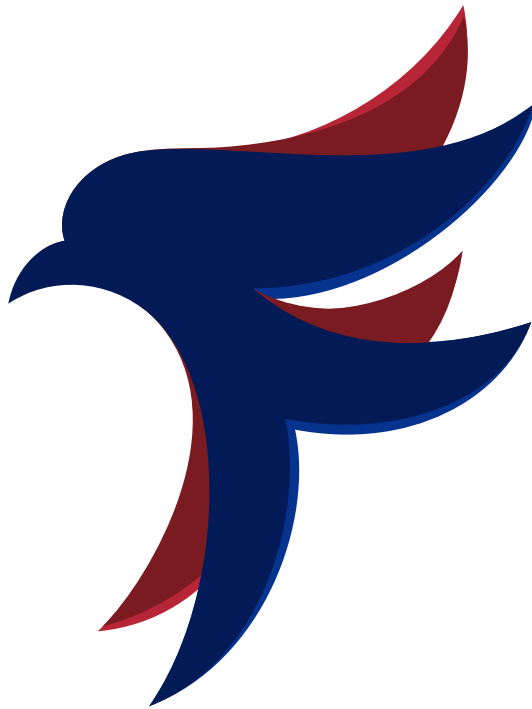


PREVENTING THE NEXT INSURGENCY: A PATHWAY FOR REINTEGRATING IRAQ'S SUNNI POPULATION

Ramzy Mardini





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PREVENTING THE NEXT INSURGENCY: A PATHWAY FOR REINTEGRATING IRAQ'S SUNNI POPULATION

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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ABSTRACT

Since the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the “Sunni community” has been imprisoned within a cycle of upheaval and violence. In its latest iteration, the Islamic State (ISIS) monopolized a Sunni rebellion that emerged in 2013-2014 to resist a domineering and repressive central government in Baghdad led by Shiite elites of the ruling Dawa party of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. In short order, the militant organization rapidly expanded in summer 2014, through Sunni-populated territories in central and northern Iraq and central and southeastern Syria. At its peak, the Islamic State had displaced the modern borders drawn after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and administered and extracted resources from a vast territory the size of Britain, governing the lives of up to 12 million people.

While categorized as an abrupt “event,” the emergence of the Islamic State was much more of a long-running evolutionary process, intertwined with Sunni grievances and fractures within society—furnishing opportunities to exploit them. The rise of ISIS was not only the result of the government’s sectarian behavior toward the Sunni population, but also the result of a more local dynamic of settling-scores between Sunnis, both within and between tribes and across the rural-urban divide. With over a year since the liberation of Iraq was concluded, the war has left behind enduring legacies and newfound grievances that are likely to cause the next conflagration. Today, division, destruction, and despair mark Sunni society like never before, and the cycle of reconstruction and deconstruction of the community has led to an ever-fragmented Sunni polity.

This chapter focuses on the current state of turmoil of the Sunni community. It impinges on important questions related to Sunni identity, organization, and participation vis-à-vis the Iraqi state. Despite the rise of great power politics, regional security competition, and growing uncertainty of the American role in the Middle East, intra-Sunni dynamics within Iraq have demonstrated before to hold an oversized impact on the country’s stability, and even to regional and international security. It is important, therefore, for Western policymakers to remain engaged and informed about the issues confronting the post-ISIS Sunni landscape. Even as it appears that the group is physically defeated, conditions within the community are likely to determine the potential and parameters of future insurgency in Iraq.

AN EXCLUSIONARY WAR

The war against the Islamic State, fought to liberate mainly Sunni-dominated territories, was largely waged by non-Sunni armed forces. This had consequences on the post-war order because it further undermined the consolidation of a Sunni political elite, which forced Sunnis to seek legitimacy by aligning with political elites in Baghdad or Erbil and serve as their local political proxy.¹

The Sunnis have long been disadvantaged. The 2003 U.S.-led invasion and the subsequent de-Ba'athification of state and society initiated by the Western occupying authority had left Iraq's Sunnis without any formal political organization, or unified political movement to support. This varied with their counterparts in the Shiite and Kurdish communities, which had alternative and longstanding elements of organization that predated the U.S. occupation, from religious lineages and establishments to political parties, respectively. Moreover, since insurgencies against the Ba'athist regime were driven by Kurdish nationalist and Shiite Islamist groups, both communities were bequeathed with pre-established armed entrepreneurs that had come to cement political power after the fall of Saddam, and which grew following the invasion.

As the U.S.-backed military campaign against the Islamic State began in 2014, Sunni leaders made numerous requests to U.S. diplomats and military officials to help train and equip their tribal members to liberate their own lands.² Although partaking in the liberation campaign would involve

casualties inflicted on their tribe, it was important for Sunni *sheikhs*, or tribal leaders, that they not be excluded from ensuring local security and overseeing governance because participation also meant access to post-war authority and influence over their territories. But instead of directly partnering with Sunni tribes as they had during the pre-2011 occupation, the United States informed Sunni leaders that wanted to partake in the liberation that they would have to acquire sponsorship by either the central government in Baghdad or the Kurdistan regional government in Erbil. While the United States, in a supporting role at the invitation of the Iraqi government, could not work outside formal security institutions, elites within the Sunni community often point at the inconsistency of allowing state-sanctioned Shiite and Kurdish paramilitaries, while the state denied weapons requested by the Sunni tribes to defend themselves.³

Thus, the access points to determine and vet which Sunni armed contingents would fight to liberate predominantly Sunni areas were controlled by Shiite and Kurdish political leaders. This diverged from previous counterinsurgency experiences (2006-2008), when the U.S. military directly aided Sunni tribal militias, known as the "Awakening" movement, when combatting al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the precursors to the Islamic State, and holding their own territories in partnership with the American armed forces.⁴ In 2014, American diplomats attempted to reconstitute a new iteration of Sunni tribal militias, but the initiative failed to convince the *sheikhs* to fight ISIS without first securing political guarantees from the Iraqi

1 Isabel Coles, "Iraq's Shi'ite Militia, Kurds Use U.S. Air Strikes to Further Own Agendas," *Reuters*, September 9, 2014.

2 Jamal Al-Dhari, "To Save Mosul, Arm the Sunnis," *New York Times*, September 26, 2016; and Rafe Al-Essawi and Atheel al-Nujaifi, "Let Sunnis Defeat Iraq's Militants," *New York Times*, July 27, 2014.

3 Renad Mansour, "The Sunni Predicament," Carnegie Middle East Center, March 2016.

4 For information on the Awakening Movement, see, Timothy S. McWilliams and Kurtis P. Wheeler (eds.), *Al-Anbar Awakening: American Perspectives, Volume 1*, U.S. Marines and Counterinsurgency in Iraq, 2004-2009 (Quantico, Virginia: Marine Corps University, 2009); and Gary W. Montgomery and Timothy S. McWilliams, *Al-Anbar Awakening: Iraqi Perspectives, Volume 2*, U.S. Marines and Counterinsurgency in Iraq, 2004-2009 (Quantico, Virginia: Marine Corps University, 2009).



