Iraq Between Maliki and the Islamic State

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POMEPS Briefings 24

Project on Middle East Political Science

Contents

Seeking to explain the rise of sectarianism in the Middle East 4
By Toby Dodge

The Middle East quasi-state system 10
By Ariel I. Ahram

How can the U.S. help Maliki when Maliki's the problem? 12
By Marc Lynch

Why the Iraqi army collapsed (and what can be done about it) 13
By Keren Fraiman, Austin Long, Columbia University, and Caitlin Talmadge

Getting rid of Maliki won't solve Iraq's crisis 15
By Fanar Haddad

How Arab backers of the Syrian rebels see Iraq 17
By Marc Lynch

Want to defeat ISIS in Iraq? More electricity would help 19
By Andrew Shaver and Gabriel Tenorio

Will ISIS Cohere or Collapse? 22
By Paul Staniland

Maliki has only himself to blame for Iraq's crisis 23
By Zaid Al-Ali

Was Obama wrong to withdraw troops from Iraq? 26
By Jason Brownlee

Can ISIS overcome the insurgency resource curse? 29
By Ariel I. Ahram

The Calculated Caliphate 31
By Thomas Hegghammer

The logic of violence in the Islamic State's war 34
By Stathis N. Kalyva

The Project on Middle East Political Science

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Online Article Index

Seeking to explain the rise of sectarianism in the Middle East
http://pomeps.org/2014/03/19/seeking-to-explain-the-rise-of-sectarianism-in-the-middle-east-the-case-study-of-iraq/

The Middle East quasi-state system
http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/05/27/the-middle-east-quasi-state-system/

How can the U.S. help Maliki when Maliki's the problem?
http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/06/12/iraq-trapped-between-isis-and-maliki/

Why the Iraqi army collapsed (and what can be done about it)
http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/06/13/why-the-iraqi-army-collapsed-and-what-can-be-done-about-it/

Getting rid of Maliki won't solve Iraq's crisis
http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/06/17/getting-rid-of-maliki-wont-solve-iraqs-crisis/

How Arab backers of the Syrian rebels see Iraq
http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/06/18/how-arab-backers-of-the-syrian-rebels-see-iraq/

Want to defeat ISIS in Iraq? More electricity would help
http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/06/19/want-to-defeat-isis-in-iraq-more-electricity-would-help/

Will ISIS Cohere or Collapse?
http://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2014/06/24/will-isis-cohere-or-collapse/

Maliki has only himself to blame for Iraq's crisis
http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/06/26/maliki-has-only-himself-to-blame-for-iraqs-crisis/

Was Obama wrong to withdraw troops from Iraq?
http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/06/26/was-obama-wrong-to-withdraw-troops-from-iraq/

Can ISIS overcome the insurgency resource curse?
http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/07/02/for-isis-its-oil-and-water/

The Foreign Policy Essay: Calculated Caliphate
http://www.lawfareblog.com/2014/07/the-foreign-policy-essay-calculated-caliphate/

The logic of violence in the Islamic State's war
http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/07/07/the-logic-of-violence-in-islamic-states-war/

Iraq's long-simmering political conflicts and violence erupted in June with the stunning capture of Mosul and advances toward Baghdad by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The collapse of the Iraqi army and the rapid seizure of territory by ISIS took most observers by surprise, but the crisis had been developing for years. This *POMEPS Briefing* collects more than a dozen recent articles by academics writing for *The Monkey Cage* and other leading online publications that explore both the immediate crisis and its underlying causes.

ISIS may have been galvanized by the Syrian civil war and insurgency, but its traction with Iraqi Sunni political factions and armed groups has a longer history. Toby Dodge and Zaid Al-Ali each trace the roots of the crisis to the sectarian governance and attempts to monopolize power by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, and his heavy-handed response to an emergent Sunni protest movement. The stunning collapse of the Iraqi army is equally rooted in this sectarian governance, as Keren Fraiman, Austin Long and Caitlin Talmadge demonstrate. Removing Maliki would not itself solve the crisis, argues Fanar Haddad, given the urgency of the military challenge to Baghdad and the deeper problems of the Iraqi political order. It is difficult to see how Iraq's Sunnis could be reincorporated into the political system and separated from ISIS while he remains, however.

How should we understand ISIS, particularly after its declaration of an Islamic caliphate? Thomas Hegghammer argues that the caliphate declaration represented a rational but risky stratagem for the group. Its remarkable use of violence has multiple goals, warns Stathis Kalyvas, and it is far too early to project its ultimate success or failure. The experience of similar groups suggests that numerous problems await the Islamic State as it tries to consolidate its power. The seizure of resources such as cash, oil and water have given ISIS real power, but the rapid infusion of such resources has crippled many other insurgencies, notes Ariel Ahram. Paul Staniland lays out reasons to wonder whether ISIS could be the rare insurgency that can overcome its organizational coherence problems.

There are few obvious policy choices for actors outside of Iraq. A longer U.S. occupation of Iraq would not likely have prevented the crisis, argues Jason Brownlee. Nor, I argue, would a return of U.S. troops make a decisive difference without resolving the underlying political problems, which alienated Iraq's Sunnis. Andrew Shaver and Gabriel Tenoria present evidence that better services, such as electricity, might entice Sunni communities back into the political fold, at least over the longer term. And while many analysts and U.S. officials have argued for the arming of Syria's moderate rebels as the key to fighting ISIS in both Syria and Iraq, I note the awkward reality that most of the Arab backers of the Syrian rebels actually support what they see as a Sunni uprising in Iraq.

The essays in *POMEPS Briefing #24 Iraq Between Maliki and the Islamic State* offer a variety of perspectives on Iraq's ongoing crisis by leading scholars. Please download and share!

Marc Lynch, Director of POMEPS
July 8, 2014

Seeking to explain the rise of sectarianism in the Middle East:
The case study of Iraq

By Toby Dodge, London School of Economics and Political Science

** This memo was prepared for the "Visions of Gulf Security" workshop, March 9, 2014.*

Introduction

It is clear that sectarian rhetoric both from above and below is now a dominant ideological trend across the Middle East. Sectarianism from above, the use of communalist language to further the interests of ruling elites, can be clearly identified in Saudi foreign policy, in the state sanctioned rhetoric of Qatari media outlets and preachers, and in the speeches of those who previously claimed to be working for anti-imperialist Arab unity in the Middle East.[1] To some extent, sectarianism from below, the popular use of aggressive and divisive communalist rhetoric can been seen as a direct response to this elite encouragement. However, it can also be read as the result of the growth of social media across the Middle East, democratizing communication that allows new, previously suppressed or marginal voices, to find a wider audience.

What is less clear is when it becomes possible to identify the start of this trend and how to judge its causes. Sectarian political mobilization could be dated to the start of the Lebanese civil war in 1975, if not to the signing of the National Pact in the summer of 1943. A later date would site the growing confidence in and funding for Saudi Arabian global Wahhabi proselytization in the 1970s and 1980s. This process moved into a defensive over-drive as a reaction to the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the Gulf state's financial support for Iraq's war against Iran from 1980 to 1988.

However, Daniel Byman dates the start of the current wave of sectarian mobilization to the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. For him, this unleashed "a massive sectarian wave" that "has grown in size and ferocity as Syria descended into strife."[2] The removal of the allegedly secular and coercively competent Baathist regime in Baghdad and Iraq's descent into a bloody communal civil war certainly brought the sectarian justification for mass blood letting to the Gulf. However, the political system put in place under the U.S. occupation also institutionalized a rough and ready form of ethno-sectarian consociationalism. This consciously divided Iraq's polity along religious and ethnic lines and encouraged politicians to seek votes on the basis of communalist identities.

This approach to identifying the origins of the current wave of sectarianism in the Middle East would see them in the aftermath of regime change in Baghdad, where a Shiite majority government, increasingly aligned to Iran, understood its relations with its own population and more recently, its relations with the wider Middle East, in terms of the religion of its ruling elite and the majority of its population. Against this background, the aftermath of the "Arab Spring," with the descent of Syria into a civil war increasingly justified in sectarian terms and the use of sectarian rhetoric by the ruling elites of the Arab Gulf states, looks like an acceleration of trends already put in place by the aftermath of regime change in Baghdad.

With this in mind, can Iraq's own descent into a civil war justified by sectarian rhetoric tell us anything about the causes of the increasing communalist politics across the rest of the Middle East? If it can, such an explanation would focus on the use of historical track dependencies by ethnic and religious entrepreneurs and the role that state weakness plays in their success.

1 Examples of this would be the increased use of sectarian rhetoric in the programming of Al Jazeera Arabic, the now infamous speeches given by Qatar based but Muslim Brotherhood aligned cleric, Yusuf al-Qaradawi in June 2013 and Hassan Nasrallah's justification of Hezbollah's fight to save the Assad regime in Syria in April and May 2013.

2 Daniel Byman, "Sectarianism afflicts the new Middle East," *Survival*, vol. 56, no. 1, Feb-March 2014, p. 80.

The Socio-cultural factors in Iraq's descent into civil war

The socio-cultural factors that are most commonly deployed to explain the rise of ethno-sectarian conflict in Iraq and then sectarian politics across the region more generally, focus on divisive sub-state identities. However, the power and relevance of these identities have not historically dominated Iraqi or wider Middle Eastern political discourse. As Fanar Haddad has argued, before 2003 "traditional Iraq discourse, whether from above or below, has struggled to openly address 'sectarianism.'"[3] Yet as the post-2003 violence in Iraq mutated from an insurgency directed at the U.S. occupation to an all out civil war, the rhetoric used to justify the increasing killings of civilians, the population transfers, and mass casualty attacks became infused with sectarian language.

Sunnis and Shi'as began using new terms to refer to each other. To Shi'as, Sunnis were Wahhabis, Saddamists, and nawasib. To Sunnis, Shi'as were al rafidha or al turs. Rafidha, meaning 'rejectionists', refers to those who do not recognize the Islamic caliphs and want instead a caliphate from the descendent of Imam Ali.[4]

Clearly, by 2006 the conflict was justified in aggressively divisive sectarian language.

Such forms of political mobilization based on religious and ethnic identity do not operate on a wholly rational, instrumental, or even fully conscious basis, as "the political genius of ethnicity in the contemporary developed world lies precisely in its ability to combine emotional sustenance with calculated strategy."[5] Haddad makes the distinction between three states of ethnic and religious identity: aggressive, passive, and banal.[6] In times of insecurity, both material and ideational, competition for scarce resources and the aggressive assertion of competing identity claims are likely to move any group's collective sense of itself from banal or passive to the violently assertive, as the group struggles for survival.

However, for these communalistic identities to triumph as an organizing principle in fluid and unpredictable situations, the existence of a certain type of sub-national political elite is required. These "ethnic and religious entrepreneurs" have to supply what a wider community needs, a degree of stability, ideational certainty, and political mobilization. They can then legitimize their role in terms of a communalistic identity that aids them in the struggle for popular support and political power.[7] In circumstances of profound uncertainty, people will turn to whatever grouping, militia, or identity offers them the best chance of survival.[8] This unstable and potentially violent process will certainly be shaped by historical path dependencies but needs the actions of political entrepreneurs to politicize and mobilize what have previously been passive, irrelevant, or non-political identity traits. In the hands of political entrepreneurs, local, sub-state, and ethnic identities will emerge from this process to provide channels for mobilization and the immediate basis for political organization.[9]

However, once this process has been set in motion, when ethnic and sectarian entrepreneurs have mobilized a significant section of the population on the basis of communalistic identity, this dynamic can quickly solidify and is difficult to reverse.[10] Previously "fuzzy" or passive identity traits can become politicized and "enumerated."[11] Survival, a degree of predictability for individuals and their families, or simply resource maximization becomes

3 Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (London: Hurst & Co., 2011), p. 1.

4 Nir Rosen, "Anatomy of a Civil War; Iraq's Descent into Chaos," *Boston Review*, November–December, 2006.

5 Joseph Rothchild, *Ethnopoltics: A Conceptual Framework* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), p. 61.

6 Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, p. 25.

7 See Rothchild, *Ethnopoltics*, p. 29.

8 Andrea Kathryn Talentino, "The Two Faces of Nation-building: Developing Function and Identity," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 17, no. 3, October 2004, p. 569.

9 David Laitin, *The Russian-speaking Populations in the Near Abroad* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 16.

10 Andreas Wimmer, "Democracy and Ethno-religious Conflict in Iraq," *Survival*, vol. 45, no. 4, Winter 2003–04, p. 120.

11 On this distinction, see Sudipta Kaviraj, "On the Construction of Colonial Power, Structure, Discourse, Hegemony," in Dagmar Engles and Shula Marxs (eds), *Contesting Colonial Hegemony: State and Society in Africa and India* (London: British Academic Press, 1994), pp. 21–32.

primarily obtainable through the increasingly militant deployment of ethnic or sectarian identity. It needs to be stressed that there is nothing inevitable about the unfolding of this process; the primary cause is the material and ideational insecurity faced by the population, the lack of institutionalized politics that guarantees citizenship, and equal access to state resources, *not* the existence of the historical path dependencies that are then mobilized by sectarian entrepreneurs.

