

The Persisting Past of Iraq

Peace and stability are high priorities for Iraq today. Yet to be effective, engagements for peace need to consider the complex interaction between Shiite and Sunni cleavages, tribal dynamics, and regional/international influences. Such dynamics cross state and non-state levels, exemplified by Iran's regional influence on Iraqi actors at all levels.

By Mae Anna Chokr

Since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime, the central state of Iraq became much weaker and more fragmented. It is characterized by high levels of corruption, dysfunctional oversight mechanisms and limited political and judicial accountability. Non-state actors have benefited from the power vacuum of the central state and have also aligned with different regional actors – namely Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey. Iraq consists of a rich and ethnically diverse history despite its major sectarian fault lines. According to the World Population Review 2021 Iraq today consists of approximately 75 per cent Arabs, 17 per cent Kurds and a further eight per cent of other minorities. While the Constitution guarantees the freedom of religious beliefs, Islam is the official religion of Iraq, with believed estimates of 65 per cent Shiites and 35 per cent Sunnis.

With a predominantly Shiite population, neighboring Iran plays a particularly influential role in Iraq. Over the years, attention has focused on the presence of religiously affiliated armed groups operating at the core of Iraq's politics, in particular, networks such as the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU). The PMU are an umbrella of armed groups. Shiite fighters form most of the PMU brigades, some of these are aligned with Irani-



Tribal leaders attend a meeting over tensions in ethnically and religiously mixed northern cities of Iraq. *Damir Sagolj / Reuters*

an interests and have penetrated Iraqi government institutions. For example, to retain the political status quo, Iran-allied actors in Iraq such as the PMU may seek to shape Iraq's parliamentary elections, such as the upcoming ones scheduled for October 2021. This has reinforced the Shiite-Sunni sectarian cleavage and has further undermined the independence of Iraqi central

state, its institutional capacity as well as challenging any ongoing conflict resolution efforts. Yet the PMU has only been able to do this and gained such traction in Iraq as they were seen as a key counter insurgency actor during the war against the so-called Islamic State (IS), which propagates an extremist Sunni narrative and that also spans international borders. At the same time,

Local Oriented Peacebuilding

One approach to peacebuilding in contexts such as Iraq is to support local actors who can work across conflict cleavages. The multiplicity of overlapping interests and alliances – such as sectarian, tribal, and regional – may provide opportunities for collaboration in unyielding conflicts. Local actors who use such opportunities may help to manage conflict and minimize societal polarization. However, to be sustainable, a link to the national level is often necessary.

tribal affiliations still remain influential in Iraq, and these sometimes also cross the Sunni-Shiite cleavage or divide.

At the international level, different actors have different stakes in the region. The E3+3 (France, Germany, United Kingdom, China, Russia and the United States), for instance continue to focus their efforts on limiting Iran's nuclear threat by trying to re-establish the Iran nuclear agreement known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which the US unilaterally left in 2018 under the Trump administration. While many view that the overall the nuclear issue should be connected to Iranian engagement in the region, Tehran categorically rejects such efforts. Hence, Iran maintains its regional influence through its proxies in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Syria.

While such dynamics have challenged conflict resolution activities, international efforts adopting a local-oriented approach may enhance peace and stability in Iraq. This approach includes building partnerships with national authorities through organizational capacity building (see textbox p.2). Any effort at working towards stability and peace in Iraq today, however, needs to reckon with the long shadow of the past in Iraq. Three dimensions seem especially important to keep in mind both in understanding the past and dealing with the present: the Shiite-Sunni sectarian cleavage; tribal dynamics; and the role and interference of regional as well as international actors.

A deeper understanding along these three dimensions can help international actors with formalized bilateral relations improve chances for facilitating durable dialogue processes amongst local actors in Iraq. While exploring the interaction between these dimensions, it is helpful to focus es-

pecially on the role and relations of the following actors: the prime minister's office, religious actors including the Shiite religious authority, the PMU, tribal networks, and regional/international actors. The interrelationship between these actors is expressed through loyalties, alliances, operational capacity, and legitimacy on local, national, and regional levels.

Sectarian Narratives

Narratives or "stories" give insight into an actor's values, interests and how an actor gives meaning to events and develops its political discourse. Narratives often legitimize political actions, even if they do not shape them in a deterministic way. In Iraq, sectarian narratives shape the political Shiite-Sunni cleavage.

Sectarian narratives are often related to group-forming processes. Once individuals form themselves into groups based on shared religious affiliations and stories, they often create a cohesive bloc or confessional sect. The political-cultural-religious overlaps of these groups are often reinforced and conveyed through religious language, shared stories and symbols. Often it also requires either an institutional backing such as by a religious authority or a charismatic leader carrying a form of legitimacy. Furthermore, such group-forming process-

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es can also be shaped by informal and local-level legitimizing processes and practices found in tribal customary codes (see textbox p.3).

