



# IRAQ AT A CROSSROADS

ELECTIONS AND THE CHALLENGES OF  
STABILIZATION BEYOND DAESH

EDITED BY GABRIELE IACOVINO AND LORENZO MARINONE



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## **Preface**

**by Andrea Margelletti (President of Ce.S.I. – Centre for International Studies)**

Fifteen years separate the “mission accomplished” discourse, pronounced by George W. Bush standing on the deck of USS Abraham Lincoln, from the defeat of Daesh announced by the Iraqi Premier Abadi amidst the blackened ruins of Mosul. Three lustra during which Iraq was swallowed by a cyclic vortex of violence and attacks, hopes and illusions, without any solution of continuity and, above all, without anyone being able to interrupt it, even when circumstances would have allowed it. This must be very clear: a good part of Iraq's troubled recent history has been written by carelessness, negligence, decisions that were perhaps too rash, unfortunately poorly thought-out solutions with regard to their consequences, and a chronic myopia towards the root causes of the problems that afflict the country.

Today we are suspended again between what may be an Iraqi redemption and the ill-fated return to a period of chaos. Daesh's "caliphate" is collapsed, buried under the ruins of Mosul, but its threat is still vital and lies beneath the ashes of a defeat that is only territorial. Beaten, but not defeated, because Daesh is only the last one in a list of actors who have managed to grow and take root, feeding on the many fragilities of the Iraqi mosaic: sectarianism, stalemate in the reforms, centrifugal drives, an economy oriented to the hydrocarbon sector, these are just some of the most pressing internal problems that wreak havoc on the country. And certainly not from today.

Despite its occurrences and recurrences, history never repeats itself the same way. The more truthful this is for today's Iraq, the more we widen the horizon and place the country in the Middle Eastern context. A context where the need to reconstruct a new regional order emerges, and gets more and more urgent, as the mechanisms that had regulated the previous order appear out of joint, sclerotic or simply dissolved and overcome by a new reality. The two sides, the internal and regional ones, are inextricably linked. All of this can only reinforce the strategic importance that Iraq assumes, with its shifting internal balances and regional players' overlapping interests, in the quest for a new recipe for stability for the entire region.



## **The Iraqi elections between internal challenges and new regional tensions**

**by Gabriele Iacovino (Ce.S.I. – Centre for International Studies)**

The Iraqi parliamentary elections are taking place under circumstances of fundamental importance – not only for the Land of the Two Rivers, but for the entire Middle East. Since the military defeat of Daesh on the field, millions of refugees have returned (or tried to return) to their homes, the reconstruction of Mosul was undertaken (albeit with many difficulties), and violence and attacks have decreased to unprecedented levels in post-2003 Iraq.

However, political elections in Iraq have already been a potential turning point, even in the past. For example in 2010, when the country, after the defeat of al-Qaeda in Iraq, seemed to be preparing for the polls amidst efforts to overcome sectarian divisions. The then outgoing Prime Minister Maliki succeeded in being reconfirmed, despite not having obtained the relative majority of the votes. But the majority of the seats went to Allawi, member of a coalition that gathered together both Shiite and Sunni constituencies. A key role was played by US President Obama. He bargained his support to Maliki, the then leader of the Dawa party, for the possibility of maintaining a small number of American soldiers even after the withdrawal of the US contingent, dictated by the end of the "Status of Forces Agreement" in 2011. Maliki, however, did not prove to be the inclusive leader, prone to dialogue, that Washington hoped for. He continued to carry out policies imbued with sectarianism that fueled social conflict. Those policies became the basis of the violent discontent of the Sunni constituent of the population, especially in the western province of Anbar, which later became the underworld where Daesh was able to catalyze consensus and plan its ideological and military ascent.

In addition, the sectarian system of the second Maliki government was exacerbated by the dysfunctional allocation of institutional and ministerial positions to the Kurdish and Sunni constituents who had supported it. In fact, when Maliki (on strong suggestion from Iran) decided not to pursue any longer the deal with Obama, which would have extended the US presence in the country, the patronage system of a



restricted élite of power could be put back in place once again, thus deeply undermining the institutions in Baghdad. Because of the internal sectarian confrontation, exacerbated by the poor governance of federal authorities, the country immediately underwent the changes in the regional balance. With the outbreak of the Syrian war and the increase in regional tensions along the Sunni-Shiite collision line, Baghdad was caught totally unprepared to counter Daesh's military advance. Thus, Baghdad's organization could quickly – and almost unchallenged – establish its “capital city” in the beating heart of the Middle East.

Today Iraq has undoubtedly many differences compared with the country back in 2014. Still, it has weaknesses linked to the Sunni-Shiite dichotomy. After the fall of the regime of Saddam Hussein, it is almost as if what was once said of Lebanon – that it was the litmus test of all regional tensions – were now even more true for the Land of the Two Rivers. Moreover, all this happens at a time when Daesh may have been defeated on the military level, but the root causes of its rise are still there, and the bulk of the Iraqi leadership of the group is only hidden in the meanders of Anbar.

