



IRAQ AFTER THE TERRITORIAL DEFEAT OF ISLAMIC STATE:

Slow recovery or danger of after-effects?

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“[The Islamic State] is a symptom, not a cause, of the deeply dysfunctional and violent politics in the region.”¹ “People were benefiting from each other’s misery and crisis attracted monsters.”²

¹ Ashour, Omar (2021, 22) *How ISIS Fights: Military Tactics in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Egypt*. Edinburgh University Press

² Mosul and the Islamic State. Podcast hosted by Omar Mohammed. Part I Creating Monsters. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/mosul-and-the-islamic-state>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The citizens of Iraq have had to struggle for the last four decades in the middle of a continuous state of emergency. Repeating political crises, large-scale violence, destruction of infrastructure and broken visions of the future have marked the collective experience of the last generations of Iraqis. The turmoil has left behind severe physical and mental wounds, deteriorated living standards and undermined entire communities' capacity for resilience, not to mention the deeply rooted tensions between the main population groups, Shia and Sunni Arabs, Kurds and members of smaller religious and ethnic minorities such as several Christian communities, Yazidis, Mandaean, Kakais, Turkmen and Shabaks.

The latest large-scale human catastrophe, that was produced by the terrorist organization Islamic State (IS),³ is today largely over, but the fragile society is still struggling with serious challenges. Several hundreds of thousands of Iraqis remain uprooted and without possibility to return to their communities due to social tensions and delayed rebuilding of destroyed properties and infrastructure. The Government of Iraq, UN and international donors, are devoting great efforts to rebuild and stabilize the areas recovering from the military campaign against IS, yet the government sustains deep controversies; it has proved to be unable to address the social and political grievances of ordinary citizens particularly in the disputed territories, i.e. areas of contest between the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government. A great risk lays in the fact that the Central Government does not show sufficient determination to bring the numerous ethnic and sectarian militia groups who are firmly connected to party politics under its control.

[Background] The Iraqi society is deeply traumatized in the midst of endless suffering that started from the gradual construction of repressive and authoritarian Baath party dictatorship (1968-1978) which was directly responsible for war against Iran (1980-1988) and invasion of Kuwait (1990). The popular uprising in 1991 following the invasion led to hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties. As a result of the regime's brutality, Iraq was placed between 1991 and 2003 under an international trade embargo which caused

tremendous suffering to ordinary citizens. The events that followed the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States led to the declaration of Iraq as part of the "Axis of Evil" and its invasion, in 2003, by an international military coalition. Torn free from the shackles of the Baath Party, the new Iraq was born severely crippled. The failed state building project led soon to a civil war.

The country's political impasse gave birth to a new horror, the emergence of extremist Islamist organizations and finally to the establishment of Islamic state organization which occupied large parts of Iraqi territory and killed in cold blood anyone who stepped in its path and drove more than five million people from their homes.

[Sectarianization of the post-2003 Iraq] A fatal error made by the new Iraqi interim government (2003-2005) was the outlawing of the Baath Party and dismantling its security and military apparatuses. The so called De-Baathification policy not only created a dangerous security vacuum, but it took away the income from roughly 400,000 families. Moreover, the policy largely eroded the confidence of Sunni population in the political process.

The power in the new Iraq was taken by Shia and Kurdish parties and concentrated in the hands of their leaders many of whom had been exiled by the former regime. The sectarian division of power was written into the constitution of the new Iraq in 2005.

The style of politics in Iraq soon begun to resemble the situation in Lebanon, where an ethno-sectarian division of power generates repeated periods of civil violence and even war. Ministries, state-owned enterprises, political posts and public sector jobs were divided amongst dominant political parties and their ethno-religious/sectarian support group.

[The seeds of sectarian violence] Already in the 1980s the increasing social and political activism of Shia Islamist groups, active in the country since the late 1950s, alarmed the Baathist regime and forced it to turn to Islam in order to boost its credibility. This helped the Sunni Islamists to transform the religious sphere in the country as more radical minded individuals were allowed to shape peoples' perceptions in faith, politics and society.

³ The terrorist organization is known in Western sources by the alternate names of the Islamic State (IS), Islamic state of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL). The term Islamic State corresponds to the organization's Arabic name (al Dawla al-Islamiya) and is therefore used systematically in the report. In the source literature, however the organization appears in the alternative forms.

First Sunni extremist organizations found foothold in Iraq at the turn of the new Millennium.

The emergence of IS organization is firmly linked with the government's discriminatory politics towards the Sunni dominated areas which led to waves of popular protests and their violent suppression by the government in 2013. The outbreak of Syrian civil war in 2011 and US President Barak Obama's decision to withdraw US troops from Iraq further contributed to the resurfacing of Sunni militancy.

IS soon succeeded in recruiting a large number Syrian fighters and former Baathist Iraqi military in its ranks together with tens of thousands of foreign fighters.

In June 2014 IS established its Iraqi "capital" in the country's second largest city Mosul, known for its extremely diverse religious and cultural heritage.

During the first decade of 2000s Mosul had become a hub for Sunni extremists as they had a firm grip on critical sectors of the local economy.

By In April 2015, IS held 138,000 square kilometres of territory, an area populated by approximately eight million people. Although short lived IS was, first and foremost, a state guided by a puritanical, extremist interpretation of Islam, with its bureaucratic institutions, including courts, morality police, schools and health clinics.

The ordinary people in occupied territories had hardly other options than to wait and try to survive under a brutal regime that committed grave abuses of international human rights law, international criminal law and international humanitarian law. The crimes included executions, torture, amputations, ethno-sectarian attacks, rape and sexual slavery imposed on women and girls.

[The aftermath of IS] U.S.-led military coalition begun air strikes against IS in Iraq in August 7th 2014, only 39 days after the declaration of the caliphate. Over the following three years, Iraqi government forces, Popular Mobilization Units (umbrella organization for some 50 paramilitary groups) and the Kurdish Peshmerga quickly took control of the occupied areas. By the end of 2017 IS had lost roughly 95 percent of its territory, including its two "capital cities" Mosul in Iraq and the northern Syrian city of Raqqa.

The final blow came on March 23, 2019 as the Syrian Democratic Forces, backed by the US-led international coalition, liberated the last IS stronghold, town of Baghouz in Syria, after a tough six-week battle.

Due to violence roughly five million Iraqis had to leave their homes between the years 2014 and 2019. The majority, some 3.5 million, were of Sunni background. According to UNHCR figures nearly 1.2 million Iraqis remain displaced. There are grave challenges to the safe and durable return of majority of them. In addition to refugee camps, these people are dispersed across the country and residing in temporary dwellings.

In each liberated community in Iraq, the government, various militia forces and the Kurdish Peshmerga begun screening the population for IS members who were hiding among civilians. Confessions have been extracted by means of torture and the courts have condemned hundreds of detainees to death.

According to the Iraqi Ministry of Justice, the courts sentenced approximately 8000 people to death between 2015 and 2021. Between 2017 and 2020 Iraq has implemented at least 225 death sentences.

The remaining IS forces were imprisoned or killed in battle and the surviving women and children were placed in closed camps. In theory Iraqi citizens cannot leave the camps without Iraqi ministry's permission, however smuggling networks are active in the area and those with sufficient financial resources eventually find a way out and in most cases flee to Turkey.

The transfers have caused several disputes and many attempts have been halted due to fierce opposition of local communities. Often the fate of the repatriated families from Syrian camps is that they end up in equally poorly equipped camps in Iraqi territory.

[Reconciliation in the traumatized society] The Parliament of Iraq launched the National Reconciliation Framework in June 2006. Its guiding principles today are three-fold: IS members are declared terrorists and those captured are sentenced to death, or they receive prison sentences, including life sentences. The members of families affiliated with IS are only freed from charges, if they denounced their relatives and cooperate with the authorities in identifying other IS members.

The challenges of national reconciliation are manifold. Particularly in rural areas and small towns the civic legal system has little practical authority, therefore reconciliation processes must take into account the tribal customary compensatory models of settling disputes. The Sunni tribes are, however, not unified and in many cases split between IS related offenders and victims. In many areas finding brokers considered as neutral by all parties has proved to be difficult.

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A further challenge arises out of the fact that often the key guarantor of security in the area is an armed militia. There is little hope to achieve any local level settlement without involving them in the reconciliation process.

There is a grave concern that harsh legal measures against IS members only contribute to the Sunni population's experience of injustice and marginalization.

In addition, the ways in which the IS members' crimes are represented in the main stream Iraqi TV media has the potential to fuel and deepen mistrust and resentment between population groups, as well as the mentality of revenge. They former IS members are brought in front of cameras handcuffed and dressed in prisoner's overalls and the programs routinely disclose their identity, family background and place of residence.

The surviving victims and their family members are offered the opportunity to express their suffering and anger and desire for revenge against the former members of IS.

The government's violent cracking of youth movements calling for political reform and detachment sectarianized political culture is also a key issue of concern. The largest of the recent movements, the Tishreen (October) movement included tens of thousands of both secular and religious activists. In 2019 the demonstrations unseated the government and forced parliament to adopt a new electoral law, but the ruling elite was not ready for a thorough change: security forces and paramilitary groups backed by Iran killed more than 600 and wounded more than 20 000 protesters largely suffocating the movement.

Another serious security threat for the future arises out of the fact that the government has proved to be unable and unwilling to bring the multiple armed militia groups under its control. Especially the constituents the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU), that have received a steady flow of Iranian support, have gained momentum and today play a central military role at the expense of the Iraqi army.

The PMUs claim to represent all Iraqis, yet their support base is among Iraq's Shia population. In legal terms, the PMUs are responsible directly to the Iraqi Prime Minister, but in practice they are largely free from constraints posed by formal state institutions. Without a plan to integrate them under the state control they challenge the state's cohesion and monopoly on legitimate violence.

Given all these elements – the deeply rooted communal trauma, distrust between population groups, contradictory government policies, and relative autonomy of PMU's – ordinary Iraqis signal that the country is in a serious crisis.

[Reconstruction and building community cohesion] The Government of Iraq requested UNDP Iraq in mid-2015 to establish a program for the stabilization of the former IS territory. It focused its activities on 31 locations within the governorates of Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, Nineveh and Salah al-Din and targeted key sectors from rebuilding infrastructure to enhancement of community cohesion.

The program has three main objectives: facilitating the return of displaced Iraqis, laying the foundations for the reconstruction, recovery and protection of communities from renewed violence and extremism.

Along with the Stabilization Project, today dozens of non-governmental organizations implement smaller-scale community projects with the support of international financiers with focus on establishing medical and psycho-social counselling centres, organizing peace committees, peace and reconciliation seminars, training and development and humanitarian assistance programs.

Despite of these efforts a dangerous flame of ethnicity and sectarianism is constantly smouldering in the political process and may result in a renewed circle of large-scale violence any moment.

THE CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The Iraqi society is deeply traumatized in the midst of endless suffering that started from the gradual construction of repressive and authoritarian Baath party dictatorship (1968-1978) which was directly responsible for wars against Iran (1980-1988) and Kuwait (1990). Besides its neighbours, the regime led by President Saddam Hussein did not hesitate to use violence against its own citizens. Tens of thousands of Iraqis died due to torture, executions and murder and the violence reached genocidal proportions during the popular uprising in 1991, culminating in chemical warfare against Kurds and elimination of nearly 350,000 members of rebelling Arab communities. As a result of the regime's brutality, Iraq was placed between 1991 and 2003 under an international trade embargo which caused tremendous suffering to ordinary citizens. As a result of poor living conditions, some 500,000 children died due to malnutrition.⁴

⁴ see: Joy, Gordon (2003) *Invisible War: The United States and the Iraq Sanctions*. Harvard University.

The events that followed the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States led to the declaration of Iraq as part of the “Axis of Evil” and its invasion by an international military coalition. Torn free from the shackles of the Baath Party, the new Iraq was born severely crippled. The failed state building project led soon to a civil war claiming again hundreds of thousands of civilian lives. Iraqis had only been allowed to breathe for a moment until the dark era struck again. The country’s political impasse gave birth to a new horror, the terror organization Islamic state (IS), which killed in cold blood anyone who stepped in its path and drove more than five million people from their homes. IS no longer occupies territories but the organization is far from crushed. As we will see in the following pages, it has returned to decentralized approach and operates actively as a guerilla force. It still has capabilities to recruit, combat and finance activities, and it sustains considerable popular support in many regions of Iraq.⁵ At the time of writing this report, the worst wave of violence has once again passed, but the challenges in efforts to stabilize the country are enormous, with each generation facing its own unique crisis. Ruined infrastructure and homes need to be rebuilt, hundreds of thousands of displaced citizens must be rehabilitated, and deep mental and physical wounds of the citizens require healing. In a country where every central political interest group has committed human rights violations, finding a compromise is particularly challenging. Instability and citizens’ loss of faith in the possibility of reconciliation risks igniting a new cycle of violence. Hatred and the desire for revenge are the fuels of extremism, but suppressing their sources requires consistency and long-term effort from the Iraqi leadership, as well as the commitment of the international community.

