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Sectarianism, Governance, and Iraq's Future

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AND IRAQ'S FUTURE**

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BROOKINGS

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Ranj Alaaldin
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The June 2014 takeover of Mosul by the Islamic State group (ISIS) was described as an existential threat to the Iraqi state and the post-2003 political order. Yet, its emergence was only a symptom of a broader series of crises that had engulfed Iraq over the past decade. While militant groups dominate headlines, it is Iraq's structural problems that have enabled their emergence. This includes weakened or partly collapsed institutions; the absence of the rule of law; dysfunctional and corrupt governance; the ascendancy of sectarian divisions; and the disastrous post-conflict reconstruction process that followed the aftermath of the 2003 U.S. invasion. State fragility in the Levant and the regional proxy war in Syria have exacerbated these challenges and have stifled Iraq's efforts to stabilize and rehabilitate its institutions.

There are competing visions for the future of Iraq and the region that have manifested themselves through violent, sectarian conflict over the Iraqi state and its resources, such as the 2006 civil war between Arab Sunnis and Shiites and the war on ISIS. Sectarianism has become most apparent through the intensification of identity politics and the institutionalization of mistrust. These issues have been used by Iraq's political elites to deflect attention away from poor governance, corruption, and lack of services. Militant organizations like ISIS, remnants of the former Baath regime, Shiite militia groups, and regional powers have deployed sectarian narratives to mobilize popular support, with disastrous consequences for Iraq's stability.

Despite being taken to the brink on multiple occasions, the Iraqi state has not collapsed; its boundaries have remained resilient, as has the Iraqi identity. Moreover, while voting preferences and the electoral process are underpinned by ethnic and religious identity, politics is increasingly contested on the basis of issue-focused topics, such as good governance and the provision of jobs and services. Through an analysis of politics after the 2003 toppling of the former regime, and referencing historical and current examples of cross-sectarian mobilization, this analysis paper examines the extent to which civil society and cross-sectarian alliances can function as modalities through which sectarianism can be suppressed. This paper places an emphasis on the shifting dynamics of

the state's relationship with its citizens post-2003, as well as examples of cross-sectarian discourse during the era of Baath rule. It examines more closely the factors and conditions that have limited the space for sectarian violence and warfare during testing periods of conflict and tumult. In doing so, it examines how national, sectarian, and non-sect, sub-state actors and institutions have developed and can influence Iraqi society.

The overarching argument behind this analysis is that Iraq needs to redefine and reimagine the Iraqi national interest, a concept that has been painfully missing since 2003. This can be done by forming a strong nexus between citizen and state through a process of reinforcing non-state actors that are strongly positioned to cultivate a unified national interest and to move beyond sectarian rhetoric and policies. Finally, this paper will contend that an organized, decentralized system represents the most effective political framework for fostering a stronger Iraqi national interest. This combination of top-down decentralization and bottom-up mobilization from civil society will help limit the space for militancy and violent sectarianism. It is important to highlight that this analysis will focus on the challenge of sectarian conflict between Arab Sunnis and Shiites, which has resulted in immense bloodshed and violent instability over the past decade. The longstanding, historical schism between Kurdistan and the Iraqi state is beyond the scope of this paper, as the Kurds have by and large engaged with the Iraqi state through a Kurdish state-building lens.

This analysis paper begins by examining how the U.S. occupation effectively dismantled the Iraqi state post-2003, paving the way for sectarian conflict and allowing for armed groups and sectarian elites to fill the resulting gap. It explores the weaponization of sect and identity and its devastating consequences for the country. The second part focuses on the Baath Party-enforced political and institutional order to explain how the former regime was able to constrain the space for group identities. The third part presents examples of how civil society and non-state actors have helped mitigate sectarian divides. It shows how different components of Iraqi society—from the religious, such as the Najaf clerical establishment, to civil society and even militia heads, such as Muqtada al-Sadr—have the capacity to collectively enable an environment that is conducive to a national framework.

The fourth part of this paper examines the decentralization conundrum that Iraqi and international policymakers face. The final section argues in favor of a decentralized governing structure that affords greater powers to the provinces and substantially reduces the nexus with Baghdad, in a manner akin to the relationship between the Kurdistan Region and Baghdad. However, this system

would not necessarily establish new regions or autonomous self-rule. The premise behind this vision is that centralized authority has not remedied Iraq's multiple challenges. The gulf between the government in Baghdad and the provinces continues to widen, both in Arab, Sunni-dominated northern Iraq, where the government's lack of support within the local population could enable an ISIS resurgence, but also in the Shiite-dominated south, where in places like Basra there is widespread discontent toward Baghdad's failure to provide services and generate jobs, despite its tremendous oil wealth.

INTRODUCTION

The June 2014 takeover of Mosul by the Islamic State group (ISIS) was described as an existential threat to the Iraqi state and the post-2003 political order.¹ Yet, the emergence of this organization in 2014 was only a symptom of a broader series of crises that had engulfed Iraq over the past decade. While militant groups dominate headlines, it is Iraq's structural problems that have enabled their emergence. This includes weakened or partly collapsed institutions; the absence of the rule of law; dysfunctional and corrupt governance; the ascendancy of sectarian divisions; and the disastrous post-conflict reconstruction process that followed the aftermath of the 2003 U.S. invasion. State fragility in the Levant and the regional proxy war in Syria have exacerbated these challenges and have stifled Iraq's efforts to stabilize and rehabilitate its institutions.

There are competing visions for the future of Iraq and the region that have manifested themselves through violent, sectarian conflict over the Iraqi state and its resources, such as the 2006 civil war between Arab Sunnis and Shiites and the war on ISIS. Sectarianism also takes the form of divisive identity politics and the institutionalization of mistrust, which has resulted in dysfunctional governance. At the same time, it has been used by Iraq's political elites to deflect attention away from poor governance, corruption, and lack of services. Militant organizations like ISIS, remnants of the former Baath regime, Shiite militia groups, and regional powers have deployed sectarian narratives to mobilize popular support, with disastrous consequences for Iraq's stability.