The Iraqi political landscape, however, has not changed in the last years. Except for political transliteration of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF or Hashd al-Shaabi). From a military point of view, these militias were a key crutch for the Iraqi institutions in the fight against Daesh, and have become the deepest expression of Iranian influence in the country. There are five major coalitions with strong Shiite traction contesting the election, with as many leaders already known in Iraqi politics. Maliki runs as head of an alliance based on the Dawa party. The outgoing Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi competes with its own, brand new alliance after pulling out from Dawa. Hadi al-Ameri, leader of the Badr Organization, a Shiite party-militia, runs for elections in coalition with the PMF. Lastly, Moqtada al-Sadr and Ammar al-Hakim, exponents of two Shiite political and more religious parties, that recently have followed two different paths: the former entered a dialogue with Saudi Arabia, the latter has taken a more conservative fold in order to protect his traditional electoral pool. As for the Kurdish parties, after President Barzani's hasty decision to hold a referendum on independence last September, there is a clear difficulty. Well-established parties, like the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Democratic Party of Kurdistan (DPK) are now very weak and totally discredited in front of the



younger members of Kurdish society. If in the past elections, both nationally and regionally, a process of change and renewal had already been triggered (mainly represented by Gorran), the elections in May could sanction a definitive generational change in the Kurdish political landscape, with inevitable repercussions for regional Kurdish institutions, which appear now self-referential and caught in a worrying spiral of cronyism and corruption. Finally, Sunni, more secular parties are mainly three, led respectively by Jamal Karbuli, former President of the Iraqi Red Crescent, by Usama Nujayfi, former speaker of the Iraqi Parliament, and by Ayad Allawi, who runs in coalition with Salah Mutlak, former deputy Prime Minister, and Salim Jabouri, speaker of Parliament in the legislature that is about to end.

In this round, the outgoing Prime Minister Abadi appears to be in a position of strength, having obtained the degrees of military leader on the field, during the victorious fight against Daesh, and having brought back Kirkuk under the control of the central government. In addition, in a necessary balance that had not characterized his predecessor Maliki's government, Abadi managed to place himself at the right distance from Teheran and Washington, both allies of Baghdad in the fight against Daesh. Moreover, Abadi has managed to become a credible player in the new Saudi attitude towards its Iraqi neighbor. Riyadh has taken on a more constructive role, be it financially, by supporting investments in the reconstruction of the country, or in seeking a cross-cutting dialogue in the midst of Iraqi political sectarianism. Despite this, Abadi remains the Prime Minister who was losing the country to Daesh, had it not been for the "external" intervention of the PMF on Iranian initiative, the Iraqi Army being totally unprepared to organize a real counteroffensive against Baghdadi. Therefore, Abadi has let the PMF put a mortgage on the future Iraqi political balance, a fact that must be put into the equation to try and read the future internal balance. It is no coincidence that Abadi in early 2018 sought an agreement with these Shiite militias, first of all in order to prevent them from joining forces with Maliki. Then, to add difficulties for the Prime Minister, there is the fact that this agreement has quickly crumbled, putting Abadi in greater difficult circumstances as far as a possible dialogue with moderate forces is concerned. In addition, even if Abadi led the country in difficult times, he remained entangled in the inactivism of the vetoes and counter-vetoes in Baghdad, without implementing a real



economic reform plan which appears to be more and more necessary to fill the coffers of the state, that can no longer rely only and exclusively on oil revenues.

On the other side is Maliki, who will try not to allow Abadi to win a second term, in order not to give too much power to his political rival, who is responsible for ousting him from the government. Despite this, however, both remain within the Dawa party, a situation that should ensure a strong Shiite leadership to the next government. Regardless the possible names for the role of Prime Minister, the next government of Baghdad has only one way to avoid that all the threats that lie under the ashes of Iraq might suddenly be rekindled again, with the risk of definitively undermining the very existence of Iraqi institutions. This way can only possibly be an ultimate turn towards cross-cutting attitudes and policies with regard to the sectarian and ethnic divisions of the country, to be accomplished through sound reforms that should free the country's economy from oil. Only in this way the country's security context could be strengthened, thus laying the foundations for an effective reconstruction of the regions (Anbar, Nineveh and Salahuddin) that were most affected by the clashes with Daesh. Also because, if sectarianism is not overcome, the conditions that can feed again jihadism in the country are already present today.

An Iraqi system more prone to internal dialogue would also be less an open territory for regional players, Iran above all. Relationships with the neighbor has always been ambivalent for the overwhelming majority of Iraqis, despite the fact that, as previously mentioned, the role played by the Popular Mobilization Forces in the fight against Daesh puts a huge mortgage on the country's political future. If we add to this the fact that the internal balances of the Shiite clergy of Najaf are also undergoing changes, and most of its religious leadership is developing attitudes increasingly closer to the school of Qom, we can understand even better how the Iraqi political balances in the wake of upcoming elections are of vital importance for internal and regional balances.

In conclusion, the next government will rule a country that is key to all the developments in the Middle East. All this in a regional context where, in the aftermath of US President Trump's choice to quit the JCPOA agreement, new balances are being set, and where a dialogue between Sunnis and Shiites has never been so far distant. Iraq, for its sectarian composition, but also for its political and





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historical weight, and for its strong nationalism regardless of the religion of its citizens, can play an interesting role in the definition of future balances, also in light of the outcome of the conflict in Syria which will likely be favorable to the Assad regime. The composition of the next government will be able to support or hinder this role. With all possible risks that this could generate.



## **Iraq's (difficult) stabilization after the fall of Mosul**

**by Alberto Simoni (La Stampa)**

In July 2017, the fall of Mosul – where, on the 29th of June 2014, the Caliphate had been proclaimed – resulted in a wave of euphoria in Baghdad. The visit of Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to the city's ruins had the intent of sending a very clear message: the Caliphate was shattered and Iraq had regained its territorial integrity after almost four years.

The offensive to liberate Mosul had begun in October 2016 and it protracted for nine months, amid peaks of intensity and stalls. In 2014, more than 3 million people were residing in the town and in neighboring areas. In July 2017, less than half of them were remaining. Ten months from the liberation of Mosul, Iraq is still swaying between new outbursts of sectarian inter-religious violence and the revival of terrorism.

It is in this climate that the country is approaching its next political elections, to be held on May the 12<sup>th</sup>: with dozens of ethnic, religious and secular factions which are supported, to different extents, by powerful regional actors and within an intricate web of obscure interests, which in turn disclose all the uncertainty that lies behind. We may summarize the main knots suffocating the country by dividing them into in three areas, as it follows: the Iran factor; the hidden threat of Sunni jihadism; and the energy issue.