In pre-2003 Iraq, the state promoted an Iraqi nationalism, which, at first glance, appeared to be without religious bias. Although, from the mid-1990s onward, President Saddam Hussein had injected Islamism into his party's ruling ideology, examples of the state using blatantly sectarian rhetoric were comparatively rare. However, on closer inspection, the ruling ideology, based as it was on Arab nationalism, relied on a passive but nonetheless important affinity with Sunni Islam. As Haddad argues, although Baathist ideology in Iraq did attempt to integrate both Sunni and Shiite imagery, it was clearly more inclusive of Sunni symbolism than Shiite.[12] In addition, it was Sunni Islam that was taught in state schools, and various aspects of Shiite religious practice were banned under the Baathist regime.[13]

This favoring of Sunni symbolism and the suppression of Shiite Islam came to a shuddering halt when the Baathist regime fell in April 2003, freeing the majority Shiite population to actively promote their religious identity. Only a few weeks after the fall of the Baath Party, up to three million Shiite pilgrims descended on the holy city of Karbala to take part in the previously banned *arba'in* ceremony.[14] In 2003, Iraq was a country with little government, almost no state institutions, and no order. The Shiite religious hierarchy, the *hawza*, became the focus of loyalty and hope for the largest section of Iraqi society.[15] Once governing institutions were tentatively set up, their senior ranks filled ethnic and religious entrepreneurs, the formerly exiled politicians and parties that actively asserted the centrality of their Shiite religious beliefs to the country's new politics and the desire to remold Iraqi nationalism, placing Shiism at its heart. This assertive promotion of religious identity produced a predictable backlash across the Sunni section of Iraqi society and then from the Sunni ruling elites of neighboring states. In an increasingly lawless country politically dominated by overtly Shiite parties and the *hawza*, those Sunnis who had previously found comfort and certainty in Iraqi nationalism began to look elsewhere. An increasingly militant assertion of a rival Sunni Islamism, supported by outside actors, was forged. In the face of persecution and then civil war, it rapidly radicalized and at its fringes turned increasingly violent.[16]

A close examination of Iraq after 2003 would not stress the existence of historic track dependencies, existing but passive religious and ethnic identities. These were certainly present but needed to be manipulated, mobilized, and solidified. Instead, it is the existence of an active and ultimately successful group of ethnic and religious entrepreneurs that made sure sub-state sectarian political identities become the dominant form of political mobilization after 2003. This was certainly a case of sectarianism from above.

State capacity and sub-state identity

Socio-cultural explanations for the increasing use of sectarian and ethnic identities for political mobilization are directly linked to the power of the state's institutions, its army and police force, but also its ability to deliver services to its population. The withdrawal or weakening

12 Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, p. 33.

13 Nir Rosen, *Aftermath: Following the Bloodshed of America's Wars in the Muslim World* (New York: Nation Books, 2010), p. 30.

14 Anthony Shadid, "A Tradition of Faith Is Reclaimed on Blistered Feet," *Washington Post*, April 23, 2003, p. A01; Glenn Kessler and Dana Priest, "US Planners Surprised by Strength of Iraqi Shiites," *Washington Post*, April 23, 2003, p. A03; and Faleh A. Jabar, "The Worldly Roots of Religiosity in Post-Saddam Iraq," *Middle East Report*, no. 227, Summer 2003, p. 13.

15 International Crisis Group, "Iraq's Shiites Under Occupation," *Middle East Briefing*, Baghdad/Brussels, September 9, 2003, p. 8.

16 Mohammed M. Hafez, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2007), p. 35.

of institutional power from society creates a vacuum for both ethnic entrepreneurs to mobilize within and the purveyors of violence, justified in sectarian language, to exploit lawlessness. This focus on state weakness to explain sectarian mobilization supports Fearon and Laitin's argument that "financially, organizationally and politically weak central governments render insurgency more feasible and attractive due to weak local policing or inept and corrupt counterinsurgency practices."[17]

A coherent state relies on its ability to impose order on the population and to monopolize the deployment of collective violence across the whole of its territory.[18] However, once a state has obtained the ability to impose and guarantee order, the basis of its sustainability and legitimacy moves to infrastructural power, delivering services the population benefits from as it operates across society unopposed.[19] The degree to which a state has reached this ideal type can be judged firstly by the ability of its institutions to impose and guarantee the rule of law, then to penetrate society, mobilize the population, and finally regularly extract resources in the form of taxation.[20] Ultimately, the stability of the state depends on the extent to which its actions are judged to be legitimate in the eyes of the majority of its citizens, and the ability of its ruling elite to foster consent.[21]

The initial causes of the security vacuum in Iraq were twofold, the lack of troops the invading forces brought with them, followed by the disbanding of the Iraqi army. Faced with the widespread lawlessness that is common after violent regime change, the United States lacked the troop numbers to control the situation.[22] In February 2003, in the run-up to war, Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki called for "something in the order of several hundred thousand soldiers" to guarantee post-war order. James Dobbins, in a widely cited study on state building published in the run-up to the invasion, compared U.S. interventions in other states since the World War II. Dobbins concluded that occupying forces would need 20 security personnel, police, and troops per thousand people. Translated into American personnel, U.S. forces should have had between 400,000 and 500,000 soldiers to impose order on Iraq.[23] In May 2003, the total strength of coalition forces numbered 173,000. This figured dropped to as low as 139,000 in 2004, and only significantly increased after President George W. Bush announced the "surge" at the start of 2007.[24] Paul Bremer's decision to disband the Iraqi army in May 2003, forced 400,000 armed, trained, and alienated ex-soldiers out onto the streets, facing unemployment. Of even greater significance, Bremer's decision meant that the Iraqi armed forces had to be rebuilt from scratch, a process that by its very nature was bound to take several years. Thus, the violence that shook Iraq after 2003 was a direct result of the security vacuum created by the lack of troops to impose order.

The civilian institutional capacity of the state in 2003 was in a similarly perilous condition. Iraq had staggered through two wars from 1980 to 1990 and was then subjected to the harshest and longest-running international sanctions ever imposed. The sanctions regime was specifically designed to break the government's ability to deliver services and, with the notable exception of the rationing system, it was effective.[25] The civilian capacity of the state was dismantled

17 Fearon and Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War" pp. 75–6.

18 For the classic definition see Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 78–9.

19 Michael Mann, "The Autonomous Power of the State: Its Origins, Mechanisms and Results," in Michael Mann (ed.), *States, War and Capitalism: Studies in Political Sociology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p. 4.

20 See Joel S. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States. State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

21 See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1998), p. 145; and Christine Buci-Glucksman, *Gramsci and the State* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980). On the lack of hegemony in the developing world see Nazih N. Ayubi, *Over-stating the Arab State: Politics and Society in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1995), Chapter One.

22 On post-regime change violence see Simon Chesterman, *You, the People. The United Nations, Transitional Administration, and State-Building* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) pp. 100, 112. On the estimated number of troops needed to impose order on Iraq see James Dobbins et al., *America's Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2003), p. 197.

23 See *ibid*.

24 Michael E. O'Hanlon and Ian Livingston, *Iraq Index: Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post-Saddam Iraq*, October 31, 2010.

25 On the sanctions regime and its effects on the Iraqi state and society, see Toby Dodge, "The Failure of Sanctions and the Evolution of International Policy Towards Iraq 1990–2003," *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, vol. 3, no. 1, January 2010, pp. 82–90.

by the looting that spread across Baghdad after the fall of the Baathist regime. This initial three weeks of violence and theft severely damaged the state's administrative capacity: 17 of Baghdad's 23 ministry buildings were completely gutted.[26] Looters initially took portable items of value such as computers, before turning to furniture and fittings. They then systematically stripped the electric wiring from the walls to sell for scrap. This practice was so widespread that copper and aluminum prices in the neighboring states, Iran and Kuwait, dramatically dropped as a result of the massive illicit outflow of stolen scrap metal from Iraq.[27] Overall, the looting is estimated to have cost as much as $12 billion, equal to a third of Iraq's annual GDP.[28]

Following the destruction of government infrastructure across the country, the de-Baathification pursued by the U.S. occupation purged the civil service of its top layer of management, making between 20,000 and 120,000 people unemployed and removing what was left of the state and its institutional memory.[29] (The large variation in estimates indicates the paucity of reliable intelligence on the ramifications of such an important policy decision.) After 2003, not only did the state's ability to impose order on Iraq disintegrate, but the coherence and capacity of its civil institutions also fell away. The population was bereft of order or state-delivered services.

Against this background of war, sanctions, inadequate occupying forces, and resultant looting, Iraq in 2003 became a collapsed state. As William Zartman has put it:

State collapse is a deeper phenomenon than mere rebellion, coup, or riot. It refers to a situation where the structure, authority (legitimate power), law, and political order have fallen apart and must be reconstituted in some form, old or new.[30]

In the aftermath of state failure, authoritative institutions, both societal and governmental, quickly lose their capacity and legitimacy.[31] The geographic boundaries within which national politics and economics have been historically enacted simultaneously expand and contract. On one level, because the state has lost its administrative and coercive capacity, the country's borders become increasingly meaningless. Decision-making power leaks out across the boundaries of the country to neighboring capitals – in Iraq's case, Amman, Damascus, and Tehran, as well as Washington. As this process accelerates regional and international actors are drawn into the conflict, for good or ill. More damaging, however, is that power drains into what is left of society, away from the state capital, down to a local level, where limited organizational capacity begins to be rebuilt. The dynamics associated with state collapse mean that politics becomes simultaneously international and highly local.[32] In the aftermath of state failure, individuals struggle to find public goods, services, and economic subsistence and physically survive any way they can, usually through ad hoc and informal channels:

When state authority crumbles, individuals not only lose the protection normally supplied by public offices, but are also freed from institutional restraints. In response, they often seek safety, profit or both. Their motives become more complex than when they could depend on the state.[33]

26 David L. Phillips, *Losing Iraq: Inside the Post-war Reconstruction Fiasco* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), p. 135.

27 Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 116.

28 James Dobbins et al., *Occupying Iraq; A History of the Coalition Provisional Authority* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009), p. 111.

29 Phillips estimates that the purge made 120,000 unemployed out of a total party membership of 2m. Paul Bremer cites intelligence estimates that the purge affected 1% of the party membership, or 20,000 people. George Packer estimates "at least thirty-five thousand." See Phillips, *Losing Iraq*, pp. 145–46; L. Paul Bremer III with Malcolm McConnell, *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle To Build a Future of Hope* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), p. 40; and George Packer, *Assassins' Gate: America in Iraq* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), p. 191.

30 I. William Zartman, "Posing the Problem of State Collapse," in I. William Zartman (ed.), *Collapsed States: The Disintegration and Restoration of Legitimate Authority* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1995), p. 1.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

33 Nelson Kasfir, 'Domestic Anarchy, Security Dilemmas, and Violent Predation,' in Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), *When States Fail: Causes and Consequences* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 55.

This is exactly the situation that the Iraqi population found themselves in from 2003 onward. The state suddenly ceased functioning, leaving a security and institutional vacuum across Iraq. Iraqi society was initially overrun by opportunist criminals, then by the diffuse forces fighting in the insurgency, and finally by a full-blown civil war. It was the creation of this coercive and institutional vacuum that allowed ethnic and religious entrepreneurs to operate with such freedom and success. The Iraqi state, long the focus of political identity but also the provider of coercion and resources, ceased to exist. The Iraqi population was cut loose, both ideationally and materially, and had to find political, coercive, and economic leadership where it could. From 2003 to 2009, religious parties and militias became the major suppliers of these scarce resources. Individual Iraqi's could only access these resources by deploying a sectarian identity.

A similar process is certainly playing out in Syria where protest and rebellion has triggered the retreat of the state. In the Gulf, with the exception of Yemen, state institutions remain coherent enough to place limits on the space in which ethnic and religious entrepreneurs can operate. State elites certainly deploy sectarian rhetoric but this continues to sit in an uneasy relationship with the language of citizenship and national equality.

Conclusions

If Iraq can be taken as a case study for the rise of sectarian politics across the wider Middle East then its lessons are fairly clear. First, the origins of sectarian politics in Iraq do not come from the historical track dependencies of the country's religious and ethnic make up. For the majority of the country's history, communalist politics have not been the main vehicle for political mobilization. From the 1920s to the 1980s Arab and then Iraqi nationalism dominated political rhetoric. The fact that Iraq had the largest Communist Party in the Middle East in the 1950s indicates that a fairly substantial section of a newly urbanized population was happy to take its class identity as the primary point of political reference. However, the dominance of sectarian identity politics after 2003 has two main causes. The first is quite simply state weakness. In the aftermath of state collapse in 2003, ordinary urban Iraqis, the majority of the population, had to find security and certainty wherever they could. It was coercive entrepreneurs on a very local level who supplied this. In the absence of state delivered law and order, militias formed and solidified in reach and organization to deliver order to the population. This order and the accompanying resource extraction were certainly justified in terms of sectarian rhetoric. But the use of Shiite, Sunni, or Kurdish political labels to justify militia activity happened after that activity started not before. Sectarianism was used as a justification not as the primary motivation. This leads us on to the second cause of sectarian politics, the role of political entrepreneurs. In 2006, Phebe Marr's research suggested that only 26.8 percent of Iraq's new ruling elite were "insiders," those who has stayed in the county under Baathist rule.[34] It was thus the politicians, returning from many years of exile, who were primarily responsible for deploying sectarian rhetoric. They used this language to divided up the polity in ways that would maximize their votes and influence and minimize the accusation that, after long periods of absence, they did not represent their own constituencies.

The lessons of Iraq for the wider region are hence clear: sectarian politics is primarily driven by ruling elites and secondarily by state weakness. A reduction in sectarian politics is possible but it would mean the ruling elites of the region choosing to move away from heralding their population in sectarian forms to a new politics based on citizenship, a highly unlikely possibility.

Toby Dodge is a professor of international relations and the interim director of the Middle East Centre at the London School of Economics and Political Science as well as a senior consulting fellow for the Middle East at the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

34 Phebe Marr, "Who are Iraq's new leaders? What do they want?" United States Institute of Peace, Special Report, March 2006, p. 8.

The Middle East quasi-state system

By Ariel I. Ahram, May 27, 2014

Many of the challenges of the Middle East appear to stem from the region's artificial, misshapen and ill-conceived borders. Beginning with the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 and the subsequent San Remo conference (1920), European powers delineated (however roughly) the political boundaries of Fertile Crescent. Designing a "better" map, revising or reversing Sykes-Picot and its siblings, has served as a political rallying cry and something of a parlor game ever since. In a recent Monkey Cage article, F. Gregory Gause III offers a compelling case for the continued durability of the colonially-imposed territorial system. But some of the very points Gause makes about the persistence of "quasi-states" and juridical borders in the Middle East actually highlight the reasons why Sykes-Picot and San Remo died many years ago. The European powers did not just inscribe new political borders, but, more importantly, elevated and implanted local rulers within new polities. In this respect, Sykes-Picot and San Remo have already been upended, at least partially. The problem is that the region is still struggling to find a coherent system to replace them.