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IRAQ AFTER 2003: THE BATTLE FOR THE STATE AND THE WEAPONIZATION OF IDENTITY

Iraq's current challenges cannot be understood without first examining the backdrop against which much of today's political and security challenges emerged, especially the post-conflict environment that followed the 2003 fall of the Baath regime. Sectarianism would not have become the powerful, destructive force that it did were it not for the weaponization of identity and sect by the exiled opposition and a series of disastrous post-conflict reconstruction policies. Among the most far-reaching was the decision by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) to de-Baathify Iraqi society. This policy removed all officials associated with the Baath Party from public office. The ban struck civil servants and bureaucrats as much as it did teachers, academics, lawyers, and engineers. Initially, some 30,000 ex-Baathists were expelled from various ministries. Of these, 15,000 were eventually permitted to return after winning their appeals.² All military officers above the rank of colonel were expelled from the state, as were all 100,000 members of Iraq's various intelligence services. Hundreds of thousands of trained soldiers, officers, and intelligence officials became jobless overnight.³

Indeed, the events that followed the fall of the Baath regime devastated the Iraqi state and its people. The number of deaths between 2003 and 2014 was estimated at around 150,000 people.⁴ In 2009, the Congressional Research Service estimated that there were as many as two million Iraqi refugees (including those who were displaced before the war), and that approximately 2.7 million Iraqis were internally displaced.⁵ The 2003 toppling of the regime resulted in the destruction of what was, by the time of the invasion, a dilapidated state and a society that was rife with criminal gangs and heavily-armed tribes. With the fall of the regime emerged not just a security vacuum, but also an ideological and political void. A battle to shape the post-2003 political order and, with that, the nature of Iraqi national identity and interests, came into play.

After decades of repression and systematic suffering, the post-2003 political order was seen as the deliverance of the Shiite community, the end of decades of brutal dictatorship, and, for some, the halting of centuries of Shiite oppression and marginalization.⁶ The repressive rule of the Baath Party and narratives of

Shiite victimhood have been a source of legitimacy to Shiite Islamist parties and Iraq's array of Shiite militias, who have positioned themselves as the guarantors of the post-2003 political order. They have, in the process, acquired considerable resources and support among cross-sections of Iraq's Shiite population.⁷

Conversely, however, for Arab Sunni actors, the new Iraq constituted an end to Baath rule and Arab glory, as well as the beginning of the rule of militias, sectarian discord, Safavid (Iranian) influence, and Western imperialism. These sentiments have enabled ISIS and other militant groups, such as al-Qaida in Iraq, to swell their ranks and to commit violent atrocities. Arab Sunni representatives, negotiating with the United States and their Shiite and Kurdish rivals, proclaimed the marginalization of Sunnis from the outset of the so-called new Iraq. This messaging aimed to mobilize and unify Arab Sunni ranks for the purposes of winning popular support, but it also sought to delegitimize the new Iraq and its leading Kurdish and Shiite Islamist factions. Altogether, the show of strength on the basis of group identities from the Arab Sunni and Shiite communities immediately after the thirty-year rule of the Baath regime intensified ethno-sectarian fissures.

The sectarian divisions within Iraqi society were compounded after the 2006 February bombing of the al-Askari mosque, a sacred Shiite shrine, which resulted in a sectarian civil war after Shiite militias engaged in reprisal attacks on the Arab Sunni community and Sunni insurgent groups.⁸ With backing from the interior ministry, disparate Shiite militias and members of the federal police force functioned with autonomy and impunity. They conducted indiscriminate attacks and fought remnants of the Baath regime, Arab Sunni tribes, al-Qaida in Iraq, and foreign jihadists. A coalition of unlikely bedfellows emerged: the Mahdi Army, the militia wing of Muqtada al-Sadr's Sadrist movement; the capital's police force, dominated by members of the Badr Brigade militia and in control of Iraq's interior ministry; and other armed gangs mobilized. The sectarian war claimed the lives of close to 35,000 people in 2006. Estimates put the number of Arab Sunnis killed at 1,000 per month. In addition, 365,000 civilians were forced from their homes.⁹ Many of Baghdad's historically mixed communities underwent major demographic changes as a result of the forced displacement of local populations.

Poor governance and post-conflict reconstruction efforts after 2003 were additionally exacerbated by the political system established by the CPA and the new Iraqi ruling elite, who had returned to Iraq from exile. Based on the ethno-sectarian power-sharing arrangements somewhat akin to the system in Lebanon, these factors collectively fragmented Iraqi society. Iraq's confessional

power-sharing mechanisms, which are not enshrined in the Iraqi constitution and are the product of closed-door negotiations between rival factions, reinforced particularistic and sectarian politics. Communities mobilized around political objectives based on their ethnicity or sect, which came at the expense of a common national identity and the pluralistic politics of co-existence that is often a prerequisite for stabilization and good governance. Ministries effectively became ethno-sectarian fiefdoms. The sect-centric narratives that have formed the basis of political and inter-communal rivalries have made group identity central to Iraqi politics and society. This means that security, social justice, welfare, and job prospects have become organized into sect-centric patronage networks. As one Iraqi official bemoaned, “Iraq does not have ministries and institutions but fiefdoms that belong to the individual parties and factions, some Sunni, some Kurdish and some Shia.”¹⁰ In other words, the root of Iraq’s current problems is not religion or primordial animosities between the country’s different communities but, rather, ethno-sectarian contestations of power that have filled a political and security vacuum.

LESSONS FROM HISTORY: CROSS-SECTARIAN MOBILIZATION PRE-2003

There are lessons from Iraq's history that reveal potential avenues for moving beyond sect-based politics and conflict; they provide examples of country-building narratives that could reduce the divisive discourse orientated around ethnic and religious identities. Sectarianism was exacerbated during the course of the country's modern history, beginning with a series of divisive British policies in the 1920s that aimed to empower the Arab Sunni elite at the expense of other communities.¹¹ Historically, the Iraqi state has not been able to fully suppress sub-national identities, as shown by the disturbances in Kirkuk and Mosul in 1959.¹² Indeed, King Faisal in 1932 lamented that "there is no Iraqi people inside Iraq. There are only diverse groups with no national sentiments."¹³ However, despite these historical differences within Iraqi society, sectarianism and sub-national identities did not have the same impact on societal relations and governance as they have had in post-2003 Iraq. In general, the three so-called principal communities, the Sunni, the Shiite, and the Kurds, are internally divided along tribal, class, and ideological lines. They have not historically engaged with the Iraqi state as distinct political groups.¹⁴

THE ISLAMIC DAWA PARTY IN THE 1950S AND 1960S

Significant sections of Iraq's Shiite community were politically mobilized from the 1950s onward with the advent of the Islamic Dawa Party. This group sought to contest power with strong support from the traditionally apolitical "marja'iyya," or clerical establishment, which played an active role in the development and promotion of the party.¹⁵ However, even the Islamic Dawa Party of the 1950s and 1960s was not oriented around populist, sectarian narratives. Instead, it saw itself as an intellectual movement that aimed for a revival of Islam and Shiite Islamic thought, and it worked closely with its Arab Sunni counterparts. The ideological founder of the Dawa Party and its spiritual head, Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, was inspired and guided by the revivalist works of Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb, as were the group's founding members. The party also added a nationalist current to its vision.¹⁶ Furthermore, Iraqi society was becoming increasingly cohesive and integrated during the era of the monarchy and during much of the 1950s and 1960s, in large part because of internal migration to Baghdad, a growing middle class, and the redistribution of wealth.¹⁷