The prolonged conflicts have socialized entire generations into reality where, in addition to wounded bodies and minds, the entire infrastructure has been severely hurt. Country where summer temperatures rise above 50 degrees Celsius has grappled with continuous power and water shortages since the fall of the Baath regime in 2003.⁶ On top of all these challenges, Iraq is considered the fifth most vulnerable nation to climate crisis. Water scarcity pushes thousands to move towards overcrowded cities, where the lack of jobs

and services stir unrest.⁷ Perhaps the most crippling negative development is the gradual deterioration of the country’s education sector. By the 1970s Iraq had achieved nearly full literacy of adult population, yet now the country is struggling with general illiteracy rate estimated between 18 to 20%. Nearly 50% of women aged between 15 and 24 years are today illiterate in the country’s rural areas.⁸

Recovery following armed conflict is an enormous challenge for any state with an extensive history of authoritarianism, failed state-building and continuous conflict. While the territorial defeat of IS presents an opportunity to alter this violent course and address its root causes, the process will be challenging. How to engage effectively with different communities affected and how to address grievances on all sides, in order to avoid the resurgence of extremism, renewed radicalization and repeated armed conflict remain the key questions to be answered in Iraq.

GENERAL AIM OF THE REPORT

The aim of the report is to shed light on key challenges of peacebuilding, reforms and reconciliation in Iraq with specific focus on north-western parts of the country, areas that formed between the years 2014-2019 the base of the international terrorist organization IS. The report will, furthermore, map the key local governance structures relevant to peacebuilding work together with the main ongoing international and national policy frameworks and processes.

THE AUTHOR

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⁷ ‘The green land is a barren desert’: water scarcity hits Iraq’s Fertile Crescent. The Guardian September 7th 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/sep/07/water-scarcity-hits-iraq-fertile-crescent-drought-farming>

⁸ UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (2014) Literacy for Women, Iraq. <https://uil.unesco.org/case-study/effective-practices-database-litbase-0/literacy-women-iraq#:~:text=Iraqi%20society%20is%20characterized%20by,Iraq%20is%2018%E2%80%9320%25>.

⁵ Abu Rumman, Muhammad (2021) Introduction: Future of ISIS after The collapse of the state. In The Aftermath of the Caliphate. ed. Muhammad Abu Rumman. (in Arabic) Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Jordan. pp 11-26.

⁶ Iraq power cuts stir protests as summer temperatures scorch country. BBC July 2nd 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-57693688>

SOURCES USED

This desk research builds on the most important academic monographs, edited volumes, peer reviewed journal articles, reports, policy briefs of major international humanitarian and relief organizations concerning post-IS era Iraq. In order to understand the social profile and violent activities of the Iraqi members of the IS, the content of major Iraqi and Syrian TV channels focusing on the theme was extensively reviewed.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT AND ITS KEY QUESTIONS

The first two chapters of the research will focus on two main questions: first, what are the key social and political processes that contribute to Iraq's political and social instability and second, what can be said about the potential risk factors of a renewed armed conflict in the area?

The third chapter will shed light on the key challenges the recovering communities face after the territorial defeat of IS. It furthermore maps the main international and national policy frameworks that guide peace building efforts in the area and briefly introduces some of the most important peace building projects and local governance structures relevant for the stabilization of local communities. The report ends with a list of policy recommendations.

CAUSES OF INSTABILITY

In order to understand the causes of instability in the present day Iraq, it is essential start by focusing on two key questions. On what kind of political legacy was the new Iraq built? What explains society's descent into violent chaos only three years after the fall of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party Regime in 2003? In order to answer these questions, we must begin by briefly examining the political culture of Iraq from the late 1960s onwards.

[Iraq under Baath] Baath Party-era (1968-2003) in Iraq has two strikingly contrasting faces. On one hand, backed by the country's huge oil revenues, the regime extensively modernized the country, invested plenty of effort in literacy campaigns, educational system, higher education, health care and building modern infrastructure.⁹

On the other hand, the regime constructed a web of security apparatuses and spent billions of dollars in military expenditures. For these reasons the Baathist era has been aptly described as the period of "Republic of Fear". The Iraqi government under Baath was first and foremost machinery of violence tinged with secularist nationalism. At the height of its power, the party employed almost half a million informers, and it constantly used violence from assassinations to kidnappings, deportations and torture to consolidate its position and eliminate its political rivals. The activities of the six central institutions responsible for internal security were aimed not so much at intelligence and information gathering as at verifying the suspects' guilt. Central positions in the army, security institutions and networks surrounding President Saddam Hussein, whose reign lasted from 1979 to 2003, were dominated by members of the Sunni population. Such unequal division of power laid the foundation for the tension between the population groups in post-2003 Iraq.¹⁰

The regime's message to citizens was that a better life and success in society were only possible through party membership. Rising in the party's political hierarchy, on the other hand, inevitably meant that the individual became ever more closely attached to the dynamics of the regime's logic of violence. Ubiquitous violence and its threat blurred the interface between an active participant and passive bystander; it was especially traumatic for the citizens, that they were forced to watch public executions and participate in violence against other citizens. It was not at all unusual for authorities to require suspects to torture other suspects, who might be members of the same family, during interrogations. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis were first suspected and then proven guilty simply because of their social and political background. Citizens paid a heavy price for their family name, often because the security authorities considered the suspect to have close family ties to banned religious, left-wing or ethnic-based forms of political activism.¹¹

Opposition activism put people at extreme risks. Entire families were arrested and tortured to pressure family members who had gone underground or fled the country or as punishment for opposition activities. Families suspected

⁹ Tripp, Charles (2002: 205-222) *A History of Iraq*. Cambridge University.

¹⁰ Ibid pp. 235-237

¹¹ Makkiya, Kanan (1998) [1989]. *Republic of Fear: Politics of Modern Iraq*. University of California Press. Berkeley and Los Angeles. pp. 46-70.

of opposition activism had to make extreme decisions in an attempt to avoid the attention of the authorities.¹²

It should be reminded that for the overwhelming majority of Iraqis, party membership was a necessity to earn a living and not simply an expression of ideological commitment. Practically all public sector jobs required party membership. After the fall of the Baathist regime in 2003, decades of resentment towards those in power erupted. Iraqis who had suffered from the regime's practice of violence and suppression of civil opinion were demanding back their sense of self-worth that was stolen from them. The retaliation and public humiliation of the party's administrative elite and internal security authorities begun immediately after the fall of the regime.¹³

Perhaps the most fatal error made by the new Iraqi interim government (2003-2005) was the outlawing of the Baath Party and dismantling its security and military apparatuses. The so called De-Baathification policy not only created a dangerous security vacuum but it took away the income from roughly 400,000 families. Moreover, the policy largely eroded the confidence of Sunni population in the political process.¹⁴ Large numbers of citizens in Sunni dominated areas boycotted the first parliamentary elections held in 2005 with a devastating result to the Sunni political blocs. The power in the new Iraq was taken by Shia and Kurdish parties and concentrated in the hands of their leaders many of whom had been exiled by the former regime.¹⁵

The battle over political representation, security vacuum, and the resulting widely spread street crime only furthered the deeply shared popular frustration. The deadly equation was born as both the new rulers and their opponents began to voice their messages in sectarian political rhetoric. Roughly simplified, from the point of view of the Shia political blocs, the question was of a role reversal; the Shias suppressed by the Baath, considered possessing the legitimate right to determine the guidelines of the country's political future. The Sunni blocs feared that the Shias would try to monopolize

their grip on the handle of power and displace all the millions of Sunni Iraqis who had Baath membership cards from the country's administration and official machinery. Simultaneously, both Sunni and Shia political factions were investing heavily on recruiting members both nationally and internationally in order to build up their military strength. The third major component of the Iraqi population mosaic, the Kurds who are concentrated on the northern parts of the country, saw the change of power as their opportunity to increase independence from the central government of Baghdad. In the aftermath of the popular uprising of 1991, no-fly security zones were established by the U.N. in southern Iraq and the northern Kurdish region and the following years witnessed the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in 1992. Increasing security brought unprecedented prosperity and the Kurdish society transformed extremely rapidly from a largely agrarian-based, highly regulated, and state-owned economy to a free market economy. The economic success was boosted to a great degree by the rich oil reserves large parts of which, are situated in the disputed and ethnically diverse territories the administrative status of which has proven to be an ongoing point of contention between Baghdad and the KRG. Turkey and Iraq proved to be keen on investing in the region, with obvious political and economic interests in the natural riches of the region.¹⁶

It was fatal for the future that the sectarian division of power was written into the constitution of the new Iraq in 2005. The style of politics in Iraq soon begun to resemble the situation in Lebanon, where an ethno-sectarian division of power generates repeated periods of civil violence and even war. The Iraqi constitution grants the post of Presidency to the Kurds, while the Prime Minister is of the Shias, and the Sunnis hold the position of the speaker of parliament. As the subsequent years indicated, Iraq became in many ways a hostage to its sectarian system, where each political grouping claiming to represent Sunnis, Shias, Kurds or smaller minority groups fights over its share and is largely driven by the fear of marginalization of its entire support population.¹⁷ An allocative system, or 'muhasasa', emerged gradually whereby ministries, state-owned enterprises, political posts and public

¹² Juntunen, Marko. & Muthana, Riadh (2008). Abu Ghraib – Varissuo: Irakilaismiehen matka Saddamin selleistä Suomeen. [Abu Ghraib – Varissuo: Iraqi Man's Journey from Saddam's Cells to Finland]. Ajatus Kirjat, Helsinki.

¹³ Cockburn, Patrick. (2009). Muqtada al-Sadr and the Shia Insurgency in Iraq. Faber and Faber, London.

¹⁴ Iraq's Shiites Under Occupation. International Crisis Group, Middle East Briefing, September 9, 2003. Available online at: [kms1.isn.ethz.ch/serveengine/Files/ISN/.../b008_iraq_shiites.pdf](https://www.kms1.isn.ethz.ch/serveengine/Files/ISN/.../b008_iraq_shiites.pdf)

¹⁵ Al-Ali, Zaid (2014) The Struggle for Iraq's Future. Yale University. pp. 75-103.

¹⁶ Hautaniemi, Petri, Juntunen & Marko, Sato, Mariko (2013) Return migration and Vulnerability: Case studies from Somaliland and Iraqi Kurdistan. University of Helsinki. p. 81.

¹⁷ The 'Lebanonisation' of Iraq. Al Jazeera Net. November 29, 2010. <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/2010/11/20101126143626991797.html>

sector jobs were divided amongst dominant political parties and their ethno-religious support group.¹⁸

The largest political gains in this situation have fallen into the hands of Iran who has for long backed the political power blocks of the Shias in Iraq. On November 30, 2010, a leading Arabic International TV channel, al Jazeera, carried out a spectator poll asking: “Who is the winner in the recent parliamentary elections in Iraq? Iran or democracy?” An overwhelming majority, eighty-eight per cent of the answers, perceived that the winner was Iran.¹⁹ Besides Iran, the role of Iraq’s Sunni neighbours, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi-Arabia should not be overlooked in the consolidation of the country’s sectarian boundaries. Iraq’s Sunni majority neighbors have for several years rallied for greater political influence on the Iraqi Sunnis in order to outplay Iran.²⁰ Should the ethno-sectarian political culture prevail, Iraq will experience increased external interference, whether by the U.S., Iran, or other regional powers.

It would, however, be erroneous to perceive Sunni and Shia sectarian groups in Iraq simply as social groupings with a sense of common identity defined entirely in religious terms and untouched by other social markers, such as local identity, tribal affiliation, world view, and political ideology. It is thus worth asking how the political identification of both Shia and Sunni population transformed during and after the Baathist era.

[The Shia resurgence] Iraq is of specific symbolic and ritual importance for Shias world-wide. Not only are eight of the twelve holy Imams (the successor to Prophet Muhammad, followed by male descendants the Prophet through his daughter Fatimah and cousin Ali) buried in Iraq but also some of the oldest religious centers of learning, madrasas, and the most renowned mosques and burial grounds are located within its borders. The town of Najaf has since the 11th century been regarded as the focal point for Shia theological

learning worldwide. Najaf, together with its counterpart, Qum in Iran, host the most influential Shia hawzas, loosely organized networks of men of religious learning with their followers and students.