U.S. Army Paratroopers, deployed in support of Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve and assigned to 2nd Battalion, 319th Airborne Field Artillery Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, fire an M777 towed 155 mm howitzer in support of Iraqi security forces in northern Iraq, August 15, 2017. (CENTCOM)

government. Because the United States failed to deliver on promises of militia integration for the Awakening forces into the government's security and civilian sectors after 2008, it left them exposed to marginalization and exclusion by Maliki's government.⁵ This had significantly damaged credibility for the United States as a broker in the eyes of Sunni tribal *sheikhs*, closing the window of opportunity in the early stages of the war to recreate something akin to an Awakening 2.0, where provincial-based national guard units would be set up and locally recruited, to fight ISIS as a part of the country's formal security apparatus receiving salaries from the government.⁶ But since the U.S. military returned to Iraq in 2014 on the basis of a diplomatic exchange of letters, its capacity and role had been dramatically limited and circumscribed compared to its previous experience in 2006-

08, when it was an occupying force with troops on the ground. This situation meant it was more dependent on the decisions and politics of the host government when taking any initiative with regards to the war effort. As a result, the U.S.-backed national guard initiative, which would empower Sunni governors and arm Sunni tribes, failed to launch due to the political resistance from ruling Shiite parties.⁷

The United States could not replicate the necessary conditions to facilitate a broad-based anti-ISIS coalition among Sunni tribes as it had done in the past against AQI.⁸ The lack of U.S. credibility among Sunni leaders and the U.S. military's circumscribed role in the war effort were not the only constraints working against favorable conditions. The threat perceptions on the ground did not align against ISIS as they had against

5 Tim Arango, "Iraqi Sunnis Frustrated as Awakening Loses Clout," *New York Times*, May 3, 2010; and Timothy Williams and Duraid Adnan, "Sunnis in Iraq Allied With U.S. Rejoin Rebels," *New York Times*, October 16, 2010.

6 Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, "Saudi Arabia Will Grant U.S. Request for Anti-ISIS Training Program," *New York Times*, September 10, 2014. For problems with the national guard initiative, see, Frederic Wehrey and Ariel Ahram, "The National Guard in Iraq: A Risky Strategy to Combat the Islamic State," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 23, 2014.

7 Tamer El-Ghobashy, "U.S.-backed Plan for Iraqi National Guard Falters," *Wall Street Journal*, October 15, 2014.

8 For information on U.S. attempts to gain greater Sunni participation in the fight against ISIS, see, Kirk Semple, "Under New Plan, Iraq's Fight Against Militants May Fall to Its Provinces," *New York Times*, September 18, 2014; and Kirk Semple, "Coalition Leader Warns of Long Fight Against ISIS in Iraq," *New York Times*, October 3, 2014. According to General John Allen, who was tapped by the White House in 2014 to take charge of U.S.-led efforts against ISIS, including outreach to Iraq's Sunni tribes, said in 2016: "The Awakening as we knew it occurred because of a series of conditions that don't exist today in Iraq. What we want is not the Awakening as an entity to be replicated. What we want is the effect of the Awakening. And that is ownership by the Sunnis in the outcome. And that's what we want." See, transcript of full interview: "Gen. Allen: Empowering Iraqi Forces is Key to Controlling ISIS," National Public Radio, January 3, 2016.



U.S. Army Capt. Mark G. Zwirgzdas, deployed in support of Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve, assigned to 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, discusses operations during the offensive to liberate West Mosul from ISIS with 9th Iraqi Army Division leaders near Al Tarab, Iraq, March 19, 2017. (CENTCOM)

AQI. “The Sunni community has two options,” described one Anbari tribal sheikh. “Fight against ISIS and allow Iran and its militias to rule us, or do the opposite. We chose ISIS for only one reason. ISIS only kills you. The Iraqi government kills you and rapes your women.”⁹

Moreover, given that U.S. policymakers prioritized the defeat of ISIS, Washington was less willing to peg its military support on condition that Baghdad embrace a comprehensive form of inclusion of the Sunni tribes in the liberation campaign.¹⁰ Instead, Shiite and Kurdish armed forces, which included dozens of militias, were mainly deployed into Sunni-dominated and mixed territories.¹¹ To the extent there were local Sunnis that partook in the liberation effort, it reflected a representation of political allegiances to the ruling parties and personalities in Baghdad and Erbil, and not a genuine representation of the Sunni tribal components of local society within the ISIS-held territories. This bipolar structure had reinforced

intra-Sunni competition and tensions, including within the same tribe—as some aligned with Erbil to balance against competitors that were aligned with Baghdad, and vice versa.

In effect, the exclusionary dimension of the war meant that Iraq’s communities would internalize varied narratives and experiences about the war, reinforcing its fractured set of identities. Victory over the war’s outcome would become a particularistic, rather than a collective, memory among the Iraqi people, as the Sunni community, by and large, were denied access to share in the experience of a victorious war.

9 David Ignatius, “Iraq and the U.S. are Losing Ground to the Islamic State,” *Washington Post*, October 23, 2014.

10 Anthony H. Cordesman, “Iraq, Syria, and the Gulf: The Cost of an ISIS-Centric U.S. Strategy,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 9, 2016; and Ramzy Mardini, “Don’t Defeat ISIS, Yet,” *New York Times*, September 27, 2016.

11 “How ISIS is Forging Unlikely Alliances,” *CBS News*, February 19, 2015.

ROOTS OF INSTABILITY

Prior to 2014, American policymakers believed that the Islamic State of Iraq, the predecessor of the Islamic State, was organizationally defeated.¹² This was the narrative after April 2010, when American and Iraqi forces eliminated the group's top leaders in a single joint operation. In the subsequent years to follow, senior U.S. officials would often emphasize that violence was at all time lows in Iraq and that politics (not violence) had become consolidated as the primary mechanism for resolving disputes. As a result, by the time the U.S. military exited the country in December 2011, U.S. officials believed Iraq had turned a corner, and its relapse to civil conflict was as unlikely as ever.¹³

The belief that another Iraqi insurgency was not probable stems from the way insurgency is conceptualized within the policy community—as an exterior disease on society, to be rooted out, rather than a violent symptom derived from what ails society.¹⁴ For example, successes in counterinsurgencies are primarily measured by their physical attributes, such as body counts and territories captured. This, in turn, narrows the parameters of how threat assessments are

formed and makes them inapt at depicting the disruptive impact that war has on society and its social fabric. Hence, policymakers become unaware (or at least unappreciative) of the feedback loops between the nuanced tensions from within society, often happening at a local level, and how those tensions can reproduce future conflict, sometimes incorporated into other conflicts happening on a broader scale.¹⁵

A dominant view is that the Islamic State was an invader on society. In reality, it had emerged through a rapid consolidation of a multiparty rebellion in Iraq during summer 2014. This allowed it to mobilize newfound resources, while absorbing a larger wave of foreign fighters, to expand its territorial control in Syria. However, despite its seeming abruptness, the Islamic State was not the effect of a single cause or event, as often depicted. It was the byproduct of many interacting dynamics that occurred over a long time horizon, including those spurred by the collapse of state institutions, a foreign occupation mobilizing armed resistance, and a civil war that tore through the social fabric and hardened group identities.