THE BAATH REGIME

The history of Baath rule, as bloody and brutal as it was, also offers some lessons for Iraq's attempts to forge a national settlement. When the Baath regime came to power in 1968, their organization of power did not necessarily "represent the interests or aspirations of the wider Sunni community in Iraq."¹⁸ What helped the Baath Party constrain the space for communal and sub-national identities was the framework of Iraqi nationalism that it established. Its ideology was rooted in pan-Arab socialism. It was anti-colonialist and was committed to the unification of the Arab lands. Born in 1940 but founded in Damascus in 1947, when it held its First Pan-Arab Congress, its founders were Syrian intellectuals Michel Aflaq, a Christian, and Salah al-Din al-Baytar, a Sunni Muslim. Zaki Arsuzi, an Alawite, contributed to the party's intellectual development but never joined and instead formed his own similar party, the Arab National Party. Syrian students studying in Baghdad introduced Baathism to Iraq in 1949, and a branch was established in 1951.¹⁹ As Ali Allawi contends, "Aflaq claimed allegiance to democracy and saw Islam as a product of the unique 'genius' of the Arab nation, with the prophet Muhammad as an embodiment of the Arab spirit."²⁰

The pluralism of the Baath regime is difficult to dismiss. Eric Davis argues that newspapers, party statements, and engagement with the public created a narrative and myth centered around Iraq's history and the glories of Islam, one that aimed to bridge the divide within Islam by framing the religion along the lines of Arab nationalism. The regime engaged with and acknowledged the existence of other groups, such as the Kurds and the Shiites, and was heavily entrenched in the Shiite communities of the south throughout its rule.²¹ It boasted prominent Shiite clerical figures as its supporters and members.²² Baath Arab nationalism and socialism attracted many Shiites. The party became a dominant force after 1958, at which point Shiites accounted for 75 percent of the party's regional leadership.²³ Even as this declined toward the late 1970s after Saddam Hussein came to power, Shiites were still heavily integrated into the state and its institutions.²⁴

Complemented by a boost in oil revenues in the 1970s, the regime won the hearts and minds of the Shiites and the broader Iraqi society, establishing a national consensus by making use of the vast sums of capital at its disposal. Toby Dodge describes how this had "the effect of greatly increasing the Iraqi government's influence over society" and that the "change in the political economy of Iraq in the 1970s delivered massive and unprecedented power to those who controlled the state."²⁵ Between 1958 and 1977, the number of people employed by the state went from 20,000 to 580,000. These numbers do not include the 230,000

employed in the armed forces and the 200,000 dependent on the state pension scheme.²⁶ There were “ambitious infrastructure projects” that enabled 4,000 rural villages to receive electricity for the first time. Altogether, “buying off the Shi’a masses was central to Saddam’s legitimisation strategy.”²⁷

The resiliency of Iraqi nationalism and, by default, the Baath regime, was soon tested by the 1979 Iranian revolution and the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq war. Described as the “surge of Shi’ism as a political force,”²⁸ in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution hundreds flocked to Mohammad Baqir al-Sadr, as a leading Shiite clerical figure at the time and the spiritual head of the Islamic Dawa Party. They called on al-Sadr “to be their *Iraqi* Ayatullah Khomeini” and lead a revolt against the regime.²⁹ Protests erupted in Baghdad and the predominantly Shiite provinces of the south.³⁰ However, unlike the revolution in Iran, protestors in Iraq lacked sufficient support from the broader population. The protests failed to reach critical mass. There is also little indication that the protests were supported by the broader Shiite community, such as its middle classes. Fanar Haddad explains this by way of reference to socioeconomic factors. A wealthy Shiite will “be aware of and perhaps even sympathetic to the discrimination that people of his/her background face,” provided these individuals associate themselves with that group.³¹ The difference between the “haves” and the “have-nots” is that the former “are very unlikely to be engaged in any form of activism aimed at redressing this perceived imbalance.”³²

The different shades of Baath-Shiite relations and the Baath regime’s capacity to sustain the strength of the relationship between citizen and state, despite the challenges emanating from Iran, was further tested a year later during the Iran-Iraq war. The fact that the war pitted Iraq’s Shiites against their co-religionists from Iran was not lost on the Baath regime. In addition to refurbishing and allocating large sums of money to Shiite shrines, the regime attempted to strengthen the nexus between Iraq’s Shiite community and Arab nationalism during the war. It did this by establishing an extensive campaign of narratives and symbolism that aimed to bridge the divide in Islam and to expand the gulf that separated Arabs and Persians. Saddam framed the war as Qadisiyat Saddam, a reference to the Arab-Islamic conquests and defeat of Sasanid Persia in 636.³³ He used Shiite religious symbolism, including the Imams Ali and Hussein, and claimed to be a descendant of Imam Ali and the Prophet Muhammad. Ibrahim Marashi and Sammy Salama note that Saddam even made Imam Ali’s birthday an Iraqi national holiday and named Iraq’s Scud missiles after Imam Hussein and his brother Abbas.³⁴

Charles Tripp emphasizes that it is important to distinguish between rural and urban Shiites. Rural Shiites were influenced by kinship, family, codes of honor,

and behavior. They differed from the urban Shiites, which included the clerics, the urban poor, and the lay professionals. This essentially portrays the complexities of identity within sects, particularly when analyzing state-community relations, both historically and in the present.³⁵ These divisions crystallized in various ways. As Marashi and Salama point out, “The Baath government could not have survived as long as it did without Shia and Kurds taking part in security forces to repress other ‘rebellious’ Shia and Kurds.”³⁶ It is unclear whether this can be attributed to the regime’s discourse, whether it was simply communities fighting for their lives, their families, and their own sense of patriotism or, alternatively, whether it was a combination of factors that saw Shiites fighting loyally for Iraq in a grueling eight-year war with Iran.³⁷ Nevertheless, it is not implausible to suggest that the regime’s discourse and propaganda played their role in rallying all Iraqis around the flag, developing a resilient sense of national unity, and ultimately establishing an ethnic wedge between Iraq’s Arab Shiites and their Persian counterparts.