### **The Iran factor**

There is one element which illustrates better than any analysis the actual degree to which Iraq is progressively sliding in the hands of Teheran. That element is the number of trips to Iraq taken in the latest months by Qassem Suleimani, commander of the foreign operations branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). At least 80 “trespasses” have been reported by military sources. Among these trips, there are also those made to Kurdistan during the days of the referendum for independence.



Since the withdrawal of American troops in 2011, the role of Iran has been on the rise, and not only with regards to the military. Through Suleimani's apparatus, many young people and militants are being recruited in Shia towns and villages (more than 65% of the Iranian population is Shia, while the 25% is Sunni). Through pro-Iranian firms, Teheran is exporting food, managing business and markets and partaking in the reconstruction through cranes and concrete "made in Teheran". Furthermore, Iran is also controlling television broadcasters through which it spreads its creed. As noted by former US deputy National Security Adviser for Iraq, Meghan O' Sullivan, the United States' withdrawal from the scene has left a vacuum behind, which the Iranians have successfully managed to fill. Since George W. Bush's America entered Iraq seeking for weapons of mass destruction, with the intent to make of Bagdad a hub for democracy in the region, Iran has started seeing an opportunity. That is to say, the opportunity to wreck the American illusions and turn Iraq into an Iranian client state, molding what had previously been an enemy during the 1980-88 war into an outpost for its own regional interests. Fifteen years after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, it is difficult to disprove the affirmation that "Iran has won, America has lost".

The main instrument by which Tehran influences Iraq is the lever of the Shiite component of Iraqi society which, by religious affinity, looks at Tehran with favour. Iran has numerous allies in the Iraqi Parliament. The Shiite parties are the direct expression of movements, if not militias, that have an agenda prone to Iranian priorities, and have progressively led the country outside the sphere of influence of the "old liberators", the Americans. Militias such as the Badr Organization and Asaib Ahl al-Haq, not to mention the Shiite Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), function as transmission belts connecting society and politics. This process of asserting the role of the Shiites in the Iraqi dynamics reached a peak in 2016, when the Parliament passed a law that gave the Shiite militias a permanent role in the Iraqi security forces. This operation had two purposes: on the one hand, state funds for the Shiite combat units, and on the other hand the recognition - *de facto* - of Iranian control over Iraqi politics. The vote of May 12 will only confirm this trend.



## **The karst river of Sunni jihadism**

From 2014 to 2017 the soldiers of the Caliphate were engaged on two fronts: a traditional war to defend the territory, and the so-called asymmetric war, or the ability to hit the enemy (the Western coalition) with occasional attacks on the ground or in Europe. The first pillar of this defense strategy has collapsed, but this does not mean that the second one is gone. Indeed, the conflict is likely to return to the post-2003 scheme (after the American invasion) and to the attacks against civilians and military personnel planned by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian killed in 2006 that – autonomously from al-Qaeda – shaped the first, embryonic idea of ISIS.

In short, if ISIS was defeated as an "Islamic State", meaning it has lost the territory it once administered, it does remain active on the second front: terrorism fueled also by the spread of its ideology, methodology and propaganda of death.

The military structure that led the Islamic State was composed of former Baathists, that is members of the Baath Party in power for 40 years under Saddam Hussein. Generals, soldiers, experienced troopers able to hide and camouflage in the (Sunni) province of the Anbar, and resurface at the right time. So it went from 2004 and the story might repeat itself. There are two factors supporting this hypothesis. First, in the first few months of 2018 appeared a flag representing a black lion on a white background.

It is the emblem of al-Rayat al-Bayda (White Lions), a paramilitary formation that groups together ISIS fugitives, members of Ansar al-Sham / Ansar al-Islam, and old Baathists. An alliance aimed at trying to stem the Shia militias and at controlling the oil wells of Northern Iraq. Second aspect: the overwhelming power of Shiites in Iraqi society, albeit mitigated in recent months by al-Abadi compared to the fulsome excesses of his predecessor al-Maliki, risks – as happened in the post-2003 – to further marginalize the Sunni community. And that's where resentment risks becoming lust for revenge. With much support for the cause of ISIS and the sectarian struggle. The season of al-Zarqawi started with attacks against Shiite sanctuaries and pilgrims in Karbala and Najaf. Saddam's heirs have shown that they can move at ease among the secret meanderings of Iraq. And to re-emerge, like a karst river, in alliance with ISIS' surviving jihadist factions.



## **The energy issue**

Iraq is the fourth largest producer of crude oil in the world, and it ranks second among the OPEC countries. Iraq's largest oilfield is located in the north, in Kirkuk region. Iraqi wells pump to an average (data from April 2008) of 4.34 million barrels, just below the limit set by OPEC. By 2022 the government would like to raise the level to 6.5 million barrels. The vast majority of crude oil is exported. The control of pipelines becomes vital. Only last April was reactivated the pipeline to Turkey, after the Kurdish autonomous government received assurances from Baghdad about the payment of the debts accumulated for the construction of the infrastructure. Solved the controversy with Erbil, Baghdad now plans the construction of a second pipeline between Kirkuk and Ceyhan. But in the north of Iraq too, ties with the Iranians are strong. From Kirkuk, almost every day tankers transport 30 thousand barrels of crude oil to Iran, to the Kermanshah refinery. Teheran in exchange sends crude oil to the southern port of Basra. There is a Kirkuk-Kermanshah pipeline project under consideration, that can compete with Turkey and thus strengthen the axis between Tehran and Baghdad. In this scenario the Kurdish component comes into play. The September referendum for the secession of Kurdistan from Iraq - despite electoral success - backfired. Baghdad, as well as the Iranian President Rohani, raised their voices against Barzani and other Kurdish leaders. By securing Kirkuk in 2014, the Kurds had the merit of preventing the oilfields to fall under the control of the Islamic State. But last October's advance of the revitalized Iraqi army (and the Iran-backed Shiite militias) allowed Baghdad to regain control of oil in a by the time "ISIS free" area. There the decision showed up, to oblige companies and foreign subjects to stipulate any agreement for the exploitation of the oilfields with the central government, thus utterly cornering the Kurds. The North of Iraq, with its oilfields, and connecting Iran, Syria and the Mediterranean, tickles the interests not only of Baghdad (which wants full and complete control) but of Tehran itself.

