ethnic and religious spectrum. Similarly, there are significant state-aligned Sunni tribal forces that have fought alongside the Iraqi security forces in northern Iraq in the campaign to liberate predominantly Arab Sunni towns and cities from ISIS.²⁷ Indeed, tribal forces, organized into the so-called 'Awakening Movement', were pivotal to turning the tide against Al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2007 and 2008, even helping establish the infrastructure that would allow for reconstruction and stable local governance, in turn providing the local Arab Sunni population with a greater stake in the Iraqi state.²⁸

3. Moving forward

The Iraqi state holds sovereign status and international recognition, remaining the only actor capable of constructing and shaping the country's constitutional and legal system. The Iraqi state must be ready to take the place of militant groups that are positioning themselves as alternatives to the government. This will require an organized and effective security force, the capacity to deliver basic services and revive the country's economy. At the bottom-up level, there are dynamics that have functioned as drivers of resilience, ensuring the state and society do not succumb to militant groups, even helping to contain civil conflict. At the top-down level, reformist politicians who do not want Iraq to succumb to corruption and the lack of accountability have resisted the efforts of malevolent actors to fully supplant and fleece the state of its resources.

For all that is said about factionalism, sectarian divisions and confrontations between Iraq's disparate communities, politics and power do not constitute a zero-sum game and there is enough history and cooperation between the various factions to be capitalized on. The Awakening Movement provides a precedent of how discontented and disenfranchised communities can be re-integrated into the state or, put another way, how grievances can be remedied by way of providing communities with a stake in the future of the country, as could a rehabilitation of Iraq's judiciary, pursuant to the goal of establishing a culture of accountability.

Rather than adopting prescriptive policy goals, there needs to be a better appreciation of the bottom-up communal dynamics that shape Iraqi society,

²⁷ Mat Wolf, "The Tribe That Won't Stop Killing ISIS", in *Daily Beast*, 10 December 2015, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-tribe-that-wont-stop-killing-isis>.

²⁸ See Michael E. Silverman, *Awakening Victory. How Iraqi Tribes and American Troops Reclaimed Al Anbar and Defeated Al Qaeda in Iraq*, Philadelphia and Newbury, Casemate, 2011.

and greater focus on civil society and the young for the purposes of stabilizing the country. While the rehabilitation of Iraq's institutions and its political system should continue, that does not mean policy-makers cannot factor into these analyses and recommendations the spoilers that impede progress and reform – including, among others, corrupt political and sectarian elites and their patronage networks.

State fragility in the region and the regionalized proxy war in Syria have additionally exacerbated Iraq's challenges. Such is the overlap between the civil war in Syria and conflict in Iraq – whose competing factions and militants have extended their conflict into Syria – that it may be implausible to bring stability to Iraq without first stabilizing Syria, and vice versa. The challenge could, therefore, be a generational one, not only because conflict in Syria is unlikely to abate for the foreseeable future but because of the multitude of overlapping political, socio-economic and security challenges that Iraq currently faces.

Despite being taken to the brink on multiple occasions, with some even declaring that Iraq is no more, the Iraqi state and society have, against all odds, survived and repeatedly bounced back. This has as much to do with Iraq's contemporary history as with the role of its institutions, the strength of the Iraqi identity and the role of sub-national actors like civil society and the religious institutions, along with tribes and indeed even armed groups.

With support from international actors, Iraq must reconstruct a national consensus and a framework capable of addressing issues of power-sharing. This will help achieve a grand bargain between Iraq's factions and communities that can end the competing political orders in post-2003 Iraq that have engulfed both state and society. This requires building on the history of cooperation and goodwill between factions, premised on the basis that they have more that unites them than divides them and, at the least, that there is enough of Iraq to go around for all.

Iraq does not have so much of a sectarian problem as of a governance problem; its ruling Shia political class lacks both vision and capacity to move the country forward. These failures of the Baghdad government and the uncertainty of Iraq's future have even led Iraq's Arab Sunnis – once vehemently opposed to any weakening of the central government – to call for their own autonomous region akin to Kurdistan, one that allows them to manage their own security and resources within a federal Iraq. Policy-makers in Iraq and internationally must afford greater appreciation to communal dynamics and drivers in Iraq, actors that from the bottom-up can influence and affect public policy and hold politicians and decision-makers to account. In the interim, a decentralized Iraq that affords greater powers to communities that perceive the government in Baghdad as sectarian, and that feel marginalized and disenfranchised, could help enable sufficient breathing room to allow the state and society to undergo a process of reconciliation.

The European Union can adopt a dual-track policy aimed at strengthening local sub-state governance (through, for example, focusing on transitional justice,

reconciliation and by devolving reconstruction and development funds) while also strengthening institutions at the federal level. Supporting decentralization does not necessarily conflict with keeping Iraq's territorial boundaries intact.²⁹ Treating civil society actors, tribes and religious institutions that have far-reaching influence and support as actors that could undermine the authority of the state is, therefore, counter-productive. It is after all these local actors that are engaged in the day-to-day business of meeting the humanitarian needs of local communities and displaced populations, as well as holding the government and political class to account by way of popular demonstrations.

The international community can encourage Iraqi decision-makers to continue Iraq's reform programme, even if this may yield limited results in the short term. Fundamentally, engagement with Iraq's government should centre on greater investment in the new generation of Iraqis: according to studies, Iraq allocated only 5.7 percent of its government expenditure to education in the 2015–16 school year, positioning the country on the bottom rank among Middle Eastern states. According to the report, only half of Iraq's internally displaced children have access to school and the cost to Iraq's economy of having so many children out of school is roughly one billion dollars in unrealised potential wages.³⁰

Armed groups should not be treated, in their entirety, as malevolent. Policy-makers may have to make some hard decisions that require engaging, potentially even supporting, groups that in the past have been complicit in human rights abuses. Yet these groups may have emerged from the ruins of violence and disorder as important socio-cultural actors that have edged closer toward accepting international norms and basic human rights.

These could be leveraged as a result of their grass-roots influence and willingness to resist malevolent actors that are attempting to shape the future of the state and society. Shifting focus and resources to local, communal actors and militias that may have or have already a mutually reinforcing relationship with the state would rejuvenate governance in Iraq, while at the same time strengthening the social contract between the state and society.

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²⁹ Of course, Kurdistan remains the exception – and may secede from Iraq – but there is little by way of empirical evidence to support the idea that this would precipitate the end of the Iraqi state, and there is immense resistance to both additional autonomous regions and secessionist movements within Iraq and the region.

³⁰ UNICEF and Government of Iraq, *The Cost and Benefits of Education in Iraq*, 21 May 2017, http://www.uniraq.org/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=7344. See also Peter Hawkins, "Iraq Must Invest in Education to Secure Its Future", in *Al Jazeera*, 27 May 2017, <http://aje.io/xp2l>.

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