However, after the first Gulf War and the 1991 Shiite uprising that followed, the Baath regime had a severely weakened hand. The regime brutally crushed the uprising. While it was out of Baghdad that the regime had previously enforced an Iraqi national framework and suppressed the space for sub-national identities, in the 1990s this effectively devolved to local, grassroots actors. This was a period of destitution and the Baath regime was no longer capable of buying off the masses. State spending for social services decreased, poverty increased, and social conditions in general had deteriorated after two costly wars with Iran and then Kuwait. Losses incurred in the Iraq-Iran war are estimated at \$453 billion, whereas those incurred from the first Gulf War, following Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait, are estimated at \$232 billion.³⁸ In the 1980s, there were 80 deaths per 1,000 live births. By 1990, that had dropped to 50 per 1,000 births. In 2001, Iraq was showing the signs of sanctions with 133 deaths per 1,000 births.³⁹

Moreover, Saddam was no longer able to project himself as the leader of all Iraqis. The regime became explicitly sectarian during the 1991 uprising in an attempt to delegitimize revolutionaries as Iranian agents, but also to coalesce Arab Sunnis around the regime and unify the ranks of regime loyalists. Tens of thousands of Shiites were systematically killed, and Shiite shrines and centers of learning were destroyed. According to witnesses, tanks were painted with “No Shiites after today.”⁴⁰ Yet, even in this environment of extreme poverty, the Baath regime was still able to maintain its rule by devolving and decentralizing its authority to religious actors and tribes. Tribes throughout the country were utilized as a sociopolitical base and were instrumentalized as legitimate partners for power-sharing. Saddam even went as far as identifying himself as the “sheikh of all sheikhs” and the Baath Party as the “tribe

of all tribes.” The regime depended heavily on Arab Sunnis from Tikrit, whereas in the south the regime co-opted the Shiite branch of the Jubur tribe. Shiite tribes were, in fact, crucial to containing the 1991 uprisings.⁴¹

Saddam increasingly employed Islamic symbolism and effectively doubled down on the instrumentalization of Islam in his foreign policy. That involved establishing extensive alliances with Islamist organizations among Arab Sunni communities in the north.⁴² In the south, Shiite religious institutions were used to recruit activists and spies.⁴³ What helped the regime in the south was the infusion of tribes with religion. The tribes’ religious culture became increasingly clerically-orientated. To consolidate the regime’s hold in the Shiite south, the Baath regime turned to Mohammad Sadeq al-Sadr, the founder of the Sadrist movement.

This group is Iraq’s most powerful sociopolitical movement today and is currently led by al-Sadr’s son, Muqtada. In the place of the state, Sadeq al-Sadr established the Sadrist movement to provide an outlet for Iraq’s destitute Shiites. He provided counseling and sent emissaries to all the Shiite areas of Iraq. The movement’s prominence also allowed for an inconvenient, tacit partnership with the Baath Party, which exploited the internal rivalries within the Shiite clerical establishment by recognizing Sadeq al-Sadr as the “marja’ al-taqlid,” or source of emulation. This conflicted with the consensus, establishment choice of Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani, who was under house arrest at the time. Sadeq al-Sadr also promoted tribal values in his teachings and stressed the Arab heritage of Iraq’s Shiites, a subtle reference to the non-Arab heritage of his rivals, such as al-Sistani, and many within the Shiite opposition ranks. From the perspective of the Baath regime, this countered Iran’s influence and provided a useful, unifying ideology that could mobilize the Arab consciousness of Iraq’s Shiite community against what it framed as alien, Persian Shiism.

Fundamentally, Sadeq al-Sadr amassed support bases in the periphery and the slums, among the tribes and the impoverished. These were areas that the Baath regime struggled to penetrate. What this strategy effectively achieved is the integration of sections of Iraqi society into the Sadrist movement, which would have otherwise constituted autonomous spheres of influence that could have presented the regime with insurmountable political and security challenges. Ultimately, the Sadrists’ move to fill the void left by the severely degraded Iraqi state in the 1990s exemplifies the extent to which local and communal actors were harnessed during the Baath era and provided another mechanism of cross-sectarian mobilization.

CROSS-SECTARIAN MOBILIZATION POST-2003: AREAS OF OPPORTUNITY

Unlike the early periods of the Baath era, it is through the prism of sectarianism that the business of governance is conducted today. This fact, combined with governance failures, have enabled an environment conducive to violent, sectarian conflict, autonomous militia groups, and Islamic fundamentalist organizations like ISIS. It is essential to note that this runs contrary to the preferences of the population. Polling data shows that more than 89 percent of Iraqis see themselves as a part of Iraq, irrespective of their ethnic or religious background, or geographic location; more than 88 percent consider democracy the best system of governance for the country.⁴⁴ The majority of Iraqis trust neither their capital (60 percent) nor their political parties (88 percent), but there was a marked preference for politicians who promote national interests over those who hold strong religious convictions.⁴⁵

Sectarianism and failures in governance have spawned a popular backlash in recent years that could forge a national settlement from the bottom-up.⁴⁶ There is dissatisfaction among a rapidly increasing young population that can no longer be ignored by Iraq's ruling elites. Iraq's population is currently estimated to be 32 million and is expected to increase to 50 million by 2050. Nearly half of the population is under the age of 21, yet the opportunities for youth to engage in politics or civic activities is limited.⁴⁷ However, there have been glimmers of hope since 2003, even if they were short-lived. The following sections discuss examples when Iraq was able to construct an inclusive form of state-building and a national settlement that stabilized and reconciled differences between its conflicted communities, after 2003. In particular, this part of the paper will examine the role played by religious leaders, such as Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani and Muqtada al-Sadr. This analysis will demonstrate the extent to which clerics, tribal leaders, and civil society groups can diminish sectarian divisions and mobilize support through building broad coalitions focused on Iraqi national interest.

THE AWAKENING MOVEMENT, THE IRAQI NATIONAL ALLIANCE (INA), AND IRAQIYAH

Beginning in 2006, the Awakening Movement involved a coalition of Sunni tribes backed by the United States to maintain security in their local areas and combat

Al Qaida in Iraq. This initiative provides an example of how discontented and disenfranchised communities can be re-integrated into the state or, put another way, how sectarian grievances can be remedied by way of providing communities with a stake in the future of their country. Iraq's Arab, Sunni-dominated heartlands in the north saw periods of stability after 2007 when the United States, as part of the surge and the Awakening movement, looked to work with, and effectively co-opt, local tribes and other communal actors in the north to combat jihadi terrorist groups. This paved the way for a greater buy-in from the Arab Sunni community, providing them with a stronger stake in, and greater representation within, the Iraqi political system. Other opportunities for alleviating sectarian tensions have manifested themselves through the diffuse nature of politics in Baghdad and the factionalism within the principal ethno-sectarian communities. The Iraqi National Alliance (INA), for example, is an amalgamation of primarily Shiite Islamist parties that have constituted the ultimate holders of power and authority in Iraq. However, this alliance also includes fierce historic rivals that have even fought one another during the course of the past decade.⁴⁸ In 2009, the Islamic Dawa Party splintered from the INA to contest elections independently, resulting in a resounding win for the party and a more fluid and dynamic political environment.⁴⁹ At one point, it almost established an alliance with prominent Arab Sunni leaders, such as Ahmed Abu Risha of the Anbar Awakening Front, but the move fell through because of resistance from regional powers.⁵⁰