## **Conclusion**

The stabilization of Iraq is still far away. The Iranian presence, as multi-faceted and scattered in every aspect, risks more than any another element analyzed above to be destabilizing and to alter regional balances. In fact, even if they have so far appeared



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to be distracted, the United States will hardly accept an Iranian zone of influence, or some kind of hegemony, spanning from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean. Iraq could therefore be the place where both regional and global powers will show their force, maybe in a not so far future.



## **Shifting gears in Iraq-Saudi Arabia relations**

by Yasir Kuoti (MERI - Middle East Research Institute)



Intensification of diplomatic efforts between Iraq and Saudi Arabia suggests that the two countries are moving toward a policy of long-term cooperation, if not an alliance. This surprising rapprochement should be understood in the context of convergent political, security, and economic interests, with implications for regional security and stability.

Relations between Iraq and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) have remained largely cold or nonexistent since the 2003 Iraq War, an outcome of the war itself that saw the empowerment in Iraq of Riyadh's regional archrival, Iran. Since January 2017, however, bilateral relations improved considerably as Saudi officials flocked to Baghdad to meet Iraqi counterparts. Iraqi officials and public figures reciprocated, in speed, with their own visits to the KSA.

The surprising rapprochement agenda have thus far resulted in, among other things, restoring Saudi diplomatic representation in Iraq, opening al-Jadidah Arar border-crossing on the Saudi northern borders with Iraq, and inaugurating the Saudi Arabia-Iraq Coordination Council, opening a new era of strategic ties between the two countries.

### **Bilateral Interests**

A confluence of shared political, economic, and security interests have come together to produce this historic change in policy, though it should not be considered in isolation of a U.S. vision seeking to build a stabilizing regional alliance in an increasingly instable neighborhood.



A key intent of Saudi Arabia's new strategy in Iraq, backed by the United States, is to isolate and contain Iran by means of bilateral cooperation and increasing trade and investments. This represents a change from an earlier Saudi approach that, since 2003, viewed Iraq as an Iranian enclave, a view that only helped to solidify Iranian influence.

This Saudi revision of policy coincided with an Iraqi vision that advocates for a centrist foreign policy agenda. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, Iraq is actively seeking to build relationships with all regional countries without necessarily limiting itself to a particular axis or an ally. Al-Abadi's latest regional tour to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, Jordan, and Iran is an example of this open and centrist foreign policy.

Another intent of this rapprochement policy is economic in nature. The Iraqi leadership's reformist program and the defeat of the Islamic State seem to have convinced the Saudi leadership that Iraq is finally transitioning toward a stable, strong, and unified country. But the Saudis also recognize that these achievements have done little to enhance the lifestyles of many Iraqis, due to limited economic opportunities. Riyadh understands the importance of improving the economic lot of Iraqis in refining its image in the country, an image that has largely been associated with support of terrorism.

Moreover, as part of the 2030 Saudi Vision, Saudi Arabia aims at diversifying its non-oil sources of income through trade and investment. Here, Iraq's desperate needs to rebuild and restore services in liberated areas, and beyond, are convened with a Saudi desire for investment in the country. Notably, in October 2017, the 44<sup>th</sup> Baghdad International Fair saw the participation of 60 Saudi companies occupying the largest section in the fair.

Much like its Saudi counterpart, Iraqi leadership understands that its long-term success necessitates the diversification of the local economy, facilitation of trade, opening the market to foreign investors, and reducing the role of public sector, which suffers from chronic corruption, inefficiency, and lack of transparency. Low and fluctuating oil prices make economic diversification all that critical and urgent.





A third intent of this rapprochement policy is security related, and is part of a broader vision for regional security and stability, backed by the United States. Saudi Arabia and Iraq share a long stretch of largely undefended borders that jihadists could use to conduct cross-border terrorism. Here, national and regional security concerns demand cooperative efforts to secure borders and share intelligence.

### **The Iranian Factor and Sectarianism**

In a column after column, observers have been cautioning of Iranian bids to undermine Iraq-KSA relations, relying on political and popular support that Tehran has garnered over the last 14 years. While such concerns are valid, owed to Iran's history of political, military, and economic influence in the country since 2003, they ignore a simple fact that Iraq is, since 2015, recovering from its over-reliance on Iran, and is increasingly acting as a sovereign nation with its own foreign policy agenda. To calm Iranian fears, Iraqi leadership is working to assure Tehran that Iraq's "return to the Arab fold" will not necessarily come at the expense of good relations with Tehran. After decades of conflict, Iraq's new policy is to be neutral and welcoming of all.

But, if and when Iran attempts to disrupt the cooperation, they are unlikely to blow serious damage to the current trend in Iraq-KSA relations.

With the growing western and Arab backing of Baghdad, Iran's role in Iraq is likely to become weakened by divergences in interests, including the very issues that are supposed to solidify the Iranian role in Iraq, namely its support to some Shiite political parties and paramilitary groups.

On one hand, Iran is interested in perpetuating the leading role of Shiites in Iraq's political process while many Shiite groups and the international community are keen on building an Iraqi state that is pluralist and inclusive with independent decision-making power.

Moreover, the rising nationalist trend in Iraq, best exemplified by Haider al-Abadi, Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, and numerous other public figures, is worthy of note in this regard. These political and religious figures have cheered the rapprochement, recognizing that it could handsomely return economic, political, diplomatic, and



security benefits to Iraq. With their enormous power, there is good reason to believe these have the political and social capital to influence the direction of the country.

