

## Future of Iraq

Although Iraq didn't experience a national revolution like Syria its fate during the Arab Spring was very similar to its neighbor. The country which was bombed, later occupied and in the end neglected by the United States had a variety of internal problems and issues which finally resulted in a radical insurgency led by the Islamic State. Daesh managed to conduct a sort of a blitzkrieg and took large swathes of land in Iraq and Syria facing little or no resistance at all. In the beginning, Iraqi Security Forces seemed powerless to engage and counter the Islamic State, only after the Coalition led by the US did the Iraqi troops show resolve to fight and reclaim their country. At the moment, we are witnessing military successes against the Islamic State both in Syria and Iraq. However, eradicating the extremists won't solve the country's problem, in fact after removing the Islamic State the Iraqi government will face yet another power vacuum which will be filled by internal, external, state and non-state actors.

The current political and security situation in Iraq will induce several issues or factors which can deeply affect the future of the country. Removing the Islamic State won't stabilize the security issues for Iraq, remnants of this massive terrorist organization will still plague some parts of the country. Furthermore ethnic tensions, especially around Mosul, will become a major security issue for the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). This leads us to another question: Will the ISF manage to tackle new problems and what role will it have in the future society? Besides security issues Iraq will be pressured by regional players such as Iran and Turkey. Both of these regional powers see themselves as future patrons of Baghdad. Lastly there is the Kurdish question which reaches far beyond Iraqi borders and will be one of the most important political subjects for the entire Middle East.

Mosul is probably the last stronghold of ISIS in Iraq. After its liberation Islamic State scope of operation will be vastly limited. Furthermore the battle for Mosul will be a turning point for the country. As stated by a senior Iraqi official the country will either "start a new chapter of political discourse or it will implode into a new state of civil war".<sup>1</sup> This statement perfectly describes the delicate ethnic situation in Iraq. Various ethnic groups which are now fighting ISIS are united because of this common goal or enemy, however when the Islamic State leaves the theatre of war all these groups will quickly try to fill the power vacuum and eventually settle the score with one another. Proliferation of these armed groups usually leads to warlordism if the country's security forces are unable to control or restrain their power aspirations.

Mosul and the entire Ninewa Governorate have a very diverse ethnic structure which has suffered allot since the onslaught of the Islamic State. This ethnic structure includes Christians, Kaka'is, Kurds, Shabak, Turkmen, Yazidis, Sunni and Shia Arabs. People from these

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<sup>1</sup> H. Al-Kohei, E. Geranmayeh, M. Toaldo, *After ISIS: How to win peace in Iraq and Libya*, European Council on Foreign Relations. ([http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/After\\_ISIS\\_January\\_2017-2.pdf](http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/After_ISIS_January_2017-2.pdf))

communities have been displaced by the Islamic State, their homes destroyed or confiscated by the terrorists or even by opposing factions fighting the Islamic State.<sup>2</sup> Ethnicity has become the main dimension of person's identification and cause to join various armed groups which are battling ISIS. However fissures are also evident inside these groups prompted by economic or personal interests. Shia are divided in the Dawa party between Abadi and Maliki, the current Prime Minister power is weakening and Maliki is seen as a new leader. Kurds from Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) are also facing divides on a strategic level. While PUK is working more closely with the Iraqi government KDP is openly supporting separation from Iraq, on the other hand the KDP has a relatively good relationship with Turkey while PUK Peshmerga are fighting alongside the PKK troops. The intra-Kurdish frictions are higher than in the past two decades. Finally the Sunni Arabs are facing difficulties not only inside their local communities but also on the higher levels of politics and the lack of representation in the Iraqi government. Absence of political leadership and religious authority is dealing serious damage to the unity of the Sunni public in Iraq.<sup>3</sup> These gaps between various ethnic groups as well as within them will represent a serious challenge for future mediators in Iraq and will make the whole reconciliation process in the country much more difficult.