The colonial arrangements began to break down when a series of coups in Syria unseated the urban Sunni elites and ushered into power military regimes that drew increasingly on the ethno-sectarian minorities of the periphery. The last of these coups, in 1968, brought Hafez al-Assad and the Alawites, a heterodox Shiite sect from the hinterlands, definitively to power. Lebanon came next. Conceived by the French as a Levantine Christian homeland, the unwritten National Pact of 1943 guaranteed the Christians the republic's presidency and with it, the preponderance of political power, while Sunni Muslims got the secondary position of prime minister. At the time, the Shiites were so inconsequential that they did not even warrant a seat at the confessional table. Decades of civil war, invasions and foreign occupations finally dispensed with this gentlemen's agreement. Now Hezbollah and the Shiites, who hold a clear demographic preponderance, maintain effective hegemony over the state. In Iraq the reckoning began in 1958, when a coup overthrew the Sunni Hashemite monarchy, longstanding British protégés. It was not until 2003 and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, though, that Sunni dominance was conclusively replaced by a Shiite-sectarian government, an eventuality that would have been inconceivable to Sykes, Picot and their ilk.

Overturning of foreign designs has come about through protracted civil wars, external intervention and repressive dictatorship. It is thus no coincidence that Syria, Iraq and Lebanon have difficulty maintaining effective control within their own territories. Political instability revolves around two diametrically opposed political impetuses: On one hand is the desire on the part of the dethroned to return to power. On the other hand, newly-ascendant groups, like Hezbollah, Maliki's Shiite alliance or Bashar al-Assad's Alawite core, have an equally powerful drive to defend their newly-won prerogatives to rule. As Gause correctly assesses, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon (plus the nascent state of Palestine) are all, to varying degrees, quasi-states. They enjoy *de jure* international standing as sovereigns but lack the functional requisites that sovereignty entails in the ability to maintain a monopoly over force across their territory. Yet, the term quasi-statehood can also denote the exact opposite phenomena: A polity denied international recognition but possessing effective de facto control over territory, for instance, Somaliland or Nagarno-Karabkh. The faltering of one type of quasi-state provides the impetus for the appearance of the other. The Kurdish Regional Government that separated from war-ravaged Iraq in 1991 and the Palestine Liberation Organization-controlled "Fatahland" enclaves in Lebanon in the 1970s are cases in point.

The last five years have provided opportunities for a new crop of quasi-states to emerge, each articulating alternative visions of governance and regional order. Consider the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), a splinter group

originating as al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia. Many observers see ISIS at best as an organized crime syndicate, at worst a terrorist group so viciously anti-Shiite that even al-Qaeda has disowned it. Both descriptions are correct, but incomplete, as they overlook ISIS's ambition to be a state (and the extent to which all states resemble organized crime rackets). ISIS explicitly rejects the political divisions inherited from Sykes-Picot. At the same time, though, ISIS's self-description as an Islamic state (*dawlah*), instead of merely organization, movement or army, is important and controversial. Indeed, despite a rocky beginning, ISIS today in many ways looks and acts like a state. In Mosul, according to reports, ISIS enforced taxes on a variety of commercial activities, including telecommunications companies that had relay towers in ISIS-controlled zones. Those who refused to pay risked abduction or murder. In Syria's Raqqa province ISIS imposed the jizya (poll tax), the same tax the prophet Muhammad placed on non-Muslim communities in return for protection.

In addition to taxation, ISIS has also asserted itself in two domains that have long been critical to successful state-making. First, it has sought out alliances with tribes on the Syrian and Iraqi sides of the Jazeera desert. Extending a territorial foothold from Deir al-Zour in Syria to Fallujah in Iraq, ISIS has resuscitated demands made during the French mandate in Syria for an autonomous, and perhaps even independent, Jazeera. Second, ISIS has become, in its own way, a hydraulic state. After seizing control of Fallujah with the help of tribal allies, ISIS has used dams, canals and reservoirs as a weapon, denying water to areas outside of its control and flooding areas to block the encircling Iraqi army. Yet ISIS's progress has been hampered by its rivalry with al-Nusra Front, al-Qaeda's designated champion in Syria, and other Islamist factions, as well as by general antipathy from the Syrian opposition.

Farther north, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat, PYD), a Syrian affiliate of Turkey's Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), unilaterally announced the enactment of a Kurdish autonomous zone near the Turkish and Iraqi borders. Like ISIS, the PYD took steps to assume state-like administrative functions, including subsidizing fuel and seed crops, restoring electricity and most importantly, deploying a militia that pushed back encroachment from Islamist rebels and essentially established a monopoly over force. The Kurds were among the main losers at the post-World War I negotiating table. Again, though, infighting more than external pressure hem in the effort to establish a broader Kurdish base, as other Syrian Kurdish factions and Iraq's Kurdish Democratic Party oppose the PYD.

The prospects for the territorial re-division of the Middle East and conclusive territorial rectification of Sykes-Picot appear slim. As has long been the case among the perennially weak states of Africa, none of the relevant regional or extra-regional powers at this point have an interest in changing European-installed boundaries. But political boundaries are just the skeleton of Sykes-Picot and San Remo. At the levels of governance and political authority the colonial system has already been substantially gutted. The outstanding question has been what will emerge instead. In contrast to "real" states of questionable capacity, quasi-states represent possible answers to these questions, however miniscule in scale, amorphous in territory or thuggish in rule. Territorial change and much less the outright demise of a state are rare. But they are not impossible – take the examples of Crimea, South Sudan, Eritrea, East Timor and the former Yugoslavia. These changes almost always come about bloodily. Still, the option of territorial realignment appears improbable at the onset of violence. As violence drags on, though, even outlandish notions gain credibility. If and when realignment does come, quasi-states will offer important instruction for how to fashion political boundaries that more closely map to political aspirations.

Ariel I. Ahram (@ariel_ahram) is an assistant professor in Virginia Tech University's School of Public and International Affairs in Alexandria, VA. He is the author of Proxy Warriors: The Rise and Fall of State Sponsored Militias *(Stanford University Press, 2011).*

How can the U.S. help Maliki when Maliki's the problem?

By Marc Lynch, June 12, 2014

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's (ISIS) genuinely stunning capture of Mosul, and advances across Iraq, look like a real turning point in regional politics. Even if the territorial gains by ISIS are reversed, its offensive has already rapidly reframed analytical debates over the nature and fortunes of al-Qaeda and the jihadist movement, the ability to contain spillover from Syria, possible areas of U.S.-Iranian cooperation and the viability of President Obama's light-footprint Middle East strategy.

The most wide-ranging verdicts are clearly premature. It's too soon to declare the rapid end to the state of Iraq and the Sykes-Picot borders, with ISIS carving out a Sunni Islamic state and leaving Kurdistan to the Kurds and the Shiite areas to Iran's mercies (for those interested, political scientists F. Gregory Gause III and Ariel Ahram already had that debate on The Monkey Cage). Past experience suggests that ISIS could rapidly alienate its current allies and the populations welcoming it, as happened in Iraq in the mid-2000s, despite its efforts to avoid past mistakes.

The absence of U.S. troops because of the 2011 withdrawal is an extremely minor part of the story at best. The intense interaction between the Syrian and Iraqi insurgencies is certainly an important accelerant, but again is only part of the story. Nor is the U.S. reluctance to provide more arms to "moderate" Syrian rebels really the key to the growth of ISIS in Syria or in Iraq. It's a bit hard to believe that the jihadists who have joined up with ISIS would have been deterred by the presence of U.S.-backed forces – "Well, we were going to wage jihad to establish an Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, but the U.S. is arming moderates so I guess we'll stay home." In reality, the shift to an externally fueled insurgency and the flow of money and weapons to a variety of armed groups is what created the conditions that allowed ISIS to thrive in the first place.

The more interesting questions are about Iraq itself. Why are these cities falling virtually without a fight? Why are so many Iraqi Sunnis seemingly pleased to welcome the takeover from the Iraqi government by a truly extremist group with which they have a long, violent history? Why are Iraqi Sunni political factions and armed groups, which previously fought against al-Qaeda in Iraq, now seemingly cooperating with ISIS? Why is the Iraqi military dissolving rather than fighting to hold its territory? How can the United States help the Iraqi government fight ISIS without simply enabling Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's authoritarianism and sectarianism?

The most important answers lie inside Iraqi politics. Maliki lost Sunni Iraq through his sectarian and authoritarian policies. His repeated refusal over long years to strike an urgently needed political accord with the Sunni minority, his construction of corrupt, ineffective and sectarian state institutions, and his heavy-handed military repression in those areas are the key factors in the long-developing disintegration of Iraq. In late 2012, protests had swelled across Sunni areas of Iraq, driven by genuine popular anger but backed by many of the political forces now reportedly cooperating with ISIS's advance (essential background here). The vicious assault on the Huwija protest camp by Iraqi security forces, in the midst of political negotiations, galvanized hostility to the Iraqi state and paved the way for growing popular support for a returning insurgency. Maliki's heavy-handed security response to the escalating insurgency across Anbar, including the bombardment of Fallujah, has predictably driven more and more Sunnis into their ranks. Maliki's purges of the Sunni leadership discredited or removed Sunni leaders willing to play the inside game, and pushed some of them toward supporting insurgency. His exclusionary policies, attempts to monopolize power and rough security practices radicalized a Sunni community that might have been brought into the system following the civil war. Iraq's political class as a whole has done little better.

U.S. officials, along with most Iraq analysts, have spent the last half-decade urging Maliki to seek a real political accord, but he had little interest in their advice. I've long

argued that the only thing that would force Maliki to change his ways would be his perception that his survival depended on it. When U.S. troops were fighting his war and securing his rule, he consistently refused to make the political accommodations that his U.S. advisers pushed upon him. After U.S. troops left, he enjoyed sufficient political strength and military security to strike the kind of political deal that could have consolidated a legitimate Iraqi order. Instead, he moved to consolidate his personal power and punish Sunni political opponents. When he went to Washington seeking military and political support in October 2013 amidst an escalating insurgency and political tensions, he could have taken the opportunity to change course before it was too late.

Maliki might now, for the first time, feel real pressure, which could force real concessions. His first instinct, naturally, has been to try to use the crisis to expand his power by calling an emergency session of parliament to pass a truly objectionable emergency law, which would give the prime minister virtually untrammeled dictatorial powers. Iraq's parliament might be able to thwart that particular power grab (it could not muster a quorum in today's first attempt). But it's clear that his political instincts remain unchanged.

Maliki wants U.S. military aid, from helicopters to airstrikes, to fight the ISIS advance. Many in Washington will want to offer assistance to save Iraq from complete collapse. But at the same time, U.S. policymakers understand from painful experience that such military aid will simply enable Maliki's autocratic sectarianism and allow him to avoid making any serious concessions. Yes, the United States should try to use this moment of leverage to attach political conditions to any military aid. But such leverage is going to face an obvious problem: It will be virtually impossible to force any meaningful political moves in the midst of an urgent crisis, and any promises made now will quickly be forgotten once the crisis has passed.

Why the Iraqi army collapsed (and what can be done about it)

By Keren Fraiman, Austin Long and Caitlin Talmadge, June 13, 2014

The collapse of Iraqi security forces this week has been nothing short of catastrophic. A surprise offensive against the city of Mosul by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has rapidly unraveled the military and police forces that the United States spent years training, arming and equipping. Now the militant group has seized much of northern Iraq. Although ISIS had been resurgent for months, no one predicted that Iraqi security forces would simply disintegrate when facing a few thousand militants. Though stunning, such collapses are not unprecedented, and history highlights two key causes: Poor intelligence, and the politicization and corruption of security forces.

Poor intelligence underlies many large-scale surprise attacks, which can panic even well-trained security forces. But security forces subject to politicization and corruption are even more likely to collapse under such conditions. In armies that recruit and promote members based on their political loyalties and/or ability to pay large bribes, leadership and morale understandably deteriorate. These fundamental deficits prevent the military from responding effectively to surprise attacks. The result is a shock that rapidly collapses the force.

The fall of South Vietnam is a classic example. In March 1975, South Vietnamese intelligence failed to identify

a major North Vietnamese offensive against the area called Ban Me Thout. Soon the entire region was in jeopardy, and South Vietnam chose to withdraw. The country's senior leadership – chosen more on the basis of cronyism than competence – then made a series of blunders in managing the withdrawal. It quickly turned into a rout as troops fled to protect their families, abandoning weapons and ammunition to Communist forces. The rest of South Vietnam then began to fall with a speed that surprised even Hanoi, and the war was over within two months.

Iraqi intelligence and military politics exhibit similar problems today. Bureaucratic infighting and alienation of the Sunni minority have made collection of human intelligence in Sunni regions challenging. Since the 2011 U.S. withdrawal, Iraq also has lost access to U.S.-provided technical intelligence. These deficits enabled ISIS to launch a large-scale offensive in the country's second-largest city largely undetected.

This surprise would have been much less damaging, however, were Iraqi security forces not thoroughly politicized and corrupt. In 2010, the International Crisis Group quoted a U.S. military adviser's bleak assessment: "Cronyism, bribery, kickbacks, extortion… [are] commonplace and… getting worse. Commanders are not chosen for their ability, but rather based on whether or not they have paid the Division Commander the fee he demands."

As a result, the initial panic from Mosul spread rapidly through demoralized and poorly led Iraqi security forces to Tikrit, Bayji and other cities. Although it is unlikely that ISIS will now seize all of Baghdad, it may be able to extend control into northern, western and even some southern suburbs that were among the group's strongholds in 2006.