¹² David Alexander, “Al Qaeda in Iraq Struggling After Leadership Blow: US,” *Reuters*, June 4, 2010.

¹³ See, speech by Antony J. Blinken, then national security advisor to Vice President Joe Biden, at the Center for American Progress, March 16, 2012; and Antony J. Blinken, Norman Ricklefs, Ned Parker, “Is Iraq on Track: Democracy and Disorder in Baghdad,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2012.

¹⁴ Despite the declared doctrinal focus on population-centric counterinsurgency as codified in the U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual 3-24, in practice, the U.S. military has transitioned to a counterterrorism-centric approach in efforts to degrade or destroy insurgent groups. This includes the “By-With-Through” mechanism of empowering and partnering with local partners to conduct military operations in Iraq and Syria. See, Morgan Kaplan, “Thinking Critically About ‘By, With, Through’ in Syria, Iraq, and Beyond,” *Lawfare*, January 20, 2019. For emphasis on the targeting process through special operations, see, LTG Michael K. Nagata’s comments in Brian Dodwell and Don Rassler, “A View from the CT Foxhole: LTG Michael K. Nagata, Director, Directorate of Strategic Operational Planning, NCTC,” *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 10, no. 6, June/July 2017: “Given my Special Operations background, what I’m most conversant in and what I have the most practical experience in has been this rather extraordinary journey that military and intelligence organizations have taken—not just in the United States but around the world—in rapidly improving our ability to identify, to track, to pursue, and to precisely target. It’s become almost doctrine in the U.S. counterterrorism community—something that General Stanley McChrystal is often cited as the pioneer for, the ‘find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze, disseminate’ (F3EAD) philosophy.” For more information on F3EAD, see, Jeremy Scahill, “Find, Fix, Finish,” *The Intercept*, October 15, 2015.

¹⁵ For intelligence failures leading up to the rise of ISIS, see, Erik J. Dahl, “Not Your Father’s Intelligence Failure: Why the Intelligence Community Failed to Anticipate the Rise of ISIS,” in *The Future of ISIS: Regional and International Implications*, eds. Feisal al-Istrabadi and Sumit Ganguly (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2008), pp. 41-66. For an academic perspective on localized dynamics leading to widespread violence, see, Séverine Autesserre, *The Trouble with the Congo: Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).



The Islamic State's capital Raqqa suffered extensive damage during the battle of Raqqa in June–October 2017. (VOA/Wikimedia Commons)

The Islamic State is often interpreted through the lens of religious doctrine and religious extremism.¹⁶ However, in reality, multiple motivations and rationales led Iraqis from various sectors of society to join the organization's rank-and-file. In policymaking circles, ISIS was the result of sectarianism and the government's marginalization of a religious minority. However, while the failure of reconciliation along the sectarian Shiite-Sunni divide is important, it misses how divisions and tensions within the Sunni community also contributed to the rise of ISIS. Politics of exclusion and marginalization played a role at the national level, particularly among elites, but failed to explain mechanisms at the local level, especially how intra-Sunni politics, vendettas, and schisms played into the rapid expansion of the Islamic State.

Oftentimes, descriptions in Washington about the consequences of the Iraq war are aggregated as empirics measuring "blood and treasure." But these tangible and physical categories of measurement fail to shed light on the destabilizing and ongoing changes that have impacted Iraqi society in irreversible and non-linear ways.

This inherently makes it difficult to grasp the enduring damage inflicted upon Iraqi society since 2003—and the spawn of second and third order effects that, over time, can regenerate new causes for rebellion. As such, U.S. policymakers in Washington underestimated the rise and rapid expansion of another Sunni insurgency in Iraq.¹⁷

The disruption and disorder ushered in by the U.S. invasion of Iraq helped form and solidify the collective identity of a "Sunni community," but it also created fractures and friction within it. These intra-communal fault lines were essential in securing societal inroads for ISIS, including the latter stages of its predecessor organization, helping to anchor it within local networks. The sources of these inroads into the Sunni community were brought on by fractures caused by major local shifts in power and the emergence of new stakeholders following the fall of the Ba'thist regime, the advent of new political cleavages bifurcating the community's traditional forms of social structure and authority, and the influx of migration due to internal displacement and proliferation of informal settlements.

16 Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, May 2015; William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (St. Martin's Press, 2015); Robert Manne, *The Mind of the Islamic State: ISIS and the Ideology of the Caliphate* (Prometheus Books, 2017); and Hassan Hassan, "The Sectarianism of the Islamic State: Ideological Roots and Political Context," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 13, 2016.

17 David Ignatius, "James Clapper: We Underestimated the Islamic State's 'will to fight,'" *Washington Post*, September 18, 2014; and Peter Baker and Eric Schmitt, "Many Missteps in Assessment of ISIS Threat," *New York Times*, September 29, 2014.



U.S. M1 Abrams battle tanks patrolling Tal Afar on February 3, 2006. (USAF)

Across central and northern Iraq, ISIS represented a multi-purposed vehicle in its relationship across Sunni-inhabited territories. Depending on the context, the organization was utilized, as a form of empowerment, not only against the government and its repressive apparatus, but also as a mechanism to address local grievances: to carry out revenge and settle longstanding scores that have accumulated within the Sunni community. The mobilization and expansion of ISIS in summer 2014 had coalesced with a deeper unraveling of the Sunni tribal system, with many tribes and communities, even at the village level, experiencing splits between those that facilitated and backed ISIS and those that resisted or fled.¹⁸

This fragmented landscape complicated the deployment of local partners in the liberation campaign. In each area—be it a village, town, or major city—those that fled the initial advance of ISIS had incurred motives of revenge to reclaim their areas from those that stayed, often

perceived as collaborators of ISIS. For example, the Shiite Turkmen community that fled Tal Afar in 2014 had been reorganized as a militia with the explicit aim expressed by its members to cleanse the city of its Sunni Turkmen.¹⁹ Even at the village level, tribesmen that had fled would later form militias made up of their own clan to return during liberation, exacting revenge against members of their tribe that had stayed and joined ISIS. “There is no other solution than to behead them,” said a Sunni Arab *sheikh* of his tribal cousins who were fighting on the side of ISIS in a town near Mosul, “because it will teach their wives, children, sons, and relatives.”²⁰ This behavior could potentially set up new cycles of violence in the years ahead.