However, these efforts were all undermined after the United States withdrew from Iraq and after Nouri al-Maliki, Iraq's former prime minister, brazenly suppressed his Arab Sunni rivals while expanding the government's indiscriminate detention of Arab Sunni citizens. In 2010, a predominantly Arab Sunni coalition, Iraqiyah, won the parliamentary elections but was then sidelined by Maliki's State of Law coalition, which was able to muster support from other factions to form a coalition government, even though it finished second. While the new government, led by Maliki, included Iraqiyah politicians, promises to afford the party powerful positions such as minister of defense and the presidency, as well as a proposed national security council that would be led by an Arab Sunni, never materialized. That dealt a devastating blow to sectarian relations, as it effectively confirmed Arab Sunni perceptions of marginalization while emboldening those segments of the community that advocated insurgency and violent contestations of power.

THE ROLE OF CLERICS: AYATOLLAH ALI AL-HUSSEINI AL-SISTANI

In August 2015, amid rising temperatures and the availability of electricity for only a few hours, Iraqis took to the streets to mobilize against the government. Launched by ordinary citizens and political activists in Baghdad's Tahrir Square

and across the country, the movement expressed the citizenry's general exasperation at the corruption and mismanagement of the post-2003 government. Protests in 2015 quickly turned into a massive popular movement. Demonstrators gathered in the main public squares of Iraq's big cities, including Najaf, Nasariyyah, and Basra, along with a host of other towns and cities, calling for "Khubz, hurriyah, dawlah medeniyah" (bread, freedom, and a civil state).⁵¹ The protests then received the endorsement of Ayatollah Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani, who called for an end to corruption and for government reforms.⁵² Al-Sistani's intervention helped legitimize and swell the ranks of the protestors, while also providing then-Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi with a popular mandate to push for necessary reforms.⁵³ The cleric enjoys widespread support across the ethnic and religious spectrum and is widely seen as a reconciler. Iraq's clerics have historically constituted an important check on the power of political elites and command an extensive web of local and national institutions that enables the Ayatollahs of Najaf to project Iraqi nationalism. As one of the leading Shiite clergymen, al-Sistani has vast social and religious networks that enable local governance, provide services, and support other public programs such as schools, hospitals, and libraries.⁵⁴ Since the emergence of ISIS and the ensuing humanitarian crisis, these organizations have used their status and wealth to provide sanctuary to the internally displaced, including Arab Sunnis and Iraq's different ethnic and religious minorities.

Al-Sistani has repeatedly called for a civil state, as opposed to a religious one. He is also known for his vehement criticism of human rights abuses perpetrated by Shiite militias. His weekly sermons, delivered by his representative Sheikh Abdul Mahdi al-Karbalai, almost always champion co-existence and pluralistic values. In 2013, al-Sistani issued a fatwa that forbade attacks on Sunni figures and sites, stating that "These are condemnable acts, and they violate the Shiite imams' orders."⁵⁵ While the 2006 sectarian war was bloody and claimed the lives of tens of thousands, al-Sistani's interventions ensured Iraq's Shiite community exercised immense restraint and absorbed thousands of deaths before conducting reprisal attacks. As one senior Iraqi official noted, "Iraq could have witnessed another genocide if it was not for Sistani. He saved Iraq's Sunnis."⁵⁶

He has been criticized by Arab Sunni factions for his role in organizing and unifying the Shiite bloc for the 2005 elections. That move was denounced for being "sectarian and in favor of the Shiite Islamists as, by unifying them, al-Sistani guaranteed their dominance."⁵⁷ Since then the mood has changed. The once-unified INA has played a pivotal role in ensuring the dominance of Iraq's Shiite Islamist parties, but it no longer has the support of al-Sistani. It is currently a deeply-fractured organization. Al-Sistani has openly condemned the parties

within the INA alliance for their corruption and poor governance.⁵⁸ The cleric is seen as a bulwark against the ascendancy of what one official referred to as extremist Shiites, “such as the militias and Iranian-backed factions within the government and parliament.”⁵⁹ This view is similarly echoed among Iraq’s Kurds, who refer to the “institution of Sistani” as an important counterweight against groups that would otherwise function with complete impunity as they commit human rights abuses and loot the state of its resources.⁶⁰

When Shiite militias committed human rights abuses against Arab Sunnis in Diyala province, al-Sistani called on the government “not to permit the presence of militants outside the framework of the state.”⁶¹ This prompted him to issue recommendations a month later that were largely derived from international humanitarian law and the rules that govern conduct during armed conflict.⁶² The Shiite religious establishment in Najaf has more generally projected Iraqi nationalism through its “quietist” tradition. This allows for a form of Shiite religious authority that has produced a historical schism with Iran since 1979, where the system of governance is underpinned by the “wilayati-faqih,” or the rule of the jurist doctrine. While there are factions that embrace Iran’s Ayatollah Khamenei as their political and spiritual leader, Iraq’s Shiites have historically resisted the doctrine. Najaf’s stance resonates with Arab Sunnis who have historically mobilized alongside their Shiite brethren against Iran. As one Arab Sunni official noted, “We fought Iran alongside the clerics during the Iran-Iraq war and we can continue to do so against extremists on both sides [Sunni and Shiite].”⁶³

THE ROLE OF CLERICS: THE SADRIST MOVEMENT

The mobilization of Iraqis was further boosted in April 2016, when Muqtada al-Sadr launched protests against the Iraqi government. Hundreds of thousands of protestors took to the streets. The unrest culminated in the storming and occupation of the Iraqi parliament at the end of April after al-Sadr gave a rallying speech in which he advocated for a “major popular revolution to stop corruptors.”⁶⁴ The popular demonstrations led by the Sadrist movement and Muqtada al-Sadr’s overtures to Arab Sunni communities in Iraq and the Arab world have opened up the possibility of greater, cross-sectarian political unity. The Sadrist movement has historically positioned itself as Iraqi nationalist and against Iranian encroachment into Iraqi affairs. During the Sadrist protests in the spring of 2016, protestors called on Iran to “get out.”⁶⁵ Al-Sadr regularly makes overtures toward Arab Sunni factions and other communities. In 2010, he attended a Christian service in Baghdad where 50 worshippers had been killed in an al-Qaida terrorist attack. He later prayed in the Sunni Abdul-Qadir al-Gailani

mosque in central Baghdad.⁶⁶ In January 2013 al-Sadr went against the tide of Shiite public opinion by backing the 2013 protests in Anbar.⁶⁷ Al-Sadr's visits to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have also helped strengthen Iraq's ties with the Arab world.⁶⁸