Despite these dramatic reversals, however, history suggests that the Iraqi government does have the ability to remedy some of these problems if it wants to. To be sure, it is deeply embedded in Iraqi politics, as Marc Lynch has rightly noted, so we should be appropriately cautious about what can be achieved. But the United States and regional allies such as Jordan could provide additional technical and human intelligence to Iraq, which would then provide better warning of ISIS movements in the future. The problem, however, is that this might require returning a limited, low-profile contingent of U.S. forces to Iraq.

Politicization and corruption are harder problems to solve, yet there, too, history shows that countries have overcome these deficits to generate greater military effectiveness – even in a short timeframe and with relatively limited resources.

In the late 1960s, for example, Jordan faced a growing threat from the Palestinian Fedayeen. To prepare for the eventual confrontation that famously occurred in Black September, King Hussein established a secret Special Branch to build an intelligence network within the refugee camps and main towns, monitor all Fedayeen activity and recruit informants. This intelligence unit ultimately proved vital in securing Jordan's victory in 1971.

Meanwhile, Iraq itself provides an example of improved military effectiveness resulting from reformed personnel policies. Convinced during the final years of the Iran-Iraq War that the Iranians might win – despite tremendous infusions of foreign weapons, aid and loans into Iraq— Saddam Hussein reformed his elite units by promoting more officers based on merit and allowing them to rapidly scale up rigorous training. The result was greatly improved Iraqi combat leadership and fighting skills, producing the victorious counteroffensives that ended the war in 1988.

What is the takeaway today? Even with better intelligence, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is unlikely to reverse the collapse of the security forces unless he professionalizes them. And that, in turn, is unlikely unless he decides that his own political survival depends on it. So far he seems to be doubling down on politicization by inviting help from Iran and re-militarizing the Shiites. Under these circumstances, sending more U.S. weapons and ammunition to Iraq won't solve the problem and actually risks strengthening ISIS if it continues to capture materials from panicked Iraqi forces.

Beyond Iraq, policymakers need to take a hard look at Afghan security forces, which have been assessed more in terms of quantity than quality. A rapid collapse of the security forces brought about the end of the Communist regime there in 1992, three years after the Soviet withdrawal. Unless Afghan security forces develop good intelligence capabilities and limit politicization and corruption, history may repeat itself.

Keren Fraiman is a recent graduate of MIT's Security Studies Program and has been granted a START Terrorism Post-doctoral Research Award for 2014-2015. Austin Long is an assistant professor at the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University. Caitlin Talmadge is an assistant professor of political science and international affairs at the George Washington University.

Getting rid of Maliki won't solve Iraq's crisis

By Fanar Haddad, June 17, 2014

Two articles of faith seem to dominate proposed cures for Iraq's ongoing crisis: Getting rid of Maliki and ensuring more Sunni inclusion. At first glance these measures seem intuitively and self-evidently necessary, but the woeful state of Iraqi politics and the magnitude of the threats now facing the country mean that, no matter how pleasing these proposals may be to our sensibilities, they are nevertheless impractical solutions – at least for the moment.

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has overseen the entrenchment and exacerbation, though not necessarily the creation, of the very worst aspects of post-2003 Iraq. From the corruption that oils every cog in Iraq's creaky machinery of state to the cynical use of identity politics to the callous reliance on violent crises in times of political trouble, the list goes on. Indeed, the army's collapse in Mosul was symptomatic of the state's signature style of mismanagement and its lack of direction, purpose and national commitment. As has been repeated ad nauseam, Maliki has tried to centralize power, neutralize Iraq's budding political institutions, politicize the judiciary and the armed forces in pursuit of his own political ends and, in the process, has marginalized opponents and alienated as broad a swath of Iraq's parasitic and incompetent political classes as possible.

As Anthony Cordesman, a security analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, has recently shown, Maliki's "scorecard" after eight years in the prime minister's office is dismal. According to Cordesman, Iraq (as of May) has the lowest per capita income of any Gulf state barring Yemen, and is ranked by the World Bank as the most corrupt country in the region excepting Yemen and Libya. And so the abysmal list continues with regards to numerous indicators that point to a consistently miserable lot for average Iraqis.

As for the always-contentious issue of Sunni inclusion, Maliki's eight years in power have widened what was already a yawning divide between Sunnis and Shiites. From utilizing de-Baathification as a political tool to the unconstitutional way in which calls for the formation of federal regions was dealt with to his worrying relationship with and use of the armed forces to the blundered handling of the Sunni protest movement, again, the list goes on. Over the past eight years, Maliki and his allies dealt with several crises and turning points in a manner that allowed quandary to morph into quagmire.

Clearly there is little need to expend further ink elaborating the faults of Maliki's tenure – particularly his second

term in office. Which brings us back to the common prescription to today's crisis; namely, getting rid of Maliki and reaching out to Sunnis. While both are necessary at some point, suggesting them as a magic wand for the current crisis is impractical.

First, although this will be hard to believe for anyone outside the prime minister's support base, Maliki commands considerable popularity. Indeed, the most recent elections clearly showed that he is the least unpopular Iraqi politician, with more than 720,000 personal votes and by far the largest parliamentary bloc. Even more baffling to the uninitiated, the current crisis is likely to have augmented his popularity, a result of existential fears if for no other reason.

Secondly, centralization of power and authoritarian tendencies coupled with the benefits of a long incumbency present practical obstacles to Maliki's removal. There are parts of the Iraqi state that are directly linked to him and vice-versa, making a sudden resignation all the more unlikely. Linked to Maliki is a complex web of institutional and personal interests spanning the breadth and depth of the Iraqi state and Iraqi politics. In short, absent intense and sustained external pressure or a coup, getting rid of Maliki is not the same as, for example, impeaching a U.S. president. The most effective candidate for applying external pressure is Iran, yet it is Iranian pressure for a Maliki exit that is least likely to be forthcoming: Iran seems uninterested in getting involved in the business of Iraqi political personalities, as long as both the Iraqi state and Shiite political cohesion continue to hold. In other words, were Iran to push for Maliki's exit, it would essentially have to pursue the unlikely policy of initiating an internal political Shiite rebellion against Maliki.

Thirdly, the knee-jerk reaction of highlighting the need to reach out to Sunnis in response to the current crisis is rather naive. Given the oceanic depths of Sunni alienation from Maliki, and all the damage that has been done over the years, what would an attempt by the prime minister to reach out to Sunnis even look like? What could he possibly say or do to engender trust from a group that views him in ways not dissimilar from how a critical mass of Shiites viewed Saddam Hussein? Furthermore, Sunni marginalization, while undoubtedly the result of Shiite-centric politicians and policies, has not been made any better by Sunnis themselves. From the beginning, there was a considerable body of Sunni opinion that was implacably opposed to the post-2003 order. As one scholar put it recently, "The most significant factor behind Iraq's problems has been the inability of Iraq's Sunni Arabs and its Sunni neighbors to come to terms with a government in which the Shi'as … hold the leading role." Indeed, in addition to the activities of ISIS, a good part of the current crisis is a rebellion against not just Maliki but the entire post-2003 political order.

Such attitudes have sustained considerable latent support for insurgency and will likely extend to any of Maliki's realistic replacements from the current crop of politicians. Furthermore, an additional problem with calls for greater Sunni inclusion lies with the caliber of Sunni politicians, who have proven themselves to be no less venal, self-interested and morally bankrupt than their Shiite counterparts. This raises broader questions about whether a change of prime minister or the formation of another "national unity government" is a solution or simply akin to rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. There are also serious questions about the representativeness of "Sunni representatives" – especially if they accept working with Maliki and are thus excommunicated with the charge of being "Maliki Sunnis."

Too many Sunnis and too many Sunni political actors have yet to resolve the profound dilemmas presented by regime change in 2003, including issues relating to the legacies of the past and Sunnis' place in the new Iraq. In resolving these issues they have been helped neither by their own political leaders nor by the Arab world's antagonistic stance toward the new Iraq nor by their own predisposition to reject the post-2003 order. Needless to say, least helpful of all have been Iraq's Shiite political actors who have done precious little to avoid validating what may once have been irrational suspicions. In essence, many Sunni Arab Iraqis have yet to find the balance

between the pursuit of their political ideals and the need to accept new realities. The counterproductive effect of this can be seen in, for example, the issue of sectarian balance: Given the widespread Sunni rejection, even amongst Sunni politicians, of the idea that they are a numerical minority, their expectations regarding sectarian balance are neither realistic nor can they be met. The contention surrounding demographics plays an equally distorting role in expectations regarding elections and elite bargaining positions.

Finally, given the scale of the current threat, an argument can be made for delaying any attempt at structural change until the crisis has subsided to manageable proportions. The inflamed fears and divisions that recent events have provoked should not be tested with additional political upheaval at the center. The Iraqi state faces an existential crisis that needs to be confronted militarily and then solved politically. What is at stake is not just Maliki but the Iraqi state and regional stability; judging by what happened the last time the Iraqi state collapsed 11 years ago, I for one think it best to avoid a repeat.

One hopes that once the immediate storm has passed, a much-needed bold restructuring of Iraqi politics will be initiated; one that perhaps includes agreeing to work toward Kurdish independence (particularly given that the Kirkuk issue has now been "solved"), formulating a new, more legitimate and more coherent constitution that provides for, amongst other things, meaningful avenues for decentralization, and generally restarting the state-building process with the vision and commitment necessary for such an undertaking. But alas, the past 11 years have given Iraqis no reason to expect their political leaders to be up to the task. For now, the debate about what needs to be done with Iraq's self-destructive politics should perhaps be delayed until the more immediate threats presented by this crisis have been addressed.

Fanar Haddad is a research fellow at the Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore. He has published widely on identity, identity politics and modern Iraqi social history. He is the author of "Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity" (London: Hurst & Co/ New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

How Arab backers of the Syrian rebels see Iraq

By Marc Lynch, June 18, 2014

As the Obama administration debates whether and how to intervene in Iraq's rapidly unfolding crisis, many advocates of intervention have argued that action in Iraq should be matched by action in Syria. Should the United States actually intervene militarily in support of the Iraqi government, however, it should know that it will be on the opposite side of many of the Arab networks that support the Syrian uprising.

That's not because they support the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which has been in a state of open warfare with most other Syrian rebel groups. They just mostly don't see ISIS as the primary issue. Many of the most vocal Arab backers of Syria's rebels support what they cast as an Iraqi popular revolution against an Iranian-backed sectarian despot. They equate the Iraqi uprising with the Syrian uprising, as a Sunni revolution against a Shiite tyrant, and actively oppose U.S. or Arab intervention against it. For just one example, the Kuwaiti Islamist preacher Hajjaj al-Ajmi, who has been one of the most prominent fundraisers

for Syrian insurgency groups, has urged repeatedly against supporting "the moves by America and Iran to confront the Iraqi revolution."

That seems to be a popular view, at least among those sectors of the Arab public most invested in supporting the Syrian insurgency. The Saudi professor Ahmed bin Rashed bin Said, who tweets to 350,000 followers as @loveliberty, said, "We must support the Sunnis of Iraq not only because they represent the Arab and Islamic face of Iraq, but to save Syria and limit Iran and protect the Gulf." A former Qatari ambassador recently warned that a U.S. intervention on Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's behalf would be seen as a war on all Sunnis. The Qatari journalist Faisal bin Jassim al-Thani laid out the lines of the new conflict in stark terms: "Hezbollah and the United States and the United Arab Emirates are all in Maliki's trench while the people and the ulema and the honest ones are with the revolution." (The UAE has since withdrawn its ambassador from Iraq, and its officials have struck a decidedly critical tone toward Maliki).

These Arab voices tend to minimize the role of ISIS and instead emphasize the broad base of support for Iraq's insurgency. Ajmi tweeted recently to his 443,000 followers that "what is happening in Iraq is a revolution of the people against injustice and tyranny and combating it over ISIS is meant to give cover to striking the revolution and frustrating it in the name of a war on terror." The popular Al Jazeera personality Faisal al-Qasim recently observed to his 1.5 million Twitter followers that the Syrian and Iraqi revolutions were examples of "dressing up a popular revolution in terrorist clothes, demonizing it and opening fire on it." Former Kuwaiti member of parliament Walid al-Tabtabaie, for instance, supports the "Iraqi revolution" while warning that ISIS "has some good people but is penetrated by Iran" and that "the corrupt in Syria can't be in the interest of Iraq… they will stab you in the back."

ISIS is a real threat, without question, a savvy and experienced fighting organization with a clear ideology, significant financial resources and a proven ability to attract foreign fighters to its cause. But this Arab counter-narrative shouldn't be ignored. The sharp divide between an American debate that focuses exclusively on ISIS and an Arab debate that focuses on a broad Sunni rebellion starkly evokes the similarly skewed discourse in the first few years of the U.S. occupation of Iraq. From 2003 to 2006, U.S. officials and media often reduced the Iraqi insurgency to "al-Qaeda" and regime dead-enders, thus vastly exaggerating the importance of al-Qaeda in Iraq, delegitimating the political grievances of the Sunni community and missing opportunities to divide the insurgency. Heavy-handed, indiscriminate military responses informed by these views helped to fuel the insurgency.

The architects of the "surge" didn't only bring more U.S. troops to Iraq and begin different counterinsurgency practices. They also moved away from such oversimplifications and began to better understand the tribal networks, local politics and diverse armed factions that made up the insurgency. This conceptual improvement then allowed creative commanders, empowered by Gen. David Petraeus's team, to work effectively with Sunnis who had grown disenchanted with al-Qaeda in Iraq. Those "Awakenings" made the decisive difference in Anbar province. Those among the Awakening movement included many nationalist and Islamist factions that had very recently been fighting against the occupation. The United States put many of them on payroll as "Sons of Iraq;" their rough treatment by Maliki after the U.S. departure in late 2011 contributed to their alienation and is part of the deeper background of the current crisis.