Finally, because Saudi investments would likely benefit the Shiite communities in Iraq, through investments in Basra oil fields for example, Iran's proxies are unlikely to impair the cooperation, because that would hurt their own communities.

There are also fears of potential sectarian tensions erupting between the two countries, which could shorten the lifespan of the cooperation. This is less likely to occur, for at least two reasons. First, on the leadership level, current Iraqi and Saudi leaderships appear to be decidedly moderate, prone to engagement, and are actively working to weaken sectarian identities in favor of moderate religious understandings and overarching national identities. Second, and equally importantly, it is not entirely accurate to reduce relations between the two countries to an ideological match; they are bound by a host of shared political, economic, and security interests that are important enough to pave the path for a durable cooperation or even an alliance. Shared interests would likely and ultimately supersede the ideological differences that divided Iraq and Saudi Arabia since 2003.

## **Conclusion**

Recently, *Foreign Affairs* characterized the improvement in relations between Iraq and KSA as "some of the best news to come from the Middle East in a long a time." Bound by shared political, security, and economic interests, the two countries are steadily moving to cement the beginning of a strategic partnership, with implications for regional stability and security. If Saudi Arabia succeeds in implementing the intents of its strategy, it will influence positive changes in Iraq, and beyond.

Engaging Iraq will not only balance the country's overreliance on Iran, but also affords it a much wider choice of partners and opportunities in the region and beyond. A key factor influencing the future of bilateral relations is Iraq's upcoming elections scheduled for May 2018. A win by a moderate and reformist leader will see the relations thrive even more.



## **The political role of the Popular Mobilization Forces and the changing balances in the Shia block**

**by Lorenzo Marinone (Ce.S.I. – Centre for International Studies)**

Coming just a few months after the defeat of Daesh as a territorial entity, the outcome of the next parliamentary elections, to be held on the 12<sup>th</sup> of May, will mark the first step towards the redefinition of Iraq's political balances. At least nominally, the struggle against Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's organization has been a unifying factor for the Iraqi political class as a whole, having engaged the entire country in the fight. However, the rise and fall of Daesh in Iraq also temporally delimitates a period of incubation that led to the emergence of new contrasts among parties, movements and ethno-religious actors, following patterns partly unprecedented. Indeed, during that time, each actor matured an interest to capitalize politically their contribution in the fight against Daesh. It should not come as a surprise, then, that the Shia block is approaching the forthcoming elections with an unprecedented degree of fragmentation, which seems remarkably far from the unity reached by the Iraqi National Alliance which, in the first elections of the post-Saddam era in 2005, managed to capture much of the Shiites' political entities.

Since 2014, the true incubator of these political aspirations has been the heterogeneous group of militias that goes under the name of Popular Mobilization Forces (Hashd al-Shaabi, PMF). These forces were already – albeit not fully – institutionalized during the last months of Maliki's second term, with the creation of the Popular Mobilization Committee, through which the former Premier attempted to make up for a lack in the national security forces, which had proven to be increasingly powerless vis à vis the threat of the jihadi advance. As a result, the PMF swiftly acquired a mass dimension, particularly thanks to the influx of hundreds of thousands of Shia fighters, most of them volunteers, who answered the 'call to arms' from Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani. In a matter of a few months, these paramilitary organizations, whose number of members ranges, depending on the estimates, from 60 to 142 thousands, have acquired a role which, potentially, exceeds security itself, and stretches out to reach the political dynamics of the country as well.



Indeed, the volunteers' enrolment mostly took place through already existing party structures and not, as al-Sistani may have originally hoped for, through the Ministry of Interior or the Ministry of Defence, thus leading to a proliferation of militias outside the control of the state. Having contained Daesh, which had come to control a third of the country, the PMF soon acquired a degree of trust and legitimacy far superior than the one enjoyed by the Military and the regular security forces, which are seen by the population as largely ineffective and deeply corrupted. This considerable amount of trust, garnered in such a tragic time in the country's history, seems to be rather transversal as, according to polls, three quarters of the Iraqi population believe the PMF should have room in future political arrangements. Thus, all things considered, these militias constitute a potential electoral constituency for all those political actors who will get to intercept their instances and their aspirations. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that, because of the skills matured during four years of conflict, the PMF are potentially capable of rivalling the State's monopoly of the use of force in a considerable part of the country. Besides conferring political legitimacy to some actors, then, these militias can also be manoeuvred and used to shape the political and sectarian landscape of the country itself.

In light of their potential political prominence, the Popular Mobilization Forces have inevitably become a terrain of struggle and competition between the main Shia political actors. Some of them include current Premier Haider al-Abadi, former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki – who is planning a comeback after the forced step back which left the leadership of the country to his fellow party member Abadi – up until Moqtada al-Sadr, the influent clergy guiding the Saraya al-Salam factions of the PFM, and Hadi al-Ameri, the leader of the Badr Organization, whose military wing has been one of the most efficient and structured ones in the PFM since its very creation.

The PMF's capability to influence the government clearly emerges once we consider Abadi's changing behavior during his term. Initially, the Prime Minister pushed for their integration into the Iraqi security forces, even managing to insert some of their factions, such as the al-Abbas Division, within the Ministry of Defence command structure. He did so in order to avoid what could have been a dangerous doubling within the security apparatus, which could have led to new tensions between different ethno-religious components. Indeed, this is in line with the general trend of



many policies promoted by Abadi. During his term, the Prime Minister did not hesitate to emphasize the distance from his predecessor Maliki, with the ultimate goal of delegitimizing him, imposing himself at the top of the Dawa party (both Abadi and Maliki come from this party, which has been the pillar of every government coalition since 2005), and finally become an undisputed reference point in the Shiite block.