Moreover, the Sadrist movement has accused rival groups, such as the Badr Brigade and the Islamic Dawa Party, of attempting to "finish it off" by way of assassinations, arrests, imprisonment, and armed confrontations.⁶⁹ In this sense, it believes it has far more in common with Arab Sunni factions than it does Shiite parties who returned to Iraq after 2003.⁷⁰ Al-Sadr's involvement in these protests and his calls for reform should, at first glance, seem counter-intuitive. After all, the Sadrists also played a central role in fueling Iraq's devastating sectarian conflict, committed sectarian atrocities, fought U.S.-led coalition and Iraqi forces, and engaged in criminal activities. However, the cleric and his Sadrist movement are currently playing a critical role in challenging sectarian populists, advocating reform and good governance, and holding Iraq's elites to account. The movement is also an example of how different components of Iraqi society can potentially mutually reinforce one another over the course of time.

Indeed, al-Sadr's victory in Iraq's 2018 parliamentary elections surprised observers and sent shockwaves throughout the political class, including the Islamic Dawa Party.⁷¹ The electoral victory did not only reflect the Sadrist movement's capacity to mobilize the masses and utilize its network to empower protestors, but it also revealed the emergence of an unlikely alliance between a Shiite-Islamist organization and a secular civil-society that includes left-leaning organizations aligned with the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP). The irony here is that the ICP was brutally suppressed in the 1950s by the same clerical establishment the Sadrist movement emerged from.

Women's rights organizations such as the Iraqi Women Network (IWN) have also welcomed the Sadrists' inclusion. They have taken this position on the basis that, despite the Sadrists' populism and conservatism, the push for gender equality and women's rights is intertwined with the struggle for social justice, nationhood, and citizenship. These unlikely alliances can help spawn greater respect for human rights and international norms among militia groups and so-called hardline organizations, such as the Sadrists and their support bases.⁷²

CIVIL SOCIETY INITIATIVES

Civil society is increasingly gaining the trust of Iraqis. It acts as an essential mechanism in "bridging the gap between citizens and government."⁷³ According to Mercy Corps, in 2013 39 percent of Iraqis surveyed asserted

that civil society makes a difference in their lives. By 2015, that number had jumped to 50 percent.⁷⁴ Civil society has additionally served as a catalyst for governance improvements. In Diyala province, the al-Noor Universal Foundation launched a campaign that successfully lobbied the provincial government to improve budgetary transparency. Subsequently, it was invited to assist the local authorities with drafting a law outlining public participation in local government. In Muthanna, the Iraqi Foundation for Cultural Liaison organized town hall meetings, conferences, and media outreach to raise awareness and mobilize citizens against electricity shortages in the summer, which resulted in the Directorate of Electricity increasing the provision of electricity to meet citizens' needs.⁷⁵ Moreover, organizations like the Iraqi Center for Conflict Management and Negotiation Skills have a national network of mediators positioned around the country and have pioneered a reconciliation strategy informed by meetings throughout the country.⁷⁶ Others have aimed to raise awareness of government corruption and, accordingly, to foster greater accountability. The Rafidain Civic Education Institute, for example, broadcasted an educational series on the local radio about government corruption and conducted workshops with activists to raise awareness about the negative impact of corruption on citizens and their democracy.⁷⁷

The role of civil-society requires appreciation here for various reasons. First, it sheds light on how non-state actors promote democratic norms from the bottom-up. Second, it illustrates how, even amid weakened state institutions and dysfunctional governance, there is an infrastructure at the local level that can help fill the gaps left by Iraq's governance failures. These two issues highlight how civil society can help establish a national framework that cultivates principles and narratives for co-existence. Filling in the gaps left by poor governance can engineer accountability and reform while also providing an outlet for otherwise disenfranchised communities.

FRAGILE GOVERNANCE & THE DECENTRALIZATION CONUNDRUM

When in office, former Prime Minister al-Abadi attempted to institute reforms that could help remedy Iraq's crisis of governance and, in the process, alleviate ethno-sectarian tensions. Security details for politicians were cut by 90 percent after the 2015 protests, which has freed up to 20,000 personnel for other duties. In addition, a \$5.34 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund in July 2016 has spurred efforts to reform the macroeconomic environment through expanding the private sector and reducing dependency on the state. However, its impact, in the short-term at least, will be piece-meal and could even prompt social unrest as a result of the austerity measures that the loan requires.⁷⁸

Al-Abadi also attempted to afford greater power to the provinces. To placate Arab Sunni communities, he moved to propose an amnesty law for insurgents; to reform the de-Baathification law; and to amend anti-terrorism laws and expedite the processing of detainees' cases. Upon coming into office in 2014, al-Abadi also considered completing the formation of the National Guards. This initiative aims to integrate Arab Sunni fighters and tribes into the security apparatus and give them responsibility for defending their local areas, in what is effectively an extension of the Awakening Movement. However, these measures failed to come to fruition. For example, efforts to implement the National Guards initiative, as well as the decentralization of powers to the provinces more generally, have come under resistance. Iraq's ruling Shiite elites fear that the initiative would end up creating a Sunni force, paid for by the government. Such a force could eventually challenge Baghdad's Shiite ruling elite, similar to the way in which ISIS did. In other words, decentralization has fallen victim to the same institutional mistrust between Iraq's ethno-sectarian factions that has undermined other efforts to decrease polarization within state and society.