It is telling, therefore, that the outspoken Iraqi Sunni tribal figure Ali Hatem al-Suleiman is now talking about a "tribal revolution" against Maliki's government. Suleiman was one of the more outspoken leaders of the Awakening. It's difficult to say how many Awakenings men, from tribesmen to members of insurgency factions to ex-Baathists, are now fighting alongside ISIS or how enduring their relationship will be, but there certainly seem to be some. The Islamist analyst Mohanna al-Hubail similarly noted that while "not all the movements and factions of the resistance in 2003 are part of this movement they were

the strongest in resisting the occupation." The realignment with ISIS by these former Awakenings fighters should give pause to backers of arming "moderate Syrian rebels." If the Awakenings members, who fought alongside the U.S. military and received enormous financial, military and political support for years, can flip back, who can guarantee that the much less directly supported Syrian rebels wouldn't?

These Arab narratives about what's happening in Iraq shouldn't be taken at face value, but listening carefully to them might help to avoid a counterproductive American foray back into Iraq. Inside Iraq, a broadly based Sunni insurgency, which commands the support of non-ISIS tribes and armed factions, would reinforce the case for why pushing Maliki for serious political accommodation before providing military aid is the right policy (Petraeus, for what it's worth, agrees). True, getting rid of him might not solve Iraq's problems, but the crisis won't be overcome without significant changes, which he seems highly unlikely to make (and nobody would trust his promises to do so after the crisis has passed). The point is not to appease ISIS, which could care less about such things, but to break the alliance between ISIS and some of its current Iraqi Sunni allies by giving them a reason to opt back into a political system in which they have largely lost faith. On their own, airstrikes and military support of Maliki without the prior delivery of real political change are likely to only push the various strands of the insurgency closer to ISIS. Political reform isn't a luxury item that can be postponed until the real business of military action has been conducted – it is the key to once again dividing ISIS from those larger and more powerful Sunni forces.

Beyond Iraq, the wide support among Arab backers of Syrian rebels for what they see as an Iraqi revolution needs to at least be acknowledged. At the least, these views suggest that effects of an Iraq intervention on the Syrian uprising are likely to be much less linear than many would currently expect, and that Washington shouldn't expect much Arab popular or official support if it acts in the name of defending Maliki against ISIS.

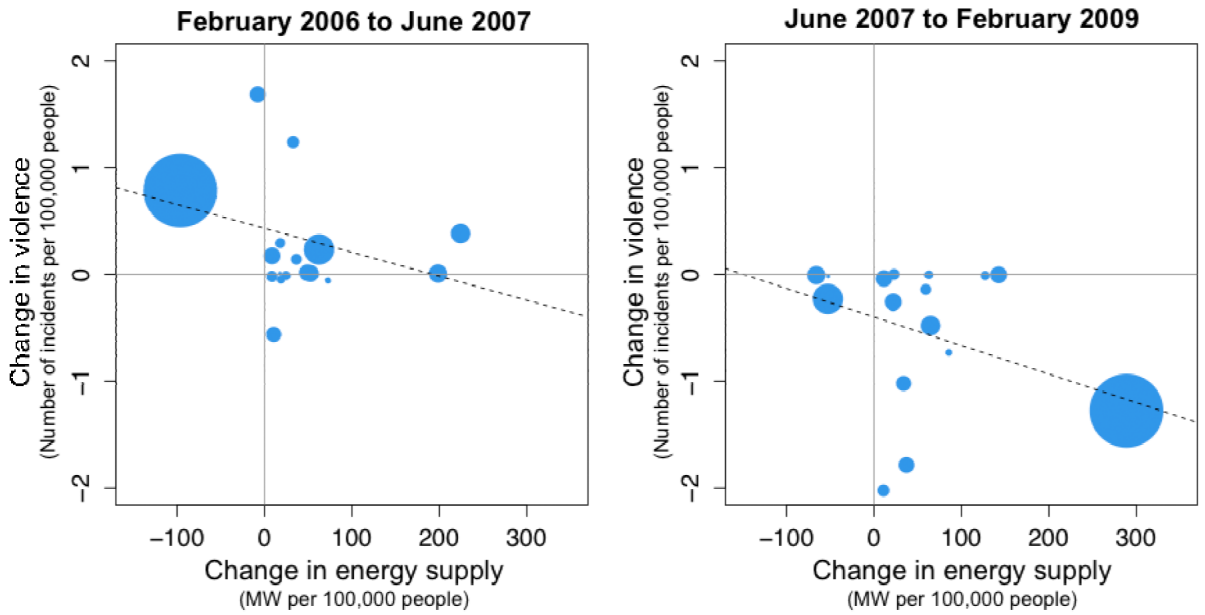
Want to defeat ISIS in Iraq? More electricity would help

By Andrew Shaver and Gabriel Tenorio, June 19, 2014

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is now in complete or partial control of more than a dozen Iraqi cities in Sunni-dominated areas of Iraq, which has set off an urgent debate over what the Iraqi government might do to reestablish control over its territory and whether the U.S. government should play a role in supporting such efforts.

Many contest the feasibility and ultimate effect of U.S. military intervention. Yet most seem to agree that the Iraqi military can't go the fight alone, a position apparently confirmed by the Iraqi government's formal request this week that the United States carry out airstrikes on Iraqi soil against ISIS rebels. Analysis has thus far tended to focus exclusively on the battlefield prospects of Iraqi forces against ISIS and how U.S. assistance might improve them. Yet the attitudes of local citizens within communities contested by ISIS toward the central government may prove critical to the outcome of the current fight.

In considering why ISIS has faced little local resistance as its forces have overrun towns throughout western and



Pre- and post-surge plots of changes in electricity provision and insurgent violence against coalition and Iraqi government forces by province. Size of circles represents province population. (Data: U.S. Departments of State and Defense; Figure: Andrew Shaver and Gabriel Tenorio/The Monkey Cage)

central Iraq, scholars have argued that the answer lies largely in discriminatory sectarian policies that are blamed for pushing Sunni leaders "toward supporting insurgency [while] radicaliz[ing] a Sunni community that might have been brought into the system following the civil war." (See also here and here.) In other words, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has a popularity problem within many of the areas now contested by ISIS.

Why is this important? Less than a decade ago, the United States sought to defeat an Iraqi insurgency that consisted of al-Qaeda militants fighting alongside Iraqi Sunnis, who then also considered themselves disenfranchised with the collapse of the Sunni Baathist regime. Academic research on this period has found that the combination of military operations and the provision of social services were effective in reducing insurgent violence in affected areas by bringing local Sunnis back into the fold.

Critically, offensive military tactics alone were insufficient. As the authors of the study observe, "the silence of the population, of a substantial portion thereof, is critical for insurgencies. … For many years the residents of Anbar governorate knew who the insurgents were but lacked either the will or violent capacity to resist them. American and Iraqi security forces had the combat power but not the required information [to defeat the insurgents]."

A lack of basic services, including electricity, fuel and water, has remained a significant source of discontent for Iraqi citizens since U.S. forces withdrew in 2011. While such grievances are not sectarian in nature – protests have persisted throughout the country – the combination of sectarian policies and lack of social services may have laid conditions suitable for ISIS's spread.

To assess how the provision of social services during the Iraq war affected insurgent violence, we examine the relationship between available electricity and insurgent attacks on coalition forces. Using daily electricity production data during the Iraq conflict collected and provided to us by the U.S. State Department for the

purposes of this study, we find strong if preliminary evidence that increased electricity supply worked to reduce insurgent violence during the conflict. (Additional details on empirical strategy appear at the end of the piece.)

This effect is present during the pre-surge period – when levels of insurgent and sectarian violence steadily increased across the country – as well as in the post-surge period, during which levels of both types of violence quickly tapered off. And the size of the effect is considerable.

Take for example the average national supply of electricity when the surge began in June 2007 (240 MW per 100,000 individuals) and the national average weekly number of violent incidents (0.18 per 100,000 individuals). A 10 percent increase in the supply of electricity from the mean in any given week is associated with a 6.8 percent reduction in violent incidents from the mean the following week, an additional 7.3 percent reduction two weeks later and a further 6.7 percent incidents after the third week. On the other hand, a 10 percent decrease in the average number of violent incidents in a given week leads to a direct decline of 0.43 percent in the per capita supply of electricity in the following week but has no statistically significant effect thereafter. Consistent with a causal story, we find that the effect of electricity on violence is greatest during summer months, when, in the face of temperature well in excess of 100 degrees, demand for electricity is at its peak.

President Obama has now embraced the position that conditions in Iraq cannot be remedied without a change in central government policies, arguing on June 13 that the problem is "not solely or even primarily a military challenge. … Iraq's leaders have been unable to overcome too often the mistrust and sectarian differences … " And he has conditioned U.S. support to the Iraqi regime on "a serious and sincere effort by Iraq's leaders to set aside sectarian differences … and account for the legitimate interests of all of Iraq's communities."

If history is any guide, to counter ISIS's influence, Iraqi forces should find a strategy that combines offensive military tactics with meeting the needs of citizens within affected communities more effective than the former by itself. The task is likely to grow both more urgent and complicated as Islamic militants commit additional resources to offering social services within communities they have overtaken. Specifically, research suggests that the Iraqi government must not simply provide for citizens but outcompete the insurgents attempting to do so as well.

A note on the empirical strategy: We regress electricity provision on insurgent attacks against coalition and Iraqi forces using a dynamic panel by districts with weekly frequency. To account for the possible selection of greater electricity supply within predictably less violent areas of the country, we use the weekly differences in electricity supply and in the number of violent incidents. We fully expect insurgent violence to affect electricity levels, so our primary explanatory variables consist of four lags of electricity supply (in differences), whose collective effect we measure. We control for lagged increases in violence in order to sort out predictive trends in violence, and we add a series of relevant controls including U.S. and Iraqi government spending electricity infrastructure and U.S. troop levels, as well as pre-war fixed district characteristics, such as ethnicity, income per capita and access to other public services.

Andrew Shaver is a doctoral candidate in political science at Princeton University. He previously served in Iraq as a member of a Pentagon task force established to carry out economics-based counterinsurgency programs. Gabriel Tenorio is a doctoral candidate in economics at Princeton University.

Will ISIS Cohere or Collapse?

By Paul Staniland, June 24, 2014

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The resurgence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has come as a shock to the Iraqi government. The key question now is whether the group can deepen its hold on the area it now controls, or whether it will instead face factional challenges from within. In my new book, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, I explore the origins and evolution of insurgent groups' organizational structures. ISIS in Iraq resembles what I call a "vanguard" group, with a tight central leadership but relatively weak local embeddedness. This contrasts with parochial groups such as the Pakistani Taliban (loose agglomerations of disparate local power centers), integrated groups such as Hezbollah that combine central cohesion with consistent local control, or fragmented groups (for instance, the disastrously divided Irish National Liberation Army).

Vanguards often emerge from movements led by ideologues – whether student revolutionaries or foreign jihadists – who are weakly connected to local networks and communities. This is the most interesting organizational starting point because groups with vanguard origins can take remarkably diverse trajectories, from the rapid collapse of urban-based leftist insurrections in Latin America to the transformation of the Viet Minh from an isolated band of activists into a hegemonic insurgency.

Networks of Rebellion outlines pathways through which vanguards change, toward both integration and fragmentation. Vanguards fragment as a result of two processes. First, sustained *leadership decapitation* can be devastating to vanguard groups. Because of weak local institutions, there is not a deep layer of second-rung leaders to take over (in contrast to a group, such as Hamas, that can refill the ranks even in the face of decapitation campaigns). Though the downfall of many vanguards, decapitation is unlikely to undermine ISIS because of the Iraqi government's weak intelligence and organizational dysfunction. Adding American advisers (or, for that matter, combat forces) will do little to generate the fine-grained information necessary for a comprehensive decapitation campaign.

Second, vanguards can be undermined by *revolts from below*. They rely on opportunistic cooperation from local factions and networks that their central leadership does not tightly control. These local free agents can turn against the center, launching fratricidal rebellions that weaken or even wipe out the leadership. In mid-1990s Afghanistan, for instance, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's inability to embed his Hezb-e Islami into tribal networks in eastern Afghanistan left him vulnerable to local defection in the face of the Taliban.

The experience of al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2006-2008 provides a cautionary tale for ISIS. Its dependence on local Sunni networks made it vulnerable to abandonment by the groups that formed the Anbar Awakening. If it fails to either co-opt or annihilate the Baathist and nationalist armed groups it is currently fighting alongside, ISIS could find itself facing the internecine factional warfare that we see in Syria. A second Awakening is doubtful because of the lack of credible Iraqi or American support for local Sunni groups, but having to simultaneously fight the Iraqi state and other Sunni groups is a very real possibility for ISIS. Already there are reports of this kind of conflict that may foreshadow the collapse of local support for ISIS's agenda. Conflict with its local partners is ISIS's most likely pathway to fragmentation (an assessment in line with a new International Crisis Group analysis).

But my book also identifies an important *local alliance* pathway toward integration. If vanguard groups can take advantage of a recalcitrant government to create linkages to local armed factions against a common enemy, the stage

is set to infiltrate and control these allied groups. Taking advantage of this opportunity requires compromising on ideological goals by adapting to local interests. Strategic flexibility can allow initially vanguard groups to build new institutions on the ground, co-opt and absorb local factions, and ultimately forge organizational integration.

AQI botched this strategy in the mid-2000s: It overreached before it could establish local control, opening the door to a revolt from below aided by American and Iraqi support for Sunni armed groups. As I noted above, a variant of dynamic is its probable fate once again. But if ISIS avoids indiscriminate attempts to purge Baathist and nationalist factions and instead carefully infiltrates and co-opts them – and uses selective violence against groups that clearly challenge it – it can better embed itself as an organization. This will prevent the coordination of dissent against its leadership. Initial reports suggest that ISIS can be quite savvy, cooperating with other armed actors, establishing local governing structures, and deploying disciplined fighting cadres.