Kurdish, Iranian and Turkish interests are intertwined in Iraq. They all see each other's interests as potential threats in the post-ISIS Iraq. For decades the Kurds have been regarded as a threat to the country's territorial integrity in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria and a serious hazard for the overall stability of the Middle East. Today we are witnessing a renaissance of the Kurdish politics in the Middle East mostly due to a previously unseen upsurge of violent Islamism. The Iraqi Kurds already have an autonomous federal entity in Iraq, and although they have been supported (materially and diplomatically) by the West, a complete Kurdish statehood won't come easily.<sup>4</sup> The Western countries are still treating Kurdish independence as a threat which can destroy cohesion of the Iraqi state, however this can change in the near future since the Kurds are serving as a corridor for the US military operations both in Iraq and Syria.

The Turkish interests in Iraq and its military presence in northern Iraq is peculiar. Despite having fierce conflicts with its domestic Kurdish population and the PKK Ankara is on good terms with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. Ankara's stance towards the KRG has evolved from rejection, to recognition and finally to declaration of the Kurd's right for independence in Iraq. There are two main reasons behind these unusual relations between Turkey and the KRG. Firstly, the KRG offers a cheap, close and high-quality source of energy for the Turkish economy thus reducing the Turkey's reliance on Iran or Russia for this particular commodity. Furthermore Turkey can also act as a conduit for the Kurdish energy that can be

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<sup>2</sup> *After ISIS - Perspectives of displaced communities from Ninewa on return to Iraqis disputed territory*, PAX p. 40-53 (file:///E:/downloads/pax-iraq-report--after-isis%20(2).pdf)

<sup>3</sup> H. Al-Kohei, E. Geranmayeh, M. Toaldo *op cit.* p.5-6

<sup>4</sup> G. Seufret, *The Return of the Kurdish Question - On the Situation of the Kurds in Iraq, Syria and Turkey* p. 1-2 ([https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2015C38\\_srt.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2015C38_srt.pdf))

exported to Europe, providing Turkey with additional economic benefits.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, Ankara is trying to maximize its relations with the KRG in hopes that Masud Barzani can influence the leadership of the PKK. Moreover, Ankara has certain political designs for the former Ottoman provinces of Kirkuk and Mosul, both of these provinces are regarded as potential additions to the Turkish state.<sup>6</sup> It is possible that the Turkish government is trying to establish some sort of a buffer zone in northern Iraq, we can see a similar design already developing in northern Syria between the cities of Azaz, Al-Bab and Jarabulus (where the Turkish forces are deployed) potentially expanding to Manbij.

Iran is playing a very specific game in Iraq. On one hand Tehran doesn't want a strong Iraq which can potentially become a future threat, however a weak Iraq that can succumb to secession can provide a breeding ground for lesser but similar groups like ISIS. Iran is seeking so called "qualified" stability for Iraq, in other words there mustn't be an exceedingly strong Baghdad nor a defenseless one. Furthermore Iraq represents an important corridor between Iran and Syria, any potential fragmentation of the country can threaten Iranian presence both in Syria and Lebanon. Besides these strategic/security interests Tehran also has economic interests in Iraq. Iran is probably Iraq's largest trading partner, however the trade is mostly consisted out of Iranian exports to Iraq. Exports usually include processed foodstuff, construction materials, household appliances etc. By dumping their cheap consumer products in Iraq Tehran is actually controlling Iraq's economy.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately there is not much Baghdad can do at the moment, Iran is exercising its power over Iraq very carefully through many aspects. In the post-Saddam Iraq unlike other Sunni states in the region Iran was very active in Iraq especially on the diplomatic plain. With the rise of ISIS Tehran was very pro-active and one of the first to offer support to the Iraqi government. Finally Iran is very calculated in the Iraqis domestic politics. In other words Tehran is watchfully favoring Abadi or Maliki depending on the current mood in Baghdad.<sup>8</sup> Iran has many opportunities in future Iraq, nevertheless Tehran's public involvement in Iraq and fierce rhetoric against the Islamic State can weaken its overall position in the Middle East. Iran has primarily positioned itself as a pan-Islamic force in the region (mainly because of its anti-American anti-Israeli stance), however battling the Islamic State and supporting Hezbollah which fights other Sunni groups in the region can have a negative impact on Iran-Sunni relations.<sup>9</sup> Although this doesn't represent an imminent danger for the Iranian government it can be treated as a long-term risk especially if Tehran aspires to become a future leader of the Muslim world.