However, from late 2016, Abadi started to appear more inclined to meet the demands of PMF leaders, as he started a meticulous operation of political “courting” in an attempt to secure a second term. Indeed, with executive order 91, Abadi officially assimilated the PMF within the Iraqi Armed Forces, albeit remarking their independence and placing them under the Prime Minister’s direct supervision, rather than under the Ministry of Interior’s or the Ministry of Defense’s control. Moreover, a decree signed on March 9, 2018 establishes the parity of status between the PMF and the Iraqi Armed Forces with respect to salaries and other privileges, while also delegating some of the Prime Minister’s prerogatives to a selected council drawn from the PMF itself, following an already existing informal chain of command.

Such institutionalization without integration goes hand in hand with the demands of those within the PMF who have strong ties with Iran. Suffice to say, with respect to this, that the re-confirmation of the command chain allowed Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, founder of the Kataib Hezbollah militia, to continue managing in total autonomy the whole of state budget destined to the militias (\$1,63 billion in 2017). Al-Muhandis can be seen as the main junction between the PMF and Teheran, due to his ties with the Quds Force in Iran. As a matter of fact, the growing importance of the PMF has allowed Iran to boost and expand its influence on Iraqi politics in a similar way than it did in the past. At the same time, though, this boost is characterized by a considerable qualitative improvement, as it passes through a direct political engagement which could provide a much more significant space of maneuver, resulting from the ambiguous double nature – political and military – of some of the PMF components. In fact, May’s election will be characterized by the participation of the Fatah coalition, which is made up of the political wings (virtually all recently established) of some of the PMF factions which are closest to Teheran, including Ameri’s Badr Organization, Qais al-Khazali’s Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Akram al\_Kaabi’s



Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Ahmad al-Assadi's Kataib Jund al-Imam, Shibl al-Zaidi's Kataim al-Imam and, finally, the already mentioned Kataib Hezbollah. On the one hand, Fatah's political statement could soon translate into its entrance into the body of government or, else, it could translate into the acquisition of a *de facto* veto power on the activity of the government itself, which would nonetheless make its role crucial. In this sense, it has been witnessed a certain opening from Abadi, who last January sought to promote an electoral alliance uniting most of the Shias with the exception of Maliki, thus binding his Nasr alliance to the Fatah coalition. Such an experiment floundered in a matter of days, perhaps more because of political calculus in prevision of the elections, rather than due to an actual incompatibility between the two. However, on the other hand, the maintenance of an autonomous paramilitary structure might allow Fatah to insert some of its members within the ranks of the official security forces, emulating on a larger scale what was already done in the past by the Badr Organization, particularly in the Diyala and Salahuddin provinces. After all, this process already seems to be ongoing in some of the areas that were freed from Daesh. In Mosul, for instance, many members of the Badr Organization have entered the ranks of the newly regenerated federal police.

The possible further consolidation of the most Iran-leaning parts of the PMF within the Iraqi institutional landscape, be it under the security profile or under the political profile, make these militias, and their political branches, actors that can, in perspective, deeply influence the dynamics of Iraqi politics for the years to come. However, it should not be underestimated that the political heritage of the PMF cannot be entirely intercepted by these factions, nor by the Abadi alone. A player like Sadr, though relegated almost to the margins of the political scene in recent years, could increase his consensus thanks to the contribution of the FMP. In fact, the Shiite cleric seems to have carefully planned his return. Sadr has repeatedly asked for the disbandment of the militias, in order to remove a possible Iranian driver of influence. In parallel, he has tried to present himself as a valid interlocutor for a plurality of actors, not least with a visit to Saudi Arabia in the summer of 2017. In addition, Sadr has exerted some pressure on Abadi through the anti-corruption campaign fostered since 2016, which touches such a sensitive issue for the electorate. Whatever the results of the May elections and the parliamentary strength of each party, the formation of the new government will probably have to go through a long negotiation



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phase between the main Shiite political actors, whose outcome could be less obvious than expected.



## **Iraqi Reconstruction: Opportunities and Political Challenges**

**by Abbas Kadhim (George Washington University)**

Prior to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, the country was ruled by a single-party government with a firmly structured hierarchy. The Ba'th Party took power by a coup d'état in 1968 and gradually established itself as the only political player in the country for the following thirty-five years. At the political level, the Ba'th adopted an exclusionary approach to its opponents, banning any form of political activity by other parties. The two main competitors, the Communist Party and the Shia Da'wa Party, were outlawed and their members were imprisoned, executed, or forced to live in exile. Meanwhile, a Ba'thification effort was launched to enroll as many Iraqis as possible. Government employees, military personnel, and students at all levels were required to join the Ba'th Party. Among those who were outside government networks, such as farmers, independent workers, and artisans, the Ba'th continued to make contacts and recruitment. While there was no written law requiring Iraqis to join the Ba'th, refusing recruitment effort was considered a hostile act that could lead a citizen to becoming a suspect and risking dire consequences.

At the social and economic fronts, the Ba'th government led a strong effort to modernizing the country. The nationalizing of Iraq's oil in 1972 and 1973, coinciding with the sharp rise of oil prices in mid-1970s, gave the Iraqi government large sums of money, which was used to build a robust infrastructure and invest in the sectors of education, industry, healthcare, agriculture, with handsome amounts spent on building strong government institutions and security forces to maintain a strong military capability for the defense of the country, as well as strong state control over the citizens. This spending paradigm was drastically changed in the 1980s, as the Iraq-Iran War (1980-1988) intensified. The war consumed Iraq's resources and, as oil exports stopped, the infrastructure of the 1970s began to gradually crumble.

In 1990, Iraq invaded Kuwait, leading to a war with a US-led coalition of thirty countries. The country was greatly damaged by heavy bombardment for thirty-five days, followed by a short ground war that lasted for a few days. Iraq was placed under a very strict UN Security Council system of economic sanctions, which ultimately





reversed all of the economic and social development gains of the previous decades. The only thing that continued to strengthen was the regime's brutal internal security measures and its defiance of the international community, which led to more and stronger sanctions. In addition to its demoralizing effect on the Iraqi society, this era witnessed complete collapse of the economy, a halt of government commitment to compulsory universal education and all other projects of modernization. The only remaining concerns for the regime of Saddam Hussein was its survival, which was ensured until 2003 by measure of absolute cruelty.