18 For efforts to mend intra-tribal tensions and splits in liberated territories, see, Osama Gharizi and Haidar al-Ibrahimi, “Baghdad Must Seize the Chance to Work with Iraq’s Tribes,” *War on the Rocks*, January 17, 2018; Khitam Alkhaykane, “Justice and Security Needs in Iraq after ISIL: Understanding Displaced Populations’ Concerns with Returning Home,” U.S. Institute of Peace, Special Report 389, August 2016; and Haley Bobseine, “Tribal Justice in a Fragile Iraq,” The Century Foundation, November 7, 2019.

19 Author’s interviews with Shiite Turkmen militia leaders, Kirkuk, 2015.

20 The comment was made by Sheikh Nazhan Sakhar al-Lehibi from the village of Hajj Ali, just south of Mosul, who led hundreds of tribal militiamen to reclaim territory against ISIS. See, Associated Press Video Archive: “Hajj Ali – 9 August 2016,” AP Video, Story Number: 4049828, August 10, 2016.

THE POST-WAR LANDSCAPE

From mass graves to systemic efforts to erase symbols of identity and culture, the Islamic State is the source of a new collective trauma for Iraq that endures today across all of the country's ethnic and religious communities. However, since the rank-and-file of the organization in Iraq was mainly derived from different sectors of the country's Sunni population, its occupation and networks were entrenched and intertwined with the social terrain. The rise and fall of ISIS not only left behind a trail of physical devastation to infrastructure and property, but also caused ruptures within the social fabric between and within communities. Today, the Sunnis face a communal-wide "existential crisis"—uncertain of what cumulative fragmentation spells for their community and its future within a country heavily influenced by Shiite militia parties.

The onslaught of ISIS and the war of liberation led to the mass displacement of millions of Iraqis, with the overwhelming majority being Sunnis. During the peak of the war, at least 5.8 million Iraqis were internally displaced.²¹ As the fighting dwindled and towns were stabilized, the majority of the displaced population returned to their homes, but over a million remain in displacement camps and informal housing arrangements. The process of post-war reintegration in Iraq has been uncertain and slow, as the barriers to return vary from one place to another. As one local Sunni tribal leader from Diyala province affirmed, "Who gets to return home has become a random practice."²² Exhibiting both physical and political dimensions, these barriers are likely to reproduce grievances within the Sunni community and serve as underlying drivers of future instability.

Soldiers from 416th Civil Affairs Battalion and Turkish military observers speak with local officials assessing the damages to local infrastructure in Tal Afar. (Blair Larson/Wikimedia Commons)



Work on the iron bridge near Fajallah, Iraq. (UNDP Iraq/Flickr)

21 Alexandra Saieh, Dhabie Brown, and Padraic McCluskey, "The Long Road Home: Achieving Durable Solutions to Displacement in Iraq: Lessons From Returns in Anbar," a collaborated report by the Danish Refugee Council, International Rescue Committee, and Norwegian Refugee Council, February 2018; and Belkis Wille, "Iraq: Not a Homecoming," *Human Rights Watch*, June 14, 2019.

22 Hamza Hendawi, "Shattered by War, Sunni Arabs Despair Over Future in Iraq," *Associated Press*, September 10, 2017.

LACK OF REVITALIZATION

At its apex, the Islamic State controlled a diverse stretch of territory across Iraq and Syria, but its level of entrenchment varied from one place to another—in addition to its ties to the local Sunni population. A mixture of army, counterterrorism, and militia forces fought to wrench control of territory out of the militant group's hands, and ISIS fought hard to keep them—resulting in devastating urban warfare in many Sunni-dominated cities at the provincial, district, and sub-district levels. In addition, the war overwhelmingly relied on American air power, and the Iraqi military, augmented by irregular militias, on the ground had an incentive to rely on its cover when facing resistance. For example, the capital city of Anbar province, Ramadi, was reported to have been 80% destroyed by the military campaign to liberate it from ISIS.²³

The physical barriers to entry stem from a lack of revitalization of those areas, including the devastation to critical infrastructure, the absence of any centralized reconstruction effort, and a lack of employment opportunities. “ISIS was a tsunami that swept away the Sunnis,” said Sheikh Ghazi Mohammed, a tribal leader of Rabia, an Iraqi city on the border with Syria. “We lost everything. Our homes, our businesses, our lives.”²⁴ One report summarizes the devastation to the Sunni community more succinctly: “Most of the 5 million displaced persons in Iraq are Sunnis. And most of the tens of thousands of Iraqis who were killed, raped, or kidnapped by ISIS jihadists are Sunnis. Nearly every city left in ruins by the fight to expel ISIS – from Fallujah and Ramadi to

Mosul – is predominantly Sunni.”²⁵

More than two years since Iraq declared ISIS defeated, the government has failed to allocate enough funds for the reconstruction of these cities, where private citizens are taking the lead to rebuild. The industries thriving in these cities before ISIS have not received enough investment to revive or hire any workers. As a result, many families who were displaced during ISIS's rein or during the campaign to oust it have opted to remain in displacement camps, where they have access to shelter, water, food deliveries, medical care, and schools for their children. In Baiji, multi-story buildings pancaked by U.S.-led air strikes remain flattened. The western side of Iraq's second largest city of Mosul, where ISIS resistance was entrenched, remains largely destroyed. The U.S. military used 29,000 munitions in the form of bombs, rockets, and artillery during the campaign to liberate Mosul—decimating basic infrastructure, including the health sector, which went from having ten hospitals to only one to service a city of over two million.²⁶ As a result, Mosul has been gripped by “reverse displacement,” as up to 25 families per day leave the ruined city to head back to camps, its migration office said last year.²⁷

23 Ben Hubbard, “Ramadi, Reclaimed by Iraq, is in Ruins after ISIS Fight,” *New York Times*, January 7, 2016.

24 Liz Sly, “ISIS: A Catastrophe For Sunnis,” *Washington Post*, November 23, 2016.

25 Scott Peterson, “How Sunnis’ post-ISIS crisis is leading some to a new Iraqi nationalism,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 27, 2017.

26 Linah Alsaafin, “One Year after Battle for Mosul, a City Lies in Ruins,” *Al-Jazeera*, July 10, 2018. Data on munitions comes from Airwars, an organization based in the U.K. that tracks civilian casualties due to airstrikes, cited in Victor J. Blue, “After the ‘War of Annihilation’ Against ISIS,” *Time*, April 6, 2019.