Sectarian narratives can be conflict inducing or re-enforcing, especially if they are politicized. Politicizing sectarian identities or group affiliations seem to contribute to the protraction of preexisting conflicts between local actors. Yet these very same narratives may also act as enablers for peace, as they may carry multiple interpretations and do not deterministically shape a specific political or military behavior. The Shiite and Sunni narratives each have a specific historical genealogy and are represented by various stakeholders with overlapping interests. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that the sectarian lens is only one aspect or way of viewing the conflict.

Shiite and Sunni Cleavages

The Shiites believes that the rightful successor of the prophet Mohammad should remain in his direct lineage known as *ahl al bayt*. The largest Shiite branch adhere to what is known as the Twelver religious school of thought, which Iran's official state religion also identifies with. This school believes in twelve imams of which the final imam, Mahdi, will appear at the "end of times".

The PMU is mainly made of Shiite fighters who require the support of an institutional religious authority known as the *Marj'iyah*, currently headed by Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. The *Marj'iyah* operates on a national level and feeds into the sectarian narrative, by issuing religious endorsements to armed groups such as the PMU. These endorsements or defense *fatwas* are based on Islamic jurisprudence to help secure nationwide support.

On a state level, the prime minister's office is the key power holder in the Iraqi federal government. The constitution of Iraq prohibits the establishment of militia organizations outside of the state's official armed forces. Prior to current minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi who assumed office in March 2018, former minister Haider al-Abadi issued a decree before the parliamentary elections, intending to redefine the PMU's function in relation to the state. By July 2019, his successor Adil Abdul Mahdi had formally stipulated a decree stating the integration of the PMU into the state's security apparatus. This organizational

infrastructure would intend to transform the PMU into a reliable and easily deployable emergency task force. Therefore, the PMU leaderships that are close to Iran have emphasized their loyalty to both Sistani and partly the state military structure.

As a state-sanctioned organization, statements that may accuse the PMU of committing human rights violations due to their militarization would directly affect the integrity of the Prime Minister's Office. Today, the prime minister's authority is in a fragile position as he attempts to consolidate a divided state of mistrusted partisan elites and regional and religious interference. On the other hand, there are politically active Shiite groups such as the Peace Brigades or the Sadrist political party lead by Moqtada al Sadr, who represent themselves as a national stronghold of Arab Iraqi Shiites. Presently, as an Iraqi religious

authority, the *Marjaiyah* is playing a role in steering away from polarization towards a more coherent national state based on citizenship which is appealing to parties such as the Sadrists.

The second major religious group are the Sunnis. The name Sunni refers to “people of the tradition”, as it stresses the prevalence of the *Sunnah* – which refers to the practices of the Prophet Mohammad through four Islamic schools of thought. An important facet of Iraq is its historically complex tribal society in which the politicization of Islam became intertwined with the sociological makeup of the country across time. Traditional tribal membership in Iraq is important for an individual in both Sunni and Shiite communities where they enjoy a degree of a locally formalized legitimacy without state interference. Sunni Arabs are largely represented by tribes situated in northwestern provinces of Iraq who had felt sidelined after the US-led invasion and the fall of Saddam Hussein’s Sunni-dominated regime.

One of the main interests for Sunni groups is their ability to maintain their social and political standing in state and non-state levels given the widespread Iran and Shiite influence. Consequently, the weakening and marginalization of the Sunni opposition has partly contributed to the mobilization and recruitment of fighters into the IS.

Tribal Cleavages

While the 2005 ratified constitution of the Iraqi state is built on democratic principles, the state’s legitimacy is continuously challenged by the self-governance of communal cleavages. Tribes in Iraq have a semi-autonomous nature and follow their own set of customary laws and other sub-identities. The politicization of sectarian dynam-

Narratives may also act as enablers for peace.

ics is often legitimized by these communal divisions. In turn, this reinforces communal representations and allows groups to play an active role in politics. Such developments prove to be complex, since political leaders and self-governed groups attempt to merge traditional and modern systems of governance. Nonetheless, a degree of territorial administrative autonomy plays a role in each of the Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish provinces due to pre-existing loyalties that have contributed to the establishment of the provincial boundaries.

Customary Systems of Conflict Settlement

Ancient tribal law in Iraq comprises a sovereign and independent body of customary laws historically held by tribes.

The initial steps towards recognizing tribal law in the 20th century were first taken by Britain’s Tribal Disputes Act in 1916, which was then adopted in 1924 by King Faysal’s government, allowing tribal law to function in the Iraqi countryside.

Arbitration laws were established in 2018 as efforts of dialogue between the state and the tribes, where the Ministry of Justice in Iraq assembled a team to secure the safety and peace of communities across all provinces, through an appointed group of tribal arbitrators.

47 tribal leaders known as *Al-awareef* were selected by the Ministry of Interior to resolve disputes on a regular basis and to reduce the expansion of conflicts, with no salaries provided.