Constitutionally, there have been attempts to legislate for the devolution of powers to provinces since 2013, but decentralization has never been fully implemented, nor even properly embraced, in principle, by Iraq's ruling elites. There are also constitutional shortcomings that Iraq's political class have limited appetite for remedying. As a World Bank study notes, plans to transfer

functions and responsibilities to governorates were not implemented in an efficient manner; in large part this is because there is no understanding and definition of which institution holds what responsibilities in the relationship between provinces and the central state. The constitution remains ambiguous and vague on these crucial points.⁷⁹

Decentralization in divided societies around the world have mixed results, with some suggesting that investing in human development is a more viable alternative for pursuing good governance and stability.⁸⁰ Certainly, decentralization is not a panacea and will depend on the extent to which such a policy can be implemented in an orderly and regulated manner. While devolving power to the local level provides communities with a sense of control over their future and could insulate them from abuse and discrimination by centralized authorities, it requires far more than participation. It necessitates a re-organization of power hierarchies and imbalances to ensure they will not face similar vulnerabilities from within their own communities and provinces. Participation in such arrangements will not, in and of itself, pave the way for pluralistic values, co-existence, and equitable power-sharing. After all, the intra-community divisions within Arab Sunnis and Shiites, Kurds, and the country's array of minority groups can be as tumultuous and divisive as inter-community relations. Each of the factions within these communities have conflicting political and ideological identities, even if there may be short-term common goals. Power is diffuse within each of these communities as much as it is within Iraq's political system. In other words, there is ample space and opportunity for citizens' rights to be abused at the local level.

Iraq also has a crisis of authority as a result of the so-called alternative authorities that have emerged over the past decade. These are essentially sub-state actors that contest the state for power and resources. Like others around the world, Iraq's sub-state actors thrive when the state is weak, or when it is dependent on these actors for governance and authority. The process and environment that enables sub-state actors does not take very long to emerge, but once established, they can be very difficult to dislodge. What further complicates this challenge is the overlap between actors at the state and sub-state levels that have the capacity to challenge the state and, in some cases, supplant the state in the provision of services, security, and the dispensation of justice. This can include tribes, militias, and religious leaders. Militias and tribal groups, for example, have weaponized the state for resources. It may sometimes be difficult to draw the line that separates those autonomous actors from the state itself. It is often not the government that can resolve local disputes, but rather sub-state actors that have greater local authority and legitimacy. And yet they also acquire resources from the state itself.

For example, in oil-rich Basra, the Iraqi government was stretched as a result of the war against ISIS. It has thus been unable to wrestle back control of territory and the local economy from Shiite tribes and militias who are engaged in armed confrontations over government contracts, land, and, ultimately, power.⁸¹

Furthermore, there is no reason why sectarian actors cannot mobilize their constituents and communities at the local level on the basis of sectarian narratives. After all, it was through institutionalizing sectarianism at the local level that ISIS ruled its so-called caliphate. The sectarian entrepreneurs that form part of the political elite in Baghdad may see little reason to depart from narratives that have been central to their survival and their capacity to acquire support and resources, even in the event these elites were afforded greater powers at the local level. New laws or governing structures could bolster their positions and will not, in and of themselves, create the national consensus that Iraq needs. Decentralization could ultimately reinforce the power imbalances at the root of Iraq's crisis of governance.

WHY DECENTRALIZATION IS STILL IRAQ'S BEST HOPE

Decentralization has produced mixed results around the world, granted.⁸² However, the possibility that decentralization can create, in perception at least, some respite for Iraq's Arab Sunnis, as well as a sense of empowerment, could itself be healthy for its effective implementation down the line. In other words, governance challenges at the local level are only part of the debate when it comes to decentralization. The other part is the deep distrust and resentment toward Baghdad's ruling Shiite elites from the provinces and the complete loss of faith in Baghdad's ability to improve services and support Iraq's Arab Sunni community.

Some have argued that decentralization requires a robust government and state to ensure it takes place in a regulated and meaningful manner.⁸³ However, a major part of the problem with centralized authority is that it has failed to produce an impartial central government in Baghdad and, as alluded to earlier, has instead resulted in a Shiite-centric state-building process. As the scholarship shows, despite attempts at establishing a shared vision of the future, which proponents of centralized authority call for, the leading community (in this case the Shiite community) normally ends up nationalizing the state in its own image.⁸⁴ Indeed, in this respect, the apportionment of ministries and political posts on the basis of ethnic and religious identity mitigates such risks. Some argue that the quota system, intended to provide an inclusive government, has institutionalized sectarianism and entrenched political elites who have divided the state and its resources.⁸⁵ However, confessional power-sharing can provide a platform and springboard for inclusive governance and political compromise for otherwise warring ethnic and religious communities. It can mitigate abuse of power by the ethnic or religious majority, particularly in post-conflict settings, where institutions are weak and where minorities have limited trust in the majority, as has evidently been the case in Iraq.

Decentralization can include political, fiscal, and administrative decentralization. For current purposes, it is the political that this paper emphasizes, whereby the shifting of the balance of power away from Iraq's ruling Shiite elites in Baghdad to local Arab Sunni leaders, according to the provisions of the Iraqi constitution,

could help address the polarization within Iraqi society. It would do so primarily by ensuring that Iraq's Arab Sunnis believe they have a stake in the country and its future. This could then pave the way for a more effective implementation of fiscal and administrative decentralization down the line as a result of the order that Arab Sunni buy-in can potentially create.⁸⁶

Arab Sunni buy-in, in this way, becomes all the more critical because of Baghdad's failure to articulate and construct not just a set of foundational myths that could bind the nation together, but also a social contract that achieves a national consensus between its competing communities. In its absence, the political legitimacy of the government has declined. This was clearly revealed by the 44.5 percent turnout rate at the May 2018 national elections, Iraq's worst turnout to date. Its public institutions, at both the central and local level, have lost the public's trust, while systematic crimes and human rights violations have shaped public perception toward the public policymaking processes in Baghdad.

A compact between ruling elites and citizens may have a greater chance of coming about if it begins at the local level, where trust in governing structures and elites is greater than that which exists toward those at the national level. This is largely due to the prominence of communalism and group identities, as well as the ruling Shiite elites' consolidation of power and influence in Baghdad. Civic participation and civil society are more deeply ingrained within local political and socio-cultural structures and are, therefore, more responsive to local communities since the accountability nexus at the local level is greater than that which exists at the national level. Another part of the problem is that there are simply too many "cooks" at the national level. Thus, the social contract that begins at the local level adopts an intra-community approach that could avoid the toxic and congested political sphere in Baghdad. In this way, decentralization could move Iraq closer to a consensus framework by helping strengthen local accountability between citizens and the provincial government. This issue was one of the three key accountability relationships identified by the World Bank as being weak and requiring improvement.⁸⁷ As the World Bank report highlights, "strengthening accountability is critical to improving service delivery as it *strengthens the social contract between the citizens and the State*."⁸⁸

To begin with, what needs to be addressed is the suspicion that Iraqis have toward the concept of decentralization, which many equate with the partition of the country. These are fears that have been exploited by those elites looking to embolden their own authority within the federal government. In 2011, for example, three provinces in northern Iraq, including Anbar, Diyala, and Salahaddin, called for federal status. These actions were declared unconstitutional

by the central government, which stoked sectarian tensions by accusing the provincial councils of plotting to harbor Baathists from the law.⁸⁹