27 Raad al-Jamas, “Finding Homes in Ruin, Destitute Iraqis Return to Camps,” *AFP*, August 24, 2019.

MILITIA CONTROL

The weakness of the state, and the presence and influence of a patchwork of militias across the post-war landscape, has produced political barriers that have hindered reintegration. Their influence is especially active in places where demographics are mixed, given the incentive to tip the ethnic and religious balance in their favor. For example, Shiite and Kurdish armed groups seized many mixed areas as they liberated them from ISIS, but have since placed additional obstacles or barred displaced Sunnis from returning to their homes and communities. Today, these areas suspected of undergoing a campaign of demographic manipulation are under militia control, and many Sunnis fear that their denial to return will become a permanent feature of their lives.

This is concerning for future stabilization, as forced demographic manipulation is one of the contributing factors in driving insurgency in the “disputed territories” between Iraqi Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmen. Beginning in the 1960s and intensifying in the mid-1970s, the Ba’thist regime pursued an “Arabization” campaign to secure Arab domination of northern Iraq, forcefully displacing ethnic minorities, most notably hundreds of thousands of Kurds.²⁸ In 2003, following the overthrow of the Ba’thist regime, Kurdish expansionism set off to roll back the process and regain lost territories, resulting in a rise in ethnic tensions with Sunni Arabs and Turkmen. And as a Sunni insurgency swept through northern Iraq in 2014, Arabs and Turkmen from the “disputed territories” that were impacted by the cycle of demographic manipulation, joined the rank-and-

file of ISIS as a measure of revenge and settling scores against Kurdish power.²⁹

The fear of return is also a factor undermining reintegration. In the city of Fallujah, Shiite paramilitary groups (operating alongside federal police forces) detained over a thousand men, releasing hundreds for medical reasons as many displayed the physical markings of torture, including rape, cuts, and burns.³⁰ Many Sunni families – either displaced or back in their communities – have missing relatives taken away by government security forces or militias. In response, the Sunni community has formed local councils to contact government officials and seek information in order to retrieve their missing family members.³¹ But the effort has not helped, as there appears to be no Iraqi authority to hold accountable. As such, despite the passage of years, there have been no criminal proceedings for those missing, and many do not know where their family members are being held or even whether they are still alive.³²

Apart from their role in placing barriers to reintegration, Shiite militias have also transformed their territorial control of liberated areas into political influence and economic gains. For instance, in many towns and cities, mayors and governors removed from power during political disputes have often been replaced with those that have good relations with nearby armed groups.³³ Militias also exploited post-ISIS areas as streams of economic extraction through a variety of illicit activities, including oil smuggling, looting, kidnapping and ransom, and extortion and taxation of the local Sunni population, especially

28 John Fawcett and Victor Tanner, “The Internally Displaced People of Iraq,” The Brookings Institution-SAIS Project on Internal Displacement, October 2002.

29 Author’s interviews with Iraqi security officials.

30 “Iraq: Fallujah Abuses Test Control of Militias,” Human Rights Watch, June 9, 2016.

31 Author’s interviews with local NGO workers involved in post-ISIS reconciliation, Iraq, October 2019.

32 Author’s interviews at displaced camp in Humam al-Alil in Ninawa, Iraq, March 2019.

33 Lahib Higel, “Iraq’s Displacement Crisis: Security and Protection,” Minority Rights Group International, March 2016.



A U.S. Army Paratrooper deployed in support of Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve and assigned to 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, leaves a tactical assembly area during an operation to advise and assist Iraqi security force partners, near Mosul, Iraq, June 7, 2017. (CENTCOM)

through checkpoints on the transportation of commercial goods.³⁴ In addition, they have used their political influence and military muscle to gain significant influence over economic markets. One example was the role of militias in cornering of the lucrative scrap metal market in Mosul, making millions of dollars off the sales of the wreckage brought on by the war.³⁵ For some groups, particularly the Sunni tribal militias that serve as local proxies of Shiite militias to govern the urban areas, armed and privileged status have been used to set up their own system of taxation, often serving as their only source of income. Not only has this sustained a sense of disempowerment and grievance among Sunnis

in post-war areas towards Shiite militias, but it has also added resentment within the community against those Sunnis aligned with them.

³⁴ "Iran's Network of Influence, Chapter: 4: Iraq," in *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, November 2019.

³⁵ John Davison, "Exclusive: Iran-Backed Groups Corner Iraq's Postwar Scrap Metal Market – Sources," *Reuters*, February 13, 2019.

BARRIERS TO REINTEGRATION

The most sensitive and complicated challenge to effective reintegration concerns the families of ISIS members. This, too, is a problem that persists due to a weak and fragmented government, which has lacked a centralized plan or common standards and guidelines to tackle the more arduous task of managing post-conflict stabilization. In addition, this may have severe security implications for the country in the future. As one Western observer noted after a visit to Iraq, “Until those in the camps are either freed or processed into the country’s criminal justice system, they constitute a growing threat to security, governance, and justice throughout Iraq, and especially in the areas where ISIS still commands support and inspires fear. The longer these people languish in legal and physical limbo, the greater the chance of an eventual ISIS revival.”³⁶

At one level, the fear from the government’s perspective is that allowing these families to return would give ISIS members on the run or in hiding a social base to return and reintegrate back into their communities. But on another level, there is concern that the return of families would provoke local violence. Hence, reintegration of ISIS families is not only a national-level concern, but also a local one among community leaders. This highlights a new societal fault line in post-conflict areas between those who were victimized by ISIS members and those who are family members of the ISIS recruits. “A lot of [Sunnis] lost their sons to ISIS,” said one Sunni tribal leader, warning about the prospect of score settling within the community, “and they want revenge.”³⁷

Thus far, first-degree family members (e.g. brothers, fathers, sons) have been the primary security concern by the government and its security apparatus. But Baghdad alone cannot determine the outcome of their status. Since the government lacks a monopoly over the use of force, other actors are empowered in the process of determining the fate of the families of ISIS members. As a result, there exists wide variation from one place to another given the local context and circumstances. Provincial-level political authorities, in addition to local tribal and community leaders, also play a role in determining the parameters of reintegration. Because risk of acceptance is varied for these actors, differences not only exist from one province to another, but also within the same province given the varied tribal makeup of Iraqi society.

One common parameter, however, is the requirement for families to get a government-issued security clearance to return to their areas of residence.³⁸ This involves a months-long process that includes a court visit to issue a statement disavowing any relatives accused of having joined ISIS, effectively cutting all ties. In the event of contact from the ISIS family member, these families are required to report any information about their whereabouts to security authorities.