In Shia Islam, with its various branches, the theological, moral and political authority is much more personified than in Sunni Islam. The believers are expected to follow a particular theological and legal tradition carried on by a publicly recognized marja’ religious jurisprudential authority.²¹ Unlike in Iran, Iraq’s hawza, stayed outside of politics for the most part of the modern history in order to preserve its spiritual independence. However, towards the end of the Baathist reign, the Iraqi hawza was rapidly drawn to the political process.²² Current supreme marja’, Ali al-Sistani, plays a prominent role in Iraqi politics today and he has even been characterized as the “most influential” political figure in post-invasion Iraq.²³

In the late 1950s and early 1960s many educated Shias were left-leaning in their political attitudes. During the early years of Ba’athist rule in the 1970s, the Iraqi regime made great efforts to co-opt increasing numbers of Shias and by 1982 nearly thirty per cent of the members of the most influential Ba’athist institution, the Revolutionary Command Council, were Shia. The war years between Iraq and Iran considerably changed the political future of Iraqi Shias. Iran had experienced a revolution that was largely rallied by Shia religious clergy. For obvious reasons the secular-nationalist, yet Sunni dominated Baath party regime feared a similar fate. The first modern Shia Islamist movement in Iraq, Da’wa, was formed in 1957. It was soon forced to move its leadership to Iran, and a number of its influential members sought refuge in Paris and London. In 1982, the leading figures of the movement, together with a new generation of exiled Shia Islamists founded (with considerable Iranian backing) the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). Like Da’wa, SCIRI soon penetrated deeply in the Iraqi diaspora in Western Europe. The Shia Islamists paid a heavy price for their open opposition to the Baathist Iraqi regime, as dozens of forefront leaders of both Da’wa and SCIRI were assassinated, executed, and tortured to death. Three decades later, the Government of Iraq was – and still is today

¹⁸ Watkins, Jessica & Hasan, Mustafa(2022) Post-ISIL reconciliation in Iraq and the local anatomy of national grievances: the case of Yathrib, Peace-building, 10:3, 335-350

¹⁹ Who is the winner in the formation of new government in Iraq. The Opposing Direction –program. Aljazeera (Arabic), November 30, 2011 Available online at: <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/04A83FB4-0724-49DF-8718-DD88F80660F9.htm>

²⁰ see: International Crisis Group (2018) Saudi Arabia: Back to Baghdad, Report 186, Middle East and North Africa. May 2018. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/186-saudi-arabia-back-baghdad>

²¹ Gleave, Robert. Marja’ al-Taqlid. Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World. www.encyclopedia.com

²² Cockburn, Patrick (2009, 145–148). Muqtada al-Sadr and the Shia Insurgency in Iraq. Faber and Faber, London.

²³ Gethin, Chamberlain & Aqeel, Hussein (2006). “I no longer have power to save Iraq from civil war, warns Shia leader”. The Daily Telegraph September 4, 2006. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1527928/I-no-longer-have-power-to-save-iraq-from-civil-war-warns-shia-leader.html>

– largely in the hands of the relatives and descendants of the persecuted founding fathers Iraq’s Shia Islamism.²⁴

In the 1980s numerous charity organizations connected to Shia Islamist parties began to engage in large scale charity work, often with considerable Iranian support. This strengthened sectarian solidarity, particularly in the southern parts of the country and among impoverished members of urban population. In the aftermath of the Second Gulf War in 1991, the Shias together with the Kurdish population unleashed decades of frustration, persecution, and political marginalization in a popular uprising with a bloody ending. The regime responded by taking up arms against both rebels and civilians in a manner that resembled ethnic cleansing in many locations. Millions were terrorized and up to 150,000 citizens were killed merely because they were Shias and the Kurds faced the similar fate in the northern parts of the country. In the aftermath of the Second Gulf War, no-fly security zones were established by United Nations in the southern Iraqi regions with marked Shia majority and in the northern Kurdish regions to protect the local populations from the retaliation of the government forces. In the new geopolitical climate following the military occupation of Iraq in 2003, numerous leading figures of the hawza developed new political visions for the Iraqi Shias, constructing them as a social and political community demanding political representation that would reflect the country’s demographic profile. Being a majority population group in Iraq, many Shias felt they had the right to define the future course of their country.²⁵

The armed activities of the Shias begun to intensify gradually and swelled into an open war against the Sunni groups shortly after the terrorist attack in Samarra in the spring of 2006. Since 2003, prominent Shia religious scholars in hawza had produced variegated views on the occupation of the country. Leading scholars, including hawza’s highest authority, al-Sistani, opposed the coalition’s military actions as well as the occupation of the country. The fiercest criticism came from Muqtada al-Sadr, who was persecuted by the terror apparatus of the Baath Party and belongs to an influential Shia family. Al-Sadr’s movement and its military unit (al-Mahdi Army) soon

began to control an entire neighborhood in Baghdad, whose former name Saddam-city was replaced by the name Sadr-city (Madinat al-Sadr). At its peak, the Al-Mahdi Army commanded almost 60,000 armed men and soon gained a foothold throughout the central Shia-majority cities. By 2005, every party even of slightest political significance had a protecting armed group behind them. Nearly 30,000 Iraqi civilians lost their lives over the next three years at roadblocks and factions fighting for their front lines. The Shia party SCIRI commanded thousands of gunmen belonging to its Badr Brigade, which consisted of officers and soldiers of Shia background who had been part of the Iraqi army during the Baath regime. A similar process, the construction of a sectarian political identity and its militarization in the name of protecting sectarian interests, affected the Sunni population as well. However, the chain of events that led to this result was very different from Shias.

[The faith campaign and the emergence of Sunni extremism] In the 1980s the increasing social and political activism of Shia Islamists alarmed the Baathist regime and forced it to turn to Islam as well. It sought to present itself as the guardian of the peoples’ religious sentiments in order to boost its credibility. Saddam Hussein, a secular nationalist hardliner transformed gradually into a believing president who claimed to save the citizens from the corruptive effects of Western imperialism, and the revolutionary potential of Shia Islamists. The regime, with its Sunni elite allowed more assertive Sunni religious and social activism.²⁶

Gradually the faith campaign helped the Sunni Islamists to transform the religious sphere in the country as more radical minded individuals were allowed to shape peoples’ perceptions in faith, politics and society. As a result, socially conservative norms became more pronounced in state institutions, in the school system and public spaces. Women’s dress code took a more conservative turn between 1992 and 1997. Public consumption of alcohol was prohibited, bars and liqueur stores were closed and memorizing the Qur’an became part of the Baath party’s curricula, and a means of promotion within the party’s hierarchy. Crumbling economic situation, due to the international embargo, enhanced collective social orientation towards religiosity in general. These trends became particularly visible among young people from middle and lower middle classes and gradually the extremist narratives began to resonate among them.²⁷

²⁴ Tripp, Charles (2007: 192–197, 234–239)) The History of Iraq. Cambridge university

²⁵ Iraq Backgrounder: What Lies Beneath. International Crisis Group. Middle east Report 6. October 1, 2002. [repository.forcedmigration.org/show_meta-data.jsp?pid=fmo:3369](https://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/03/030610IraqBackgrounder.pdf)

²⁶ Mosul and the Islamic State. Podcast hosted by Omar Mohammed. Part I Creating Monsters. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/mosul-and-the-islamic-state>

²⁷ Ibid.

Iraq After the Territorial Defeat of Islamic State: Slow Recovery or Danger of After-Effects?

Extremists with experience from the battlefields of Soviet Afghan war (1979-1989) proved to be highly influential ideologues for the first generation of extremists Iraq. The Ansar al-Islam movement formed in 2001 by Mullah Fateh Krekar, in the north-eastern Iraqi Kurdistan, was the first impactful, modern extremist organization in the country. It attracted radicals from both Iraq and the wider Arab world in the post 9/11 global context. The next five years witnessed the emergence of organized extremist infrastructure in Iraq. The key figures gained influence as they managed to organize armed resistance against US-led military coalition forces entering Iraq in 2003. It is hardly surprising that the international military coalition was met with international resistance; Iraq became a target country for thousands of Sunni extremists similarly to Afghanistan and Bosnia years earlier. First extremist organizations finding a foothold in Iraq although shattered shared common objectives; they saw themselves as a legitimate front against foreign occupiers, and those predominantly Shia Iraqis who collaborated with them. Rooted in the ideas of the father figures of Islamist extremism such as Abu al-Ala al-Mawdudi, Sayyid Qutb and Egyptian Islamic groups of 1970s, they saw violence as a religious obligation. Religious authorities within the movements issued legal statements, fatwas, allowing the killing of any individual deemed as “infidel”. Tawhid wa Jihad-movement, later to be named as Al-Qaida of Iraq and led by Jordanian Afghan war veteran Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, became the enemy number one for the political blocks representing the Shia population but also to the US led coalition forces.²⁸

Zarqawi’s master plan was to ignite a sectarian war in Iraq which would increase unrest and turn the entire Iraqi population against the foreign occupiers. Amidst this chaos the Sunnis would take hold on power. In 2004, Zarqawi described the Shia population as “the most cunning bunch of mankind, scheming and malicious like scorpions”.²⁹

The plan backlashed as Zarqawi’s ruthlessness begun to divide Sunni extremists in and outside of Iraq. International Al-Qaida’s second man Ayman al-Zawahiri openly rejected Zarqawi’s visions, yet Zarqawi was tolerated and allowed to lead the Iraqi branch of the organization. Between 2007

and 2008, the US led coalition, together with Sunni tribes opposing Zarqawi’s brutal policies, initiated so called Sahwa [awakening] military campaign. Zarqawi was killed in US air strike in 2006, and his organization experienced massive losses; US forces had either killed or arrested 34 of 42 of the movement’s top figures. Zarqawi was replaced by Abu Ayyub al-Masri, who succeeded in merging numerous hardliners into a new entity called the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) which begun to develop administrative and strategic policies of the organization.

At this stage, the resurgence of Sunni extremists in Iraq seemed highly unlikely, but they came back. Bitterness towards the Shia prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, due to his discriminatory politics towards the Sunni dominated areas, was followed by massive wave of popular protests which the government suppressed with extreme violence in 2013. The outbreak of Syrian civil war in 2011 further contributed to the resurfacing of Sunni militancy. However, the most pivotal condition paving the way for the emergence of the new wave of terror was US President Barak Obama’s decision to withdraw US troops from Iraq. With the emergence of security vacuum, the extremists launched series of attacks against the central government and its security apparatuses with renewed intensity. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the elected leader of ISI following the death of al-Masri, consolidated relations with Syrian extremists affiliated with international al-Qaeda and issued a statement in April 2014 claiming leadership over Iraqi and Syrian al-Qaeda and retitled the movement as the Islamic State (IS) which was to operate under the banner of caliphate. International al-Qaeda leadership disagreed and banned al-Baghdadi’s operations in Syria. Finally, after several months, international al-Qaeda disassociated itself from IS. Al-Baghdadi, nevertheless, succeeded in recruiting a large number Syrian fighters and former Baathist Iraqi military in its ranks together with tens of thousands of foreign fighters who begun to arrive from all around the world.³⁰

It is paradoxical that while IS aimed at imposing its vision of Islamic governance on the population it established its Iraqi “capital” in Mosul in a region known for its extremely diverse

²⁸ Al-Kubaysi, Yahya (2013) Salafi jihadism in Iraq (in Arabic) <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/node/3549>

²⁹ Halverson, Jeffry (2013) The Anti-Shi’a Polemics of an Online Salafi-Jihadi: The Case of Nasir al-Qa’ida in Historical Perspective. *The Muslim World*. Vol 103

³⁰ Jefferis, Jennifer (2016) ISIS Administrative and Territorial Organization: Origins and Roots European Institute of the Mediterranean Yearbook 2016. <https://www.iemed.org/publication/isis-administrative-and-territorial-organization/>

religious and cultural heritage. In Mosul and the surrounding areas of Nineveh province Sunni and Shia Muslims, Christian Assyrian and Chaldeans, Shabaks, and Yazidis shared a centuries long history coexistence in largely interwoven neighbourhoods.