An agreement between competing factions in Baghdad could prevent a repeat of similar authoritarian attempts at suppressing decentralized authority. In the post-ISIS climate, there may be little appetite among the powerful, Shiite Islamist policy entrepreneurs in Baghdad to pursue such a policy, at least not if it requires discarding their bias toward the existing political order and conceding power to other actors. The different Shiite Islamist groups are divided on multiple issues, but they remain essentially unified when it comes to limiting autonomy for Arab Sunnis. These actors, and others, have vested interests in maintaining the existing political order and, with that, their power and privilege. Additionally, they are strongly positioned to torpedo any national effort aimed at empowering local actors through, for example, establishing barriers to participation, mobilizing resources to ensure decentralization is never legislated, or through the use of coercion. These biases are evidenced by their simplification of the problem to one of terrorists that are challenging Iraqi forces: “There is no conflict between the Sunni and the Shiite at the root of the violence in Iraq. The fighting is not sectarian but merely between the Iraqi forces and law enforcement, and those who opposed it. The main enemy is terrorists. *We* have a moral obligation and responsibility to defend the Iraqi people, and therefore to remove terrorism.”⁹⁰

Public opinion has to be mobilized in favor of decentralization if it is to ever be implemented in a meaningful and effective manner. This will require a unified effort on the part of both elites and civil society to allay concerns that decentralization could lead to partition. Doing so requires a concerted effort on the part of the political class, civil society, the media, and the religious establishment in Najaf. The issue must no longer be engaged through a “divided society” lens, as has been the case since 2003. As mentioned above, this impedes consensus on the issue between elites and communities that have been involved in zero-sum conflicts for at least a decade. Instead, Iraqis must aim for an elite bargain that can achieve popular support through a division of labor framework that no longer weds decentralization and federalism to group identities. That requires formulating a country-wide discussion focused on informing public opinion and establishing monitoring mechanisms that can properly gauge and inform public opinion to ensure decentralization does not take place in an environment of suspicion and fear. This will have to be launched by the government, but the implementation and oversight of the initiative should include civil-society.

A decentralized strategy would not simply be dependent on elite deal-making and confidence-building measures, but it would also rely on local actors from civil

society that have great experience in managing social and economic development programs from the international community, as well as their longstanding civic activism. Effective decentralization depends on institutional mechanisms; political and civic will; and democratic norms at the local level. The crucial point is that these processes must be overseen and implemented as constitutive components of a decentralization strategy, as opposed to being independently implemented by Baghdad. This is necessary because of the credibility and accountability deficit from which Baghdad suffers, as well as the psychological disconnect between Baghdad and the Arab Sunni provinces.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the complexities of sectarianism in Iraq against the backdrop of a fluid and dynamic political environment that can be both challenging and destabilizing for the Iraqi state and society. However, it also presents a number of opportunities that could help stabilize the country and reconcile its conflicted factions and communities.

Iraq's history holds examples of how a national framework can be forged to establish a strong nexus between citizen and government. The Baath era demonstrates a political and institutional order that had varying levels of legitimacy and that drew on the social capital of Iraqi society to facilitate economic, political, and social interactions. The Baath regime was able to use local identities and institutions to promote its development and the framework of a single Iraqi construct. In post-2003 Iraq, the state was unable to leverage its people's histories and customs in a similar manner to establish a common narrative and set of foundational myths that could establish a common polity. This void has been dominated by sectarian elites and armed groups. Nevertheless, there has been significant pushback from local, communal, and grassroots actors that must be afforded greater appreciation by policymakers. At the bottom-up level, there are dynamics that have functioned as drivers of resilience, ensuring that the state and society do not succumb to militant groups. These dynamics have also helped to contain civil conflict and to strengthen the fabric of Iraqi society.

Remedying Iraq's divided society, strengthening societal level mobilization, and improving governing structures requires new power relationships negotiated between the different actors that make up Iraq's socio-political order. In the interim, a decentralized Iraq could allow state and society to undergo a process of rehabilitation. Even if decentralization and federalism have produced mixed results in other divided societies, the perception of self-rule, responsibility, and having a stake in the future of the country—within the confines of the Iraqi constitution and through a dialogue and consensus-based interaction with the central government that forms part of an elite bargain—could create the breathing room that allows the state and society to undergo a process of rehabilitation. Decentralized authority may not necessarily address all of Iraq's problems, but it could enable a more stable political environment by addressing the power imbalance in Baghdad. Centralized authority continues to

create power imbalances in favor of Iraq's Shiite elites, meaning Iraq could be engulfed in perpetual warfare unless there is buy-in from Iraq's Arab Sunni communities.

Political decentralization that sees limited interference from Baghdad, if any at all, could provide respite for Iraq's Arab Sunni communities that then paves the way for a more effective decentralization process that addresses good governance shortcomings. Ultimately, the process could be a generational one: a phased approach to decentralization would move from the elite bargain at the top-down to then take account of local politics and economies. It requires ensuring that decentralization is genuine; that is, real power and authority must be devolved; secondly, it requires insuring there are robust mechanisms for preserving and prolonging democratic norms at the local level that allow for inclusive governance, accountability, and fair elections.

Iraq, with support from the international community, can adopt a dual-track policy aimed at strengthening local sub-state governance. This could be done, for example, through empowering local actors to focus on transitional justice and reconciliation; supporting reconstruction and development projects; and monitoring human rights abuses and sectarian crimes. This requires stronger institutions at the federal level. Supporting decentralization does not necessarily conflict with what the international community has historically regarded as the sacrosanct territorial boundaries of the Iraqi state. Treating civil society actors, tribes, and religious institutions that have far-reaching influence and support as actors that could undermine the authority of the state in the event of a dual-track strategy is, therefore, counter-intuitive. It is, after all, these localized actors and structures that are engaged in the day-to-day business of meeting the humanitarian needs of local communities and displaced populations. They also hold the government and political class to account by way of popular demonstrations.

The international community can encourage Iraqi decision-makers to continue its reform program, even if this may yield limited results in the short-term. What the recent and ongoing interventions and roles played by Muqtada al-Sadr and Ayatollah al-Sistani show is that the current nature of power and authority in Iraq requires revisiting the traditional definition of the government and the state so that it includes sub-state actors or alternative authorities that overlap and interact with the state. The dynamics of interaction between the multiple lines of authority in Iraq—ranging from civil society, to members of the political class and the religious establishment, and even groups who were complicit in violence and instability—requires greater appreciation moving forward. This will help establish a national framework that reinforces the relationship between citizen and government, constrains the space for sectarian conflict, and remedies shortcomings in governance.

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