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<sup>5</sup> *Turkish presence in Northern Iraq: A Situation with Broad Regional Implications*, Al Bayan Center for Planning and Studies February 2016, p. 8-9 (<http://www.bayancenter.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Turkish-Presence-in-Northern-Iraq.pdf>)

<sup>6</sup> G. Seufret *op cit.* p3

<sup>7</sup> M. Eisenstadt, *Iran and Iraq* p. 5-6

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/opeds/Eisenstadt20150913-IranPrimer.pdf>)

<sup>8</sup> Mohammad Ali Shabani, *Making sense of Iran's Iraq Policy* p.3-5 (<http://carpo-bonn.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/CARPO-Brief-1-Shabani.pdf>)

<sup>9</sup> A. Nader, *Iran's role in Iraq*, p.14

([http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE151/RAND\\_PE151.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE151/RAND_PE151.pdf))

After the fall of Mosul the ISF has been morally mutilated, since the start of 2014 the ISF has also been suffering a string of military catastrophes. The ISF failure in 2014 goes far back to post 2003 Iraqi reconstruction, where military along with other governmental institutions has been neglected or badly reconstructed. Various military branches and its units were lacking training, expertise, leadership, communications, equipment etc. All of this became very evident when the Islamic State came to existence. The leadership vacuum was probably the main problem within the ISF. There weren't enough officers to command the brigades and the Iraqi Ministry of Defense lacked the administrative power to hire new personnel. The other problem was probably the withdrawal of the US troops. Though this can be described as a triumph of the Iraqi government to finally push the Americans out of their country, it probably was the US political move to finally implement its exit strategy from Iraq. Despite this, popular mobilization efforts after 2014 have been a success and managed to rebuild the ISF capacity to some extent. Furthermore after the ISIS advance Baghdad was lucky enough to receive military support both from the coalition led by the US but also from Russia, Iran, Turkey and even China. Iran was the quickest in providing military support both to the ISF and other Shia paramilitary forces battling the Islamic State, thus further consolidating its political hold over Iraq.<sup>10</sup>

The final factor which will determine and affect the future of Iraq are the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). The military will have a hard job in the upcoming years, dealing with the terrorists and remnants of the IS will only represent a small portion of its entire duty. Primary objective for the ISF will be to establish a security framework in which governmental institutions can effectively function and their authority implemented across the whole country. This will be especially challenging since there are many factions and armed groups that have diverged from Baghdad's authority and have gained significant influence in some parts of the country. Of course this isn't a problem that can be solved solely by military means, however a strong and respective military represents a crucial pillar of society and in a post-conflict society such as Iraq it can be a decisive aspect of stability.

Despite facing similar challenges Iraq unlike some other countries in the MENA region has managed to avoid the devastation of a full-blown civil war. In that perspective the future of the country won't bear the burdens of the civilian conflict furthermore the reconstruction and reconciliation processes should go much more smoother. However unlike other countries in the region Iraq has been razed in the previous decade by the US intervention, many problems that the country is facing at the moment are partially caused by the same military intervention. Although any wider fragmentation of Iraq is unlikely the Kurdish issue will be the focal point both for the Iraqi government as well as for the other neighboring countries in the future. Such as the Great Powers have shaped the political map of the Middle East after the World War I, today we are witnessing a similar process however supplemented with regional powers as main arbiters.

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<sup>10</sup> Dr. Michael Knights, The Future of Iraq's Armed Forces (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/The-future.pdf>)

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