Tribal dispute resolution consists of a set of communal rituals of reconciliation. The communal gathering or diplomacy is traditionally carried out in the sheikh’s house or the victim’s house as a symbol of goodwill. The process of the settlement is named *sulha* in Arabic, in which a *fasel*, or a sum of money, is agreed upon as a price to pay for the damage of honor that has been caused.

Based on different variables such as closer geographical proximity of Sunni and Shiite areas, tribal relations, or shared history all have direct influence on reconciliation or opposition between both sects. For that reason, tribal networks have played stabilization roles and have shifted alliances depending on personal interests. For example, Sunni tribes in Mosul in the north of Iraq, oppose Iranian influence while Sunni tribes in the Ramadi area in central Iraq are leaning towards reconciliation with Iran backed local leaders. Moreover, in 2016 the head of the PMU’s Commission Faleh al-Fayyadh had publicized the presence of roughly 40,000 to 50,000 Sunni fighters within a registered brigade of the PMU known as the Tribal PMU. This displays the ability for tribes to bridge across the sectarian divide.

It is important to keep in mind that the tribal system represents a crucial social system in the country, previous attempts at dismantling the tribal networks gravely destabilized the country and increased chances of armed conflict. For this reason, the Iraqi government continuously attempts to ensure that tribal loyalties, allegiances, and their affairs are taken into consideration to maintain social stability.

Regional and International Level

In January 2020 a US drone assassinated one of the Iran’s leading figures Qassim Soleimani – the commander of the Quds Force, a division of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – as well as Iraq’s PMU chief of staff. This took place after the US Defense Department identified that Soleimani posed a threat on US personnel in

Iraq and throughout the region. In addition, as one of the largest Sunni Arab countries, Saudi Arabia’s stark opposition against Iran’s competitive regional role has added to the local Sunni-Shiite tensions through indirect warfare. On a regional level, competing neighboring states support different internal rivals politically and militarily.

The ongoing conflict between Sunni and Shiite Muslims in Iraq today is influenced by a historical rivalry between Iraq and Iran reflected across numerous accounts between Arabs and Persians. Their competition for regional political power is due to their close geography and shared history. For this reason, as opposed to Iranian loyalty, if Shiite groups in Iraq are empowered by their national or Arab identity this may trigger tensions on an intra Shiite level. More specifically between an “Arab Shiite vision” and an “Iranian Shiite vision” in Iraq on both local and national levels.

How the Biden administration’s foreign policy will reflect onto Iran remains unclear, as several scenarios are at play. This includes potential results of the negotiations in Vienna revisiting the JCPOA signed back in 2015. The lifting of sanctions or in contrary further limitations on Iran will have a direct impact on regional proxies such as in Iraq. Due to pressures caused by the sanctions, Iran is dependent on Iraqi resources including capital and border access that allows smuggled resources to cross into Iran through Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. However, unlike other regional proxies, the PMU is an organ of the state under the authority of the Prime Minister’s office in Iraq. This allows a degree of

legitimacy and credibility within the Iraqi state alongside Sunni (and other) representatives in the government. The PMU's link to the state could potentially provide Iraq a powerful role in conflict de-escalation domestically and regionally, through the PMU networks as a common interlocutor.

Engagement for Peace and Stability

Understanding sectarian dynamics in Iraq can help to inform efforts when addressing challenges over stability, peace, migration, humanitarian action and development. By recognizing existing sectarian dynamics and their respective stakeholders – as discussed above – the core issues on local, and nation-

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al levels become more easily identifiable and conflict resolution efforts more contextualized. Such efforts need to build on the inherent flexibility in sectarian narratives, the crossing of conflict cleavages and work towards the development of mechanisms to deal with conflict nonviolently. This requires

engaging with different actors and working towards inclusive and effective local and national governance systems.

Moreover, conflicts may not only forcefully displace people, but also disproportionately affect children and female migrants. While many international actors focus on migration, understanding sectarian narratives, tribal dynamics and regional/international actors can help interpret reasons associated with refugee and humanitarian aid movements. This can add to durable solutions and social protection assistance for displaced persons. Additionally, the impact of conflict on the local infrastructure of Iraq has exacerbated water, land, and environment conditions in the last years, resulting in a lack of access to basic services. Development is needed. Yet there is little or no incentive for private

sector investment, given the lack of funding and the absence of electoral and judicial accountability. Accordingly, localization strategies can help the repair of infrastructure and improve services such as health, education, treated water, nutritional supplements, sewage treatment and road repairs.

Overall, religious authorities in Iraq carry a social and political weight capable of swaying an outcome towards resolving conflict. Engaging with religiously inspired groups is therefore necessary, even if challenging. The development of an all-inclusive vision for Iraq and considering the state and non-state levels and sources of legitimacy is key to peace and stability. For that reason, a reflection on why stories of the past continue to persist today can shed light on a way forward.

For more on perspectives on Mediation and Peace Promotion, see [CSS core theme page](#).

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