The final decision to use military means to topple the Iraqi regime was made by President George W. Bush in March 2003, who led a coalition to invade the country and accomplish the first phase – regime change – in a matter of weeks. The US administration took control of the Iraq through an appointed administrative authority, led by former Ambassador L. Paul Bremer, who signed a number of directives dismantling all state institutions, including the ones that were not directly involved in the regime's brutality. The following eight years were a long journey to establish functional state institutions and restore the baseline of acceptable daily life. By July 2004, an Iraqi Governing Council and a subordinate government were put together, and Transitional Administrative Law was drafted and signed. A National Assembly was elected, whose main task was to approve a permanent constitution. This task was accomplished in 2005 and in 2006, the first elected government was seated. Since that date, Iraq held regular free and fair national and provincial elections, well within the internationally acceptable standards.

Meanwhile, the Americans and the Iraqi governments that served from 2006 to the present never managed to provide Iraqis what they needed most: adequate electricity, a decent healthcare system, adequate education system, a functioning economy, and most importantly, security. Between 2006 and 2014, Iraq generated a trillion dollars from oil sales, but none of it went to development projects in these sectors. Most of the money was lost in corruption schemes, mismanagement, and wasteful projects. Some Iraqi cities were permanent theaters for the activities of anti-government international and domestic terrorist groups that caused a great deal of death and destruction. The last iteration of such terrorist activities was the rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The terrorist group made a



dramatic appearance on 10 June 2014, when it occupied Nineveh Province and, in a matter of days, it managed to take firm hold of one-third of total Iraqi territory, exposing the completely demoralized military, which was haphazardly established by the US-led coalition. In the following weeks, the country was abandoned to fend for itself against the most savage group of religiously fanatical terrorists. It was finally saved by a *fatwa* (religious ruling) by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who called on Iraqis to fight in defense of Iraq. Tens of thousands from all ethno-sectarian backgrounds heeded the call and stopped ISIS in its tracks, in preparation for a three-year counteroffensive that finally defeated it and liberated all Iraqi soil.

The liberation, however, was not cost-free. The battles across large swaths of land left thousands of deaths and devastating destruction. Most of the fighting was done in the cities and residential areas, and ISIS made explosives its main defense strategy. They set explosives and Improvised Explosive Devices in houses, cars, shops, schools, and roadsides. In certain cities, such as the western side of Mosul, damage and destruction was up to 90%, making the return of the population impossible for some time to come. In addition to the destruction and lack of essential services, there are countless of explosive devices that are yet to be located and dismantled. Iraq's government must act rapidly to rebuild destroyed homes and public facilities, restore services, locate and treat unexploded devices, and facilitate the return of internally displaced people to their towns.

Among the other challenges in the short term is the election season and possible change of administration. For the balance of this year, the Iraqi political class will be fully occupied by the post-election drama and the marathon of negotiations it will necessitate. The formation of a government in Iraq is not a straightforward process. Although the elections will have winners and losers, forming a government is not directly reflective of the election results. It is mostly the outcome of ethno-sectarian consensus and intra-sectarian deals. At the national level, there must be a general acceptance of all top candidates, who must also pass a difficult vetting system within their respective groups. This process will consume everybody's attention for months, and national obligations, such as reconstruction and other issues of governance, will be sidelined for months. If the current government continues in place for the coming term, there will be some continuity and the return of focus on reconstruction will be



relatively faster. If, however, another government is seated, we will not see tangible steps taken before the mid-2019.

Another challenge would be the political economy. Iraq is a rentier state almost totally dependent on oil revenue. With the current oil prices, which are barely enough to support the operation of baseline expenditure, allocating funds to the needed massive reconstruction projects will be a highly contested policy. According to the Iraqi government, the destruction ISIS left behind in all liberated territories will require more than 40 billion dollars to rebuild. To overcome the loss of patience among Iraqis in other provinces, the next government must allocate sizeable funds to urgent projects in central and southern Iraq. Funds they don't have at the current time or in the near future, with the forecasted oil prices.

Iraq needs to pull all of its political and financial resources to meet the mounting challenges of post-ISIS era. The international community can provide a lot of help in a multiple of ways: political, financial, expertise, and by applying pressure on the Iraqi government to adopt policies that eliminate corruption and mismanagement.

## **The Relations Between Baghdad and Erbil and the Future of Disputed Territories**

by Nassr Mohammed Ali (Nahrain University)



### **Background**

The post-2003 era has inaugurated a new phase in the relations between Baghdad and Erbil after decades of tension and bloody conflicts, which dating back to establishment of Iraqi state in 1921. The new constitution of 2005, organized the relationship between Baghdad and Erbil on the basis of federalism. However, many of controversial issues emerged related with division of powers, managing of natural resources (oil and gas), the Peshmerga forces (the military forces of Kurdistan Regional Government, KRG), and what are called internally as disputed territories. Although the 2005 constitution outlined the roadmap to resolve these controversial issues, until now none of these have been resolved, because both parties (Baghdad and Erbil) interpret the constitution in different ways and refusing make concessions and compromising. This dispute make the *de facto* policy the only means by which these parties deal with each other.

The issue of internally disputed territories considered one of prominent and problematic issue. Since this territories included multi ethnic, religious, and sectarian groups, and this complex mosaic overlaps with concentration of valuable amount of oil and gas resources, especially in Kirkuk. That explains why the latter has long been one of the most important and most dangerous among the country's disputed territories, which include parts of Salaheddin, Nineveh and Diyala governorates. It contains approximately an estimated nine billion barrels of oil and hosts a series of



strategic installations and facilities, including its oilfields, airport, and the important K-1 military base.