The stumble in building a new Iraq opened the door for many political forces to manipulate population relations and pay back old grudges. Immediately after 2003 the Kurds strengthened their presence aiming to reclaim areas where Saddam's regime had carried out "Arabization campaigns" i.e. forced migration of the Kurdish population from their homes and replacing them by ethnic Arabs. Soon the Sunni population and Kurds accused each other of dangerously manipulating ethnic prejudices for political ends. The Shia dominated government only increased the tensions between the population groups by purging Kurds from Mosul's army divisions and replacing them with Shias. In this smouldering atmosphere Sunni extremists who had gained a firm foothold in the city already in the 1990s gained momentum. By the end of the first decade of the 2000s Mosul had become an economic and logistical hub for radicals. Militant Sunni groups had gained the control of the critical sectors of the local economy. Local business owners and contractors were forced to pay protection money and those who refused were murdered and kidnapped. The levels of violence increased sharply in the larger Mosul area in 2007 and 2008 and the militias gained control of the local justice system and guaranteed impunity by killing and threatening judges, witnesses and other involved parties. The situation of religious minorities also worsened suddenly. The number of Christians in Mosul city had shrunk from 30,000-40,000 in 2005 to 3,000 in 2014. Terrorist attacks against churches were frequent and the remaining Christian women were forced to wear a Muslim headscarf in public spaces.³¹

The central government showed little willingness to stabilize the region. In fact, the al- Maliki regime had cut Mosul's security budget in 2009 and by the time of IS takeover in June 2014 Mosul suffered from severe security shortages. The most catastrophic thing for the future was that the city had vast state resources including money, weapons and ammunition that ended up in the hands of IS. The people who would later occupy central roles in IS had a very simple recipe: the security situation had to be weakened and the citizens' trust

that the Iraqi authorities could protect them had to be eroded. Kidnappings, road side bombs, targeted assassinations and bribery became everyday reality. In addition, IS strived to increase people's frustration with the Iraqi administration, and the judiciary in order for their intervention to look like saving the citizens from the corrupt government run by people whom IS considered apostates. After driving the Iraqi security forces out of the city in June 2014, IS attempted to win the hearts of citizens by creating a sense of stability in their minds by ensuring that all key functions of society from courts to collection of waste worked better than before. With time, the real face of the organization became clear; it closed the borders of the conquered towns and shackled the citizens with its brutal violence. While it enforced the moral precepts it laid down with the utmost strictness, it constantly violated them in practice.³²

The ordinary people of Mosul had hardly other options than to wait and try to survive under a brutal regime that committed grave abuses of international human rights law, international criminal law and international humanitarian law. These horrible acts included executions, torture, amputations, ethno-sectarian attacks, rape and sexual slavery imposed on women and girls. The approximately 200 mass graves containing thousands of victims that have been found so far also testify to the horrors IS committed in Iraq.³³

[See Infobox 1: Contested visions for the future on pg 11]

³² Mosul and the Islamic State. Podcast hosted by Omar Mohammed. Part III Hell Betrayed. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/mosul-and-the-islamic-state>

³³ UNITAD Our Mandate. UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL (UNITAD). <https://www.unitad.un.org/content/our-mandate>

³¹ Becker Aarsch, Mathilde (2021) Mosul Under Isis: Eyewitness Accounts of Life in the Caliphate. IB Tauris. pp. 29-35.

Infobox 1. Contested visions for the future

In 1916, the UK and French Empires agreed to divide up the Ottoman Empire's mid-eastern territories between the French and British zones, which later formed the independent states of Iraq, Syria, and Jordan. The largely arbitrarily drawn borders grouped together disparate ethnic and religious groups. While some observers have claimed that Iraq is an artificial construct and too diverse to unite under one flag others have emphasized that Iraqi identity can be understood as a product of a long historical experience with enduring appeal to many people of the area. Against this background is it justified to claim that the country's diversity is the cause of its unrest? A positive answer would be too simplistic, yet in the same breath it should be recognized that discourses promoting ethnic and religious rivalries are a central part of the dynamics of conflicts in the country's recent history. In the case of Iraq, the idea of groupness requires careful consideration. It is erroneous to see Iraq's current political divides as the result of a power struggle between the largest population groups Sunni and Shia Arabs, and Kurds simply because a multitude of differentiating factors, as indicated by the previous pages, runs across each group. Rather, it is helpful to conceptualize the tensions in Iraq through narratives of victimization and trauma, which mask rivalries both between and within each ethnic and religious community.

In addition, it should be kept in mind that the complex power struggles in Iraq have a wider international dimension. The major Sunni powers of the region, the Gulf States and Turkey and Shia powers, Iran and Syria, have been supporting the opposing sides in Iraq. Typical of Iraq's turbulent recent history, the relations with neighbors have varied from strategic partnership to deep hostility. Currently, Iran supports Iraq's Shia political parties and multiple militia groups, which are advancing the broad interests of Iran. The predecessor of the Iran of our time, The Persian Safavid Empire, conquered between the 16th and 18th century much of eastern Iraq. This fact is still a source of distrust between many of the Shias of Iraq and Iran. In grossly simplified terms, many Iraqi Shias might share a religion with Iranians, but they are still wary of Iran. Iranian influence in Iraq is, however, a far greater issue of distrust for many Iraqi Sunnis, who see that the Iraqi Shias are secret pawns of Iran. The regional Sunni powers have shown sympathy for the political aspirations of Iraq's Sunni population though Iraqi Sunni identity has not been translated into clear political unity in Iraq. Besides regional players, a greater competition between the NATO countries and Russia and China, on the other hand, also shape Iraq's security environment. The political future of the Kurds is complicated by the fact their historic "homeland", which they have occupied for millennia, is today divided between Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran. The Kurds have been fighting for their own nation state for well over a century. At present any effort of the Kurds to promote their cross-border unity creates serious international tensions in the area. What further complicates Iraq's political future is oil. A significant part of the country's huge oil reserves is located in the most diverse region of the country in terms of ethnicity. Disputes over the rights to use the reserves and the allocation of oil revenues between different population groups create recurrent political tensions. When violence reignites in Iraq, the same question is asked time after time: should the arbitrary borders imposed by European powers be replaced with new borders that respect Iraq's ethnic diversity? Given the complexity of the national and geopolitical situation such efforts would inevitably ignite another large conflict in the area. Building a more stable political order in Iraq remains an extraordinarily difficult challenge.

See: Lynch, Marc & Siddhartha Patel, David (2019) Introduction. in Religion, Violence, and the State in Iraq. Crown Center for Middle Eastern Studies. <https://pomeps.org/pomeps-studies-35-religion-violence-and-the-state-in-iraq>

Conkar, Ahmet (2021) The Future of Iraq: Security, Stabilisation and Regional Vocation. NATO Parliamentary Assembly. <https://www.nato-pa.int/document/026-gsm-21-e-rev-1-future-iraq-conkar>

The Kurds' Long Struggle With Statelessness. Council of Foreign Relations. <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/curds-long-struggle-statelessness>

SURVIVING THE AFTERMATH OF ISLAMIC STATE

[What is Islamic State after all?] By In April 2015, IS held 138,000 square kilometres of territory, an area populated by approximately eight million people.³⁴ At the peak of its power, between 2014 and 2017, IS was, first and foremost, a state guided by a puritanical, extremist interpretation of Islam, with its bureaucratic institutions, including courts, morality police, schools and health clinics. It was determined to expand on a global scale through military and terrorist means. In the local context of Iraq, the organization can also be characterized as an insurgent movement claiming to fight for the rights of the Iraqi Sunni population marginalized by the Shia dominated political elite of Iraq. It established its Iraqi capital in Mosul, Iraq's second largest city which, as noted in the previous pages, witnessed a steady growth of extremist Islamist activity from the 1990s onwards.

Much like Baathist regime decades earlier, IS targeted everyone who stood on its way. This time the prime enemies were the Iraqi security authorities and militia groups linked to the Shia dominated Iraqi regime, the ordinary members of Shia communities and Iraq's smaller religious and ethnic minorities, but also the overwhelming majority of Sunnis who opposed its political and spiritual views. Since IS was at the peak of its power so multidimensional in nature, the scars it produced between 2014 and 2017 on Iraqi society reach deep into its fabric.

In ideological terms IS is firmly rooted in so called Salafi-Jihadi tradition of extremism, which puts a heavy emphasis on the concept of takfir [excommunication of non-Muslims and those Muslims considered as deviant] to legitimate its violence.³⁵ Its core literature builds on conservative and literalist Wahhabi teachings of Sunni Islam including the writing of the movements 18th century founding father Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab.³⁶ Of the more contemporary writers IS found influence from Abu Abdulla al-Muhajir's and Abu Bakr Naji's books and letters, that outline an extremist interpretation of the Islamic concept Jihad.³⁷

³⁴ Ashour, Omar (2021) *How Isis Fights: Military Tactics in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Egypt*. Edinburgh University Press. pp-1-2.

³⁵ On the recent ideological developments of Salafi-Jihadism see Maher, Shiraz (2016) *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*. Hurst Publishers. So-ufan, Ali (2017) *Anatomy of Terror: From the Death of bin Laden to the Rise of the Islamic State*. W.W Norton & Company. Turner John (2014) *Religious Ideology and the Roots of the Global Jihad: Salafi Jihadism and International Order*. Palgrave Macmillan.

³⁶ Ashour, Omar (2021) *How Isis Fights: Military Tactics in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Egypt*. Edinburgh University Press. pp-1-2.

³⁷ Al-'Adamat, Muhammad (2020) *The Future of IS in Syria and Iraq in What Comes After IS* ed. Muhammad Abu Rumman. (In Arabic) Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Jordan 2021.

[Membership through co-opting, recruitment and forcing] In Iraq IS co-opted effectively former Baathist military personnel to strengthen its strategic, combat and administrative capacities. In addition, it proved to be effective in mobilizing several Sunni tribes with deeply rooted hatred towards the Shia dominated central government within its ranks. In many families, whose roles within IS have been covered by Iraqi media, there were up to a dozen of individuals who served in different roles in the organization. In addition, its message reached a wide international audience thanks to sophisticated media campaigns that were disseminated via social media platforms. As a result nearly 40,000 foreign fighters from 110 different countries arrived to Iraqi-Syrian conflict zone between 2013 and 2016.³⁸ IS also invested plenty of effort in creating the next generation of fighters and thousands of women also travelled to the area. According to London based Quilliam foundation by 2016 nearly 31,000 IS women from Syria, Iraq and across the world were pregnant.³⁹

Part of IS's bureaucracy was as a well-functioning reception system. At the peak period between 2014 and 2015, on top of local Iraqi and Syrian recruits, each week some 1000 foreigners arrived in the area. The arrivals were placed in a three-week camp which included ideological indoctrination classes, physical combat training and weapons training. Depending on individual's suitability and background, newcomers were directed to explosives and weapons training and some foreigners were assigned to external operations unit, in order to carry out attacks abroad.

The motivations of Iraqis to join the ranks of the organization varied greatly. First, there were those who could be characterized as organization's permanent core. These individuals had embraced its ideology and were ready to die for the caliphate's cause. For others ideology was not the primary reason for joining, but instead, they shared similar political and social grievances, such as feeling of marginalization and urge to retaliate against the Shia-dominated Iraqi government and security forces. Many

³⁸ Abu Rumman, Muhammad (2020) Introduction. in *What Comes After IS* (In Arabic) Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Jordan 2021

³⁹ Isis's unborn army: Thousands of women being used to breed 'next generation of terrorists'. The Independent, March 7, 2016. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/over-31-000-women-are-currently-pregnant-within-the-so-called-islamic-state-new-report-reveals-a6916756.html>

members participated in Sunni insurgence movements from 2003 onwards and were captured and suffered brutal treatment in the Iraqi prisons and detention centers, or they had family members with such experiences. Third group consisted of those who joined because of pragmatic reasons, often lured by material rewards, steady monthly income, or other economic opportunities.⁴⁰ The recruiters also lured, often via Facebook and other social media platforms, young people with the promises of finding a spouse and starting a family. Finally, some joined under the pressure and threat of violence exerted by the organization.

The senior leadership of IS in the area was overwhelmingly in the hands of Iraqis and Syrians.⁴¹ A number of Iraqi leaders came from a closed circle of trust, and they shared professional histories in the Iraqi army under Baath party regime and its security institutions. Many also knew each other based on shared prison experiences after participating in the Sunni resistance movements after the year 2003, or they had common interests in business and commerce.

The lower and middle level members of IS of Iraqi origin functioned in a wide variety of roles within the organization. On individual level their 'career pathways' seem extremely diverse. Many joined in their late teens or early twenties, following the example of father, uncle, cousin or elder sibling and started from basic bureaucratic, administrative and logistical tasks, building of explosives, or armouring vehicles and moved little by little towards bomb and mortar attacks, arrests, kidnappings, targeted killings and outright combat and terrorist activities. One of the corner stones of IS's military strategy was that it relied heavily on suicide attackers.⁴² Curiously, nearly 60% of were of Saudi origin and the rest were predominantly of Iraqi, Egyptian and Moroccan origins.⁴³

Numerous Arabic TV stations such as Iraqi venues Al-Iraqiya and Al-Sumariya together with Saudi channel Al-Hadath have

⁴⁰ IS on the Iraqi-Syrian Border: Thriving Smuggling Networks Husham Al-Hashimi June 16, 2020 <https://newlinesinstitute.org/isis/isis-on-the-iraqi-syrian-border-thriving-smuggling-networks/>

⁴¹ Islamic State Senior Leadership: Who is Who. Brookings Institution. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/en_whos_who.pdf

⁴² Ashour, Omar (2021) How Isis Fights: Military Tactics in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Egypt. Edinburgh University Press. p. 12

⁴³ Abed, Samuel Fares (2015) IS suicide operations (in Arabic). Al-Hiwar al Mutamaddin - Issue: 4938, September 27, 2015. <https://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=486324>

multi-year program series focusing on IS members convicted of extremist crime. These materials provide an excellent opportunity to understand individual career paths within the organization.