ISIS has a bad track record at institutionalizing local alliances, but the possibility still exists because the Maliki government's unwillingness to broaden the space for Sunni political participation makes ISIS's job far easier. Even Sunnis who are skeptical of the radical Islamists or believe they can use and then dispense with them may end up caught between an uncompromising regime and a formidable ISIS. If ISIS has learned from its bloody past, it will avoid picking unnecessary fights with these Sunni factions and instead try to slowly integrate them into its own structures. For American and Iraqi policymakers, time is of the essence: The longer ISIS can take advantage of this lack of other Sunni options, the more likely it is to transform into a resilient armed presence.

Paul Staniland is an assistant professor of political science and co-director of the Program on International Security at the University of Chicago. He is the author of Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse *(Cornell, 2014). He has published in scholarly journals on civil war and international security, with a focus on South Asia.*

Maliki has only himself to blame for Iraq's crisis

By Zaid Al-Ali, June 26, 2014

Shortly after Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia were deposed at the start of 2011, large numbers of young Iraqis called for their own demonstrations against Iraq's corrupt political class. Nouri al-Maliki, who had just started his second term as prime minister despite not having won the March 2010 elections, clearly felt at risk and promised that he would not seek a third term in office. Three years later, shortly before the April 2014 parliamentary elections, Maliki once again appeared uncertain of his own fortunes and declared that he would not insist on a third term. "My mother did not give birth to me to be prime minister," he declared, in an attempt to appear humble before millions of impoverished Iraqis.

Yet, Maliki went on to outperform all rivals by a significant margin in April's elections. His State of Law alliance obtained the support of 24 percent of the voting public and 92 seats in parliament; Maliki personally secured 720,000 votes. His closest rival earned about a third that amount. But this electoral victory was achieved before Maliki lost

control over around a third of Iraq's territory to Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), an extremist organization, and before the army that Maliki had been micromanaging for years simply melted away. Although many outside observers have expressed shock at these developments, anyone who has read any serious analysis of Iraq's current situation, including my book *The Struggle for Iraq's Future*, would not have been surprised. Now, with a disaster – to which he has clearly contributed – staring him in the face, Maliki is insisting that he be returned for a third term.

In doing so, Maliki has the support of a significant number of Iraqi and foreign analysts who argue that if Maliki is not returned as prime minister the electoral results will have been "overturned." There are a number of important problems with this argument.

The first is that the electoral results are not as clear an indication of Maliki's popularity as some would have us believe. Rather, the results are a clear illustration of how far the benefits of incumbency extend in the Arab region. The benefits are real and are also long lasting: Ayad Allawi and Ibrahim al-Jaafari occupied the prime minister's position in 2004 and 2005 respectively. Despite their terrible performances in government, they continued to attract hundreds of thousands of votes in successive elections (even 10 years later).

Moreover, being prime minister makes it very easy to toy with electoral results: In April 2014, many observers raised their eyebrows when Maliki counterintuitively won a majority of votes in many areas on Baghdad's periphery that have suffered the brunt of his military offensives. In addition, creating vast patronage networks is a straightforward exercise in the absence of strong oversight frameworks. When state funds are invested in particular areas, citizens are made to feel that the funds originate from the prime minister personally. Even worse, Maliki's allies (and his relatives) were caught on camera promising gifts to citizens (including land deeds) in exchange for their support. Finally, Maliki benefited from unprecedented control over state media, which allowed him to frame the national narrative around a strongman image.

The second issue is that Iraq's system of government is parliamentary and not presidential. Personal popularity of specific politicians is in fact totally irrelevant to the question of who should become prime minister. The only legitimate criterion in parliamentary systems is the ability to obtain parliament's confidence. In other words, the parliament and the entire political system must have sufficient trust in the prime minister to allow him to negotiate agreements and offer concessions. Without that reservoir of trust, a parliamentary system cannot function.

Based on that criterion (which is the only one that is applicable), Maliki is perhaps the worst candidate possible to occupy the prime minister's position, precisely because he will not be able to successfully negotiate any further agreements or convince anyone of his good faith. He only has himself to blame: In November 2010, Maliki entered into the Irbil Agreement, which allowed him to start a new term in office in exchange for a number of concessions and reforms, none of which he delivered. His unending series of broken promises have transformed him into the lamest of ducks, unable to convince anyone of his good intentions, even when he genuinely does promise reform. The hostility that he has engendered from those who do not support him will make it impossible for him to lead an effective administration.

Thirdly, it is very common in parliamentary systems around the world for the largest bloc to be excluded from the prime ministry or for it not to be allowed to dominate governments. Comparative data gathered for an upcoming book on government formations by Sona Golder of Pennsylvania State University and Garrett Glasgow of the University of California, Santa Barbara, show that in European parliamentary democracies the largest parliamentary bloc did not receive the prime minister's position 29 percent of the time between 1945 and 2012.

In Germany, the largest bloc was not in government from 1969 to 1982 and again from 1998 to 2005. In Italy's 2008 elections, Silvio Berlusconi's People of Freedom Party obtained 46.8 percent of the popular vote and 344 (out of 630) seats in the lower house of parliament; nevertheless,

Berlusconi was deposed as prime minister in 2011 after one of his political allies defected. Although his party was still the largest bloc by a wide margin, Berlusconi did not have enough confidence in parliament. Similarly, in the 2009 Lebanese elections, Saad Hariri's Future Movement obtained 29 (the largest bloc by far) out of 128 parliamentary seats. Hariri occupied the prime minister's position for a year and three months, until one of his allies withdrew its support, and he lost parliament's confidence. Hence, although still the leader of the largest political bloc in parliament by far, Hariri was forced into opposition for years.

The analogy with Hariri is quite telling because he was forced into opposition for a combination of reasons, including allegations of his general incompetence. Maliki supporters should note that democratic legitimacy does not merely depend on personal popularity (in presidential systems) or on parliamentary support (as in Iraq), but also on the ability to govern in accordance with accepted democratic norms (including ensuring fair treatment for all by the security forces). Maliki has proven himself incapable of doing so, and should step down for that reason, if for no other.

In addition to the electoral, legal and political cases set out above, a number of negative arguments to support a third term have also been made. For example, some have argued that Maliki cannot or should not be deposed now because to do so would be to cause for a major change in the state's functioning during a time of national crisis. In response, I would argue that the spheres of influence that Maliki has created within the security services are clearly incapable of defending the country. Those dynamics cannot be allowed to continue, firstly because they represent a long-term threat to the country's stability and secondly because of the short-term risk that ISIS has created. In other words, if we stay the course with the current political leadership, we are all going to drown in the process.

Others have argued that the security forces are already too loyal to Maliki and that any attempt to remove him could result in backlash by some officers or units. Once again, that is an argument for immediate removal. If personal loyalty to the prime minister is a genuine concern, then action should be taken immediately or we should just admit that Iraq is not a democracy and surrender our fate to the will of a single individual.

Some argue that, because any future prime minister (at least in the foreseeable future) would have to be Shiite, replacing Maliki would make no difference because Iraq's Sunnis would continue to reject any Shiite leadership. That argument is in fact oblivious to the current dynamics within provinces like Mosul, Salah al-Din and Anbar. When one actually takes the time to sit with the families that live in these provinces, which very few people care to do, the vast majority of discussions revolve around the years of random arrests and horrific abuses in detention. It is seriously misguided to argue that sectarianism per se is more of an obstacle to reconciliation than years of abuse under Maliki.

Others have made analogies with the removal of Mohamed Morsi by the Egyptian military in July 2013, suggesting that Maliki's supporters would take to the streets and wreak havoc along the lines of the Muslim Brotherhood if their man does not retain his position. Maliki, however, does not have that type of stature. He is not a religious figure, and although his party is religious is nature, its supporters are attracted to it for the reasons set out above and not because of its spiritual appeal. In fact, when demonstrators took to the streets following the start of the Arab Spring, Maliki promised that his supporters would organize counter-demonstrations, but only a few hundred supporters showed up (Moqtada al-Sadr, one of his principle critics, joked that they were paid for).

The final argument that is made in Maliki's favor is that there is no one else who could govern the country. There appears to be a growing consensus in Iraq that there are in fact many candidates who could do a far better job than Maliki. The tragedy however is that all the country's main political forces continue to look from within their own ranks for ideas on who could take over. A new idea must be immediately floated in Iraq and it must break out of the ethno-sectarian paradigm. There is no need to choose ministers from the

current crop of corrupt political elites who have been running the country into the ground since 2005.

If parties understand the depth of Iraq's existential crisis, they should also come to understand that they are all also to blame. What is needed today, aside from dealing with the immediate military threat that ISIS poses, is a leader who can start to clean up Iraqi politics and rebuild understanding and trust between communities. This will require administrators of integrity and a minimum level of competence. They should not be hard to find because over the years Maliki has targeted, demoted or fired any person of integrity who has stood in his way. These are the individuals that we should rely on if we are to turn the corner and repair state and society. Without their involvement, we are likely to continue drowning, even if the threat from ISIS is averted.

Zaid Al-Ali (@zalali) is a lawyer specializing in comparative constitutional law and international commercial arbitration. He is the author of The Struggle for Iraq's Future: How Corruption, Incompetence and Sectarianism Have Undermined Democracy *(Yale University Press, 2014).*

Was Obama wrong to withdraw troops from Iraq?

By Jason Brownlee, June 26, 2014

Did President Obama usher in Iraq's current crisis when he withdrew all U.S. forces and shattered the stability achieved by former president George W. Bush's "surge"? Foreign policy hawks have vigorously promoted that narrative, but their account does not withstand scrutiny. For one thing, it is now abundantly clear the Iraqi government was not "stable or self-reliant" at the end of 2011. Further, U.S. boots on the ground would not have made it so. Before the troops came home, Americans watched for eight years as the United States failed to resolve Iraq's internal conflicts. Keeping soldiers there beyond 2011 would not have halted the political hemorrhaging.

The U.S. experience in Iraq – sometimes heartbreaking, often humbling – has echoed the hard-earned lessons of Washington's prior adventures abroad. In a 2007 World Politics article on "nation-building," I noted that the United States "has done best where it has done less" and "has been more effective at refurbishing and strengthening an existing state [e.g., Germany and Japan] than at laying a new foundation [e.g., South Vietnam, Haiti]." The second Bush administration aspired to break that trend, attempting to establish an orderly European-style state on the Tigris and Euphrates. Instead, the administration repeated the failures of the past. Radical regime change triggered a traumatic renegotiation of Iraqi politics, one that may take decades to play out.

When Iraq is considered alongside prior cases, it becomes clear that the current crisis dates to the entry of U.S. forces in 2003, not their departure three years ago. The most the United States has accomplished through military interventions in the developing world is to replace or reinforce local leaders, typically in missions that lasted a year or less. By contrast, longer troop commitments and more ambitious schemes of political engineering have tended to end badly. This pattern flips the current controversy on its head. Rather than thinking that U.S. leaders pulled out of Iraq too soon, future generations will likely wonder why they took so long.

Table–U.S. Military Interventions

	Duration	Stable after US Withdrawal?
Lebanon	Less than 1 year (1958)	Yes
Grenada	Less than 1 year (1983)	Yes
Panama	Less than 1 year (1989)	Yes
Kuwait	Less than 1 year (1991)	Yes
Dominican Republic	1 year (1965-1966)	Yes
Lebanon	2 years (1982-1984)	No
Somalia	2 years (1993-1995)	No
Haiti	2 years (1994-1996)	No
South Korea	3 years (1945-1948)	No
Cambodia	3 years (1970-1973)	No
Italy	5 years (1943-1948)	Yes
Bosnia-Herzegovina	6 years (1998-2004)	Yes
West Germany	7 years (1945-1952)	Yes
Japan	7 years (1945-1952)	Yes
Iraq	8 years (2003-2011)	No
South Vietnam	9 years (1964-1973)	No
Austria	10 years (1945-1955)	Yes
Kosovo	*Ongoing (1999-)*	*To be determined*
Afghanistan	*Ongoing (2001-)*	*To be determined*

SOURCES: Christopher J. Coyne, After War: The Political Economy of Exporting Democracy (2008); James Dobbins et. al., America's Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq (2003); David M. Edelstein, Occupational Hazards: Success and Failure in Military Occupation (2008); Minxin Pei and Sara Kasper, "The American Record of Nation-Building," (May 2003).

Obama's critics have cited Germany, Japan and South Korea as places where the U.S. military has been "a stabilizing force." They contend that the lack of a similar residual troop presence (numbering between 20,000 and 30,000) caused the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to grow and the Iraqi army to fold. Such claims merit investigation: Has that hypothetical scenario ever actually happened? In modern history has a country comparable to Iraq overcome internal political divisions thanks to the United States keeping boots on the ground? Of course, to answer these questions it is important to avoid cherry-picking the record for favorable cases. One should examine not only where the U.S. military has kept residual forces for decades, but also where it left completely – after years, or months.

The following table lists 19 U.S. military interventions that involved ground troops since World War II. (Afghanistan and Kosovo are coded as ongoing.) The countries are ordered based on the duration of U.S. military involvement, from shortest to longest. A third column shows whether or not the country was politically stable (free of endemic violence) immediately after U.S. troops withdrew. This coverage, while not intensive, is fairly comprehensive, and even this concise overview offers instructive patterns for Iraq.

Many factors shape the outcomes of U.S. operations abroad, yet duration appears to have little independent effect. The cases cluster in three groups. First, there were the medium duration interventions (average of seven years) in the former Axis powers and the former Yugoslavia. These projects "succeeded" in the sense that when U.S. forces departed, the countries were not wracked by violence. Caution is warranted, however, before attributing stability to the U.S. troops who were kept around *after* the fighting and peacemaking concluded.