#### **Article 140: Difficulties of Implementation and Different Perspectives**

The origin of article 140 of constitution, dates back to 2003 in Article 58 of Transitional Administrative Law (TAL), which includes normalization of the situation in Kirkuk and other disputed territories, and because of failure to reaching a viable solution that satisfies all major parties (Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen), this Article was replaced by Article 140 in the 2005 constitution. Consequently the Article 140 included 3 steps, which have been mentioned in Article 58 of TAL. These steps are: normalization, that means dealing with the effects that have taken place in demographics in Kirkuk and other disputed territories which had occurred in the previous three decades of Baath regime as a result of Arabization campaigns; a census; and a referendum in Kirkuk and other disputed territories to determine the will of their citizens. Article 140 provides a deadline to implement the Article with its measures, which is December 31, 2007.

Erbil considered the Article 140 the only roadmap to resolve the problem of Kirkuk and other disputed territories, because the Kurd have the majority in the city. It should be note that the 1957 census divided Kirkuk's population according to mother-tongue, finding the governorate was 48.3 percent Kurd, 28.2 percent Arab, 21.4 percent Turkmen, and the rest Chaldean, Assyrian, or other minorities.

On the other hand the Arabs and Turkmen oppose the Article 140, and they argued that the deadline to implement of this Article has expired, since the constitution provides no guidance on what should happen if this deadline is not met by December 31, 2007, and therefore, they confirmed that it needs for a constitutional amendment (that was one of the four possible options for resolving the dispute over Kirkuk suggested by UN Special Representative Staffan de Mistura in April 2009 ). In addition, they accuse Kurdish parties of changing demographic structure and identity through forcibly displacement of other communities, of having settled thousands of Kurdish families instead of them in the context of a “Kurdification” campaign, and they fear from possibility of annexing Kirkuk and other territories to KRG. Although the Kurds are considered majority in Kirkuk, the other communities of



non-Kurds claim the majority for themselves, and that make difficult to join Kirkuk and other territories to KRG. Consequently if multi-ethnic territories join to KRG with narrow majority of voters, the result could be instability, tensions and enflame ethnic conflicts for decades to come. This scenario could lead to tensions between two major parties in KRG as well, since the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) is the dominant party in Kirkuk and if this city join to KRG, the PUK could gain the upper hand in the parliament of KRG over its main rival, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

Despite Erbil demands to implement Article 140, it tends to exploit the weakness of government in Baghdad to impose *de facto* control over the disputed territories, as it did when the Peshmerga took control over disputed territories after the fall of Mosul in 2014 in the hands of ISIS, and the president of KRG Massoud Barzani declared in press conference in Erbil in June 27, 2014 that "Article 140 has been completed for us, and will not talk about it anymore."

### **Referendum and Shifting Power Balance: What are Possible Scenarios?**

The relationship between Baghdad and Erbil, after September 25, 2017 referendum was rejected by Baghdad, Turkey and Iran, entered into new stage, and shifted the balance of power in favour of Baghdad. Since The Iraqi federal forces entered disputed territories held by Erbil since 2014 and took control over the airport, oil fields and the North oil company in Kirkuk. It must be highlighted here that the oil of Kirkuk supply 50% of KRG oil exports. This new status weakened Erbil in the negotiation and extracted it from many of pressure points toward Baghdad, as the latter gained the upper hand in the negotiations for the future of relations with Erbil.

According to the new circumstances in this context and in the face of international and regional pressures, especially Turkish and Iranian rejection of Erbil dominance over disputed territories, of the pressures from Baghdad, and of the divisions between two major parties PUK and KDP, Erbil may accept to keep Kirkuk as a governorate not organized in the autonomous region, as a viable realistic option in post-referendum period. No doubt this scenario is more favourite by Arabs and Turkmen.



Meanwhile Erbil is well aware of the stakes which would have resulted from the return to de facto Kurdish control on disputed territories, whether it do this due to the collapse of fragile security, rising terrorist threats, or upsetting the balance power between it and Baghdad, giving to the increasing strength of local actors in this territories following defeating ISIS. Consequently Erbil cannot underestimate the heavy presence of Popular Mobilization Forces (Shiite forces) in Kirkuk and other disputed territories along with tribal mobilization (Sunni Tribal Forces), as well as the armed groups from other minorities like Turkmen and Yezidi (who accused Peshmerga with retreating from Mount Sinjar in August 2014, leaving the Yazidis fell into ISIS hand, who then committed brutal massacres against them). Moreover, Erbil definitely cannot deny and ignore the role of Iran and Turkey.

### **Next Parliamentary Election of 12 May 2018 : Looking a Head**

Erbil will contests the next parliamentary election in the midst of internally sharp divisions between two major parties PUK and PDK, as well as losing it control over disputed territories and it will likely will lose many parliamentary seats in disputed territories. However, Erbil will be an important part in the formation of next government, as it did since 2003, and thus an important party in any future discussion about Kirkuk and other disputed territories.

Whatever the outcomes of the next parliamentary elections, which are not much different from their predecessors, the comprehensive settlement or major negotiation to disputed territories – let alone other contentious issues- are excluded and the output of negotiation will be temporary measures, particularly if we take into consideration the challenges confront next government related with control and integrated the armed groups deployed in disputed territories and another challenge is how to return of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in this territories.

Finally, the future of disputed territories is connected with other measures related to rule of law, ethno-sectarian politics, corruption and governance in Baghdad and Erbil alike, as well as the policies of peacebulding in disputed territories in post-ISIS era, and how to engage of local actors in future negotiations of disputed territories.



## **Biographies**

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Gabriele Iacovino is the Director at Ce.S.I. – Centre for International Studies. He entered the Institute in 2010 as analyst of Middle East and North Africa and became the Coordinator of all the analysis wing of the Institute in 2013. His fields of analysis include geopolitics and security in North Africa and Middle East, jihadi terrorism and deradicalization and global issues.

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