A.I, a convicted IS member, was born in 1996. He comes from a family with long history of extremist activity. His father, a former officer in the Iraqi army during the Baathist era joined Al-Qaida of Iraq in 2006 and due to his engagement in terrorism he served a sentence in the notorious Camp Bucca prison, which hosted several future leaders of IS at the time. A.I's father's role in IS was to lead the coordination of the suicide operations, and after a short combat duty he began to assist his father by recruiting and training suicide candidates in the Hawija region west of city of Kirkuk. A.I carried out later several attacks against Iraqi security and the Kurdish Peshmerga forces, kidnapped security personnel and collected ransom money.⁴⁴

T.A. was 15 years of age when he joined IS, inspired by his father and elder brother, both members of the organization. His career started by working in a gasoline station that was confiscated by IS in his native town Falluja. He was then transferred to combat duties and was arrested by the Iraqi army in 2016.⁴⁵

M.M. born in 1994, pledged allegiance to IS at the age of 20 in 2014. His father and six uncles served in different roles in IS's machinery of violence, mostly in the Nineveh province. In 2014 M.M. begun serving IS's religious police in Hammam Ali, a small town some 20 kilometers south of the city of Mosul. The following year he was transferred to combat duties, and he participated in a number of attacks against villages in Makhmur, south-west of Mosul. Prior to the military defeat of IS he fought against the Kurdish Peshmerga forces in several locations of the Nineveh province and then retreated over the border to Syria, where he spent some six months in the Deir ez-Zor region. M.M. then continued to Turkey via migrant smugglers and in 2021 returned to Iraq with the help of a forged passport. He was commanded by the remaining IS structures to Kirkuk to carry out future terror operations. Finally, M.M. was caught by the Iraqi security forces in 2021.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ In the Grip of the Law TV-program (in Arabic). Iraqia News TV station. Aug 21, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0LWvINvN60Y>

⁴⁵ In The Grip of the Law TV-program (in Arabic). Iraqia News TV station Sept 30, 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tesg-XdE8HU&t=5s>

⁴⁶ In The Grip of the Law TV-program (in Arabic). Iraqia News TV station. July 2022 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A8xplpB_PVY

A special category was made up of child soldiers of IS, who joined, usually guided by their parents, between the ages of 5 to 14. It is estimated that in 2015 IS had trained some 1100 child soldiers and the numbers reached 4500 in western Iraq only. Particularly many, nearly 900 children, were within its ranks in Mosul. IS abducted systematically boys from Iraq's Yazidi minority population, persuaded them to convert to Islam and trained them for combat duties. It has been estimated that the number of missing Yazidi children is approximately 3000 many of them are estimated to be radicalized and unwilling to compromise their radical views.⁴⁷

A.Q., born in 2000, was abducted when he was 14 years of age. He was taken from his home in Sinjar region to al-Muhandiseen quarter in Mosul in a group of 48 other children. The training included Quranic and Sharia studies and watching IS's combat and execution videos with the result that A.Q. converted to Islam. He adopted the attitude that all opponents of IS are heretics and deserve to be killed. After the training he participated battles in Syria "but not serious ones" as he explained, and continued "to die in battle is not an issue for us. It is a question of either victory or martyrdom." Soon afterwards, while still in Syria, he married D. an abducted Yazidi girl who had as well converted to Islam. When the Syrian Democratic forces achieved victories in their area, A.Q. signed up for a suicide mission but was not chosen. A man A.Q. had acquainted with, also a member of IS, promised to take the young couple to Idlib region, the main remaining rebel foothold in Syria, at the time, but the plan failed. Instead, they returned to Iraq and were placed in refugee camp administrated by Kurdistan Regional Government. Both have refused to join their remaining family members and inform being loyal to IS. "If IS was like before, I would not have come to Iraq" A.Q. says.⁴⁸

[Ruling and controlling: bureaucracy, economy and moral policing] The caliphate proved to be very effective in absorbing the administrative know how in Iraq. The fact that the bureaucratic machinery was built on the back of the structures that existed before IS occupied parts of Iraqi territory created catastrophic consequences for the future of those forced into the organization's service; they and their families would come to bear the burden of a huge negative reputation

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48 A.Q.'s and D.'s interview was conducted by the Al-Hadat TV channel (in Arabic) in 2016 (unspecified date) and is available in <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9eHCAnPljl>

in the post-IS Iraq.⁴⁹ IS established "ministries" which were labeled as '*diwans*', among them the feared morality police '*hisba*', and '*diwan al-anfal*' which administered war spoils. These structures were put up rapidly in Mosul by co-opting personnel and murdering and replacing unwanted civil servants. It was important for the new conquerors to create an image of stability, efficiency and moral uprightness of the administration, judiciary, law enforcement and security authorities.⁵⁰ Much like the Baathist regime decades earlier IS constructed in the end an all-pervasive, horrendous system of control.

As noted earlier, the radical Islamists had largely taken control of the daily commerce, business and construction sectors in Mosul well before IS's takeover. After June 2014, IS only tightened its grip on the local economy in the city. Unlike earlier generations of Islamist extremists, IS was not relying on donors, but instead, it established an effective taxation program that included fuel, vehicles, cash withdrawals and many essential food products. It has been estimated that its taxation program alone generated hundreds of millions of dollars annually and an additional 500 million from the proceeds of the seized oil wells.⁵¹ The IS caliphate also acquired property by expropriating the wealth of minority populations, especially Christians' and Yazidis' properties, businesses and land.⁵² Many confiscated Christian churches, in the city of Mosul, were turned into training centres for recruits, among other functions.

Morality was enforced by imposing extreme punishments. Blasphemy, apostasy, adultery, homosexuality, and collaboration with the disbelievers were punished by death sentence. Beheadings and executions were often carried out in the public spaces. The bodies of people accused of being spies were swung from the railings of bridges. Smoking and selling cigarettes led to imprisonment or lashing, but paradoxically IS controlled a large and lucrative business of smuggling of cigarettes. Billboards were set up on streets to inform of

49 Callimachi, Rukmini (2018) The ISIS files NY times April 4, 2018 <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/04/04/world/middleeast/isis-documents-mosul-iraq.html>

50 Mosul and the Islamic State. Podcast hosted by Omar Mohammed. Inside The Islamic State In Mosul (Special part) <https://extremism.gwu.edu/mosul-and-the-islamic-state>

51 Jefferis, Jennifer (2016) ISIS Administrative and Territorial Organization. IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2016

52 Callimachi, Rukmini (2018) The ISIS files NY times April 4, 2018

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regulations concerning women. They were allowed to leave their houses only in full face veil, niqab and accompanied by a male relative. The violators were beaten and their male family members were fined. Women were sentenced to jail for eyebrow plucking or inappropriate haircuts and men who played dominoes or playing cards faced the similar punishment. Soon women were nearly entirely isolated from public life.⁵³

From early 2015 onwards residents were no longer able to get out of IS-controlled areas. Those attempting to flee were killed or flogged and those who succeeded placed their remaining relatives and property in risk. Communication and media devices were banned, and as far as the citizens were concerned, the rest of the world was outside of their reach. After the commencement of military operations to retake the core areas of IS, the suffering of civilians only worsened. Iraqi authorities advised civilians to stay in their homes, but the coalition forces failed to respond to the fact that IS had embedded its fighters and snipers into civilian areas. Coalition used explosive weapons with wide area effects, together with air strikes with the result that thousands of civilians lost their lives. A desperate sight was repeatedly seen in the Iraqi TV media: exhausted civilians holding a white cloth running towards the coalition forces exposing their stomachs and chests to show they were not wearing explosive belts. Civilians were often horrified to approach the government forces as IS had planted in their minds the idea that the government would punish them harshly because they would be considered citizens of the caliphate. In fact, extrajudicial executions, other unlawful killings and torture took place.⁵⁴

The worst fate was for those who IS considered its enemy for one reason or another. The list of crimes is long and shocking and it includes random attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure, mass summary killings, that meets the criteria of genocide, torture, abductions, rape and other forms sexual violence, enslavement, the recruitment and use of children for military activities, pillage, looting and the deliberate destruction of civilian homes and other infrastructure. IS targeted deliberately Christians, Yazidis, Shi'a Shabak and Sh'ia Turkmen communities. Thousands of

ordinary civil servants and members of security and armed forces who refused to pledge allegiance to the caliphate were systematically killed.⁵⁵

On top of all these horrendous acts IS it sought to destroy every element of Iraq's extremely rich cultural heritage that it deemed un-Islamic. Hundreds of Shia mosques, tombs and shrines were destroyed and museums with collections containing invaluable elements of the history of Mesopotamian civilizations were looted.⁵⁶ Finally, as the coalition forces forwarded in Mosul in June 2017, the 800-year old Al-Nuri mosque, one of the best known landmarks of the city and the site where Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi declared the establishment of the caliphate, in June 2014, was blown up.⁵⁷

[See Infobox 2: Organization of the Islamic religious field in Iraq on pg 17]

⁵³ Human Rights Watch (2016) Iraq: Women Suffer Under ISIS. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/04/06/iraq-women-suffer-under-isis>

⁵⁴ Mosul and the Islamic State. Podcast hosted by Omar Mohammed. Inside The Islamic State In Mosul (Special part) <https://extremism.gwu.edu/mosul-and-the-islamic-state>

⁵⁵ Salihi, Razaw (2019) Terror and Torment: The Civilian Journey to Escape Iraq's War Against the "Islamic State" in Iraq After ISIS The Challenges of Post-War Recovery. Eds Jacob Eriksson Ahmed Khaleel. Palgrave MacMillan. p. 83-88

⁵⁶ Becker Aarsch, Mathilde (2021) Mosul Under Isis: Eyewitness Accounts of Life in the Caliphate. IB Tauris. pp 45-56.

⁵⁷ ISIS Destroys Historic Mosque In Mosul As Iraqi Forces Close In. NPR News, June 22, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/06/22/533903315/isis-destroys-historic-mosque-in-mosul-as-iraqi-forces-close-in>

Infobox 2. Organization of the Islamic religious field in Iraq

In order to understand the complex organization of the Islamic religious field in Iraq it is useful to start from the concept of religious endowment, 'waqf'. In Iraq, as elsewhere in the Muslim majority contexts in MENA-region, the religious endowments include two main categories; public religious sites, such as mosques and shrines and second, lands, real estate, and any property declared as such by their original owners.

Prior to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Islamic endowments were under strict government control and administered by the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA). Both Shia and Sunni places of worship were run by administrators appointed by MERA, and known for their loyalty to the regime. MERA, together with the local Baath party offices, issued the licenses for imams and preachers and their work was under firm government control. The post-invasion Iraq adopted a new model that emphasized the autonomy of religious institutions and independent operation in the public sphere. MERA was replaced by separate Sunni and Shia offices of endowments - the Office of Shia Endowment (OSHE) and the Office of Sunni Endowment (OSE). In addition, the minority religions were organized under the Office of Christian, Yazidi and Sabeian Mandaean Endowments. The aim of the policy was to grant all sects and religions more freedom to express their identities and beliefs, yet with regard to Islamic field, it generated new struggles over the identity of religious sites and properties. Iraq witnessed increasing confessionalization of the religious domain and new rivalries between religious actors. As an example, Shia Islamists and clerics accused the supporters of the former regime of having invested on building merely Sunni mosques and forced donors to register their endowments as Sunni rather than Shia ones, as a part of marginalization of the Shia identity. Despite continuous efforts, OSHE and OSE have not been able to agree until today on a unified method to determine the identity of endowments and religious sites. With these developments the boundaries between Sunni and Shia places of worship are today more solidified and neutral spaces have become points of contention rather than of cohabitation. Several historical mosques in Iraq's major cities have been claimed as their own by both OSHE and OSE which in turn has turned into battles (at times backed by armed militias) over history and identity of entire areas.

see: Kuran, Tim (2001) The Provision of Public Goods under Islamic Law: Origins, Impact, and Limitations of the Waqf System. Law & Society Review Vol. 35, No. 4 (2001), pp. 841-898

Harith, Hasan (2019) Religious Authority and the Politics of Islamic Endowments in Iraq. Carnegie Middle East Center, Series on Political Islam. https://carnegieendowment.org/files/03_19_Hasan_Islamic_Endowments_final.pdf

Abu Zeed, Adnan (2019) Sunnis accuse Shiites of expanding influence in Mosul. Al Monitor, July 16, 2019.