These countries were not "stabilized" by a couple of divisions from the Pentagon. Lasting stability followed costly, international wars. Residual forces then helped maintain peace – between countries, not within them. Crucially, the U.S. military did not adjudicate *internal* political conflicts like the present struggle between ISIS and Baghdad. In fact, a RAND study of nation-building noted that U.S. soldiers in Germany, Japan and Bosnia had been atypically safe; unlike their counterparts elsewhere, they experienced *zero* post-conflict combat fatalities. Considered in isolation, such cases are a poor guide for Iraq.

The remaining evidence suggests that, in the developing world, the more modest the goals, the more successful U.S. interventions have been. The second cluster of cases comprises five countries where U.S. forces reinforced or removed specific leaders. In Lebanon (1958), the Dominican Republic, Grenada, Panama and Kuwait the U.S. military stayed a year or less. U.S. troops did not stick around to arbitrate local politics or erect new governments from scratch. Their departure was followed by stability. The countries were not perfect by any means. In fact, the willingness of U.S. officials to defer to local institutions,

warts and all, was a key asset. Set against the remainder of cases, these brisk, circumscribed missions brought far less tumult than the alternative.

The third group includes Iraq and a half dozen other places where U.S. forces stayed between two years and 10 years but did not deliver lasting stability. If the lesson of the second group was "less is more," the third set teaches "more is less." Extended and often costly military commitments did not end civil strife (Lebanon in the 1980s, Haiti and Somalia in the 1990s) or secure the countries from external aggressors (South Vietnam, Cambodia). Even in South Korea, sometimes mentioned as a model for Iraq, U.S. intervention after World War II failed to secure the local government. As Georgetown University Professor David Edelstein has written, it was the 1950 to 1953 Korean War, and not the 1945 to 1948 U.S. occupation, that saved the South Korean state and enabled the indefinite U.S. military presence there.

The range of U.S. interventions – from the triumphs to the quagmires – displays a recurring pattern. Sooner or later, whether in victory (Japan) or defeat (Vietnam), U.S. presidents defer to the power of the local society. Take, for example, then-President Ronald Reagan's response to Lebanon. In his oft-quoted "Evil Empire" speech, Reagan warned: "If history teaches anything, it teaches that simple-minded appeasement or wishful thinking about our adversaries is folly. It means the betrayal of our past, the squandering of our freedom." But the president's Manichean posture belied deep pragmatism. Seven months after Reagan uttered those words a suicide bomber in Beirut took the lives of 241 servicemen. By the first anniversary of the "Evil Empire" address, all U.S. troops were out of Lebanon. Withdrawal was not appeasement; it was reason.

Fast-forward 30 years. As Obama ended the U.S. military presence in Iraq, Sen. John McCain charged that, "The administration seemed more concerned with conforming to Iraq's political realities than shaping those realities." If so, the White House was extending a strong bipartisan tradition of recognizing the limits of military force. We ignore those constraints, and the modest record of U.S. operations abroad, at our peril.

With ISIS on the march and Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki defiant, it is tempting to think the current administration could have done something different to keep Iraq from reaching this precipice. History, however, provides no evidence that a longer U.S. troop presence would have made the difference between state cohesion and state collapse. Unlike wine and violins, nation-building does not improve over time. It just costs more, in money and lives.

In the record of U.S. military interventions, the clearest destabilizing force is not the departure of U.S. military forces, but their arrival, with ambitious political projects in hand. It follows then that the eight-year U.S.-led occupation in Iraq was not a golden opportunity for nation-building, and certainly not one that would have worked out given a few more years. The occupation was an imprudent attempt to mold politics in the developing world and Americans will probably remember it that way, as a slow motion Somalia or a slightly abridged Vietnam.

Jason Brownlee (@jasonbrownlee) is an associate professor of government and Middle Eastern studies at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of Democracy Prevention: The Politics of the U.S.-Egyptian Alliance (Cambridge University Press, 2012) and Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Can ISIS overcome the insurgency resource curse?

By Ariel I. Ahram, July 2, 2014

The recent advances of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), since redubbed the Islamic State, in northern and western Iraq brought into focus the profound ideological and sectarian cleavages that drive the conflicts in both Iraq and Syria. But there is more to the story than a puritanical Sunni rebel movement seeking to unseat Shiite apostate rulers and revive the caliphate in the Middle East. IS is also gaining momentum in the struggle to control two natural resources that have defined the history of the Middle East – oil and water.

With its conquest of Mosul and Tikrit, IS gained a stranglehold over Iraq's northern oil export pipeline and the country's largest refinery. As Iraqi security forces retreated in disarray, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) sent its Peshmerga army to defend Kirkuk, site of Iraq's largest oil fields. More than just blocking IS's encroachment, the move turns the Kurds' long-standing claim to Kirkuk into a fait accompli. The KRG has already sent oil through its own pipeline to Turkey and onward to Israel, bolstering the KRG's network of regional alliances and potential supporters of Kurdish independence. Meanwhile, every diverted barrel is a direct hit to Baghdad's budget.

Less noticed, but equally consequential, is the battle over water. If control of oil has driven economic development in the modern Middle East, control of water has been a fundamental component of civilization itself. For decades, the Syrian and Iraqi governments focused on hydrology in their bids for socioeconomic development, building a bevy of dams, canals and other infrastructure to control floods, improve agricultural irrigation and generate electricity for their populations. Denying or diverting water, though, was also tantamount to war. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) Saddam Hussein fretted that Iran would destroy dikes and dams on the upper Tigris River in order to cause flooding in Baghdad. In the early 1990s Syria and Iraq nearly went to war with Turkey over plans to divert part of the Euphrates River, and in 1992 Iraq famously cut off the water to the marshes of southern Mesopotamia in order to destroy the terrain where Shiite insurgents were hiding out. Punishing drought conditions in rural Syria may even have caused social unrest that helped precipitate the beginning of the March 2011 uprising.

Now, it is IS's turn to flex its hydrological muscles. In February 2013, IS took control of the Tabqa Hydroelectric Dam in Syria, once a showcase in former president Hafez al-Assad's development plan and a major electricity source for Aleppo. Earlier this spring, IS opened up dikes around Fallujah to impede the Iraqi army as it tried to besiege the stronghold, causing flooding as far away as Najaf and Baghdad. With its recent advances, IS now controls the hydroelectric dam at Mosul, Iraq's largest, and IS is poised to take the dam at Haditha, the country's second largest. With the tables turned, the Iraqi government finds itself considering a preemptive opening of the Haditha floodgates to block IS's path.

The addition of a resource war dynamic in the midst of the already significant ideological and sectarian cleavages in Iraq and Syria is hardly welcome news. Whether it's coltan in Congo, coca in Colombia, poppies in Burma and Afghanistan, oil in Nigeria or blood diamonds from Sierra Leone, natural resources have taken center stage in some of the world's bloodiest and most protracted civil wars. Most researchers point particularly to the "lootability" of resources – whether they are easily seized and can be sold on the international market at a significant mark up – to explain the onset and intensity of resource wars. Control over these goods motivates people to take up arms while the revenue from selling them fund the fight. Jeremy Weinstein shows how resource "rich" rebel movements are prone to attracting opportunists and thugs, who are ill-disciplined and prone to manhandling civilians. Rebel groups with access to lootable resources are liable to splinter and metastasize, becoming more like criminal operations than political movements.

But not all resources are lootable and not all lootable resources have the same centrifugal effects on rebel behavior. As Philippe Le Billon and Eric Nicholls have shown, unlike diamonds or drugs, dams and oil rigs are better targets for extortion than physical appropriation. After all, these structures are far more valuable assembled and operational than broken down for spare parts. Moreover, dams and rigs require a cadre of experts, technicians and engineers to run effectively. And, as Mancur Olson famously pointed out, opportunities for extortion create incentives for building sustainable, long-term rule, which are distinctly different from simply predation. According to New York Times reporter Thanassis Cambanis, IS left the staff at the Tabqa Dam unharmed and in place, allowing the facility to continue operations and even selling electricity back to the Syrian government. Similarly, oil fields under IS control continue to pump. Indeed, IS has shrewdly managed these resources to help ensure a steady and sustainable stream of revenue. As one IS fighter told the New York Times, while Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's loyalists chant "Assad or burn the country," IS retorts "We will burn Assad and keep the country." Beside revenue from oil and water, IS collects a variety of commercial taxes, including on trucks and cellphone towers. It has also imposed the jizya (poll tax) on Christian communities under its control. According to the Chaldean patriarch, so far there has been no violence committed against the significant Christian population around IS-controlled Mosul.

Whereas resources like diamonds or drugs motivate rebel forces to take as much as they can as quickly as they can, the need to manage capital and technology-intensive natural resources has actually increased the interdependence between IS and civilians. Already in effective control of significant amounts of oil and water, the Islamic State is one step closer to becoming a reality.

Most resource wars come to abrupt and violent ends, with the military defeat of one side. Macartan Humphrey suggests that external interventions are more common in resource wars in order to assert control over the spoils of war. Concomitantly, the availability of lootable resources is also corrosive to military discipline, making resource-dependent armies and rebels especially easy to defeat. When British troops intervened in Sierra Leone in 2000, the Revolutionary United Front was little but a collection of mafias fighting to retain control over the diamond mines and could mount little defense.

Yet IS appears to be the exception to this rule. Oil and water, unlike diamonds or drugs, contribute to the coherence to the Islamic State and the discipline of its governance. While both the United States and (even more significantly) Iran have dispatched military advisers to Iraq, full-blown outside intervention is difficult to imagine. Other forms of non-violent interventions, such as placing sanctions or embargoing IS's oil production, are unlikely to be effective. Alternatively, coming to agreements on the disposition and distribution of water and oil resources could form the basis for some modes of negotiation. IS has already cooperated with the Assad regime in the distribution of electricity. While arrangements for sharing water and oil will not bridge the profound ethno-sectarian and ideological gap separating IS from the KRG, Iraq, Syria and the myriad of other belligerents, it could provide a basis for conflict management that mitigates the worst violence and spares civilians further harm.

Ariel I. Ahram (@ariel_ahram) is an assistant professor in Virginia Tech's School of Public and International Affairs in Alexandria, VA. He is the author of "Proxy Warriors: The Rise and Fall of State Sponsored Militias" *(Stanford University Press, 2011).*

The Calculated Caliphate

By Thomas Hegghammer, July 6, 2014

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On June 29, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) declared itself a caliphate with its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the caliph. The declaration struck the jihadi movement like a bombshell. Hani al-Sibai, a radical ideologue based in Britain, said on Twitter that he nearly choked on his Ramadan breakfast when he heard the news.

The move is bold and unprecedented. The caliphate is a form of government associated with early Islam and with the successive Islamic empires that dominated the Muslim world until the early 1920s. While most Muslims today view the caliphate as a thing of the past, jihadis see it as an ideal form of government that ought to be reinstated. Still, jihadis have thus far viewed the caliphate as a utopia – much like Marxist groups viewed the perfect communist society – because the Islamic legal conditions for establishing a caliphate are difficult to meet in the modern international system. For decades, restoring the caliphate has been the declared end objective of all jihadi groups, but none of them has had the audacity to declare one – until now.

For "old" jihadi groups like al-Qaeda, ISIS's move is utterly preposterous. The veterans see themselves as having spent a lifetime fighting superpowers, all the while holding back on declaring a caliphate – only to see a bunch of newcomers come in from the sidelines and steal the trophy. Adding insult to injury, ISIS is now demanding that the veterans submit to the authority of a young, obscure (at least until July 5) caliph. That demand comes because in theory, the leader of a caliphate rules all Muslims and has supreme executive authority in military matters. All this is happening while ISIS supporters taunt the old guard on social media with comments such as: "If Al-Qaida and al-Taliban could not establish khilafah [caliphate] with all their power and territory for all these years, how can we expect them to suddenly unite upon haqq [truth] now? Al-Khilafah does not need them, rather, they need al-khilafah."

As J.M. Berger has pointed out, ISIS's strategy is a risky one. There is a very real chance that it will emerge from this verbal fistfight heavily bruised. A number of the world's most senior jihadi ideologues have already come out against ISIS on the caliphate question, and the criticism from supporters of al-Qaeda and groups like Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda-anointed jihadi group in Syria, has been scathing. Meanwhile, ISIS has so far only received the pledge of allegiance (baya) from a small number of minor clerics, dissidents from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and groups in the Syrian-Iraqi theater that were at risk of being swallowed by ISIS anyway. To be sure, ISIS has also seen many declarations of support from grassroots sympathizers around the world, but it is unclear whether these are newly won adherents or people who were cheering on ISIS already. As Berger put it in another article, it looks like "ISIS threw a party and nobody came."

This raises the question: Why did they do it? It is hard to believe that ISIS simply miscalculated and genuinely thought the entire jihadi movement would submit to its authority. ISIS is not an isolated sect, but a tech-savvy bureaucracy that monitors enemy Twitter accounts and consumes academic literature (in fact, it will probably read this very article). It must have known the lay of the ideological land. We should therefore not dismiss the move as ideological excess, but rather assume it was based on a careful calculus.

It is possible, for example, that this was a bid for the youth vote in the jihadi movement. ISIS may have realized it was not going to win over the pro-al-Qaeda old guard anyway, but that there was a potential to further increase its appeal among young recruits, especially abroad. Bear in mind that for the past three years, virtually all of the world's new jihadi foreign fighters have gone to Syria, where a majority

has joined ISIS. By comparison, only a handful has gone to Pakistan, Yemen or Algeria to train with al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Moreover, ISIS has arguably been the biggest game in town the past year in terms of visibility on the jihadi Internet. Finally, with its battlefield advances in Iraq over the past month, ISIS has demonstrated real-life impact that other jihadi groups can only dream of. New recruits – who tend to be young, male and impatient – may be attracted to the group that gets things done. Declaring a caliphate consolidates this youth appeal by adding another element of bravado to the ISIS project. In such a context, heavy criticism from the ideological establishment may paradoxically bestow an underdog image on ISIS, which younger recruits may find attractive. What the older generation sees as youthful arrogance, the new generation often sees as legitimate opposition to the established order. We see examples of this attitude in recent Twitter messages from ISIS soldiers: One Twitter user who goes by the name "Abu Klashnikov" openly rejects the legitimacy of traditional religious authority figures, declaring, "I dont care for no shaykhs name stop namedropping me these so called big shaykhs."