Families must also have sponsors present in court to support the disavowal statement and serve as a guarantee for their compliance. Ordinarily, multiple and particular sponsors are required to show up in court, such as second-degree family members, tribal or clan leaders, and the

36 Thanassis Cambanis, “The Coming Emergency in Iraq: Neglected Prison Camps are Incubating a New Extremist Threat,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 1, 2019.

37 Scott Peterson, “How Sunnis’ Post-ISIS Crisis is Leading Some to a New Iraqi Nationalism,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 27, 2017.

38 “Northern Iraq: Security Situation and the Situation for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in the Disputed Areas, including Possibility to Enter and Access the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI),” Country Report, Country of Origin Information, Danish Immigration Service, November 2018.



mukhtar—or local administrative representative at the village or neighborhood-level. But again, there are differences from one place to another given local circumstances. In some areas, such as the sub-district of Hawija in Kirkuk province, only one sponsor is required instead of three as there is concern that if the barriers are too high, it would de-populate the area given that far too many residents have first-degree family members who joined ISIS. In other areas, such as in the sub-district of Rabia in Ninawa province, the Shammar tribe has gone as far as rejecting the return of any second-degree family members of accused ISIS members.

As of today, the Iraqi government continues to lack a uniform policy or mechanism for bringing the status of ISIS family members closer to resolution. In fact, at one point, Iraqi authorities had considered an internment camp be created to relocate and house all families of suspected ISIS members—be they alive, dead, or captured—which would isolate and stigmatize future generations coming from that community. While the government does not have a way to

determine the number of ISIS family members, most estimates are in the hundreds of thousands. The systemic lack of data on this question has led to stigmatization by government and society against the displaced community at large, regardless of having relational ties or not to members of ISIS.

Beyond the lack of an overarching policy, the Iraqi government has also neglected to take partial steps that would make immediate and tangible progress towards a resolution of the issue. For instance, many Sunni families lost their official identification documents during ISIS's reign or in the ensuing war. The central government has been slow to expedite the issuance of new documents, which further undermines state-building initiatives to rebuild areas and reintegrate the impacted populations after war.

Many children born under ISIS do not have a government-issued birth certificate. However, the problem extends beyond those only recently born under the Islamic State. According to one estimate, up to 40,000 children that already



(UNDP Iraq/Flickr)

should be in public schools cannot attend because they lack proper documentation.³⁹ In addition, many families struggle to make their way back home as the lack of those documents reinforces suspicion and stigmatization of being families of ISIS members. Without papers, they cannot leave camps or cross checkpoints to seek medical care if their areas of residence lack hospitals. “No documentation means a lot,” said one local NGO worker spearheading reconciliation efforts in post-conflict areas, “they cannot get a job, they cannot get married, they are not Iraqis.”⁴⁰ Indeed, this includes certificates of birth and death, marriage and divorce, in addition to other forms of identification that relate to citizenship and welfare, such as passports and ration cards used for public distribution of government benefits, like basic food.⁴¹

The loss of identification impacts basic and property rights, inheritance, employment, mobility, and all forms of state-based programs, services, and benefits. This not only negatively impacts the everyday life of many Sunnis in

Iraq, but also leads to a failure in repairing the social fabric within liberated territories. In effect, these ongoing disparities exhibited in Iraq’s post-war integration process will foster a growing stateless population, unanchored to state or society, which breeds grievances from within the Sunni community and can be easily exploited by armed groups to recruit locals and informants to penetrate and produce social bases of support.

Last year, government-imposed closures of a number of displacement camps came “with no coherent policy on how to continue supporting vulnerable people and communities upon their return,” whereby many are “thwarted by fiefdoms of power that control their access to land, housing, and property rights, or citizenship documents.”⁴² The primary problem is the government’s lack of legibility of society. This highlights its limited capability—from both a physical capacity and legal standpoint—to establish a stable post-war order in liberated territories. Weak legibility and information leads to indiscriminate actions that undermine the hope for effective reintegration,

³⁹ Author interview with NGO official, Iraq, November 2019.

⁴⁰ Author interview with NGO official, Iraq, November 2019.

⁴¹ “Iraq: Families of Alleged ISIS Members Denied IDs,” Human Rights Watch, February 25, 2018.

⁴² Hafsa Halawa, “The Forgotten Iraq,” Middle East Institute, Policy Paper 2020-7, March 2020.



in addition to regenerate grievances within the Sunni community.

For example, one major challenge undercutting legibility lies in over-aggregation. This conundrum is reflected in two interrelated ways. The first is *definitional*: what are the legal parameters that constitute membership in ISIS? Without a working definition, there has been a tendency to broaden the scope where no legal consensus exists to help distinguish between Iraqis that voluntarily joined the organization's apparatus versus civilians who cooperated or colluded with the group for a variety of reasons. Radicalism and ideological affinity for the militant cause has been the overarching assumption when Iraqi authorities attribute motivations to ISIS recruits. But in reality, it was a diverse array of motivations—from local to national, opportunistic to defensive—driving Sunnis to join or collaborate with the group.

The second way over-aggregation is exercised is in the *measurement* of the distribution of justice. Currently, the national government in Baghdad and its security establishment do not distinguish

between varying roles and actions in ISIS. Instead, they treat membership with one broad brush.⁴³ The consequence of this leads to a rigid and binary legal approach, simplified as one (1) for membership and zero (0) for non-membership. This allows for no space for Iraq's judiciary to distribute varying degrees of legal punishment as a case-by-case basis in corresponding with a particular crime. Hence, despite the complexities that underlie all insurgencies, members of the group—regardless of their role in the organization or their rationales to join it—are treated equally and subject to the same degree of punishment. Iraq has already sentenced many of its own nationals, as well as non-Iraqis, to death under its counterterrorism law in speedy trials that human rights group worry may rely on circumstantial evidence or confessions obtained through torture.⁴⁴

⁴³ According to a Human Rights Watch report, "The judiciaries of the Iraqi government and the KRG are relying on their respective counterterrorism courts to rapidly prosecute all of these ISIS suspects on charges brought under their counterterrorism laws, primarily and often exclusively on the charge of membership in ISIS, with no distinction made for the severity of the charges brought against suspects and no effort to prioritize the prosecution of the worst offenses." See, "Flawed Justice: Accountability for ISIS Crimes in Iraq," Human Rights Watch, December 5, 2017.

⁴⁴ "Flawed Justice: Accountability for ISIS Crimes in Iraq," Human Rights Watch, December 5, 2017.