<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/07/iraq-mosul-endowment-sunni-shiite-sectarianism.html#ixzz7jNdOJfUr>

[IS today] IS caliphate left a very bloody one, albeit short-lived mark in history: it barely had time to grow up to be five years old. U.S.-led military coalition begun air strikes against IS in Iraq in August 7th 2014, only 39 days after the declaration of the caliphate. Nearly two months before this date Iraq's leading Shia authority Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani urged men to take up arms against IS, which led to the establishment of so-called Popular Mobilization Units (PMU). Over the following three years, Iraqi government forces, PMU and the Kurdish Peshmerga quickly took control of the occupied areas. By the end of 2017 IS had lost roughly 95 percent of its territory, including its two "capital cities" Mosul in Iraq and the northern Syrian city of Raqqa.⁵⁸

The final blow came on March 23, 2019 as the Syrian Democratic Forces, backed by the US-led international coalition, liberated the town of Baghouz after a tough six-week battle. Months before this event IS had been expelled from the Iraqi cities it occupied. After heavy battles Mosul - among dozens of other liberated cities towns and villages - was largely in ruins. The end of the caliphate did not mean the defeat of IS as an organization. It has transformed itself into an effective insurgent force in many locations of the Middle East, particularly in the rural Iraq and Syria and the Sinai peninsula in Egypt. It is, in addition, capable of making sporadic attacks in Yemen, Somalia, and Libya. The United Nations, estimated in August 2020 that the number of IS fighters was approximately 10,000 in Iraq and Syria only, and it manages to recruit constantly Iraqi youth into its ranks. A number of former IS fighters have been captured recently by Iraqi security as they have returned to Iraq from foreign hideouts in order to establish cells in different regions of the country.⁵⁹

Although IS militants are incapable to carry out large operations on Iraqi territory, they frequently target members of government and security agencies and kidnap and assassinate political leaders. According to Iraq's Counter Terrorism Service (ICTS), IS attempts to form small sub-groups and sleeper cells within critical urban areas in Sunni-majority provinces of western and north-western Iraq. IS has established its fighter bases in hard-to-reach areas in the

deserts of the country. At the time of writing this report, ICTS was conducting extensive operations in Tuz Khurma, about 200 kilometres north of Baghdad, involving ground forces, and the Iraqi Air Force with its F-16 fighters.⁶⁰

IS has lost its central sources of income, the tax revenues of conquered territories and the oil wells it once controlled, yet it still has tens of millions of dollars at its disposal. It makes frequent money transfers through the informal and trust based hawala system, cryptocurrencies and creates new revenue through smuggling, extortion, looting, and ransoms.⁶¹ IS's future forecasts depend to a great extent on the will of Iraq's political elite to address the social root causes that drive people to extremism. After the fall of the caliphate, Iraq struggles with ever messier political and social tensions. Every armed group that participated in the destruction of the caliphate, whether it is the question of the Iraqi army, the PMU forces, the Kurdish Peshmerga, or smaller militia groups, all committed atrocities and thus fuelled the resentment between the population groups. The war against IS was also interpreted in multiple ways: for some it ended as a victory to their own ethnic or sectarian group, for others it brought glory in the name of religion or tribe. The fall of IS was carried out by joint forces, but the operation certainly did not increase national cohesion.

[See Infobox 3: IS timeline (2004 – 2018) on pg 19]

⁵⁸ Wilson Centre Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State.

⁵⁹ Al-Hamid, Raed (2021) ISIS in Iraq: Weakened but Agile. New Line Institute, May 18, 2021. <https://newlinesinstitute.org/iraq/isis-in-iraq-weakened-but-agile/> Abu Rumman, Muhammad (2020) Introduction. in What Comes After IS (In Arabic) Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Jordan 2021

⁶⁰ ICTS Facebook page. <https://www.facebook.com/iraqicts>

⁶¹ Bunzel, Cole (2021) Explainer: The Islamic State in 2021. Wilson Center. December 10, 2021 <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/explainer-islamic-state-2021>

Infobox 3. IS timeline (2004 – 2018)

2004-2013

- 2004: Abu Musab al Zarqawi establishes al-Qaeda in Iraq. He is killed in US air strike in 2006.
- Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) is established with Abu Omar al Baghdadi as its leader.
- US-led military campaign weakens ISI.
- Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki targets Sunni leaders. Sectarian tensions increase.
- Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi sends operatives to Syria and ISI carries out bombings and prison breaks in Iraq. ISI begins to consolidate control in Syria.
- ISI militants gain control of Fallujah and parts of Ramadi in Iraq

2014

- ISI takes over Raqqa, Syria and Mosul, Iraq and declares the cities as capitals of its emirates.
- Islamic State (IS) is established
- IS executes between 1100 and 1700 Iraqi army recruits stationed at Camp Speicher, Tikrit.
- IS begins its genocide campaign against Yazidis. Some 400,000 people are captured or forced to flee from their homes. Thousands of adults are murdered. At least 3000 young women are taken as sex slaves. Boys are forcibly recruited into IS.

2015

- Kurdish Peshmerga fighters force out IS militants from the Syrian border town of Kobani.
- At least 200 Assyrian Christians in northeastern Syria are abducted by IS .
- IS occupies Ramadi, Iraq.
- Peshmerga drives out IS from Syrian towns on the Turkish border and Iraqi forces recapture oil refineries from IS.

2016

- Iraqi forces seize several occupied Iraqi towns from IS. It no longer controls oil wells in Iraq.
- IS Spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani is killed in US airstrike in Syria
- Syrian rebel forces take town Dabiq from IS and Iraqi forces retake Christian areas near Mosul
- US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces retake Raqqa, Syria from IS.
- US military sources announce IS having lost some 50,000 fighters between 2014-2016

2017

- IS loses the control of nearly 70 percent of eastern Mosul, most of its commanders are killed.
- Coalition forces announce that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi escaped from Mosul.
- Iraq's Prime Minister Haider al Abadi declares the end of the IS caliphate on July 9, 2017.

2018

- IS returns to decentralized approach against government and security agencies and attacks on selected targets. It maintains combative, financial and media capacities and it recruits new members in many areas of Iraq.

see: Wilson Centre Timeline: the Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state>

CHALLENGES TO COMMUNITY COHESION

[The return of displaced people] From 2014 onwards IS's military victories increased mobility across the state border between Iraq and Syria. In a chaotic situation, both IS forces and people fleeing them were on the move. When Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate in June 2014, he practically wiped the border between Iraq and Syria off the map and thus enabled the movement of both the IS aggressors and those fleeing them. For the displaced Iraqi citizens, the consequence was a difficult stalemate for the coming years; many of those who fled were on the move without passports and identification documents, and thousands would be accused or suspected of complicity in the organization's atrocities or sympathizing with it.⁶² Roughly five million Iraqis had to leave their homes over the next five years, the majority, some 3.5 million, were of Sunni background⁶³, many of whom had experienced previous displacements.⁶⁴

It was often simply impossible to assess an individual's relationship to IS. Was it a question of a devoted member of the organization or a person forced or abducted to join in its activities, a relative of an active member, or a victim of violence or the threat thereof? Regardless of what their relation to IS was, the people on the move were physically and mentally injured and often severely traumatized, and they had no other possibility than to seek shelter from the overcrowded and chaotic camps. At the same time, it must be mentioned that civilians were not only victims, but they engaged, opposed, resisted, navigated and strategized against IS in multiple ways.⁶⁵

After the collapse of Baghuz, the last IS stronghold in Syria, on March 23, 2019, the remaining IS forces were imprisoned or killed in battle and the surviving women and children were placed in closed camps. A number of orphaned children

of IS families and those abducted by the organization and unwilling to return to their remaining family members ended in child protection centres, where they were subject to psychosocial support. According to Hana Edward, director humanitarian NGO Amal in Iraq, there is clear lack of political will to reintegrate these children as the wider society sees them as a potential threat. Even among specialists, there is wide disagreement on how to find solutions to the situation. Psychologist Wa'il al-'Aji, in contrast to Edward, emphasizes that while the children are certainly victims of IS they pose a danger to wider society and deradicalization of children requires plenty of time effort and at times separation from the surrounding society.⁶⁶

In each liberated community in Iraq, the government, PMU forces and Peshmerga begun screening the population for IS members who were hiding among civilians. All men and boys over the age of 13 were separated from the women and younger children. Their relation with IS was estimated based on eyewitness accounts and computerized databases. In many cases guilt was established on flimsy grounds and the accused subsequently disappeared or were swallowed by detention facilities, under the administration of Iraqi and Kurdish regional authorities. In many cases confessions have been extracted by means of torture and the courts have condemned hundreds of detainees to death. According to the Iraqi Ministry of Justice, the courts sentenced approximately 8000 people to death between 2015 and 2021. Between 2017 and 2020 Iraq has implemented at least 225 death sentences.⁶⁷

The return of those civilians who were victims of IS's violence is still under way and according to UNHCR figures nearly 1.2 million Iraqis remain displaced. There are grave challenges to the safe and durable return of majority of them. In addition to refugee camps, these people are dispersed across the country and residing in temporary dwellings. Physical barriers such as destroyed houses and infrastructure, lack of access to services and bureaucratic hindrances, together with climate related challenges, make return impossible in many cases. Perhaps more than anything the barriers are social. As noted, many entire families are suspected in their home communities of

⁶² The Red Line (In Arabic) Al Sumariya TV <https://www.alsumaria.tv/watch/20229>

⁶³ Khaleel, Ahmed (2019) *The Future of the Iraqi Sunni Arabs*. in *Iraq After ISIS: The Challenges of Post-War Recovery*. (eds.) Jacob Eriksson and Ahmed Khaleel. Palgrave MacMillan. p. 52

⁶⁴ Davis, Rochelle (2018) *Iraqis Displaced by ISIS: A Mixed Methods Study of Displacement and Durable Solutions*, lecture at Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University Feb 22, 2018 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oxQwKZqERYQ>

⁶⁵ Becker Aarsch, Mathilde (2021) *Mosul Under Isis: Eyewitness Accounts of Life in the Caliphate*. IB Tauris. pp 11-14.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ The figures are gleaned from Amnesty International's data Death Penalty: Facts and Figures. see: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/05/death-penalty-2021-facts-and-figures/>

being either members or supporters of IS and its ideology or in one way or other complicit in its activities. Their chances of returning to home communities are narrowed by serious local resistance.⁶⁸ Disregarding the challenges to community cohesion both Iraqi and Syrian governments have forged premature returns. As an example, several hundreds of IS affiliated families were moved from Khaan al Jabal Camp in the Hasaka province to Iraq.⁶⁹ Tensions in home communities have often led to secondary displacement of returnees to informal displacement sites and stretched the capacity of communities in more settled areas of Iraq.

Another kind of veil of suspicion surrounds the returnees. Those who fled from Iraq to Syria without travel documents and are planning to return home often have no other choice but to turn to smugglers. Those caught by the authorities are arrested and their motives come under suspicion. According to the Iraqi border authorities, they should have registered on the Syrian side with the local administrative supervisor mukhtar and then process their documents with the assistance of the Iraqi embassy in Syria. The refugees, on the other hand, suffer from serious lack of trust in the authorities and believe that they will be categorically condemned as IS supporters. Among the people arrested by the border authorities there are undoubtedly both those who involved and those not involved in the violence under the IS regime.⁷⁰

The largest of the camps hosting IS members, Al Hol, is located in north-eastern Syria and currently under the administration of Syrian Democratic Forces. In March 2022, nearly half of the camp's 60,000 residents were Iraqis. Among them there are some 200 abducted members of Yazidi community.⁷¹ In theory Iraqi citizens cannot leave the camp without Iraqi ministry's permission, however smuggling networks are active in the area and those with sufficient financial resources eventually find a way out and in most cases flee to Turkey.⁷² The orphaned children of IS families, as noted earlier, are placed in reintegration centres.

According to the Iraqi government sources from mid-2021 onwards some 500 people have been officially transferred to Iraq from the Al-Hol camp, most of whom under 18 years of age. The transfers have caused several disputes and many attempts have been halted due to fierce opposition of local communities. Often the fate of the repatriated families from Syrian camps is that they end up in equally poorly equipped camps in Iraqi territory.⁷³ Several reports indicate that the returnees are subject to complex vulnerabilities, such as lack of access to basic services and dignified housing. In addition, their livelihood opportunities are narrow, and they face, as noted, many challenges related to safety and social cohesion.⁷⁴

[IS family - a controversial concept] In Iraqi media the term "IS family" [‘awail daa’sh] is used frequently, although there is much controversy about its exact meaning. For this reason, only rough estimates can be made about the number of displaced families' affiliations with the organization. Furthermore, the meaning of the term may differ slightly according to context in different areas of Iraq; at times it is used to declare the family unwelcome or when seeking revenge. In many cases, the involvement of one family member in the violence of IS marks every family member. This may happen even in the cases where individuals were forced to work in its bureaucracy, or they had nothing to do with the organization and its ideology. Especially families from Sunni-majority areas may think that they have been collectively stigmatized and accused of at least tacit support for IS. However, several recent analyses of the years of the extremist organization's rule have revealed a much more nuanced picture; a large majority of the Sunni population engaged in diverse forms of resistance against the organization's brutal rule, even in its capital of the Iraqi territory, Mosul.⁷⁵

Perhaps it is most enlightening to approach the term by considering the different relationships of families to the activities of the organization. In this way, four different types of families can be identified.⁷⁶

⁶⁸ IOM Iraq Crisis Response Plan 2022-2023. <https://crisisresponse.iom.int/response/iraq-crisis-response-plan-2022-2023>

⁶⁹ What is the truth about transferring hundreds of ISIS families to Iraq (in Arabic). Rudaw Net. March 3, 2022 www.rudaw.net

⁷⁰ The Red Line (in Arabic) Al Sumariya TV channel 2022, The Red Line (in Arabic) Al Sumariya TV channel <https://www.alsumaria.tv/watch/20229>

⁷¹ Survived Yazidi woman relates her story as ISIS leader's wife (In Arabic) CNN Arabic https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_vNja9svk

⁷² ISIS women reveal Turkey's role in smuggling them out of Al-Hol Refugee Camp in North and East Syria. Syriac Press, 28.6. 2022. <https://syriacpress.com/blog/2022/06/28/isis-women-reveal-turkeys-role-in-smuggling-them-out-of-al-hol-refugee-camp-in-north-and-east-syria/>

⁷³ What is the truth about transferring hundreds of ISIS families to Iraq (in Arabic). Rudaw Net. March 3, 2022 www.rudaw.net

⁷⁴ IOM Iraq Crisis Response Plan 2022-2023. <https://crisisresponse.iom.int/response/iraq-crisis-response-plan-2022-2023>

⁷⁵ see: Becker Aarseth, Mathilde (2021) Mosul Under ISIS: Eyewitness accounts of life in the Caliphate. I.B Tauris. Mosul and the Islamic State. Podcast hosted by Omar Mohamed, Episode IV, part 2. Never Again, Silence. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/mosul-and-the-islamic-state>

⁷⁶ see: Al-Hashimi, Husayn (2020) ISIS in Iraq: The Challenge of Reintegrating 'ISIS Families' New Lines Institute July 7, 2020 <https://newlinesinstitute.org/isis/isis-in-iraq-the-challenge-of-reintegrating-isis-families/>

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The first group includes members of the family, whose father or elder sibling pledged allegiance to IS and participated in its combat activities or served in any acts of direct violence.