If the caliphate declaration was an attempt to drive a wedge in the jihadi generation gap, we may be looking in the wrong place when we take the reactions of so-called heavyweight ideologues as a measure of ISIS's success. A better metric might be the response from low-level activists online and in the street. Another thing to watch is the flow of foreign fighters to ISIS in the months to come.

One might object that theology matters, and that young Islamists are in fact receptive to the scholarly arguments against the ISIS declaration. But we may be overestimating the sensitivity of younger generations of jihadists to the term "caliphate." The past two decades have seen a trend toward increasingly bold statehood claims by jihadi groups, and this may have watered down the taboo associated with the modern use of the term caliphate. In the late 1990s, for example, Mullah Omar took the title "Commander of the Faithful" (*Amir al-Muminin*), a title traditionally reserved for the caliph. In addition, the past decade has seen the declaration of at least 15 different jihadi "emirates" in different parts of the Muslim world, a terminological development unthinkable 30 years earlier. Last but not least, ISIS itself has used the term "Islamic State" in its own name since 2006, and then-leader Abu Umar al-Baghdadi also styled himself "Commander of the Faithful." This caused some controversy at first, but people soon got used to it (the group's decline in the late 2000s had little to do with the name). ISIS may therefore be calculating that younger Islamists do not see the liberal use of the word caliphate as such a big deal, and that their doctrinal doubts will be offset by the sense of achievement that comes with finally having a "real" Islamic state.

Another possibility, not incompatible with the preceding one, is that ISIS declared a caliphate in order to complicate U.S. plans to support an Iraqi counteroffensive against ISIS. A drone campaign against ISIS now would likely rally the jihadi movement behind the new caliphate and trigger a wave of terrorist attacks in the West. Of course, Western action against ISIS at any time would have an effect of this type, but the caliphate declaration likely increases its potential scale. This is partly because it would make it easier for ISIS to persuade other groups to act on its behalf, and partly because it would allow ISIS to exploit, for recruitment purposes, the widespread Islamist conviction that the West never tolerates Islamist governments.

It was probably no coincidence that two days before the caliphate declaration, ISIS launched a Twitter hashtag campaign titled "#CalamityWillBefallUS" that threatened the United States with terrorist attacks in the event of drone strikes. The campaign generated tens of thousands of tweets and was covered widely by international media. While the majority of tweets were probably automatically generated, there were several hundred unique messages, several of which were produced or retweeted by foreign fighters in the field. Of course, one might argue that such threats are common on the Internet and should therefore not be taken too seriously. However, this campaign differed from other online threats in both its scale (hundreds of unique messages) and specificity (being linked to drone attacks). Failure to implement such a widely publicized threat would mean a considerable loss of credibility for

ISIS and its supporters. Besides, while many Internet threats are cases of intention without capability, ISIS may well have the capability to launch – or at least inspire – attacks in the West, given the many Western foreign fighters in its ranks.

In combination, the Twitter threat campaign and the caliphate declaration arguably constitute a certain deterrent against U.S. military operations against ISIS in Iraq, at least in the short term. To be clear, the threats alone do not make much difference, for U.S. military strategy is not guided by fear of terrorist reprisals (on the contrary, threats can make U.S. intervention *more* likely). However, the caliphate declaration has created a temporary political situation in which the entire jihadi movement is having to decide whether to support ISIS or not. A U.S. offensive in Iraq right now would force that decision in ISIS's favor for many groups and individuals. Had the caliphate not been declared, a U.S. intervention would not have quite the same rallying effect. Of course, the U.S. may well choose to ignore these factors, but then at least ISIS has done what it could to maximize the cost for the United States associated with an offensive. If, on the other hand, the United States decides to postpone its contribution to the Iraqi counteroffensive, ISIS will temporarily face less resistance. The caliphate declaration may thus have been partly designed – or at least timed – to help ISIS consolidate its territorial gains in Iraq.

The caliphate declaration may thus produce two tangible strategic benefits for ISIS: Greater recruitment appeal among young jihadists and a delayed U.S. intervention in Iraq. There may be other benefits too, not least increased morale in ISIS's existing ranks.

But there are potential costs as well. In the short term, old-guard jihadi ideologues may persuade Gulf donors to give less money to ISIS. Other rebel groups in Syria may start collaborating even more closely to fight ISIS. Western governments may become more inclined to supply weapons to anti-ISIS rebel groups in Syria. In the longer term, ISIS's appeal to jihadi youth may decline as the group is pushed on the defensive, the novelty factor wears off and governance problems accumulate.

However, a closer look at these costs suggests they are not as large as they may seem. Recent evidence suggests that ISIS is less dependent on Gulf donors than previously assumed. As for the other negative developments, they probably would have occurred anyway. In other words, this was not a real gamble, because there was not much to lose. Let's consider the counterfactual scenario in which ISIS did not declare the caliphate. By late June, the group had made too many advances in Iraq and too many enemies in Syria to be left alone. In Iraq it faced a government counteroffensive supported by U.S. drones and Special Forces. In Syria, it faced continued opposition from Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic Front. And in the West, it faced increasingly strong measures against foreign fighter recruitment. With this scenario as the alternative, declaring a caliphate may well have been the slightly better option. Thus the caliphate declaration may have been arrogant, but it was not delusional, and we should continue to understand ISIS as a pragmatic, rational actor. Ideology and self-interest can go hand-in-hand, and sometimes the best thing and the right thing are the same.

At the same time, the caliphate declaration is probably not a game-changer. It spells neither boon nor disaster for ISIS. It is admittedly still early to draw conclusions about the effects of the declaration, because we do not know exactly how the jihadi grassroots will respond or what the U.S. role in the Iraqi counteroffensive will be. However, at this point it looks like the declaration made a marginally positive difference to ISIS's situation.

How good that situation is depends on the reference point. Judged by the standards of transnational jihadi groups, ISIS is doing exceptionally well. Never before has an Islamist group this radical had so much territory, so much money and so many Western recruits. Even if ISIS was *literally* decimated – that is, reduced to a tenth of its current size – it would still be one of the largest jihadi groups in the world. However, by the standards of national insurgencies, ISIS is in some trouble. Further expansion – to Baghdad, Saudi Arabia or Jordan – is highly unlikely given the obstacles in its way. It may preserve much of its territorial gains in Iraq in the next few months, but within a year the Iraqi government should, with U.S. assistance,

be able to push it back to where it was in early 2014. In the longer term, ISIS may face governance strain in its remaining areas as locals tire of strict moral policing and economic stagnation. In addition, it faces a broad alliance of intelligence services that knows more and more about it. Three years from now, ISIS will probably be substantially weaker than it is today, but for reasons other than the caliphate declaration.

The bottom line is that business in the jihadi world will largely continue as usual after the declaration. Over time, the new caliphate will come to be seen as just another militant group, albeit a very presumptuous one. In the meantime, it is probably wise for Western governments to let the internal jihadi debate run its course. Premature military intervention will give the caliphate a jump-start it does not deserve.

Thomas Hegghammer is director of terrorism research at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI). A Middle East specialist by training, he has studied jihadi groups since before 9/11. He is the author of Jihad in Saudi Arabia *and the co-author of* Al-Qaida in its Own Words *and* The Meccan Rebellion.

The logic of violence in the Islamic State's war

By Stathis N. Kalyvas, July 7, 2014

When North Vietnam invaded South Vietnam and overran its army, most observers and analysts expected a bloodbath to follow. The Vietnam War had been going on for a long time and the communist insurgents had suffered enormous losses, as well as inflicted considerable damage on their enemies, both on various battlefields and most importantly across thousands of hamlets. There, the war had acquired a character common to many civil wars – that of vicious neighbor on neighbor violence. To top it all, the South Vietnamese state and military apparatus was huge, having being fed by the United States at a clip of billions of aid. Revenge, communist practice and the necessity of repressing a large-sized *ancien régime* all converged to suggest an enormous outbreak of violence. It didn't happen. To be sure, hundreds of people were executed, tens of thousands sent to "re-education" camps, and many more were forced to flee the country. But a bloodbath of epic proportions failed to materialize. One did did, however, take place next door in Cambodia, where virtually no one had expected it.

This vignette illustrates the pitfalls of trying to make sense of violence in the context of civil wars, a tendency that has already emerged with regards to the latest round of fighting in Iraq. The temptation is great to see patterns where none may exist. For example, the current fashion of the day is to predict a sectarian bloodbath in Iraq stoked by the jihadist onslaught. The previous wave of sectarian killings in Iraq, the bloody record of the Islamic State, formerly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Syria, and its own pronouncements after it took over Mosul, all appear to confirm these expectations. However, we should be skeptical about such interpretations and predictions.

For starters, data on violence in civil wars is almost always incomplete: Sometimes it overcounts and sometimes it undercounts, while almost always much information is missing. Most importantly, the context is almost always absent. Even in an era of seemingly plentiful, real-time data availability, a lot more may be going on (and is almost certainly going on) under the radar – and this is crucial

for making sense of what is happening. For example, I have shown that the part of violence that tends to be undercounted consists of individualized "selective" killings of suspected collaborators of the enemy, which may exceed in size spectacular, collective massacres. Indeed, a recent U.N. report appears to suggest such a pattern, pointing to at least 757, mostly civilian, fatalities from June 5 to 22, in the provinces that have seen the bulk of insurgent activity. At the same time, initial reports about mass executions of close to 2,000 Iraqi army prisoners by the Islamic State appear to have been overstated by the organization, an indication that we should take self-reported claims with much more than the proverbial pinch of salt. Indeed, recent analysis suggests that the mass executions around Tikrit may have been lower than the numbers claimed.

The actual numbers, and their actual allocation between indiscriminate and selective killings, matter because they have vastly different implications about the nature of the conflict. If it turns out that the bulk of violence meted out by the Islamic State consists of randomly targeted Shiite fighters and civilians, this would be in line with an interpretation of their main strategic goal as being about provoking an all-out sectarian war between Iraq's Sunnis and Shiites. The logic is pretty obvious: Random violence against Sunnis would provoke equally random retaliation by Shiites against Sunnis, activating the sectarian cleavage and forcing Sunnis and Shiites, irrespective of either their initial or true preferences, to side with the most radical representatives of their sects. According to this logic, the Islamic State would emerge as the champion of the Sunnis and acquire a much larger base of support than it could otherwise claim.

The Islamic State experience in Syria, however, may be suggesting a different story. Although there is a lack of a systematic and reliable account of violence that also takes into account its targeting logic, there have been several processes at work. First, it has been killing, in often graphic and highly publicized ways, enemy fighters – primarily regime fighters but also members of its insurgent rivals. The killing of prisoners was a common feature of pre-modern warfare, a tactic intended to scare enemies and cause defections. It is also designed to project resolve, a tactic often used by weaker military actors and, in the case of the Islamic State, it has apparently been used as a recruitment strategy. Second, it has been killing suspected collaborators of its enemies, including the Syrian regime or most commonly its insurgent rivals. "Selective" killings of suspected enemy collaborators are the most common tactic employed by both insurgents and governments in civil war contexts. Third, it has been targeting "misbehaving" individuals in areas it controls, from petty thieves to those disrespecting its authority. Again, this is a common practice for rebel rulers and state-builders, from "stationary bandits" to incipient states, one intended to build up support from the community. When not implemented in an excessive way, this tactic does fulfill this goal.

Lastly, it appears to have engaged in indiscriminate massacres of civilians who belong to a different religious sect (Alawites and Christians in Syria, Shiites in Iraq). Possibly, the intention may be of stroking a sectarian war, along the lines described above. However, alternative (or complementary) interpretations may be offered as well. For example, it may be that these instances reflect local conflict dynamics rather than a grand strategy of sectarian war, a response to specific battlefield contexts. Relatedly, this violence may result from local commander initiatives, or even reflect chain of command breakdowns, both common occurrences in the fragmented battlefields of civil wars. Or it may result from long-standing feuds between competing local communities and groups that happen to be members of different sects, rather than the sects per se. In all these instances, this violence may be understood as local and fail to escalate at the sect level.

What should we make out of all this? I would like to stress three points. First, violence is not a transparent process and we should be careful about drawing easy conclusions from what transpires from the fog of the civil war battlefield. Second, there is nothing particularly Islamic or jihadi about the organization's violence. The practices described above have been used by a variety of insurgent (and also incumbent) actors in civil wars across

time and space. Therefore, easy cultural interpretations should be challenged. Third, if the Islamic State ought to be characterized, it would be as a revolutionary (or radical) insurgent actor. These groups project a goal of radical political and social change; they are composed of a highly motivated core, recruit using ideological messages (although not all their recruits or collaborators are ideologically motivated – far from it) and tend to invest heavily in the indoctrination of their followers. They tend to prevail over their less effectively organized insurgent rivals (see the examples of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front or the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka), but their Achilles heel lies in their radical proclivities which often turn local populations against them if the opportunity arises, as happened in Iraq with al-Qaeda in Iraq. Revolutionary groups can appropriate a variety of other causes (nationalism, ethnic or sectarian identities), but their revolutionary identity is central and helps make sense of much of their activity. In that respect, we have much to learn from revisiting the action and strategy of the last generation of insurgent revolutionary actors, those of the Cold War.

In short, analyzing the Islamic State as a revolutionary actor that happens to be Islamist is a much more promising avenue of interpretation than seeing it as either simply an Islamist actor or a sectarian one.

Stathis N. Kalyvas is Arnold Wolfers Professor of Political Science at Yale University.

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