THE PROSPECT OF MILITANT RESURGENCE

Within the policy community in the West, debate over the future of ISIS occupies two extreme ends of a spectrum: between the belief that it is militarily defeated and the belief that its comeback is inevitable. These policy debates, however, are not only over-simplifications, but also reflect differences in how threat assessments conceptualize ISIS. From one end, ISIS is treated as a physical organization that has been militarily routed from any meaningful existence, whereas the other treats it as an ideology that cannot be vanquished, least not by the use of force.⁴⁵ But regardless of which framework is used to define what ISIS represents, conditions on the ground—especially within the Sunni community in Iraq—will determine its evolution and future.

Since the Islamic State lost its last territorial stronghold in 2019, security experts have warned about the dangers of its future resurgence.⁴⁶ This, along with the belief that the U.S. military's withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 led to the rise of ISIS, has translated into government policies that advocate for an enduring U.S. military presence in Iraq and Syria. "We cannot allow history to repeat itself in Syria," argued then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in January 2018. "ISIS presently has one foot in the grave, and by maintaining an American military presence in Syria, it will soon have two."⁴⁷ However, the belief that an enduring American

military presence in the Middle East will prevent another insurgency is misguided.

Moreover, there exists wide variation on the status of the organization and its current threat assessment.⁴⁸ For example, the *New York Times* reported in August 2019 that there remained 18,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria, whereby "sleeper cells and strike teams have carried out sniper attacks, ambushes, kidnappings and assassinations against security forces and community leaders."⁴⁹ This followed a 2018 report by the United Nations that claimed the organization had somewhere between 20,000 to 30,000 fighters left.⁵⁰ The U.S. government estimates of current ISIS membership, however, are more conservative. According to the Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve, there are between 14,000-18,000 "members" across Iraq and Syria, including up to 3,000 of them being foreigners.⁵¹ But the Department of Defense's Inspector General admits that the numbers and figures vary widely, both within and outside government.

Unlike in the years prior to the 2011 withdrawal, the situational awareness of the U.S. military's presence in Iraq has now become circumscribed due to limitations to its capacity and role, by-and-large confined to military bases. Today, U.S. military officers heavily depend on the

45 Jenna Jordan, "The Death of Baghdadi Isn't the End of ISIS," *Washington Post*, November 5, 2019; Michael W.S. Ryan, "Defeating ISIS and Al-Qaeda on the Ideological Battlefield: The Case for the Corporation Against Ideological Violence," Center on Irregular Warfare and Armed Groups, United States Naval War College, 2018; and Abdelillah Bendaoudi, "After the 'Almost 100 Percent' Defeat of ISIS, What About its Ideology?," Al-Jazeera Centre for Studies, May 8, 2018.

46 Ben Wedeman and Lauren Said-Moorhouse, "ISIS has lost its final stronghold in Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces says," *CNN*, March 23, 2019.

47 Statement by Rex Tillerson, seen here: <https://twitter.com/statedept/status/953725614694965248>

48 Ben Hubbard, Rukmini Callimachi, and Alissa J. Rubin, "Leader's Death Will Damage ISIS, but Not Destroy It," *New York Times*, October 27, 2019.

49 Eric Schmitt, Alissa J. Rubin, and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "ISIS is Regaining Strength in Iraq and Syria," *New York Times*, August 19, 2019.

50 Bethan McKernan, "Up to 30,000 ISIS Fighters Remain in Iraq and Syria, says UN," *The Independent*, August 15, 2018.

51 Figures cited in "Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress," April 1, 2019 – June 30, 2019.



Iraqi Federal Police snipers march onto the rifle range to conduct training during an Iraqi security forces-led course, supported by advisers from Combined Joint Task – Force Operation Inherent Resolve, near Mosul, Iraq, May 16, 2017. (CENTCOM)

cooperation of their various Iraqi counterparts to verify and share intelligence on the ISIS threat and counterterrorism operations.⁵² This has undermined the ability of the U.S. military to perform independent intelligence assessments about the current and future threat of militancy in Iraq. In addition, there is concern over the stability of those partnerships with the Iraqi intelligence and security community going forward, especially given heightened U.S.-Iran tensions, which impacts Iraq's political landscape and pressures domestic actors to choose sides.

While disparity and variety of intelligence data represent a challenge in making accurate threat assessments, a more comprehensive and enduring problem remains a weakness in definition over the broad spectrum of membership in the Islamic State. Throughout its self-declared territorial state across Iraq and Syria, the boundaries between the militant organization and society can be muddled. Formally, many recruits who joined the group in a given area originated from the local communities; informally, many who did not join in rank-and-file occupations had collaborated in civilian roles in a number of ways. Hence, the parameters of a threat assessment cannot rely on the narrowed framework of an armed soldier or official administrator because the depth and scope of collaboration by civilians has an impact,

especially when measuring organizational resiliency.

In addition, to what extent was civilian collaboration a behavior motivated by voluntary support or in reaction to preserve survival? Was voluntary support to further the cause of the organization's goals or to leverage the organization to further the cause of the individual's parochial aims (e.g., revenge by way of settling a local score)? These questions, in theory, are central to understand if and where the Islamic State has fertile ground within a society to rebuild its network infrastructure. However, as stated earlier, the government lacks the capability and willingness to approach post-conflict stabilization outside its current black-and-white framework, which is bound to reproduce grievances rather than reconcile them.

The only reliable way to assess and manipulate the ISIS threat over the long term is to identify and address grievances within the Sunni community. Without a favorable social base and opportunities to exploit tensions and grievances among Sunnis, the organization would be unable to regenerate new social networks in Iraq, let alone strong enough to reclaim and hold territory.

⁵² Discussions with multiple U.S. military officers, Iraq, December 2019.

A SOCIETAL-CENTRIC APPROACH

The rise and fall of the Islamic State leaves behind a legacy in Iraq that has forever impacted state and society. For the Sunnis, the trauma brought on by the atrocities and wreckage of war will continue to haunt the community and impact its future generations. But even as physical infrastructure and homes are rebuilt in liberated areas—and should life return to some degree of normalcy—the social fabric will take decades of reconciliatory efforts to repair. Given that the organization was derived from the community itself, the ISIS upheaval has altered aspects of the Sunni society in irreversible ways. To avert history repeating itself, Western engagement with the government of Iraq should shift away from prioritizing a military approach toward one focused on a fragmented society, namely on reconciliation, reintegration, and reconstruction within the post-war territories.

The policymaking community in Washington and European capitals are deeply concerned about the resurgence of the Islamic State. However, they often depict the militant organization as a constant threat just over the horizon, waiting for the opportune moment to take advantage of an opening and regain control over its lost territory. If there is any easing off the foot-pedal on combatting ISIS, Western policymakers fear its return is inevitable. Today, resources and attention may be diverted away from the anti-ISIS military effort due to the loss of Western military capability to operate in Iraq, internal unrest inspired by the anti-government protest movement, and rising tensions between the United States and Iran, especially after the January 2020 U.S. assassination of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani.⁵³

But based on the impression of ISIS as an organization today—as some sort of “caliphate-in-waiting”—the assumption underlying its constant persistence is flawed. It also reinforces a policy that advocates and prioritizes a preventative military approach, which requires a foreign military presence that endures into the foreseeable future. In reality, in order for ISIS to regain the organizational capacity to recapture and govern territory—rather than merely hold the capability to wage an asymmetrical low-grade insurgency—the group requires new social networks to be reproduced through social grievances. This would not be possible without conditions within the Sunni community that allow the group to barnacle onto grievances and exploit them to receive support from the local population.