Second group consists of families where a member, or the entire family pledged allegiance but did not participate in the direct acts of violence.

M.M., born in 1989, pledged allegiance to IS in 2014 in his native city Mosul. His elder brother served in secretarial tasks at the “Real Estate Ministry” of IS, administering the properties of ordinary citizens expropriated by the caliphate. M.M. begun serving at the same ministry and was in charge of over 300 confiscated properties and their assignment to the members of IS. After gaining the trust of his superiors in this task, he moved on to armouring vehicles stolen from authorities and later equipping vehicles used in car bombings with explosives.⁷⁷

In the third category, a member or entire family pledged allegiance to IS and participated merely in economic cooperation, (for example in logistics, or transport of people or supplies) with the organization.

M.K., born in Baquba Iraq in 1977, served as civil servant in the local water department. He pledged allegiance to IS in 2016 and begun to provide taxi services. Among other missions he was transporting members of IS cells responsible for particular suicide operation, including explosives specialists, mechanics, strike coordinators and suicide candidates from Baquba to Mosul.⁷⁸

A.M., born in 1991, joined IS shortly after obtaining a master’s degree in petroleum refining technology in Mosul University. He served at secretarial tasks in the administrative office of the IS’s “ministry” of Military Finances. Due to good performance rose to the position of administrative assistant.⁷⁹

In the fourth category entire family or one of its members was forced to pledge allegiance to IS, yet did not participate in any direct administrative or violent activities. In the city of Mosul, for example, shortly after IS takeover the local administrative offices were placed under the caliphate’s “ministries” and the former civil servants were forced to continue in their duties.⁸⁰

[Legal and bureaucratic barriers of return] The legal and bureaucratic challenges faced by the IDPs are manifold. In order to return, the families need to renew lost or destroyed identification and civil certificates (that many minors have never owned) and a mandatory security clearance from their communities of origin. The local head man, mukhtar plays a central role in family-specific safety assessments. In case of negative assessment, the only way forward is through time-consuming and expensive criminal complaint at court against the family member or relative suspected IS membership. The court then issues an arrest warrant for the relative, and the plaintiff receives a certificate indicating willingness to testify against the relative, a procedure which at least in principle allows the plaintiff to receive the clearance. The outcomes of the court processes can be very unpredictable as the allegations of IS links can be arbitrary and subject to abuse. In some cases, the tensions between families or individuals step in. Neighbors may be rejected as a way to shield one’s own household from suspicion, or because of old grudges. Particularly female headed households often face legal impasses, as mothers with husbands who were IS members find it extremely difficult to obtain security clearance or civil documentation for themselves and their children. A court procedure against a husband may, for example, compromise a woman’s inheritance rights and risk her losing her support network. Many women face an unbearable situation; either they denounce their husbands or remain social outcasts unable to obtain security clearance. What is more, the stigma in people’s minds is in many cases so strong that whether the woman has a certificate or not, she together with her children, remains an outcast in the eyes of the community.⁸¹

⁷⁷ The Red Line (in Arabic) Al Sumariya TV channel. Part 40/2022

⁷⁸ In The Grip of the Law TV-program (in Arabic). Iraqia News TV station. April 17, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3d3O1pQe-PE>

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ The ISIS Files: When Terrorists Run City Hall - The New York Times, April 2 <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/04/04/world/middleeast/isis-documents-mosul-iraq.html>

⁸¹ Exiles in Their Own Country: Dealing with Displacement in Post-ISIS Iraq Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°79 19 October 2020 p1.

[Reconciliation in the traumatized society] Stabilizing society after a decades-long state of emergency is a huge challenge for Iraq. As we have seen throughout the previous pages, the country is torn apart by extremely complex social and political tensions. The key question is how to solve the endless cycle of revenge and create a political culture where extremism does not have an echo base. In deeply traumatized communities, that have undergone highly distressful personal events, disruption of social networks, severe human rights violations, loss of property, discrimination and displacement the task is particularly challenging.

National reconciliation has been one of the key political issues in Iraq since the regime change of 2003. The major challenges can be summarized by three questions: how to guarantee fair participation for the Sunni population in the Iraqi society and its decision-making processes, how to persuade the Shia-majority to accept a view of democracy, in which political power is not absolute, and finally how to balance Iraq's Kurds desire for greater autonomy with the benefits of a unified Iraq? The reconciliation efforts materialized in June 2006 as the Parliament of Iraq launched the National Reconciliation Framework, firstly with the purpose of granting justice to the victims of Baath era. In the post-IS context the government's reconciliation efforts can be summarized as a combination of judicial and non-judicial proceedings including establishment of truth-telling commissions, reparations, prosecution and institutional reform. The guiding principles are three-fold: IS members are declared terrorists and those captured are sentenced to death, or they receive prison sentences, including life sentences. The members of families affiliated with IS are only freed from charges, as previously noted, if they denounced their relatives and cooperate with the authorities in identifying other IS members. The approach with suspected IS sympathizers varies from case to case.⁸²

In view of national reconciliation, many challenges are directly linked with Iraq's specific 'tribal' sociocultural character. Particularly in rural areas and small towns the civic legal system has little practical authority, therefore reconciliation processes must take into account the tribal customary models. The relations between disputing parties are regulated by means of the so called 'musalaha'-system according to which

the offending party, whether family or clan or tribe, must compensate the offence by offering a 'diya', blood money and meet other case specific conditions in order settle the issue. The tribes are, however, not unified and in many cases split between IS related offenders and victims. In many areas finding brokers considered as neutral by all parties has proved to be difficult. In such settings it is essential to analyse the nature of the conflict from the broadest possible perspective, and to identify their claims and demands before commencing the actual reconciliation process. In some areas the families of victims of IS, rather than receiving 'blood money' from the victim's tribes, have been paid by Iraqi government's official compensation fund. In many cases, the external development agencies have avoided to engage with tribal *musalaha*, on the basis that it undermines civil law. A further challenge arises out of the fact that often the key guarantor of security in the area is an armed militia. There is little hope to achieve any local level settlement without involving them in the reconciliation process. However, UN, according to its guidelines prohibits listing members of militias such Popular Mobilization Units in local peace committees. Solutions have to be sought creatively, often by establishing indirect and unofficial contacts.⁸³

In addition, in the complex political reality of Iraq reconciliation requires addressing extremely complex legal, economic and social challenges such fair sharing of Iraq's oil revenues and the role of Arab-identity and Islam in the society. These questions have raised repeated calls for the reform of constitution drafted by the Shia and Kurdish parties, yet unfortunately, key provisions remain unresolved.⁸⁴

[Patching the psychological wounds] Repairing the destroyed infrastructure, buildings and private homes will take years, but how to repair the broken lives, fractured bodies and minds and patch the deep communal wounds? Ultimately, the stabilization of Iraq requires a thorough trauma treatment of the entire society. Focus must be first and foremost on the majority of the population, the youth under 25 years of age who represent today 60% of the Iraqis. For large part of the youth, the entire life history has been a constant state of

⁸³ Watkins, Jessica & Hasan Mustafa (2022) Post-ISIL reconciliation in Iraq and the local anatomy of national grievances: the case of Yathrib, Peace-building, 10:3, pp. 335-350

⁸⁴ see: Al-Ali, Said & Auf, Yussef (2020) The Iraqi Constitution: Analysis of the Controversial Articles -Solutions and Recommendations. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Amman, Jordan. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/17146-20210115.pdf>

⁸² Latif, Ali (2008) The Status of Iraqi National Reconciliation. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/20622> National Reconciliation in Iraq. Wilson Center March 26, 2007. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/national-reconciliation-iraq>

Iraq After the Territorial Defeat of Islamic State: Slow Recovery or Danger of After-Effects?

emergency, violence or the threat of it. For millions of young people war and communal violence became a social condition that shaped their identities, self-perceptions, self-worth, survival strategies and future projects. Healing is impossible without hope and dreams and trust that society can offer a dignified future.

The government of Iraq, together with international donors and hundreds of local NGOs, does invaluable work to repair the scars of violence, as we will see shortly. Yet the same government is engaged in a number of policies that pull the other direction. As noted, the Iraqi judiciary has handed down thousands of life imprisonment sentences and capital punishments for those members of younger generation, who participated in the activities of IS. It can be assumed that harsh legal measures only contribute to the Sunni population's experience of injustice and marginalization. The victims of violence must get justice and the perpetrators of crimes must be held accountable, but the government must also be vigilant that the justice system does not create the basis for yet another cycle of revenge.

Another worrying trend can be seen in the mainstream Iraqi media. The ways in which the IS members' crimes are represented in the media has the potential to fuel and deepen mistrust and resentment between population groups, as well as the mentality of revenge. As mentioned earlier, numerous Iraqi TV stations have commercialized the treatment of the crimes of IS extremists as part of their program stream. The programs follow a very similar pattern: those convicted of crimes under the banner of IS, many of whom are either life prisoners or sentenced to death, appear in the programs under their own names. Their faces are revealed and their home addresses and parents' names are disclosed. In case there are other family members involved in IS's activities, their names and roles in the organization are made public as well. This is also done in the case that the interviewee has joined IS as a minor.

The interviewees are brought to the TV studio handcuffed and dressed in the yellow overalls of the terrorist convicts. In many programs, the interviewee is obliged address the interviewer with the term "sayyidi" [master] in each sentence. After reviewing the personal criminal history in IS, the interviewee is brought to a selected crime scene, escorted by armed security officers in prison uniform and still in handcuffs. At the site the dramatic criminal history is reviewed. In many

episodes, the interviewees are made to face the women they have raped, or captivated as sex slaves. At times, they are forced to meet the relatives of the people they have killed or kidnapped, including their young children. The victims and the family members are offered the opportunity in front of the cameras to express their suffering and anger and desire for revenge against the convicts. In some episodes, the convict is ordered to kneel in the middle of a public street in order to receive emotional outbursts from the victims' relatives for tens of minutes.



Abducted Yazidi woman meets her rapist.



The father of IS soldier, who participated in group execution in this street in Mosul.



A young man who pledged allegiance to IS at the age of 14 and started working in explosives building workshop.

The government's attitude towards youth movements calling for political reform and detachment sectarianized political culture is also a key issue of concern. The post-2003 generation has voiced repeatedly its demands for political and social change. Mass protests erupted across Iraq in 2011, 2015 and 2018 and the largest of these movements, the Tishreen (October) Movement, emerged in late 2019. It included tens of thousands of both secular and religious activists who were demanding hope and future. The crowds assembling in Baghdad's Tahrir square, the main site of protests, targeted widespread corruption, youth unemployment problem, poor public services and called for a new kind of national identity, free of sectarian differentiation and Iranian influence in Iraqi political life. In their social media campaigns, the protesters used the hashtag "We want a homeland". Frequently heard slogan in the demonstrations was "Iran out" by which the Tishreenis criticized the Iranian backing of Iraqi political parties and their armed wings. Soon the confrontation between protesters and the security forces seemed evident. The tensions were further amplified due to the fact that Iran sided with the Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi and many paramilitary groups had voiced their opposition to the protest movement. Demonstrations unseated the government and forced parliament to adopt a new electoral law, but the ruling elite was not ready for a thorough change: security forces and paramilitary groups backed by Iran killed more than 600 and wounded more than 20 000 protesters largely suffocating the movement. While Iraq has not witnessed mass protests following the early elections in 2021, the protest movements are not dead, instead they gave birth to a number of actors and NGO's that actively create new spaces to challenge the system in different ways.