The predecessor of ISIS, for example, was determined by many experts to have been militarily defeated in 2010; shortly thereafter, it controlled and governed huge swaths of territory with an army and administration. This radical reversal in fortune for the extremist group did not occur due to any preexisting military or economic capabilities, or any changes of its ideology. The difference had been that a large segment of the Sunni population, more so than at any other time since 2003, mobilized into a state of rebellion against the government. But even prior to the outbreak of violence or mass mobilization to rebel, extortion and racketeering networks of ISIS’s predecessor—supported by wider availability and participation of locals as informants—had penetrated Mosul as a “shadow government,” collecting taxes from civilians and business owners.⁵⁴ While strong and professional policing institutions are lacking in Iraq, more securitization does not dispel the multivariate

⁵³ Vivienne Walt, “Why Iraqis are Worried about an Islamic State Resurgence after Soleimani’s Death,” *Time*, January 8, 2020.

⁵⁴ Author’s interviews with civilians and local business owners in Mosul, July 2019. For more information about financing of ISIS’s predecessor, including extortion and racketeering, see, Patrick B. Johnston, Mona Alami, Colin P. Clarke, and Howard J. Shatz, “Return and Expand? The Finances and Prospects of the Islamic State After the Caliphate,” RAND Corporation, 2019.



Members from the Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service present Marine Gen. Joseph F. Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, with a flag from Bartilah, a town recaptured just outside of Mosul from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. (Dominique Pineiro/U.S. Department of Defense)

root causes that drive locals to participate in explicit and implicit acts of rebellion.

Regardless of how “resurgence” is defined and measured, for ISIS to repeat its historical success of territorial control will require the remobilization of social bases of the Sunni community to participate in rebellion. However, in its ongoing counter-ISIS campaign, the West continues to place an overemphasis on military operations. This is largely reflected in the kinetic actions taken through airpower, targeting remnants of the group in desert and mountain ranges. But this overlooks the real danger of civil war recurrence brought on by unaddressed grievances, which can only be mitigated and managed through political efforts at the local and national level. To this end, the key to mitigating the risk of another wave of Sunni insurgency is to deprive ISIS, or future extremist groups, of local social networks to regenerate their membership and organizational apparatus. Here, three zones of concern are highlighted that require policy attention: ongoing inter-tribal and intra-tribal divisions, the proliferation of informal settlements, and the uncertainty surrounding

displaced and excluded communities.

First, the issue of tribal reconciliation and reintegration with the state and society is imperative to post-conflict stabilization. Because the rise and rule of ISIS involved the active participation of many Iraqi Sunnis, the motive to settle scores after its defeat for the crimes it committed will remain a factor risking another cycle of violence.⁵⁵ The group’s rise was buttressed by pre-2014 motives of revenge that played out not just between tribes, but also between families within the same tribe, leading to tribal fragmentation. To offset the risk of future waves of settling scores within the Sunni community, targeted dialogue at the local level between tribal leaders requires a sustained effort by third-party mediators and non-government organizations that specialize in conflict resolution.⁵⁶ This requires expansive and stable partnerships between international organizations and appropriate authorities in Iraq, as well as engagement at all levels of government: local, provincial, and national.

⁵⁵ Isabel Coles, “Iraqi Yazidis Take Revenge as Islamic State Atrocities Unearthed,” *Reuters*, February 10, 2015; and Isabel Coles, “As Bodies Wash Up from the Tigris, Some See Signs of Score-Settling,” *Reuters*, April 19, 2017.

⁵⁶ Osama Gharizi and Haidar al-Ibrahimi, “Baghdad Must Seize the Chance to Work with Iraq’s Tribes,” *War on the Rocks*, January 17, 2018.

Second, given Iraq's decades-long history of turmoil, which included devastating economic sanctions and international and civil wars, urban peripheries experienced a boom in informal settlements, or self-built illegal housing communities. Their lack of integration into formal governance institutions or city urban plans had practically led to stateless communities, exacerbating the urban-rural divide. This problem was especially pervasive on the western outskirts of Mosul, and served as a breeding ground for local ISIS facilitation and recruitment in the years prior to its self-declared caliphate. The problem of informal settlements is likely to exacerbate given the recent wave of internal displacement, and the government's weak capacity and willingness to tackle the issue.

Finally, barriers to reintegration placed against displaced Sunnis, in addition to the societal exclusion of families of ISIS members, are factors of destabilization that will have a cumulative impact on current and future generations. If families are not reintegrated back into their communities, grievances are likely to intensify over the coming years and invite radicalization within the camps. This serves as ground for extremist groups to recruit. Without sustained pressure and support from the international community, it is unlikely Iraqi leaders will be able to mobilize the political will to tackle issues surrounding reintegration. The removal of barriers to entry will require the demobilization or removal of militias from Sunni areas. This is unlikely without stronger state capacity and a security apparatus able to fill the vacuum to provide safety and certainty to returnees.

Today, local Sunni elites across the former territories of the Islamic State desire that the central government in Baghdad to move away from its binary approach and adopt a different legal framework to incorporate variation. A justice system that reflects varying types of membership and degrees of crimes committed to correspond to different levels of punishment is essential to mitigate the risks of conflict recurrence. This would allow opportunities for reintegration in the future, especially for those who do not have blood on their hands. Since all tribes in Sunni areas have members who joined the militant organization in one form or another, there is a collective interest

to create legal space for members (and their families) to eventually be reintegrated back into their local communities.

Moving into the new decade, Western engagement with a post-war Iraq should focus on these three broad issue areas, which will help national and local elites mitigate individual and group motivations to correct grievances through opportunistic violence. A strategy to counter ISIS's ideology as a way to advance de-radicalization policies is insufficient because ISIS was the byproduct of various motivations—many inspired by legitimate grievances that were unrelated to Salafi-jihadism or a commitment to Sunni statehood. To prevent conflict recurrence, a concerted effort is needed at the local level to repair and reconcile the local divisions within the Sunni community, and at the national level to reintegrate that community into the wider network of state infrastructure, governance, and service provisions.

Without these state and nation building mechanisms in place, revisionist armed actors are bound to find fertile ground, establish network ties, and expand and penetrate different segments of the Sunni population.





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