The accounts of the protests revealed a serious security threat for the future: the government's inability and unwillingness to bring the militia groups under control. As it was described in the previous chapter, an international military coalition was behind the overthrow of IS. However, the measures that destroyed the caliphate had a worrying and counterproductive consequence: the campaign empowered a whole array of actors that operate autonomously and largely outside of the control of the state security forces. Especially the constituents of the umbrella organization for some 50 paramilitary groups, the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU), that have received a steady flow of Iranian support, have gained momentum and today play a central military role at the expense of the Iraqi army.

The PMUs claim to represent all Iraqis irrespective of religion or sect. In fact, they have incorporated militias both from Sunni Arab and minority populations, yet their support base is among Iraq's Shia population. These militias are perceived especially in the Shia dominated areas as the rescuers of the nation from the brutal grip of IS. The sentiment is starkly opposite in Sunni-dominated areas, where the PMUs are seen as feared sectarian militias who exact violent revenge against Sunni population and operate without fear of consequences.⁸⁵ In legal terms, the PMUs are responsible directly to the Iraqi Prime Minister, but in practice they are largely free from constraints posed by formal state institutions. Without a plan to integrate them under the state control they challenge the state's cohesion and monopoly on legitimate violence. The further the PMUs manage to gain autonomy and expand their influence outside of the security, the more they appear as a state within a state.⁸⁶ After the collapse of the IS caliphate, the PMUs have invested heavily in the economic sphere focusing on reconstruction and services to citizens in the areas that suffered the heaviest destruction. Moreover, there are clear signs that PMUs are also increasingly investing on political field, and in fact, a number of their leaders occupy seats in the Iraqi parliament.

Given all these elements – the deeply rooted communal trauma, distrust between population groups, contradictory government policies, and relative autonomy of PMU's – ordinary Iraqis signal that the country is in a serious crisis. While writing this report, a number of interviews were conducted with Iraqi journalists and civic activists living in both Baghdad and Mosul. According to one interlocutor who has a long career as journalist and writer, for young people Iraq is a not a home, but rather a guest house: everyone is ready to pack their suitcases and travel to a new destination.

⁸⁵ The Human rights watch, among other human rights organizations, have documented dozens of atrocities committed by the PMU's, including forced displacement of civilians, destroying civilian homes by explosives, beatings and looting of livestock. See: Human rights Watch (2018) Families with ISIS Relatives Forced into Camps Beaten, Homes Destroyed, Livestock Looted. February 4, 2018 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/04/families-isis-relatives-forced-camps> Human Rights Watch (2017) Iraq: Displacement, Detention of Suspected "ISIS Families" Troops Force Residents Out, Demolish Homes. March 5, 2017. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/05/iraq-displacement-detention-suspected-isis-families>

⁸⁶ International Crisis Group (2018) Iraq's Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State Middle East Report N°188, 30 July 2018. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iraq/188-iraqs-paramilitary-groups-challenge-rebuilding-functioning-state>

According to another human rights activist, making peace and giving up the cycle of violence requires raising an enlightened generation that respects human dignity, but the constant instability has destroyed the school system and illiteracy has increased alarmingly. Third interlocutor mentioned that hopelessness is also reflected in the methamphetamine problem among young people, who are looking for a moment's escape from the oppressive reality. In fact, the use of the drug went up 40% between 2016 and 2019 among age group 15-29, however the entire country had in 2019 only one clinic with 13 beds to treat the addicts.⁸⁷

[Peace building and community stabilization efforts]

Despite the huge challenges, the Iraqi government clearly strives for the reconstruction of the country and shows genuine effort to patch the social wounds with the help of local and international partners and donors. In its national development plan for the period 2018-2022, the government lists as its strategic objectives, among other issues, the recovery of communities affected by the displacement crisis and restoration of human security. Furthermore, the plan expresses committed to reducing unemployment and underemployment, enhancement of human security for the poorest and vulnerable groups and upgrading the country's sustainable human development indicators.

With the support of the Global Coalition, the Government of Iraq requested UNDP Iraq in mid-2015 to establish a program for the stabilization of the liberated areas. It focused its activities on 31 locations within the governorates of Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, Nineveh and Salah al-Din and targeted key sectors from rebuilding infrastructure to enhancement of community cohesion. The community level activities were crafted to support the Iraqi government in building peaceful and cohesive societies. The Stabilization Project is supervised by the government and the priority is given to location-specific needs. UNDP Iraq is carrying out rehabilitation work through the local private sector (in case of infrastructure projects) and local NGO's (in case of community cohesion projects). The Stabilization Project received funds from 29 international partners and works with a budget of US\$1.48 billion. The program has three main objectives: facilitating the return of displaced Iraqis, laying the foundations for the reconstruction, recovery and protection of communities

from renewed violence and extremism. At the writing of this report, the program supported the return of nearly five million Iraqis displaced by IS and carried out over 3000 infrastructural, capacity building and community cohesion projects in the liberated provinces. As of writing of this report, UNDP Iraq remains the Iraqi Government's preferred partner to continue its work to stabilize, bring peace and stability to the communities that suffered the greatest losses under IS.⁸⁸

Along with the Stabilization Project, dozens of non-governmental organizations implement smaller-scale community projects with the support of international financiers. Al-Mesalla for Human Resources Development was established in 2006 and it was one of the first peace building organizations that entered Mosul after its liberation. In cooperation with its international partners, it has organized peace and reconciliation seminars, training and development and humanitarian assistance programs and recreational activities to the people in the recovering city. With a staff of slightly more than 150 professionals it has also established a web of medical and psycho-social counselling centres in the camps of the displaced people. Al Mesalla has carried out some 150 projects many of them with the help of international donors, including UNHCR UNDP and UNFPA.⁸⁹ Civil Development Organization was founded in 1999. With the staff of some 360 specialists and nearly 80 volunteers it shares the areas of interest with Al-Mesalla. Its most recent projects were funded by UNICEF, UNHCR, UNFPA, and Save the Children, among other donors. The projects have included focus areas such as assistance for the IDP communities and protection and legal assistance to IDPs.⁹⁰ Worth mentioning is also Harikar, a Dohuk-based NGO with a staff of 270 people. It focuses on provision of livelihood opportunities and services to vulnerable IDPs and conflict-affected Syrian youth in Dohuk area.⁹¹

⁸⁸ UNDP Iraq. <https://www.undp.org/iraq>

⁸⁹ see: <http://almesalla.net/>

⁹⁰ see: <https://cdo-iraq.org/>

⁹¹ see: <https://www.harikar.org/>

⁸⁷ After war and terror, Iraq plagued by drug crisis. France 24, May 24, 2019. <https://www.france24.com/en/20190524-reporters-iraq-war-bagdad-drugs-post-traumatic-stress-disorder>

AFTERWORD: ROLE OF TRAUMA IN EXTREMIST VIOLENCE

Months of immersion in the cycle of violence in Iraq raises questions that startle the observer: is it justified to assess that the young Iraqi men and teenagers who perpetrated violence under the banner of IS were radicalized? Were they simply products of a thoroughly traumatized society permeated by decades of violence?

This report cannot provide an answer to this central question, but one thing becomes clear: the relationship between trauma and extremist violence needs to be explored much more deeply in the Iraqi contexts. It must be noted that explaining violence with reference to individual psychological factors, such as trauma, is in many ways limited, however the studies that have paid attention to the topic bring out very interesting observations. Western research routinely approaches extremist violence as the end result of an individual radicalization process, through which violence is seen as a legitimate means to reach social and political ends. In Iraqi society, shaped by the long cycle of violence and traumatizing events, the drivers for violent extremism may differ considerably from the western contexts.

A number of studies have indicated that exposure to war during childhood has an impact on the formation of identity.⁹² Youth who grow up amidst continuous violence easily identify with a collective that claims to offer protection and advocates its rights. In an extended conflict that reaches over several decades, older members of households easily instil militarized notions of manhood and masculinity in boys. In such a setting male identity may include attitudes that legitimate violence as a means for political and social goals.

Only a few of the young recruits, whose life stories have been covered on Iraqi TV stations mention, that they joined the ranks of the organization for ideological reasons and, for example, use expressions typical of Islamist extremists. Almost all who joined the organization under the age of 20 had, as stated earlier, were recruited under the influence of an older family member or a relative. For many, material, rather than ideological factors were the key enticement to join.

It is also possible to see that the Iraqi youth fought a very different war in the ranks of IS than the foreign fighters. Although IS built state-like structures, in case of the large majority of the ordinary Iraqi recruits, IS appears in practice as an insurgency movement waging war against the Shia dominated central government of Iraq and its security apparatuses. For large part of the Western foreign fighters, the enemy was much more broadly defined; the mission was to engage in a global struggle to expand the caliphate by means of warfare and acts of terrorism perpetrated by hidden cells.

A number of studies have pointed out that war and political violence are linked to high prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and psychological disorders, high levels of aggression and domestic violence. A study conducted among 55 incarcerated former IS fighters, most of whom men in their twenties, concluded that 54.5% of the men meet criteria for a PTSD. Nearly two-thirds had been displaced at least once and four out of five had been hit by a caregiver, and nearly the same proportion had witnessed domestic violence against other family member. Slightly over 16% reported being wounded with a weapon by a caregiver as a child.⁹³

Much more attention needs to be paid to the ways in which mental disorders and experience of war events manifest in the life courses of the perpetrators of extremist violence. However, the results of this study signal that building social cohesion and peace in Iraq require healing the wounds of constant political violence that have penetrated into the most private areas of the lives of families and individuals. The circle needs to be broken: traumatic experiences produce post-traumatic stress disorders which may lead to extremist violence.

⁹² see among others: Al-Obaidi, Abdul Kareem (2013) Psychological Trauma: Experience from Iraq. *Journal of Trauma & Treatment*, January 2103.
Fromm, Gerard (2022) *Traveling Through Time: How Trauma Plays Itself Out in Families, Organizations and Society* Phoenix Publishing House.
Keynan, Irit (2015) *Psychological War Trauma and Society: Like a Hidden Wound*. Routledge

⁹³ Rezhna, Mohammed, & Neuner, Frank (2022) War trauma, mental health, aggression, and violent-extremism among former ISIS terrorists. *Journal of Affective Disorders Reports* 10 (2022).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Key issues in view of peace making

1. Conflict is still simmering in many areas of Iraq. The fight against IS has altered local power structures as different parties representing the constituents of Iraq's sectarian and ethnic mosaic seek to promote their position after the collapse of the caliphate.
2. In addition, the question of the status of disputed territories has brought unresolved political issues back to the forefront of conflict. The political and security situation varies significantly across Iraq's governorates and regions.
3. Mosul region, together with the surrounding Ninewa Governorate is the most diverse region in the country. Stabilization of the area requires that all ethnic, religious, political, actors are involved in the decision-making processes and access to government positions at the national and local levels.
4. There is a great need to enhance reconciliatory dialogue and cooperation between ordinary citizens, local communities and local governments.
5. A very important step forward is that in many areas local communities have organized themselves in peace committees that serve as platforms of peace and trust building for community leaders representing the different population groups.
6. Plenty of dialogue and bridge building between different populations is still required to fully capacitate youth to respect the diversity and freedom of religion within and across communities.

Recommendations in view of IDP's

1. Iraqi authorities have continuously made promises of investigations into violations of human rights and international humanitarian law concerning the IDPs. Most of these investigations are never heard of again. A framework for durable solutions on return should be developed with the participation of Iraqi and Kurdish civil society and in cooperation with local authorities.
2. Return should be supported only when it is safe, voluntary and informed.

Recommendations in view of building community cohesion

1. Civilians need support to build local, inclusive forms of governance. Only inclusive bottom-up processes can contribute to real political solutions.
2. Local peace committees must be supported by international specialists. Recovering communities are in need of help to create citizen platforms where local concerns can be voiced to stakeholders, past experiences can be addressed and mediation efforts can be formulated.

Recommendations in view of Sunni majority communities

1. Ending the threat of reempowerment of IS cannot be realized without a political settlement that reintegrates Sunni Arabs in the political process. A fair distribution of power and wealth according to the population proportions must be guaranteed and rebuilding efforts should be equally targeted regardless of the ethnicity and religious profile of the communities.

Recommendations in view Popular Mobilization Units

1. Legal ambiguities surrounding PMUs must be solved: a separation of security actors from political and economic activity must be implemented. The livelihood possibilities of former fighters must be guaranteed. It must be guaranteed that the formal security institutions can function effectively independent of paramilitary assistance and influence.

Recommendations in view of relations between the Central Government of Iraq and Kurdistan Regional Authority

1. As long as there is no resolution between the central Government of Iraq and the Kurdish Regional Government for the disputed status of recaptured areas, the risk of further violent conflict remains high.
2. Bring the Government of Iraq, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and all relevant local stakeholders to the negotiation table to agree on a process for the two governments to find a solution for the disputed areas, in particular the Ninewa plain.